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GERMANY

Sabrina P. Ramet

Since the unification of Germany in 1871, the country’s churches have functioned under five distinct systems: Imperial Germany (1871–1918), with a privileged status for the Protestant Church in most of the country and for the Catholic Church in Bavaria; the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), which adopted a constitution that ‘pledged the neutrality of the state in religious affairs’ (Froese and Pfaff, 2005, 404) and was viewed with disfavour by the two major churches; the Third Reich (1933–1945), which worked to corrupt Christianity by delegitimating the Old Testament and reimagining Jesus of Nazareth as an ‘Aryan’ (i.e. non-Jew), while setting up a pro-Nazi German Christian Movement, which some Protestants joined; the German Democratic Republic (1949–1990), a communist state which promoted the secularisation of society and succeeded in dramatically reducing the number of Protestants within its borders; and the Federal Republic of Germany, in two incarnations – the so-called Bonn Republic (1949–1990) and reunified Germany (1990–present), both of which have been committed to preserving a multi-party system with a free press, guarantees of human rights, and Church–state separation.

There is little left of the legacy of Imperial Germany or the Weimar Republic today, but the 12 years of Nazi rule scarred German society both physically and psychologically, and, in the years immediately following the war, the churches were the most forthright in admitting their failings in the Nazi era.

The legacy of the Third Reich and Allied occupation, 1945–1949

The churches were quick to try to come to terms with the Nazi legacy and what it meant for German national being. To put it plainly, was Nazi rule an organic outgrowth of certain long-term tendencies in German history (as some writers feared) or, rather, an aberration, a departure from what Germany had been and continues to be all about? Certainly, the Evangelical Church leaders believed that the latter was the case and that the Nazi regime should be understood as having been ‘imposed upon the German people by a group of thugs’ (Spotts, 1973, 60) who then led the German people down a violent path to tragedy, much as the Pied Piper of lore is said to have led the children of Hamelin to their doom. Although both major churches had been compromised, at least to some extent, the Evangelical Church had been more seriously penetrated by Nazism than the Catholic Church. Indeed, the Nazi-sponsored (Protestant) ‘German Christians’ took over all but three of the Evangelical provincial churches, although,
even at peak, only a third of Evangelical clergy affiliated with this movement. A reaction set in, with a synod of Evangelical clergy, led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, meeting in May 1934 in the town of Barmen, where they organised the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche) to oppose Nazi corruption of the Christian faith and assert the supremacy of Scripture in defining the content of Christianity.

Where the Catholic Church was concerned, it is noteworthy that both Pope Pius XI (reigned 1922–1939) and Pope Pius XII (reigned 1939–1958) issued encyclicals condemning the racism and glorification of the state associated with Nazism – respectively in the encyclicals *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937) and *Summi pontificatus* (1939). Catholics refused to join the ‘German Christian’ movement; indeed, the Vatican had barred priests from joining the Nazi party and few priests – only about 150 – did so (Spotts, 1973, 109). In the years of the Third Reich, 1933–1945, 417 German Catholic priests were taken to concentration camps (Gatz, 2009, 104). Among Catholic leaders, Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber of Munich, Bishop Konrad von Preysing of Eichstätt and Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen of Münster had been the most outspoken in defending the basic equality of all people(s), including Jews, extending care to unbaptised Jews, and protesting various Nazi policies, including the euthanasia programme. After the war, Preysing and Galen were elevated to the College of Cardinals. Nonetheless, there were also arguments about how the Church had behaved in Nazi times, alongside a blanket repudiation by Catholic bishops of the notion of collective guilt – as opposed to Mitschuld or ‘shared guilt’, which they freely acknowledged.

After the collapse of the Nazi regime, ‘German Christians’ were removed from leadership positions in those Evangelical Landeskirchen where they had taken control; adherents of the Confessing Church were behind most of these coups. Post-war Germany was divided into four occupation zones, administered respectively by the Americans, the British, the French and the Soviets. The first three of these were intent on promoting Western-style democracy in the country. In this context, it is curious that, in the first press conference in post-war Germany, the influential Pastor Martin Niemöller ‘said that democracy would not work in Germany’ (Knappen, 1947, 99). There were, nevertheless, differences between the policies of the four occupation powers. Initially, however, the four erstwhile Allies were able to agree on some aspects of Kirchenpolitik (Thierfelder, 1992, 5–6), with local communists feeling solidarity with pastors with whom they had shared time in Nazi concentration camps, but differences soon emerged. For example, the British left it up to the Evangelical Church hierarchy to root out ‘German Christian’ bishops and pastors; the French set up commissions to oversee the screening process; and the Americans were more interventionist, giving Bishop Hans Meiser of Bavaria a list of 170 pastors whom they wanted to see removed from their positions in that province. Nonetheless, the three Western Allies wanted to see the churches play a positive public role. Initially, the Soviet occupation authorities took a very similar line to that of the three Western Allies when it came to religious policy. Indeed, ‘a large number of Church witnesses from 1945 testified to the benevolent attitude of Soviet occupation authorities vis-à-vis the Churches’ (Thierfelder, 1992, 17). The Soviets also accepted the principle that the churches should be allowed to denazify their own ranks (Kleßmann, 1993, 34). But the Soviets wanted to exclude the churches from the public sphere, limiting their role to liturgical and ritual functions (on the model of the Russian Orthodox Church), and Propst Heinrich Grüber, who served during 1945–1947 as deputy chairman of the advisory board for ecclesiastical matters at the Berlin magistrate’s office, noted that he had to remind the Russians on several occasions ‘that we have a different concept of the Church from the Orthodox Church’ (as quoted in Thierfelder, 1992, 17). Specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church emphasised ritual, while the German Protestants placed their stress on pastoral work. Thus, while, immediately after the German capitulation, the
Soviets ensured that the churches in their zone could work freely, over time they introduced restrictions incrementally. Among the acts of the Soviet occupation authorities, under the rubric of separation of Church and state, was to ban all confessional schools (Goeckel, 1990, 95). In July 1950, addressing the third Congress of the SED, Otto Grotewohl announced that instruction throughout the entire school system, including at the university level, would henceforth be grounded in (atheist) dialectical materialism. However, under the GDR’s 1949 constitution religious instruction could be conducted in schoolrooms at the end of the school day. In the late 1950s, new regulations specified that religious instruction could be held only after an interval of at least two hours following the end of regular classes. By 1968, religious instruction could no longer take place on school premises and had to be conducted on Church premises. As for the Americans and the British, at first they did not want to allow confessional schools, but angry protests from Catholic bishops forced the American and British occupation authorities to reconsider.

The end of the war resulted in the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. As these German refugees flooded into post-war Germany, they changed the confessional demographics. About 80 percent of expellees gravitated to communities where locals shared the same religion; but the remaining 20 percent created changes in local confessional composition.


For the churches, the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) – or West Germany, as it was also known until 1990 – represented a fresh start, with the prospect of new directions in ecclesiastical structure, policies and politics. On the Evangelical side, the old German Evangelical Church was scuttled in December 1945 and a new umbrella organisation, the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, or EKD), marked a new beginning. At the time of its inception, it embraced all the Landeskirchen across all four occupation zones.

Political parties and the churches

On the Catholic side, it was recalled that the deputies of the ever-loyal Centre Party had voted unanimously, on 24 March 1933, to endorse the Enabling Act, authorising Nazi leader Adolf Hitler to exercise dictatorial powers. Rather than revive the old Centre Party, which had dissolved itself on 5 July 1933, Catholic authorities decided to collaborate with Protestants in launching a new interconfessional party – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with a sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU). The Catholic bishops also decided not to revive the Volkverein, a lay organisation which they feared might act independently, i.e. without taking episcopal preferences into account. The Centre Party nonetheless reorganised itself, even without Church support, and contested the first elections to the Bundestag. Perhaps ironically, the Catholic bishops, having decided that the CDU/CSU would be their champion, used the power of the pulpit to urge Catholics to abandon the Center Party and vote for the CDU/CSU. The Centre Party survived for a few years, but by 1958 it had ceased to be a viable contender.

Beginning in 1961, the CDU suffered a decline in its voting base, due to the defection of Protestants to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Free Democrats (FDP); by 1965, Catholics were also switching their support from the CDU to the SPD. This was a result, in part, of the SPD’s increasingly friendly attitude vis-à-vis the Church (Spotts, 1973, 143, 160). By contrast with these dominant parties, the FDP, seen as unsympathetic to the churches’ interests, benefited in the early years from anti-clerical support. Later, in 1969, when the FDP joined the SPD to form a coalition government, the issue of abortion came up. The
coalition partners decided to reform Paragraph 218 of the Criminal Code to allow abortions to be available within a fixed deadline. The vote in the Bundestag was so close (247 to 233) that the measure was referred to the Bundesrat, where the individual Länder were represented and where the CDU/CSU had the advantage. To no one’s surprise, the Bundesrat overturned the bill. However, the Bundestag had a chance to override the Bundesrat, provided it could muster more votes. It managed to do so on 15 June 1974, by a vote of 260 to 218 (Tichenor, 2014, 612, 622).

**Church–state relations, 1949–1972**

In Imperial Germany, the state provided subsidies to the churches. One of the curiosities of the Church–state arrangement, as set up in the FRG, was the Church tax (Kirchensteuer), collected by the state on behalf of the religious organisations, even though Church and state were declared to be separated. The Church tax has been regulated by provincial governments and, while it is usually calculated at 9 percent of a person’s income, in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, it is fixed at 8 percent.

Both the EKD and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) were affected by the post-war loss to Poland of territories east of the Oder-Neisse rivers. It took the EKD until 1966 to address this question, when it issued its Memorandum on Expellees and the Relationship of the German People to Their Eastern Neighbours. In this memorandum, the EKD declared that ‘Germany ha[d] no right to reclaim the Oder-Neisse territories’ and that historical, political and theological arguments to the contrary should be considered specious (Spotts, 1973, 136). The RCC took even longer to adapt to the new political reality, waiting until 28 June 1972 to adjust diocesan borders to conform with national borders. Until then two episcopal sees (Schneidemühl and Breslau) lay entirely within Polish territory, and one (Ermland) was divided between Polish and Soviet territory. This opened up the possibility to appoint Polish bishops to head dioceses located in Poland. On 28 June 1972, the same day on which the papal bull, *Episcoporum Poloniae*, revised diocesan boundaries, Bolesław Kominek was appointed to serve as Archbishop of Wrocław (formerly Breslau).

On the domestic front, the 1960s were years of student protest – demanding reform of the universities and protesting capitalism and the American war in Vietnam. The number of demonstrations by German university students increased in the latter half of 1967. Soon their demands were no longer limited to reform of the university but escalated to demands, from some quarters, to revolutionise society (Greschat, 2011, 111). There were also massive demonstrations against the Vietnam War in mid-February 1968. Then, at the end of January 1969, the EKD Council expressed its concern about the radicalisation of the conflict over social and political questions. Meanwhile Protestants were losing interest in their Church. In 1968, 60,000 persons registered their departure from the Evangelical Church (and thus from the obligation to pay the Church tax), setting a new record. In 1969, the number of exits from the EKD climbed to 112,000, and, in 1970, to 203,000. By 1972, some 40 percent of Christians admitted that they never visited church – up from 15 percent two decades earlier (Greschat, 2011, 114). While the number of Protestants declined (in part also due to the higher mortality among Protestants relative to births), in both West and East Germany, the number of Catholics stayed more or less level. Where Protestants had accounted for 60.7 percent of the population in 1939, against 33.1 percent for Catholics, by 2016, after decades of erosion of Evangelical ranks in both West Germany and East Germany, German Catholics outnumbered German Evangelical-Protestants (see Table 18.1).

**Debates about military service and rearmament.** Military service was one of a number of controversial issues which the churches confronted. Already in 1950, in the context of US pressure on the FRG to rebuild German military strength, the EKD appealed to Germans to refuse to
perform military service, in order to preserve the peace. At the first synod of the EKD (23–27 April 1950), some of those present wanted the Church to call for a general refusal to bear arms, even in the event of war; the majority rejected this proposal, however, and the final communique emphasised rather the need for governments to seek peaceful solutions to conflicts of interest. By contrast, ‘as early as 1950–51, the majority of Catholic clergy spoke out in favour of remilitarization’ (Kubbig, 1974, 92) and the Catholic Church was slower to take up the question of conscientious objection, to which it could give at most a qualified endorsement. After the option of ‘alternative service’ was introduced, the number of applicants for this option rose from 871 in 1967 to 3,495 in 1968 (Kubbig, 1974, 67).

Where the Vietnam War was concerned, some Protestant theologians were urging German Christians (in 1968) to support the Viet Cong, who were fighting against the US-backed government in Saigon. When the Bundestag debated German rearmament and later debated conscription, some German Protestant pastors and theologians took to the streets of Bonn in protest. While most Evangelical bishops spoke out on political matters, Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger, chairman of the EKD Council from 1967 to 1973, thought his Church was becoming too political. Bishop Otto Dibelius of Berlin was likewise concerned about the political engagement of bishops and pastors, which seemed to go beyond defending the Church’s direct institutional and moral concerns. As a result, Gustav Heinemann, who had opposed rearmament and condemned nuclear weapons for the Bundeswehr, was not re-elected president of the synod in 1955 and Niemöller, another critic of rearmament, lost his seat on the EKD Council. Their removal signalled the advent of a politically more quiescent Protestant Church in West Germany; it would still speak out on burning issues and could even make appeals to the flock, but it would no longer enter forcefully into public debates.

The RCC faced similar challenges. For example, in the early 1950s, a group of prominent Catholic lay persons spoke out against rearmament, only to be attacked in the ecclesiastical press. But cultural change was irresistible. Indeed, there were several factors which contributed to an erosion of traditional values and change in all social milieux, among which the introduction of television in 1954 was prominent: by 1957, roughly a million households had television sets. The erosion of Catholic traditional values (such as daily prayers and regular penance) loosened people’s attachment to the Church, manifested in the decline in attendance at Holy Mass by a third between 1968 and 1973 (Gatz, 2009, 186). The transformation in religious attachment was accompanied by a decline in the number of births, a transformation in the role of women, and changes in what was considered acceptable sexual behaviour. As traditional values declined in importance, there were freer discussions of abortion, with demands for a loosening of restrictions on abortion. In 1982, 40 percent of Catholic women in the FRG still felt a ‘very close’ attachment to the Church; by 1993, this figure would drop to just 25 percent (Gatz, 2009, 189).

**Values, sexual revolution and abortion, 1966–1990**

Traditional values were likewise losing their hold on Protestants. Thus, in June 1966, Hamburg Bishop Hans-Otto Wölber published ten theses on Church reform, stressing *inter alia* personal

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**Table 18.1 Confessional distribution in Germany, 1939 and 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Evangelical Protestants</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>43,396,437</td>
<td>22,583,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>21,920,000</td>
<td>23,580,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Goeckel (1990, 14) and Süddeutsche Zeitung (2017).*
piety, the need to enliven the liturgy, and the need to think about the Church of the future. In May 1967, the General Synod of the VELKD published 36 theses on structural reform. Some groups, especially those influenced by the Socialist German Student Union (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund), went further and spoke of ‘revolutionising’ the Church. At the other end of the ecclesiastical spectrum, the aforementioned Bavarian Bishop Dietzfelbinger led a small minority opposed to the project of Church reform (Greschat, 2011, 123). It proved impossible to counter the Bavarian Church’s reservations about reform, with the result that the project of comprehensive Church reform stalled.

Meanwhile, the sexual revolution which was sweeping both the United States and Western Europe opened up a free discussion of not only abortion but also homosexuality, divorce and pornography. Like the RCC, the Evangelical Church abhorred these phenomena and, as early as 1970, the EKD published a statement concerning marriage and divorce, underlining that marriage entailed a commitment to lifelong partnership. Nonetheless, on 14 June 1976, the Bundestag passed a law on the reform of marriage and family right. The EKD Council criticised the new law, and took its objections to the Federal Constitutional Court in November 1979. On 28 February 1980, the Court ruled that the law was in conformity with the constitution.

Similarly, the EKD and the RCC alike were frustrated in their efforts to hold back liberalisation of the law on abortion. According to the teachings of both churches, abortion should be not only forbidden, but also punishable, even in cases of rape. In spring 1970, a group of professors of criminal law proposed that abortion should be allowed without penalty during the first three months of pregnancy, when the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, or where there were medical or eugenic justifications. The churches rejected this proposal, but on 21 March 1973, after previous government drafts had been killed off, the government returned with a new draft law, proposing to allow abortion within a specific deadline. The Catholic Church responded with a massive propaganda effort. The EKD also came out against liberalisation of the law and joined the RCC in issuing a joint declaration. But within the EKD there continued to be a struggle, with liberal Protestants not prepared to accept the judgement of the Church leaders (Greschat, 2011, 169). Finally, the Bundestag took up the issue once again and, on 26 April 1974, sanctioned abortions within the first trimester.

In the years 1972–1982, there were 1.5 million more deaths of EKD members than baptisms, a shortfall of an average of 140,000 members per year (Greschat, 2011, 188). This, together with exits from the Church, produced a steady decline in income from the Church tax. Moreover, the shrinkage of the EKD membership contributed to a steady contraction of the Church’s influence in society. Resignations from the two mainline churches continued to take their toll throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In any given year in 1953–1967, the number of exits from the Evangelical Church never reached 45,000, while withdrawals from the Catholic Church never reached 25,000. In the 1980s, by contrast, between 113,006 (1983) and 147,753 (1989) left the Evangelical Church each year; among Catholics, between 54,962 (1982) and 93,010 (1989) left their Church each year (‘Kirchenaustritte’, 2017, 3). The number of baptisms also sank in the 1970s and 1980s – in the case of the Catholic Church, sinking from 80.8 baptisms per 100 children born to couples with at least one Catholic parent to 76.8 in 1990. And finally, abortion continued to be contested. Against pressure from women’s groups demanding access to abortion during the first three months of pregnancy, the Catholic Church especially maintained pressure on the Bonn government to keep abortion illegal.

Sabrina P. Ramet
From the very beginning, the confessional distribution in East Germany was dramatically different from that in West Germany. In 1946, when Germany was still under foreign occupation, there were 22,283,166 Protestants (49.7 percent) in the three Western zones of occupation, against 20,734,022 Catholics (46.3 percent) and 1,792,387 adherents of other religious associations (4.0 percent); in the Soviet zone of occupation that same year, there were 14,963,000 Protestants (80.0 percent), 2,233,000 Catholics (12.0 percent) and 187,000 others (1.0 percent) (Goeckel, 1990, 14). Forty years later, both major congregations had shrunk, with 6,435,000 Protestants (1986) and 1,050,000 Catholics (1987) in East Germany. The third largest religious association at that time was the New Apostolic Church, with 80,000–100,000 members. No other religious association in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had more than 30,000 members (Ramet, 1992, 70; Goeckel, 1990, 115).

Moreover, while both the EKD and the RCC were actively engaged in politics in the FRG, in the GDR only the Evangelical Church took an active role in politics, with the Catholic Church consciously distancing itself from any engagement with the regime and restricting itself to defending its core interests (such as its position on abortion).

There were eight provincial Churches (Landeskirchen) in the GDR divided into two umbrella organisations: Anhalt, Berlin-Brandenburg, Saxony (Magdeburg), Görlitz and Greifswald – all members of the Evangelical Church of the Union; and Mecklenburg, Saxony (Dresden) and Thuringia – all linked with the United Evangelical Churches in the GDR (VELKDDR). The latter three remained purely Lutheran, while the EKU Landeskirchen reflected the heritage of the Prussian-era Union Church, which had brought Evangelical (Lutheran) and Reformed (Calvinist) Churches under a common roof. All of these remained associated with the all-German EKD (which had been established in 1948) until 1969 when, under pressure from the ruling party (the Socialist Unity Party or SED), they severed organisational links with the Evangelical Church in West Germany and established the League of Evangelical Churches in the GDR (Bund Evangelischer Kirchen in der DDR, or BEK).

The constitution adopted in 1949 guaranteed freedom of religion and allowed the churches to pass their own constitutions and to enforce their own regulations. But although relations between individual SED members and individual pastors had been, on the face of it, friendly during the years of Soviet occupation, the climate changed soon after the establishment of the GDR. As early as 1951, the Central Committee of the SED (CC SED) issued a decree, requiring that all school teachers teach from a materialist-atheist perspective (Fricke, 1984, 72). The EKD replied at a district synod on 19 October 1951, charging that the decree violated the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion. Meanwhile, after the Second Party Conference of the SED, the authorities stepped up pressure on the Evangelical Church’s youth organisation, the Junge Gemeinde, alleging that the organisation was engaging in espionage and other illegal activities (Fricke, 1984, 75). The SED was concerned that pastors were having an ‘undesirable influence’ on young people and, in the course of 1952–1953, 72 Evangelical pastors and youth leaders were arrested and more than 300 young Christians were expelled from secondary school. Starting in 1952, the SED characterised the Junge Gemeinde as a ‘criminal’ organisation. But then, on 11 July 1953, in the wake of nationwide protests against communist rule, Erich Honecker, at the time head of the SED’s youth organisation (the Freie Deutsche Jugend, or FDJ), declared that the Evangelical youth organisation was not illegal and that one did not have to embrace Marxism-Leninism in order to join the FDJ (Fricke, 1984, 76–77; Fulbrook, 1995, 94). Subsequently, in 1954, the regime introduced the Jugendweihe (Youth Consecration) as an alternative and rival to Church confirmation. On 26 December 1954, the country’s Catholic
bishops issued a pastoral letter declaring that young Catholics should not take part in the Jugendweihe. This resulted in a boycott of the ceremony by Catholics; Protestants also avoided it in the short term. Thus, in 1955, only 1 percent of young people of the appropriate age took part in the regime-sponsored ceremony. But after the regime imposed negative consequences for those refusing to take part in the nominally voluntary dedication ceremony, participation climbed to more than 90 percent (Fricke, 1984, 77–78; Ramet, 1992, 52). That the Jugendweihe was aimed at the churches was completely obvious and, in any case, substantiated by a statement made by Albert Norden, Secretary for Agitation of the CC SED in 1958: ‘The Church’, he said on that occasion, ‘is the last organized enemy in the GDR’ (as quoted in Fricke, 1984, 79).

The role of the CDU (East) in Kirchenpolitik

Although the GDR was to be established as a one-party state, with the local SPD forced to unite with the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) to constitute the SED, Soviet occupation authorities decided soon after the end of the war to allow four small parties to emerge: a Christian Democratic Party not linked with the CDU in the West, a Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD), a German Farmers’ Party (DBD) and a National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD). These were intended to reconcile, respectively, Christians, liberals, farmers and former Nazis to the communist system. These parties were too small to be politically relevant (except for the CDU, which at the end of 1989 became energised overnight). Where the churches were concerned, only one of the four small parties – the CDU (East) – had a role to play. In addition to the aforementioned task of reconciling Christians to the communist system, the CDU (East) also provided Christians with an organisational vehicle for their participation in the political life of the country. The CDU (East) was further intended to serve as a line of communication between the SED regime and the Churches. From the beginning the CDU (East) also did its best to advocate for the churches. As early as 1949, when the institutions of the GDR were being established, this party pleaded for religion to remain part of the curriculum; thanks to this party’s efforts, the churches were allowed to use school premises after hours for the teaching of religion, although religious instruction would not be considered part of the curriculum (Naimark, 1995, 453–454; Dähn, 1982, 23). Otto Nuschke, who served as chairman of the CDU (East) from 1948 to 1957, showed a certain independence and, in conveying the government’s official greeting to the Evangelical Church on the eve of its 1950 synod in Berlin-Weissensee, he ‘failed to mention the proclamations criticising the East Zone government made from pulpits throughout the Zone’ (CIA Information Report, 1950, 1). For that oversight, he was personally reproached by Otto Grotewohl and Walter Ulbricht. Nonetheless, in votes in the Volkskammer – the East German equivalent of the West German Bundestag – Christian Democratic deputies generally went along with whatever the SED wanted. The one exception came in March 1972 when some Christian Democratic deputies, supporting the churches’ position, refused to endorse a bill to make abortion more available.

Collaboration with the SED regime and accommodation to the new reality

The SED also tried to win over bishops and clergy to collaboration. In this spirit, SED authorities sponsored and financed a League of Evangelical Pastors, hoping to influence clergymen and use the league as their instrument. This league had its own newspaper but never counted even 200 members and was finally dissolved in 1974 (Henkys, 1982, 17). The SED had better success in finding bishops open to some form of collaboration and had its greatest success in Thuringia. Here, Oberkircherrat Gerhard Lotz reported on confidential internal Church affairs to the State
Security Service (Stasi) (Fulbrook, 1995, 98). Better known is Lotz’s fellow Thuringian, Moritz Mitzenheim, resident Bishop of Thuringia from 1945 to 1970, who challenged the Evangelical consensus in the 1950s by arguing that participation in the Jugendweihe was not incompatible with Church confirmation. Mitzenheim rejected the confrontational posture preferred by Bishop Dibelius, trying rather to maintain cordial and supportive relations with the regime and to seek concessions from it through persuasion and consultation’ (Ramet, 1992, 54). Mitzenheim met with SED General Secretary Walter Ulbricht in July 1958, signing a communique which stated, *inter alia,* that ‘the Churches … are in fundamental agreement with the peace efforts of the GDR and its regime’ (as quoted in Ramet, 1992, 55). The regime showed its appreciation of Mitzenheim’s work by decorating him with the Order of Service to the Fatherland (in Gold) in 1961 and with the Star of People’s Friendship (in Silver) in 1966.

By then, a new state constitution was being drafted and, in the first draft of the 1968 constitution, guarantees of freedom of belief and conscience, and of the rights of the churches, were omitted (Goeckel, 1990, 70). In response, a letter signed by all the Evangelical bishops except Mitzenheim asked that these guarantees, found in the 1949 constitution, be restored. The final draft offered a partial accommodation of the bishops’ requests, granting freedom of belief but not providing as much assurance concerning education and Church finances as the bishops had sought (Goeckel, 1990, 71–73). Meanwhile, the Evangelical *Landeskirchen* were coming under increased pressure to effect the aforementioned organisational break with the EKD. Before doing so, the East German *Landeskirchen* sought the approval of the EKD Council, since the Evangelical Church in the GDR was heavily dependent on sizeable subsidies from the EKD in the West. Once this approval was secured, representatives of each East German *Landeskirche* had to give their approval; with that, the new Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR (BEK) was born on 10 June 1969. However, even though this new organisation had been set up to meet SED expectations, the authorities did not recognise it until February 1971, when Paul Verner, the Politburo member responsible for Kirchenpolitik, sanctioned the new ecclesiastical umbrella organisation and signaled a new openness to the Church (Goeckel, 1981, 81). The Church allowed itself to feel encouraged by this apparent olive branch and, at its July 1971 synod in Eisenach, the BEK embraced the formula ‘Church in Socialism’. Bishop Albrecht Schön herr explained the formula in these words: ‘We want to be a Church not alongside, not against [socialism], but rather within socialism’ (as quoted in Fulbrook, 1995, 106). From one point of view, this explanation might seem pointedly vague; but what was clear was that Schön herr and other Church leaders wanted the regime to allow the Church to operate without overt interference or obstruction. In 1974, in the context of the construction of new cities throughout the GDR, the BEK obtained permission for the construction of new church facilities.

From the March 1978 ‘summit’ meeting to the celebrations of Luther and Müntzer. Relations between the BEK and the SED regime gradually improved over the course of the 1970s, in spite of systematic discrimination in career opportunities against conscientious objectors who opted to perform their military service as construction solders (*Bausoldaten*). This general warming of relations culminated in a historic ‘summit meeting’ on 6 March 1978 between Bishop Schön herr and Erich Honecker who, in 1971, had inherited the leadership position as General Secretary of the SED. After the meeting, there were improvements in pastoral access to prisons, state pensions for pastors and other Church employees, and an opening up for the importation of religious literature into the GDR. But soon after the Schön herr–Honecker summit meeting, the SED announced its plan to introduce obligatory premilitary training (including instruction in the use of hand grenades and riding around in miniature tanks) for both sexes in the ninth and tenth grades. The Evangelical Church Federation protested, but the regime went forward with its plan, later extending premilitary training to include the
eleventh grade. Together with continued controversy over discrimination against those who served as Bausoldaten, this contributed to the emergence of an independent peace movement, sheltered by the Evangelical Church, which allowed the pacifists to meet on church premises. The Evangelical Church’s engagement with the independent peace movement was unacceptable to the SED, which, in the short run, curtailed travel by East German clergy to West Germany.

But the SED wanted the Evangelical Church to collaborate in celebrating the quincentenary of Martin Luther in 1983. The official Martin Luther Committee of the GDR was established on 13 June 1980, with Erich Honecker as chair. In a 1947 East German publication, Luther had been excoriated as ‘the spiritual ancestor of Hitler’ (Ramet, 1992, 61), but within two decades Luther was well on the way to rehabilitation. Of course, the SED regime was not interested in Luther as a religious figure; rather, celebrating the religious reformer figured in the regime’s broader effort to reclaim the German past. Church representatives participated in the work of the Martin Luther Committee; the state, mainly to serve its own interests, allocated funding to restore churches and sites of historic importance.

The SED was even more comfortable celebrating Thomas Müntzer, the sixteenth-century religious radical and political utopian whom both the Evangelical Church and the SED considered a ‘theologian of revolution’ (Ramet, 1992, 62). The SED set up a fresh committee to organise the commemoration of the Müntzer quincentenary in 1989; as in the case of the Martin Luther Committee, the Thomas Müntzer Committee was headed by Honecker. The Evangelical Church established its own Müntzer committee and also appointed three observers to sit in on meetings of the state committee. As was also the case with the Luther quincentenary, the regime commissioned biographies of Müntzer as well as musical works and theatrical productions to honour him. But collaboration between Church and state in honouring Luther and Müntzer – the latter, in any event, not a great favourite of the Church – did not signify an end of problems in their relationship. The Evangelical Church continued to complain about discrimination against those who had served as Bausoldaten and to demand a true social service alternative to military service. The Church also greeted Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s programs of glasnost and perestroika – both rejected by the Honecker regime. And, during 1988 alone, the authorities prevented distribution of the Church’s newspaper, Die Kirche, on 15 occasions (more details in Ramet, 1992, 65–66). Finally, even before the GDR came crashing down in late 1989, the Evangelical Church’s formula, ‘Church in socialism’, was being subjected to criticism from within Church ranks for possibly implying that the Church was embracing socialism.

Reunified Germany, since 1990

The reunification of Germany posed challenges for both mainline churches, giving rise to a number of controversies and disputes. One of the noisiest involved abortion, which had been legal during the first trimester of pregnancy in East Germany, but illegal in West Germany. In 1995, a compromise bill was passed, declaring abortion ‘illegal’, unless a woman agreed to participate in a programme of abortion counselling. The Catholic Church signed up to take part in this programme and, according to official data (from 1997), managed to dissuade almost 90 percent of the women it counselled from having abortions. Upon completion of counselling, women wishing to continue with abortion were issued certificates of eligibility for abortion. Archbishop Johannes Dyba of Cologne felt that it was inappropriate for the Catholic Church to be playing a role in facilitating abortion, even if only for about 10 percent of the women the Church counselled, and ordered Catholic counselling centres in his archdiocese to
stop issuing ‘abortion licenses’. He also referred the matter to the pope who, in January 1998, ruled that Catholic counselling centres should stop issuing these certificates. Efforts to find a compromise failed and, by the end of November 1999, the German Catholic Church had withdrawn from this counselling programme.

A second controversy involved allegations of collaboration with the Stasi, on the part of bishops and clergy of the Evangelical Church. The EKD ended up reviewing the records of all of its pastors and employees and concluded that only about 5 percent of them had had inappropriate meetings with the Stasi. Although this involved only a small minority of religious, the damage done to the EKD’s reputation was considerable.

Withdrawals from the Church

The revelations about pastoral collaboration with the Stasi was a factor in the increase in withdrawals from the EKD, while the Vatican’s refusal to compromise on abortion undoubtedly induced some Catholics to reconsider their affiliation with the Church of Rome. In the years 1990–2016, a combined total of 9,076,623 members left these churches (Kirchenaustritte’, 2017). The resultant decline in income from the Church tax induced both the RCC and the EKD to sell off church buildings. In the years 1990–2010, the EKD closed 340 churches, selling some and demolishing others (Schulz, 2013, 1, 3).

East and West had developed different traditions as regards pastoral care in the military, with the FRG having authorised military chaplaincy in 1957 via an agreement with the EKD, while military officers in the GDR were usually members of the SED and, accordingly, were forbidden to have any contact with clergy (Goeckel, 1997, 41). At first, the BEK – before its absorption into the EKD – rejected any extension of the military chaplaincy to the new Bundesländer. In fact, both Churches objected to the requirement that chaplains abstain from political activity. But in 1991, a compromise was reached, granting civilian pastors access to military installations during a two-year transition period. Eventually, an agreement was reached with both churches and, as of 2009, there were just under 100 Catholic chaplains and more than 100 Protestant chaplains serving the Bundeswehr (Dörfler-Dierken, 2011, 81).

The political parties and the Church

Although the churches’ social agenda is broad, encompassing work for peace, easing poverty, providing counselling to married couples, and combating racism, there are uniquely two controversies of high interest to the churches, which have divided the political parties of the Federal Republic: the legal status of same-sex couples and the legal status of abortion. The right of same-sex couples to get married under German law and to adopt children came up for a vote in the Bundestag in June 2017. The measure passed by a vote of 393 to 226, with four abstentions. All 193 deputies from the SPD, all 64 deputies from the Left Party, and all 63 deputies from the Green Party voted to support the measure. However, the CDU/CSU was divided, with 225 deputies, including Chancellor Merkel, upholding the churches’ view and voting against the measure, but with 75 Christian Democratic deputies supporting it, with four abstaining and five not voting (Deutsche Welle, 2017a). The compromise on abortion described above, involving mandatory counselling, was not entirely satisfying to anyone and, by early 2018, the issue was once again being debated, with Angela Merkel’s CDU, the CSU and far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) seeking to keep Paragraph 219a (criminalising advertising or providing information about abortion) on the books. The SPD, FDP, Greens and the Left Party all want to repeal the law (Guardian, 2018).
Other controversies have included the implication of 49 Church members, including clergy, in the sexual abuse of 547 boys in the Regensburg Domspatzen boys’ choir over a period of decades (Deutsche Welle, 2017b); the demand by some Catholic women to be ordained (there are already women priests in the EKD); challenges to the practice of hanging crucifixes in classrooms in state schools in Bavaria; the influx of hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim migrants, beginning in 2014; and the emergence of the Islamophobic Pegida movement and its political counterpart, the AfD. Both churches have supported taking in refugees/migrants, although the EKD has called for priority to be given to Christian migrants, Yasidis and Muslim families with children or ill family members (‘Kirche und Flüchtlinge?’, 2017). Given its Islamophobia, the AfD has been characterised as unChristian. As for Pegida, which has organised public rallies to protest granting refuge to Muslims, RCC and EKD bishops, clergy, and lay persons have come out against Pegida, rejecting the movement for dividing society – although there is also an ultraconservative wing within the RCC, which has welcomed the appearance of Pegida.

Conclusion

In the three-quarters of a century since the end of the Second World War, the EKD and the RCC of Germany have operated first under Allied/Soviet occupation, and subsequently under two rival political systems: the German Democratic Republic; and, in two incarnations, the Federal Republic of Germany. In all of these periods, the churches have played positive roles, whether assisting in the post-war reconstruction of democracy, sheltering the independent pacifists in the GDR, defending human rights, advocating for ethnic minorities, calling for dialogue with Muslims, and supporting the democratic system of the FRG. But at all points in time, the churches have faced threats – from infiltration in the GDR; from scandals, especially involving sex abuse by Catholic clergy in the FRG; and from the steady haemorrhaging of both churches through the withdrawal of hundreds of thousands of persons from membership, with the consequent decline in Church income. Beyond that, secularisation has taken a heavy toll. In particular, according to data from 2017, 37 percent of Germans do not believe in God while, as of 2018, only 10.2 percent of Catholics and 3.5 percent of Protestants are attending church services regularly (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

Beyond that, in the years since 1945, the churches have had to deal with shifting sands, not merely in terms of politics, but also in terms of changing sexual mores, increasing tendencies in both churches for believers to pick and choose what they are prepared to accept where Church commandments, strictures and doctrines are concerned, and, of course, the political and financial impact of the continued withdrawal of Christians from membership in these churches. Yet, thus far, the churches have failed to devise fundamentally new strategies to meet these challenges.

References

Germany


