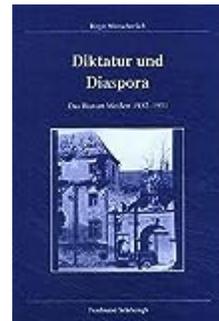




Birgit Mitzscherlich. *Diktatur und Diaspora: Das Bistum Meißen 1932-1951.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2005. 725 S. EUR 88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-71799-3.



Reviewed by John S. Conway (Department of History, University of British Columbia)

Published on H-German (October, 2007)

A Persecuted Catholic Diocese under Totalitarian Attack

The political division of Germany after 1945 necessarily affected the German Catholic Church. The enforced separation led to very different developments on either side of the Iron Curtain. In West Germany, the Catholic Church regained virtually all of the privileges removed by the Nazis, successfully defended the validity of the 1933 Reich Concordat, and enjoyed an esteemed place in the social and political life of the Federal Republic. In contrast, Catholics in the GDR, like other religious communities there, found themselves under a renewed political dictatorship imposed by the central Marxist government in East Berlin, subjected to continual harassment and even persecution, and exposed to constant spying by the agents of the notorious Stasi.

The number of Catholics in East Germany was not large. The diocese of Meißen, which is almost coterminous with the state of Saxony, and includes the cities of Dresden and Leipzig, had only approximately 250,000 Catholics. Meißen derived this position from its medieval roots, and still retains the bishop's seat in the small town of Bautzen. Compared to the much larger dioceses in western and southern Germany, Meißen was con-

sidered an outpost in the diaspora of the former Prussia. Nonetheless, its comparative history during both the Nazi and communist dictatorships is an illuminating, instructive chapter. It is all the more fitting because from 1932-51, the diocese was under the leadership of one man, Bishop Petrus Legge. The nineteen stormy years of his episcopate have now been thoroughly and excellently analyzed by Birgit Mitzscherlich.

This volume appears with many other previous dissertations as a part of the renowned Blue Series published by the Catholic Commission for Contemporary History, first established in West Germany in 1967. Over a hundred similar studies in this series now form an impressive record of first-class Catholic scholarship. (It would be fair to say that no other country or community can match this achievement.) The original aim of the commission was in part to provide documentary evidence of the Church's experiences under Nazi rule, and in part to answer critics who had challenged the hierarchy's view, adopted immediately in 1945, that the Catholic Church had been a prime victim of Nazi totalitarian onslaughts. This goal was later expanded to cover earlier periods of German

Catholic life, and more recently has been extended to the history of Catholicism in the GDR. Mitzscherlich's research, which would clearly not have been possible during the period of communist rule, can therefore be regarded as a significant product of Germany's and the German Catholic Church's reunification.

In Mitzscherlich's view, the Catholics of the Meißen diocese were twice the targets of totalitarian oppression. Their experience at the hands of the Nazi Gauleiter Martin Mutschmann, one of the more radical of Hitler's henchmen, was brutal. So too, Saxony and its people suffered from the fact that the post-1949 communist regime aimed at remaking society along Marxist lines. Mitzscherlich's concern is to depict how the Catholic population and its leaders coped with these onslaughts, and to describe in detail the successive waves of state-induced intimidation and indoctrination. At the same time, she shows how the experience of Meißen was conditioned by the fact that the Catholics had all along been a minority and considered themselves as living in an isolated diaspora. Approximately half the book is devoted to the Nazi period and half to postwar developments; the author closes with the death of Bishop Legge in 1951. The book's length derives from the need to consult both western and eastern German archives as well as the fortunately well-preserved local church records; Mitzscherlich also draws on Vatican archives for the Church's early years. In addition, the author has been able to interview some survivors among the diocesan clergy, and adds this oral history to the record. As a consequence, this is a meticulous, pioneering work.

When Bishop Legge was appointed in 1932, shortly before the Nazis seized power, the diocese of Meißen was a small, relatively poor Catholic outpost in a part of the country known for its strongly socialist, even communist, tendencies. Legge was a "pastoral" bishop and resolutely abstained from all political utterances. But the dramatic events of 1933 evoked in Saxony the same ambivalent responses as elsewhere. The initial prohibition of Catholic membership in the Nazi Party was withdrawn by the bishops in March, and in July the signing of the Reich Concordat aroused hopes that the new political order would not only remove forever the danger of a communist coup, but would lead to a working alliance with the church. In Meißen, as elsewhere, many churchmen came to believe they could be good Nazis and good Catholics at the same time.

Mitzscherlich's narrative of events covers virtually all aspects of Catholic public life, but especially those with

political dimensions, such as the press, schools, associations, or youth groups. Her examination of these different aspects is thorough and obviously based on exhaustive research. So her conclusions are all the more well founded. She shows that for the first two years the Catholics of Meißen enjoyed a relatively quiet life, which only reinforced their illusions about their new political masters.

The situation changed drastically in 1935, with the arrest of several youth chaplains and leaders. This initiative apparently came from the Gestapo's new campaign against "political Catholicism," coupled with the Nazi drive to monopolize all youth organizations in the hands of Baldur von Schirach, the Hitler Youth leader. At the same time, Mutschmann took over the executive control of the provincial government. Matters quickly escalated. A series of edicts against Catholic youth clubs, including outright prohibitions, was issued during the summer months. Worse followed in October when the bishop himself, as well as his vicar-general, were arrested and imprisoned on alleged grounds of smuggling currency out of the country. Even though later acquitted, the bishop had to take a leave of absence from his duties and spent more than a year in exile.

Despite this clear evidence of Nazi hostility, the Catholic faithful continued their support of the regime, endorsed Nazi anticommunist and antisemitic propaganda, and welcomed Hitler's expansionist goals. The bishops were equally timid in failing to protest the persecution of their colleague Legge, were unwilling to mount any form of public protest, and instead merely attempted to uphold the legalities of the Concordat. As for Legge, the public humiliations of his trial, the lack of confidence demonstrated by his clerical superiors, and the imposition of an unwanted co-adjutor bishop, affected him deeply and held lasting consequences during the remainder of his episcopate.

In these depressing circumstances, Catholics in Meißen were faced with ever-increasing Nazi deprivations. Catholic schools were closed, newspapers and journals censored, building permits refused, festival processions prohibited, and state subsidies curtailed. Catholic officials were constantly walking a tight-rope. Priests could not fail to note that church services and sermons were under surveillance. Approximately thirty priests were put on trial for alleged anti-state activities, but only eleven were sentenced to a concentration camp, where three lost their lives. This atmosphere of intimidation went hand in hand with the belief among Catholics

that supporting Hitler and his regime would be rewarded by more favorable treatment in the future. Particularly after the outbreak of war, the clergy were at pains to demonstrate national loyalties and preach obedience to their flocks.

Passivity, isolation, and fear of the consequences led Catholics to concentrate on their internal religious lives. Mitzscherlich's skillful research in the surviving documentation has led readily enough to her view that the Meißner Catholics were victims. At the same time, however, she avoids any discussion of other undocumented aspects, such as Catholics' responses to various events: the Kristallnacht pogroms, the wartime mass murder of Jews, the so-called euthanasia program, or the bestiality of the campaigns of the eastern front. But since these areas demonstrate Catholics' failure to oppose the criminal regime which they had for the most part loyally and vocally supported, or to take more than isolated measures to uphold Catholic and Christian values, Mitzscherlich's silence on these subjects is rather glaring.

In the second half of the book Mitzscherlich pays the same close attention to the fate of the Meißner Catholics under the Soviet occupation and later communist dictatorship. She naturally stresses both the continuities and the discontinuities between the two regimes. Her narrative and analysis of these new circumstances is insightful and exemplary. One of the first significant developments under Soviet rule was the re-establishment of political parties. Shortly after, the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) was founded, appealing to both Protestants and Catholics. But within a year, and before the official establishment of local governments, it became clear that the Soviet authorities were determined to place power in their hands of their Marxist followers, many of whom had spent the war in exile in the Soviet Union. In Saxony, the so-called Socialist Unity Party (SED) came to dominate. Its leading officials included communist hardliners who made no secret of their virulent anti-clerical and indeed anti-Christian antipathies. In such circumstances, the CDU was quickly reduced to a mere front party that served to disguise the basic hostility of the new regime.

In Meißner, Legge showed no willingness to allow himself to be drawn into any new political troubles. He and his officials sought in vain to regain lost ground in the matter of schools, press publications, and youth groups. But with the official establishment of the GDR in 1949, it was clear that only a repetition of totalitarian repression was to be expected. The few priests who had believed it possible to achieve a Christian socialism

were soon enough disillusioned by the barrage of stereotyped defamation against Catholic Church members as the agents of the imperialist West, in the pay of Rome, ex-Nazi sympathizers, or unrepentant warmongers. The 1950s saw a continuous onslaught that differed little from that of the Gestapo. The aim was clear: to achieve a complete separation of church and state, and assert the ubiquitous political control of the ruling party.

Despite all this, the new regime sought to attract the support of those it called "progressive Catholics" who would demonstrate antifascist credentials by aligning themselves with the goals of the new communist rulers, especially in the creation of a "peace front" against the "revanchists." The evidence, as Mitzscherlich tell us, is that such propaganda was ineffective virtually everywhere. Catholics had for too many years been indoctrinated against the errors of Marxism. They revealed little of the self-deluded wishful thinking they had displayed under the Nazis. And the outspoken opposition of both the Vatican and their West German colleagues to any such compromises or concessions prevented the emergence of any group of Catholic "fellow-travelers."

With the growing tensions of the Cold War and the unremitting ideological campaigns of the SED, pressures increased on the Catholic Church to conform with suitable messages of support for the communist aims. Any refusal was naturally seen as a sign of "reactionary and state-hostile" attitudes among the clergy, a few of whom suffered imprisonment as a result. So discretion led to an almost complete silence on political matters. At this point, it would have been helpful if Mitzscherlich had made some comparisons with the parallel experiences of the East German Protestant Church, though this might well have led to an unmanageable expansion of her text.

Legge's final years were ones of great disappointment. His hopes of recovering from Nazi depredations were increasingly frustrated by the deliberate plans of the new Saxon authorities to impose their own totalitarian monopoly over all aspects of communal life. The result was once again to force the church to withdraw into its liturgical sanctuary and to concentrate on inner spiritual tasks. The Catholic community became an island of ideological nonconformity. This stance was maintained throughout the forty years of the GDR's existence and enabled the church to emerge in 1990 relatively uncompromised. This retreat was only strengthened by Legge's unwillingness to associate himself with colleagues beyond the diocese's borders. He only once attended the national bishops' conference in Fulda, which may be seen as a sign

of his continuing frustration. He died early in 1951 as the result of a car accident.

No one familiar with the events of the German Church Struggle, or the vast historiography written since can fail to admire Mitzscherlich's praiseworthy industry. This is a story which will not need to be told again. And yet, the question has to be asked: why was such an effort expended on developments in an undistinguished minor-

ity diocese and on the even more less-than-striking leadership of its bishop? The answer presumably is that this is another chapter in the long history of struggle in Germany between the religious milieu and in this case two variants of political power. Avoiding any hagiographical overtones, the author present her material more as an omen for the future. As such we can be grateful for her diligent research and perceptive analysis.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: John S. Conway. Review of Mitzscherlich, Birgit, *Diktatur und Diaspora: Das Bistum Meißen 1932-1951*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13789>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.