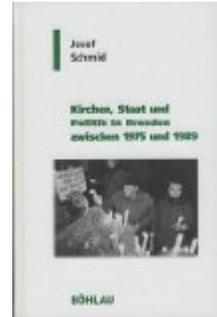


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernd Schäfer. *Staat und katholische Kirche in der DDR.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1998. 501 S. DM 68,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-04598-2.

Josef Schmid. *Kirchen, Staat und Politik in Dresden zwischen 1975 und 1989.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1998. 521 S. DM 128.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-412-11497-8.



Reviewed by John S. Conway

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2001)

Sammelrez: Kirche und Staat in der DDR

Bernd Schäfer's 500 page study of the complex relationship between for the Communist regime and the Catholic Church in the German Democratic Republic is a comprehensive and well researched account. He was, of course, particularly fortunate that the overthrow of this unlamented government in 1989 led to the opening of ist archives, such as those of the Party hierarchy, its secret police agency - the Stasi - and of its Secretariat of Church Affairs, all virtually complete. So too the Church authorities gave him permission to see their papers. The contrast with the much more restricted access to the equivalent sources for the western part of Germany is notable. Schäfer seized his opportunity, and now builds on a series of preliminary findings published earlier in articles.

He divides his material into five chapters each tackling roughly a decade, but adopting the same format: first, a general analysis of the Communist regime's wider policies, then an account of the specific policies and tactics towards the churches, and finally a description of the

Catholic Church's response.

As is already well known, the Catholic minority - never more than ten percent of the population - was always on the defensive. Despite an obvious sympathy for his fellow Catholics, Schäfer's principal stress is on the policies of those who organized the persecution, or more latterly the restrictive obstruction, of the churches. He traces the various stages from the initial outright determination to stamp out the churches entirely to the later awareness of the impossibility of success. In contrast to the similar practices adopted towards the Protestants, Schäfer makes the good point that the Catholics were always more suspect because of their links to the Vatican, and hence a disproportionate amount of the Stasi's resources were deployed against these alleged "puppets of revanchist imperialism directed by the superstitious clique in Rome".

This account is primarily written from the top down-

wards, so that the leading Party officials and the members of the Church hierarchy take a prominent place. But their interplay is well described. He also shows that how well the Stasi was informed about church affairs, due to the diligence of their agents, including several Catholic priests, or to secretly-planted listening devices. "Der Forscher beginnt die Lektüre zunächst als distanzierter Voyeur, bis er selbst in zahllose Biographien aus allen Teilen der DDR und die Perspektiven der MfS-Führungsoffiziere unvermeidlich hineingezogen wird". (p.25)

The outlines of this cat and mouse story are now well known. Schäfer adds the details of the campaign against the Catholics. The Communist ideological onslaught could however at times be combined with a variety of tactics, which only added to the churches' difficulty in assessing the best response to defend their interests. On the whole, the Catholics took refuge in withdrawal into the sacristy, refusing to take part in the so-called socialist remodeling of German society. This was a tactic for survival, and held at bay some of the ham-handed attempts either to seduce the church leaders into approving "real existing socialism", or to recruit agents for the Stasi.

Following the Second Vatican Council, some progressive Catholics wanted to risk a more positive encounter. But neither the Catholic hierarchy nor the regime's authorities encouraged such behaviour, and suppressed it as long as they could. Not until the late 1980s did the Catholics begin to join the Protestants in giving support to those antagonistic policies which in the end brought the regime crashing down.

Josef Schmid's account of the Churches' political stances in Dresden chooses a regional study for the final years of the GDR regime, but covers in more depth many of the themes in Schäfer's book. He takes issue with one-sided, monocausal and moralistic treatments, such

as those of Gerhard Besier. At the same time, he devotes more space to the affairs of the local congregations, both Catholic and Protestant, and thus usefully complements Schäfer's study. And, not surprisingly, Schmid emphasizes the leading role of the Saxon Protestant Church, whose leader Johannes Hempel was a towering figure not only in his own church but on the wider world ecumenical stage.

Dresden became an important centre already in the early 1980s for church activities seeking to mobilize a following for "peace action". The leaders rediscovered the resources for Christian pacifism, despite its long absence from Lutheran theology. They sought thereby to provide a focus against the Communists' propagation of militarism, and to be a part of the wider protest against the regime's totalitarian control.

Schmid gives an excellent and full account of these struggles, skillfully blending his sources, similarly drawn from the Party, Church, State and secret police archives.

At the same time he clearly outlines the dilemmas of the church authorities, discouraging open political provocation while insisting on the biblical basis for any protest. But in 1988 and 1989 this balancing act gave way to a more open espousal of the Church's political witness and opposition to the regime, especially, in Dresden, on ecological questions. At last, the Catholic Church emerged from its reticent stance. But Schmid also makes clear that the Churches' involvement, though significant, cannot be seen as the main instigator of the regime's downfall. There still remained, and indeed still today remain, too many theological reservations within the churches' ranks, so that their political witness can only be described as an adjunct to the revolutionary events of 1989. But Schmid's account is an impressively solid piece of research.

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Citation: John S. Conway. Review of Schäfer, Bernd, *Staat und katholische Kirche in der DDR* and Schmid, Josef, *Kirchen, Staat und Politik in Dresden zwischen 1975 und 1989*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2001.

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