

Swords into Ploughshares: the Unofficial “Peace Movement” and the Churches in East Germany

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

Is there an unofficial peace movement in East Germany? In May this year the Second European Disarmament Convention was held in West Berlin, with the conscious intention of breaking through the East-West divide symbolised by the Berlin Wall. In practice the Wall proved as impermeable as ever. None of the unofficial peace people invited from the Soviet bloc were given passports or exit visas to travel to West Berlin. A number of western peace campaigners did, however, manage to slip across to East Berlin to meet with independent peace campaigners there. They brought back two open letters. The first, signed by seventeen people from East Berlin and Jena, began by explaining why “attempts at an open peace discussion” in East Germany caused the regime to fear “that this political system might be destabilised”.

These fears are the reason why the ideas and concrete actions of mainly Christian peace circles (*Friedenskreise*) — what has been described in the West, not entirely accurately, as an independent peace movement in the GDR — have constantly been suspected of being actions of the Class Enemy [. . .] manipulated from outside.

The second, from the Jena “Peace Community” (*Friedensgemeinschaft*), declared “We do not want our own peace movement [. . .]”

These open letters exemplified and clarified several points which are not entirely understood by many sympathetic western peace persons. First, there is not and cannot possibly be an independent peace movement in East Germany like that in West Germany: with an open, nationwide organisation, independent mass demonstrations, and a declared, prime objective of changing (if not, confounding) the defence policy of the country’s allied super-power. That twenty people gather together in a church hall to discuss these issues at all is already great daring in East German terms. Secondly, the dramatic growth of church-sponsored and church-shielded “open peace discussion” is not a direct result of — let alone a copy of — the burgeoning of western peace movements. Thirdly,

to suggest that it is, is not to help but to hinder that discussion. These points are no doubt obvious to anyone with any knowledge of Eastern Europe.

The main cause of the movement of opinion in East Germany is the progressive and systematic *militarisation* of life in that country — a militarisation which is, paradoxically, more omnipresent and inescapable than the militarisation of Poland under martial law. It begins in the Kindergarten, in the toyshops and the children's books. Six-year-olds have "military exercises" in school. The young Pioneers "re-play" the building of the Berlin Wall. The Civics textbook for fourteen-year-olds includes "implacable hatred of the enemies of the people" among the goals of *Bildung* (education). In 1976 the Chairman of the Society for Sport and Technology, Lieutenant-General Teller, could boast that "nearly 95 per cent of all young men between sixteen and eighteen take part in the Society's pre-military courses". The "education to hatred" (as it is openly called) continues intensively in "political education" during the eighteen months' compulsory military service. There are many cases of schoolboys of fifteen or sixteen committing themselves to an extra eighteen months or more of military service. After military service many workers continue in the paramilitary reserve "Battle groups" (*Kampfgruppen*), based in the factories and now some 400,000 strong.

In a work published in East Berlin in 1979, *Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics and the Training of Soldiers*, we read

A war for the defence of the socialist fatherland is beautiful, not, to be sure, because of the destruction of material goods, the death of people and external effects, but because of its high and noble goal . . . the heroic deeds (*Heldentaten*), which are done in the name of the People and the workers of the whole world.

The Defence Minister, General Heinz Hoffmann, meanwhile adapts the doctrine of the Just War to the prospect of a third world war:

With all the suffering that would come upon the peoples of the world in this last and decisive conflict between Progress and Reaction, above all in capitalist countries — it would be, on our part, a Just War. Thus we do not share the opinion, which is held even by progressive people in the peace movement, that a Just War is no longer possible in the nuclear age . . .

At the same time, the statue of Frederick the Great has been returned to its place of honour in the Unter den Linden, and in the last three years the regime has demonstratively rehabilitated the "progressive" heritage of Prussia.

It is important to note that this militarisation has been *intensified* in the last five years, and this intensification is at least in part a response to the

gently corrosive effects of détente. The more contacts East Germans have with the West, the more the regime needs to exert itself to preserve the fiction of the threat from the West. As part of these exertions, "Defence Studies" (*Wehrkunde*) for fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds were introduced in all schools in the autumn of 1978.

Although *Wehrkunde* was but one more instrument added to the existing military orchestra, this was a turning-point because it met with decisive and public criticism from the Protestant Churches. From this time forward one can chart a steady growth of the peace discussion within forums provided by the Protestant Churches. Milestones along this path (which I have no space to describe in detail) were the fortieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, in September 1979; the Church's own "Peace Decade" meetings in November 1980 and November 1981 (the latter of which launched the now famous "swords into ploughshares" symbol); and the extraordinary peaceful demonstration in Dresden on 13 February 1982 (the anniversary of the Anglo-American bombing), when some five thousand young people from all over the GDR foregathered in the *Kreuzkirche* for a "Peace Forum", and perhaps one thousand of them went on in the late evening to a moving candlelit ceremony before the ruins of the Church of Our Lady. Between these milestones, more and more East Germans, particularly young people and by no means all churchgoers, were meeting in church rooms to debate and meditate on the subject of peace.

Plainly the growth of this movement was not wholly unconnected with developments on the GDR's frontiers — the opposition to the forthcoming deployment of Cruise and Pershing II missiles in West Germany, Solidarity in Poland — about which the population was, of course, excellently informed by West German radio and television. A direct influence could be detected, for example, in the adoption of the catchy West German peace movement slogan "*Frieden Schaffen ohne Waffen*" (make peace without weapons). But more often the influence was indirect: the regime responded to what it perceived as challenges from East and West with a barrage of militaristic propaganda: the East German peace people reacted to this reaction. They are at pains to stress that theirs is first and foremost a home-grown response to conditions in the GDR.

The proclaimed objectives of the great majority of the church-protected peace initiatives bear out this contention. The most frequent demands are for better conditions for conscientious objectors; for the possibility of a civil alternative to military service, a "social peace service"; for an education to peace rather than to war; for a reduction in sales of military toys and less glorification of the military in public life. Even in the two open letters to the European Nuclear Disarmament conference, the goal of a nuclear-free zone in central Europe was only

mentioned as an ultimate ideal (without any specific appeal to the GDR or the Soviet Union to reduce their nuclear weapons), and in many of the documents of the East German peace discussion the subject of nuclear disarmament does not feature at all.

The “Conception” of the Jena Peace Community — a one-page summary of its nature and aims — makes it clear that for them the concept of peace has more to do with the question of how human beings should live together under a totalitarian regime, than with the question of how the super-powers should live together in a nuclear world:

What we want:

Peace between human beings as a condition for life, as freedom, equality, brotherhood — refraining from violence.

What we mean by peace:

Life in free responsibility in the community.

A way of life in which human dignity and personality is respected, in which the personal freedom of the individual is not restricted, in which it becomes a matter of course that people stand by and help each other, in which justice reigns among men. Harmony between men and nature/environment.

They thus express a bundle of aspirations which are both more modest and more ambitious than those of the western peace movement: more modest, in the demands they make (or do not make) on the defence policy of the regime and its allied super-power, more ambitious, in the demands which they make upon the whole political system. While the notion that “dissidents” have somehow “infiltrated” the peace groups is a secret policeman’s fantasy, it is clearly true that the “peace movement” in East Germany is a movement of moral protest not merely against one particular set of policies, but against the system itself.

How do the Churches respond to this challenge? Although the Catholic Church very belatedly entered the peace debate with a pastoral letter in January this year,* by far the most important contribution has been made by the much larger Protestant Churches. Here, too, it is difficult to generalise, because the stubborn differences of tradition between church provinces (all Lutheran, but some more Lutheran than others) are expressed in considerable differences of approach, and because (as elsewhere in Eastern Europe) bishops may say one thing but the lower clergy will often do another. These differences are particularly marked in Thuringia, where the University of Jena has become the focus of a particularly active peace discussion, while the Church has a tradition of collaboration with the State, justified by a crude version of Luther’s “*Zwei Reiche Lehre*” (Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms). (Historians note that the collaborationist “German Christians” were particularly strong in this

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region during the Third Reich.) When seventeen young people were arrested in February this year, after an attempted symbolic minute's silence for peace on Christmas Eve, the Thuringian Lutheran Church initially distanced itself from them — provoking a storm of controversy among East German Protestants (as well as in the West German media). Subsequently, however, the Church did intervene on behalf of the 17, who were later released.

In general it can be said that the Protestant Churches are stronger than they have ever been under communist rule, not least because of Mr Honecker's search for a *modus vivendi* with them (symbolised by his 6 March 1978 meeting with the then head of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, Bishop Albrecht Schönherr), and West German influence, and they have used this strength to protect and encourage the "open peace discussion", even when the participants are not regular churchgoers. In at least one church in East Berlin there is a "wall newspaper", giving the latest details on the progress of the Geneva negotiations, and a breakdown of the sizes of the Soviet and American nuclear arsenals which is not quite the same as the one you find in the Party daily, *Neues Deutschland*. The Church regards this open and honest discussion as valuable in itself, even if it has no immediate (evangelical or political) results.

Secondly, the church hierarchy continues to intervene at central, regional and local level with the state authorities, both to re-state their hopes of a general change in policy on such matters as military toys, *Wehrkunde*, and civil alternatives to military service, and to help individual conscientious objectors (starting with the conscientious objection of parents to their fourteen-year-old children being taught to shoot and hate).

At the same time the hierarchy has tried to spell out the limits beyond which it will not and cannot go. These flow from a deep and long current of German Protestant reflection on the proper relation of Church to State, from Luther to Bonhoeffer. Thus, in a thrilling question and answer session during the Peace Forum in the Dresden *Kreuzkirche*, Bishop Hempel echoed Luther's famous meditation "On the Freedom of a Christian", explaining

that political freedom is a great good, and we should speak out for it, where we can, but external freedom and internal freedom are not the same, above all for the Church; that is to say that in the struggle for external political freedom the Church, as far as I understand the Bible, has a clear limit.

In practice this theologically justified, self-imposed limit is often indistinguishable from the politically justified "limits of the possible". The most important "test case" in this respect, so far, was undoubtedly the so-

called "Berlin Appeal" of January 1982, which called for the withdrawal of the "occupying forces" from both German States, and a nuclear-free Europe. In early February the main organiser of the appeal, Pastor Rainer Eppelmann, was arrested. The church leadership of Berlin-Brandenburg secured his release, but published a stiff statement in which it criticised the analysis and form of the "Berlin Appeal", and emphatically advised against the collection of signatures for it. Thus it seems so far that the church hierarchy will not support any initiative which places among its aims the central goal of END. This self-limitation is based on a realistic assessment of the reaction of the East German regime.

Like all Soviet-bloc regimes, the GDR is hoist with its own petard by an independent peace movement. No one talks more loudly about the "struggle for peace" (*Friedenskampf*), so how can it object to people joining that struggle in their own way? The "swords into ploughshares" symbol is an excellent example of the way in which the independent peace groups have turned the communists' own rhetoric against them, for its design is modelled closely on the sculpture presented by the Soviet Union to the UN! An "*Argumentationshilfe*" (Aid to Argument) for leaders and agitators of the official youth movement (FDJ), nicely illustrates the intellectual panic of the Party on this question. In itself the symbol is a good thing, says the *Argumentationshilfe*, but we are against wearing it at this particular moment in this particular country, because

the wearing of this insignia is clearly directed against the policy of the Party and State, and thus against the vital interests of our *Volk*, yes, against the interests of mankind . . .

It is absurd that demands for disarmament should be directed simultaneously at West and East, at Reagan and Brezhnev.

Whoever accepts such demands ignores:

- the Laws objectively working in social development
- the Lessons of History, in particular of the last eight decades, especially the experiences of the struggle for Peace (*Friedenskampf*) in recent years and decades, which make it plain where the danger of war comes from.

These arguments are truly unanswerable.

The operative fact is, however, that the regime has now effectively banned the wearing of the insignia: schoolchildren have been punished, students threatened with rustication, and workers with dismissal, for wearing it. And although East German youths have responded with an almost Polish talent for graphic ingenuity (for some time they simply stitched a circle on their denim lapels, where the badge would have been), the ban — unlike in Poland — has been effective.

Less colourfully, but more seriously, all the main demands of the

Churches — whether on *Wehrkunde*, on the “social peace service”, on military toys, or on treatment of conscientious objectors — have met with blanket regime hostility and only the smallest of concessions. It is true that the number of “building soldiers” — the only legal possibility of non-armed military service — has been allowed to increase slightly, to perhaps as many as one thousand in 1982, but in recent months there have been at least five confirmed cases of people imprisoned for refusing to perform military service, even though they had declared themselves willing to serve as “building soldiers”. Quite apart from the substantial vested interests of the military, and the Honecker leadership’s obvious interest in militarisation as a means of political control and mobilisation, the regime has clearly made the (probably correct) tactical calculation that *any* concession, however small, would give disproportionate encouragement to the independent peace activists. While they will obviously continue to handle the church hierarchy with velvet gloves, especially during this Luther anniversary year, another major motive for tolerance — the Soviet hope of encouraging opposition to NATO in West Germany — must be fading.

Looking forward into 1984, then, the condition of the unofficial “peace movement” under the auspices of the Protestant Churches in the GDR can be judged in two quite different lights. Viewed, by analogy with western peace movements, as a pressure group whose primary objective is to obtain significant changes in the foreign and defence policies of its government, it must be adjudged an almost total failure. It has achieved almost none of its (by western standards) extremely modest objectives. But I have tried to suggest that this is not the way in which it should be viewed and judged. If, putting aside the prism of western peace movements, one considers the East German peace discussion in its own terms, then it is a remarkable achievement. When I lived in East Berlin in 1980 it was hard to imagine that within two years there would be independent, voluntary groups all over the country, in which young people could get together and actually *say what they thought* about the most urgent political concerns of the day. In a country where most children learn to tell political lies sooner than they learn to cross the road, where the double life — one opinion at home, another at school, one language in private, another in public — is second nature, this in itself is a moral and psychological breakthrough for countless individuals. This movement will have no major political breakthroughs to show in the foreseeable future: but it already has a host of human breakthroughs, small, personal triumphs of truth and dignity and courage, to its lasting credit.*

*See also review on pp. 354-55 — *Ed.*