

## **‘All Over the World Jehovah’s Witnesses are the Touchstone for the Existence of True Democracy’: Persecution of a Religious Minority in the German Democratic Republic\***

HANS-HERMANN DIRKSEN

### **Introduction**

Following the breakdown of the Third Reich and the dividing up of Germany by the Allied forces, the eastern section of Germany, excluding the capital Berlin, became the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ). A clash between communist atheists and Christian believers was clearly on the horizon. The Potsdam Agreement of 1945 guaranteed freedom of religion and respect for religious organisations, and this related to the eastern section of Germany as well.<sup>1</sup> When the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established in 1949 its Constitution also contained guarantees for the practising of religion. It soon became obvious, however, that these declarations existed solely on paper and had only a minor influence on the policies of those in power. The government hindered the work of the Protestant and Catholic Churches and banned a number of smaller churches and religious groups like the Salvation Army and the Christian Scientists. Astonishingly, however, none was persecuted more severely or for a longer period of time than the religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Zeugen, 2000).

Initial repressions started by the Soviet authorities only had some effect on the activities and worship of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. As the German authorities assumed increasing responsibility within the SOZ they began regular surveillance, which led to repression and finally culminated in open persecution. Landmarks were the ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in August 1950 and a trial at the Supreme Court of the GDR in October 1950. Witnesses suffered in a system of terror in the 1950s and early 1960s which meant imprisonment for up to 15 years and the loss of all possessions. In the 1970s and 1980s the Ministry of State Security refined to perfection a system of surveillance and subversion. Not until after the collapse of the GDR was freedom of religion once again granted to Jehovah’s Witnesses, in a further landmark in March 1990.

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Even though methods of persecution varied over time, in line with destalinisation or the Helsinki Declaration, the 40 years of persecution prompt the question why there was never any reassessment of the Witnesses as a subversive organisation. Was the evangelising work of the Witnesses a real threat to the GDR system because it was a religious group that never compromised? Was GDR doctrine so inflexible that no administrative authority ever dared to speak up in defence of the Witnesses? A traditional misconception is that Jehovah's Witnesses never obey any state power of any kind. This is definitely incorrect, as numerous official documents prove that Witnesses are reliable workers and loyal citizens who pay their taxes. The only occasions on which Jehovah's Witnesses refuse obedience is when the state makes demands which the Witnesses perceive as in contradiction to God's Word, the Bible. These would include, for instance, state demands to go to war or to venerate national symbols. In such cases Witnesses refrain from complying and stay neutral. They would, however, not try to overturn the state's power by means of a revolution, for example. Questions still remain, then, and become even more valid in view of the fact that persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses was a phenomenon not only of the GDR but of the whole communist world (Dirksen, H.-H., 2002; Slupina, 2002). This article reviews developments leading to the ban on the Witnesses in the GDR and discusses the reasons for their long-term persecution.

### **The Start of Repression after 1945**

Freed from National Socialist persecution and liberated from concentration camps, Jehovah's Witnesses once again resumed their evangelising activities. The fact that many Witnesses were recognised as victims of Nazi persecution worked in their favour. In Magdeburg their religious society was re-established as an association as early as 9 September 1945 (BA HVDVP, pp. 150ff), and the property of their so-called Bible House in Magdeburg was returned to them. On 13 October 1945 the school administrative board for the municipality of Magdeburg confirmed that the 'International Bible Student Association (Germany Branch)' was approved for religious services by the Soviet Military Administration (SMA) (WTA Magdeburg). Throughout the entire SOZ new congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses were established. Witnesses in Halle, for instance, obviously experienced no problem at that time in obtaining permission from the local SMA to worship. For a short period of time it seemed that the Witnesses would become an acknowledged denomination and that adherents would enjoy true freedom of religion. Because of their public missionary work and substantial attendance at meetings where no mention was made of the inauguration of socialism, however, the Witnesses soon became the focal point of political interest on the part of the central SMA in East Berlin. Witnesses began to experience repeated problems in gaining further permission for religious services from local SMA officials. Operations against the Witnesses were started on the basis of locally-enacted regulations to hinder their religious activities. In one district religious services were forbidden in private homes and could be held only in public places. In the neighbouring district, on the other hand, all religious services in public places were forbidden and only those in private homes were permitted. In one district preaching from house to house was not allowed, whereas in a neighbouring district there were no objections, as long as services were held by a local minister (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, pp. 111ff.). Even though by this time regional constitutions had been issued in Saxony, Thuringia and Mecklenburg that ensured the free and undisturbed exercise of religion, the local authorities curtailed this freedom by declaring for instance that religious

gatherings could take place only in facilities belonging to that particular denomination, and since the newly-reorganised Witness groups generally did not possess their own meeting-places permission had to be requested for each individual meeting. If the regulations were not observed, services were stopped and responsible preachers were fined or even arrested. Sometimes the authorities simply claimed that no permission existed, and intervened on that basis.

In order to counteract these developments the Witnesses continued to pursue their goal of obtaining the general status of a registered religious organisation, and were finally successful in 1947 when the SMA headquarters in East Berlin confirmed in writing that 'the administration of the sect 'Bible Students' (Jehovah's Witnesses) is herewith informed that they are among the sects permitted within the Soviet Occupation Zone. Head of the Department for Public Organisation, Major (signed) Vassil'yev' (WTA SMAD). Arbitrariness continued at the local level, however: 'Presenting this document at places where interference occurred helped in some instances, but other officials seemed to feel that the headquarters was far away and that they were their own lords' (Yearbook, 1974, p. 222). Later the German administrative authorities also began to interfere with the Witnesses. This development occurred simultaneously with an increased centralisation of surveillance activities in the SOZ, as well as with a gradual transfer of administrative authority from Soviet to German hands. Whereas surveillance had initially been primarily conducted at local level, after the establishment of the German Administration of the Interior (*Deutsche Verwaltung des Innern* (DVdI)) surveillance reports reached the highest levels in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED)). A report on Jehovah's Witnesses in Annaberg district in Saxony, for example, states:

They do not participate in the democratic reconstruction and refuse any political cooperation. During the petition for a referendum [on the proposal that Germany should be reunified under communist leadership – HHD] they not only refused to sign, but actively opposed the referendum. In their house-to-house propaganda and agitation they untiringly visited every household and family. (S HStA Mdi, p. 7)

In September 1948 Wilhelm Pieck, chairman of the SED and later president of the GDR, received reports about the activities of religious 'sects' in the SOZ from his private secretary Walter Bartel. Bartel had been incarcerated with Jehovah's Witnesses in the concentration camp at Buchenwald, where he was a leading official of the illegal Communist Party. He noted for instance that 'the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, Bible Students or Bibleworms, as we called them in the camp', held meetings in the Brandenburg region with some 100 in attendance, especially young people. He also argued that those believers abstained from political or union activity, rejected public referenda, and materially supported their activity by means of parcels of food and other provisions from abroad (BA Bartel, p. 24).

Those reports seem to indicate clearly that the meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses attracted huge public attention, to the detriment of the political activities of the SED. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses were misjudged as political rivals in the fight for the allegiance of the masses. Quite possibly the exact number of religious adherents was overestimated.

As chairman of the SED Pieck himself took over the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, issuing a 'board decision about the activity of religious sects' during a

meeting of the most important party organ at that time, the Central Secretariat (*Zentralsekretariat*), on 14 September 1948, at which Pieck's SED co-chairman, Grotewohl, was also present. Point 12 of the protocol reads: 'Within a very brief period, a brochure is to be compiled about the reactionary political activity of sects that align themselves against the progressive forces, the democratic constitution and the Soviet Union' (BA Zentralsekretariat, p. 2). This decision was one of the first central decisions of the SED aimed at combating the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses when the authorities had realised that the adherents of this religious organisation were strictly neutral towards socialism and refused to participate in political organisations, petitions for a referendum or elections. The SED Central Secretariat commissioned the so-called *Kommissariat K5* (a predecessor of the Stasi, the Ministry of State Security) with the new task of surveillance of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the SOZ. On 22 September 1948 Bruno Haid, a member of the SED Central Secretariat Department for Personnel Policy, wrote to Erich Mielke, the vice-president of the German Administration of the Interior (DVdI) and later minister of State Security, asking him to forward all material about the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses and about all political agitation on their part (BStU Bruno Haid, p. 7). Reports once again showed that Jehovah's Witnesses congregated and talked about the rapid approach of God's Kingdom but not about engaging in politics. On 6 December 1948 the head of the Thuringian K5 Department reported:

According to the reports received it is noticed that in these meetings no antidemocratic propaganda takes place, but it is clear that because of the negative attitude of this sect towards all public issues, the recruited ones – and these are not old women, as one may assume, but mostly members of the working population – are lost for our purposes. (BStU K5 Thüringen, p. 19)

Exactly this kind of neutrality and political abstinence, however, prompted the SED leaders to categorise Jehovah's Witnesses as dangerous and among the enemies of socialism. Although the SED was still interested in maintaining an illusion of religious freedom it tried to accuse Jehovah's Witnesses of subversive tendencies. On 13 September 1949, just before the establishment of the GDR as a state, the highest SED committee, the Politburo under the chairmanship of Pieck and Grotewohl, decided to take radical public measures against the Jehovah's Witnesses (BA ZK Politbüro). The subject was introduced by Walter Ulbricht, later general secretary of the SED, who declared that the Jehovah's Witnesses, a 'sect under American influence', were a foreign body in the GDR, and that they opposed the progress of socialism through their activities, which were hostile towards reconstruction.

The behaviour of 'Jehovah's Witnesses' within the Soviet Occupation Zone shows even more clearly that this organisation is an especially subtle means of propaganda of American monopolism. In some cases it has even been noticed that this organisation has been used for espionage. At the same time, the number of members of this organisation has increased rapidly within the last few months, as can be noted particularly in the democratic mass organisations (the DFD [Democratic Women's Society] and the FDJ [Free German Youth]), and to some extent even in the Party itself. (BA ZK Politbüro, enclosure 2)

An operation plan was set up to contain the activities of the Witnesses and to influence the public against them. The first paragraph about the planned measures reads:

All concrete proof about the American, imperialistic propaganda of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' must immediately be exposed by the press and on the radio. The Ministerial Departments of Culture and Education and of Mass Agitation, as well as the Ministerial Department of Women and Youth Affairs, are instructed to keep careful track of the movements of 'Jehovah's Witnesses' and to make the material continually available to the press and the radio. All this propaganda should not deal with the religious problems of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses', but should fight only the political consequences or the political statements of this American imperialistic propaganda. (BA ZK Politbüro, enclosure 2)

Newspaper articles began appearing, for example in the main party mouthpiece *Neues Deutschland*, in which Jehovah's Witnesses were labelled among other things 'Witnesses of Wall Street'<sup>2</sup> or later in many other newspapers as 'agents of American monopolism' (see for example Agenten, 1950). Systematic proceedings by the *Volkspolizei* (People's Police) to disrupt and prohibit Witness activities, meetings and assemblies spread throughout the GDR, accompanied by short-term arrests. In February 1950 the Jehovah's Witnesses, and particularly their headquarters, the Bible House in Magdeburg, tried to draw attention to this deplorable state of affairs by means of a lengthy petition to the GDR leadership entitled *Petition zur Gewährleistung wahrer Gottesdienstfreiheit* (*Petition for the Guarantee of True Freedom of Worship*). Several examples of propagandistic actions by the authorities, the press and other organisations against the Witnesses were cited, and the petition concluded with the remarkable statement that 'all over the world Jehovah's Witnesses are the touchstone for the existence of true democracy' (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, pp. 211ff.).

In the summer of 1950 the GDR government was preparing for the first elections in the newly-independent state, to be held in the middle of October. It was foreseeable that Jehovah's Witnesses as a whole would not participate in these elections, and the government feared that the Witnesses would try to stop others from participating – all the more so since many other citizens and church members were sceptical for purely political reasons about the forthcoming election of the newly-founded bloc party under the guidance of the SED, the National Front (*Nationale Front*). (Some reports gave the National Front a membership twice its actual figure.) The government needed 'acceptable' reasons to eliminate the Witnesses in order to avoid giving the impression that religious persecution was involved; but as documents now reveal, the evidence that the Witnesses were enemies of the state was poor. What was presumably the last report by the main police department in East Berlin before the ban on the Witnesses contains information about an increase in 'agitation and assembly' by the Witnesses and about some minor irregularities like the distribution of unlicensed literature and alleged agitation against the peace movement. The report repeats the suspicion of espionage, based solely on the reason that the headquarters of the Witnesses was located in the United States; but it goes on frankly to admit that so far the police had had no proof of espionage or of any activities by Witness agents (BA HVDVP, pp. 140 ff.).

### **The Ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Show Trial of 1950**

A short time later, however, on 30 August 1950, there was a lightning action of arrests of some 400 leading Witness preachers by the Ministry of State Security (Stasi) throughout the GDR (BStU MfS HA XX/4 825, p. 46). (By the end of 1950 the number was well over 800 arrests.) On the same day the Stasi raided the Bible House in Magdeburg; 27 Witnesses were arrested and the whole complex confiscated.<sup>3</sup> Only one day later, on 31 August 1950, the GDR's minister of the interior, Steinhoff, wrote a letter to the 'German branch office of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society' in Magdeburg notifying them that the Witnesses had been removed from the list of registered religious organisations and were henceforth banned:

The activity of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' over in the past 10 months proves clearly that they are misusing the name of a religious community for unconstitutional purposes. They have pursued systematic agitation against the existing democratic order and its laws under the guise of religious meetings on the territory of the German Democratic Republic and Greater Berlin. Furthermore, they have repeatedly imported and distributed illegal publications, the content of which violates the Constitution of the German Democratic Republic and undermines efforts to maintain peace. At the same time, it has been established that the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' have served as spies for an imperialistic power. (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, p. 287)

Although the ban was issued on 31 August 1950 the public was not informed until a week later. In the meantime newspapers published defamatory articles against Jehovah's Witnesses, along with alleged resolutions from the working population (Dirksen, A., 2003, pp. 83 ff.). *Neue Zeit* wrote: 'We believe that in all the religious history of mankind there have never been such "preachers" who have agitated so ruthlessly for war. This agitation appears especially ruthless if it is done as openly as in our Republic' (Propagandisten, 1950). In East Berlin the *Berliner Zeitung* agitated:

The activities of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' unrestrictedly serve the enemies of our democracy; they are busy accumulating victims, who wish for their own suicidal destruction, for the war of atomic extermination waged by American imperialism. Their extensive literature comes from the USA zone and their sources of money are to be found in the USA. The leaders and instigators of this religiously glossed organisation are enemies of mankind and our own safety demands that we take this into account. (Apostel, 1950)

Not until 5 September 1950 was news of the ban and of the wave of arrests first published in newspapers (Jehovas, 1950a, 1950b; Zeugen, 1950). (This is the reason why in almost all later references 4 September 1950 is given as the date when the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in the GDR.) Because the SED did not want to appear hostile to religion in any way just before the elections in October 1950, the ban was afterwards said to have been introduced at the 'working people's request'.

Meanwhile the Witnesses in detention were subjected to psychological torture by means of attrition. Lights were left on all night, and nightly checks were constantly carried out so that the captives could not sleep. During the night they would be called for interrogations which often lasted until the morning roll-call. When they were taken

back to their cells their beds would have been folded back and locked. During the day it was strictly forbidden to sleep; the prisoners were to have time to think about their crimes. Some Witnesses who were considered especially dangerous were locked in dark cells for months during the preliminary investigations. Some Witnesses, like Erich Poppe from the city of Meissen, even died as a result of mistreatment during detention by the Stasi (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, p. 283).

A problem for the authorities was that they could not be sure that the courts would sentence Jehovah's Witnesses in accordance with their wishes. The chief state prosecutor of Saxony-Anhalt in Halle, for example, raised the question as to whether it would be useful to conduct such trials at all, since Jehovah's Witnesses were well known and would be likely to be seen as martyrs (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003b, pp. 299ff.). It was therefore decided that the prosecutor general of the GDR, Ernst Melsheimer, would hold an impressive show trial at the Supreme Court of the GDR in East Berlin which could serve as a model for all subsequent trials in regional courts. For this purpose a number of detained Witnesses were transferred to East Berlin. The Stasi was responsible for all investigations and for writing the investigation report. No public prosecutor or any juridical organ played any part in this investigation. After the close of the investigation the minister for state security, Wilhelm Zaisser, personally handed over the completed charge against nine leading Jehovah's Witnesses (BStU Aktion Zeugen Jehovas 1) to the chief public prosecutor of the GDR who practically adopted it word for word and forwarded it to the Supreme Court for the filing of an indictment. The introduction read:

All persons charged are members of the so-called Watchtower Bible and Tract Society which has its seat in Brooklyn/USA and who call themselves 'Jehovah's Witnesses'. This organisation tries to give the impression of being a religious organisation and of dealing only with religious matters. Investigations though have proven that this organisation is a cleverly disguised espionage organisation of American imperialism at whose order the widely branched suborganisations of the Watchtower Society operate. (BStU Aktion Zeugen Jehovas 2)

The infamous Hilde Benjamin, vice-president of the Supreme Court of the GDR and later minister of justice, was appointed chairwoman of the trial. Shortly after she had been handed the charge she and two associate judges from her criminal division set the dates for the trial: 3 and 4 October 1950. It became obvious that neither the chief public prosecutor's office nor the Supreme Court had attempted to check the investigations or the evidence that had been collected by the Stasi; their assumption was evidently that everything was in order (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, pp. 319ff.). On 4 October, after the evidence and witnesses had been heard, the Witnesses were sentenced to terms of between eight years and life imprisonment for alleged espionage, warmongering and boycotts.

The list of reasons for the sentences starts with a declaration that reactionary circles in the West are inspired by hatred toward the creative endeavours and success of the German people in the GDR. In order to disrupt these efforts they will make use of organisations to carry out espionage and subversion against the GDR; one such organisation is the Jehovah's Witnesses. There follows a lengthy enumeration of the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, describing them as unlawful and without religious foundation. Without proof Jehovah's Witnesses are declared agents of the West and condemned as criminals. The basis for the sentences was article 6 of the GDR

Constitution of 1949, which thereby was established as the main legal instrument to convict all political dissidents and alleged opponents of the GDR. This was combined with directive 38 of the Allied Control Council, which permitted further sanctions like the withdrawal of civil rights and liberties (*Verlust der Ehrenrechte*) and the loss of all possessions.<sup>4</sup> This trial before the Supreme Court of the GDR thus established an infamous new instrument for dealing with political enemies.<sup>5</sup> It became in particular the basis for a wave of hundreds of trials against Jehovah's Witnesses that were held in almost all higher regional courts throughout the GDR over the next decade.

### **New Methods Used by the Stasi**

In the aftermath of the ban many Witnesses lost their jobs. Stern-Radio-Leipzig, for example, dismissed 'Georg Br.', a Jehovah's Witness, on 10 October 1950 on the following grounds: 'Your undemocratic behaviour forces us to terminate your employment immediately.' In this case 'undemocratic' meant not participating in elections and not voting (copy of the dismissal document and a letter to him, in possession of the author). The Witnesses were also denied further recognition as victims of fascism, and thus lost the personal pension granted to all former concentration camp inmates. A difficult time thus began for those Witnesses who had not been arrested. Leading preachers and many Witnesses who had already gained experience under National Socialism had been arrested and convicted. Many of those Witnesses who now took the lead in the group had become Jehovah's Witnesses only a few years earlier and did not have much experience of underground work. They nevertheless courageously continued their underground activity. They sent couriers to West Berlin who would pick up magazines such as *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, as well as instructions for the religious services, and would deliver these to the individual groups. Preaching activity continued to be carried out clandestinely. Whoever was caught had to expect to be arrested and sentenced to long-term imprisonment. Couriers, group leaders and regional leaders (so-called 'circuit servants')<sup>6</sup> who were arrested could expect sentences of 10–15 years in prison.

It soon became clear to the authorities that the show trials initiated in August 1950 were not really going to restrict the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The *Volkspolizei* regularly reported on continuing Witness activities, and now that these took place underground the Stasi could no longer determine who was taking the lead in the individual groups. Erich Mielke, who was now in a position of senior responsibility in the Ministry of State Security, therefore decided as from 1951 to place the emphasis on infiltrating Jehovah's Witness groups with secret collaborators (*Geheime Mitarbeiter* (GM)) as informants (*Dienstanweisung*, 1951).

The Stasi had employed informants earlier, but now it organised the operation on a much wider scale. It instituted so-called Operational Proceedings (*Operative Vorgänge* (OV)) to coordinate and guide the observation of the individual groups. These methods produced some results: the Stasi was now in a better position to expose the leading preachers, especially the circuit servants, and have them arrested. Whenever a leading preacher was arrested, however, someone else immediately took over his function and the Stasi had to start all over again. From 1956 on, the Stasi therefore used an additional tactic against the Witnesses: 'The goal of the operation is to create insecurity and divisions within the sect. This is to achieve disintegration of the sect of "JW" from within. These methods have proved successful in certain districts, so that the members are suspicious of each other' (BA ZK Arbeitsgruppe Kirchenfragen). The Stasi tried to compromise some leaders in the eyes of their fellow-believers and



thereby create insecurity and suspicion amongst them. In addition it wanted to give the Witnesses in the GDR the impression that the branch offices in the West were only using them and that they were not looking after their interests or showing concern for their well-being. The Stasi also tried to gather together former Jehovah's Witnesses in order to create a so-called opposition to this religious organisation which would produce publications in which the teachings and the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses were to be reviled (Hirsch, 2000, pp. 53ff.). It had recruited those former Jehovah's Witnesses before their release from prison or amongst those who had left the organisation of their own accord.

### **The Berlin Wall**

From the early 1960s the process of destalinisation meant that the hardline policy of arrests and convictions of Jehovah's Witnesses could no longer be maintained. Foreign policy demanded that the GDR could not afford to be seen to be practising religious persecution. The policy of 'inner disintegration' (*Innere Zersetzung*) thus became an even more important element in the struggle against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

This was accompanied with a substantial change in the circumstances of the Witnesses beginning with the building of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961. Since the Berlin Ultimatum by Khrushchev in 1958, that unless the western armed forces were withdrawn from Berlin he would put all roads into West Berlin under the direct charge of the GDR administration, Jehovah's Witnesses had been anxious in case their supply routes to West Berlin would one day be cut off. From 1959/60 they had therefore begun to make arrangements by establishing an extra body of leaders for the Witnesses within the GDR who would ensure that contacts with the branch office in West Germany and the supply of religious literature would not be interrupted. Three top leaders were chosen, and the GDR was divided into five districts, each with its own leader; these had assistants for the individual circuits in their district. The Witnesses were thus well prepared when the building of the Berlin Wall began.

Since religious literature could no longer be smuggled in from West Berlin it was decided to start copying it in the GDR from microfilm or specimen copies of the latest magazines. At first the copying was done on typewriters; later simple printing methods were used; and finally the Witnesses were able to obtain their own simple copying and printing machines, which facilitated and increased productivity.<sup>7</sup> All this was performed under the oversight of the body of leaders in the GDR.

### **The ZOV 'Swamp'**

After only a short while the Stasi realised that the Witnesses had appointed a new leadership in the GDR. In March 1963, therefore, they launched a new 'Central Operative Procedure' (*Zentraler Operativer Vorgang* (ZOV)) under the codeword 'Swamp' (*Sumpf*) in order to find out who the leaders were and in which areas they were active (BStU ZOV Sumpf, p. 9). The goal was to arrest and convict the leaders. By November 1965 the Stasi had identified some members of the leadership with the help of unofficial collaborators (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IM)), but still did not know exactly how many members made up the leadership body. The aim of the Stasi this time was not only to infiltrate the organisation with IMs, but specifically to prepare the latter for taking up responsible positions so that they could possibly take over the whole leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR.

On 23 November 1965 the Stasi was ready. Local Stasi authorities arrested 17 leading Jehovah's Witnesses in Dresden, Erfurt, East Berlin and Halle and interrogated them for several months. The preliminary proceedings were summarised and eight criminal trials were held in various district courts. The series began in 1966 with the main trial, that of the leading Witness and two co-defendants, in the district court of Dresden. The trial lasted six days, and on 5 August the Witnesses were sentenced to 8–12 years in prison (BStU BG Dresden). They were accused of maintaining the supply of religious literature, of reporting on preaching activity to the branch office of the Jehovah's Witnesses in West Berlin, of transferring information and of engaging in agitation and propaganda endangering the state. The basis for this sentence was no longer article 6 of the Constitution but a criminal law amendment act of 1958. On 12 December 1966 the last sentence in the series was passed by the Halle district court against three Witnesses who were sentenced to 5–10 years in prison (BStU BG Halle). Despite these sentences the Witnesses carried on with their religious activities in an organised way.

From 1967, as a result of the political situation, Witnesses were no longer convicted for their religious activities. However, their preaching work and the distribution of their literature were still viewed with hostility and the Stasi looked for excuses to punish them for their activities. From about 1970 Witnesses who were caught preaching were issued with administrative fines in accordance with the administrative offence law of 1968 (Law, 1968). In 1975 a law relating to associations was passed and administrative fines were levied in accordance with this new law (Law, 1975). An administrative fine of about 200–300 Marks was imposed and increased if the Witness was found preaching for a second or third time. According to this law, an individual Witness was active on behalf of an association that was not registered and not permitted. This procedure of punishing Witnesses with fines continued until the collapse of the GDR. The Stasi also adopted the practice of so-called 'preventive talks' (*'Vorbeugegespräche'*) with leading Witnesses in order to intimidate them and to dissuade them from continuing their religious activities. Thus during the later years of the GDR the Stasi still carried on searching for new methods to fight the religious activities of the Witnesses. As a result it was not until 1990 that repressions and persecution of the Witnesses in the GDR stopped and the ban was lifted.

### **Conscientious Objection to Military Service**

On 24 January 1962 a law on compulsory military service was introduced in the GDR (Law, 1962). This proved to be an occasion for further persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. Hardly 20 years had passed since the Witnesses had faced a similar situation in Nazi Germany, where many had paid with their lives. For reasons of conscience, because of their Bible-based views on war and neutrality, young Witnesses decided not to render obedience to the 'superior authorities'. When conscription to the National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee* (NVA)) started in April over 40 Witnesses who refused military service were arrested and convicted. As the numbers of Witness objectors increased into the hundreds, the government began to feel anxious; and when the Protestant Church also took a stand on behalf of Protestant conscientious objectors, a new law was enacted on the 7 September 1964 to allow the possibility of serving in so-called 'construction units' within the army (Law, 1964).

The GDR thus became the only Eastern European country to provide an alternative service that did not involve the use of weapons. However, this alternative service was still organised in a military context. Conscripts in the construction units

had to wear uniforms with spades on their epaulettes and had to vow to defend their country. Most of their work had to be carried out on military facilities, streets or bridges. They had to attend political education and even participate in military drills. Moreover, those in charge of the construction units were officers and soldiers of the NVA. The government authorities believed this to be enough of a concession to conscientious objectors. However, since service in the construction units was under the complete control of the military, the Witnesses did not consider it as a real alternative. Consequently in almost every subsequent year about 200 Witnesses were prosecuted for their refusal to serve. Witness objectors were usually sentenced to one year and eight months in prison. If they had served in the military earlier and had then become Jehovah's Witnesses, they could then be drafted for the reserves. A Witness who refused to serve in the reserves was usually sentenced to six months in prison. While imprisoned, the Witnesses were forced to work hard for various branches of industry, for instance in the chemical industry, often under very poor and unhealthy conditions.

Although these terms of imprisonment cannot be compared with the severe persecution and prison terms of earlier GDR times, the challenge of conscientious objection was one which faced every single young Witness turning 18. The churches in the GDR could approach the state authorities on behalf of their conscientious objectors, but the Witnesses could not do so as their organisation had been banned for years. It was only in 1986 that the policy on drafting Jehovah's Witnesses changed. The reason for this change in policy is not yet fully clear, but it seems to be linked to the desire of the GDR authorities to improve their international reputation. From then on, Witnesses were no longer punished for conscientious objection. The authorities continued to draft them but did not react when they refused. The incarceration of conscientious objectors did not seem fitting in a country trying to develop a good relationship with the West. Since the government hesitated to arrest and convict Protestant or Catholic conscientious objectors because of the significant influence of their churches the Witnesses constituted 45 per cent of all arrested conscientious objectors in the GDR and 90 per cent of those convicted. Altogether at least 2700 Witnesses were sentenced for refusing military service (Dirksen, H.-H., 2004a, pp. 36–39).

### **Long-Term Persecution**

The reasons for 40 years of constant persecution are not easy to evaluate, beginning with the question why the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses was issued. This decision was undoubtedly made at the highest level of party and state, since Walter Ulbricht and his comrades were involved in issuing the decision of the Politburo in 1949. When it became clear in the course of time that the Witnesses could not be forced to stop their evangelising work, a sense of helplessness must have developed. This feeling, accompanied by the false idea that Witnesses were engaged in anti-election propaganda some months before the first elections in the GDR in October 1950, almost certainly caused the SED to react with a round of arrests to serve as an example. This was in fact one of the first extensive Stasi actions performed simultaneously throughout the whole GDR. Then followed the quickly-enacted ban on the Witnesses. In connection with the subsequent condemnation of the Witnesses, the SED had to combat the 'incorrect view' held by the chief public prosecutor's office in Saxony-Anhalt. Only when the prosecutor did not act as the party expected was the decision made to stage a large show trial in the Supreme Court. The show trial itself was a big propaganda success and set the stage not only for the subsequent trials of

imprisoned Witnesses but for all trials of dissenters and political enemies. Until the 1980s the outcome of trials of Witnesses was beyond question, and served as continual reinforcement of the idea that the ban was correct and that the persecution of Witnesses was justified.

Another important circumstance was the fact that after 1950 the Witnesses were categorised as a subversive underground group, a category that needed to be put under strict surveillance by the Stasi (BStU Aktion Zeugen Jehovas 3, p. 75). This meant that no other authority had the right to deal with them or to take measures against them. When the *Volkspolizei*, for instance, gained evidence of Witness activities, the evidence or the name of the persons concerned immediately had to be given to the Stasi; the police were not permitted to investigate on their own. Consequently, no other authority in the GDR had extensive knowledge about the Witnesses and after two or three decades nobody knew very much about them at all. This even included the Stasi itself, so that at least once a year the Stasi commanding officers from East Berlin had to hold local meetings to review results and to explain to junior Stasi members why efforts against this 'dangerous sect' needed to be intensified.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, oblivion for the Jehovah's Witnesses was precisely the aim of the leading Stasi officers, so that they would be marginalised in society. When the Witnesses came into contact with authorities, be it at school, at work or in their preaching activities, only the Stasi could advise the authorities how to act. Occasionally some Jehovah's Witnesses would decide to make contact with the Stasi themselves in the hope of improving the legal status of the Witnesses in the GDR; but an internal Stasi directive ruled that all such conversations were to be used only to promote the process of decomposition within the Jehovah's Witness organisation (BStU MfS HA XX/4 693a, pp. 188, 191 ff).

Even higher administrative authorities in East Berlin had no responsibility concerning the Witnesses. The Bureau of the State Secretary for Religious Affairs (*Staatssekretär für Kirchenfragen*), headed in the 1980s by state secretary Klaus Gysi, which worked directly for the members of the study group at the SED Central Committee responsible for church matters (*Arbeitsgruppe Kirchenfragen am ZK der SED*), had no authority to deal with this religious group. Documents about the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Bureau's archive show that the main function of the Bureau as far as the Witnesses were concerned was to collect facts and reports about them. The archive contains no directives or decisions about how to deal with the Witnesses, however. Once in a while a high-ranking Stasi officer would come to the Bureau, collect new reports about the Witnesses and sometimes give instructions. On every such visit the Stasi officer would make it clear that the Witnesses were a criminal subversive group and not a religion, and that therefore they did not fall within the responsibility of the state secretary for Religious Affairs. Legalising the Witnesses at that time would not have been the business of the Bureau. In 1985 the US Department of State in Washington wanted to exert some pressure to ease the conditions for the Christian Scientists in the GDR. In this context the question of the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses was also raised. State secretary for religious affairs Gysi commented that 'the issue was not what he regarded as a religious question, but their refusal to accept the political authority of the state' (BA Staatssekretär).

Surprisingly even the archive of the study group for church questions at the SED Central Committee itself reveals little material about the Witnesses in the last two decades of the existence of the GDR. In comparison with the massive number of Stasi files this reveals a considerable discrepancy between the level of knowledge about the Witnesses in the Politburo on the one hand and the Stasi – the 'sword and

shield of the party' – on the other. Meanwhile, and in contrast to the early 1950s, the party-state apparatus relied entirely on the secret work of the Stasi, on the assumption that the latter knew best how to deal with the state's main enemies – incidentally not only in this context. It was the habit of the Stasi to persist in activities they regarded as 'historically' correct: what was correct in the past will also be correct in the future. State policy towards the Witnesses, although a very small group, resembled many areas of policy in the GDR. Although the Witnesses had never been a real threat to socialism or to the state itself since they were obedient to the state's law as long as no Christian principles had to be violated, the Stasi nevertheless spent personnel and material resources on keeping them under surveillance, and the idea that they were a centre of political-ideological diversion (*Politisch-Ideologische Diversion* (PID)) was maintained for decades. Since this religious group had been stigmatised as an arch-enemy since the birth of the GDR ('one of the oldest institutions of antidemocratic and anticommunist diversion in the area of Christian religious communities' (BStU MIS HA XX/4 48, p. 59), it was doubtless necessary for the state to continue to persecute them until the breakdown of the GDR. The poor understanding of the true nature of this religious group and the refusal to accept that they were not enemies of the state is typical of lasting misconceptions on the part of the Stasi throughout the history of the GDR. The Stasi and the SED ignored reality, new developments and especially the people. The Stasi failed and the GDR fell because they were not able to recognise what really threatened the existence of the GDR.

Another reason why the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses was never reviewed was a consequence of personnel continuity in the Ministry of State Security. The Stasi department led by Oberst Wiegand had a special section working on the Witnesses headed by Hauptmann Herbrich. He had been on this assignment since the late 1950s and knew much more about the Witnesses than his superiors did. Herbrich's proposals on how to deal with the Witnesses were accepted because everyone knew of his long experience with them. Erich Mielke, the head of the Stasi, had also been in a leading position in 1950 and had himself issued some directives about the Witnesses at that time. There was therefore a long Stasi tradition and personal continuity on this particular issue. Nobody in the party-state apparatus dared to take the initiative to think the case of the Witnesses over or saw the necessity to reconsider the Stasi view of the Witnesses.

Another important consideration is that the Witnesses themselves had no political influence or anyone lobbying on their behalf. As a result of their Christian neutrality in political matters they never tried to obtain influence, as the churches in the GDR did for example. The latter had leverage through their politically significant links with the West. Often churches and religious groups also considered various kinds of compromise; the Witnesses from their biblical standpoint could not do so, and therefore had no possibility of changing the state's view of them. The issue of conscientious objection illustrates the difference. Lothar de Maizière, who in 1990 was the last prime minister of the GDR, had often served as an attorney for Protestant conscientious objectors. The church engaged him to defend these cases in court. He never defended Witnesses, however, because they were not granted attorneys in their military court cases. Furthermore, most church-linked Protestant conscientious objectors were not even drafted, in order to prevent massive church protests against the state's conscientious objection policy. In addition, only utilitarian necessities brought about minor changes in the GDR, as for instance the easing of conditions concerning the Mormons in the 1980s. This change mainly occurred because the state's leader Erich Honecker believed this would improve the relationship with the USA and he hoped to be invited by the US government.

The final feature which ensured that the Jehovah's Witnesses remained a unique case was their determined Christian neutrality. This neutrality involved not participating in the construction of the worker-peasant state and refusing military service. The authorities took advantage of the Witnesses' stance in order to claim that they were not persecuting the Witnesses for their religious beliefs but punishing them because they were using religion for purposes hostile to the state. Another main consideration was of course the fact that the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses was in the United States, 'the main enemy of socialist reconstruction and world peace'. Witnesses were therefore automatically considered to be 'monopolistic capitalists' and 'warmongers'. This view of the Witnesses never changed during the 40 years of the GDR.

## Conclusion

Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR was pursued with great intensity. So far, we have ascertained that about 6000 Witnesses were arrested; of these 4000 were sentenced to prison terms, 15 to life imprisonment. About 325 Witnesses were imprisoned in both Nazi Germany and the GDR (Dirksen, H-H., 2004b). Over 60 Witnesses died in prison; some others shortly after their release from prison (they were usually released prematurely so that the reputation of the prison system would not be adversely affected by their deaths in prison). Innumerable other Witnesses experienced a wide variety of types of repression, such as exclusion from higher education, loss of employment, or simply enervating long-term surveillance (Dirksen and Dirksen, 2002). Nevertheless the persecution of the Witnesses proved the GDR to be an undemocratic state, and moreover an insecure one. The authorities feared all opposition, and organised and maintained the most comprehensive surveillance system in communist Europe, but even this system was not able to guarantee the survival of the state. The assertion that freedom of religion really is a touchstone and an indicator of true democracy turned out to be true in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR.

## Notes

- 1 The text is to be found in Potsdamer, 1984, pp. 182, 187. Paragraph III, point 10 reads: 'Taking into consideration the necessity of upholding military security, freedom of speech, press, and religion are granted. Religious organizations are to be respected.'
- 2 The author of one such article, which appeared in *Neues Deutschland* on 16 September 1949, was Stefan Heymann, a victim of the Nazis himself and a member of the national board of directors of the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (VVN), a body which supported such victims and filed claims for compensation. Heymann had earlier acknowledged the fate of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich as well as their antifascist behaviour.
- 3 BA HVDVP, pp. 158ff: Report of the head of the *Volkspolizei* in Saxony-Anhalt, Paulsen, to the main administration of the German *Volkspolizei* of 2 September 1950. For this report Paulsen could only refer to the statements of the Stasi, since the *Volkspolizei* had not been involved in the action at all.
- 4 It is salutary to note that many of those convicted had already been punished in Nazi times because of their religious beliefs and had been imprisoned in concentration camps. Fritz Adler, for instance, was sentenced in 1935 by a special court in Halle in a similar show trial staged by the Nazis against leading Jehovah's Witnesses (Dirksen, 2003b, pp. 286 ff.).
- 5 Control Council Directive (*Kontrollratsdirektive* (KD)) 38, of October 1946, *Amtsblatt des Kontrollrates in Deutschland*, Berlin, 11, 31 October 1946, pp. 184–90; *Zentralverordnungsblatt*, Berlin, 1947, pp. 203–11. This directive was issued by the Allied Control Council in

order to facilitate the process of denazification in postwar Germany. Anyone who had been a member of the Nazi party was assigned to one of the categories listed in the decree and investigated accordingly.

- 6 *Kreisdienster*: travelling elders who gave spiritual guidance, oversaw the preaching work of the local congregations and maintained contact with the headquarters.
- 7 Information supplied by Johannes Wrobel, Watchtower History Archive, Selters/Ts.
- 8 See for example the coordination consultation carried out by the Ministry of State Security (*Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*), Main Department XX, Subdepartment 4, with members of the Potsdam District Administration (*Bezirksverwaltung* (BV)) on 13 March 1985: 'Of course we sadly have to admit that our reconnaissance results concerning the activities of regional functionaries [of JW] are insufficient, especially with regard to the presentation of evidence. In this respect we really have to be more active' (BSTU MfS HA XX/4 693b, pp. 59 ff.).

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