The Politics of Peace in the GDR: The Independent Peace Movement, the Church, and the Origins of the East German Opposition

by Steven Pfaff

Comparative research offers some insights into the genesis of movements under highly repressive conditions in which dissident groups are systematically denied the organizational and political resources necessary to mount a sustained challenge to the state. During the 1970s and 1980s there were circles of dissidents in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), but most grievances were not expressed in an organized form, and there were few opportunities to mobilize protest against the Communist regime. State repression and party control of society meant that opposition had to be organized within institutions that were shielded from state control. Religious subcultures offered a rival set of identities and values while generally accommodating the demands of the regime. Within the free social space offered by the church, a peace movement developed during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The effort to build an independent citizens’ peace movement based in the church played an important role in linking together various groups committed to nonviolent protest, peace, ecology, and human rights into a coherent, if still organizationally weak, opposition during the East German revolution of 1989.

In the wake of the 1977 declaration of the Czech human rights group, Charter 77, Erich Honecker, the East German head of state, was asked by a Western journalist if the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was also affected by the growing international human rights movement. He replied, “We are not affected and in the GDR there can be no discussion of so-called civil rights activists.”! Honecker had reason to be confident. Compared with its neighbors in socialist Central Europe, the GDR of the 1970s had little organized opposition, and the dissidents it did have were largely disorganized and isolated. Yet a decade later the situation had changed. By the late 1980s a proliferation of social movements had taken place, largely under the institutional umbrella of the Lutheran Church. These groups played an important
role as catalysts in the mobilization of popular protest in the fall of 1989 and
helped to maintain the peaceful character of the revolt against Communism.
What had changed between the late 1970s and the late 1980s? The “anti-
political” dissident intellectuals and their struggle for civil society and human
rights in East Central Europe during the 1970s and 1980s has become a
well-known chapter in the demise of Communism. Despite a widespread
tendency to generalize from Poland, the most influential case, to the rest of
the region, the manner in which these politics unfolded varied considerably
across different states. Opposition movements varied in terms of their social
infrastructure, their strategies and political visions, and their mobilizing
capacity. Even if the degree of organization and ideological rejection of
socialism varied among opposition movements because of the specific institu-
tional environments in which they developed, all were structurally alike in
that they relied on subcultures of opposition, loosely organized groups, and
the limited institutional resources available to dissidents under Communism.
In this essay I explore how social movements pressing for peaceful
change in the GDR arose and how the independent peace movement pro-
vided a set of rhetorics, tactics, and institutional linkages that were crucial to
the emergence of a democratic opposition. As much as the East German dis-
sidents were part of a broader movement throughout Eastern Europe, they
were also shaped by the particular circumstances of GDR socialism, its anti-
fascist political culture, and its relatively high levels of political infiltration
and repression. Extending and redirecting existing studies, I show how the
independent peace movement that arose at the end of the 1970s represents a
bridge between the isolated dissidents of the 1970s and the broader social
movements of the 1980s. The independent peace movement provided a lan-
guage and a practice of pacifism and nonviolent resistance that was well
suited to the political realities of state socialism, as well as drawing on the
institutional resources of the Lutheran Church.

MOVEMENT POLITICS IN A REPRESIVE
POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Formally speaking, one could say that there was no opposition in the GDR. 
As with other Communist regimes, the GDR had effectively monopolized
the resources for social mobilization and denied the legitimacy of any organ-
ized interests outside its control. The regime defined the opposition in very
broad terms, including any forces independent of party control or failing to
conform to official norms. Political criticism, independent association, and
even non-conformity were regarded as seditious and as potential threats to
state security that had to be monitored and sanctioned by the political police. However, for purposes of comparative analysis, not all such activity can be properly considered political opposition. In this essay I focus on the roots of formally and informally organized, ongoing efforts by politically alternative groups to change or influence state policies.

Although the GDR in the Honecker era (1971–1989) no longer engaged in the terror and mass imprisonment of the era of Stalinist repression, it remained one of the most repressive Eastern Bloc states. Thousands of citizens were “ransomed” to the West because of their dissatisfaction with life in the GDR or their political activities, and a few thousand languished in prison for political offenses. The Ministry for State Security (Stasi) mushroomed into an enormous apparatus during the 1970s and 1980s, maintaining dossiers on about six million people and employing tens of thousands of agents and hundreds of thousands of informers. The Stasi tapped telephone lines and routinely read mail. As Klaus Kaden, a Leipzig pastor, explained, fear of arbitrary arrest and Stasi surveillance was a constant worry among activists: “This was an ever present fear somehow; it permeated all walks of life; this haunting fear that you could be arrested anytime, right off the street. The Stasi heard everything, knew everything, were everywhere, and everybody knew that.” Agents infiltrated dissident circles and often compelled participants to report on their activities and accomplices.

Comparative research offers some insights into the genesis of movements under highly repressive conditions in which dissident groups are systemati-
cally denied the organizational and political resources necessary to mount a sustained challenge to the state. Although there were circles of dissidents in the GDR, most grievances could not be expressed publically or reorganized officially. Repression and party control mean that discontent and opposing outlooks were hidden or publicly falsified. Opposition or resistance activities had to be organized either on a conspiratorial, underground basis or within institutions shielded from state control.

In their analysis of the rise of nationalist movements in the Soviet Baltic, Hank Johnston and David Snow have argued that accommodative and oppositional subcultures may help to sustain movements in highly repressive settings. According to Johnston and Snow, subcultures of accommodation may provide an alternative source of identity and values in state socialist regimes, but because the members of these subcultural groups must operate in a context of repression and surveillance and make use of existing institutions, they will usually outwardly conform to the expected norms until provided with opportunities for more public expression of grievances. A more radical challenge may be posed by subcultures of opposition located on the
margins of public life. Members of these subcultures openly criticize the society’s political values and public institutions. They represent what has been called a counterculture in the Western context. Such groups can, given sufficient political opening or organizational shelter, become a source of political opposition in state socialist society. Johnston and Snow argue that, in the context of declining repression and broadened institutional access that accompanies reform, some accommodationist groups may be radicalized into a more defiant opposition. In a context of declining state control, a relatively narrow opposition can become the basis of popular mobilization against the state.\textsuperscript{10}

For Johnston and Snow, the oppositional attitudes that develop within these subcultures can offer a challenge to state control. Dissident communities may create spaces for a broader public discussion of taboo issues or for political criticism. The alternative culture that results from these discussions may promote the spread of cognitive frames that clarify grievances and highlight injustices. If these frames become the foundation of a common political rhetoric and if dissidents can promote the use of symbols that unite diverse grievances, it may help to bring individuals together into a movement.\textsuperscript{11}

In the case of East Germany, the dominant Lutheran Church nourished a subculture that, under the pressure of repression and political marginalization, offered a rival set of identities and values while still generally accommodating the demands of the regime.\textsuperscript{12} Within these church-sheltered movements, attempts were made to focus popular grievances against the regime. In the late 1970s and early 1980s peace issues provided a set of unifying frames that were expanded to include ecology and human rights. The effort to build independent citizens’ movements around these issues played an important role in linking varied groups together into a coherent, if still organizationally weak, opposition during the East German revolution of 1989.

\textbf{THE CHURCH AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DISSENT}

Although the churches endured significant repression for a decade after 1945, the state’s relationship with religious communities began to improve as the regime was consolidated.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, in 1978, the Union of Protestant Churches (BEK) and the government of the GDR reached the accommodationist Church in Socialism agreement. As a result, the church was afforded greater autonomy in exchange for political neutrality. Church officials made assurances that the church was neither “a place of opposition” nor a “disguised opposition party.”\textsuperscript{14} The agreement meant that the church in the GDR was integrated into and at the same time at a critical distance from the Communist
system. As East Germany’s only semi-independent institution, it provided free spaces and ideological differences with the dominant system that the regime’s opponents could exploit.

Dissident groups were allowed to use church facilities, but only so long as they remained within it—no public expressions of dissent were permitted by the church or the state. There was little centralization or universally recognized leadership in the GDR’s dissident milieu, although a common foe and similar political and ethical commitments helped to provide coherence. The Berlin activist, Gerd Poppe, nicely summarized these commitments as a mixture of “demilitarization, democratization, decentralization and self-determination.”15 This loose orientation was reflected in recruitment into the alternative political milieu.

There were several routes into the opposition in East Germany: through sub- and counter-cultures, dissident intellectual circles, church-based organizations, and draft resistance and conscientious objection. The most important routes were church involvement and the experience of conscientious objection to compulsory military service. A striking number of activists in the GDR shared these characteristics and experiences. Many were draft resisters. Many were the children of pastors or came from households where they received religious instruction and became involved in Christian youth organizations. Not only did this set them apart in an officially atheistic society, but those who chose a Christian confirmation over the state-sponsored coming-of-age ceremony (Jugendweihe) were often obstructed in attending university and other higher education, severely limiting their possible career paths. The system of punishments and rewards maintained by the Communist Party (SED), and its ongoing efforts to eliminate or marginalize Christian social and cultural milieux, thus created whole categories of persons who shared common grievances and for whom the route to political opposition was virtually over-determined. These were people who had already paid, very early on, some of the highest costs that the regime ordinarily reserved for those who failed to comply with the system.16

Biographical factors and cohort experiences also clearly mattered in explaining why the churches drew in dissidents. Older Christians who had experienced the Stalinist repression of the 1950s were typically far less willing to confront the state directly than those who had come of age in the relatively “liberalized” climate of the 1970s.17 By the late 1980s, however, people in their twenties and early thirties saw Mikhail Gorbachev as a symbol of hope and the possibility of reforming socialism, and some in their forties and fifties remembered their dashed hopes for the “Prague spring.” For many important GDR dissidents, the disappointments of 1968 marked the first break with
the SED and paved the way for ongoing opposition. The Berlin pastor Rainer Eppelmann emphasized the experience of protesting Warsaw Pact intervention in the summer of 1968: “For a whole range of people ’68 was a very influential experience for the rest of their lives. For the first time they were able to master their fear of the state and its representatives and didn’t give in to it and became more actively engaged. They became GDR citizens capable of resistance.”18 The dissident pastor Christoph Wonneberger, who visited Prague in 1968, explained, “It was impossible to remain quiet . . . I tried to bring all of this to the attention of the public, despite the risks that involved.”19

Furthermore, Christians in the GDR, or those who grew up in religious milieux, were far more likely to hold traditional or “value-conservative” (Wertkonservativ) views at odds with Marxist ideology and the SED’s official anti-fascism. The state, of course, recognized this tendency and discriminated against organized religion while railing against “reactionary clerical circles.” Having long ago grudgingly accepted the country, in spite of their disadvantages, many discontented Christians were more easily brought into confrontation with the state and joined church-based groups as a means of self-expression and personal fulfillment.20 The movement within the church also had the advantage of connecting younger dissidents with a previous generation of opponents from the Christian milieu. In this way, church structures and personnel offered “a certain continuity” with the dissent of the 1950s and 1960s; “the knowledge of earlier church resistance was preserved as well as some bourgeois, national-conservative attitudes.”21 These attitudes and political visions broadened the spectrum of organized political dissidence in the GDR and helped bring the concerns of younger intellectuals to a broader audience.

Conscientious objectors also shared an outsider’s perspective and official discrimination. In the face of considerable opposition, in 1962 the GDR introduced the general military service. Facing unexpected protest from youth and the church, the state agreed to create unarmed construction battalions (Bausoldaten) for conscientious objectors in 1964. Failure to serve in the “National People’s Army” or in the construction divisions was a black mark on a young person’s record that blocked the route to a university education and many desirable career opportunities. By the late 1970s there were a few thousand current and former objectors who composed an important reservoir of support for independent political groups. These objectors created networks for mutual support and played a large role in organizing peace seminars in the late 1970s.
As social movement research has demonstrated in a variety of instances, churches and religious communities usually considered conservative or stabilizing factors can be important resources for movements. This can be understood, in part, because they offer sheltered space for free association and communication, as well as institutional continuity and the faith that helps movements endure through disappointments or periods of abeyance. Often there is an elective affinity between nonviolent protest groups and Christian communities that see political action as an expression of religious conviction and communication with God. In a number of Christian traditions, personal sacrifice and bearing moral witness are seen as important forms of self-transformation, and faith serves to encourage the oppressed. The early stages of the United States civil rights movement and American pacifist movements are good examples of this affinity.

The German Lutheran tradition, for all its historic tendency towards compromise and submission, also provided symbols and rhetorics of resistance stretching from Luther’s defiance at the Diet of Worms to the Barmen Declaration of 1934. In explaining why he saw resistance against the state as an obligation, the activist pastor Christoph Wonneberger echoed Luther: “For me what I did was not only contradiction or protest, rather it was of course always resistance . . . Here I stand and I will not yield; resistance, in this sense.” The Leipzig pastor Klaus Kaden explained the discussion circles for would-be emigrants and political opponents that he created in his congregation: “The gospel of Jesus represented an immense life support for these people. We read the Bible together. . . . We had people who, for the first time in their lives, were holding Bibles in their hands, common people but also intellectuals. And they reflected on their situation through the word of the Bible.” Besides providing faith and potent moral rhetoric, religious communities can often be a source of material resources, publicity, personnel, and extra-local ties and sources of information for activists. In this the East German church was no exception.

Joachim Gauck, a Rostock pastor, explained that there was often an element of opportunism in opposition groups’ relations with the church: “Religious things could not be forbidden. Protest meetings would have been forbidden and so everything had a religious character.” Much of what the opposition groups did under the roof of the church and the rubric of Christian engagement grew from interests and commitments that were not necessarily religious in orientation. Although the majority of Christians took no public action against the regime, they still represented an important reserve of support for dissident movements, first shielding them in their congregations and later joining the emerging civic movement in large numbers. Yet
many of the young people attracted to the message of peace and justice associated with Protestant teachings were often deterred by the church’s bureaucratic rules and conservative posture.

Rainer Hildebrandt has argued that the importance of the Church in the GDR was to provide a space in which people had the “chance to experience honesty” and escape the culture of dissimulation and the pressure to conform.28 However, the institutional importance of the church was not limited to affording opportunities for self-expression and retreat from oppression. Throughout the history of East Germany, only the church offered the resources, alternative ideologies, and cultural traditions that could serve as the foundation for a critical culture and organized opposition. As the sociologist Detlef Pollack has noted, the most important aspect of the church as institution was that its independent communication structures permitted open discussion that was ultimately heard even outside of its walls.29 But the church was not in opposition to the regime, only in tension with it. The Lutheran Church in the GDR thus cannot be seen as the basis of a popular rejection of Communism, but rather as the largest, most important niche in a society of niches into which individuals retreated to escape pressures for conformity and compliance. It was within this niche, whatever its limitations, that the roots of independent social movements took hold.

THE RISE OF THE INDEPENDENT PEACE MOVEMENT IN THE GDR

The late 1970s witnessed growing coordination of opposition to the government. In 1976 intellectuals were startled by the expulsion of the dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann and the suicide of the pastor Oskar Brusewitz to protest militarism in the GDR. The Biermann affair, in which the prominent songwriter was expelled for his criticism of the regime, raised considerable unrest within the SED itself and convinced some that hopes for gradual liberalization within the party were misplaced. In fact, after 1976 unpopular measures undertaken by the SED—especially in questions of military service and instruction—were commonly met with organized opposition of some kind.30 At the same time, the church had established its place as an autonomous institution in socialist society. The changing domestic scene was matched by changing international relations. Détente and the Helsinki process that led to the formal recognition of human rights principles by the socialist regimes offered some space. Czechoslovakia’s Charter 77 movement suggested that regimes might be forced to honor the agreements protecting human rights that they had signed.
Détente, however, gave way to increasing confrontation. In 1980 the Solidarity movement in Poland and the eventual introduction of martial law shook the picture of repressive stability that had prevailed in Eastern Europe. In response to rising Cold War hostility in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet allies were forced to mobilize greater resources for the defense of the Warsaw Pact. This campaign placed enormous political, social, and economic pressures on the GDR. Erich Honecker had affirmed his dedication to bloc politics in 1976 when he told East Germans, “It is our internationalist duty not to let up our revolutionary class consciousness. There is peace because we are strong and well armed.” But the large military expenditures, expansion of military service, and events within the Soviet bloc, especially the Afghanistan intervention, prompted growing calls for cooperation and disarmament within Warsaw Pact nations. In Western Europe, protests against the NATO Euromissile deployment and calls for a “nuclear free zone” in Central Europe resonated on the other side of the Berlin Wall. The emergence of the Green Party in West Germany and the international prominence of peace and ecology issues in the 1980s raised hopes for an end to militarism and provided an alternative model for political organization based on radical democracy and deep ecology.

Owing in large part to the broad, deeply felt abhorrence of war shared by most Germans after World War II, peace initiatives in the GDR received considerable popular support. Pacifism and non-interventionism were also encouraged within the church by official endorsement of “liberation theology” in Latin America, with Nicaragua taken as a symbol of that doctrine. The regime sponsored a host of peace-related organizations and assemblies, but claimed that there was neither a place for nor the “objective need” for an independent, citizen-based peace movement. Government-sponsored campaigns typically contrasted the Soviet Union as a “bastion of peace” with Western militarism and expansion. Indeed, the SED proclaimed socialism itself the true “peace movement” and pursued peaceful coexistence with West Germany, the new cornerstone of its foreign policy. Nonetheless, some East Germans, particularly young people, were increasingly dissatisfied with the limits that official peace groups imposed, especially in view of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As a result, a self-consciously “independent” peace movement began to develop that was critical of the official peace propaganda.

The alternative peace movement in the GDR drew partially on non-conformist currents in the broader (international) youth culture, but was also heavily influenced by Christian pacifist themes and the example of the peaceful U.S. civil rights movement. When the government expanded compulsory military education in 1978, conscientious objectors and practicing Christians
were increasingly drawn into the same critical orbit. Even state-controlled institutions were not immune from the swelling movement. The Communist youth leagues (FDJ) organized “rock for peace” concerts, with East German rock bands making explicit use of pacifist themes and symbols in their lyrics. Critical voices within the party, such as that of the Marxist dissident Robert Havemann, were generally silenced, however, and discussion of politically sensitive issues in the official media was closed off. Whatever support existed for the aims of Havemann and others within the party, no reformist faction took shape within the SED, and critical discussion of the type supported by the activists was banned from open forums. In a letter to independent peace groups, Havemann despaired of official toleration and urged activists to make full use of Western contacts to gain international recognition and get their message across to East Germans through widely available West German TV and radio.34

Despite its hesitation, the church was compelled to support pacifist groups underneath its roof. In 1980 the GDR-wide “Peace Decade” conference met under the slogan *Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen* (“Make peace without weapons”), which was coined by Robert Havemann and the Berlin pastor Rainer Eppelmann. Soon the “peace without weapons” slogan became the unofficial motto of the independent peace movement in the GDR, and was linked with the biblical image of a man beating a sword into a plough.35 The “Swords to Ploughshares” symbol rapidly diffused outside of church circles. By the early 1980s an estimated 100,000 people adopted it and other symbols of the independent peace movement. Associated dissident texts were also widely distributed. Although the regime banned the symbol and the slogan, young people adopted it enthusiastically, sewing it onto coats and parkas as a statement of alternative political awareness.

The defining event of the independent peace movement was the demonstration held in February 1982 to commemorate the anniversary of the 1945 fire-bombing of Dresden. Organized with the help of the Dresden peace group *Wolfspelz* as part of a “Peace Forum” held in Dresden churches, the protest vigil drew some 5,000 people.36 A new self-confidence and self-awareness among activists was plainly evident. The movement was also buoyed by the January 1982 joint Berlin Appeal of Robert Havemann and Pastor Eppelmann calling for the neutralization, disarmament, and eventual reunification of Germany.37 The statement, combined with the subsequent demonstration, was evidence that the peace movement in the GDR now had the organizational and programmatic outlines of a serious movement. Indeed, by early 1983 there were an estimated 100 independent peace groups in East Germany, almost all within the shelter of the church.38 Although
most groups were local in membership and orientation, a few nationwide organizations also developed to unite disparate activists. Among these were *Frieden konkret* (“Concrete Peace”), founded in 1983, and *Frauen für den Frieden* (“Women for Peace”), organized in 1982.

Nevertheless, there were clear limits to what the church was able or willing to tolerate. The church was ultimately forced to call for an end of the “Swords to Ploughshares” movement because of state charges that it was a “misuse” of pacifist messages and a threat to national defense.³⁹ The proposals of the Dresden pastor, Christoph Wonneberger, for a social work alternative to military service (*Sozialer Friedensdienst*, or SoFD) were denounced by the regime and repudiated by the church. Under political pressure church officials in Saxony forced Pastor Wonneberger to abandon his proposals. Wonneberger’s subsequent transfer to Leipzig, although aimed at neutralizing his political influence, proved to have fateful consequences when he reorganized the “Peace Prayer” services in Leipzig churches and encouraged the formation of dissident groups under church protection.⁴⁰

By 1983 the independent peace movement in the GDR had reached a high point. Indeed, its very success at drawing young people into a coherent movement that sought peaceful change, greater freedom, and an end to armed confrontation with the West was considered a threat during a period of rising military confrontation between the two blocs. Moreover, with the deployment of NATO Euromissiles and Soviet SS-20s in the fall of 1983, the East German regime no longer saw a compelling propagandistic benefit in tolerating an alternative peace movement.⁴¹ This, combined with events in Poland that indicated the risks of independent citizen initiatives, resulted in a conservative clampdown by the SED. A wave of repression against the peace movement in 1983–84 disrupted or destroyed about half of all peace groups. Under state pressure many local congregations no longer permitted their rooms and resources to be used by the independent groups. Well-known dissidents could often escape harsh prison sentences, but only by leaving the country for the Federal Republic of Germany. Peace movement members faced dismissal from higher education, occupational discrimination, and other repressive measures, and the church warned young people that it could do nothing to defend them. Church officials called for a retreat from confrontation with the state.⁴²

Although the peace movement declined after 1983, it had given rise to important networks and new organizations, chiefly within the walls of the church. In important ways the peace movement of the early 1980s prefigured the democracy movement at the end of the decade. The same factors that gave rise to movement activity in the early 1980s were present later in the
decade: expanded access to church institutions, the development of protest frames with the capacity to link diverse interest groups and grievances, and a favorable international political context. Within the Church an enduring legacy of the peace movement was the importance of youth ministries in encouraging politically alternative groups. After the experience of the independent peace movement and its struggle against the militarization of society, the church began to assume a more critical distance from the party and the state. Theological seminaries in Naumburg, Leipzig, and East Berlin played an important role as think tanks for the peace movement and for the subsequent development of human rights activism. Even if peace activism was discouraged, many activists and pastors spun off onto other issues.43 Thus, one enduring consequence of the peace movement for the subsequent development of opposition was that “increasingly a portion of the opposition was firmly installed in the church.”44 The second was that the norms associated with the peace movement, including nonviolence, tolerance, and reconciliation, were widely diffused within dissident subcultures. This proved an important factor in setting the tone of the revolution of 1989, especially during the tense early weeks in September and October.

BEYOND THE PEACE MOVEMENT: THE QUESTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

In 1985 the members of the Friedrichsfelder Friedenskreis, a Berlin-area peace group, wrote to church officials: “In the peace movement consciousness regarding the close relationship between peace and human rights is growing. Many experiences of the last few years demonstrate that the goals of peace work are dependent on basic democratic rights and freedoms.”45 Still, the embrace of human rights issues by dissident intellectuals and social movements remained tentative. In the mid-1980s only a handful of intellectuals and activists were trying to organize human rights groups, despite the prominence of such groups in neighboring countries. Indeed, it was largely the result of disappointments with other social movement issues that eventually created interest in more directly political challenges to the regime.

In the late 1980s the diverse and largely uncoordinated challenges posed by new movements and lifestyles were given greater political resonance with the growing focus on human rights and democratization as the cutting edge of political dissidence. From the mid-1980s on, the growth of human rights and ecology groups was encouraged by events within the Soviet bloc: the continued struggles for Solidarity in Poland, the rise of Gorbachev, and the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences all encouraged a broader challenge
to “really existing socialism” and its political and economic models. Responding in part to the Polish, Hungarian, and Czech dissidents and in the wake of the Helsinki accords on human rights, East German intellectuals began to recognize the centrality of basic human rights and political pluralism as the foundation of a more open society. The “Gorbachev factor” encouraged hopes for democratic reform throughout the region, with deep resonance in the GDR where the Honecker regime explicitly rejected glasnost and perestroika.

Influenced by human rights activists in Eastern Europe and frustrated by the limits of church-based activism, Berlin-based intellectuals formed the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights (Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte, or IFM) in 1985–86, a group committed to the struggle for democratization and the development of an alternative public sphere. After church authorities canceled a planned human rights conference in 1985, human rights advocates felt pushed out of the church. In hopes of improving socialism, the IFM demanded democratic freedoms, human rights, demilitarization, and a reform dialogue with the regime. This represented an important step in the development of a coherent political opposition in the GDR. Influenced by dissident groups in East Central Europe, particularly Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the IFM played a key role in inspiring the “second public sphere” (zweite Öffentlichkeit) in the GDR, particularly through its own samizdat newsletter. As a result of a shifting focus away from issues of peace and disarmament towards issues of environmental accountability and human rights, the social movement field in East Germany became far more diverse. By 1989 only about 25 percent of independent groups in Leipzig worked primarily on issues of peace and militarism, and in the GDR as a whole such groups composed only 35 percent of all organizations by mid-1989.

Leipzig, the GDR’s second-largest city and a center of opposition activity in the late 1980s, is an interesting case of how a democracy movement began to emerge that was clearly rooted in earlier activist experiences and institutional linkages growing out of the peace movement. The Leipzig peace prayers that provided the rallying point for the peaceful revolutionaries of 1989 were initiated in September 1981 at the downtown St. Nicholas Church during the height of the independent peace movement. The first demonstration in connection with the St. Nicholas Church took place in 1983 when peace prayers against the deployment of NATO missiles spilled into the streets outside the church. In 1987 Pastor Wonneberger, banished from Dresden for his peace activism there, took over the direction of the prayers and gave youthful activists a role in organizing the services and deciding their thematic content. Quickly becoming the center of the alternative
political scene in Leipzig, the regular Monday evening peace prayers resisted pressure from state and church officials to neutralize their content or banish them from the city center.48

It was also under Wonneberger’s encouragement that the first explicitly pro-democratic human rights group was founded in Leipzig. Wonneberger explained that the turn to human rights activism in the late 1980s came partially out of his frustration with the limited political vision of alternative groups in the GDR and his disappointment with the failure of the peace movement. For Wonneberger, the embrace of human rights themes was a necessary step in the direction of “practical politics.” By then he had come to see democracy and human rights in the GDR as the basic question underlying all of the relatively ineffective pressure for reform in East Germany. Likewise, Uwe Schwabe, a young activist in Leipzig’s environmental groups, helped to organize the more politically confrontational IG Leben (“Initiative for Life”) group because he saw demands for social change as inextricably linked to issues of democracy and human rights. The example of the East European dissidents provided powerful lessons for Wonneberger and others persuaded by the struggle for human rights.49

The organizational structure of the oppositional subculture was a loosely bound, diverse field of affinity groups. Most of the dissident groups were founded in the mid- to late-1980s, and their reliance on the church is evident in the role of pastors, theology students, and activist lay members in organizing and hosting these groups. All were small-scale groups, the largest consisting of no more than a few dozen members, and many of the activists had overlapping affiliations with several groups. This means that there were no more than a few hundred people active in the city’s alternative political culture, with a hard-core group of perhaps sixty activists. Some of these groups were well infiltrated by Stasi informants. In one group, “Hope for Nicaragua,” there were, according to Stasi reports, only about fifteen members, of whom three were informers.50

The focus of these groups was shifting to human rights advocacy and the struggle for democracy in the surrounding region of Saxony as well. Among the roughly 85 alternative political groups throughout the region that met at a church-sponsored conference in March 1989, the turn towards human rights and democracy activism was clear. Streiflichter reported that human rights themes provided new links among ecology and environmental protection, peace and disarmament, and Third World solidarity.51 A Stasi analysis of June 1989 estimated that the opposition in the entire GDR consisted of about 2,500 people who belonged to some 160 politically alternative groups. Some sixty “hard-core,” “fanatical” political activists led these groups.52 Until
the unexpected revolution of October 1989, independent movements in the GDR remained politically criminalized and socially marginal. In short, despite the limited spaces that had developed for organized dissidence, there was no broad “civil society” arrayed against the state. There was only this loose collection of activists and church-based groups that, in many regards, resembled the new social movements in Western democracies more than they did an organized opposition.53

PEACE MOVEMENTS AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF OPPOSITION

In a variety of settings, activating pre-existing communities has been found to be an essential element in creating a framework for subsequent movement mobilization.54 In East Germany, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the repressive environment meant that a nascent opposition was deprived of many of the organizational resources and communication structures that are a taken-for-granted element of much of the research on movements in liberal polities. Outside of Poland, opposition groups in Central and Eastern Europe were generally composed of loose, informal dissident networks. Recruitment occurred primarily through personal contacts, and movement activity chiefly took place within sheltered niches such as churches, literary and cultural associations, and circles of like-minded acquaintances.

In East Germany the church became a moderator between a disaffected society and an authoritarian state. Although it lacked the institutional, political, and ideological resources to oppose the state directly, the church did provide an umbrella under which independent movements such as the GDR peace movement could develop. One might be tempted to draw parallels between the role of the church in East Germany with that of black churches in the U.S. civil rights movement or the Catholic Church in Poland, but a degree of caution is in order. The East German Lutheran Church was far closer to the state than was the case for black churches in the Jim Crow South or for the Catholic Church in Communist Poland, and it had a far more limited institutional reach. Only a small minority of East Germans held strong religious convictions, and church influence did not extend broadly across social classes and cultural milieux. In short, the alternative cultural infrastructure in East Germany was not as large, or as autonomous, as that which developed in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. And in contrast to the U.S. South, churches neither served as the center of community life nor provided a clear, emancipatory religious ideology.
Nevertheless, without the church, whatever its institutional and ideological limits, the East German dissidents would have gone unheard. Dissidents found space within which to develop a peace movement despite organizational and political pressure. In the context of the “second cold war” of the early 1980s, external conditions proved unfavorable for the development of a mass movement around peace issues in the GDR, although dissidents did succeed in establishing a political voice independent of state control. Dissidents had more success in the late 1980s with the rise of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and the economic deterioration of socialism. The GDR’s independent groups were increasingly drawn into a wider international context where calls for democratization and human rights had greater resonance. But because the GDR’s police agencies continued to repress all organized dissent until the Communist Party was in a state of terminal collapse, the opposition movements were still only embryonic in the fall of 1989. Their success must be measured not in terms of their organizational capacity to challenge the state head-on but rather in articulating and publicizing alternative ideologies and political values at odds with the political monopoly and ideological orthodoxy that were foundations of the Communist system. True to its roots in the independent peace movement, the dissident movement’s insistence on nonviolence helped to ensure that the fall of the Communist regime would be a largely peaceful one.

NOTES

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10. See Johnston and Snow, “Subcultures.”

11. The “master frame” concept can be distinguished from the more micro-oriented framing literature on movement recruitment. In this paper I am referring to the purposeful adoption of broader frames to link grievances and political visions by activists, rather than frames understood as means by which “actual” or “real” grievances are made understandable to movement participants. My own usage is closer to McCarthy’s discussion of successful public issue framing by protest movements. Master frames capable of bridging multiple movements and uniting them in a single

12. The Lutheran Church in East Germany (BEK) had about five million members, representing about 30 percent of the population in 1988. However, the vast majority of these members were passive, and rates of baptism and church attendance were quite low, since East Germany was an officially atheist society with a history of religious discrimination and persecution.


16. How this gradual involvement could occur was made clear in an interview with a Leipzig activist and former theology student. He explained that, as a young man from an observant Christian family, he already knew he was going to be prevented from attending university, so why not also refuse to serve in the army? After he was threatened with imprisonment (but not actually imprisoned) for refusing military service, the threat of imprisonment for his political activism hardly seemed as frightening. And so it went from there. Rainer Müller, interview by the author, Leipzig, July 15, 1998.


25. Quoted in Philipsen, *We Were the People*, 145.

26. As Eppelmann explained: “With the construction of the Wall, I know directly that the Lutheran Church established a regular network of contacts between Eastern and Western congregations . . . there were a few cases of congregations in which that was constant, where such contact was active for the whole period from 1961 to 1989.” See Eppelmann, interview, 7–8.


30. See Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR*; also Fricke, “Politische Strafjustiz im SED-Staat.”


35. Of course, this symbol and the religious sentiment associated with the Book of Isaiah have been widely employed throughout the world. In the USA, radical pacifists even dubbed vandalism of US weapon systems and the military equipment “Isaiah actions” as they literally tried to “beat swords into ploughshares” (Epstein, Political Protest and Cultural Revolution, 200–01). This is another example of the potency of religious symbols and rhetoric in a diversity of settings.


38. See Neubert, Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 464.


41. To cite one example, in September 1983 during a meeting between former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, East German Bishop Forck, and SED Chairman Honecker, Schmidt urged toleration towards the independent movements in the GDR, reminding Honecker that these people were “unthreatening romantics” and that it “made a good impression” for the state to tolerate them. Honecker politely demurred, and the repression was stepped up. Recounted in Neubert, Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 485.

42. See accounts in Neubert, Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 238–41; also in Friedensbewegung in der DDR, ed. Büscher, Wensierski, and Wolschner, 290–92.
43. Pacifism and like concerns within the Church led to formation of a number of environmental and women’s groups in the GDR. Seminarians at the Protestant Theological Seminary in Leipzig, for example, founded AG Umweltschutz (Working Group for Environmental Protection) in 1982, which produced the important samиздат newsletter, Streiflichter, in the mid-1980s.

44. See Neubert, Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 497.

45. Ibid., 598.


49. Christoph Wonneberger and Uwe Schwabe, interview with author, Leipzig, June 8, 1998; see also Wonneberger, “Ich habe immer tun müssen, was ich für richtig hielt.”


