



Christian Science in East Germany: The Church that Came in from the Cold

Dr. Gregory W. Sandford

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Christian Science as a religious denomination was banned and persecuted under the Nazis, reinstated under the Soviet Military Administration in eastern Germany after World War II, and then once again forbidden to organize by the new East German state (German Democratic Republic, or GDR) in 1951. Reasons for this decision were first the alleged danger to public health posed by its spiritual healing activities and second its close American connections. Over the following decades, despite persecution by the East German secret police ("Stasi"), small groups of Christian Scientists continued to meet in private homes, disguising their religious gatherings as birthday parties or similar social events. They also found various ways to smuggle in Christian Science literature they needed for informal religious services and to carry on spiritual healing. There were occasional arrests, interrogations, and even rare prosecutions, but these isolated underground activities went on without serious interruption. Efforts by East German Christian Scientists to get the 1951 decision reversed, supported from a distance by the Mother Church in Boston, were repeatedly rebuffed during the 1960s and '70s. Official attitudes began to moderate in the mid-1980s, however, as a result of the evolving international climate, personnel changes in the State Secretariat for Church Affairs, the growth of dissident activities within mainstream GDR churches, and the intercession of the U.S. Embassy in East Berlin. Parallel with more conciliatory policies toward other religious minorities such as Mormons and Jews, GDR authorities came to see Christian Scientists as an inoffensive minority whose toleration might actually improve East Germany's image. With the active support of the Ministry for State Security, they were granted special permission to receive religious literature from Boston in 1985. Later, a week before the Berlin Wall opened in 1989, Christian Science was officially recognized as a legal denomination—the only such recognition ever formally granted by the GDR government to a new religious organization. The concessions made to Christian Science illustrate the degree to which the GDR in its final days was willing to compromise ideology in hopes of gaining stability and legitimacy. Seen objectively, it seems inconsistent for a regime committed to an atheist philosophy to accept spiritual healing as a safe alternative to medicine. The decision to recognize Christian Science appears to have been influenced not only by political considerations, however, but also by the positive impression made by the character and quiet determination of the Christian Scientists themselves. In that respect, the tiny community of Christian Scientists made their own contribution to East Germany's "gentle revolution."

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