

**“CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIALISM ARE NOT OPPONENTS”:  
The Propaganda Offensive in Berlin-Brandenburg under Soviet Occupation Concerning  
‘Religious Freedom’ under Communism**

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### **Introduction**

The “religious freedom” propaganda campaign in Soviet-occupied Germany served to illustrate the complexity of the religious policies of the SVAG (*Sovetskoe Voennoe Administratsii v Germanii*-Soviet Military Government in Germany) and SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*-Socialist Unity Party of Germany) authorities. This policy demonstrated the numerous contradictions between SVAG and SED designs towards the Churches as opposed to what they proclaimed in their propaganda. Both the SVAG and the SED moved to restrict the activities of the Evangelical and Catholic Churches in the areas of religious education and to a lesser extent with religious charitable work. They also sharply attempted to prevent any collaboration between the Churches and the CDU (*Christliche Demokratische Union*-Christian Democratic Union) in the Soviet zone. At the same time when socialism was created in Germany under SED leadership they proclaimed that full religious freedom would be honored.

This essay will analyze how effective the propaganda campaign was at winning over Evangelical and Catholic clergy to the support of, or at least non-opposition to, the SVAG and SED authorities. It will also address what the implications of the propaganda campaign success for future Church-State relations in the GDR were, and how the actual reality of SVAG and SED religious policies contrasted with their propaganda claims. The methods by which the Communists attempted to win over certain religious leaders have not been discussed extensively in the existing historiography during the period of the Soviet occupation. This essay will examine these issues more extensively than in the previous historiography of the period of the Soviet occupation, when the roots of the substantial accommodation between the Evangelical and SED in the late 1960s, known as *Kirche im Sozialismus*, were established.

The propaganda of the SVAG and SED to prove complete religious freedom was possible under Stalinist-style socialism was false, despite the limited compromise made between Stalin and the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943. The vicious persecutions of Churches in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe after the Second World War proved these claims were fraudulent from the beginning. The propaganda campaign in the Soviet zone, just as everywhere else in Eastern Europe, was initially formed to dupe gullible elements of Eastern Europe’s population during the delicate period in the first few years after 1945 when the Communist parties had not yet assembled sufficient strength to seize power.

There was also a second, more important reason for this propaganda campaign. The SVAG and the SED did not print articles in *Tägliche Rundschau* or *Neues Deutschland* attesting to religious liberty in the Soviet Union or invite Evangelical and Catholic clerics to visit Orthodox Churches in Soviet Russia merely to convince them to drop any opposition to the creation of Stalinist-style socialism in the Soviet zone. It was also part of a long-term project begun by the Soviet authorities and continued by SED’s political police, the Stasi, after the founding of the GDR to recruit clergy and clerical staff from the Evangelical and (to a far lesser extent) the Catholic churches with the

intention of undermining them from within, as well as to prevent collaboration between the two Churches in resisting the GDR's policies. This propaganda offensive began almost immediately after the beginning of the Soviet occupation. The SVAG's Propaganda/Information administration and, in particular, its leader, Colonel Sergei Tiulpanov, played the central role in this process.<sup>1</sup> The SED would not engage in this propaganda offensive until shortly before the zonal elections of October 1946, largely due to controversies among the SED leadership concerning exactly what its religious policies should be. It would not be until the end of the Soviet occupation that the SED would finally take the lead role in this process in Berlin-Brandenburg. By this time, SVAG had turned to producing anti-religious propaganda of a "scientific-atheistic" character, while both it and the SED had turned to portraying the "progressive" Evangelical Church as a partner in rebuilding German democracy as opposed to the "reactionary" Catholic Church

In the Soviet zone of Germany this took a special significance regarding the Evangelical Church, since it was still formally linked with the Evangelical Churches in the Western zones. This gave the propaganda campaign a unique importance. SED party leaders as well as Tiulpanov believed that if they were able to influence prominent Evangelical religious leaders in the Soviet zone, this could in turn allow them to influence the actions of religious leaders in the western zones of Germany. At the very least, these policies would drive a wedge between clerical "progressives" and "reactionaries" in the Soviet zone and limit the Evangelical Churches' capacity for independent action in opposing SVAG-SED policies.

The SVAG and SED authorities also kept at a distance those Evangelical clerics who desired to work with them in promoting a combination of Marxism-Leninism with Christianity. This is not to say they did not use groups in Berlin-Brandenburg such as the League of Religious Socialists, but were careful never to give too much authority to "red" clergy besides writing newspaper articles praising religious freedom in the Soviet Union, preferring to keep the propaganda offensive concerning religious freedom a top-down process, controlled exclusively by SVAG and SED authorities. This, in turn, limited the effectiveness of the propaganda campaign, because it appeared as a tightly-controlled process dictated by the Soviet authorities rather than something sympathetic clergy took an active and independent role in.

The Catholic populations of Berlin-Brandenburg as well as its clergy were, by and large, not won over by the SVAG and later the SED propaganda offensive, especially since the Catholic leadership in Berlin, Konrad von Preysing, and in the Vatican, Pius XII, were deeply and outspokenly anti-Communist. The SVAG and SED only experienced limited success with the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg, given the fact the Evangelical Bishop, Otto Dibelius, was scarcely less hostile to the Communists than Preysing. Nevertheless, by 1949, the SVAG and SED could point to limited success for sowing internal divisions among senior Evangelical leadership in Brandenburg between Dibelius and officials such as the Evangelical General Secretary Kurt Krummacker and Church Provost Heinrich Gruber, who were much more sympathetic to the idea of religious freedom continuing to exist under a German state led by the SED.

In addition, the SVAG and SED authorities recruited numerous "progressive" clerics at the lower levels of Evangelical hierarchy who active worked against attempts by clerical "reactionaries" to work against the goals of the Soviet authorities. Like so many other aspects of the GDR's religious policies, the extensive infiltration of the Evangelical Church in the GDR, which seriously weakened its senior leadership's ability to resist the SED-dictatorship, began under SVAG auspices during the Soviet occupation of Germany.

The question of Evangelical collaboration with the Communist regime in East Germany remains an unsettled question in the historiography about the Evangelical Church under Communism. As Gerhard Besier argued, whatever claims can be made for the merits of the

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<sup>1</sup> The SVAG's Propaganda Administration was in charge of political affairs in the Soviet zone, and took the most active role of all institutions of the Soviet military government in Germany in bringing about the transformation of the Soviet zone into a German state on the Stalinist model. Whether this happened inadvertently due to the complex structure of the Soviet military government with numerous competing institutions or was always intended by the Soviet leadership remains a considerable controversy in the historiography of the Soviet occupation. The Propaganda Administration, created in June 1945, changed its name to the Information Administration in January 1947.

eventual cooperation between the Evangelical Church and the SED regime, the process morally compromised Evangelical leaders and assisted the GDR's political police, the Stasi, in its attempt to infiltrate the administration of the Evangelical Church with spies and informers from the late 1960s to late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> However, as Horst Dähn points out, the limited agreement between the Evangelical leaders and the SED authorities did provide an independent space for the Churches to continue their charitable activities and to subtly support the emerging East German dissident movement in the 1970s by using the Churches as "free spaces" for diverse groups to discuss their opposition to the regime.<sup>3</sup> Works written after the fall of the GDR such as those by Robert Goeckel have built on Dähn's argument discussing the benefits of the Churches' independent role in the GDR's society, and the aid it provided at the grassroots level for the East German dissident movement in the 1980s, even with those elements which did not have a strong religious character. Goeckel also notes, however, the success of the Stasi infiltrating the administrative apparatus of the Evangelical Church, a process which was greatly accelerated once the staunchly anti-communist position of Otto Dibelius was discarded in the mid-1960s.<sup>4</sup>

While much of the historiography concerning the accommodation between religious and state leaders in the Soviet zone and the GDR discusses why the Church ultimately embarked on such a policy, considerably less attention is made as to why the Communist authorities in East Germany, first the SVAG and later the SED, pursued these attempts to win over Evangelical and Catholic laity and clergy with promises of "religious freedom." Answering the neglected question of what the Soviet and SED hoped to gain from obtaining the support of religious institutions rather than simply trying to suppress them will be the main contribution of this essay to the existing historiography on Church and State relations in East Germany as well as to the history of the Soviet military occupation.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Creation of the "Religious Freedom" Campaign in Soviet-occupied Germany June 1935 to October 1946**

The three key events for understanding the SVAG and SED attempt to integrate religious freedom into their broader propaganda campaign for the hearts and minds of the German people from 1945 to 1949 are the KPD's exile conferences in Brussels in June 1935 and Bern in April 1939 and Stalin's meeting with Metropolitan Sergei of Moscow in September 1943. At the KPD's first exile conference in Brussels, the party for the first time recognized freedom of religious belief as a fundamental right of the German people. Two years later the KPD's Central Committee issued a proclamation congratulating the Confessing Church and opposition Catholics for their resistance to the Nazi regime. At the Bern Conference in 1939, the KPD reaffirmed its commitment to religious freedom and promised in a future socialist Germany that the Evangelical and Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Besier, *Der SED-Staat und die Kirche: Der Weg in die Anpassung*. Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1993. 722.

<sup>3</sup> Horst Dähn, *Konfrontation oder Kooperation: Das Verhältnis zwischen Staat und Kirche in der SBZ/DDR*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State: Political Conflict and Change under Ulbricht and Honecker*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990. 297.

<sup>5</sup> The sources for this chapter include the records of the SVAG's Propaganda/Information Administration, both its headquarters in Karlshorst and its branch in the Brandenburg capital of Potsdam. Tiulpanov's subordinates in Brandenburg followed his lead in attempting to recruit clerical "progressives" to the cause of promoting the idea of religious freedom under Stalinist-style socialism. Also vital are the official papers of three leaders of the Socialist Unity Party, Wilhelm Pieck, Otto Grotewohl, and Walter Ulbricht, which discuss how the SED dealt with Christian clergy who openly supported the ideology and policies of the SED. The materials from SED's Working Group for Church Questions, a branch of the Central Committee's Secretariat founded in October 1949, also contain some valuable information concerning the SED's attempt to use guarantees of religious freedom as a propaganda tool during the Soviet occupation. The newspapers of the SVAG and SED, *Tägliche Rundschau* and *Neues Deutschland*, are of central importance, since these were the main mediums by which the SVAG and their German allies promoted the claim of complete religious freedom existing in the Soviet Union and that similar conditions would exist in a socialist Germany. Of additional importance are the records of the Evangelical and Catholic Churches in the Soviet zone, as well as materials from the Christian Democratic Union in the Soviet zone. Otto Dibelius' records reveal his attempts to maintain a staunchly anti-Communist position for the Evangelical Church in Brandenburg while trying to head off voices in the Evangelical Church who argued for greater accommodations with the SVAG and SED authorities.

Churches would be able to play an independent and vital role in society. The further cooperation of KPD members and dissident German clergy in the Soviet-sponsored National Committee for a Free Germany (NKFD) and shared imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps also contributed to hopes of a lasting cooperative relationship between the KPD and the German Churches, especially since the KPD had presumably abandoned the militant atheism which characterized its policies regarding the religious question from 1918 to 1935.<sup>6</sup>

A similar “breakthrough” between religious and communist leaders occurred in September 4 1943, when Stalin met with Metropolitans Sergei of Moscow, Aleksei of Leningrad, and Nikolai of Kiev. After twenty-six years of relentless persecution which came near to destroying the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution, the Soviet government made a few limited concessions to the Orthodox leaders. At the meeting Stalin praised the Orthodox Church’s support for the Soviet war efforts and promised they would be allowed to elect a new Patriarch (left dormant since the death of Patriarch Tikhon in 1925), open a few seminaries which had been closed by Soviet authorities, and publish a Church newspaper. In addition, Stalin created a branch of Sovnarkom to serve as link with Orthodox and Soviet leaders, the Council of Russian Orthodox Church affairs. The fact that Stalin staffed the Council with NKVD veterans, including its leader Colonel Georgi Karpov, provided clear evidence as to his real intentions towards the Churches, but this still marked a remarkable turnaround by the Soviet leadership.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, neither of these apparent reversals of anti-religious policies marked a genuine move by the KPD and the Soviet government away from the creation of an atheistic society as part of their long-term goals. Both were tactical considerations designed to temporarily win over religious allies in order to serve the broader plans of the KPD and the Soviet Union. In the case of the KPD, both Pieck and Ulbricht were simply interested in recruiting as broad a base as possible to support their reconstruction of a post-Hitler Germany; the commitment to religious freedom could be affirmed publically while the German communists gradually built their power base, and then be discarded once the KPD was strong enough to turn on religious institutions.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Stalin, the moderate concessions to the Orthodox Church in 1943 were designed for future propagandistic purposes in claiming “religious freedom” existed in the Soviet Union, and, more importantly, to use the Russian Orthodox Church in suppressing independent Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and Byelorussia, which were often centers for nationalist resistance to Soviet rule.<sup>9</sup> The KPD/SED and SVAG propaganda offensive in the Soviet zone should be viewed in the same light. At no time was it a serious attempt to build a lasting and peaceful relationship with religious institutions, but rather it was intended to sow divisions within the Church leadership and make them unable to resist anti-religious policies in the Soviet zone.

As with numerous other religious issues, the SVAG authorities took an active role in the religious propaganda campaign before the KPD/SED. The KPD leadership stalled initially in defining its position on religious issues after its reorganization in the Soviet zone in June 1945, which gave the CDU the opportunity to describe its ideology as aggressively atheist, much to the consternation of certain SVAG officials, especially in the Propaganda Administration. The KPD’s newspaper, *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, rarely discussed religious issues, and when it did, it usually either denounced the Vatican or German Catholic clerical leaders, or strictly emphasized the need to secularize the education system in Germany.<sup>10</sup>

In comparison, the SVAG newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau* immediately began to stress the existence of religious freedom in the Soviet Union, and continued to do so throughout the first three years of the Soviet occupation. The Soviet publishers of newspaper were quick to recruit German clergy who would testify to the tolerant attitudes of the Soviet military authorities towards

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<sup>6</sup> Goeckel, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Tatiana Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*. London: M.E. Sharpe Publishers, 2002. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Goeckel, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Miner, *Stalin’s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 315.

<sup>10</sup> *Deutsche Volkszeitung*. 22 June 1945. 1. 13 Jul 1945. 2.

religious institutions. One of the first issues of the newspaper, published on June 9, 1945, contained an article entitled "Church Life in Brandenburg", written by a Catholic priest named Hermann Schubert. Schubert wrote that the Red Army had allowed the Catholic Church to re-open the churches of Saint Gotthardt and Saint Katherinen in the city of Brandenburg, both of which had been closed since the end of the war.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant early article which developed this theme appeared three days later in the SVAG newspaper. Written by an Evangelical pastor named Karl Fischer, it was entitled: "The Church-Yesterday and Today." Fischer began the article by emphasizing the Nazis' long-term plans included the elimination of religious belief and all religious confessions from Germany, and that this process had already begun during their last years in power. Fischer noted that the Nazis had claimed a victory of the atheistic communist Russians would mean the death of religious belief in Germany. He reminded Germans that the Nazis claimed the Communists would shoot every priest they found, destroy churches, ban religious belief, and generally treat religious believers with scorn and derision if they had won the war.<sup>12</sup>

Looking on a month after the surrender of Germany and the beginning of the Soviet occupation, Fischer claimed that the only destroyed church buildings had been those destroyed by the effects of the war. The only priests and ministers removed from their positions had been those who were supporters of the Nazis, that Church services have continued, and religious freedom has been restored in Germany following years of Nazi persecution. He concluded that the Red Army clearly did not want a "Kirchenkampf" and both the Protestants and the Catholics should ally themselves with the new democratic order in Germany. Fischer concluded it would be a painful but necessary process to root out the remaining Fascist sympathizers in the Protestant and Catholic churches but it had to be done, especially concerning the "German Christians" The Churches could only endanger themselves through opposition to the Soviet occupation and therefore had to reform along democratic lines in cooperation with the Allied authorities.<sup>13</sup>

Another popular theme was the existence of peaceful relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet authorities. Many of the initial articles stressed how the Soviet people were struggling to rebuild religious life in the USSR after the ferocious assaults on Russian Orthodoxy by the invading German armies. One notable example was an article by an Oleg Kurganov on August 3 1945. Kurganov mentioned how the monastery of New Jerusalem in the town of Istra suffered the most, since the Germans stole most of its precious valuables, exploded the bell tower and used the medieval buildings as an ammunition supply depot. Kurganov concluded his article by writing the assault on the monastery was representative of Germany's assault on Russia's religious heritage.<sup>14</sup> A similar article on September 18 also mentioned the destruction of cathedrals and monasteries throughout the Soviet Union by the German army, noting the pillaging of religious valuables and artwork, noting in particular the desecration of the Uspensky Cathedral in Kiev.<sup>15</sup>

The clear intention of these and other articles was to depict the Nazis as the true enemies of religious belief as opposed to the Soviets. Articles testifying to peaceful cooperation between Orthodox leaders and Soviet authorities frequently appeared in *Tägliche Rundschau*, beginning with an article on November 15 entitled "Die Religionsfreiheit in der USSR" by a "Professor" E. Levin. Levin admitted it was true that complete legal separation of Church and State existed in the USSR, but complete religious freedom existed as well, and had contributed to peaceful relations between religious and secular authorities. Levin also noted the Soviet Union should serve as the model for

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<sup>11</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. "Kirchliches Leben in Brandenburg" 9 Jun 1945. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. "Die Kirche-Gestern und Heute" 12 Jun 1945. 1. Perhaps not coincidentally, this was same day SVAG Supreme Commander Georgi Zhukov issued order number two which allowed for the creation of antifascist political parties

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 13 Aug 1945. 2. The New Jerusalem monastery was known in Russia as the Voskerensky Monastery, it finally re-opened as an Orthodox monastery in 1990.

<sup>15</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 18 Sept 1945. 2. Among the destroyed churches noted by the article were 1670 Orthodox, 237 Catholic and 69 Protestant Churches, as well as 532 synagogues.

states with diverse religious groups, since Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic religious communities lived in complete peace with each other and with the secular government in Moscow.<sup>16</sup>

The SVAG newspaper made a visible attempt to recruit prominent Evangelical leaders in its December 5 1945 article. The head of the Evangelical Church Chancellery in Berlin-Brandenburg, Dr. Kurt Krummacher wrote a lengthy article regarding his time in Soviet captivity from 1943 to 1945, noting the Soviet authorities at the POW camp allowed the German prisoners to celebrate Christmas, even going so far as to provide them with Christmas trees. Krummacher also revealed he had recently met with the head of the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs Georgi Karpov, who assured him any remaining issues between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet government were in the process of being rectified. Much like Levin, Krummacher concluded his article by claiming other churches, including those in Germany, should emulate the model established by the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time the SVAG authorities were concerned that the relatively free environment in the Soviet zone with regards to religious belief could possibly “infect” Red Army soldiers and officer stationed in Germany. A report sent on April 28 1946 from the head of the SVAG Propaganda Administration in Potsdam, V.M. Stroilov, to the head of the Propaganda Administration for Brandenburg I.I. Milkhiker, illustrated this. Stroilov had attended a recent religious service at the Aleksandr Nevsky cathedral, a Russian Orthodox Church built in the nineteenth century. Stroilov noted he attended the service since he was aware some Orthodox priests who currently served in the Cathedral had, during the Nazi era, praised the German invasion as the only way to save Russia from atheistic Bolshevism. Stroilov informed Milkhiker he saw seven Red Army officers attending the service, none above the rank of major. He also noted the priest mentioned during the service the suffering inflicted on Russian Orthodox believers by the Nazis during the Second World War. He concluded his report by claiming the small number of Red Army officers attending the service was a good sign, but the Propaganda Administration authorities had to remain vigilant against local Orthodox Churches obtaining an “undue influence” over Red Army personnel.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the SVAG’s proclamation of Soviet support for religious belief had its limits when it applied to Soviet soldiers.

Despite the propaganda push during the first seven months of the occupation, SVAG authorities remained dissatisfied with their progress on the question of “religious freedom.” In a report written by Arkadi Sobolev, a member of the Political Council of SVAG, and sent to SVAG Supreme Commander Marshal Georgi Zhukov on January 26 1946, Sobolev claimed the SVAG needed to redouble its efforts on the religious question. He wrote the SVAG still needed a clear and united religious policy which would prevent clerical reactionaries from making unfavorable comparisons between the Soviet authorities and the Nazis. Furthermore, the Soviet authorities had to find progressive-minded clerics, especially in the Evangelical Church, in order to use them to gain greater influence over the German population. If the SVAG, particularly its Propaganda Administration, failed to act in this manner, the Churches in the Soviet zone would fall under the influence of the “Anglo-Americans” as had already been the case in the American and British zones.<sup>19</sup>

Sobolev’s fears were rooted in the fact the KPD still had not clarified its position on the question of religious freedom, and, given the KPD’s and the SVAG’s aggressive push to secularize the education system in the fall of 1945 and spring of 1946, this led to charges by Evangelical and Catholic clerics as well as by CDU leaders that the SVAG and their German “friends” in the KPD were determined to create an atheistic society in Germany. The leadership of the KPD was also

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<sup>16</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 15 Nov 1945. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 5 Dec 1945. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF- State Archives of the Russian Federation) fond. 7077-SVAG Brandenburg, opis’ 1-Upravleniie Propagandi, delo. 196- ianvar –aprel 1946, ll.77-78.

<sup>19</sup> *Die UdSSR und die Deutsche Frage 1941-1948: Dokumente aus dem Archiv für Aussenpolitik der Russischen Föderation* Volume 2: 9 Mai 1945 bis 3. October 1946. Eds, Jochen Laufer, Georgii Kynin and Viktor Knoll. Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2004. 241-242.

aware of this possibility. In a report sent a few months earlier to Wilhelm Pieck by Otto Winzer, the head of the *Abteilung Volksbildung* (Department of the People's Education) in the Soviet Sector of Berlin, Winzer noted numerous Evangelical and Catholic clergy in the Soviet zone assumed the educational policies of the KPD and the SVAG gave proof to their suspicions both were avowedly atheistic.<sup>20</sup>

It would not be until the KPD merged with the SPD to form the Socialist Unity Party in April 1946 that the German Communists finally began to clarify their position on the question of religious freedom. The first hint of the SED's toleration of religious freedom occurred in April 1946, when the SED agreed to allow optional after-hours religious education in secondary schools in the Soviet zone, moving away slightly from their earlier determination to completely secularize the education system in the Soviet zone.<sup>21</sup>

This step was clearly not enough for the SED's executive leadership in countering charges made by the Churches and CDU that SED was an avowedly atheist political party. A directive dated July 5 1946, sent by Dr. Naas Weiman, the deputy head of the SED's Department for Culture and Education, to all provincial and district SED leaders in the Soviet zone, demonstrated this. The directive informed them they had to incorporate three central points regarding religious freedom in their efforts to win the support of the Soviet zone's inhabitants. The first was the foundations of the Socialist transformation of Germany must allow freedom of thought, including the free exercise of religious belief. The second was that the holding of religious belief should not be a barrier against any German's participation in the building of Socialism. Many religious Germans had shown themselves to be positively inclined towards socialist beliefs, and the SED was tolerant of religious thought. The third was to remain aware the Churches themselves have a positive contribution to make to the reconstruction of Germany after the disastrous effects of Nazism and the Second World War. The directive concluded by emphasizing SED party members should also remind the population of the SED's open support of SVAG efforts to reconstruct Church buildings and assist their material needs.<sup>22</sup>

By this point, the SED was also using the party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, in a manner similar to the SVAG newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau*, printing newspaper articles by Evangelical clerics who argued there was a great deal of common ground between Christianity and Marxism-Leninism. In an article in the July 26 issue of the SED newspaper, the SED and SVAG favorite Kurt Rackwitz, an Evangelical minister in Berlin, claimed since Socialists and Christians shared beliefs on a number of key issues, genuine and lasting compromise between Church and State in a future socialist Germany was entirely possible. Conversely, Rackwitz also noted the Churches in Germany could no longer expect the same privileges from state authorities, who were rightly committed to building a secular political order.<sup>23</sup>

While this article was followed by several others in a similar vein, it would not be until August 30, 1946 as elections neared in the Soviet zone, that the leadership of the SED finally issued its attempt at a definitive statement regarding its position on religious freedom in the pages of *Neues Deutschland*. In a statement signed by SED leaders Wilhelm Pieck and Otto Grotewohl, the party proclaimed all antifascist and progressive Christians could count themselves as an important part of all democratic forces in the Soviet zone. This was especially true, according to the statement, since the goals of the SED's scientific socialism were the same as those of the Christian Churches, namely the pursuit of peace, an end to poverty, and recovery from the effects of the war. Pieck and Grotewohl promised full religious freedom would exist in a German state under SED leadership, but the party rejected the notion it would subject itself to religious concerns, just as the

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<sup>20</sup> Stiftung Arkhiv für Parteien und Massen Organization in der DDR. (SAPMO-SED Abteilung, located in the Bundesarchiv) DY 30- SED Zentral Komitee IV 2-ZK Sekretariat, 12-Arbeitsgruppe für Kirchenfragen, 124- Juni-Dezember 1945

<sup>21</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung, DY 30-SED Zentral Komitee, IV 2- ZK Sekretariat. 9.05-Abteilung Volksbildung,78-Mai -Dezember 1946

<sup>22</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung, DY 30- SED Zentral Komitee IV 2-ZK Sekretariat, 12-Arbeitsgruppe für Kirchenfragen, 1-Januar -October 1946

<sup>23</sup> *Neues Deutschland* 26 Jul 1946. 1.

Church should not expect to submit itself in any partisan sense.<sup>24</sup>

Weiman sent another directive dated September 30 1946 to all district and provincial SED leaders. Weiman ordered them to make immediate contact with "Socialist Priests" and use them to assist the SED in the next month's elections, especially in dispelling rumors concerning the hostility of the SED towards religious belief.<sup>25</sup> The next day at the Martin Luther celebrations in the city of Eisleben in Sachsen-Anhalt, SED leader Wihlem Pieck gave a speech in the presence of Otto Dibelius, Moritz Mitzenheim, Kurt Krummacher, and other Evangelical Church leaders praising its role in rebuilding democracy in the Soviet zone. Pieck specifically pointed out both the SED and the Evangelical Church were dedicated to "the democratic Renewal, the preservation of National Unity, and the securing of peace throughout Germany and Europe."<sup>26</sup>

The final propaganda push by the SED and their clerical allies was a front page article in *Neues Deutschland*, signed by a number of Evangelical clergy in all five provinces of the Soviet zone, and likely written by Kurt Rackwitz. The article, entitled "Christianity and Socialism are not Contradictory" (*Christentum und Sozialismus sind keine Gegensätze*) argued the socialist order which the SED and the SVAG would construct in the Soviet zone came very close to the central tenets of Christianity. The author made a specific comparison to the dictum of Matthew 22:37, that one should love God with all their soul and love their neighbor as themselves. It asked the readers to remind themselves of the shared imprisonment in concentration camps by socialists and Christians under the Nazi regime, to keep in mind the SED has worked with the Soviets to restore religious freedom to Germany, and has "given us back the task of religious education, which only we can accomplish successfully."<sup>27</sup>

The SVAG also continued their own propaganda offensive concerning the question of religious freedom during the run up to the zonal elections of October 1946. Officials in the SVAG's Propaganda Administration in Brandenburg noted the CDU's propagandizing concerning the SED's determination to enforce state atheism continued to have a damaging effect on the political fortunes of the SED in the upcoming elections. A report sent to Milkhiker, from the head of Propaganda Administration for the city of Eberswald, N.M. Rosenzweig on August 31 1946 is an excellent example of this. Rosenzweig wrote to his superior that the combined force of the CDU and their clerical allies had successfully portrayed the SED as intent on enforcing an atheist social order on Germany, a social order directly modeled on the Soviet Union. Rosenzweig argued the SVAG had to use its authority to prevent the continued collaboration of the Churches and the CDU. One of the key tools it should use, according to Rosenzweig, was to continue to stress the existence of religious freedom in the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

The SVAG had already implemented this policy in the pages of *Tägliche Rundschau* during the months leading up to the zonal elections of October 1946. On August 17, the newspaper printed a front page article about the status of the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union. The author, a Soviet journalist named O.I. Tugan-Baranovskii, pointed out to readers of the Orthodox Church's role in assisting the Soviet regime in defeating the Nazi invaders, clear evidence of positive relations between the Orthodox Church and the Soviet state. He also noted private religious education existed in the homes of Soviet citizens, and the fact the Orthodox Church operated its own newspapers, seminaries, and printing presses independently from state control. The article concluded with the claim that the idea the Soviet authorities were hostile to religious freedom was simply a myth spread by those who wished to undermine the accomplishments of the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup>

Far more ambitious, however, was an article from the August 23 issue. The issue contained

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<sup>24</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 30 Aug 1946. 1.

<sup>25</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung, DY/30/IV 2/14/1

<sup>26</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 1 Oct 1946. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 18 Oct 1946. 1. The impact of the article may have been limited by the fact that, while the article had a number of signatories from the entire Soviet zone, no high ranking Evangelical church officials in Berlin-Brandenburg had signed it.

<sup>28</sup> GARF, f. 7077- SVAG Brandenburg, op. 1-Upravlenie Propagandi, d. 201-avgust-oktiabri 1946, ll. 66-78.

<sup>29</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 17 Aug 1946. 1.

a lengthy discussion by Metropolitan Alexander, head of the Russia Orthodox Church in Germany and Belgium, concerning his recent visit to the Soviet Union in order to observe the status of the Orthodox Church under Communist rule. Alexander reported very positively on what he observed in the Soviet Union, particularly his meetings with religious leaders in Kiev and Moscow. He specifically noted in the article the Soviet government's attempts to assist the reconstruction of Churches destroyed by the Nazi invaders, as well as the full attendance at every religious service he attended. Alexander concluded his article by stating his visit had convinced him religious life was thriving in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet model of Church-State relations could serve as an inspiration for the rest of Europe.<sup>30</sup>

The propaganda offensive concerning religious freedom in a future socialist Germany coincided with a general restraint on the part of SVAG and SED authorities with regards to their relations with the Evangelical and Catholic churches during the early period of the occupation. While the determination of both SVAG and SED education officials to secularize the German secondary education system led to some early conflicts with the Church leadership in Berlin-Brandenburg, religious charitable activity and religious youth and women's work were generally not harassed by state authorities. The Soviet authorities still hoped the SED's success in the upcoming zonal elections in October would allow it to expand its influence in the Western zones of Germany. This eventually would lead to an SED-dominated, united Germany under Soviet control, which then could implement the same religious policies which actually existed in the Soviet Union, policies which marginalized any social or public role for any religious institutions, just as other SED policies would mirror those of the Soviet Union.

Both the SVAG and the SED were careful to not implement Stalinist social, economic, political, and religious policies during this early period, which could jeopardize their chances of ruling a united Germany. Therefore, the SVAG authorities were very careful not to create too great of dichotomy between their propaganda supporting religious freedom and the reality of religious life in the Soviet zone. Once the likelihood of the Western zones falling under Soviet influence became more distant as the occupation continued into 1947 and 1948, the SVAG and SED religious policies became more restrictive. This did not keep them from continuing their propaganda drive of religious freedom, just as they would never abandon their official commitment to a unified Germany despite the fact the Soviet policies of Stalinization in their zone made political and economic unification very unlikely.

### **The Propaganda Campaign in the Aftermath of Zonal Elections, Nov. 1946 - Dec. 1947**

The zonal elections of October 1946 did not go well for the SED. While it was still the strongest political party in the Soviet Zone with fifty-three percent of the vote, its rivals the CDU, the LDP, and, in Berlin, the SPD, had done far better under the discriminatory tactics of the SVAG authorities than almost anyone in the SVAG or the SED thought possible.<sup>31</sup> In a report sent on November 18 1946, to the head of the Central Committee's Foreign Department, Andrei Zhdanov, Colonel Sergei Tiulpanov admitted the "atheist" element played a substantial role in the SED's poor showing. Tiulpanov claimed despite the SVAG and the SED's attempts to portray themselves as supportive of religious freedom, the CDU and the Churches were able to paint both as intent on creating an atheist social and political order in Germany. He argued the SVAG and SED would need to redouble their propaganda efforts against "reactionary" attacks by Christian clergy and their political allies.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately the results of the zonal elections in October 1946 did little to alter the SVAG and SED's path to creating a German state on the Soviet model, especially once cooperation between

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<sup>30</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 23 Aug 1946. 4. The article was part of the "Soviet Union Today" series which ran once a week in the newspaper which discussed various aspects of the political, economic, cultural, and social life in the USSR.

<sup>31</sup> Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation 1945-1949*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995. 329.

<sup>32</sup> *Die UdSSR und die Deutsche Frage 1941-1948: Dokumente aus dem Archiv für Aussenpolitik der Russischen Föderation* Volume 3: 6 Oktober 1946 bis 15 Juni 1948. Eds, Jochen Laufer, Georgii Kynin and Viktor Knoll. Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt 2004. 52-60.

the Soviets and the Western Allies regarding the administration of Germany began to break down. The elections made both the SED and the Soviet authorities more insecure of the degree of support they received from the population of the Soviet zone.

Just as Tiulpanov stated in his report to Zhdanov, the SVAG and the SED increased their propaganda efforts regarding the question of “religious freedom” in a future socialist Germany. Both *Tägliche Rundschau* and *Neues Deutschland* continued to emphasize the existence of religious freedom under the Soviet government, and how this would exist in a socialist Germany as well. The Christmas issue of *Tägliche Rundschau* combined this theme with another prominent topic in the SVAG newspaper, the benevolent treatment of German POWs who remained in Soviet hands. An article informed German families their husbands and sons were still allowed to celebrate Christmas with religious services with the support of Soviet military officials in the POW camps, just as SVAG officials allowed religious Germans to continue to observe Christmas in the Soviet zone.<sup>33</sup>

The Christmas 1946 issue of *Neues Deutschland* contained an article by Kurt Rackwitz. He emphasized religious Germans needed to rededicate themselves to the unified causes of Christian brotherhood and socialism in the coming year. Rackwitz concluded the article by claiming only if religious Germans understood the crucial linkage between Christianity and socialism could a peaceful and democratic government be created in Germany.<sup>34</sup>

In the aftermath of the disastrous October 1946 zonal elections, Rackwitz and other leftist Evangelical clergy in Berlin-Brandenburg were eager to actively assist the SED in fending off additional attacks from the Evangelical Church leadership and the CDU. Their organization, “The Working Group of Religious Socialists” had its founding conference in the Soviet sector of Berlin from November 9 to November 11, and reported on its activities to SED leader Wilhelm Pieck on November 26. Led by Rackwitz, the group had fairly extensive ambitions. In the report Pieck received, Rackwitz argued their first goal was to make Christians aware that belief in Christ must also be followed by belief in Socialism. They would instruct all of their parishioners that a true Christian must also be a socialist. They also promised to make all Evangelical Christians in Germany aware that atheism was not a prerequisite for belief in Socialism.<sup>35</sup>

Rackwitz also informed Pieck they wanted to work with the other Evangelical clergy and laity to ensure religious institutions in Germany would support the creation of socialist democracy. It also would strive to create a community of socialist priests, ministers, theologians, and seminarians, as well as to win over sympathetic members of the Church administration at all levels throughout Germany. Furthermore, Rackwitz and his followers promised to inform religious believers and in the religious press of the SED’s positive attitude towards religious freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Rackwitz and the other leaders of the Working Group of Religious Socialists sent another letter to Pieck and SED co-leader Otto Grotewohl on December 11 1946. The letter thanked the SED for its declaration supporting religious freedom. They admitted often in Germany’s past religious leaders and institutions have often served as an obstacle to the socialist parties, although this will no longer be the case. The letter concluded with a plea by the Working Group of Religious Socialists stating their hope the people of Germany were not so cynical after twelve years of Nazi lies that they would doubt the promises of the SED to support religious freedom.<sup>37</sup>

The importance of the Working Group of Religious Socialists for the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg was minimal. The office records of Bishop Otto Dibelius scarcely mention the activities of Rackwitz and the Working Group of Religious Socialists, besides the occasional warning to Evangelical clergy to avoid following political groups which ascribed to a “materialist-atheistic worldview” and especially of attempting to link Christian

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<sup>33</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 25 Dec 1946. 3. The issue also contained an article by the pro-SED Evangelical pastor Karl Kleinschmidt reminding German readers to keep in mind the devastation brought about Germany’s armies during the war, and not to become too enraptured in their own suffering.

<sup>34</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 25 Dec 1946. 4.

<sup>35</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung NY 4036/756-Nachlässe Wilhelm Pieck

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

theology with Marxism-Leninism. Even Evangelical Church leaders such as Kurt Krummacher and the Bishop of Thuringia, Moritz Mitzenheim, who were inclined to a more cooperative relationship with the SVAG and SED, were still quite resistant to SED policies regarding Evangelical administration of schools and hospitals. Rackwitz and his followers lacked an appeal to these clerics, since neither Krummacher nor Mitzenheim were interested in attempting to merge Christianity with Marxism-Leninism.<sup>38</sup>

Rackwitz was disappointed in the progress made by members of the Working Group during its first year of existence in winning over more of the Evangelical clergy and laity to their cause. On October 22 1947, after his organization was renamed the Union of Socialist Priests, he wrote a letter to Pieck and Grotewohl about his concerns about the lack of progress made by the socialist clerics. Rackwitz blamed SED party members whose open hostility to religious belief aided reactionaries in the Evangelical and Catholic Churches. He specifically pointed to a meeting of cultural functionaries of the SED (which he referred to as "our party") in Berlin at the beginning of October, during which a Dr. Stern and a Dr. Ruhiner made successive speeches arguing the fundamental tenets of Marxism-Leninism left no room for Christian beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

Rackwitz argued these statements only played into the hands of reactionary clergymen who completely opposed the SED. He suggested a rejection of the principle of atheism as a prerequisite for membership in the SED would go a long way to convincing religious Germans the Socialist Unity Party was not hostile to religious institutions. He argued many religious Germans could not abandon their belief in God. Therefore if the SED openly proclaimed atheism and dialectical materialism, this would only serve to drive Christians into the hands of the CDU. According to Rackwitz, anything less than neutrality on the religious question for party membership would put "our politicians" at a disadvantage, although he understood many of the party members of the SED would maintain an atheistic worldview. He concluded by arguing his appeal was based not his profession as an Evangelical cleric, but as a dedicated member of the SED who wanted it to lead a democratic, antifascist Germany.<sup>40</sup>

Given the fact the SED was remaking itself as a Stalinist "Party of the New Type" during this period Rackwitz could hardly have expected a benevolent response. In fact, Rackwitz did not receive a response at all. Otto Grotewohl did reference Rackwitz's letter in a memorandum sent to Wilhelm Pieck on November 10 1947. Grotewohl wrote while the SED could not abandon dialectical materialism as part of the foundations of Marxism, it could be more careful concerning how this was presented in party schools and for public consumption, and emphasized that it was not in the SED's interests to appear hostile to religious institutions. He promised at the end of the memorandum he would discuss the issue with fellow party leaders Ulbricht, Meier, Ackermann, and Oelssner.<sup>41</sup>

Pieck also responded to Rackwitz's concerns six days later on November 23 in a letter sent to Grotewohl, Ulbricht, Ackermann, Meier, and Oelssner. Pieck wrote that all SED party members had to be well-versed in fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. This meant teachers within party schools had to be knowledgeable of and be able to instruct the principles of dialectical materialism, since dialectical materialism was an essential element of the philosophical foundations of Marxism-Leninism. This did not mean religious Germans could not be members of the Socialist Unity Party, but neither could the SED abandon dialectical materialism as an essential part of their ideology.<sup>42</sup>

Pieck added the Churches did not automatically place themselves in conflict with the SED merely because they were religious institutions, but did so when they opposed the policies of the party. This in turn would cause the clergy, especially those who shared the views of the SED, to

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<sup>38</sup> Evangelisches Landeskirchliches Arkhiv Brandenburg (ELAB-Provincial Archive of the Evangelical Church in Brandenburg) Bestand 603-Nachlässe Otto Dibelius A 17. 1.1. Despite their considerable disagreements on a number of issues pertaining to the relationship between the Evangelical Church and the SVAG/SED authorities, Krummacher and Dibelius were in complete agreement regarding the preservation of religious education in the German schools.

<sup>39</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung NY 4036/756

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

make a choice between the party and their clerical leadership. If the Churches truly desired peace between it and the SED, it could continue its work among religious Germans but had to recognize the SED would make every effort to spread its influence through an ever-broader segment of the population. Ultimately the Churches could not prevent this.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly the SED's public pronouncements of support for religious freedom had its limits when placed against its ideological commitment to dialectical materialism and atheism. This was also the case with the SVAG authorities. On May 22 1947, Tiulpanov sent a letter to the heads of the Information Administration for the five provinces of the Soviet zone, entitled "Church Life in Contemporary Germany." Tiulpanov noted the active involvement of the Evangelical and Catholic churches in political life in the Western zones of Germany, which had been a fact of West German political life since 1945, would soon emerge in the Soviet zone. Tiulpanov pointed to the Evangelical Bishop of Brandenburg, Otto Dibelius, as among the most active clerical collaborators with the CDU. Dibelius had been instrumental, according to Tiulpanov, in attempting to link the SVAG and the SED with militant atheism.<sup>44</sup>

Tiulpanov mentioned that it was in the SVAG's direct interests to recruit "progressive" clerics against the "reactionaries" in both the Evangelical and Catholic churches, a process which would be eased by the SVAG's and SED's constant emphasis of religious freedom under socialist rule. At the end of his report, he outlined SVAG's religious policies and its specific goals for the Evangelical and Catholic churches in Germany. The first goal was to shift the church leadership organs from West to East Berlin, there it will be under their influence. The second was to decrease the influence of the church on the young people and elimination of the church-run youth organizations. The third, final, and most important goal was to reduce the influence of conservative clergymen within the Evangelical and Catholic churches and to neutralize the churches in the area of politics.<sup>45</sup>

As their private correspondence reveals, despite their propaganda concerning religious freedom, neither SVAG nor the SED believed in anything but a very limited institutional role for the Evangelical and Catholic churches in a future socialist Germany. This did not mean the propaganda offensive of "religious freedom" in the pages of *Neues Deutschland* and *Tägliche Rundschau* ended as the Soviet occupation entered 1947 and the process of Stalinization began to accelerate. An article in *Neues Deutschland* on February 2 1947 entitled "Our Position towards the Churches and Christianity" demonstrates a subtle shift in the SED's propaganda approach. Written by one of the SED's chief ideology experts, Otto Maier, the article started by claiming the SED was the last institution in Germany which desired any confrontation with the Catholic and Evangelical Churches. Maier rather surprisingly wrote the SED recognized the supreme authority of the Churches in spiritual affairs. At the same time, the Churches had to be prepared to accept the full and complete authority of the state in secular affairs. He claimed while Christians and socialists may have different views on metaphysical issues, their ultimate goals of peace and an alleviation of poverty were the same. The article denounced the demagogues in the CDU and the Churches who argued the SED was hostile to religious beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

Unusually, given the predominance of KPD members in the leadership of the SED, Maier pointed to the SPD's Gothaer Programm of 1875 and its Erfurter Programm of 1891, in which the SPD recognized freedom of religious belief as a fundamental human right, as evidence German socialists had always tolerated the *private* expression of religious belief. He concluded the article by stating the SED would continue to abide by this respect for religious freedom, but forcefully concluded that the Churches would never play a political role in the new Germany led by the SED, since "political religious movements are reactionary elements within reactionary states."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. The implication Pieck made was the Churches would have to accept this arrangement permanently.

<sup>44</sup> GARF, f. 7077- SVAG-Brandenburg, op. 1-Upravleniie Propagandi, d. 220-ianvar-mai 1947, ll. 55-59. Tiulpanov noted the Catholic Church, particularly Cardinal Von Preysing of Berlin, was little better in its support of reactionary politics.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 2 Feb 1947. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. "Das politische Kirchentum als reaktionäres Element eines reaktionären Staates hat"

*Tägliche Rundschau* continued to print articles which testified to the existence of religious freedom in the Soviet Union. A prominent leader of the FDJ in the Soviet zone, Robert Menzel, wrote an article in the August 30 1947 issue concerning his examination of religious life in the Soviet Union. Menzel specifically mentioned his visit to the St.Nikolai-Church in Leningrad. He commented that the Orthodox services he viewed during his week in Leningrad were consistently full of worshipers, both men and women. Menzel recounted how he asked the Orthodox priests he encountered at the Church whether the Soviet claims for the existence of religious freedom within the Soviet Union was a mere façade, which the priests sharply denied. According to Menzel, the priests he encountered stated they were free to celebrate all religious holidays and the Orthodox Churches were always full of parishioners. He concluded his article by recounting the claim of numerous Orthodox priests who assured him the Soviet government in the previous thirty years had never interfered with the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church or the freedom exercise of religious belief by Soviet citizens.<sup>48</sup>

The use of the Russian Orthodox Church's status in the Soviet Union for propaganda in the Soviet zone of Germany was approved at the highest level of the Soviet government. The head of the Council for Orthodox Church Affairs, Georgi Karpov, in January 1947, reported to Politburo member Georgi Malenkov, head of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party Secretariat, concerning this policy. Karpov informed him Russian Orthodox clerics who met with foreign visitors in Moscow and Leningrad and testified to the existence of complete religious freedom in the USSR provided a valuable service for the Soviet state. Karpov noted this was especially important for SVAG propaganda in Germany, since the exiled Russian Orthodox clergy in the Western zones of Germany were actively collaborating with the American and British authorities in spreading "anti-Soviet" propaganda.<sup>49</sup>

The other main aspect of the "religious freedom" campaign, to split clerical "progressives" from "reactionaries" and create schisms in the Evangelical and Catholic Churches in the Soviet zone was also implemented on the orders of the Soviet government. The head of the Communist Party's Central Committee for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop), G.F. Aleksandrov, reported to Soviet ideology chief Andrei Zhdanov on October 1946 concerning SVAG attempts to demonstrate its tolerance for open expressions of religious faith. Aleksandrov specifically referred to the recent SVAG permission to allow the Evangelical Church to publically commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther in the cities of Eisleben and Berlin. He informed Zhdanov the leadership of the Catholic and Evangelical churches in the Soviet and Western zones was entirely reactionary, and SVAG policies which supported "religious freedom" would make it easier to divide the "progressive" clergy from its "reactionary" leaders.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout 1947 and 1948, SVAG and to a lesser extent SED authorities in the German organs of self-government significantly altered the two parts of the "religious freedom" campaign. Gradually the themes of "religious freedom" in the Soviet Union were emphasized less and less, besides occasional references to freedom of belief in the SED-led *Volkscongress*-sponsored all-German constitution. Instead, atheistic-scientific propaganda explicitly attacking religious leaders and religious institutions gradually replaced it. In addition, another theme emerged regarding the religious question in the Soviet zone, namely the "progressive" role played by the Evangelical Church as opposed to the "reactionary" politics of the Catholic Church.

This change in SVAG and SED propaganda was mirrored by their more stringent positions which emerged regarding religious education in the secondary schools, religious charitable activity, and religious youth and women's organizations. As chances for a united Germany under Soviet influence became increasingly remote after October 1946, the SVAG authorized policies

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<sup>48</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 30 Aug 1947. 2. This particular issue also condemned CDU leader in the Western zones Konrad Adenauer for trying to create a "political Christianity" to serve reactionary political ends.

<sup>49</sup> RGASPI (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsialno-Politicheskoi Istorii-Russian State Archive for Social and Political History) f. 17-Tsientralnii Komitet, op.125-Sovet po delam religii pri SM SSSR, d. 407-ianvar-aprel 1947, ll. 1-50. The Council of Orthodox Church Affairs was a branch of Sovnarkom, the supreme executive organ of the Soviet government.

<sup>50</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 407, ll. 76-77

implemented through the SED-controlled organs of self-government which quickly transformed the Soviet zone into a German state on the Soviet model.

This was reflected in the pages of *Tägliche Rundschau* and *Neues Deutschland*, as well as reports of the SVAG's Information Administration and correspondence between the leaders of the SED. Both newspapers devoted much more of their time to attacking certain positions of the Evangelical and Catholic Churches with regards to political and educational issues. An example of this trend is an article in the October 17 1947 issue of *Neues Deutschland*. The unnamed author of the article denounced the CDU in the Soviet zone as well as the leadership of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches of Berlin-Brandenburg for opposing the wishes of the "progressive majority of parents in Berlin" who desired an entirely secular school system.<sup>51</sup>

The SED was not yet willing to cede the ground to the CDU on the religious freedom question. On November 16 1947, a few weeks before the SVAG's removal of Jakob Kaiser ended the political independence of the CDU in the Soviet zone, Kurt Rackwitz wrote a front page article entitled: "A New Path for the Churches." Rackwitz asked whether the Church had abandoned the path that leads to "the torture of humanity, Capitalism, and Militarism." He sadly suggested the positions taken by many Evangelical and Catholic clergy in the Soviet and Western zones indicated the answer was no. Rackwitz emphasized the Churches should allow the religious socialists who had clearly opposed Hitler to emerge to the forefront in the leadership of the Evangelical Church, and not to be swayed by the nationalist and reactionary appeals of the CDU. Rackwitz concluded his article with a firm statement that the Church must reconcile itself with the aims of the working classes, and accept that out of the ashes of war a new, dynamic, and just social order would be created.<sup>52</sup>

The SED newspaper also continued to publish articles highlighting the cooperative relationship between the SVAG authorities and certain leaders of the Evangelical Church. On December 17 1947, *Neues Deutschland* contained an article discussing a meeting between the Evangelical Provost for Brandenburg, Heinrich Gruber, the head of the Evangelical Church Chancellery, Kurt Krummacher and Colonel Sergei Tiulpanov. Krummacher and Gruber made three requests to Tiulpanov. The first was a public promise by SVAG authorities to continue religious services in the Soviet internment camps. The second was to provide a "Christmas amnesty" to German youths who had been arrested by Soviet officials during the last four months. The third and final was for the SVAG to return church bells to Evangelical communities in the cities of Oranienburg and Apolda which had originally been seized by the Nazis. Tiulpanov was non-committal on the first two requests but promised the SVAG would eagerly acquiesce to the third request. The article concluded meetings such as this demonstrated the continued support of the SVAG authorities for the preservation of religious freedom in Germany.<sup>53</sup>

### **The "Religious Freedom" Propaganda Drive During the Stalinist Transformation of the Soviet Zone, Jan. 1948 - Oct. 1949**

Ironically, *Tägliche Rundschau* had, throughout 1948, largely abandoned printing articles discussing religious freedom in the Soviet Union, although they continued to emphasize the policies of the SED which promoted religious freedom in the Soviet zone of Germany. An article in page three of the October 29 1948 issue of the newspaper discussed section five of the German Constitution proposed by the SED-dominated *Volkscongress* a few months before. The unnamed author of the article pointed out section five of the Constitution specifically preserved the SED's acceptance of religious freedom, and served as a refutation of charges of the CDU in the Western zones that the SED was an "atheistic" political party. Section five specifically guaranteed religious freedom in Germany, and proclaimed there would be no "state Church" in the future "German Democratic Republic." In addition, it expressly forbade the use of the churches for political purposes. The section also stated voluntary religious education will be allowed in the schools areas

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<sup>51</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 17 Oct 1947. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 16 Nov 1947. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 17 Dec 1947. 2.

after regular school hours, to be provided by the Protestant and Catholic churches.<sup>54</sup>

In the Information Administration, Tiulpanov began to urge his subordinates throughout the Soviet zone to gradually scale back the “religious freedom” campaign and instead emphasize in SVAG propaganda material of a “scientific-atheistic character.” In a report sent from Tiulpanov to K.V. Martemianov, the head of the Information Administration in Brandenburg, on February 12, 1949, Tiulpanov discussed this theme in some detail. Tiulpanov informed Martemianov the Evangelical and Catholic churches, in league with the CDU in the Western zones as well as British and American authorities would continue to attack the accomplishments of the SVAG and the SED in the Soviet zone. In particular, “reactionary clergy” would demonize both the SED and the SVAG as determined to force atheism on the German population.<sup>55</sup>

Because of this situation, Tiulpanov argued that Martemianov and those under his command were not to allow “religious fanatics” to disseminate their own propaganda, nor to allow the churches to publicly claim the SVAG and the SED were attacking religious institutions. Tiulpanov concluded his report by arguing “the heart of this work” had to be the dissemination of scientific-Marxist propaganda, through brochures, leaflets, speeches, presentations on the radio, and so on. It was also vital to disseminate material indicating the Churches’ were involved in activities of an anti-Soviet and anti-democratic character.<sup>56</sup>

Three days later, Martemianov sent a similar report to his subordinates in the SVAG’s Information Administration in the province of Brandenburg. Martemianov instructed them, in addition to exercising greater control over the social and charitable activities of the Churches, to work more aggressively in disseminating “scientific-atheistic” propaganda. Martemianov insisted they had to make absolutely sure that the Churches did not take political positions opposed to those of the SVAG and the SED. The goal of the SVAG authorities was to create in the German people a scientific-atheistic worldview, which meant removing the Churches from a visible position in German society. At the conclusion of his report, Martemianov demanded his subordinates had to make sure they only used the most qualified people in their staffs to handle this assignment, and work in close coordination with the SED’s anti-religious specialists. They also needed to gather more materials that provided evidence of the oppositional activities of both the Evangelical and Catholic churches, as well as materials concerning personal information regarding clerics engaged in “anti-democratic” or “anti-Soviet” agitation.<sup>57</sup>

As Martemianov’s instructions suggest, the SED had also largely abandoned much of the “religious freedom” propaganda campaign in favor of scientific-atheistic propaganda that attacked not only religious institutions but the very basis for religious belief. In a similar manner, *Neues Deutschland* blamed religious “reactionaries” for delaying necessary political and educational reforms in the Soviet zone. One notable example came from the November 14 1948 issue of *Neues Deutschland*. An article on page five blamed the CDU in both the Western and Soviet sectors of Berlin for allowing the “religious motivations” of the Catholic and Evangelical Church to guide their attempts to hold up attempts to secularize the education system in Berlin.<sup>58</sup>

A more direct attack appeared in the February 13 1949 issue of the SED newspaper. However, it also represented the more sophisticated tactics of the SED, which attempted to create a schism between the Evangelical and Catholic churches in the Soviet zone of Germany. The article on page four, entitled “The Struggle against Clerical reaction in Hungary” discussed the trial in Budapest of Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty. It justified the trial of Mindszenty by arguing the Catholic Churches throughout Eastern Europe, under direct orders from the Vatican, had waged a reactionary campaign against progressive political, social, and economic reforms in Eastern Europe since the end of the Second World War. The article concluded with a statement which affirmed the Lutheran, Calvinist and the other Protestant Churches had taken a “progressive”

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<sup>54</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 29 Oct 1948. 3.

<sup>55</sup> GARF, f. 7077-SVAG Brandenburg, op.1-Upravleniie Informatsii, d. 254- ianvar-aprel 1949, ll 39-43.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> GARF, f. 7077, op.1, d. 254, ll 42-43.

<sup>58</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 14 Nov 1948. 5.

attitude towards the creation of Soviet-style democracy following the end of the Second World War. In comparison, the Catholic Church everywhere sided with counter-revolution, and would continue to be used by the United States and “the other imperialist powers.”<sup>59</sup>

The SED newspaper continued this tactic throughout 1949. The issue of *Neues Deutschland* on April 3 1949 contained a front page article entitled “The Church for the World Peace Movement.” The article was written by Bishop Beste of Mecklenburg, a prominent opponent in the Evangelical hierarchy to Dibelius’ harder line towards the Soviet and SED authorities. Beste wrote the Church would never again be used for propagandistic purposes or help to create enemies between different states. The Evangelical Church also would try to prevent the danger of war from emerging in Europe again, with the aid of democratic forces in the Soviet zone.<sup>60</sup>

*Tägliche Rundschau* eventually adopted this propaganda tactic as well, attacking the Catholic Church and its leadership as leading the forces of international reaction, while noting the importance of “progressive” voices in the Evangelical Church in Germany. One notable article which attacked both Pius XII and Cardinal Preysing came from the July 6 1949 issue. The unnamed author of the article stated Pius XII, along with his allies in Spain, Portugal, and Berlin, in particular Cardinal Preysing, were the foremost allies of the United States in its attempt to pursue the “Cold War” dividing the world into democratic and imperialist spheres. The article also pointed to the Concordat between the Vatican and Hitler in 1933 as evidence of Papal sympathy for and collusion with Fascism. Despite the fact that complete religious freedom existed in the Soviet zone, Preysing continued to work with the British and Americans in their attempts to undermine the *Volkscongress* and the democratic reforms of the SVAG and the SED.<sup>61</sup>

An article which appeared in August 27 in *Tägliche Rundschau*, emphasized the “reactionary” role played by Catholic Church in Europe. Entitled, “Why has the Vatican played its last card?” and written by an anonymous author who claimed to be an Evangelical cleric, the article attacked Pius XII’s threat to excommunicate European Catholics who joined Communist parties in Europe, including the Socialist Unity Party in the Soviet zone. The author argued the Vatican saw Communism as a threat to its attempts to gain global spiritual influence, although this was not because Communism was anti-religious, since as the Orthodox Church functioned freely in the Soviet Union and since 1945 the Evangelical Church had been granted complete freedom of action in the Soviet zone of Germany. Instead, the Catholic Church feared losing its “reactionary” influence over the newly constructed people’s democracies in Eastern Europe. The author also claimed evidence of the Vatican’s plans was its failure to condemn or excommunicate Hitler, because they viewed him as an ally in spreading their political power throughout Europe. The article did offer a minor concession to Catholics in the Soviet zone as it complimented individual Catholics for their bravery in joining Communist parties throughout Europe.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the attempts to separate the “progressive” Evangelical Church from the “reactionary” Catholic Church, the SED and the SVAG leadership recognized attempts to split the Evangelical Church from the Catholic Church in Berlin-Brandenburg would not bear immediate fruit. By 1949 Dibelius and Preysing had openly proclaimed their resistance to SVAG and SED policies, which they viewed as creating a new dictatorship in the Soviet zone of Germany. SED leader Wilhelm Pieck reported to the SED Secretariat in August 1949 that Otto Dibelius continued to meet with members of the CDU in the Western sectors of Berlin, for the specific purpose of undermining SED policies in the Soviet zone. Pieck admitted Dibelius’ belief that the SVAG and SED had created a new “red” German dictatorship left little doubt he would be an implacable enemy in the years to come.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 13 Feb 1949. 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Neues Deutschland*. 3 Apr 1949. 1. Beste did remark that Dibelius agreed with the views Beste expressed in the article, and that they expressed the views of the entire Evangelical leadership in the Soviet zone.

<sup>61</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 6 Jul 1949. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 27 Aug 1949. 2. The SVAG newspaper even went so far as to allow Dibelius to publish an article in May of 1949 pleading for all four Allied powers and for the German people to work towards maintaining the unity of Germany.

<sup>63</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung NY 4036/756

The SED leadership also had little doubt about the continued hostility of the Catholic Church in Berlin-Brandenburg to any German government led by the SED. A party resolution dated August 10 1949 noted Preysing's support of Pius XII's recent declaration concerning the excommunication of Catholics for joining a Communist political party. The SED leadership viewed this as an attempt to undermine the authority and legitimacy of Communist countries everywhere in Europe, but also as an opportunity for the SED to step up a recruitment drive of "progressive" Catholics in the Soviet zone.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, the officials in the SVAG Information Administration in Brandenburg in 1949 had little doubt of the continued resistance of clerical "reactionaries" to the policies of the SVAG and SED would continue despite the three year "religious freedom" campaign and the more recent attempts to indoctrinate the population of the Soviet zone with scientific-atheistic propaganda. In a report sent by Martemianov to Tiulpanov on February 29 1949, Martemianov wrote both the Catholic and Evangelical Church leadership continued to undermine the CDU's attempts to align itself with the SED. He noted reactionary clerical leaders in Berlin-Brandenburg still had considerable success at convincing religious Germans the SED was determined to create an atheistic society in Germany. He concluded his report by assuring Tiulpanov he felt the change in Soviet propaganda from emphasizing religious freedom to emphasizing atheism and scientific materialism was the correct course, but it would take some time before it demonstrated any concrete results.<sup>65</sup>

With regard to the clergy of the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg, the SVAG-SED "religious freedom" propaganda campaign did have a limited but measurable effect. This was largely limited during the period of the Soviet occupation to lower-level clerics such as Kurt Rackwitz. In Brandenburg, many of the clerics in Evangelical Church concurred with Dibelius' openly hostile position to the communist authorities, such as their support of Dibelius' decision to publish his famous *Hirtenbrief* on June 1 1949, which compared the communist order currently under construction by the SVAG and the SED to the Nazi regime. Two weeks after the letter was published, Dr. Hans Asmussen, the head of the EKD's press service, proclaimed in an open letter to the Evangelical laity the leadership of the Church in Berlin-Brandenburg supported Dibelius' recent statement regarding political and religious life in the Soviet zone. Asmussen wrote the Evangelical Church in the Soviet zone had been subject to continual intimidation and harassment. He also called upon clergy and laity in the West to support the embattled clergy within the Soviet zone of Germany and not to forget them in their struggles.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, SED and SVAG propaganda efforts to split the "reactionary" Catholic Church from the "progressive" Evangelical church in 1948 and 1949 had little effect on the Catholic and Evangelical Church leadership in Brandenburg. Dibelius and Preysing continued to make common cause on a number of issues central to both Churches, such as their joint letter to the four military governments in Berlin protesting the School law of May 1949, which secularized the school system in the four sectors of the city.<sup>67</sup>

Fissures did emerge, however, between Dibelius and the rest of the leadership of the Evangelical Church in the rest of the Soviet zone, as well as Provost Heinrich Gruber and General Secretary Kurt Krummacher in Berlin-Brandenburg. Also, Bishop Mitzenheim of Thuringia and Bishop Beste of Mecklenburg moved away from Dibelius' confrontational policy and searched for

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<sup>64</sup> SAPMO-SED Abteilung, DY/30/IV 2/14/12

<sup>65</sup> GARF, f. 7077-SVAG Brandenburg, op.1-Upravleniie Informatsii, d. 256- ianvar -mai 1949. ll. 19-30. Martemianov admitted efforts to divide clerical progressives from reactionaries in the Evangelical Church was progressing faster than attempts to turn Evangelical clerics against those in the Catholic Church.

<sup>66</sup> Evangelisches Zentral Arkhiv (EZA-Central Evangelical Archive in Berlin) Bestand 4-Kirchenkanzlei der EKD, Repositur 448, 157-158. This contrasted sharply with events a decade later, as the EKD leadership in Brandenburg and most of the GDR repudiated Dibelius' call for a massive civil disobedience campaign in his open letter to the Evangelical population, entitled *Obrigkeit* (Authority)

<sup>67</sup> ELAB, Bestand 603, B 17.

areas of cooperation with the SVAG and especially the SED authorities.<sup>68</sup> The emergence of this split in the Evangelical leadership in Brandenburg was publicly obvious following Dibelius' and Gruber's visit to the now Soviet-run concentration camp at Sachsenhausen in March 1950. Gruber's stated opinion concerning relatively benign conditions at the camp in comparison to how it was administered under the Nazis was in sharp contrast with Dibelius' negative comparison between the two.<sup>69</sup> This rupture would continue to fester throughout the 1950s until the temporary victory of the collaborationist "Kirche im Sozialismus" policy in the late 1960s.

## Conclusion

The "religious freedom" propaganda campaign represented SVAG and SED religious policies at their most duplicitous. Neither the Soviet authorities nor their German allies seriously believed either the Evangelical or the Catholic Church would have any long-term role in a Soviet-dominated Germany. The propaganda campaign roughly followed the general trend of SVAG and SED policies towards religious charitable work as well as youth and women's organizations. Just as a limited toleration for these activities existed on the part of the SVAG and the SED during the early period of the occupation, the "religious freedom" campaign was a temporary tactic while the SVAG and the SED established the foundations of the GDR.

Ultimately the propaganda campaign failed in its objective of winning over the majority of the Evangelical and Catholic clergy in Berlin-Brandenburg, besides a handful of clergy such as Kurt Rackwitz who were already inclined to cooperate with the Soviet authorities. The main reason for its failure was that SVAG and SED claims of support for "religious freedom" contrasted too sharply with the reality of religious life in the Soviet zone. This resulted in the increasing estrangement of the Evangelical and Catholic leadership from the Stalinist regime constructed in the Soviet zone, leading directly to the intense Church-State conflicts during the beginning of the Ulbricht era in the 1950s.

Yet the "religious freedom" propaganda campaign was more complicated than just an attempt to demonstrate to the inhabitants of the Soviet zone the existence of religious freedom in the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the occupation, as the Soviet offensive against the Vatican increased in its intensity, both *Tägliche Rundschau* and *Neues Deutschland* attempted to separate the "progressive" Evangelical Church from the "reactionary" Catholic Church. While this would predate the "double isolation" of the Catholic Church noted in the historiography of Church-State relations in the GDR, it had very little success with the Evangelical Church leadership in Berlin-Brandenburg. The strongly anti-Communist Evangelical Bishop Otto Dibelius and the Catholic Bishop Konrad von Preysing found common cause on a number of issues, in particular SVAG and SED religious education policies. Nor do the conversations of the Evangelical Church leadership in the Soviet zone indicate any deep hostility to the Catholic Church in the Soviet zone or even the Vatican.

The impact of the "religious freedom" campaign on the Evangelical and Catholic laity is difficult to determine exactly, given the available sources. Officials in the SVAG's Propaganda/Information Administration often complained of the continued (and largely correct) belief among religious Germans in Brandenburg that the SVAG and SED were determined to create an atheist social and political order. The "Working Group of Religious Socialists," composed largely of Evangelical clerics such as Kurt Rackwitz who were deeply supportive of the SVAG and SED policies, was a part of the "religious freedom" campaign insofar as they wrote articles in both *Tägliche Rundschau* and *Neues Deutschland* attesting to the common ground between Marxism-Leninism and Christianity. Their efforts to open SED membership to religious believers and to minimize the importance of dialectical materialism in its ideology were almost completely ignored

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<sup>68</sup> EZA Bestand 4, Repositur 448. It would not be accurate to say those who opposed Dibelius' more hard-line stance had simply been completely duped by the "religious freedom" propaganda campaign of the SVAG and the SED. It is accurate to hypothesize the declarations by both the SVAG and the SED authorities supporting religious freedom as opposed to the destruction of religious institutions convinced them some type of compromise could be made between the Evangelical Church and an SED-led German state.

<sup>69</sup> *Tägliche Rundschau*. 13 Mar 1950. 1.

by the SED leaders Wilhelm Pieck, Otto Grotewohl, and Walter Ulbricht. Even Evangelical leaders in Brandenburg such as Heinrich Gruber and Kurt Krummacher, who were not in league with Dibelius' openly anti-Communist stance, were not taken in by the "religious freedom" campaign in the manner of Rackwitz and his supporters.

The "religious freedom" propaganda campaign begun at first by the SVAG and then the SED reveals complexity of their religious policies during the history of the Soviet occupation. While their long term plans for religious institutions were not in doubt, in the first few years of the Soviet occupation they were more than willing to promise complete protection of religious freedom in an SED-led German state, and temporarily backed this promise up by toleration of religious charitable activities and the April 1946 compromise on religious education. Ultimately, the use of the issue of religious freedom in SVAG and the SED propaganda supports the view of historians such as Vladislav Zubok, Dirk Spilker, Gary Bruce and Hubertus Knabe who argue Stalin and the SED leadership always desired a Soviet-controlled East Germany even if they failed to control the entire country. Yet it also lends credence to Norman Naimark's interpretation of SVAG policies as dictated primarily by events on the ground, in this case, the continued importance of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches as two of the few German institutions which survived Nazism. The propaganda campaign from 1945 to early 1948 has to be seen in the light not only of the SVAG and SED efforts to win the support of the population of the Soviet zone, but also the inhabitants of the Western zones as well, since the SVAG as well as Stalin aspired for the SED to lead a Soviet-dominated, united Germany. As the Cold War between the Soviets and West emerged in occupied Germany and chances of a united Germany under Ulbricht's leadership became more remote, the "religious freedom" campaign was altered and partially abandoned by the SVAG and the SED due to the political situation in occupied Germany after 1948.