On East Germany, BLM, and the Communist Narrative

by **Anne-Christine Hoff** (June 2021)

Untitled, Cornelia Schleime, 1986

A friend of 36 years recently severed ties with me over a disagreement about Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM's open

advocacy of Marxism was a non-starter for me, and my friend, who is black, felt that in order to push for social change, good people of all races should support them.

Her desire to end our 36-year friendship over a difference of opinion caused me no small amount of pain. She just stopped communicating with me while insisting she respected my views. Even though she said all the right things, I could see by the excessive lag between emails and her extremely formal style of writing she wanted nothing more to do with me.

It was my experiences living in former East Germany that colored my thinking, I tried to tell her, but how can you convey personal experience to someone who has never gone through it? A few experiences stick out in my mind about my time in Rostock, Germany that began in October 2001 and ended in April 2002. These relatively insignificant experiences made me question the society that forty years of communism had created in east Germany.

The first happened early in my stay in Rostock, a coastal university town in northeast Germany. I had traveler's checks, but no bank would cash checks except at certain limited times of the day. Unfortunately, I had missed those times, and a long holiday weekend was approaching. Armed with a modest amount of cash that I had gotten at the airport in Frankfurt before traveling by train north to Rostock, I went to buy groceries and was short a few pfennigs.

In the United States, there are often jars for just such a time, and I have had many a cashier wave me on, but this cashier stopped the line with what seemed an intent to humiliate. I asked an elderly woman behind me if she would be willing to make up the difference, and she responded with impatience that I was holding up the line. Wow, I thought, these people seem angry.

In my dorm, a few weeks later, I had another strange encounter with my East German suite-mate Stefanie. She was 19, and she had grown up in the local North German coastal area, so she had lived for just short of ten years under socialism. She had taken part in the young Pioneers and from the way she talked, after the Wende, she had also been part of some post-reunification version of that organization. Actually, from Stefanie, I also gathered that such largely secular youth groups had gone on almost uninterrupted since 1936. The Nazis had had the Hitler Youth from 1936 to 1945, which sought to take children out from under the influence of their parents and hand them over to the Nazi state.

Stefanie was always in the kitchen organizing events or rushing off to exercise classes or cultural events. She was extremely active until one day she wasn't because she had caught a cold and was in bed for most of the day. I ran into her in the kitchen and asked her how her cold was.

"If someone asks you such a stupid question, you tell them my cold is fine, but I am terrible."

Wow, ok. After that, I decided to avoid her kitchen community organizing. I was beginning to realize one of the things that I didn't like about socialism was that it was social, and I did not particularly feel like socializing with people who told me they thought I was stupid or who humiliated me because I was a few pfennigs short at the register.

My French roommate was a socialist herself and very anti-American. According to Katrine, the World Trade Center attacks were simply a way to get attention. She also believed American ideas about freedom were cribbed from the French. In Katrine's world, Americans were fat and stupid, and if they weren't, then they were rich and imperialist. There was no middle ground.

This constant antagonism wore me down, especially as I

had failed my comprehensive exams for the PhD in English, and I had a make-up exam to take in May of the following year. The bodies from the collapse of the Twin Towers were then just a few weeks old, and she was already saying the Americans were "attention-whores" who didn't deserve the worldwide sympathy they were getting.

One day a bookshelf in our dorm room, which had been unsteady, fell directly on me and knocked me down. I was knocked out for a split second. When I came to, I saw Katrine's face, and there was a look of amusement on it. I was not seriously hurt, but Katrine's laughter at my expense shocked me. The next day I marched down to the University of Rostock Housing Office and put in for a transfer.

The transfer was a single room in an "*unsanierten*" ten miles outside of town. Sight unseen, I took the dorm room and I was able to pick up the key later that day.

Katrine and I had traveled together to Poland by train a few weeks before. There Katrine experienced the worst kind of punishment for an anti-American like herself. The Poles loved Americans. In a blintz restaurant in downtown Warsaw, the owners came up to Katrine and me and expressed their condolences for the thousands who lost their lives on 9/11 a month or so earlier.

On trains and in busses, when Poles opened their wallets, there you would see a picture of the Pope or the Virgin Mary or baby Jesus. Those who knew English spoke to us freely. I had not expected that. It was only recently when listening to Donald Trump's address in Warsaw that I learned that the Poles had chanted, "We want God" during a visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. Was this then the thing that had made the difference in the spirit of the Polish people?

A beautiful couple drove Katrine and me across town to a concert we planned to attend simply because we had asked for

directions and it was late and they didn't want anything to happen to us walking around that late at night.

Their feelings toward me were so completely in contrast to the lack of concern that I experienced in the former GDR. Materially, the two countries were both experiencing hardships. Neither was super rich, but the Poles had their faith and they seemed to have guarded their hearts from jealousy and anger.

Marx once said, "The first requisite of happiness of the people is the abolition of religion." ("A Criticism of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right.") He also wrote of Christianity, "The serial principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the Middle Ages, and are capable in case of need of defending the oppression of the proletariat, even if with somewhat doleful grimaces" ("The Communism of the Reinischer Beobachter").

I now understand that the campaign to stamp out Christianity in East Germany was extraordinarily successful.

For example, a study about beliefs and society conducted in 2012 revealed that East Germany is "the most godless society on Earth." In that study, not one east German under 28 could be found who believed in God.

It was not always this way. A graph by Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff illustrates this decline in religious observance well. According to the graph, in 1950, 92% of all GDR citizens were Christian (80% Protestants, 12% Catholics) with only 5% proclaiming themselves unbelievers. By 1989, the numbers had almost completely inverted. The non-religious rose from 5% to 70% in 1989, and Protestants in 1989 made up just 25% of the population of East Germany, Catholics 5% (From Goddyn, 17).

The results of the 2011 census also indicate that the vast majority of East German districts have populations where between 70-100 % do not believe in God. (In only a handful of

districts were the percentages less than 70%.)

From what I understand, the fifties were a period in East German history of removing Christianity from cultural life. For example, in 1955 the East German government implemented the practice of a state-run secular coming of age ceremony called the Jugendweihe that was meant to be an alternative to Christian confirmation. In the late 1950s, religious instruction was taken out of the public schools, leaving the church responsible for Christian education (Lieb, 14).

The Stasi also had tremendously long tentacles and reached into every sphere of East German life, but particularly into Christian life. According to The Star-Tribune, Reverend Paul Rogers of Minnesota learned about the practices of the Stasi firsthand while working in the 1960s in what was then West Berlin. Local Lutheran leaders informed him that the government often denied medicines to pastors and their families in East Germany as leverage so that they would become informants of the state.

Rogers would sometimes help the Lutheran World Foundation secretly deliver medicines "so they didn't have to make that difficult decision:"

> "I would go to [Soviet] East Berlin, ostensibly to photograph a church," said Rogers. "While I was there, I would make contact with the pastor. In the conversation, I'd give him the time and location of a medicine drop . . . typically under a bridge."

Helge Voigt, a pastor in East Germany, remembers Christmas from his boyhood in Leipzig as an event devoid of any mention of Jesus Christ. The family celebrated Christmas by listening to Bach's Christmas Oratorio, opening a few gifts and enjoying a special dinner. There was no nativity scene and no angel on top of the tree. He also recalls from his school

days that Christians were ridiculed.

"The teacher would point them out and everyone would laugh," said Voigt.

The Jugendweihe rite of passage was used as a litmus test for a young person's adherence to socialist ideology. Christians and other students who didn't take part were often denied privileges, even university admission. The government could also discriminate against Christian adults by controlling their prospects for education, jobs, and housing or by changing their place on the wait list for a car or a refrigerator.

After crushing any vestige of Christian life in East Germany, the State recognized the Kirchenbund in 1971 with a few stipulations:

> "The Church may not be neutral between capitalism and socialism but must minister in keeping with the constitution and social aims of the GDR."
>
> "A church that supports the humanistic aims and peace initiatives of the GDR is likely to gain the confidence of the government."

My overarching impression of the East Germany I encountered a little over a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall was that it was an extraordinarily controlled society. Its relatively small size and its extensive secret police service lent itself to creating a parasitically closed society.

So, what does this have to do with Black Lives Matter? The two systems share a Marxist worldview. For those who adhere to BLM's bromides, the rewards are plenty. Amazon, Target, Walmart, and other corporations know about those, but there are also social advantages for individuals who espouse their quasi-religious perspective. Like the former GDR, BLM

will accept Christians as long as they drink the Kool-Aid and toe the line. But incidents like the Bible burning one in Portland and the harassment of churchgoers in Troy, New York indicate that they will not abide Christians who believe in the Bible or who continue to practice their faith in any meaningful way.

Like BLM, the GDR government gave the church a choice that wasn't a choice at all. They could either conform to the will of the state or be cast outside society with all the challenges that life outside society entails. Either be an informant or watch your child get sick for lack of medicine. The vastness of the United States stands in contrast to the small size of East Germany, and yet just like GDR's bid for total control during socialism, BLM's push to control the narrative has also been extraordinarily successful.

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