German History in Documents and Images

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Young Christians Propose a “Social Peace Service” as an Alternative to Military Service (December 7, 1982)

Taking the peace propaganda of the SED at face value, young Christians proposed a “social peace service” as an alternative to compulsory military service. They wanted to express opposition to the arms race and the militarization of East German society while trying to initiate a political dialogue with the ruling party on a local level.

A World without the Military – that Would Be an Alternative

In the spring of 1981, when three church workers from Dresden drafted a text demanding the introduction of civilian service as an alternative to military service in the GDR, they were probably unaware that they had provided the impetus to the most significant peace initiative in the GDR (both in terms of numbers and political impact) since the debate on military instruction in schools. Their demands were actually nothing new; time and again, young conscripts had written letters and petitions that criticized the options for unarmed military service in the National People’s Army as insufficient.

It was only in March [of this year] that the leadership of the [Protestant] state church of the province of Saxony considered a letter by students in Naumburg that “mentioned the possibility of a civilian alternative to military service in the context of the larger question of concrete steps toward promoting peace. This letter was forwarded to the Church Leadership Conference.”

The Dresden initiative differed from similar attempts in the 1960s and 1970s, however, in that it aimed from the outset at a broader public within the church. Up to that point, petitions by individuals or small groups had always ended up with the state authorities or the church leadership, without having had any tangible effect. The Social Peace Service [*Sozialer Friedensdienst*] Initiative, which quickly became known by its abbreviation SoFd, was set up differently, so that many people could lend their support to the initiative through signatures without it becoming the type of signature collection subject to authorization in the GDR. Also, it was not addressed to the church leadership or state agencies but was supposed to be sent to the synods that convene in the fall. They were supposed to take up the matter and forward it to the government.

The Dresden text spread quickly throughout the entire GDR. It was read aloud, discussed, and signed at events and community evenings organized by Protestant youth groups [*Junge Gemeinde*] and student groups. Most copies of the appeal were duplicated by typewriter. In June 1981, the proposal circulated at public church congresses in Görlitz, Stralsund, and Dessau. At a "question and answer session with church personalities," young people asked church representatives to take a stance on the issue. Although it was primarily younger people who participated in the initiative, the proposal met with general acceptance in all church circles. The strongly Protestant, almost pietistic basic understanding of the appeal, which probably could have emerged in this form only in the Saxon part of the GDR, virtually ruled out any possible Christian argument for rejecting the proposal.

A basic characteristic of the concept is that its focus is not on protecting the conscience of the individual but on fulfilling a societal duty. Peace should not only be demanded but also practiced, starting today, through "emblematic" personal sacrifice, and help should be given to those who, according to Christian understanding, need it the most. "Regarding the present proposal," wrote the church leadership of the province of Saxony in November 1981, "two things should be emphasized as particularly important:

a) the connection between an expressed commitment to peace and peace service
b) the connection between disarmament and responsibility for the socially weak."

Because the paper was limited to proposals that appeared feasible and were not deemed futile from the outset, it found broad resonance among the church public, and the church leadership even made it the subject of negotiations between the church and the state. But this "realism" brought the authors criticism from other supporters of the cause.

One member of an East Berlin peace group said: "I didn't sign, because I simply see some things differently. For example, living in barracks – I spent a year and a half living in one of those structures, and I know what that means. This is exactly how they break people down; they tear you away from your social ties and prohibit all contact with the outside world. That wears you down; it is an essential part of the structural violence. Now, whether I stoke up the stove in the barracks or care for patients, there isn't really much of a difference for me." And a conscientious objector to all forms of mandated service explained: "I refuse to accept this heteronomy. Social action cannot be prescribed. I have to practice it all the time."

During the summer of 1981, supporters of the initiative made numerous attempts to introduce their demands into discussions with state representatives. There were opportunities to do so at the voter gatherings in June of that year, since those gatherings were always held in the lead-up to the *Volkskammer* elections. Such meetings have no direct influence on decisions, and they generally inspire just as little interest as the rest of this hollow political ritual, but sometimes critical questions did manage to shake them up. One person involved reported on such a meeting:

“Of the twenty-five young people, only three showed up aside from me. Even the *Volkskammer* candidate who was supposed to introduce herself failed to come, so we could only speak with one representative from the municipal district, the party secretary of the residential district, and the residential district chairman, who was a career officer. After we had spent an hour debating the poor quality of the streets and the sidewalk lighting, and the terrible rolls and miserable sausage in the market, I started discussing my problems:

1. Legal regulations for young people under eighteen who want to become construction soldiers [*Bausoldaten*] but who still have to participate in pre-military training in school and vocational instruction.
2. The labor shortage in health and social service professions, including care for the elderly, and the proposal to introduce a social peace service, that is, a civilian alternative to military service.
3. How can I nominate candidates for election who represent my own interests?”

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Source: “Eine Welt ohne Militär – das wäre eine Alternative” [“A World without the Military – that Would Be an Alternative”], *Frankfurter Rundschau,* December 7, 1982, p. 14.

Translation: Allison Brown