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Veronika Albrecht-Birkner,

Freiheit in Grenzen. Protestantismus in der DDR

[Freedom Within Limits. Protestantism in the GDR]

Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019; 282 p.

by Katharina Kunter

In autumn 2019 Germany will celebrate 30 years peaceful revolution in the GDR. This jubilee marks a turning point: contemporaneity is slowly becoming history. Given the recent authoritarian changes in Europe, the freedom narrative of 1989 comes to its end, too. This shift in perspective affects church history as well. A current overview of the history of GDR Protestantism is therefore very welcome.

Veronika Albrecht-Birkner, church historian at the University of Siegen, chooses a systematic approach. She firstly analyses main features of church policy of the SED state, who aggressively promoted atheism as its leading educational tool. Then she turns to the focus of her book, the eight historically grown regional organized churches in the GDR, the so-called *Landeskirchen* in Mecklenburg, Saxony, Thuringia, Greifswald, Berlin-Brandenburg, in the church province of Saxony, in Anhalt and in Görlitz. Albrecht-Birkner works out their differences in piety, in ecclesiastical structures and in their different political orientations towards the SED state. All in all it becomes apparent, how important this regional church identity was (and is) for East German Protestantism. Instructive, too, is the chapter about the free churches in the GDR. Until the end of the GDR there were 31 officially registered churches and religious communities; among them a minor number of Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites and Quakers. Birkner-Albrecht points out the ambivalent situation of them: The SED state promoted their existence to present himself as a guarantor of religious freedom.

In contrast to these two chapters, the chapters about the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR, the *Bund Evangelischer Kirchen in der DDR*, a kind of nationwide protestant church federation, and the chapter about transnational and ecumenical Protestantism in GDR offer little new. Albrecht-Birkner presents the inner view of different church actors, keeping an eye on church leaders as well as church-related groups or parishes. Because her sources are mostly written testimonials and self-descriptions of former GDR-church actors she draw a picture of lived experiences, of inner church life and theology in the GDR. In terms of methodology, she writes with an explicitly theological approach. This has two consequences: Firstly, there is no embedding of GDR Protestantism in major historiographic contexts and current patterns of interpretation. Neither learn the readers something about the socio-historical foundation of the protestant church, nor of its cultural-historical meaning or its special significance in comparison to other protestant churches in communist countries. Yet Mary Fulbrook's everyday history of the GDR would have offered an excellent bridge, but Albrecht-Birkner is completely neglecting international literature. Secondly forsters Albrecht-Birkners theological approach the continuation of the narrative of a dichotomous East-West antagonism, as it was formulated by some GDR eyewitnesses, especially in the 1990s.

Metaphors such as "learning community" or statements such as "freedom as a GDR-Protestant signature" maintain a normative character and are offered as the timeless legacy of GDR Protestantism.

30 years after 1989, her book stands exactly at the turning point between contemporaneity and historicization. It is worth reading for those who prefer an inner church perspective instead of a distant historical perspective, and for those who want to understand the Protestant church in GDR from inside, with the voices and the perspectives of contemporaries.