

The Nikolai Church and Prayers for Peace (Retrospective Account, 2014)

Abstract

Richard Schröder, a theologian and active member of the GDR peace movement, recounts the humble beginnings of the peace prayers in the Nikolai Church in Leipzig. He also describes conflicts that arose between church authorities and engaged East German citizens in the process of organizing these prayer meetings. The Leipzig peace prayers sent a signal to other GDR localities where similar events were emerging.

Source

Twenty-Five Years Ago

Swords and Ploughshares

In the West, November 9th, the date the Wall fell, is the focal point of commemorations of the autumn of 1989. In the East, October 9th marks the important historical turning point: in Leipzig, the Monday Demonstrations toppled the SED dictatorship. Below is an abridged version of a laudation honoring the Monday demonstrations. It was delivered on the occasion of the awarding of the 2014 National Prize by the “Deutsche Nationalstiftung.”

Recollections of the autumn of 1989 have different accent points in East and West. In the West, November 9th is the decisive date, because the fall of the Berlin Wall opened up the path to German unity. In the East, October 9th is the key date for many because the success of that particular Monday Demonstration brought down the SED dictatorship.

The Monday Demonstrations started with the prayers for peace, which were held every Monday at 5pm in Leipzig’s Nikolai Church. This is how they first came about: in 1978, the GDR Education Minister, Margot Honecker, introduced a new school subject: military training. Many parents protested. In response, the Protestant Church demanded an education for peace – in vain. It then decided to hold a Decade of Peace every year on the last ten days of the church year with daily peace devotions.

The first Decade of Peace took place in 1980. In preparation for these devotions, the youth pastor of Dresden, Harald Brettschneider, compiled a folder of materials for the various congregations, along with a bookmark printed on fleece. The bookmark featured a Soviet sculpture by Yevgeny Vuchetich, namely a man forging a plowshare from a sword. The Soviet Union had donated this sculpture to the United Nations in 1959. It had been inspired by a biblical passage from the prophet Micah: “In the last days, the nations will come to Zion, and they will forge their swords into plowshares.” Surely, it could not be forbidden to reproduce this Soviet sculpture, complete with the words “swords to plowshares” and the attribution “Micah 4,” on fleece (and that was because, unlike printing on paper, which was subject to censorship, printing on fabric was considered decoration)?

Because it was fabric, the bookmark could be sewn onto jacket sleeves, which had not been the intention at all. Teachers and policemen began hunting for this badge. It had to be removed immediately or the jacket would be confiscated. Students were expelled because of this. Some young people even sewed white patches onto their sleeves with the inscription: “A blacksmith was once here.”

This Decade of Peace also took place in Leipzig’s Nikolai Church. The weekly peace devotions in Nikolai

went like this: in Leipzig's Probstheida neighborhood only a two-room apartment was available for church work. One evening, on account of a scheduling error, two groups stood in front of the door, the fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds of the Young Church group and the members of the Bible Group, ages sixty and up. What to do? The youth deacon Günther Johannsen suggested "Let's have the young talk to the old." The old asked: "Why do you young people provoke the state with the "swords to ploughshares" patch and risk your future?" The young answered: "The state is becoming more and more militant. There is massive pressure on us to serve in the People's Army for three or as many as ten years, otherwise we are not allowed to study." The old were astonished. "We don't know any of that." That's when the idea of a prayer for peace was born: in the city center, after work and on Mondays, because that's Pastors' Sunday.

They approached superintendent Friedrich Magirius, who endorsed the idea. The Church Council, chaired by Pastor Christian Führer, had many critical questions, but finally opened the church doors. So began the very eventful and often contentious history of the weekly peace prayers at Nikolai Church. The church leadership was not overly enthusiastic about the peace prayers. It will cause us problems, we will attract the attention of the Stasi; in the end, there will be prohibitions and restrictions and permanent surveillance. And, in fact, that's what happened. Pastor Führer and Superintendent Magirius deserve credit for not cancelling a single Monday prayer or moving a single one to a different place, despite enormous pressure from the state, for eight long years. That's how the Nikolai Church and the public square in front of it became an institution.

The beginnings, however, were depressing. Seven participants showed up for the first peace prayer in 1982, eleven for the second, thirteen for the third. They consoled themselves with the words of Jesus: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." One young person from Probstheida painted a poster with the motif "Swords into ploughshares," which, to this day, is still displayed as a memento in the Nikolai Church. The first time a demonstration followed a peace prayer was in November of 1983. About fifty young people with candles sat in a circle in the market square. No chanting, no posters. Six participants were sentenced to prison terms of up to two years for this heinous deed.

Christoph Wonneberger became important to the subsequent history of the Monday prayers. He had previously been a pastor in Dresden and had made a name for himself with the idea of a Social Peace Service [*Sozialer Friedensdienst*, SOFD], which met with initial support within the synods of the regional churches but was opposed by the SED on the grounds that it would undermine military morale. In response, church leaders withdrew their support and settled for the establishment of the Construction Soldiers (unarmed soldiers who worked in construction), which existed in no other socialist country. And they were able to obtain suspended sentences for those who refused to serve in any capacity.

Wonneberger took over the coordination of the peace prayers at Nikolai Church in September 1987. By then, Gorbachev had proclaimed *glasnost* and *perestroika* and had even awakened new hopes in the GDR. In Leipzig, too, groups of defiant young people had formed, among them the Action Group Life [*Initiativgruppe Leben*, IGL] and the Human Rights Working Group, which invoked the Final Act of the 1975 Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki. The interest of these groups was political. The Nikolai Church was for them a safe space and a stage, but they had no interest in prayer and worship service. Therein lay the stuff for a robust conflict, also among pastors.

Wonneberger gave those groups total freedom, Führer and Magirius did not want to see the life of the parish threatened by the Monday prayers. As "landlords" they were held responsible by the state for everything that happened in the Nikolai Church. After the last peace prayer before the summer break in 1988, Magirius dismissed Wonneberger from the coordination task and excluded the above-mentioned groups from further involvement in the peace prayers. At the next peace prayer, representatives of the groups sought to read out a protest declaration, but Magirius turned off the microphone. When the organ

drowned out the protest, representatives of the groups shut off the organ's motor. One should not imagine the peace prayers as an idyll and an exercise in Christian harmony.

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Source: Richard Schröder, "Vor 25 Jahren: Schwerter und Pflugscharen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 5, 2014. © All rights reserved. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung GmbH, Frankfurt. Available online at:

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/vor-25-jahren-schwerter-und-pflugscharen-13190515.html>

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