Donors in a Dictatorship: Giving, Civil Society, and Peace Cultures in Communist East Germany

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Research Problem

As social scientists continue to study ways of using philanthropy to “create” democracy and civic engagement in Eastern Europe following the fall of communist regimes, it seems especially important and timely to investigate traditions of giving under communism. My transnational project focuses on charity and philanthropy in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that supported causes in the developing world.

I have repeatedly been struck by how few Westerners, even scholars of East Germany, are aware of the tremendous amount of philanthropic giving that existed in the GDR. This work aims to correct that misperception and analyze the role of charities in linking the GDR to the rest of the world. My research project examines three types of philanthropy, which cover the spectrum of giving in the GDR: communist (Solidarity Fund), church (Protestant “Bread for the World” and Catholic “Need in the World”), and private collections.

Theories

Social scientists have debated the nature of East German civil society with increasing intensity following German unification. Scholars who emphasize the totalitarian power of the state argue that no independent society existed as the regime played an important role in all sectors of society, while those who focus on everyday life declare there was more individual agency in the former GDR. I seek to enter this debate by analyzing one marker of a strong civil society, an active “third sector,” that is, philanthropic organizations outside the purview of government or business. A number of important works have examined charity organized by the churches, but these have tended to center either on the relationships to the state or on voluntarism within the GDR. I aim to extend the area of inquiry to analyze the effects of these individuals and institutions within the GDR. While I do not dismiss the influence of the state (and its oppressive arms), I see more markers of civil society than have traditionally been associated with a dictatorship.

Methodology

My work benefits from access to virtually all of the records of the now defunct GDR. My project employs a methodology, standard for historical studies, which places primary emphasis on documentary evidence. A Fulbright grant provided me a year in Germany to complete substantial research. I researched in the German Federal Archives, four state archives, and seven church archives and have found an abundance of sources. Among the documents that I have found thus far are records of: amounts of donations, lists of shipments, letters from donors, negotiations between collection administrators and communist officials, correspondence with representatives of African states, pamphlets, posters and other materials for advertising.

The collections allow the historian to peer behind the iron curtain and measure popular response to calls for humanitarian aid. By illustrating the active involvement of East Germans and the humanitarian nature of their donations, my work will redress a common misperception of life in the Eastern Bloc, which emphasizes the militarism of communist regimes. While I do not discount the abuse of state power in the GDR, I find it important also to examine independent elements in society. I accomplish this task through an examination of the quantity of popular participation in the collection campaigns. Here I trace the donations received by the different collecting agencies. The size of the contributions provides one measure of the existence of an independent third sector. There was a general rise in giving throughout the existence of the campaigns so that one can see an impact over time of the collections. In addition, my work examines individual efforts to organize collections. Through examining these networks, I illustrate the development of networks calling for social justice. My work here will focus on the types of interactions between groups as well as the size of the groups. This associational life is a significant marker of civil society.

Findings

Despite a history of animosity between the churches and the communist state, these institutions cooperated in creating popular collections for the socialist and leftist developing world. The state was more involved in the philanthropic process than traditionally has been the norm in the United States or Western Europe. It limited collection points, required approval for purchases, and oversaw shipments of all collections. Because the East German Mark was not hard currency, money could not simply be transferred. Despite these hurdles, East Germans gave generously. By the fall of the East German dictatorship in 1989, “Bread for the World” had raised 180 Million East German Marks over 30 years, “Need in the World” a further 83 million in 21 years, and the Solidarity Committee had raised millions more in its 29 years of collecting.

In addition to these mainstream efforts, grass roots charity developed in the late 1960s and continued until the fall of the regime in 1989. This type of philanthropy was sometimes organized under umbrella organizations, such as the INKOTA group that promoted greater understanding of the developing world, but also consisted of independent actions. In the latter case, people gathered used goods or purchased new items at stores, boxed them, and shipped them to contacts in foreign states. In some cases, groups of people sent regular (weekly) packages of aid. The parcels could only be sent to countries friendly to the GDR, as foreign post was monitored, but it did provide an outlet for individual action. These collections tended to be carried out by younger people who rejected state policies and saw the churches too closely aligned with the communist regime. Through their giving, they created independent associations that one sees in any civil society.