

The World Council of Churches Assembly in New Delhi 1961 and the German Democratic Republic: Navigations in a Complex Network of Loyalties

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Abstract. The 1961 Assembly in New Delhi was significant in the process of “de-Westernisation” of the World Council of Churches (WCC). This article highlights first the endeavour of the secretariat for ecclesial affairs in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to emphasize the “joint struggle” of the “progressive forces” in the WCC. This perspective is also reflected in some of the more recent academic literature – albeit with a reversed assessment. However, the power shift away from “the West” was characterized by different trajectories. The article therefore argues, second, that the interests of the “progressive forces” were diverse and the alliances fragile. While African, Asian and Latin American representatives sometimes shared the suspicion and criticism of “the West” by Eastern representatives, they also acted independently and spoke for themselves. The processes of de-Westernisation of the WCC were embedded in a complex setting of loyalties, transloyalties and negotiation processes.

Key Words. De-Westernisation, German Democratic Republic, Transloyalties, World Council of Churches.

Introduction

This contribution is one of the results of the research project “Connected Histories – Contested Values: World Lutheranism and Decolonisation: Processes of Transloyalties, 1919-1970” (CHCV) conducted as one of the Excellence in Research projects at VID Specialized University. The aim of the project is to analyse negotiation processes between (mainly Protestant and especially Lutheran) churches and other stakeholders with a focus on values and loyalties from 1919 to 1970 (VID 2024). We are particularly interested in how cultural and religious identities were transformed by negotiation processes in the tension between different loyalties and describe these as “transloyalties”: Key actors crossed boundaries and reinterpreted traditions, and thereby prompted dynamic exchange. During these interactions with

multiple partners (colonial governments, nationalist organisations, secular NGOs, health organisations, and educational institutions) new concepts emerged which required explaining to the traditional constituency (LUDWIG et al. forthcoming a: Introduction).

The term loyalty became more explicitly used in the period of the Cold War with its strict demand on allegiances (LUDWIG et al. forthcoming b: Introduction). International organisations – such as the United Nations or, on the ecclesial side, the World Council of Churches – were torn between different political interests and suspected of being influenced by “the other side.” Since the membership basis was widened to increasingly include Eastern and Southern countries or churches, this was connected to a process of “de-Westernization” in which the power balance was newly configured.

This article provides a case study of the third WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 which was significant in this process. It focuses especially on the approaches and activities of political authorities in the German Democratic Republic, particularly the secretary of state for ecclesial affairs, Hans Seigewasser, and his department. These politicians, as well as church leaders close to the system, had a strong interest to emphasize the “joint struggle” of the “progressive forces” in the Cold War and also in WCC politics.

The perspective of a close cooperation in a more or less one-dimensional process of “de-Westernisation” is also reflected in some of the more recent academic literature – albeit with a reversed assessment: After the end of the revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of most Marxist–Leninist governments, the re-orientation of the WCC in the 1960s could be seen very critically.

However, the power shift away from “the West” was characterized by different dimensions and trajectories, and while African, Asian and Latin American representatives sometimes indeed shared the suspicion and criticism of “the West” by Eastern representatives, they also spoke with their own voices and acted independently. There were also differences in their perspectives. The article therefore argues that while there were strong endeavours by Eastern socialist states to influence ecumenical decisions, the interests of the “progressive forces” were diverse and the alliances fragile. The processes of de-Westernisation of the WCC were embedded in a complex setting of loyalties, transloyalties and negotiation processes.

In the following section, a background and a brief literature review will be provided. Then the article will focus on the selection and observation of delegates to the WCC Assembly in New Delhi by the GDR–authorities, before their assessment after the Assembly and further developments are discussed. The analysis is based on documents which today are hosted in the German

Federal Archives in Berlin.¹ In its last sections, the article will try to assess the significance of these sources and put them into the context of the conference report. To check the claim of joint anti-imperialist interest by non-Western representatives, three “Third World” (a term used at the time) perspectives – Abuna Theophilos (Ethiopia), Francis Akanu Ibiam (Nigeria) and M.M. Thomas (India) – will be introduced.

1. Background and Brief Literature Review

For the World Council of Churches (WCC), an ecumenical umbrella body founded in Amsterdam in 1948 which today includes “most of the world’s Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches” (WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES 2024), the Third Assembly in New Delhi in November/December 1961 was an important event in the process of de-Westernisation. The acceptance of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as other Eastern Orthodox Churches, into membership, the integration of the International Missionary Council into the WCC and the stronger representation of African, Asian and Latin American Churches – symbolized by the fact that the WCC met for the first time outside “the West”, in New Delhi in India (which had become independent in 1947) – made the Assembly a crucial event.

In historiographical perspectives, the ecumenical significance of “New Delhi” has been often highlighted. The movement towards stronger ecclesial cooperation and unity was seen as a sign of the times and found expression not only in the WCC Assembly, but also in the announcement of an ecumenical council for the Roman Catholic Church by Pope John XXIII in January 1959 (POPE JOHN XXIII 1959) which led to the Vatican II Council from 1962 – 1965. The spirit was captured in a cover story of the *Time Magazine* which optimistically declared that “the scattered forces of Christian faith are realigning and regrouping.” (Quoted in KENNEDY 1962: 25; cf. GRANBERG-MICHAELSON 2013: 127). The Assembly in New Delhi also received scholarly attention because of the integration of the International Missionary Council into the World Council of Churches (WARREN 1979).

¹ These documents do not seem to have been used before in research, and they add and supplement to Besier’s work (BESIER 1993, 2017, cf. also BOYENS 1999) which is based on material in other archives, such as the Zentrales Parteiarchiv der SED (Central Party Archive of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei/Socialist Unity Party SED, governing party GDR), the Evangelische Zentralarchiv in Berlin, the Bundesarchiv Potsdam and the Landeskirchenarchiv Hannover.

This fusion was not welcome by all: Some evangelicals felt that they had lost “their theological and organizational home” and in some later books the split between the WCC and the Lausanne Movement is traced back to this integration. (VAN GELDER & ZSCHEILE 2011: 32).

However, in the time of decolonization and church partnership, the step was consequent and necessary, since the churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania could no longer be represented through missionary structures or by missionary organizations. David Bosch summarized it well when he wrote: “The dichotomy -on the global structural level – between unity and mission was overcome ... (T)here can be no doubt that a crucial theological point was made: unity and mission belong together” (BOSCH 1991: 470). Since the venue as well as the growth of the WCC – out of the 23 new member churches admitted in New Delhi, eleven came from Africa, five from Asia and three from Latin America (KUNTER 2014: 32). – indicated a move away from the previous Western basis, New Delhi is regarded as a milestone in the formation of a true “World Council of Churches”.

Analyses of the WCC in the “New Delhi” – and “post-New Delhi” period also differ in their views on the political and ecclesial-political course of the council. On the one side, there are publications which present the developments in the light of emancipation struggles or as an institutional history. An example is the work edited by Harold C. Fey, *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, first published in 1970 (FEY 1970). The merits and the limits of this approach have been succinctly described in a review by Thomas Sieger Derr in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*:

It is “official” history told by the participants. It is the WCC’s own book, paid for ... by a subsidy to the Committee on Ecumenical History from the Disciples of Christ. The great majority of the contributors are current or former World Council staff members, and the rest are also veteran participants in the movement, by their life and work committed to the cause. Understandably there is no muckraking here, and no acid skepticism. The view is that of sympathetic insiders. They have the advantage of knowledgeability, but their account also suffers occasionally from the uniform tone of utter tactfulness common to those who are guarding an image from all unseemliness. Too many descriptions, having roused the reader’s curiosity, stop short of utter frankness (DERR 1973: 635).

On the other side, there is a research tendency to critically reflect the political involvement of the WCC. Two dimensions have been highlighted: First,

after New Delhi, the Council became more outspoken on “Third World Poverty, economic debt, hunger and racism”, and some analysts felt that it became characterized by a habit “to blame reflexively the West in general, and democratic capitalism in particular, for problems in the Third World” (VERMAAT 1989: 102). Second, the admission of the Russian Orthodox Church also raised concerns about political infiltration by the Soviet Union, and by other socialist states of the Warsaw Pact. After the end of the Soviet bloc in 1989/90, when new archival material became accessible, it became increasingly clear that the ecumenical efforts in the East had often closely monitored and influenced by the socialist states to prevent discussions of human rights violations within their sphere of influence (cf. for instance BOYENS 1999). An overview of the developments, with a particular focus on the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, has been given by Pavol Bargár in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies* (BARGÁR 2022: 365-382). Developments in the German Democratic Republic have been first tackled by Gerhard Besier whose study on the German Democratic Republic and the Church also includes material relating to the ecumenical movement and to the WCC Assembly in New Delhi (BESIER 1993: vol. 1, 434 ff.).

These two trajectories are sometimes seen as very closely interwoven, strengthening the same process of distancing the WCC from “the West”. This view is expressed in Gerhard Besier’s, Armin Boyens’ and Gerhard Lindemann’s *Nationaler Protestantismus und Ökumenische Bewegung. Kirchliches Handeln im Kalten Krieg (1945-1990)*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1999, a book which is advertised (and summarized) as follows:

While the USA was politically closer to the WCC in the 1950s due to its economic and ethical superiority (e.g. in the Korean War), the USSR was able to gradually turn the tide in its favour in the 1960s with the help of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Christian Peace Conference. The churches in the Third World, which saw Western supremacy as the imperialist system of oppression par excellence and, against the backdrop of hunger and racial and social discrimination, did not attach any greater importance to the Western values of a democratic society than the “real socialist” states of the Eastern Bloc, also made a significant contribution to this².

In this massive volume (1974 pages), Armin Boyens chapter focuses on the WCC between East and West; he builds on the earlier work of Besier.

² https://www.duncker-humblot.de/buch/nationaler-protestantismus-und-oekumenische-bewegung-9783428100323/?page_id=1; (Last accessed September 15th, 2024). Translated from German by the author (and deepl).

The merit of their contributions is that they include archival sources which document developments in the former GDR.

In the following, in a first step the perspectives of the GDR's political authorities on the WCC Assembly in New Delhi will be further explored, and the assessments of the State Secretariat for Church Affairs will be highlighted. In a second step, it will be argued that processes of de-Westernisation and politicization of the WCC were more pluriform and polycentric as portrayed in the summative statement quoted above.

2. Assembly Preparations in the GDR's State Secretariat for Church Affairs

In August 1961, the Department West Germany/Abroad in the State Secretariat for Church Affairs (Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland im Staatssekretariat für Kirchenfragen) in the GDR wrote an assessment of the previous preparation and the main problems of the World Council of Churches Assembly. The assessment pointed out that WCC was the largest non-Roman umbrella organization of Christian forces, currently including 172 members churches. Taking the preparations so far into account, it was assumed that the New Delhi Assembly will become the scene of hard disputes. There were, on the one hand, the forces which were described as "reactionary": They wanted to maintain the previous line of the World Council of Churches as "an instrument of imperialism" and tried – "under the guise of increased evangelistic activity" – to create a common basis of anti-communism. The planned integration of the International Missionary Council³, as well as the negotiations and the efforts to form an alliance with the Vatican, were interpreted along these lines⁴.

On the other hand, the GDR assessment noted positive developments and a growth of "the progressive forces within the World Council of Churches and its member churches". Three factors were particularly highlighted: 1. "The changed power balance in the world and in particular the collapse of the imperialist colonial systems. The development of the nation states and the formation of independent national churches (...) bring new anti-imperialist forces to the World Council of Churches". 2. The success of the 1st All-Christian Peace Conference

³ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland: Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Berlin, den 1. August 1961: Einschätzung über die bisherige Vorbereitung und Hauptprobleme des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 8. November bis 6. Dez. 1961 in Neu-Delhi (Weltkirchenkonferenz), p. 10. All translations of German archival material are mine.

⁴ Ibid, 5.: "Dem Punkt 'Einheit' liegen z.B. bestimmte Bestrebungen zu einem Bund mit dem Vatikan (auf der Basis des Anti-Kommunismus) zugrunde ..."

(held in Prague, June 13-18, 1961) which had become a powerful ecumenical force. The Czech theologian Josef Lukl Hromádka (1889-1969), a driving force behind the movement since 1961, had been elected President and his position in the WCC was strengthened – especially noteworthy for the GDR observers since “the reactionary forces in Evanston in 1954 tried to get him out”⁵. As a key advocate of a closer interaction between Christianity and communism which he considered “to be the most humane of all socio-political and economic orders” (BARGÁR 2022: 375; PISKULA 2010. For the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church see STOECKL 2014: 21f.). Hromádka had become a symbolic figure – especially since he had clashed with the US-American representative John Foster Dulles at the first WCC Amsterdam in 1948 (cf. for instance BOCK 1991). 3. It was expected that the planned admission of the Russian Orthodox Church to the World Council of Churches, whose leading representatives were members of the governing bodies of the Christian peace movement (“Patriarch Alexy is a member of the Continuation Committee, Archbishop Nikodim is a member of the Working Committee”) would also lead to the strengthening of the already existing progressive forces and widen their base⁶. “The ROC has consistently championed peacekeeping issues at all ecumenical gatherings in which it has participated”. The admission of the ROC was also seen as a “counterweight to the existing efforts towards unity with the Vatican”. It represented “a large number of believers, the citizens of the first peace state in the world, the leading state of the socialist world system and of the world peace movement”⁷.

The assessment continued that “in order to further strengthen the positions of the progressive forces, the appearance of the delegates from the socialist countries is of crucial importance”. Compared with other socialist countries, the preparation of the delegates from the GDR was particularly difficult: Since at that time (und until 1969), the territorial Protestant churches (Landeskirchen) were still member churches of the all-German Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the East German political authorities were interested to prevent a joint “all-German” representation of the GDR delegates with those from West Germany.⁸ Therefore, GDR representatives could not participate in a joint preparatory meeting in Arnoldshain in West Germany,

⁵ Ibid, 10. All translations of quotes from German to English are mine.

⁶ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland: Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Berlin, den 1. August 1961: Einschätzung über die bisherige Vorbereitung und Hauptprobleme des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 8. November bis 6. Dez. 1961 in Neu-Delhi (Weltkirchenkonferenz), 10.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

⁸ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland: Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Berlin, den 1. August 1961: Einschätzung über die bisherige Vorbereitung und Hauptprobleme des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 8. November bis 6. Dez. 1961 in Neu-Delhi (Weltkirchenkonferenz), 11, 12.

and they had to travel via Prag to New Delhi (BESIER 1993: 436).

Another measure was to exercise influence at church events in preparation for New Delhi through the progressive forces – in particular through the Association of Pastors (Pfarrerbund). They should work

in the direction that the main theme and the sub-points of New Delhi are presented positively, i.e. a) that the 'Light of Christ' can by no means be the 'Light' of incitement and anti-communism (...) b) that 'unity' should by no means be a covenant with anti-communism and the Vatican c) that 'ministry' cannot be separated from the most important issue facing humanity, peace and d) that under 'testimony' a position is taken against colonialism and neo-colonialism⁹.

Already in April, Gottfried Noth had submitted a list of 20 representatives from the churches in the GDR¹⁰. Each proposal was now closely scrutinized by the GDR authorities, and the magistrates and municipalities in which the suggested delegates lived were contacted. Just to give a few examples:

The Magistrate of Grossberlin (Greater Berlin) provided an assessment of parish vicar Ingeborg Becker (* 13.5. 1910), a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg church leadership and theological director of the Burckhardthaus. She was seen as having "a negative attitude towards our state order", because she had "smuggled students from the GDR to West Berlin via the Burckhardthaus for a short-term course". She did not vote in 1957 and 1958, and was seen as having influenced others not to vote in 1961. "So it turned out that she has an extremely negative influence on the people entrusted to her. We do not believe that Vicar Becker will appear abroad as a citizen of our state"¹¹.

The Council of the District Halle gave its opinion on two men – youth pastor Steinacker and Oberkirchenrat Dr. Müller. Steinacker was seen as having had a very negative impact on the students of the Heim-Oberschule in Naumburg, regarding "our workers' and peasants' state". "He did not take part in any referendum or election. He openly espoused the line of Dibelius". Therefore he had been removed from Naumburg to Halle in 1959 where he continued to "consistently represents the reactionary line of bishops Dibelius,

⁹ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland: Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Berlin, den 1. August 1961: Einschätzung über die bisherige Vorbereitung und Hauptprobleme des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 8. November bis 6. Dez. 1961 in Neu-Delhi (Weltkirchenkonferenz), 11, 12.

¹⁰ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, 10, 1. Landesbischof D. Noth, Dresden an die Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Berlin, den 13.4. 61.

¹¹ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803: Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Beurteilung Pfarr-Vikarin Ingeborg Becker, Berlin, den 28.9. 1961 (Unterschrift nicht leserlich).

Lilje, etc”. It was also noted that Pastor Steinacker’s father was an old Nazi and Steinacker himself had been a leader of the Hitler Youth. The Council agreed with the two district councils it had consulted “not to give Pastor Steinacker any approval for leaving for New Delhi”, since “this is a person who will in no way act as a representative of the German Democratic Republic abroad”.

In contrast, Dr. Müller was regarded as a representative of the Protestant regional church (Ev. Landeskirche Anhalt) who was “trying to take a loyal position towards our workers’ and farmers’ state and to explain this publicly”. “He strives to understand actions of our government and the problems of our time in general”. However, in regard to the West Berlin Kirchentag (a church convention which was not welcomed by the GDR) he had taken an ambiguous position and, for a while, “the wrong attitude”, but then respected the ban, did not go to the Kirchentag and gave back his sermon assignment. “In the interest of the acceptable relationship between our state and the Ev. Landeskirche Anhalt”, it was agreed to give Dr. Müller permission to attend the World Council of Churches Conference¹².

In the end, eight delegates from the churches in the GDR participated in the New Delhi Assembly. The other suggestions were rejected “because, as a result of their previous behaviour, there was no guarantee that they would present themselves as citizens of the GDR”. Before their departure, the eight remaining participants were invited to a fundamental conversation in which they were instructed about the importance of their behaviour as citizens of the first German peace state¹³.

3. The evaluation of the Assembly by the GDR-authorities

Almost immediately after his return from New Delhi, on December 9 (the Assembly had ended on December 5th), Bishop Mitzenheim was invit-

¹² Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803: Rat des Bezirkes Halle Biertüpel – head of department an den Staatssekretär für Kirchenfragen, Halle, 31. August 1961

¹³ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, pp 7, 8: “Von 20 vorgesehenen Teilnehmern aus der DDR wurden 8 die Ausreisegenehmigung erteilt, und zwar: Landesbischof D. Mitzenheim (Gast) Eisenach, Landesbischof R. Beste, Schwerin, Landesbischof D. Noth, Dresden, Sup. Glembitz, Friedrichsroda, OKR Miller, Dessau, Missionsdirektor Brennecke, Berlin Diakonisse Becker, Dresden, Missionar Gutsch, Berlin (Jugend-Delegierter). Den übrigen Teilnehmern musste die Ausreise verweigert werden, da sie in Folge ihres bisherigen Verhaltens nicht die Gewähr boten, dass sie als Bürger der DDR auftreten. Bischof Krummacher verzichtete auf die Teilnahme mit dem Argument, dass ein verantwortlicher Bischof hierbleiben müsse. Mit den Delegierten der DDR wurde vor ihrer Abreise eine grundsätzliche Aussprache geführt, in der sie auf die Notwendigkeit ihres Verhaltens als Bürger des 1. deutschen Friedensstaates nachdrücklich hingewiesen wurden”.

ed to visit the Department West Germany/Abroad in the State Secretariat for Church Affairs (Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland / Ausland im Staatssekretariat für Kirchenfragen). Mitzenheim had not been a delegate, but a guest and acted as an observer; the assessment of New Delhi Assembly of the department seems to have been based on his report¹⁴.

The Post-New Delhi Assessment regarded the outcome of the 1961 WCC Assembly as positive. It noted that the socialist states had not been openly attacked, and the delegates had restrained themselves on the German and West Berlin question. The representatives of the West German “military church” (“Militärkirche”), who had made every effort to use the conference for NATO policy, had been isolated and had found no basis for their attacks against East Germany. In contrast to the second assembly at Evanston in 1954, the Assembly in New Delhi had focused on the main political problems. It had become obvious, the report stated, that the change in the balance of power in the world in favour of socialism and peace also had an effect on this ecclesial organisation¹⁵.

In its conclusion, the evaluation report regarded the New Delhi Assembly as determined by the existing balance of power in the world. The decisive factors were the development in Africa and Asia, the existence and work of the Prague Peace Conference and the admission of the Russian Orthodox Church¹⁶.

The coming not only of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also of the Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria, Rumania and Poland into the membership of the World Council was also highlighted in the official New Delhi Report as affording “a lively hope that the Christian community can transcend the political and economic divisions of the world to a greater extent than most

¹⁴ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi. The report itself is undated, but the following document refers to it as follows: Stellvertreter – Berlin C 2, den 18. Dezember 1961, Poststr 30. Betrifft: Ergänzungen zum Bericht vom 11.12. 61 über den Besuch von Bischof Mitzenheim am 9.12. 61 – anhand der Notizen des Koll. Flint, Stellvertreter.

¹⁵ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, p. 1.

¹⁶ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, 5

people have believed possible” (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 54)¹⁷. At the third day of the Assembly, on November 21, Alexis, Patriarch of Moscow, expressed great satisfaction at seeing “the Russian Orthodox Church a member of the brotherhood of Christian churches and denominations that form the World Council of Churches”. In his address, he also pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church

expects the World Council to display ‘an ever-increasing purposefulness’ in meeting the ‘daily needs of human society’ on the basis of the Gospels. In carrying out ‘their duty of peace-making’ in a ‘world full of tension’ all Christians must ‘resolutely call upon the leaders of states to start negotiations with the aim of achieving the last agreement on universal and complete disarmament, with effective international control’ (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 14,15).

This leads to another dimension mentioned by in the GDR report: The Russian Orthodox Church had played a significant role behind the Christian Peace Conference. The Evaluation Report commented that the “positive forces in the World Council of Churches, such as Prof. Hromodka”, had gained a basis particularly through the Prague conference and could act even more consistently. At the same time, the position of USA representatives and “other political-clerical forces (such as Dibelius)” – which had been still dominant in Evanston 1954 – had been weakened. The Evaluation Report was particularly pleased by the election of the church president D. Niemöller – “an opponent of fascism and nuclear armament in West Germany” and “a representative of the Prague Peace Conference” – to become one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches. “In this election, the changed attitude of the World Council of Churches and the rejection of the Bonn Ultras becomes particularly clear. (...) The West German “atom bishops” (“Die west-deutschen Atombischöfe”) tried with all their might to prevent the election of D. Niemöller and to have the NATO bishop Lilje elected instead. These attempts also failed miserably.

A policy statement on the world situation was seen as other “decisive blow for the military church”. This statement identified Berlin as the most dangerous

¹⁷ THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 10, notes that a large majority had been in favour. The voting on the admission was carried on by written ballots, but opportunity for verbal statements was given. Two churches used this: “For the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, Archbishop John of San Francisco stated that it had abstained from voting on the application of the Orthodox Church of Russia. (...) Bishop Zoltan Beky of the Hungarian Reformed Church in America explained that it had abstained from voting and hoped that the World Council would not be used as a platform for political purposes”.

areas of concern and warned against carrying out further provocative actions – the report highlighted the “arming of the Bonn army with nuclear weapons”. “This decision is a significant support for the progressive forces, especially for the brotherhoods (Bruderschaften) in West Germany (...)”¹⁸. A general statement of principles on limited and controlled armaments recommended as a means of detente was also welcomed. The report pointed out that reference was made to the Rapacki plan (a plan proposed by Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki to the United Nations General Assembly in October 1957) as a limited plan for nuclear disarmament and demilitarization in Central Europe by establishing a nuclear-free zone. “It is noteworthy that NATO Bishop Lilje and nuclear war theologian Prof. Vicedom opposed the declaration voted on the global political situation, while other Bonn representatives abstained”¹⁹.

The report also noted the “massive criticism by the delegates of the African and Asian churches of the previous imperialist oriented activities of the churches. It turned out that there are strong contrasts between these ‘young’ churches and the old ‘mission churches’”. The Indian M.M. Thomas was cited here as an example:

The Church’s identification with Western culture and power, on the one hand, and her pietism and fear of the action of organized groups aiming at changing the political and social structure on the other, have prevented her from free positive responsible relationship with the struggles of African and Asian people to gain a new life²⁰.

Thus, the post-New Delhi report described the attempts of the GDR and other socialist states to influence the 1961 Assembly and the subsequent developments in the WCC as positive. The report noted with satisfaction that an “all-German delegation” did not come about and that even the West German delegates had not been united. The assessment report concluded that New Delhi had been a fiasco for the representatives of the “West German military church”²¹.

¹⁸ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, 5,6.

¹⁹ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, 5,6. Der Appell des Weltkirchenrates an die Regierungen u. Voelker.

²⁰ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, 2.

²¹ Bundesarchiv DO 4/2803 Arbeitsgebiet Westdeutschland/Ausland, Einschätzung des Verlaufs und der Ergebnisse der 3. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen vom 18.11. -5.12.1961 in Neu-Delhi, 8, 9.

After the conclusion of the assessment, a brief summary of reports from other socialist countries was added (probably received afterwards), according to which the delegation from the GDR had been extremely restrained and the delegates from other socialist countries could not dare to raise GDR problems because they could not risk being stabbed in the back by representatives from the GDR. In his working group, Bishop Beste had taken a very negative and aggressive stance against the socialist restructuring of agriculture (forced collectivization)²².

Also added afterwards was a report of the deputy of the department, Flint, about the conversation with Mitzenheim, which by and large confirmed the statements of the assessment, but added some details. For instance, Mitzenheim had reported that he had had an opportunity to talk with Finnish and Swedish delegates and asked whether he could follow possible invitations of these churches. The Secretary of State replied that on the part of the state, there was of course also an interest “in expanding contacts with church authorities in Scandinavian countries. Of course, it must always be taken into account that those leaving the country always and everywhere behave truly as citizens of our GDR”²³.

4. Ecumenical Cooperation in the Aftermath of the Assembly

In the following years, efforts were made to strengthen the cooperation between the GDR and the Ecumenical Movement. Thus, in 1964, the Gerhard Brennecke wrote in his capacity as director of the Ecumenical-Missionary Office to the Secretary of State for church affairs, Hans Seigewasser²⁴, regarding participation of GDR citizens at study programs of the Ecumenical

²² Ibid., 9: Zusatz über die Delegation der DDR. Ergänzung: “Nach Mitteilung aus den sozialistischen Ländern ist die Delegation aus der DDR äußerst zurückhaltend in Erscheinung zu treten. (...) Die Delegierten aus den sozialistischen Ländern konnten es aufgrund des Verhaltens der DDR-Delegation nicht wagen, Probleme der DDR zur Sprache zu bringen, da sie nicht riskieren konnten, dass ihnen Vertreter aus der DDR in den Rücken fallen und dadurch auch noch den Vertretern der westdeutschen Militärkirche Möglichkeiten zu Provokationen zu geben. Landesbischof Beste ist in seiner Arbeitsgruppe sehr negativ und aggressiv gegen die sozialistische Umgestaltung der Landwirtschaft aufgetreten. (Zwangskollektivierung)”.

²³ Stellvertreter – Berlin C 2, den 18. Dezember 1961, Poststr 30. Betrifft: Ergänzungen zum Bericht vom 11.12. 61 über den Besuch von Bischof Mitzenheim am 9.12. 61 – anhand der Notizen des Koll. Flint, Stellvertreter. (“Der Staatssekretär wies darauf hin, dass wir selbstverständlich auch staatlicherseits Interesse daran haben, wenn die Kontakte mit kirchlichen Stellen in skandinavischen Ländern ausgebaut werden, dabei müsse natürlich immer Berücksichtigung finden, dass der Ausreisende sich stets und überall wahrhaft als Bürger unserer DDR verhält.”).

²⁴ About Seigewasser cf. <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/kataloge-datenbanken/biographische-datenbanken/hans-seigewasser> (last accessed September 15th, 2024).

Institute Bossey. He summarized the developments and the aims of the centre²⁵. The GDR officials had, however, some information about Bossey before this application: In August 1961, Dr. Landmann, a member of the CDU parliamentary group in the People's Chamber (Volkskammer), had attended the lay course "Africa in the midst of our world" ("Afrika inmitten unserer Welt") and had sent a detailed report to the secretary of state. He had had many discussions with West Germans, but also with Swizz, English, Dutch, African and Swedish participants, especially about the GDR and they reserved one evening especially for this question in Gasthof Celigny. Here Landmann referred to the peace plans of the GDR and other proposals of the government. These had not been known to the other participants who had been misinformed, but Landmann could prove his points in black and white – he had brought copies of various documents. Overall, Landmann summarized, the course had brought good discussion results,

which will certainly be disseminated by the participants in all the countries represented. The main results of the Africa themes were that Africa should remain neutral and that the western churches should renounce colonialism and paternalism more actively in order to achieve true brotherhood with Africa and its churches. The majority of course participants also realized that negotiations between the two German states about a peace treaty, reunification and the West Berlin question must and will take place.

In a concluding conversation with Landmann, Prof. Wolf, the director of the institute, welcomed the fact that competent representatives of the GDR were taking part in conferences in Bossey, since there was a great interest in clarifying discussions, particularly about Christian life in the socialist countries. "In addition, the positive opinions of official representatives of the GDR were more important than the negative interpretations already known from propaganda"²⁶.

This was passing the ball perfectly to the Secretariat of Church Affairs. A memo noted:

²⁵ DO 4/2802 Ökumenisch-Missionarisches Amt (Beteiligte Kirchenleitungen, Evangelische Kirchenleitung zu Berlin, Evangelische Kirchenleitung zu Magdeburg, Evangelische Kirchenleitung zu Greifswald, Direktor: Gerhard Brennecke to Herrn Staatssekretär Hans Seigewasser . Staatssekretär fuer Kirchenfragen. 102 Berlin, Poststr. 30m Berlin, den 22. Dezember 1964: "Betr.: Teilnahme von DDR-Bürgern an den Kursen im Ökumenischen Institut Bossey".

²⁶ Bundesarchiv, DO4/2802. Staatssekretariat. Bericht von Dr. Landmann, Berlin, Über den Laienkursus "Afrika inmitten unserer Welt", im Ökumenischen Institut Bossey bei Celigny, Schweiz vom 16.8.-28.8 61.

The report of Dr. Landmann shows that it is right and important that representatives from the German Democratic Republic, who stand firmly on the ground of our workers' and farmers' state and act accordingly, are given the opportunity to take part in such events – but only really such representatives ... It would be worth considering whether we share the opinion of the director of the institute, Dr. Wolf, that positive opinions of official representatives from the GDR were more important than negative interpretations already known from propaganda, should not be used to allow positive forces to accept invitations to negative forces²⁷.

In 1965, the cooperation was further intensified. The administrator of the Bishop's Office of the Church of Berlin-Brandenburg, D. Jacob, requested the State Secretary for Church Affairs to hold a Working Committee meeting of the World Council of Churches on Faith and Order in Bad Saarow in July. The Secretariat granted the request and also decided to invite the international guests to a dinner (in conjunction with the Chairman of the Council of the Frankfurt/O District), in which personalities from social life in the GDR (National Council, Peace Council, CDU) also would participate. During the meeting, a debate as to be held to explain the policy based on peace and international understanding and the social and economic development of the German Democratic Republic. It was also pointed out that "well-known representatives from the socialist countries such as Archpriest Borovoy, USSR, and Dr. Smolik, CSSR, who also perform important functions within the framework of the Prague Christian Peace Conference" would participate. The implementation of the conference would also help to strengthen the position of D. Jacob, who "has repeatedly spoken out in support of our peace policy", but "has to contend with a great deal of resistance within his church leadership"²⁸. The meeting was conducted as planned and the dinner was also used to record smalltalk information of influential Western guests such as Prof. Schlink (Heidelberg)²⁹.

²⁷ Bundesarchiv, DO4/2802 Aktennotiz fuer Kollegen Weise, Im Hause – Akz. 18-22-11 (unterzeichnet von Scheil). "Betr.: Bericht des Dr. Landmann MdV über seine Teilnahme an dem Laienkurs 'Afrika inmitten unserer Welt' im Ökumenischen Institut Bossey".

²⁸ Bundesarchiv Berlin DO 4/2800: Vorlage an das Sekretariat Berlin, den 24. März 1965. - Betr.: Tagung des Ökumenischen Rates – Arbeitsausschuss für Glaube und Kirchenverfassung – in Bad Saarow in der Zeit vom 6. bis 12. Juli 1965 (unterzeichnet von Seigewasser, Staatssekretär).

²⁹ Bundesarchiv Berlin DO 4/2800: Aktenvermerk (12.7.65 Guenter Wirth): "Bei dem Empfang ökumenischer Gäste (Faith and Order) in Frankfurt/Oder am 9.7. 65 sass ich neben Prof. Huston, Evanston (USA) und Prof. Schlink (Heidelberg). ... Aus dem, was ich von ihm hörte, schien mir folgendes interessant zu sein: 1. Er ist der Meinung, dass die SPD einen leichten Stimmengewinn haben wird, ob sie siegt, das zu sagen, sei jetzt unmöglich, weil hierbei viele Faktoren zur Wahlzeit selbst eine Rolle spielten..."

5. GDR Political Perceptions of New Delhi 1961 and the Conference Report

New Delhi marked a turning point in the history of the World Council of Churches and initiated a process of de-Westernization. This process was, as we have seen, accompanied by hopes of the GDR regime to exercise more influence on the ecumenical movement, and the GDR Post-New Delhi Assessment Report regarded some developments at New Delhi as a “decisive blow for the (West German) military church”.

However, this report was selective and represented some of the proceedings of the Assembly in a one-sided way.

Thus, for instance, the statement on the Berlin question had not only warned against the arming of the Bundeswehr with nuclear weapons, but also against

any further attempt to isolate West Berlin from the East or from the West (...) Christians must make it plain that, quite apart from the rights or wrongs of any particular case, political actions which split churches or families or divide Christian from Christian are matters they can under no circumstances condone (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 269).

This was not mentioned in the Report. In regard to the disarmament – question, the official Assembly Proceedings mentioned indeed the plan of the Polish foreign minister Rapacki – but alongside the plans of the British politicians Robert Anthony Eden and Hugh Gaitskell (IBID.) which were not mentioned in the GDR document.

There were also no references to other statements which implied a criticism of the GDR. At the first day, Bishop Gottfried Noth gave an interpretative address on the assembly theme “Jesus Christ, the Light of the World”. In a moving conclusion, especially significant because of its relation to the difficult experience of the Church in East Germany, he said:

(...) We Christians have not been promised that we shall be the cleverest politicians, scientists, technicians or economists We can rely only on one thing; when Christians face the distress of the world in the name of Christ and in his love, then he sends his light, and the spell of sin – which blinds both the wise and the foolish – is broken. How far the light will penetrate is in God’s hands (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 8,9).

Bishop Dibelius, spoke about the continuing need for service to refugees, including refugees from East Germany, and on Monday, November 27, a sermon prepared by General Superintendent Dr. Günther Jacob of East Germany who had not received permission to leave his country was read by Praeses Dr. Scharf (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 25).

6. African and Asian Perspectives: Abuna Theophilos (Ethiopia), Francis Akanu Ibiam (Nigeria) and M.M. Thomas (India)

Moreover, the statement that there had been a “massive criticism by the delegates of the African and Asian churches of the previous imperialist-oriented activities of the churches” was summative and lumped a great variety of positions together which were complex and could not so easily be reconciled, let alone pushed in the political agenda of the GDR and other states of the Eastern bloc.

Thus, in a statement on behalf of the Ethiopian Church, Abuna Theophilos pleaded for a missionary revival in the Church and for a clear demonstration by all churches in Africa that Christianity is not just a “white man’s religion” (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 15).

Probably one of the most influential African participants in New Delhi was Sir Francis Akanu Ibiam, Chairman, of the Council of the University College in Ibadan and the first Nigerian governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria after independence in 1960. Since 1958, he had been one of the driving forces behind the All African Conference of Churches; at the 1961 Assembly he was elected one of the six presidents of the WCC³⁰. In his New Delhi speech, Ibiam paid tribute to the missionaries for what they had done for African peoples, and then spoke frankly about ‘stumbling blocks’ to the Christian movement in Africa occasioned by discriminatory racial practices. He also emphasized the urgent need for the unity of the Church in Africa and for theological education (THE NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 21). His outspokenness against racism had an impact on the WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 which sharply criticised the oppressive Portuguese regime in Angola and also published a message to the Christians in South Africa which confirmed that no one who believes in Jesus Christ can be excluded from a church because of his “colour” and “race” (KUNTER 2014: 35). Based on his personal experiences, Ibiam had addressed the problem of racism for a long

³⁰ For brief biographical overviews see UKA, ODUYOYE 1995: 108-111. There are also longer biographies such as NWAFO 1988.

time³¹ and war recognised as a Pan.Africanist (GATHOGO 2015) and as a leading representative of African independence. Among many other awards, he was “decorated with a Golden Star Medal of the First Degree of the Order of the Russian Orthodox Church, after the Great Vladimir by the Patriarch of Masion and All Russia-Alexy” (UKA). Yet, as Raphael Chijoke Njoku has shown in a brilliant analysis, multiple tensions and complexities – and, one might add, loyalties – existed in Ibiam’s personality; he was influenced by “negotiated and fluid ideals that transcended a narrow network or cultural identity.” (NJOKU 2013: 97, 98). Among these influences were Western education and by an encounter with the moderate Ghanaian intellectual James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey. Before Nigeria’s independence, he had advocated a mutual cooperation with the colonial authorities and a step-by-step constitutional progress to self-government; he was awarded the British title OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 1951 and “the Queen’s Coronation medal” in 1953 (NJOKU 2013). Nigeria’s (and also Ibiam’s) relations with Britain remained close until the beginning of the Biafra war in 1966.

Indian positions also did not fit so easily into the East-West camps. In his greeting to the Assembly, the Indian prime minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru warned the WCC Assembly to regard international relations too much from a Cold War perspective. The statement of the Indian M.M. Thomas, Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society at Bangalore and an outstanding theologian who later (in 1968) became moderator of the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee was also more double-edged and complex than portrayed in the GDR assessment. Thomas pointed out on the one hand that the Gospel is not to be identified with any one culture or political order and on the other hand that the redemption which Christ offers embraces within its scope “the world of science and technology, of politics, society and culture, of secular ideologies and religions”. He accordingly stressed the role of Christians in the new nations as that of “partners in the common struggle for the secular conditions for true human living”. He also indicated ways in which the Christians in these areas can bear their Christian witness and contribute to responsible nationhood instead of merely building “segregated communities.”³² (NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 27, 28). Thomas, who had been inclined towards Marxist ideology in his younger years but had become disillusioned with the developments of communism in both In-

³¹ For instance, when he had been denied service in a “For Whites Only” restaurant in Northern Rhodesia (today’s Zambia) in September 1952, he described the white man as “self-confident, arrogant, and the monarch of all he surveys.” Cf. NJOKU 2013: 93.

³² NEW DELHI REPORT 1961: 27, 28.

dia and Eastern Europe since 1947, formulated a position which did not fit so easily into the Cold War camps as the GDR officials would have liked.

Conclusion

These are just a few examples to illustrate those processes of de-Westernisation of the WCC which started in New Delhi in 1961 were not one-dimensional. They were embedded in a complex network of negotiations, and the leadership of the WCC navigated between different forces. Some steps were ambiguous: The admission of the ROC strengthened, on the one side, the possibilities of the Soviet Union to monitor and influence decision-making processes; on the other hand, it weakened the Prague Peace Conference as an ecumenical alternative. Bishop Ting, who represented the three self patriotic movement in China, had been very disappointed about the Russian Orthodox Church's decision to apply for membership in the WCC³³; at the All Christian Peace Conference (ACPC) in Prague in summer 1961 he had stated "that the World Council was the enemy of China and the Chinese Churches"³⁴. The increasing participation of churches from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe strengthened the WCC's claim to be a Christian World Organisation instead of being a western based organisation. This led to new power balances in which the SU and the GDR, as we saw, indeed tried to exercise influence by controlling their own delegates and forging alliances with other non-Western forces. These alliances were sometimes successful, but often also fragile, and in order to understand the compromises made, one has to take the polycentric configuration in which the WCC had to manoeuvre into account.

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³³ Boyens 1999: 99 referring to AOR, Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee Bossey (19-23 June 1961, TOP 27 Prague Peace Conference.

³⁴ From Dr. Glen Garfield Williams – Geneva, 20th June 1961. Strictly Confidential. Memorandum. Subject: Interview with Bishop K.H. Ting of China in Prague.

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