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Military Instruction and the Protestant Churches (June 14, 1978)

The introduction of military instruction for ninth- and tenth-graders in polytechnic secondary schools reflected the ideological orientation of the East German education system. Such blatant indoctrination engendered public criticism, which was echoed, in turn, by church groups. The following statement, which was issued by the office of the Federation of Protestant Churches [*Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen*], summarizes the talks held between the Church and East German political leaders.

Guidelines for the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders in the GDR [on the introduction of military instruction], June 14, 1978

Berlin, June 14, 1978

Federation of Protestant Churches [*Bund der evangelischen Kirchen*]
Secretariat

Increasing worries have been spreading in our congregations over the last few months about a government measure that first became known through hearsay: The introduction of military instruction in the ninth grade of general education schools. Congregation members turned to church officials with a pressing desire for information and advice, and with a definitive request that we speak out to prevent such a plan from being implemented. A number of petitions in this regard were also received by the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders in the GDR.

I. In this situation, the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders turned to the government of the GDR, requested specific information on the matter, expressed reservations and objections, and asked that state authorities abandon the plan, should such a plan in fact exist.

On June 1, 1978, the undersecretary for church matters then gave an extensive, verbal account to the chairman of the conference and his deputies, along with the secretaries, informing them of the existing plans to introduce military instruction. According to that account, the following is planned:

- Introduction of “military instruction” as a subject in the ninth grade of general education schools starting on September 1, 1978. Four two-hour class sessions per year, in addition to the regular class schedule up to now. Instruction is obligatory for boys and girls; no grading is planned.
- Continuation of the theoretical instruction to the same extent in the tenth grade.

- Implementation of a complete course on civil defense starting on September 1, 1978, in the ninth grade, also obligatory for girls and boys. The duration is two weeks for five hours daily, at the end of the school year. No instruction with weapons.
- Parallel to these civil defense courses, implementation of pre-military camp for a duration of two weeks on a voluntary basis; only for boys; training also includes handling weapons (small caliber).
- In the tenth grade starting in 1979, obligatory three-day final examination during the winter vacation.

These plans were extensively interpreted and explained by the undersecretariat for church matters. Following are records from the argumentation that developed in the further conversation with the church representatives:

- The planned measure should not be viewed and judged in isolation, but should instead be seen within the overall context of the peace policies of the government of the GDR.
- Military instruction and the credibility of the peace policies are linked. Stability and the GDR's defensive readiness have been an important contribution to the preservation and safeguarding of peace in central Europe.
- The introduction of military instruction is in total compliance with the laws of the GDR: Constitution, Article 23 – law for the protection of peace – law on the uniform socialist education system – juvenile law – law on civil defense.
- The introduction of military instruction does not in principle create any new facts (cf. Hans Beimler Competitions – Society for Sports and Technology – pre-military training).
- The planned military instruction enables Christians to practice brotherly love in the case of a catastrophe and to effectively help others in civil defense – self-protection – First Aid.
- All other socialist countries already have obligatory military instruction as a unit of school instruction and have had good experiences with it.
- The desired educational goals: discipline – sense of responsibility – activity – physical training.
- The principle of voluntary participation is guaranteed regarding training with weapons. The desired participation, however, is 100 percent.

In contrast to this presentation, the church representatives expressed their reservations and objections.

- Question: Can a clear orientation towards an education towards peace remain a priority if increased military education results in a one-sided influence on consciousness-formation?
- Serious reservations regarding the age at which military instruction is to begin. Risk of early fixation on friend-enemy thinking and of becoming accustomed to violence as a means of resolving conflicts.
- Fear that the introduction of obligatory military instruction in the schools at this time (creation of trust-building measures, détente, increased efforts for disarmament) will have to be viewed from a foreign policy standpoint as a demonstrative act that would harm the credibility of the peace policies of the GDR.
- The peace testimonials of Protestant Christians from the GDR in the ecumenical movement will be less effective.

In the case that military instruction is introduced according to the plans presented, the

representatives of the church declared that they will support those parents and legal guardians who for reasons of conscience do not see themselves as able to allow their children to participate in this instruction. They have expressed their concern that nonparticipation in this instruction for reasons of conscience will be judged as a sign of political unreliability.

These viewpoints were presented by the representatives of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR on the basis of mutual responsibility for peace and the people. They were listened to attentively by the representatives of the state. It was not apparent that the government will abandon their plans for military instruction.

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Source: "Konferenz der Evangelischen Kirchenleitung in der DDR zur Einführung des Wehrunterrichts vom 14. Juni 1978" ["Conference of Protestant Church Leaders in the GDR on the Introduction of Military Instruction, June 14, 1978"]; reprinted in Hans-Jürgen Fuchs and Eberhard Petermann, eds., *Bildungspolitik in der DDR 1966-1990. Dokumente [Educational Policy in the GDR 1966-1990. Documents]*. Berlin 1991, pp. 115-20.

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