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Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State: A Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945–1990

Raymond Kuehne

Norma S. Davis

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Raymond Kuehne. *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State: A Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945–1990.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Norma S. Davis

Raymond Kuehne, Fulbright Fellow at the University of Marburg and National Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the University of Virginia, came to writing this book through a fortunate set of circumstances. The son of German immigrant parents, Kuehne served in the North German Mission from 1958 to 1960 under presidents Burtis F. Robbins (1957–59) and Percy K. Fetzer (1958–63). The mission office was in West Berlin, but the mission president presided over Church affairs in East Germany as well. During his missionary service, Kuehne saw firsthand the situation for the East German Saints because the Berlin Wall was not erected until 1961. He writes:

Personal contact and communication between mission presidents who lived in West Berlin and the members in the GDR [German Democratic Republic or East Germany] was difficult but adequate. . . . Many East Berlin residents worked in West Berlin and crossed the border daily. Tourists also crossed the border at will, on foot or via the city's subway and elevated trains, as did the author when he was a missionary in West Berlin in 1959. (63)

From 2002 to 2004, Kuehne served a second mission with his wife in the Freiberg Germany Temple. There he met Henry Burkhardt, who had served as a counselor in the North German Mission presidency for some thirty-eight years and was the first president of the Freiberg Temple. When Kuehne heard Burkhardt speak to the temple workers concerning the history behind the building of the temple, he wanted to read more on the subject. He was told that, although this temple was the only one built in a Communist country, very little had been published on the subject. Burkhardt gave Kuehne a copy of a paper he had written shortly after the temple was dedicated. Using this paper as a basis for his research, Kuehne interviewed other members of the Church who were involved in the temple construction. This led him to stories about life in East Germany during and after World War II, as well as life behind the Iron Curtain

during Communist rule. Documents from the LDS Church Archives in Salt Lake City, from East German government records, and from memoirs supplied by members of the Church add strength and depth to *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State*.

The book was originally published in 2008 by the Leipzig University Press in German. The 2010 English translation of what are often complex materials is excellent, and the 359 pages of documentation, along with nearly one hundred pages of appendices and charts, may be more information than the casual reader needs. However, for those who have knowledge of and interest in the history of East Germany, as well as those interested in the worldwide growth of the Church, this book is invaluable.

Kuehne's method is to present events, supply documents, and then leave the readers to come to their own conclusions. For example, in the introduction he states that "readers may wish to consider a basic theological question: What does God expect from every person, regardless of where and when he lives on this earth, and can any government create conditions in which man is incapable of meeting those expectations?" (xiii). His own opinion seldom intrudes on such questions. The readers are left to decide for themselves.

The first two chapters cover the Latter-day Saint organization of the German mission, World War II, and the Soviet occupation. Chapters 3 through 14 cover such subjects as "Life Prior to the Berlin Wall 1949–1961," "Living with the Wall 1961–1989," "How Mormons Defined Citizenship," "Church Youth Programs," and "Improved Relations in the 1970s and 1980s." The last six chapters cover the results of the Saints' responses to difficult situations: the building of the Freiberg Temple, the historic meeting between President Thomas S. Monson and Communist Head of State Erich Honecker, the first missionaries to enter the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from outside, the first missionaries from the GDR to serve outside the country, and the end of Communist rule. The final chapter focuses on the man readers will grow to admire: President Henry Burkhardt.

An example of a few lines from a lengthy quotation in the first chapter will serve as one example of the strength of Kuehne's documentation. This report is written at the end of World War II in 1945 by Paul Langheinrich. Langheinrich served in the East German Mission presidency when communication with the United States was severed during the war. Through an American army officer in West Berlin, he sent this report to Salt Lake City, giving some idea of the response of the Relief Society organization to the situation in the Eastern Sector at that time:

We began our real Relief Society assistance in 1943 when the greatest destruction began and many members lost all of their possessions. Members from every part of the mission contributed linen, clothes, household articles, furniture and almost anything that the needy members required. So much was contributed in two months that we asked the members to temporarily discontinue sending contributions to the mission, but to retain them in the separate branches. Demand for relief was very high. For example, thirty-five families of Königsberg were made destitute in one night. (10)

Similar reports are given of the work of the Sunday School, Mutual Improvement Association, Primary, and of those involved in genealogy. The spirit of the mission presidency at that time is evident in Langheinrich's concluding statement:

The slogan of the mission presidency during the entire war was: The war is not our affair, we didn't start it and cannot end it, but we can live and proclaim the gospel. None of our faithful members should suffer when it lies within our power to prevent it. We can say that God has truly helped us. He has inspired and blessed us so that we can truly say: "Many miracles have taken place in the East German Mission." (11)

Some understanding of what it was like to live in a war-torn land destitute of food, shelter, and basic needs shines through in Kuehne's narration. In a separate chapter, he quotes from the same report: "Since the end of the war, the nutrition and feeding of the members in most sections of the East German Mission has been a catastrophe. The members in Saxony in the Erzgebirge lived for days on end only on potato peelings" (14).

The chapters are supported with eleven appendices which are particularly noteworthy for the richness of their content and the depth they add to the main body of the text. Consider appendix B: "Two Refugee Centers 1945-1947," a supplement to chapter 2: "Soviet Military Administration 1945-1949." We learn there that the East German Mission carried an additional burden when refugee members of the Church came pouring in from countries along their eastern border. The presidency set up homes in Wolfgrün and Cottbus to provide the refugees shelter and food. Local couples were called on missions to serve as supervisors. The following excerpts from Wolfgrün will serve to show the richness of the material in these appendices:

What was the condition of the members when they arrived? Almost all of them were completely exhausted, worn out, and sick, having a long flight and terrible experiences behind them. They came out of the provinces of East and West Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia and had often traveled long distances by foot to reach a train. They were often robbed of all they had along the way. Whoever had a good coat or dress or boots

were stripped of such items. How thankful and happy they were to reach this home in Wolfgrün, where they could finally wash and bathe themselves, receive food and drink, and be relieved of many of their worries. Their thankfulness was often expressed in the monthly testimony meetings. (376)

The material further reveals that after the war members of the Church gained more assistance and less resistance from the Russian authorities than they received from local German leaders:

In January 1946, at a time of extreme cold, the mayor, accompanied by four policemen, came at the request of the provincial magistrate and demanded that I and all the occupants leave the house immediately otherwise he would forcibly evict us. I told the mayor that we would not leave willingly, that he would have to remove each individual by force. When the mayor saw that he would not be successful with threats, he and the policemen left. Later, I received a written order from the provincial government in Dresden. It said, "All occupants of the Mormon refugee camp in Wolfgrün will be taken immediately via Ölsnitz to the western zones. The mayor is authorized to provide train cars and provisions for three days." When the mayor asked when we would leave, I again told him that we would not leave the home, since we had permission to live here. . . . I said, "Herr Mayor, there is 'One' [SMAD or Soviet Military Administration in Germany] who stands above you and the provincial magistrate and when 'He' will, then we will receive ration cards." Two days later, on February 10, 1946, the mayor asked me to meet with him, at which time he said that the provincial magistrate had called and that we were to receive ration cards immediately. There were eighty-nine members in the home at that time. (378)

While hardships were great, there is evidence of another side of life in the refugee homes as presented in a report from the Cottbus refugee center:

Free time activities were within the domain of the [center's] branch. To seek fun outside the Church was not only frowned upon, but it was also not necessary. Dances were held frequently, in addition to theatrical performances, ballad, operetta, and folk song evenings and also sport activities. Special events included spring, fall, Christmas and New Year festivals, Pioneer celebrations, and bazaars. Erwin Gröschke and his orchestra often played at dances. With his help, the musical life of the branch blossomed. . . . The Mormon Pioneers served as the great example for this type of community life. People spoke often about them, and the effort to follow them and to incorporate their ideals gave meaning and significance to life at that time. (372)

It is tempting to add more from other chapters and appendices, particularly the surprising information that, in spite of their extreme needs, the German Saints managed to acquire and preserve precious genealogical records that the Nazi regime had hidden in secret caches throughout the country.

Under the direction of the mission presidency and through the efforts of eleven local missionaries, some fifty thousand books were taken to secure vaults in East and West Berlin and eventually microfilmed and placed in the Granite Mountain Records Vault in Salt Lake City. This short excerpt is an example of what the five pages of appendix C: “Recovery of Genealogical Records 1946” contains:

Everything pointed to Rothenburg Castle, and we found thousands of books when we arrived there. Unfortunately, much to our grief, we had to admit that some of those books had been used by local people as heating material. Furthermore, we determined another large portion of the books had been left exposed to snow and ice. After we took measures to prevent further destruction, we returned to Berlin to make preparations for the recovery of these books. (386)

One final example deals with the historic meeting between President Thomas S. Monson and Chairman Erich Honecker. Kuehne provides the background leading up to this meeting as early as chapters 3 and 4, then after giving the reader a great deal of other information, he addresses the subject in chapter 17. He begins by quoting Wolfgang Paul, first president of the newly formed Germany Dresden Mission, describing his surprise and joy in bringing the first eight missionaries into the GDR in March 1989. Next he quotes President Henry Burkhardt concerning the first ten East German missionaries to leave the GDR on foreign missions in May 1989. Then he asks the question: “Why did the border open so easily for those two groups?”

The answer, in part, is given in eighteen pages documenting the meeting and includes the resulting compromises agreed upon by both sides. Lest readers think that the story ends with “they lived happily ever after,” Kuehne presents the reaction to the meeting from both members of the Church and from the general public. Examples range from “I was unbelievably moved” to “It had the appearance of kneeling before a socialist government. It was not good for us personally” (322–23). Two final excerpts are enlightening in this regard:

President Burkhardt: I often received threatening phone calls and was asked how we, as a church, could fraternize with the Communists like that. I had to put up with that for a while. I received letters that were not written with the nicest tone, because people believed that I was one who had initiated or was desirous of this contact. But I had the inner satisfaction that President Monson wanted this connection.

President [Frank] Apel [currently President of the Freiberg Temple]: Some members asked us after the Wende [reunification of Germany], “Why were you with Erich? You sold yourselves.” But I see it entirely differently. There were hardly any government leaders in any Western country

that did not have contact with Erich Honecker, who didn't visit him, shake his hand, or sit at banquets with him. And so we said to ourselves, "We must try to obtain as much as possible without denying our faith." (324)

Once again, rather than interpret or answer his own questions, Kuehne leaves that task to the reader, further underscoring the strength of the book. Such a practice should be paramount for anyone writing a documentary history, but it is seldom achieved. When it occurs, as it has with Kuehne, readers are likely to have more trust in the material.

Whether Kuehne meant it to happen or not, several "heroes" emerge in the pages of the book. Some will be expected by LDS readers: President Thomas S. Monson, President Henry Burkhardt, and the many faithful named and unnamed Saints who endured so much with fortitude, humor, and joy. Several faithful and brave mission presidents also stand out, and recognition is given to President Spencer W. Kimball in teaching the Saints to live the twelfth Article of Faith under such trying times.

In my opinion, another and perhaps unexpected hero emerges from the pages of the book: Günther Behncke, the communist head of the legal division of the Secretariat for Church Affairs from 1981 to 1990. Kuehne states that Behncke "contributed significantly to the success of the Church in that last decade of the German Democratic Republic" (46). He quotes Behncke at length from a 1991 interview in which he explains the perspective he used in dealing with Latter-Day Saints and other churches during this time. Throughout the book are abundant examples of how Behncke skillfully guided Honecker and others to the Honecker-Monson conference of 1988.

The book's greatest weakness is the absence of an index. Considering its documentary nature and the expectation that it will become a reliable reference for other researchers, this seems unusual. An index would also have been helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with the history of this time and may have difficulty connecting events from one chapter to another. A map of the area would also have been useful for the same reasons. I suggest that anyone who is unfamiliar with the country supply themselves with a good map of Germany and its neighbors to the east. Personally, I wish more had been documented about the sisters who served as missionaries during the Communist period, the first sister missionaries to leave the GDR, and the first sister missionaries to enter from the outside.

Having said this, there are many more positives to note in *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State*. Few topics intrigue readers more than accounts of valor under difficult circumstances. Raymond Kuehne has

managed to incorporate a moving example of valor within this documentary history of Latter-day Saints living in East Germany. This book is an important addition to the growing body of documentation concerning the growth of the Church throughout the world.

Norma S. Davis (garoldandnorma@gmail.com) is Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Brigham Young University. She thanks her husband, Garold N. Davis, Professor Emeritus of Germanic Languages and Literature at BYU, who proofread and contributed valuable advice to this review. The Davises served in the Germany Dresden Mission (1989–1990) as office couple to President Wolfgang Paul. With President Paul's permission, they conducted interviews and collected unpublished stories, which *BYU Studies* published in 1996 under the title *Behind the Iron Curtain: Recollections of Latter-Day Saints in East Germany, 1945–1989*. They are personally acquainted with many of the people and events mentioned in chapters 18 and 19 of the book, and they affirm Günther Behncke's significant contributions to the Church's success in the GDR during 1981–90. In 2006–8 the Davises served a second mission, spending the last six months in Dresden in the Institute Outreach Program for young single adults.