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Henry Burkhardt and LDS Realpolitik in Communist East Germany

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Raymond Kuehne. *Henry Burkhardt and
LDS Realpolitik in Communist East Germany.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011.

Reviewed by James H. Backman

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.
(From Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life*)

The biography of Henry Burkhardt is an inspiring story tied to a group of Church members caught up in the politics of Germany after World War II. Like a young David asked to face a Goliath of repressive national power that caused a fledgling people to fear the political force around them, Burkhardt led faithful Latter-day Saints for four decades in a manner reminiscent of early pioneers like Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff. Like each of these early faithful servants, Burkhardt became a leader at a young age, when as a missionary he was called in 1952 at the age of twenty-two to be a counselor in a mission presidency. His area was what we know as East Germany, which had been carved out in postwar Germany and occupied by Soviet armies. He was still serving as a temple president in that land—officially known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and the Communist regime disintegrated and in 1990 when Germany unified once again.

Raymond Kuehne frames the history of Henry Burkhardt against the intriguing political background of a Communist nation. He tells the story of how the small Church community survived and eventually flourished under a power that was radically antithetical to people of faith. Burkhardt was a devoted man, relying on faith, prayer, scripture, and spiritual guidance, as well as the instructions he received from Church leaders. Church-state relations in the GDR were directly impacted by the quiet, consistent,

friendly, and cooperative manner in which he worked with political leaders. The relationship between LDS leaders and the government of the GDR eventually led to the building of the only temple ever constructed in a Communist state, an event that was extremely surprising since the Iron Curtain placed huge restrictions on travel, communication, and freedoms that many other members of the Church took for granted. The politics behind these church-state relations receive substantial attention throughout the book and justify the LDS Realpolitik phrase in the title.

This book is the third contribution by Raymond Kuehne unfolding the history of Latter-day Saints in East Germany. This book differs from his other works by focusing on the life of one Church leader. This attention to an individual role model—in this case a humble, serious-minded, and faithful servant of God—acts as an accessible passageway to the broader events and accomplishments of the East German Saints. Kuehne's other book *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State* and his article in *Dialogue* about the Freiberg Temple are based on his same extensive research.¹ Yet somehow the story of a single Church leader involved in these remarkable events is more compelling than focusing on the temple, as in Kuehne's previous article, or on the group of four thousand Church members, as highlighted in his previous book. I suppose readers tend to seek out individual heroes within important historical movements in order to be inspired in the face of their own challenges.

Kuehne based this documentary history largely on oral histories and on journal entries from Henry Burkhardt. Between 1989 and 1993, Church archivists gathered forty of these oral histories covering the time soon after the fall of the East German regime. In addition, Kuehne conducted seventy more oral interviews between 2003 and 2009. Helpful notations indicate the year in which the oral history quotations were recorded. Kuehne also used two microfilm collections from the Church History Library, including documents from the State Secretary for Church Affairs for the GDR (1950–90) and Stasi Files, which came from the 760 pages contained in the Stasi collection of reports on Burkhardt

1. Raymond M. 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); Raymond M. Kuehne, "The Freiberg Temple: An Unexpected Legacy of a Communist State and a Faithful People," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 2 (2004): 95–131.

from the infamous East German secret police. The files were obtained by Henry Burkhardt in 2009 and are included in the Church History Library along with his personal journals. Another referenced document is an unpublished typescript by Burkhardt from 1983 on the building of the Freiberg Temple (“Wie es zum Bau des Freiburger Tempels kam,” translated as “Developments Leading to the Building of the Freiberg Temple”). Kuehne also uses excerpts about Burkhardt from President Thomas S. Monson’s book *Faith Rewarded: A Personal Account of Prophetic Promises to the East German Saints*.²

A documentary biography is a powerful means of presenting the factual context of a person’s life by carefully chosen excerpts from personal journals, oral interviews, and official documents. The reader should recognize, however, the limitations of this approach to telling a story. It is not comparable to other popular biographies in which the story is conveyed through beautifully constructed prose, with many portions of the narrative aided by the author’s creative and personal observations. Long quotations from scores of oral interviews and from lengthy journal entries of Henry Burkhardt himself result in an uneven literary style.

On the back cover of the book, the publisher promises that the book, in addition to the personal history of Henry Burkhardt, also presents “a case study of church-state relations in the GDR.” The work falls short in this respect because political historians looking for a helpful chronicle about the way the government dealt with religious organizations will not find information on how other religions in East Germany were treated. The LDS Church had such a small number of members, and the specific accomplishments produced through the relationship the government had with this one Church leader were unique, so it is hard to imagine that scholars can learn very much in terms of how this Communist system dealt with the predominant Catholic and Lutheran churches. The title of the original German publication (*Henry Burkhardt—Ein Leben für die Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligen der Letzten Tage in der DDR*, which means *A Life for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the GDR*) does not mention the political theme of the biography and does not emphasize the Communist setting of the events described. The political context is especially interesting to English-speaking readers,

2. Thomas S. Monson, *Faith Rewarded: A Personal Account of Prophetic Promises to the East German Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996).

but it is not a primary purpose of the book to serve as a commentary on a Communist government's relationship to churches in a larger context.

Regarding possible concerns that the documentary style opens up sensitive, personal information about persons associated with Henry Burkhardt, the author seems to have avoided many such issues. For example, the name of one of the Stasi informants who served as a branch president is never disclosed. The author deserves special appreciation for the excellent English translations he personally made of the full German book itself and of the journal and oral history compilations on which the book is based.

Kuehne explains that he was serving a temple mission with his wife in the Freiberg Temple when he first met Henry Burkhardt. A long discussion with former Temple President Burkhardt triggered the author's long-term interest and extensive research, which led to his two books and article about the developments in East Germany during these Soviet and Communist eras. Latter-day Saints are familiar with stories about President Monson's special relationship with Church members in this isolated country through the conference talks and the book published about his ministry there as a young Apostle. The blessing he pronounced became well known among the East German Saints, and many carried a copy of the amazing blessing with them because of the promises given in it. President Monson explains, "I stood at the pulpit with tear-filled eyes and a voice choked with emotion and made a promise to the people, 'If you will remain true and faithful to the commandments of God, every blessing any member of the church enjoys in any other country will be yours'" (64). He repeated a similar set of promises in a dedicatory prayer that he pronounced on the land in 1975.

The political events in the country are interesting when seen from the perspective of LDS Church developments in Europe. The Soviet military occupation began in 1945, and the GDR was established in 1949. At this time, the Church operated in the area as the East German Mission. Burkhardt was a significant leader and official representative for the Church in all connections with the East German government from 1952 to 1990, because the government wanted to have dealings solely with a citizen of its nation.

Because of the knowledge that he was regularly under surveillance from the Stasi, Burkhardt learned to be very circumspect in his statements in both private conversations and public speeches. Once when he was asked if it bothered him to know that informants were

in regular attendance at Church, he explained that it was no worry for him, and it could result in the conversion of a spy from the outside. He also welcomed active members of the Church serving as informants because, he reasoned, they would report events more accurately than persons outside of the Church who did not understand its doctrines and organization.

At first, Saints from Germany were able to attend the Swiss Temple relatively freely. Soon after the temple was dedicated, for instance, newlyweds Henry and Inge Burkhardt were sealed there. The Saints continued attending the temple until the Berlin Wall went up in 1961. In response to this, Burkhardt spoke at a conference in December 1961, emphasizing that “the work of the Lord cannot suffer as a result of conditions imposed by man. It will more or less depend on us, and how we carry out our callings, whether the work of God will continue to go forward with success in this country” (50).

Burkhardt’s journals indicate what a powerful desire Latter-day Saints had to have access to the ordinances performed in temples. He explained that over the initial two decades of isolation following the construction of the Berlin Wall, he regularly carried requests from Church members to government officials for visas so couples could travel to the Swiss Temple for their eternal marriage sealings. The requests were uniformly turned down, except for occasional permissions received for elderly, retired couples.

Finally, in 1978, government officials suggested to Burkhardt that the Church build a temple in their country rather than attempt to have members travel. In March of that year, President Erich Honecker, head of the East German government, announced a major change in the GDR’s church policy in a speech titled “The Place of Christians and Churches in the Socialistic Society.” Honecker explained, “Many opportunities are opening now and in the future for churches, as churches within socialism, to work cooperatively toward the deepest of humanistic goals” (83). The temple in Freiberg was announced in 1982, with the groundbreaking in 1983 and the dedication in 1985. Burkhardt explained the joy of the Saints who had never expected this event to occur in their lifetimes: “Personal preparation for a temple visit had been made over the years. Time and again they had been taught to so live as to be worthy for a temple visit. They lived to that standard and saw the dedication of the temple as fulfillment of the highest wishes of their hearts” (99). Burkhardt, who personally “never believed that a temple could be built in the GDR” (88), served as the first Freiberg Temple president.

Burkhardt received advice early in these decades from Elder Spencer W. Kimball and then later from Elder Thomas S. Monson. They advised him to work cooperatively with government officials with the goal of making friends with them. Early on, he questioned this approach because the government system seemed to be so opposed to the legitimate desires of the Latter-day Saints he represented. Looking back, he explained, “We always felt like we were standing with one foot in jail. But those years are past, and we did alright, in fact we did very well at the end” (31). Eventually, he gave heed to the directions he received from the Apostles, and he attributed the ultimate successes achieved to the friendly approach they firmly encouraged.

To help explain Burkhardt’s accomplishments in the Church, Kuehne includes a chapter called “His Leadership Style and Character” in which he relates a number of stories and descriptions about Burkhardt to illustrate traits commonly pointed out by those who knew him well. For example, Wolfgang Suess, a missionary in the GDR and later branch president of the Freiburg branch, commented, “Brother Burkhardt was very exact, very correct, very conscientious, and he took wonderful care of us as missionaries” (28). After a visit from Elder Spencer W. Kimball, the Apostle noted, “We were pleased indeed with President Burkhardt who seems to have judgment and wisdom beyond his years. He has such a sweet spirit and a splendid attitude, and I am sure he has done a great service and will be able in the future to do even a greater one” (44). President Monson described Burkhardt as “one of the most faithful Latter-day Saints I have ever met. Truly the Lord has raised him up to help provide for the saints in East Germany” (66). He also said, “It was a privilege to meet with this giant of the Lord who goes forward in directing our affairs behind the Iron Curtain without regard to any consequence to himself or his family” (68). In a 2008 interview, Ruth Schult stated, “He was a model for us, because he worked for the church his whole life. He sacrificed much time and much of his family life, but no one heard him complain, not even his wife. He never wanted to be pushed into the foreground, but preferred to stay in the background” (137).

Referring to himself, Burkhardt remarked in a 2008 oral interview, “If someone now were to say, ‘See all what you accomplished!’ that was not I, for I was only a tool and take no pride in it. Without help from above, I would not have been able to do anything” (123).

The primary beneficiaries of this book are all readers interested in discovering modern-day stories that inspire them to live the gospel in their daily lives even under duress. This book adds a human face to perhaps

one of the most difficult eras that any community of Latter-day Saints has faced in the last half century. Their experiences will inspire future generations in the same way that biblical, religious, and pioneer stories of determination, sacrifice, and faith in the face of hardship have stirred souls the world over.

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