

# MCC and the German Democratic Republic's State Security Service (Stasi), 1945–1989

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The division of Germany into four occupation zones at the end of the Second World War stimulated thousands of refugees, including Mennonites, to flee from the Soviet Occupied Zone (SOZ) and seek refuge in the West. By the time of the construction of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961, nearly three million people had emigrated from the SOZ (later the German Democratic Republic, GDR). Fleeing the GDR required reporting to an emergency reception camp where individuals would receive a “routing slip [*Laufzettel*] for the emergency admission procedure” (Kimmel, 2005, p. 121). The seemingly innocuous “inspection station” (*Sichtungsstelle*) concealed a procedure involving all the secret services of the Western Allies and the Federal Republic of Germany. The GDR’s Ministry of State Security (MfS, commonly called the Stasi, from the German word “*Staatssicherheit*”) also attempted to obtain information and exert influence to the point that fugitives were forcibly abducted and returned to the GDR. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) helped some of these Mennonites find new homes in the western hemisphere. MCC work in refugee assistance meant the organization was also under constant surveillance by the Stasi.

In the Marienfelde Emergency Reception Camp in West Berlin, refugees were first presented to American security services, then to

British authorities, then to French officials, and finally to West German inspectors. All the interviews were attended by members of the secret and counterintelligence services. The order of presentation indicated the relative status of the several states. The German authorities did not have much to say. The more interesting a fugitive was from the point of view of the secret services, the longer the procedure took. For example, fugitives who had performed special, governmental, or military tasks in the GDR were sometimes “questioned,”<sup>1</sup> i.e., interrogated, in some cases over a period of several months. Particularly important persons were typically flown out to the West immediately by US authorities so that the East German secret service could not retrieve them. Today, it is assumed that more than a few of those who fled actually worked for the Stasi. Some of the refugees were sent back to the East to act as an agent of a Western secret service. Others, especially young people, from whom not much information was expected, received their stamp from the station *Sichtungsstelle* within a very short time so that they were granted “leave” until they could depart the camp permanently once they were fully approved.

There was hardly any place in Germany at the time where more international secret services were concentrated than in West Berlin and especially in the Marienfelde Emergency Reception Camp. “According to the director of the British Secret Intelligence Service (M16), nearly half of the agency’s ‘total strength’ was concentrated there at the end of the 1950s” (Allen, 2017, p. 1). The American office, where interrogations were carried out under the supervision of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), is said to have been equipped with leaden walls conversations could not be intercepted. Everyone, in the East and West, was trying to gain as much information as possible from the other side.

While only 30 percent of those who fled were classified as “in danger of life and limb” and thus accepted as “political refugees” there was always the possibility of appeal. The Investigative Committee of Free Jurists (Untersuchungsausschuss Freiheitlicher Juristen) prepared expert legal opinions. This association of lawyers, whose members had also fled the GDR, was now trying to help other refugees. The organisation was financed by the CIA in the first years after the war and maintained an office on the grounds of the Marienfelde camp. Dr. Götz Schlicht, himself an émigré, worked for the Free Jurists but also as an agent for the GDR’s Stasi as an unofficial co-worker (Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter, IM) of the Stasi, codenamed “Dr. Lutter.” After twenty-eight years in this role he received honours from the head of the Stasi, Erich Mielke. (Ciesela, 2005, pp. 157–164). Yet he was surely a well-disguised double agent, as the

Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) also awarded him the Federal Cross of Merit.

As the above example indicates, nearly everyone who worked with refugees from the East was “automatically” in contact with state securities from the East and West. In the emerging Cold War context, the Mennonite Central Committee (working in Berlin since 1945) also assisted refugees from the GDR. This role invariably placed them in contact with various secret services. In considering the MCC response to this environment of hyper-surveillance, I focus on the secret service of the GDR, the Stasi. This includes its official employees and its unofficial collaborators who were first designated “Geheimer Informator” (GI, secret informer) and later, from 1968 onward, as IM (Kowalczyk, 2013, pp. 219–246).

Established in 1950, the Stasi developed into a surveillance and repression apparatus. In 1989 it had about 91,000 employed officers and, depending on how they were counted, up to 189,000 IMs, (Kowalczyk, 2013, pp. 190, 215). These IMs consisted of a spectrum of people including overzealous citizens who wanted to report anything about so-called dissidents. That term could also those who had made an unsuccessful escape attempt, were homosexual, belonged to the music and art scene, or simply stood out as maladjusted youths.

The Stasi tried repeatedly to discover the vulnerabilities of GDR citizens in order to manipulate them for its own interests and as a means of coercing informants. For example, there was a young member of a youth group from the Mennonite community in the GDR who ran into a problem at his rural farm, where he worked in the LPG (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft, agricultural production cooperative). He made a mistake and so the Stasi came to him and said: Either you pay for the damage, or you go in prison. But you also can tell us every once in a while, about the Mennonite Church you go to. He never visited the Mennonites in Berlin again.<sup>2</sup> A distinction must therefore be made between the main officers of the secret police and their unofficial co-workers. The Mennonites and the MCC had to deal with both.

What did the Stasi really know? Sometimes information from Stasi IM was quite crude and can present an interpretive challenge for historians. One such report was an observation of the house of the Mennonite elder Erich Schultz in Berlin-Dahlem (West) noting that in the “Mennonite-Mormon Church in Dahlem, ‘Church of the last three days of Jesus,’ visitors from the GDR were interrogated by American church leaders and after that they get presents.”<sup>3</sup> The conflation of Mormon and Mennonite indicated that the atheistic IM had little detailed knowledge about Mennonites as a religious minority. In another case, the IM just observed that “Yesterday you

ate [ice] cream!” This may sound irrelevant but the recounting of past everyday behaviours would have indicated to those being interrogated that they were perpetually under surveillance. The observed person would feel captive and thus were prevented from working against the interests of the state.

The following four examples that form the core of this article stretch across four decades. They reflect the ongoing observation of MCC through Stasi eyes while revealing the different ways that MCC dealt with Stasi surveillance.<sup>4</sup> Though further historical research is needed on this subject, the engagement of a historic peace church with secret services also merits theological reflection.

### **The Attempt to Ban the Mennonite Church in the GDR**

The German historian Imanuel Baumann was the first to describe the documents located in the Bundesarchiv (BArch) concerning a special case where the minister of internal affairs, Dr. Carl Steinhoff, with the help of the Volkspolizei (People’s Police) and its spies, tried to ban the Mennonite Church in the GDR (Baumann, 2016, 2021, pp. 397–414). The question Baumann could not answer clearly was why the attempt was ultimately unsuccessful.

MCC worker C. F. Klassen arrived in Berlin immediately after the end of the Second World War in 1945 to organize refugee relief and was followed by MCC representative Peter J. Dyck (Rempel, n.d.). When Dyck came to Berlin for the first time in June 1946, he rode in a US military jeep through the American sector in Berlin-Lichterfelde West and picked out a house to serve as the MCC headquarters in Berlin. As he recalls, “The Germans had lost the war. The Americans were now in charge, and if they wanted German houses, they simply requisitioned them. We drove back to 107 Ring Strasse. I said, “That one.”” (Dyck & Dyck, 1994, p. 97) From this location MCC distributed relief supplies. It is estimated that 10 percent of the relief goods reached its own people and 90 percent were given to the city’s population, regardless of origin or religion (Enns, 2017, p. 68, note 32).

In addition to administering relief, MCC sought to aid displaced Mennonites from the East. A spectacular departure by train in January 1947 was reported by MCC workers Elfrieda and Peter Dyck in their book *Up from the Rubble* (1994, pp. 91–139). With the approval of the Russian military administration, a train carrying over one thousand Mennonites, most of them from the USSR, left the western sector of Berlin and travelled through the Soviet

Occupation Zone to Bremerhaven. From there they emigrated to South America on the Dutch ship *Volendam* (Regehr, 1991).

Many of the approximately two thousand Mennonites who fled East and West Prussia also had a desire to escape to the West after arriving in the SOZ. MCC helped them to do so. Encouraged by their ministers, who held services and passed on information in the SOZ and later the GDR, many ventured to escape to the West under the cover of nightfall, sometimes with the help of guides who knew the area. One of these escapes was to have a lasting impact on the Mennonites in the GDR. On Sunday, July 8, 1951, the elder and minister Rudolf Hein, his family, his friend Hermann Dau and his family—nineteen persons in all—organized a Sunday excursion from Mulmke, Harz, from which they did not return to the GDR. Elder Bruno Goetzke, remunerated by the MCC for pastoral care of the brothers and sisters in the GDR, announced the successful escape at a church service in Halle an der Saale, GDR. An informer for the Volkspolizei was sitting in the congregation and immediately reported to his superior:

The financing of the crossing is carried out by a pastor from America who is still supported by a believer in the sect, the owner of a knife factory in America. The money for the crossing would only be advanced by these two persons and each member would have to work first one year in farming there, for which there are no wages, and thereby pay of two-thirds of the debt, the remaining third would be easily covered later, as there are dollars in America.<sup>5</sup>

This rather peculiar report, as well as several others about Mennonites escaping to the West with the help of the MCC, led to Minister Steinhoff's attempt to ban the Mennonite faith in the GDR. The reason, according to a letter written by Steinhoff, was not because Mennonites were particularly pious people or because they refused military service, but because they made common cause with the "Anglo-American warmongers" and deprived the people of the GDR of manpower and assets thus damaging the construction of a socialist society. Therefore, all religious activities of the Mennonites were to be banned with threat of penalties and their assets were to be confiscated.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Steinhoff's hostility and the constant surveillance of Mennonites by the Stasi, the proposed ban of Mennonites in the GDR never came into effect. Why not? Three possibilities emerge. First, a document marked "confidential" which was found in the MCC archives in Akron (Reprint see, Thiessen, 2020, p. 20), notes that Probst Heinrich Grüber, a Protestant pastor in West Berlin who had been in a Nazi concentration camp in the 1940s, together with

Otto Nuschke, then deputy prime minister of the GDR, wanted to intervene on behalf of the Mennonites, though it is unclear if either took any action. Secondly, in his letters, Steinhoff wrote to “Genosse [comrade] Plenikowski” in the Central Committee of the Socialist Party (SED). Anton Plenikowski came from West Prussia. Before the Second World War he was a teacher in the Liessau area of West Prussia, where several Mennonites lived (*Mennonitisches Adressbuch*, 1936, p. 88), and Mennonite children attended his classes. Plenikowski thus had earlier knowledge of the Mennonites. In the GDR, he was also responsible for the refugees from the East. Many of the so-called “Plenikowski-Umsiedler” wrote letters to Plenikowski asking for support. Plenikowski always assured the “Danzigers” of his full support (Schmole, 2008, pp. 161–162). He was a great critic of Steinhoff, stating that he was not able to lead a ministry (Maeke, 2020, pp. 165–166).<sup>7</sup> There was some discussion suggesting that Plenikowski should become successor to Steinhoff as minister of the interior even though this position ultimately went to Willi Stoph (Schmole, 2008, p. 163, note 32). Therefore, it seems Plenikowski would have been the wrong person for Steinhoff to seek support from in banning Mennonites.

The more likely reason why the Mennonites were not banned was that Minister Steinhoff was summarily dismissed in May 1952 by Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the SED, under pressure from Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Steinhoff had no military record and was considered too bourgeois for the communist governments both in the USSR and in the GDR (Maeke, 2020, pp. 162–170). The dismissal meant that Steinhoff could not pursue his project any further and it seems that no one else was interested in implementing the ban as he had conceived of it in 1952.

### **Rapprochement on Peace Issues, 1955–1965**

Motivated by MCC workers from North America, European Mennonites also rediscovered their historic Anabaptist peace witness in the years after the Second World War. This took on heightened significance as it occurred in an emerging Cold War context. Mennonites did not want to be embroiled in the ideological confrontations of the era, but faced with the “prevailing anti-Communism” of the western world (Sawatsky, 2018, p. 480), they sought to build bridges over what British prime minister Winston Churchill had called the “Iron Curtain” in 1946 (Mojzes, 2018, p. 510).

At the inaugural World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, Mennonites from the Netherlands (*Algemene*

Doopsgezinde Societeit, ADS) and from Germany (Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden, VDM) were also present. An important message of the assembly to the world was "War is contrary to the will of God!" However, opinions and methods regarding how the various churches justified this assertion and wanted to achieve peace were far apart. Thus, at the suggestion of the so-called Historic Peace Churches (Mennonites, Quakers, and Church of the Brethren) together with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), talks were arranged with Protestant churches (Lutheran and Reformed). As an answer to the announcement of WCC, this group published a booklet called *Peace is the Will of God* (1953, see Sawatsky, 2018, p. 481). Four so-called Puidoux Conferences, named after the first meeting place, followed as forums for discussion, at Puidoux, Switzerland, August 15–19, 1955; Iserlohn, West Germany, July 28–August 1, 1957; Bièvres, France, August 2–7, 1960; and Oud Poelgeest, Netherlands, July 9–14, 1962 (Driedger, n.d.; Durnbaugh, 1978).

The fear of a renewed, and potentially nuclear, war between East and West, with divided Germany at the centre, led open-minded Lutherans and Reformed Christians, especially those inspired by the tradition of the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche), to sit down at one table with the peace churches in order to renew a dialogue interrupted for hundreds of years. Despite the goals of clarifying the view on church and state and developing a peace ethic and reconciliation policy, the very different understandings of the state and church held by the participating churches prevented a joint declaration. However, the conferences did provide a forum for mediating discussions between East and West. Thus, church representatives from the Eastern Bloc were deliberately invited to the 1960 conference in Bièvres, France. On the Mennonite side, participants included Harold S. Bender, John H. Yoder, Paul Peachey, Albert J. Meyer (all from North America), Carl Brüsewitz, Henk B. Kossen (both from the Netherlands), and Heinold Fast (from West Germany).

Leading representatives of the so-called Prague Christian Peace Conference (CPC), particularly co-founders Prof. Josef L. Hromadka and Jan M. Lochmann, participated in the opening talks with churches from Eastern Europe. The theme of the Bièvres meeting was "The Importance of the Lordship of Christ for our Existence in State and Society," and it became clear that these discussions would have an impact on the relationship between the state and the church in the participants' respective political systems. Therefore, it is no wonder that state authorities, especially in the East, followed

with interest the positions held by church representatives held in these East–West talks.

The theologian Gerhard Bassarak (1918–2008)<sup>8</sup> was sent from the GDR to Bièvres. Bassarak was an East German theologian, later professor at Humboldt University in East Berlin, who made contact with the Mennonites and also worked together with the Stasi. He was sent to Bièvres with instructions from the Stasi “to obtain information about the views of these organizations and their leading personalities” (Stasi-Archiv: BStU, MfS AP, Nr. 11.329/92, p. 63) and to “make contacts.” Bassarak, at this time operating under the code name GI “Freund” (from 1968 on Bassarak was known as IM “Buss”), received the following assignments from the Stasi: (1) to gather information from international reactionary Protestant-aligned entities; (2) to participate in the leadership within oppositional circles of the Protestant Church in both parts of Germany; (3) to build up the German section of the Prague Christian Peace Conference (Ibid., pp. 91–95). The Protestant-aligned entities and the German section of the CPC also included Mennonites. In fact, Bassarak met John H. Yoder in 1960 in Bièvres. At that time, Yoder was working on his PhD in Europe. It is also possible that the two had known each other since 1958, when Bassarak studied in Bossey, Switzerland, at the institute of the World Council of Churches, where he was supported by a scholarship from the Stasi with the goal of establishing ecumenical contacts there as well (Ibid., p. 13). In any case, Yoder was on Bassarak’s correspondence list, which was also available to the Stasi (Ibid., p. 108).

A later Stasi file on Bassarak states: “The GI was able to obtain all the needed information about the reactionary entities of the Protestant Church and the ecumenical movement. . . . He successfully established the German section of the Prague Christian Peace Conference as well as an institute of the [CPC]” (Ibid., pp. 91–95).

The CPC had been initiated in Prague in 1958 by theologian Joseph Hromádka from the Church of the Czech Brethren and sought to “incarnate the Soviet effort to champion religiously sanctioned values such as a peaceful coexistence and justice for the oppressed” (Loya, 2018, p. 492). Mennonites had been in contact with the organization since 1958 (Sawatsky, 2018, p. 473) and in 1964 the so-called Second All-Christian Peace Conference in Prague was attended by nearly one thousand delegates from many countries and various churches in the East and West, including nineteen Mennonite delegates from Europe and North America.<sup>9</sup> It was here that Marlin Miller, then head of the MCC Europe Peace Section, met Bassarak. On January 16, 1965, Miller wrote a letter to Bassarak (BArch, DO 4/723, Bl. 965/966) in which he referred to the meeting in Prague



with the aim of organizing a seminar of theology students from East and West for better mutual understanding. The theme chosen was "Christian Obedience in a Divided World."

On the East German side, in addition to Gerhard Bassarak, the Evangelical Reformed pastor Dr. Dieter Frielinghaus (later a member of the German Communist Party) and Carl Ordnung (of East Germany's Christian Democratic Union) were involved in the planning of this study tour. All three can be regarded as being loyal to the state and had close contacts to State Secretary for Church Affairs Hans Seigewasser. From the Mennonite side, John H. Yoder was assigned to lead the group which included nine Mennonites from North and South America and Europe.<sup>10</sup> For three weeks in the summer of 1965, they travelled through East Germany and Czechoslovakia. There they met church people as well as party officials and staunch Marxists. The group visited cultural centres such as Weimar and memorial sites such as the former concentration camp at Buchenwald. The Stasi collected the reports that Mennonites wrote about this trip and were particularly interested in one statement which asserted that there were some Christians in the communist countries who seek to work creatively with the system without ultimately choosing any system (BArch, DO 4/723, Bl. 963). The Stasi wanted to keep an eye on these "undercover Christians." A year later, the Canadian John B. Toews planned an MCC-funded trip with the goal of establishing private independent contacts and learning about the real situation of Christians in the GDR (MCCArch, Toews, 1966). MCC official contacts at that time were either influenced or, in the case of Bassarak, directly controlled by the Stasi.

MCC would start a new Cold War bridge-building endeavour in 1966 in which volunteers were sent to live in the east. The first regular MCC volunteers were a pair of intrepid women in Yugoslavia (Jantzen, 2012, p. 18). The program continued throughout the Cold War, with Mark Jantzen one of the last students sent by MCC to East Germany to study at Humboldt University from 1988 to 1991. With the help of Prof. Dr. Heinrich Fink, who was the head of the theology department at that time, Jantzen got his visa to enter the GDR (Jantzen, 1993, pp. 20–22). Fink, along with his wife Ilsegred, had good contacts with the Historic Peace Churches, as he had been a long-time participant in the CPC.

On November 25, 1991, Joachim Gauck of the Federal Commission for Records of the Former State Security Service of the German Democratic Republic (BStU) wrote a letter to the minister of science in the re-united Berlin Senate, stating that Heinrich Fink had been an IM of the Stasi since 1969. Fink, codenamed "Heiner," was a reliable IM according to his commanding office ("Den Heiner nimmt

uns keiner!," 1991, pp. 20–22) who "has comprehensive contacts to national and international church circles and committees." (Lindemann, 1999, p. 796, note 56). We can assume that Fink's contact with the Mennonites was also in the context of his Stasi assignment.

In an interview in 2019, Canadian Mennonite John Rempel talked about his student days in Berlin in 1971–1972, when he lived in West Berlin and regularly went to East Berlin to study with theology students from the GDR (Thiessen, 2020, p. 115). He had a scholarship from World Council of Churches, not from MCC. While there, he also attended a seminar course with Bassarak. Bassarak made a deal with the Stasi that he, Carl-Jürgen Kaltenborn, and Heinrich Fink would rotate through the different theology chairs at Humboldt University.<sup>11</sup> While in this position Bassarak moved the seminar from the official university rooms to his private living room with the rationale that they could talk more openly with each other there. The students considered it a great honour to be received privately by the professor. Hardly anyone suspected that Bassarak was all the while spying for the Stasi as an IM. Having placed great trust in Bassarak, Rempel was horrified when he learned this in 2019. He described the seminar atmosphere as very open, remembering the professor would even occasionally express critical words about the state and the SED. Today we must assume that this was calculated. Not only North Americans like John Rempel but other GDR students were encouraged to say what they really thought about the state and its representatives. The Stasi wanted to know this so that it could better assess and more precisely control its future pastors.

### **MCC and Vietnam, 1965–1974**

In the mid-1960s, US president Lyndon B. Johnson initiated new offensives by South Vietnam and its allies against communist North Vietnam and its allies, including East Germany. MCC became increasingly involved in the war issue as Lowell Jantzi, a conscientious objector with MCC in South Vietnam from 1970 to 1973, recounts.<sup>12</sup> Though MCC workers wanted to provide aid and alleviate hardship, they were very intertwined with the US military and thus with the war effort (Jantzi, 2020). They realized that only if they helped the victims of war on both sides could they gain trust as an independent peace church. Thus, they used every opportunity to establish contacts with North Vietnam, even though this was certainly seen as collaboration.

In 1954, at the beginning of MCC's work in Vietnam, twenty-three-year-old Delbert Wiens was sent to build up an MCC program.

As many of the US activists in South Vietnam at that time he seems to have been an anti-communist who wanted to work for “Free Vietnam” and help the Christians who fled from the communist North to the “free” South. For Wiens, MCC work at that time was directly connected with the US government and therefore also with the US military (Fast, 2011, pp. 4–5). Wiens’s successor as MCC representative in Vietnam was Dr. Willard S. Kraybill, who tried to make MCC’s work in Vietnam more independent from official US influence. That led to problems. US Ambassador Bunker asked MCC worker Paul Leatherman if they also helped the “enemy” in their medical and relief program. “We do not check ID cards,” Leatherman answered. The ambassador replied: “You know the VC [Viet Cong] are the enemy. If you are feeding the VC and treating them in your hospitals, this is treason and you know the penalty for treason.” “Mr. Ambassador,” Leatherman responded, “[we are] here doing the work of the church. We follow a book that you may or may not be familiar with. It commands us to feed the hungry, to heal the sick and to clothe the naked. I know what the penalty is if we do not do that” (Martin, 2018).

The worldwide Mennonite community wanted to support MCC’s work in Vietnam, both South and North. Thus Atlee Beechy, professor and dean of students at Goshen College in Indiana, and an outspoken expert on Vietnam, gave a presentation at the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in Amsterdam in 1967 on the work of the MCC in Vietnam: “During the past months the Mennonite Central Committee has made numerous but unsuccessful efforts to initiate a relief program to the people of North Vietnam. Such efforts are being intensified for our faith demands caring concern for these unfortunate victims of war” (Beechy, 1967, p. 207). MWC participants wanted to support MCC work in Vietnam, so of the total \$11,130 gathered in the worship service collection, \$5,231 was to be used for “Vietnam relief (both North and South)” (C. J. Dyck, 1967, p. 3). Until Beechy’s report at the MWC Assembly in 1967, no viable contacts had been made with leaders in North Vietnam. After the official MWC in Amsterdam there was a “little World Conference” in East Berlin on August 5 and 6, 1967. There the evangelical Dr. Herbert Landmann, a pulmonary specialist and Vietnam expert from the GDR, held a lecture with slides telling about the destruction of hospitals in North Vietnam by the US military. Nearly forty guests from abroad took part in the meeting including some from MCC (Friesen, 1967, p. 176).

In the summer of 1968, while on a secret mission for MCC, Atlee Beechy made several contacts with the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF). In Paris, he met a delegation from the

Democratic Republic of Vietnam and NLF. In Algiers, he spoke with representatives of the NLF, and in Prague he met the General Secretary of the NLF. "These contacts eventually led to multiple shipments of medical supplies to civilian clinics in NLF zones of the south and hospitals in the north." (Martin, 2018). Several authors reference these shipments, including Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen (1988, pp. 139–162) and Paul Fast (2011, p. 9) without detailing how the supplies were delivered.

Beechy's last meeting in East Berlin was with Landmann. John R. Friesen, pastor at the Menno-Heim in West Berlin, and John Wieler, MCC representative for Europe, both Canadians, had arranged contact between Landmann and Beechy. Friesen also accompanied Beechy to the interview. Landmann had previously reported about the Mennonite peace church to the minister of health of North Vietnam, a "GDR-friend country," who was very pleased with MCC's commitment. Furthermore, Landmann had a friend in the NLF, or more precisely, a patient, Mr. Dang. In conversation, Landmann related that he had informed officials in the GDR about Mennonite beliefs and their peace witness. This had been met with great interest. In his top-secret report, Beechy summed up the contact with Landmann, noting,

It is too early to evaluate how significant this channel might be for further contacts, but I am inclined to believe that Dr. Landmann is an important figure in the fabric of power structure related to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and that he is in a position to interpret our purposes to people in responsible positions. (MCCArch, Beechy, 1968)

Beechy felt Landmann's position within the GDR hierarchy was so influential that he could advance Mennonite concerns for North Vietnam as well. His assessment was correct. During their conversation it was agreed that John Friesen, along with Landmann, would liaise with representatives of the North Vietnamese Embassy. Friesen would organize a total of four relief shipments for North Vietnam through Landmann and the GDR. The money came from MCC Canada and was administered by the newly formed International Mennonite Relief Organization (IMO) in Europe. On Dr. Landmann's advice, the IMO purchased various equipment including a vaccination machine with which mass inoculations could be administered to the rural Vietnamese population. This equipment was obtained by IMO in West Germany and sent to West Berlin. There, Marian and John R. Friesen picked it up at the train station, loaded it into their Volkswagen van, and drove it across the border to East Berlin. The machine continued to Poland, where it was loaded onto a ship and dispatched to North Vietnam. As a telegram

from North Vietnam verifies, the goods actually arrived and were put to use.

TELEGRAMM		DEUTSCHE POST	
Aufgenommen		DOKTOR LANDMANN	
Tag: Monat: Jahr: Zeit:	TUBERKULOSE FORSCHUNGSINSTITUT		Übermittelt:
7. Dez. 1973			ag: Zeit:
von:	KAROWERSTRASSE 11		an: durch:
1111SI BLN A DD	1115 BERLIN/RDA		
1154Z BLN BUCH			
Telegramm aus ZCZC 146 HANOI 23/22 5 1530			
ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT SPARE PARTS HYPOSPRAY MANY THANKS TO JOHN FRIESEN AND HERBERT			
DANG			
COL 11 1115			
Für dienstliche Rückfragen Hinweis: 1310 NNNN 1154Z BLN BUCH 1111SI BLN A DD/			

Figure 1. Telegram from Mr. Dang to Dr. Herbert Landmann, dated Dec. 7, 1973, from Hanoi, North Vietnam. From the estate of John R. Friesen. Located at Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg (vol. 6428, file 20).

We now know that Dr. Herbert Landmann also worked as an informal collaborator (IM code name “Chefarzt” or “Chef”) on behalf of the Stasi. He was also supposed to use his contacts to the Mennonite pastor John R. Friesen for the interests of the Stasi. Landmann had been connected by the Stasi to the dissident Robert Havemann and became his personal physician and confidant. He received personal information that he immediately shared with the Stasi. Landmann’s file also contains a written report prepared by a Stasi officer based on Landmann’s oral statements. About John Friesen it stated that he

harbours an extraordinary fanaticism for helping the Vietnamese people. The adoption of a Vietnamese orphan is an expression of [his] condemnation of the barbaric USA war in Indochina. . . . The IM [Herbert Landmann] has a very great influence on Friesen. He is so adored by the latter that he is often embarrassed. . . . Friesen is anxious to visit the PR [People’s Republic] of Vietnam. He asked the IM to support his application to the embassy. (BStU, MFS, AIM 13947-84, Bd. 1, p. 34)

IM “Chef” and his Stasi commanding officer, First Lieutenant Gerischer, discussed how they could use Friesen as a so-called “blind informant.” Landmann asked Friesen if he could find the address of Havemann’s son, who had fled the GDR to West Berlin. Willing to help and unaware of where the order came from, Friesen asked around in West Berlin until he finally found the address of the fugitive and was able to joyfully communicate it to “his friend Herbert,” who immediately revealed it to the Stasi. At the time Friesen was no longer an MCCer, but because of his connections to John Wieler, Atlee Beechy, IMO, and MCC Canada, this made no difference to the GDR representatives.

### **Stasi Attempts to Infiltrate MCC, 1980–1990**

With the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Berlin Mennonite congregation was divided and it was no longer possible for Mennonites from the GDR to visit the church services at Menno-Heim. Walter Jantzen, a transport entrepreneur, was a member of the congregation’s board and lived in East Berlin. He was encouraged and commissioned to care for the church members in the GDR. Thus, with the help of others, he formed the Mennonite congregation in the GDR. When Walter Jantzen announced his retirement at the end of the 1970s, the preacher, pastor, and surveyor Gerd Bambowsky, who had sometimes preached in the Mennonite congregation in East Berlin, became active. As Renate Roeser, the former voluntary secretary of the Mennonite congregation in the GDR recalled, Gerd Bambowsky arranged for Knuth Hansen to become pastor and “take over the congregation.” “Then he slipped in there just like that,” she said of this change of leadership personnel (Thiessen, 2020, p. 143). Some of the congregation members in East and in West Berlin suspected that Pastor Hansen had connections with the Stasi. Renate Roeser assumed that Hansen was a “servant of two masters” (Thiessen, 2020, p. 143), as she described it. But no one really knew.

After leaving the Mennonites in April 1990, Pastor Hansen served as a pastor in the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg. His possible Stasi background did not appear to hinder him. Normally it was enough if the pastor told his church that he had no contact with the Stasi and this assertion was rarely questioned. In the obituary written after Hansen’s death in 2019, there was no information about the Mennonites or his Stasi activity in the years before 1990 (Musold, 2019, pp. 16–17). Friends of Hansen remembered him positively as a supportive member of the community (Thiessen,

2020, p. 137). Despite the silence about his earlier life, research by a staff member at BStU, Ann-Katrin Reichardt (Reichardt, 2020, pp. 104–106), as well as my own work in Mennonite archives suggest Hansen had a connection to the Stasi. Indeed, the employment of Hansen in the Mennonite church was a deliberate strategy. Hansen, on leave of absence from his role in the Evangelical regional church in the GDR, succeeded Walter Jantzen as salaried pastor of the Mennonite congregation in the GDR in May 1980 (Thiessen, 2020, pp. 134–135). A year later, at the service for his reception into the congregation on May 10, 1981, he claimed to have excellent contacts with the state secretary for church affairs who, at that time, was Klaus Gysi. This astonished some who found it striking how many privileges Hansen enjoyed. He had an almost permanent visa to visit West Berlin and repeatedly obtained travel visas for church board members to go to Mennonite conferences and meetings in the West.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it became known that Hansen had already been targeted by the Stasi as early as the late 1960s through his friend Gerd Bambowsky. He worked for the Stasi from 1971 onwards as IM “Paul” together with Bambowsky (IM “Gerd”, alias IMF<sup>13</sup> “Heinz Wendland”, alias IM “Konrad Hammer”). After Walter Jantzen, born in 1907, retired in 1980 and moved to Salzgitter, West Germany, in 1981, the Stasi, with the help of Bambowsky, engaged Hansen as a so-called “Influence IM” (Einfluß-IM). Influence IMs were what the Stasi labeled “persons who occupied a leading position in an organization through which they could exert influence on its future” (Reichardt, 2020, p. 105).

The Stasi observed the Mennonite congregation in the East for a long time. Long before Hansen became pastor, the Stasi had maintained an apartment across the street from Jantzen’s house, from which they observed who went in and out (Thiessen, 2020, p. 172). As the guestbook shows, many MCCers visited the Jantzen home. Later Hansen reportedly told the secretary of the congregation not to write anything significant in its council minutes. This suggests that he probably had to pass the minutes on to the Stasi and was perhaps seeking to protect members of the congregation as well as himself (Thiessen, 2020, p. 149).

Hansen’s primary purpose was to provide information about Mennonite contacts in the USSR, and thereby to help monitor the so-called smuggling of literature from West to East (Reichardt, 2020, pp. 91–106). According to an employee of the BStU, Hansen’s extensive personnel file was destroyed by the Stasi in 1989. However, other files and secondary reports contain references to his activities. According to information now available, Hansen was not so much spying on the members of his Mennonite congregation as

leveraging those connections to establish contacts with Baptists and Mennonites in the USSR. In doing so, the Stasi was merely performing support services for the USSR's intelligence service, the KGB.

Bambowsky and Hansen had previously worked for the KGB in the 1970s. They had contact to the Western missionary organisations Open Doors in the Netherlands and Licht im Osten in Korntal, West Germany. There Bambowsky had the opportunity to obtain and copy a list of contact persons in the USSR which appears in his Stasi folder.<sup>14</sup> On that list was a variety of information including reference to a "printing press" (*Druckerei*), which Bambowsky passed on to the KGB. Based on this tip, the KGB uncovered an illegal printshop near Kiev and was able "to work on these persons in a focused manner with a clear operational orientation."<sup>15</sup> This Stasi jargon likely meant arresting the printshop operators and confiscating the equipment.

Through Hansen, the KGB hoped to similarly infiltrate MCC. The file covering exchanges between the "brother organizations," the KGB and the Stasi, states:

IM "Paul" became the leader of the Mennonite religious community in the GDR. In this capacity, he attained contact with the head of the Mennonites in Europe, SALATZKI [*sic*] (BRD) [i.e., Walter Sawatsky, the MCC director for Europe based in Neuwied, West Germany, at that time]. Salatzki intends to use the IM as an agent for "East projects" [*Ostarbeit*], specifically for the USSR. It is planned that the IM will carry out a trip to the USSR (Moscow-Tallinn) in August 1982 on behalf of Salatzki. . . . The Soviet side accepted this procedure and had significant operational interest in IM "Paul" being used by Salatzki to get to know the directions and bases of attack in the USSR.<sup>16</sup>

The report on the implementation of an operational mission in Moscow, dated May 19, 1982, reads:

IM "Paul" travelled to the USSR for the first time after his appointment to a church leadership position with the Mennonites. The Western headquarters of the Mennonites [MCC!] immediately reacted to this and gave him specific orders. While implementing these orders he met relevant politically operational circles among Soviet Baptists. During his assignment he established a good contact with the representatives of the Mennonites of Canada.<sup>17</sup>

Acknowledging that this account had also been written for the benefit of Stasi's self-representation to the KGB, it is nevertheless important to note that Hansen came to the Mennonites in the GDR with a clear assignment and that the focus of his efforts was the MCC and its work in Eastern Europe. To what extent the Stasi, and



thereby the KGB, succeeded in obtaining information and possibly exerting influence on the activities of the MCC is not yet known. Walter Sawatsky wrote, in a personal statement, that he had contact Hansen soon after his appointment: "We were courteous when meeting, I remember going for a short walk with him, but never a serious conversation, including nothing on how he saw his role as pastor to the seniors across the GDR" (personal communication, May 31, 2022). While Hansen may have sought information, MCC's approach was geared in such a way that it hardly offered state agencies any targets for reprisals or persecution. Peter Rempel, who worked with MCC Europe director Walter Sawatsky in Neuwied, West Germany, from 1981 to 1986, told us, "We at the MCC wanted to build bridges across the Iron Curtain. To do this, we placed people in Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and also in the GDR. This was done quite quietly (Thiessen, 2020, p. 150)."

There was little written in public reports on MCC activities in Eastern Bloc countries, although staff members tended to give personal accounts when they visited congregations and conferences in the West, especially in North America. In contacts with people from the East, MCC was well aware that "the state was listening in." Thus the rule was to talk mostly about MCC's organization and motives but not to talk about contacts and persons. Nor was anything concealed from the governments of the Eastern Bloc countries because MCC attached importance to the fact that its workers were not doing anything illegal. Bible and literature smuggling or similar activities were frowned upon by MCC. Bambowsky and Hansen obtained their information on literature smuggling through their contacts with the missionary organizations Open Doors and Licht im Osten. Mennonites were involved with the latter. To what extent Hansen, through his actions as a pastor, brought his brothers and sisters in the faith in the USSR and in the GDR into peril or even sent them to prison is not yet known.

## **Conclusion**

During the Cold War, MCC repeatedly sought contacts with countries of the Eastern Bloc through its staff. The most important message was to assure the brothers and sisters in faith that they were not forgotten. MCC wanted to use every opportunity to send messages of peace and reconciliation and to express its discipleship. Throughout the period from 1945 to 1990, the Stasi continuously observed Mennonites in the GDR and tried to gain influence over them. This contrast between MCC aims and Stasi goals results in

four conclusions. First, the Mennonites were regarded by the secret service of the GDR, the Stasi, especially in the 1950s, as enemies of the state and representatives of an imperialist social order that would be harmful to the building of the (atheist) socialist state. Though members of the Stasi tried to ban Mennonites in the GDR they were unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. Second, in the search for allies for the GDR's socialist peace policy, informal co-workers of the Ministry for State Security (MfS), including Gerhard Bassarak, also tried to establish contacts with Mennonites and with the Historical Peace Churches. Bassarak (IM "Buss"), Heinrich Fink (IM "Heiner"), and others maintained good contacts with Mennonites and the Stasi. They helped MCC bring students to the GDR and build bridges between East and West even as they acted as agents of the Stasi. Third, despite its entanglement in the Vietnam War, MCC made all possible attempts to establish contacts with communist North Vietnam. Though they were unaware of his full identity, IM "Chef" of the Stasi, Dr. Herbert Landmann, helped MCC circumvent the US embargo against North Vietnam. While Landmann abused MCC trust and used John Friesen as a "blind informant" for the Stasi, their relationship also allowed MCC and IMO to send four transports of medical supplies to North Vietnam and thus credibly demonstrated the Mennonite peace testimony. Fourth, the international networking of the Mennonites and the MCC interested the Stasi so much that it inserted the "influence IM" Knuth Hansen (IM "Paul") into the Mennonite community in the GDR. By doing so, the Stasi hoped to establish contacts with Mennonites and Baptists in the USSR to uncover possible illegal activities of these religious communities—which it partially succeeded in doing.

These four episodes demonstrate the entanglement of MCC and intelligence agencies during the Cold War. Though MCC wanted to build bridges and not succumb to ideological polarization, the Stasi and its undercover police influenced the work of MCC. Certainly, it was not always clear which of its partners was on what side, but MCC had to reckon with the fact that their people and contacts would be spied upon. On May 7, 1976, fundamentalist preacher Carl McIntire protested at MCC headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania, against the MCC invitation of Soviet Baptists to North America. "They do not represent the church, they represent the soviet government and the KGB," McIntire proclaimed (Jantzen, 2012, p. 31). Though the partners of MCC were likely sent with instructions from intelligence agents to report back on their interactions, it can be argued that it is better to engage in dialogue rather than fanning the flames of hate as the McIntire did. As Paul Mojzes states:

[All] efforts should be made to build bridges rather than promote war (cold or hot). As long as the opponent is not interested in even negotiating but only in destroying those who are not like-minded . . . , then with them no dialogue will be possible. . . . [But] we will dialogue with anyone for as long as the other party strives for positive accomplishments in the interest of human betterment. (Mojzes, 2018, p. 532)

In conclusion, Mennonite organizations, including MCC, should be well-informed about the political circumstances and security climates in which they are operating. They should then weigh the risks of engaging with authoritarian regimes and act to become witnesses of Christian peace.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Köhler (1991) writes of this procedure, in neutral terms, that the Allies just wanted to know from the refugees what was going on in the Zone (i.e., the Soviet Occupied Zone). He doesn't mention that these were all interrogators from secret services (p. 75).
- <sup>2</sup> The author knows his name. See interview with Renate Roeser, March 10, 2020, in Thiessen (2020, pp. 140–144, here p. 144).
- <sup>3</sup> Stasi-Archiv, Berlin: BStU, HA XX/4 2976, Abteilung X Berlin, den 28.2.1958 Wi./ Tgb.-Nr. KO/X/277/58v an die Hauptabteilung V Gen. John.
- <sup>4</sup> Though general research in this area has expanded, many of the sources I have examined here, and will study further, have not been consulted by other researchers. These are found in the archives of Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, short: Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Stasi-Unterlagen, Berlin (BStU); Bundesarchiv, Berlin, (BArch); Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof, Germany (MFSt); MCC Archives, Akron, PA (MCCArch); and Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg (MHA).
- <sup>5</sup> Lust, Chief Inspector of the People's Police in a letter to Ministerium des Innern (Ministry of Inner Affairs), Mr. Staatssekretär (State Secretary) Warnke, 23.8.51, Betr. Religionsgemeinschaft "Men(n)oniten," BArch, DO 4/723, Mennonitengemeinde in der DDR; Bd. 2: 1951–1966.
- <sup>6</sup> Dr. Karl Steinhoff, Minister, letter to the Chief of the Main Office (Hauptverwaltung) of the People's Police (Deutsche Volkspolizei), Betr. Religionsgemeinschaft "Mennoniten," bezug, Ihr Schreiben vom 23.8.51, BArch, DO 4/723, Mennonitengemeinde in der DDR; Bd. 2: 1951–1966.
- <sup>7</sup> Müller-Enbergs (2010).
- <sup>8</sup> Neubert (2010).
- <sup>9</sup> See P. J. Dyck (1964) and Miller and Yoder (1965). See also "Ost-West Begegnung" (1965).
- <sup>10</sup> Hugo Jantz, Neuwied/Rh., Germany; John H. Yoder, Elkart/USA; Henrique Enns, Curitiba/Brasilien; LeRoy Walters, Heidelberg/Germany; Roy Vogt, Winnipeg/Canada; John Redekop, Fresno/USA; Alle Hoekema, Netherland; Paul Baumann, Biel/Switzerland; Nickolas Dick, Toronto/Canada. See

- MCCArch: Peace Section Activities, PSEC Student East-West Encounter 1964–1965.
- <sup>11</sup> Niederschrift Anruf Gen. Schleupner, In: BStU, Berlin XV 1005/69 “Buss” Beifügung, Bd. 1, p. 87.
  - <sup>12</sup> The interview with Lowell Jantzi was conducted by Bernhard Thiessen at MCC headquarters, Akron, PA, July 11, 2019. It is not published yet.
  - <sup>13</sup> IMF is an Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter der Abwehr mit Feindverbindung zum Operationsgebiet (MfS), that is: “Unofficial co-worker for defence with connections to the enemy in the area of operations” (MfS). See Kowalczuk (2013, p. 409).
  - <sup>14</sup> HA XX/4, Bericht über den Einsatz des IMF “Heinz Wendland” in der Sowjetunion in der Zeit vom 12.4. bis 17.4.1979, Berlin, 24.4.1979, BStU, MfS, A-324/75, Bd. 5, Bl. 248–253, here 253.
  - <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 103
  - <sup>16</sup> Hauptabteilung XX/4 Berlin, 8. 12. 1981, gez. wie-ha, Bericht Beratung mit dem Bruderorgan der UdSSR in Moskau, BStU, MfS HA XX/4, Nr. 487, p. 262
  - <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

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