



E.A. Harris/Rothco cartoon

East German peace movement growing

By Lucy Komisar

EAST BERLIN—The taxi driver turned around when he heard the American ask to go to Sarmariterstrasse. "Oh, you're going to the church," he sneered. Pastor Rainer Eppelmann's gothic red brick church is not a favorite of this communist government or of the taxi drivers who may double as secret police.

It is a center for the growing independent peace movement that opposes Soviet as well as American armaments and that is a target for arrests and harassment by the "Stasis," nickname for the Staats Sicherheit, the state security police.

When peace activists in November sought to deliver petitions to the Soviet and American embassies asking them to take unilateral steps toward disarmament, police picked them up at their homes or rendezvous places. Some were not permitted to leave their homes or were transported out of Berlin; others were questioned for up to 24 hours.

In October, 150 peace activists were arrested in the same manner when they attempted a demonstration in Alexanderplatz, the main square, the same day as massive peace protests in the West.

IN SEPTEMBER, 100 people attempted to make a human chain from the American embassy to the Soviet embassy. They spread out along Unter den Linden, the city's famous boulevard, then moved toward the American embassy, where police intervened.

That same month, after the government ordered nurses to register for conscription, a group of East Berlin women dressed in black and went to Alexanderplatz to mail letters telling government leader Erich Honecker they would not cooperate with the new draft law which also orders all women to register for emergency service. Some of the women were arrested, but later the government said the notice to nurses was a mistake.

Until recently, government reaction to the peace movement has been relatively mild for a communist country. Most of those arrested have been released, an indication of Honecker's dilemma. The small peace groups are tied to the Lutheran church and also have close contacts with the Western peace movement. The government has not wanted to have conflict with the first nor weaken the second with grist for hawkish mills.

HOWEVER, SINCE the November vote by the Bundestag to accept the installation of Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in West Germany, Honecker has cracked down, with arrests in East Berlin and half a dozen cities throughout the country. It is not just a reaction to the peace movement's criticism of planned deployment here of SS-20 missiles. The government fears any organization that acts independently. And many peace movement leaders say that their long-term goal is the democratization of East German society.

The movement here is built on small circles of 10 or 20 meeting in private homes or in groups of 50 or more in churches. An estimated 10,000 are involved in 100 cities.

They can't use normal means of communication—press, mail, leaflets, posters or phone. "If you want to get people in Dresden to join an action in Alexanderplatz, you don't telephone, you go to Dresden," explained one activist. A lot of general information comes via West German television, which reports on the movement in broadcasts that reach 85 percent of East Germany.

MEMBERS OF the peace movement are mostly young people, workers, churchgoers, some intellectuals, but not the expected students and professors, who would be thrown out of the universities. They are people for whom personal professional progress is not the priority. And they are not the pro-Western elements of the society. They are critics of the East, but not dissidents.

For this peace movement, the issue is not only the missiles, but the militarization of East German society.

Pre-military training here begins in kindergarten where children paint pictures of tanks, play with war toys, receive visits from soldiers, take trips to barracks and learn songs and stories about the military protecting their families and country. At 12, they learn to use pistols, and in 1978 the government introduced two years of theoretical and practical military training beginning at age 14.

Conscription is for 18 months, but youths who don't volunteer for three years service don't get into college. [Some who want to study certain specialties are pressured to sign up for 5 or 10 years as officers. Two years ago, the government announced that women would have to register.]

CHURCHES SUPPLY the only meeting rooms for peace activities. Some pastors who run Christian youth groups institute discussions about peace and social issues.

In the last few years, some churches have sponsored mass meetings on peace. Eppelmann, a 40-year-old former construction soldier who shares the culture of the new generation, has become the most important link between the church and the independent peace groups, and his Samarkirche is a center for peace activities. [Eppelmann co-authored the Berlin Appeal, a statement signed by many East Germans which proposed, among other things, a nuclear free zone in all of Europe. It landed him in jail for a day.]

Although the church provides their only protection, some peace activists are impatient with what they see as church conservatism and unwillingness to challenge the government further.

THERE IS NO disagreement between church leaders and activists on their opposition to nuclear weapons on both sides of the wall and on their fear of nuclear catastrophe that starts in Germany and wipes them out.

"We are for a nuclear-free Europe," said Bärbel Bohley, 38, a leader of Women for Peace. She and another member of the group were jailed in December and held for six weeks on charges of treason for talking to foreign journalists. Their releases came after strong pressure from West Germany.

"We are for no NATO and no Warsaw Pact," said Katja Havemann, 30, an activist who spent more than 2 years under house arrest. "We are for neutrality and independence for both German states," she said.

They think the goals of the American freeze movement are too narrow, that it offers no political alternative.

"As long as the blocs are in confrontation, we can't expect a democratic structure to be achieved in East Germany," said one activist.

FOR THE PEACE movement, the reform of East Germany is a central goal. Peace leaders say they cannot separate the peace question from the human rights question: "To fight the missiles, we must have more freedom and democracy and the right to fight as grass roots."

The peace movement does not consider itself clandestine or underground. Members demand to use their constitutional rights of assembly and speech. They want the right to travel. They want dialogue with their own officials. They want to change East German society by starting open critical discussion. "We must fight for the right to discuss these questions in public," said one.

East Germans, who see West German television, are better informed and more critical of the West than people in other East bloc countries. One activist observed, "I know of no one in the GDR [German Democratic Republic] who thinks the Pershing 2 and cruise missiles are positive. In Poland, it may be different."