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Homosexuality in East Germany (retrospective account, 1994)

Eduard Stapel, a gay rights activist, paints a striking picture of the beginnings of the gay rights movement in East Germany, its role within the Protestant Church, and the response it engendered from the Ministry of State Security.

Interview with Eduard Stapel (Gay League of Germany, SVD) by Kurt Starke, April 19, 1994

Starke: When would you date the beginning of the gay movement in the GDR?

Stapel: Actually, back to the first attempt by the Dresden doctor [Rudolf] Klimmer in the 1950s, though I don't know very much about that. In the 1960s, as far as I know, nothing happened. Then, the attempts by the Homosexual Interest Group [*Homosexuellen Interessengemeinschaft*] in Berlin starting in 1973. And in the late 1970s with Uschi Sillge in Berlin. With respect to the institutionalized movement, the date would be 1982. But before that, these attempts had already been made.

[. . .]

Why did the church simply do that [i.e., allow homosexual study groups to be set up within the church]? I mean, the church has its own relationship to homosexuality. I had to ask myself, why did the church of all things accept homosexuals?

There is no such thing as "the" church. Regarding such issues, there is always an entire spectrum from total rejection to approval. It was also not possible *everywhere*, and not possible everywhere to *immediately* set up such study groups. But right here in Leipzig there was a college chaplain, a student representative, and also the church council, which, after we explained it to them, agreed and felt this was exactly what had to be done, that the church had to work through things and compensate for deficits. And ultimately that worked in many places. In the end, there were 22 such church-based study groups all over the GDR.

Would you view the church as taking on a certain democratic function in the GDR? To simply take in a minority that had a hard time in society. To offer this minority some space. Democracy is of course always also politics, but in this case the democratic and human functions came together. Could it be explained like that?

Yes, I think so. Certainly, there were also people within the church who thought the GDR could be undermined with the help of the homosexuals. And there were not only the gay and lesbian groups, but also human rights groups, environmental groups, peace, women's and lots of other groups, that worked in the spirit of this function of the church. . . .

All of them controversial subjects. . . .

All of them controversial subjects. But such groups were even possible in the first place because the eight Protestant state churches in the GDR were pretty democratic. The local congregation decides what will be done. Even if the church leadership was of the opinion that homosexual groups did not belong there, the congregation could say we're going to do it, let the consistory, the state church authorities, and the bishop have a fit. For one thing, these study groups were possible because the church was democratic (and hopefully still is and stays that way). For another thing, I think, this work itself and the church also contributed to democratizing the GDR or at least to emancipating different groups in the population such as the homosexuals, who otherwise would not have spoken out as they did, would not have learned democracy like that.

In the 1980s and especially within the context of AIDS, I have repeatedly been asked why the FDJ [Free German Youth] did not open up to homosexuals, why the city councils made things so difficult, why it was so hard to set up meeting places, etc. I never really had an answer and just said, well they're stupid. . . .

Certainly, it has a lot to do with stupidity and prejudice. But over the course of 40 years I don't think the Politburo and the Central Committee are capable of such perpetual stupidity. There had to be a strategy behind it. That's what I think. If there really was one, I don't know. There is also the question, for example, why Stalin reintroduced the anti-homosexuality laws after they had already been abolished. That cannot be due only to stupidity. Maybe it has something to do with treatment of minorities in general, and the function of scapegoats.

[. . .]

On the subject of the state: You have had your experience with the state. And so here too, we cannot get around the unpleasant subject of the Stasi. A difficult subject. . . .

Not for me.

Why not for you?

It was totally obvious during GDR times that the Stasi listened to everything, read everything. So when I wrote a letter, I was sure that it would, or at least could, be read. In the end the letters would be delivered to me at home already opened; they didn't even tape them shut again. We knew about it. Or if we were in groups and I noticed that someone went politically way too far, I would always slow him down so no one would end up walking into the trap. To that extent, I am surprised that today some people are surprised at everything the Stasi did, but back then they never would have been surprised.

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Source: "Interview von Kurt Starke mit Eduard Stapel (SVD) am 19. April 1994" ["Interview with Eduard Stapel (Gay League of Germany, SVD) by Kurt Starke, April 19, 1994"]; reprinted in Kurt Starke, *Schwuler Osten. Homosexuelle Männer in der DDR* [*The Gay East. Homosexual Men in the GDR*]. Berlin, 1994, pp. 91-110.

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