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Pax Christi Deutschland im Kalten Krieg 1945–1957

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The Catholic peace movement »Pax Christi« emerged out of a »crusade of prayer for the conversion of Germany,« which had been inaugurated by lay members of Catholic *Résistance* circles together with the French bishop Pierre Marie Théas in the fall of 1944. For its initiators, and soon for its German members as well, the movement's main purpose was not only spreading Catholic teachings about peace throughout the world or a reconciliation between Germans and French; rather, they understood Pax Christi as a movement of comprehensive spiritual renewal with whose help European postwar societies would be directed back to their Christian roots. This transpired through a concentration on prayer, while practical peace work took the form of international pilgrimages and peace conventions. Consequently, the cross of Christ became a symbol of protest against both a perceived progressive de-Christianization of Europe and the intensifying East-West conflict. In the process, a reappropriation took place, through a »recoding« of both traditional theological and popular religious elements, which succeeded – despite the avowedly apolitical character of the prayer movement – in expressing a political aim, for example the integration of Germany into a future European community of nations.

While the earliest Pax Christi groups emerged in the western occupation zones soon after the end of World War II, the systematic establishment of a German branch was begun in 1947 by Catholic lay organizations whose members had taken part in the youth movement in the 1920s. Regions of concentration were located in the Saarland, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Bavaria. Before the eventual break in 1949 between the German branch and the general directorship in France as a result of organizational difficulties, Pax Christi in Germany was able to record a significant upsurge. In the process, the German branch struck a chord with church groups of widely varying religious and political orientations, which in turn forced the group's leaders to hone their integrative abilities. Both conservative proponents of »Christian Western civilization« and adherents of Christian socialism saw the prayer movement as their chance to exert spiritual influence on postwar German society. Common to all of these groups was that their members had been shaped by the Catholic youth movement in the interwar years, as well as by the Liturgical Movement.

This initially rapid growth made more professional organizational structures a necessity, which in turn diminished the movement's originally »charismatic« character and led to internal conflicts. The new organizational principles for the Pax Christi movement outlined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 led to a greater level of Church control: the previously vigorous activity by lay members was subordinated to strict clerical leadership. Of course this development did give the movement the opportunity to achieve broader societal influence. Beginning in 1951, and characterized by the catchwords »prayer,« »study,« and »action,« the preconditions for interdisciplinary scholarly peace efforts were established and contacts to better-educated classes were sought. Yet this newly won scope for action, as well as hopes for fur-

ther growth in membership and sociopolitical influence, came up against limits with the Korean War in 1950. When Chancellor Adenauer spoke out in favor of rearming the country and the bishops followed his lead, the German branch of Pax Christi – which like every national branch was headed by a bishop president – was riven by internal conflicts of loyalty. To head off suspicions in politics, church, and society about political non-conformism or communist infiltration, internal dissenting voices were suppressed by the movement's leadership. This entailed a process of alienation from the Christian Democratic political parties even among leading representative. Pax Christi members attempted to counter the threat of stigmatization and marginalization through an exaggerated sense of »elite« status and by drawing distinct boundaries vis-à-vis non-church peace organizations.

Critical engagement with the Nazi past was made easier for Pax Christi leaders by the fact that their French counterparts never demanded a confession of guilt. Instead, the focus on a common Catholicism enabled the Germans to step out of their national history of guilt and enter the stream of an international Lourdes pilgrimage.

With this advance of trust, the German Pax Christi movement at first became an advocate not only of German prisoners of war but also suspected war criminals. The construction of the »Bühler Friedenskreuz« (the »Cross of Peace« erected at Bühl in Baden, near the German-French border, in 1952) gave symbolic expression to the process of reconciliation. Not until the Oradour-sur-Glane trial that opened in Bordeaux in 1953, however, did initiatives for contacting foreign victims of the Nazis and exerting stronger influence on West German politicians in matters of memory politics begin to take shape. The earliest indicators of increased political activity in the German branch of Pax Christi were protests against the German *Ordensgesetz* of 1956, a proposed law that would have permitted the wearing of military decorations and other honors from the Nazi era, as well as early pleas for German-Polish reconciliation. As a result, the 1950s became a »bridging« phase for future critical assessment of the German past. The learning process that set in at that time was what enabled the manifold practical efforts by members on behalf of victims of Nazism during the 1960s.