

## The Richard Wurmbrand case

Examined on the background of the relations between the Protestant Churches in Germany and the Orthodox Church in Romania during the Cold War (1945-1980)

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This research in contemporary church history at Tübingen University focuses on the specific “case” of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, which took place in the turbulent phase of upheaval between the late 1960s and early 1970s in Germany. Being known for his books “Tortured for Christ” (1967) and “In God’s underground” (1968), etc., Wurmbrand supported the Christians in suffering and persecution “behind the iron curtain”. All this happened after Wurmbrand had been freed in 1964 with the help of the “Norwegian Israel Mission” and Christian Jews from England. He then came to the West in 1965 and raised his voice for the “voiceless”. But his efforts to “enlighten” people on this “real existing” socialism were not only met with open interest, but also provoked harsh criticism from a number of Protestants in West Germany accusing Wurmbrand of “anticommunism” and considering him a “troublemaker” for the East-West détente.

This “Wurmbrand case” was first initiated by a circular church letter sent to the mainline Evangelical Churches in Germany on 1 April 1969. The “Kirchliches Außenamt”, the German Evangelical Church’s Foreign Office back then, was chaired by Adolf Wischmann; another circular letter issued by the “Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauung” (Central Office for Worldviews) followed on 1 June 1969; yet another came forth from the “Kirchenkanzlei” (Central Church Administration) on 12 November 1969.

### 1. Research gap

There is a need in contemporary church history for a study on the ecumenical relationship between the churches of Romania and Germany. This relationship was shaped by the religious attitudes of the churches of the East and West towards Romania, a Communist governed country at the time. While there has been a series of

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unofficial or official, private or institutional, contacts, visits, and ecumenical seminars and conferences on theology during this period, no detailed studies have yet been undertaken about it.<sup>2</sup> Only a few sporadic references and individual papers on specific events are to be found in scholarly literature, but they are limited to certain denominations during this period.

This need is partly due to the fact that the research on contemporary church history has developed generally as a new sub-discipline of church history relatively recently and gradually in German universities. Secondly, it can be attributed to the fact that the churches in Eastern Europe – particularly with regard to Romania and the West – after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 did not perceive the self-critical analysis of their past, the so-called “coming to terms with the past”, as their main task. In addition, it is also difficult for researchers to access the documents in different archives for legal, logistical, or financial reasons.

## 2. Initial research focus

The research will focus on the following issues in particular:

- The life and thought of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, especially his reaction to the persecution of the church.
- Official ecumenical relations taking place between the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC), respectively the World Council of Churches (WCC) and RomOC, between 1945 and 1990.
- The political environment and the policy of West German Protestantism concerning the relationship between church and state between 1965 and 1979. I will limit myself here to those persons and church leaders who have dealt with the “Wurmbrand case” explicitly.
- The reception of events by eyewitnesses through “oral history” interviews.<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Archival sources

To obtain a sophisticated overall picture of the complex historical events, a thorough research and deep analysis of archival materials is undoubtedly necessary, which will include the following:

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<sup>2</sup> For the relationship between RomOC and WCC see Kaisamari Hintikka, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the World Council of Churches, 1961-1977*, Helsinki 2000; see also book review [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2065/is\\_1-2\\_54/ai\\_87425987/?tag=content;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2065/is_1-2_54/ai_87425987/?tag=content;col1) [Access: 24.03.2012]

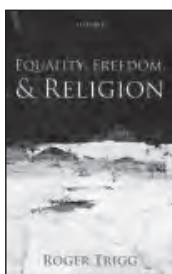
<sup>3</sup> For example, with Dr. H.C. Hans Bergel, a German journalist and author, who was imprisoned in the same cell with Richard Wurmbrand in the jail of Jilava. He personally told me parts of his story during a conference held in Munich on 7-9 December 2009; Richard Wurmbrand left a very strong impression on him.

- Church archives in Germany: Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin (EZA) “Central Archive of the Protestant Church”; several archives of the EKD in Germany.
- Archive of WCC in Geneva.
- National archives: the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives in Romania (CNSAS); Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry of State Security in the former German Democratic Republic (BstU).
- Archives of mission boards: Hilfsaktion Märtyrerkirche, Germany; Voice of the Martyrs, USA.

#### 4. Conclusion

In view of the forthcoming 10th General Assembly of the WCC in Korea in 2013 under the theme “God of life, show us the way to justice and peace” and the General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance in Korea in 2014, it is my concern to establish scholarly “bridges” for a reconciliation in the future through a differentiated picture of the earlier path of the churches in the Communist era analysing and describing the lessons, that Korea can learn from former developments in Europe.

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