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REVIEW – MORMONEN UND STAATSBÜRGER

Reviewed by Ingrid Sherlock-Taselaar

Raymond Kuehne, *Mormonen und Staatsbürger: Eine dokumentierte Geschichte der Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligen der Letzten Tage in der DDR*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007. Hardbound: €19.

Twenty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and while great strides have been made towards achieving economic, political, and constitutional unity, vast differences remain between the former East Germany and West Germany. One can but agree with Chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in East Germany, when she proclaimed in 2009 that the process of German unity has not ended yet.¹ In his book, Andreas Staab queried whether a complete unification will ever be possible or whether Germany will be faced with a continued separation.² This continued separation in some areas, he argues, is due to the fact that the citizens of the former East Germany are essentially required to forge a new identity which is neither an automatic nor an easy process. One of the many obstacles of forging a new unified identity is a lack of understanding between the groups involved in the process. This lack of understanding is often based on a lack of knowledge about one another. Knowledge unifies, strengthens, and creates understanding between peoples.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a worldwide church and as such incorporates among its membership people from many nations. However, beyond their shared doctrine, rituals, and faith, to what extent do members truly know and understand one an-

¹ Franz Solms-Laubach, 'Umfrage: Ost- und Westdeutsche entfernen sich voneinander', *Welt Online*, 20 May 2009. See <http://www.welt.de/politik/article3775359/Ost-und-Westdeutsche-entfernen-sich-voneinander.html>, accessed 30 November 2010.

² Andreas Staab, *National Identity in Eastern Germany: Inner Unification or Continued Separation* (Westport: Praeger, 1998).

other? Raymond Kuehne's book *Mormonen und Staatsbürger: Eine dokumentierte Geschichte der Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligen der Letzten Tage in der DDR*, the subject of this review, shows that it is actually not very difficult to select a group of Latter-day Saints about whom very little is known. Remarkably this group does not reside in some far-flung corner of the world but rather in the heart of Europe, viz. the former East Germany.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall little was known about the life of the Latter-day Saints in East Germany (GDR). The GDR was, between 1945 and 1990, an officially atheistic state thus there was little religious organisation. Throughout those years, however, a small army of Latter-day Saints managed to remain true to their faith while simultaneously being good citizens of the state. It was a delicate balance that traced its roots to the LDS Articles of Faith. Outside the GDR there was the occasional hearsay and many an urban legend about how, for example, the LDS Church printed the German Books of Mormon and other Church materials in the GDR and then "forgot" to ship a number of boxes to West Germany. This, so the story tells, was the only way for the GDR Saints to gain access to these books and materials. East met West on the occasional ecclesiastical highlights such as the Munich Area General Conference.³ About 200–500 elderly Latter-day Saints from beyond the Iron Curtain were allowed to attend this conference if they promised to return to their countries after the conference. Everybody, including the body of an elderly sister who had passed away during the conference, returned. Some General Authorities such as Ezra T. Benson (48–51), Spencer W. Kimball (318–19), Thomas S. Monson visited the GDR and from 1972 onwards. Henry Burkhardt, a long-standing leader in the GDR, was allowed to travel to Salt Lake City once a year to attend General Conference there (315). In spite of these contacts, the enduring faithfulness of the GDR Saints life of the Latter-day Saints in the GDR remained terra incognita until Raymond Kuehne undertook to write a documentary history of the LDS Church in the GDR.

Kuehne succeeded in writing an objective study of the history and experiences of the GDR Saints in this 565-page tome. He based his

³ The Munich Area General Conference was held on August 24–26, 1973. For a detailed report, see <http://lds.org/ensign/1973/11/news-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

book around a series of themes that younger members of the LDS Church who gathered for a special meeting in Dresden in 2003 thought were important for such a book. Themes included were first and foremost the building of the Freiberg Temple, but also missionary efforts in the GDR, building of meeting houses, feelings of members when they saw the freedom and riches of other countries, how to fulfil their desire to go to a Temple and many more. Kuehne used a perfect mixture of official documents, sourced from the GDR government and the LDS Church, as well as personal interviews and private letters. The text is complemented by a good number of interesting photographs. It is clear that the book is written for the impartial and curious reader. It should appeal to the casual reader who is just interested in the history of the LDS Church in the GDR. However, the book is such a treasure trove that it will also appeal to the scholarly reader who, for example, wants to research LDS history in the GDR or someone who is interested in small church communities and the efforts of their religious leaders to balance their religious and civic lives. The length of the book should not frighten the potential reader because the twenty chapters follow each other in a logical and clear manner. Some chapters describe the events of a particular time period, e.g. chapter five depicts the time before the Berlin Wall and chapter six portrays the time after the Berlin Wall. Other chapters explain what daily life was like for the Saints in the GDR, such as chapter nine which tells about the youth activities so common in an ordinary LDS community, but quite different in the GDR, or chapter ten which explains what school, study and professional life in the GDR was like. The book, therefore, not only fills gaping holes in the history of the LDS Church in Europe but gives an interesting insight into the life in the GDR.

Kuehne describes in the introduction that when he started this project there were a number of obstacles to overcome (7-12). In the 90's there was a general debate as to who would be qualified to write the history of the GDR. Would historians who did not belong to the communist party be able to write an impartial and scientific history? What shape would such a history need to take? This discussion was also relevant to Kuehne's project and perhaps even more so. Could an American who had never lived in the GDR write an honest history of the LDS Church in the GDR even if this American was of German descent and had served a mission in Germany as a young man? At first there was some reluctance from both members and ecclesiastical leaders but the building of the Freiburg Temple and the opportunity to serve a

mission there with his wife opened doors for Kuehne that eventually led to the writing of this book with the increasing enthusiasm and help from the local Saints.

I would heartily recommend this book in either German or English.⁴ It is a well written book that makes (LDS) life in the GDR transparent and exciting.

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⁴ The book has recently been published in English. See Raymond Kuehne, *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State: A Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945–1990* (University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, 2010).