CHAPTER THREE

THE LIMITS OF POLITICIZATION OF THE SCHOOLS
IN THE GDR: THE CATHOLIC EICHSFELD REGION
AND THE PROTESTANT ERZGEBIRGE – A COMPARISON

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The SED’s claim to power was an unlimited one. The party sought to control and steer all aspects of life within society as part of its utopian project of bringing about a new society with new people. This excessive overreach and the hubris of a godlike claim to total power were bound to come up against numerous limitations. These aspirations to power could not be achieved from above without difficulty and without ruptures in the system, in a process that was indeed influenced by a wide range of factors. This resulted in a certain freedom within a scope of action to do what was mandated by the system.

The churches – and due to their larger membership, the mainstream Protestant churches in particular – presented the greatest obstacle to the SED in its plans to impose its ideology. Since children and teenagers also represented the most important target group for politicization, and were at the same time still under the strong influence of the church, schools constituted the main front in the party’s struggle with the churches. The repressive actions of the SED against Christians in the schools met, in the end, with great success. While Catholics, living in a virtual diaspora, strove to ‘hibernate’ their way through the system, the Protestant Church lost nearly sixty percent of its membership in the course of the forty-year dictatorship. A few areas of the GDR proved to be relatively resistant to the eradication of religiosity among the population. This included the Upper Eichsfeld region (Obereichsfeld), which was the largest contiguous Catholic area of the GDR, and the Erzgebirge (“Ore Mountains”) region, a Protestant stronghold. The question must then arise as to how the Christians of these two areas were able to limit the influence of the SED in matters of education.1

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1 The author focused on this question in her doctoral dissertation, **SED-Staat und Kirche – Grenzen der Politisierung am Beispiel von Schulen im katholischen Eichsfeld**
The division of this paper into four periods follows the progression of the political measures and events that constituted turning points for Christian teachers and students. The first period spans the time between the October 1945 reopening of schools in the Soviet occupation zone through the Spring 1953 directives on the “evaluation of all high school[2] students and teachers” and on a “complete restructuring of school types in the GDR in detailed adherence to the Soviet model.” These directives constituted a turning point in the “cleansing” of the high schools of all “elements” that veered from the SED doctrine. With the “new course,” numerous dismissals and expulsions were rescinded, and the reorganization completed in full. The events of 1954 would, however, show that the general thrust would be maintained. This would destroy, once and for all, the hopes of large sections of the population for a democratic school system, which was justified in view of the original promises of the KPD/SED,[3] and which had begun to gain new momentum with the “new course.” These hopes had, however, already begun to be disappointed as a result of the resolutions of the second SED party congress in September 1947. This turning point marked the end of the first period of investigation. The second period was characterized in its entirety by the efforts of the SED to bring the education system under its full control, which entailed ending the churches’ influence in the area. This phase peaked in the “transition from the antifascist-democratic school to the socialist school” and the establishment of the Jugendweihe, a secular youth consecration ceremony in 1958,[4] as well

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