

## INTERVIEWS

# "The Melody of My Life is to Do All Things to Hinder War": An Interview with Rev. Dr. Werner Krätschell – Part II

Adam Tietje, ThD, DMin<sup>a</sup>

Keywords: East Germany, German Military Chaplaincy, Communism, Berlin Wall

<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.147540>

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## Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2026

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This is part II of *Military Chaplaincy Review*'s interview with Werner Krätschell. We sat down with him in his home in Berlin via MS Teams on August 29, 2025. Werner Krätschell was born in Berlin during World War II and lived in East Berlin after the war until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. He was a pastor and later a superintendent over twenty-four pastors in northern East Berlin. He was active in the [Pankow Peace Group](#) in the 1980s and later facilitated round table talks in East Berlin after the fall of the wall. He was asked to lead the effort to establish a military chaplaincy for the federal states that had been part of the former East Germany. He oversaw those efforts as the Chief of Chaplains from 1997 to 2005. He is also the author of *Die Macht der Kerzen: Erinnerungen an die Friedliche Revolution Mit einem Essay von Timothy Garton Ash* [*The Power of Candles: Memories of the Peaceful Revolution with an Essay by Timothy Garton Ash*]. Retired Furman University professor Don Lineback, an old friend of Werner's who made the connection with *Military Chaplaincy Review*, also joined the conversation along with Johannes Sasse who assisted at key points with translation. This interview has been edited for clarity.

*MCR*: That was a really helpful description of your experience on the inside of life in East Germany in your role as a pastor, as a person, and what it meant to be a witness to the corrosive effects of a very impoverished ideology and the craving for something more substantial, something more real and true in people's lives, and how the church became a place for people to find that, even if it wasn't in the context of an encounter with God for themselves, but with other people who were searching for that.

I think we could probably stay in the context of your life and work for a long time, given how much time you've given to that work. But I'd like to move forward to bring some of that into conversation with your connections to military chaplaincy. You opened us up with this incredibly powerful story of this formative moment in your life as a child, deeply traumatic moment, and how that has colored your life's work to bend in the direction of the prevention of war. You were asked to help establish a military chaplaincy in

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<sup>a</sup> Adam is *MCR*'s editor and the author of *Toward a Pastoral Theology of Holy Saturday*.

the new federal states that had formerly been part of East Germany. You had the responsibility to oversee the formation of military chaplains in those new federal states from 1997 all the way to 2005. I'd love to hear how you bring your work as a pastor in the context of East Berlin, as someone whose very life was formed in the crucible of World War II, how you then came to see your role in establishing this place for religion in the context of the military itself?

Werner Krätschell: It was a very difficult task for the West German army, the old *Bundeswehr*, to integrate the communist army of East Germany. But it worked wonderfully because the West German army sent the best officers and generals to East Germany to take responsibility for the former Communist army. It was important to help the West German officers understand the mentality and the broken personalities of East Germans, of the soldiers and officers. I served as a mediator in this difficult situation, to help the East and West armies come together as comrades and not as enemies.

I'll give you an example. I told you that only twenty percent of the East Germans were religious. And the same was true in the former East German army, only twenty percent knew what a pastor was. The other eighty percent had never been to church, didn't know the commandments, and had no contact with faith or the church.

### **We Never Want to Have a Cadaver Obedience**

There is a good tradition in the West German army after the World War II. The founders of the West German Army in 1956 were Confessing Christians. They said we never want to have a cadaver obedience as under Hitler or other German armies of kings. We want to have an army that is dependent on the parliament and not a party or a president. That remains true to this day in the German *Bundeswehr*.

The second point was that the education of the soldiers—you have in your units also, I think, in the American army certain times where the soldiers are educated in ethics and other questions—and this was done in the former German armies by officers. The Christian founders of the *Bundeswehr* decided that this was not to be done by the officers but by pastors, by us. When the East German and West German armies came together, the East Germans were educated in this special education program by our clergy. And they discovered that the values that are important for life are better influenced by faith rather than ideology.

### **They Had Discovered That Chaplains Were Helpful for Them in Their Difficulties**

And then for the first time since World War II, the German army was deployed to a combat zone in Bosnia, in the former Yugoslavia. The first group of soldiers and units to go to the former Yugoslavia to help end the

war were soldiers from the former East Germany. These former East Germans soldiers who were only twenty percent religious were asked, “do you want to have chaplains when you go?” Ninety percent of the East German soldiers, most of them were not religious, decided we want to have chaplains. They had discovered that chaplains were helpful for them in their difficulties. And you know in every army there are difficulties, drugs, family life, money and so on. They discovered that the chaplains were the best mediators in difficult situations.

*MCR:* Chaplains became important mediators, bridging the divide of East and West. When soldiers were sent to Bosnia, they were a meaningful presence there as well. And then, of course, not long after is September 11, 2001, and the Germans were a part of the NATO mission in Afghanistan as well. And you would have been still involved with military chaplaincy at that time?

Werner Krätschell: Yes. I was the chief of chaplains in the former East Germany. My role was to visit our chaplains when they were in the Balkans, in Kosovo or wherever. I visited them and had good contact with the generals who had to lead the military units. In the German army, the leading chaplains are in a high position because in an army all is oriented in ranks. The invisible rank of a chaplain is very high. [Military chaplains in the *Bundeswehr* serve in solidarity with soldiers but in a [civilian status](#).] And because I was on the top, I always had good communication with the leading generals. They were interested to know how their soldiers were doing and what could be done to make it better.

*MCR:* It sounds like chaplains play an important educational role. Chaplains are critical in terms of education around ethics, both ethics in the conduct of war and ethics in the context of the organization itself. But chaplains also play an important role in caring for soldiers amid the ebbs and flows of life generally, and then especially amid the particularities of what it means to be a soldier or a soldier who is sent on a mission.

Werner Krätschell: Yes. I want to add that chaplains can give soldiers a cultural education as well, to help them understand that art and painting and music, Johan Sebastian Bach, for instance, are not understandable without religion. These things are important not only for an individual life, but also for the whole society. Chaplains and pastors are educated in different disciplines from psychology to theology and so we are good helpers to give those who have never had contact with these deeper cultural values a broader perspective than materialism or career.

### **The Best Way to Bring Peace in This World Is to Forgive**

I want to add that I do not want to have any smell of hero. I did my work very simply as a Christian in the footsteps of Jesus.

The communist leader during the last months of the GDR was Egon Krenz. The wall came down in November 1989 and at the beginning of December, Egon Krenz, the Communist leader, lost his power. Christmas Eve came some weeks later. The wall had come down, and we had wonderful services in a united Berlin. And after one such service, I took a candle and went to this man who lived only 100 meters from our church. I didn't know if he would say, "no, Christian, I don't want to have a visit." The opposite was the case. I came and he said, "my comrades do not come, but my pastor comes." And we talked for three hours that night and it was a kind of confession of his life. Because I am a pastor and because of the secrecy of confession, I cannot share this conversation with him. But you can see in this situation that the best way to bring peace in this world is to forgive.

When I would tell people about this, I would get a lot of protests from my fellow East Germans who would say, "you have visited the devil. You are on the wrong track. We want to show how brutal the communists were" and so on. And therefore, when you ask what the task of the chaplain is—wherever in the world, in Germany or the United States or wherever—the main task is to look for situations where forgiveness is possible and to help enemies could come together. Chaplains all over the world are interested in bringing enemies to a round table. And I have experience with this when I was a Superintendent in Berlin after the wall came down.

### **We Have to Build Round Tables**

Many people expected that there would be a catastrophe, a fight against communists and that the victims would take revenge. No, no. It happened another way. All over East Germany round tables were built. I was chosen to lead the roundtable in East Berlin, in the City Hall of Berlin. I had to moderate the roundtables. On one side sat the old communists and other parties of the communist system and on the other side sat the opposition groups and the new parties. I had to make them work together for the administration of the city, for traffic and energy questions and even to help to kill the system of the Stasi, of the Secret Service. That is my picture. We have to build round tables.

### **You Can Differentiate the Uniform and the Person Who Is in Uniform**

And in the background, you have the wonderful heritage of Martin Luther, the German reformer. He made a distinction—and this is his gift for us—he made a distinction in the human personality. You have an inner personality and a person who is fulfilling a role or duty. Soldiers have to follow the rules of having a uniform or others in other roles in the economy or culture. But that is not the only information about a person because in the uniform there is a human being. You can differentiate between the uniform and the person who is in uniform. You can accept the role of the uniform, the official

being of this person, and on the other hand, you can see the person beyond the uniformed person and have another entrance to the inner world of a personality. That is chaplaincy.

*MCR:* That was quite moving as you took us through that moment of confession, your charge on the importance of forgiveness, and the role that clergy and chaplains and religious leaders can and do play in bringing enemies together and making possible the conditions for friendship, reconciliation, and healing. What an incredible moment in history in terms of the division of a country, the reunification of a country, and the role those various institutions played in making that possible. It seems that within the military there were intentional moves to establish rules and norms that facilitated that reunification. Chaplains also helped in terms of thinking about habits and practices that you and others embodied around what it means to share a common life as a people in a democracy. You've given us a lot of important examples and stories in that direction and I'm wondering if there's anything else you would want to say around the relationship of the military to the parliament, not to a party, not to the president as being important civil military relations in Germany. I'm also wondering how chaplains continue to support the relationship between civil society and the military. What habits and practices can chaplains encourage and participate in. And, of course, you've already started laying some of that out.

Werner Krätschell: Thank you very much. You are very good. You have a great ability to bring things together. Your description in your last sentences was wonderful. To bring some of these important things together let me offer an example.

To be a chaplain in our armies there must be a small taste of the biblical vision. And one central vision you find is that of the prophet Isaiah. Every chaplain must have this in his or her being that there is a vision that is more than our normal understanding. Be so kind to hear this vision, a vision from Israel. I want to read it in King James English. Isaiah 2. Verse 4: "And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It's your turn.

*MCR:* I really want that to be the last word.

Don Lineback: May I interject something?

*MCR:* Of course.

Don Lineback: In the 1950s and the 1960s and the 1970s, and in the 1980s everybody in the world agreed on one thing about East and West Germany, they would never come together without a huge conflagration. Everybody knew that. The only way the conflict between those two countries would end

would be in a massive military confrontation. It didn't happen because of what Werner called *die Macht der Kerzen* [the power of candles] could you tell us about that?

### **Candles Are Stronger Than Tanks and Nonviolence Is Stronger Than Military Power**

Werner Krätschell: Yes, that is a wonderful picture of the idea of nonviolence. Candles are stronger than tanks and nonviolence is stronger than military power. That was our real experience in the streets of Berlin. For me as a Christian, it was the influence of the Word of God. It was the first time that we had in Germany a revolution without bloodshed. In 2019 [on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall], I published a book, titled *Die Macht der Kerzen* [*The Power of Candles*].<sup>1</sup>

At the end of our conversation, I want to tell you this story of Norway.

It was the fiftieth anniversary of chaplaincy in the Norwegian army. I was asked to give the main lecture. I spoke, in English, about the past, present, and future of army chaplaincy. We had a great discussion afterward in the castle of Oslo. After the lecture, there was a big dinner in the castle, and all the clergymen and women came and their partners too. It was wonderful to see them clothed in blue and red, and when we entered the castle there were torches and music. I was asked as a guest to add a short message at this dinner. There were, I think, two hundred people and the bishop and the general and all leading persons of the army.

### **Where Water Is Stronger Than Stones and Where Nonviolence Is Stronger Than Tanks**

And I said to them in my greeting: Dear friends, I am happy to be back in Scandinavia because the most decisive influence on my life happened in Scandinavia when I decided to go back to East Germany. And I was declared crazy by my family and friends. But I had a wonderful twenty-eight years to observe and to influence a situation where water is stronger than stones and where nonviolence is stronger than tanks. For twenty-eight years I had to live under these conditions and now I am back in Scandinavia, and I am happy to be with you. There was an unforgettable silence in this audience. Some had tears.

The end of the conference was the next day, Sunday, in the Cathedral of Oslo. We were a little bit early, and I was able to sit close to the pulpit and throne. The leading man of the Norwegian army, the Norwegian king came in. It was wonderful to have this atmosphere, and we sang wonderful songs,

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Krätschell, *Die Macht der Kerzen: Erinnerungen an die Friedliche Revolution Mit einem Essay von Timothy Garton Ash* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2019).

and the Bishop of Oslo preached a great sermon. After the service, they had a reception. The senior chaplain asked me to come. I was brought to have a short conversation with the king. This was obviously in response to my words at the castle. The bishop had decided to bring us together. I told the king a little bit about the situation of being back in Scandinavia.

### **You Can Imagine That This Melody, This Leading by God toward Forgiveness, Humor, Love, Openness, and Reconciliation, This Is in the Air**

I also told him that I had a phone call that morning with my wife in Berlin. I said, “Annagrete, I’m going to the service, and the King of Norway will be there.” And she answered, “oh, that is like in a fairy tale.” I told the King what my wife had said that you are here is as in a fairy tale. And he answered, “dear friend, it is so a little bit.” And he laughed and it was a wonderful meeting. You can imagine that this melody, this leading by God toward forgiveness, humor, love, openness, and reconciliation, this is in the air. If you live in that atmosphere, no Devil can kill you.

*MCR:* The way that this tapestry of your life or the orchestration of your life, as you keep using the language of music and melody, how it’s been woven together, how the themes and the melodies have worked together through the years, is quite a powerful witness.

The things that we’ve been hearing in terms of the witness and role of a chaplain are also quite powerful, but perhaps even contradictory. You’ve given us an image of chaplains as signs of peace in the middle of institutions of war. Your quote from Isaiah is a witness to something that breaks into the world, that is not of the world, but that points beyond. For us in the U.S., there’s all kinds of talk around the possibility of war with China and Russia. Russia is already at war in Ukraine.

Werner Krätschell: I know.

*MCR:* Germany is, of course, deeply involved in supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia, as is the U.S. And so, there’s a lot of fear and anxiety around the return of large-scale combat. For chaplains in the U.S. or in other countries, what would you want to say to them about the kind of witness or role that they could play even before war? Hearing the way that you’ve woven these themes together through your life or how they have been woven in and through your life, what would you say to chaplains who have these rumors of war on their horizon?

### **A Better Way**

Werner Krätschell: I would say to them, discover your own creativity. Before war it is possible to love your neighbor but also to love your enemy. He may also be a father, as you are or a mother as you are. And if you have this way of

thinking, be courageous because God has made you so that you have also the possibility not for enmity but for love. And if you are convinced that this is the better way, you find in your military unit ways to bring an understanding that is open to new ways of communication and the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

*MCR*: I think that is a good place to put it down. Thank you, Werner. What a gift you've given to us to share your life in this way, to share your time in this way. It has been an honor and I'm deeply, deeply grateful.

Published: December 14, 2025 EDT.



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