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Cardinal who's a post-Soviet legend looks back

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†This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Catholic terms, this anniversary is also, in its own way, a moment of regime change.

One by one, the bishops who led the churches of the former Soviet sphere out of the catacombs, and into the "shock therapy" of absorbing several decades of post-Vatican II development in the West all at once, are beginning to fade from the scene. For example, Pope Benedict's trip to the Czech Republic last weekend was also a swan song for Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, who's announced that he expects to be replaced by year's end.

†Another legend of the post-Soviet period is Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, Germany, now almost 76 and thus beyond the normal retirement age. While there's no indication yet of when the pope might accept his resignation, Meisner nonetheless realizes that he's nearer the end than the beginning, and finds himself in an introspective mood.

†Meisner, who spent his youth and most of his ecclesiastical career in the former East Germany before moving to Cologne in late 1988, recently gave a long interview to his archdiocesan newspaper looking back over his career.

†There are actually several nuggets in the interview, including Meisner recounting how he and his friends in school burned their textbooks in protest over being forced to learn Russian.

Those who know Meisner only after 1989, by which time he'd acquired a reputation as one of the most

blunt and outspoken prelates in the world, will be amused by his explanation: He spent so many years carefully modulating his speech under the Communists, he said, that he's not inclined to be diplomatic now.

For church historians, however, perhaps most interesting is Meisner's analysis of the obvious contrast between the Vatican's Ostpolitik under Pope Paul VI, premised on reaching an accommodation with the Soviets, and the more pugnacious challenge to Communism under John Paul II.

Typically, that difference is framed in ideological terms: Paul VI, the career diplomat, pursuing a softer line, while John Paul II, the resistance leader in Poland, was more of a hawk. Meisner, however, suggests an alternative explanation.

He said that Paul VI, in company with Meisner himself and virtually everyone else at the time, assumed that the Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe would last another "two or three hundred years," and therefore the church had to make some sort of arrangement with them, or risk being snuffed out. John Paul II, on the other hand, believed that the end was near, and that the system simply needed a shove to collapse under its own weight.

In fact, Meisner reads his own appointment to Cologne in late 1988 in terms of John Paul's intuition.

"Neither I nor anyone else, including all the German politicians, could have imagined the imminent collapse of the Communist system," Meisner said. But by sending an East German to Cologne, Meisner said, "the pope sent a clear signal: 'Gentlemen, pay attention, because something is about to happen.'"

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Meisner was installed in Cologne in February 1989, and by November the Berlin Wall had collapsed.

By Meisner's reading, the difference between Paul VI and John Paul II therefore wasn't so much about which one was a dove and which a hawk. The difference lay instead in their assumptions about the durability of the Soviet regime, undoubtedly shaped, at least in part, by the fact that John Paul II came from the weakest link in the Soviet chain: Poland, where the vulnerability of Communist rule to aroused civic resistance was always most clear.

Whatever one makes of it, Meisner's perspective is worth pondering among other things, because his generation of prelates won't be around much longer to offer their insights.

(A brief footnote on Vlk: In some ways, this past weekend was a bittersweet sendoff. While Benedict XVI was in town, the Czech Prime Minister, Jan Fischer, met with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State. Afterward, Fischer announced that the Vatican did not regard the resolution of church/state disputes in the country, including the restitution of \$8 billion in church property stolen by the Communists and never returned, as "urgent." That assertion was confirmed by Vatican officials. The development had to be somewhat dispiriting for Vlk, for whom the property dispute, and other sticking points in church/state relations, has been a signature issue for the better part of his 18-year term in Prague. On the eve of Benedict's departure, Vlk said on Czech TV that he regarded his tenure as a "failure," saying he had "accomplished nothing" in relations with the state in almost twenty years.)

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