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The Persecution of the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1953–1968

I. If we summarize the development of the Communist Party's stance towards the Roman Catholic Church (and often towards the church and religion in general) and the form and content of state church policy, there is no doubt that it can be characterised as a strange mix of pragmatism and ideological blinkers (which generally prevailed). The dominance of the ideological perspectives that pertained in all other areas of life in post-1948 Czechoslovakia made it impossible for any kind of reasonable agreement to be reached between the Communist-controlled state and the church, even though such a *modus vivendi* could have been beneficial to both sides, not just to the church. While it may have appeared in the first three years after the war that the conciliatory coexistence of the Catholic Church and Communist adherents of Marxist materialism was not impossible, the Communists soon destroyed that illusion after they had grabbed complete power. Most measures against the church were implemented in the period when the new system was being established (1949–1951). Among the hostile steps taken against the church were an effort to split it using collaborationist groups (patriots' movement); merging the Greek Orthodox Church with the Orthodox Church; land reform; dissolution of both men's and women's orders; the breaking off of relations with the Vatican; church trials; internment of the church hierarchy; and anti-church legislation.

Thanks to its compact configuration, the Catholic Church proved a fundamental problem to the Communist regime. The Communists preferred exercising power to political negotiations, as seen in the approval of a church law in October 1949 that brought churches under state control. In line with this is what was referred to as the "Catholic action", a policy in support of "progressive Catholics" that were to distance themselves from the Vatican. However, that ended in fiasco. Among those who took part actively were people whose loyalty to the Communists became fully apparent later with the foundation of the Peace Movement of the Catholic Ministry in 1951. The existence of that organisation was one of the many reasons that relations between the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Vatican became an impossibility for a whole decade. In the first wave of persecution, the Communist leadership planned to cripple the church and virtually exclude it from social life, which to a

large degree it succeeded in doing. However, one area in which the regime did not achieve the expected success was in winning the support of church members. Even after grabbing control of the country and making use of all the means at their disposal, the Communists were unable to ignore the potential threat posed by the church. Despite Czech society being regarded as among the most secular in the world and the fact that the country has a thorny relationship with the Vatican, in 1950 76% of the population still declared themselves to be Roman Catholic. This figure points to the fact that there was a considerable percentage of Christians among Communist Party voters.

II. The milestone of the year 1953, the death of Stalin and in Czechoslovakia of Gottwald, is an illusory one, because the processes begun in previous years carried on. From 1952, a campaign had been launched with the aim of snuffing out religion throughout the country and building an atheistic society. A general change in church policy was seen in a switch from declared efforts to involve the church and its members in the joint "building of Socialism" to a more open formulation of the position that there would be no place for them in that future society. Religion was driven out of the education system, while it was made clear that membership of both party and faith group was incompatible. However, a plan drawn up in March 1953 with the intention of disbanding female orders and congregations in July of that year was in the end shelved indefinitely. Revolts in Germany and Hungary played an important role in that decision by senior party organs, as did the relatively unsettled situation in Czechoslovakia resulting from monetary reform. While certain changes for the better can be observed from 1953, they were in most cases merely cosmetic. Examples were an end to the capricious transfer and pensioning off of priests by church secretaries and a reduction in arbitrariness with regard to the granting of permission for church ceremonies. The most important changes in that period include the abolition of PTP units (military forced labour camps) and the closure of internment and work camps in 1953–1956, from which the majority of monks and priests held against their will were freed.

A short ideological thaw around the year 1956 did not bring practical changes, as while penal repression did ease it did not cease. Church members sentenced in show trials remained behind bars and bishops' seats remained unfilled. The relative liberalisation which followed the 20th congress of the Communist Party in the USSR and events in Poland and Hungary did not greatly affect Czechoslovakia. On the basis of the information available, it can be observed that the number imprisoned at the beginning of the 1960s was very similar to the figure from the first wave of church repression. The extent of that persecution goes some way to dispelling the theory that anti-church terror was confined to the early 1950s. None the

less, in July 1956 the political bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party tasked the minister of justice with cooperating with the ministers of the interior and education and culture to examine all 384 cases involving priests in jail at that time.

Further proof that persecution was ongoing was the fact that trials of members of religious orders took place in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s. What did differ from the early phase, however, was the typology of these proceedings. Instead of trials of individuals from single orders there were trials of larger groups of monks from one order or congregation. The aim of such horizontally conducted trials or other group trials of monks from one order was not merely to get rid of leadership figures, but to put monasteries from out of action.

Generally speaking, the label anti-church trial is also problematic because the term implies a policy towards the church hierarchy, while from the mid 1950s the Communists made it abundantly clear that what they were engaged in was a fight against their religious co-citizens. It became apparent that the party's efforts to control the church through internal fragmentation had failed. Expectations of internal strains between the hierarchy and the clerics were not borne out, while collaborationist organisations like the Peace Movement of the Catholic Ministry found very little support among the laity. Despite the Communists having possession of all media influence, supported by organs of repression, they did not success in detaching the Catholic Church from the Vatican and creating a so-called national church. Among the notable changes implemented by the state in 1956 was the dissolution of the State Office for Church Affairs and the transfer of its powers to the Ministry of Education and the shelving of a campaign to enrol children into the church. Calls for an end to repressive steps against the clergy led only to a decrease in the number of cases and a slight reduction in the sentences of some imprisoned priests.

The Central Committee refused to countenance either the release of priests, as happened in Poland and Hungary, or a review of their trials. The most common reasons for imprisonment were, according to the period classification, the crimes of: treason, espionage, endangering state secrets, subversion, incitement, spreading alarm, failure to report a crime, association against the state, and obstruction of state governance of the church. Alongside proceedings against priests, there were increasing numbers of show trials of members of the Catholic laity, intellectuals, writers, members of Orel (a Christian sports organisation), the Scouts, etc. State employees did not escape the pressure and were repeatedly instructed to quit the church.

III. The latter half of the 1950s is characterised by a drive to force religious education (RE) out of schools. Teachers with a Christian worldview were discriminated against, while schools at which there was a huge decline in interest in RE were highlighted. RE was still part of school curricula in Czechoslovakia until 1952, but the regime quickly changed that. By the middle of the 1950s less than one half of school pupils attended RE classes (in 1955–56 the percentage was 43%). Between the end of the 1950s and the end of the 1970s the percentage of children who officially studied RE fell by approximately eight, with only 5% still attending RE lessons at the end of the 1970s. In some districts, such as border areas and in the Central Bohemian region, RE disappeared completely. In the biggest cities in Bohemia and Moravia, meanwhile, around 8 to 10% of all school pupils went to RE classes. As a result of persecution, attendance numbers at religious services declined continuously. Meanwhile, the secularisation of social life intensified. Efforts aimed at forcing the church to remain behind the doors of church buildings continued; traditional processions and pilgrimages disappeared, and the church was limited to social and charity work.

Repression deepened further with the approval of a new constitution in 1960 intended to reflect the successful culmination of Socialism in Czechoslovakia. The word "church" did not appear in it at all and there was no mention of relations between the state and churches or religious associations; the document limited itself to asserting the religious freedom of the individual. Article 2, paragraph 32, § 1 states: freedom of religion is guaranteed. However, in article 1, paragraph 18, § 1 it is stated that the cultural policy of Czechoslovakia's education and school system is built on the fundamentals of Marxism and Leninism closely linked to the life of the working class. This practically precluded religious freedom because Christian citizens were not allowed to contravene the state's atheistic line. The 1960s saw a deepening of the discord in the relationship between the ruling party and religion. Practically nothing changed in the position of the Communist Party and representatives of state governance. They warned Roman Catholic priests and lay people against activism and against growing attendance at services. Their work was to be primarily focused on young people and to exclude any form of religious life.

IV. The marked wave of arrests of priests that took place in the first third of the 1960s gives the lie to the myth of the moderation of Socialist rule in Czechoslovakia and the "wonderful" 1960s. The last of those imprisoned for their beliefs were not freed until 1967–1968. The state's new church policy represented the first reforms connected with the Prague Spring.