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The First Stage of the Communist Struggle for Power in Central and Eastern Europe, 1945–1956: The Tragic Fate of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

PIERWSZY ETAP KOMUNISTYCZNEJ WALKI O WŁADZĘ W EUROPIE
ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ 1945–1956. TRAGICZNY LOS HIERARCHII
KATOLICKIEJ W CZECHACH I NA SŁOWACJI

Streszczenie

Po zakończeniu drugiej wojny światowej Czechosłowacja stała się jednym z krajów komunistycznych. Do 1948 roku kraj cieszył się jeszcze względnym spokojem. Po komunistycznym zamachu stanu w lutym 1948 roku wszystkie obszary życia społecznego zostały zindoktrynowane przez ideologię marksizmu-leninizmu. Kościół katolicki i inne mniejsze wspólnoty chrześcijańskie stały się wrogami ideologicznego państwa. Na Słowacji Kościół katolicki był liczniejszy i miał silną tradycję. W Czechach miał bardziej skomplikowaną historię z powodu wojen husyckich, wpływu reformacji luterkańskiej i wojny trzydziestoletniej. Po 1918 roku państwo czechosłowackie było budowane w opozycji do katolicyzmu według hasła „Precz z Rzymem! Precz z Wiedniem!”. Od 1948 roku władze komunistyczne zwalczały wszelką działalność religijną. Działalność edukacyjna, życie zakonne i działalność charytatywna zostały zakazane. Badania nad tym okresem są wciąż dość trudne, ponieważ działacze religijni byli zmuszeni do ukrywania swojej odwagi. Aby przedstawić pierwszy etap walki z religią i tragiczny los hierarchii kościoła katolickiego, skorzystano z międzynarodowej literatury na ten temat.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół rzymskokatolicki, Kościół greckokatolicki, komunistyczny reżim, polityka antykościelna ZSRR

1. Political and religious conditions in the Eastern Bloc countries

After the end of World War II in May 1945, communist-ruled states were established. Many of them in the USSR learned about the destructive practices against religious groups. The ideological struggle in the Eastern Bloc countries pitted the communist parties against people and institutions with different visions of their country's future. The communists attributed their political legitimacy to the military liberation of the region and their role in the reconstruction of war damage and the gradual normalization of everyday life. The reconstruction of industry and the towns and villages destroyed during the war was only possible thanks to the enormous determination of entire societies that, despite radical political changes, wanted to resume normal life after the end of the war.¹ Across Central and Eastern Europe, religious persecution had a similar ideological basis.² The communist authorities aimed to limit and then destroy existing forms of religiosity so that it would be easier to implement their atheistic vision of society. The results of general elections, which were rigged in favour of the communists, were intended to convince local societies of the relatively high acceptance of the new form of power in their societies and of the need for changes in social life. Conflict between religion and communist ideology was therefore inevitable. The priorities of the communist programme included the fight against the Catholic Church, which posed a threat to the new state structures based on Marxist ideology. In the battle against religion in individual countries, churches were transformed into warehouses, cinemas and public buildings, and even into museums of atheism. All communist party programmes treated religious issues in a hostile manner.³

The way the anti-religious policy was implemented depended mainly on the role of the Church in the history of the nation and the number of believers. The teaching

- 1 J. Mikrut, *Le memorie senza volto del comunismo*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 11/29–30.2010, pp. 4–5, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/cultura/2010/276q04b1.html [accessed: 29.11.2010]; J. Mikrut, *La Chiesa cattolica, la seconda guerra mondiale e le vittime del nazionalsocialismo Non basta contare i morti*, in: "L'Osservatore Romano" 5.15.2019, <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/non-basta-contare-i-morti> [accessed: 15.05.2019].
- 2 A. Grajewski, *Chronologia i historyczne uwarunkowania represji wobec duchowieństwa katolickiego w krajach Europy środkowej*, in: J. Myszor, A. Dziuro (eds.), *Represje wobec duchowieństwa Kościołów chrześcijańskich w okresie stalinowskim w krajach byłego bloku wschodniego*, Katowice 2004, p. 17; P. Madajczyk (ed.), *Social Engineering in Central and South-East Europe in the Twentieth Century Reconsidered*, Warsaw 2017.
- 3 J. Mikrut, *Il martirio cristiano come testimonianza della fede in Europa Orientale 1945–1991*, in: A. Fejerdy (ed.), *La Chiesa cattolica dell'Europa centro-orientale di fronte al comunismo*, Roma 2013, p. 31.

of atheism became mandatory for all students.⁴ Contemporary historiography identifies four levels of conflict with the Catholic Church: doctrinal, moral, national, and existential. There were three phases of religious policy: an initial phase, whose intensity varied from country to country, featuring attempts to eliminate the Church from public life; a phase of open confrontation in which attempts were made to prevent the Church's activities through administrative means; and a final phase, the goal of which was to make the Church authorities completely dependent on the communist administration.⁵

The year 1948 was a turning point in the development of state-church relations in Europe. An ideological confrontation between the East and the West began, leading to increased global tensions. Meanwhile, the already strengthened international communist movement was building a system of total control over the spiritual and socio-political life of nations. The Catholic Church in Poland played a special role among the Eastern Bloc countries, due to its influence on the country's history; Poland also had the largest Catholic population. The situation was different in Czechoslovakia (the CSSR), where the social structure was not as favourable to the Church as in Poland, but where, after the war, the communist party was forced to cooperate with other political parties. A strong confrontation with religion took place after the communists took power on their own following the 1948 parliamentary elections.⁶ The communist authorities created administrative obstacles to church structures in the fields of religious education and charitable and social activities. All men's and women's orders in the CSSR were liquidated, and it might be expected that these institutions, which had contributed so much to society, would not have survived this pragmatically prepared action. However, things turned out differently. Thanks to their personal testimony of religious life, they not only survived the liquidation of religious orders, but also raised and educated new generations of young monks and nuns. Thereby, they ensured their continuity of existence and, after the fall of communism, the revival and continuation of religious life.

4 J. Mikrut, *Le memorie...*

5 B. Cywiński, *Ogniem próbowane. Z dziejów najnowszych Kościoła katolickiego w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 2: *I was prześladować będą*, Lublin–Rzym 1990, pp. 455–460.

6 A. Grajewski, *Chronologia i historyczne uwarunkowania represji wobec duchowieństwa katolickiego w krajach Europy środkowej*, in: J. Myszor, A. Dziuro (eds.), *Represje wobec duchowieństwa...*, p. 22.

2. Slovakia

The independence of the Slovak Republic was proclaimed on March 14, 1939, and until 1945, Slovakia was an independent state under the control of Germany, which imposed its ideological and political influence on the people. Up to the end of the war, the Slovak People's Party played an important role. The Catholic Church was dominant in Slovak society; Catholics constituted approximately 80% of the population. During the war, the President of the Slovak Republic was Father Josef Tiso, who was supported by the Catholic Church, which tried to limit German influence.⁷ A painful issue of this period was the anti-Jewish policy of the Slovak government and the related deportations of the Jewish population to German concentration camps. The Slovak Episcopate, in a memorandum of October 7, 1941, and a pastoral letter of March 21, 1943, appealed to save the Jewish population. The fact that the president was a Catholic priest was of great importance after the communists took power. Fr. Tiso was sentenced to death and hanged on April 18, 1947, in Bratislava. After the end of the war, the Slovak People's Party was banned, and national politics became completely dependent on the Soviet Union.⁸ On May 26, 1946, parliamentary elections were held, in which the communists obtained only 30.37% of the votes, while as many as 62% were won by political groups associated with the Democratic Party, whose programme was based on Christian values.⁹

The structure of Slovak society was far from the ideals proposed by communist ideology; for centuries, the majority of the population had identified with religion. Therefore, radical social changes had to be implemented. In October 1945, larger estates and banks were nationalized. Two sets of agrarian reforms were carried out, and wealthier peasants were persecuted. Mental and physical violence was used against them; many were sent to labour camps or forced to leave their hometowns. Other forms of coercion were aimed at schoolchildren and university students. The education system became an important part of the ideological struggle to gain total power over society. Already in 1944, during the Slovak National Uprising against the Third Reich, which lasted from August 29 to

7 E. Hrabovec, *La Chiesa cattolica in Slovacchia (1939–1945) fra la fedeltà allo Stato nazionale e la resistenza contro gli influssi ideologici del Terzo Reich*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *La Chiesa cattolica in Europa centro-orientale di fronte al Nazionalsocialismo 1933–1945*, San Pietro in Cariano 2019, pp. 823–842.

8 J. Mikrut, *Die christlichen Märtyrer des Nationalsozialismus und Totalitarismus in Mitteleuropa 1938–1945*, Wien 2005, pp. 303.

9 M. Katuninec, *Represje wobec duchowieństwa katolickiego na Słowacji w latach 1945–1956*, p. 36; J. Pešek, M. Barnovský, *Štátna moc a cirkvi na Slovensku 1948–1953*, Bratislava 1997.

October 28, private and church schools had been closed, and the traditional pluralism in education ended. The school laws adopted in April 1948 initiated a rapid process of ideological organization. All schools had to join a uniform state-controlled education system based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

In May 1945, to limit the influence of the Catholic Church, the activities of Catholic associations and organizations were banned. The Church, like other Christian communities, became an ideological enemy of the authorities. Despite this, the Church was the only legally operating institution in communist Czechoslovakia, although its worldview was completely opposed to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. For this reason, social conflict over religion and Christian values was inevitable. There began a period of increasing repression against the Church and its entire organization.¹⁰

According to the census of March 1, 1950, Slovakia contained 3,432,638 inhabitants, 99.72% of whom declared religious affiliation to one of the Christian communities. Only 9,679 (0.28%) did not indicate any religious affiliation. The largest and traditionally most influential religious denomination was the Roman Catholic Church (76.20%), followed by the Greek Catholic Church (6.55%). The second-largest number of believers belonged to the Evangelical-Augsburg Church (12.88%).¹¹

The fight against the Church was planned in two stages. First, legal changes were introduced; second, the entire church hierarchy was isolated, to be gradually replaced by groups of priests openly cooperating with the communist authorities. The secret police prepared lists of priests willing to cooperate and of opponents who were to be eliminated from society.¹² In 1950, Bishop Ján Vojtaššák (1877–1965) from the diocese of Spiš,¹³ a representative of the Catholic clergy in the Council of State of the Slovak Republic, was arrested for the second time (he had already been arrested for seven months after the occupation of Slovakia by the Red Army). In January 1951, in a show trial together with bishops Peter Pavol Gojdič and Michal Buzalka, he was sentenced in Bratislava to 24 years in prison for treason and espionage. In 1963, he was released and forced to leave Slovakia. He died in the Czech Republic on August 4, 1965. Also in 1950, Bishop Eduard

10 K. Kaplan, *Stát a církev v Československu v letech 1948–1953*, Brno 1993, p. 14.

11 Ibidem, p. 13.

12 *Hnutia vlasteneckých knazov*.

13 I. Chalupický, *Il vescovo di Spiš, Ján Vojtaššák*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede. Esperienze personali e collettive dei cattolici in Europa centro-orientale sotto il regime comunista*, San Pietro in Cariano 2017, p. 88.

Nécsey (1892–1968), Apostolic Administrator of the diocese of Nitra,¹⁴ and Róbert Pobožný (1890–1972),¹⁵ bishop of Rožňava, were interned. Only bishops Ambròz Lazík and Josef Čarský remained at large.¹⁶

At the theological faculty in Bratislava, under the control of the communist authorities, a seminary was set up for future Slovak priests. At the time, this was the only theological seminary in Slovakia. In the first half of the 1950s, studies lasted first for four and then five years. During this period, only a few willing candidates could count on being admitted to a theological seminary. Future priests were taught by priests and professors from a pro-government organization, and the number and calibre of seminarians were not adequate to the actual pastoral needs. The role of diocesan bishops, even when they were not imprisoned, was limited to conferring priestly orders; all other matters related to their priestly service were decided by the Slovak office for religious denominations.

The existence of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia was problematic for the state authorities. Initially, they planned to make it independent of the Vatican; its eventual liquidation was part of extensive anti-church activities. The process of elimination went down in history as Operation P. The Synod in Prešov took place on April 28, 1950, attended by 820 delegates, including about 100 clergy. The synod announced the end of the Union of Uzhgorod between Orthodox Christians and the Catholic Church, established on April 24, 1646, and their return to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁷ The Greek Catholic faithful had three options: converting to Orthodoxy, joining the Roman Catholic Church, or not making any declaration and operating in the secret Greek Catholic Church. Through the intervention of the CSSR government, out of 305,000 Greek Catholics, over 200,000 converted to the Orthodox Church. Despite government prohibitions, about 20 per cent converted to the Catholic Church.¹⁸ Clergy from the Orthodox Church now celebrated services in temples.¹⁹ Left without pastoral care, the faithful were intimidated, and some were arrested.²⁰ In 1950, Pavol Peter Gojdič (1888–1960), bishop of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Prošov, was arrested

14 M. Kerdík, *I vescovi nella tormenta*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, pp. 74–76.

15 Ibidem, pp. 69–73.

16 M. Katuninec, *Represje wobec duchowieństwa...*, p. 40.

17 J. Coranič, P. Šturák, J. Koprivňáková (eds.), *Cirkev v okovách totalitného režimu. Likvidácia Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi v Československu v roku 1950*, Prešov 2010, p. 63.

18 J. Pešek, M. Barnovský, *Štátna moc...*, p. 252.

19 G. Székely, A. Mesaroš, *Greckokatolícy na Slovensku*, Košice 1997, p. 26.

20 P. Šturák, *Dějiny gréckokatolíckej cirkvív Československuv rokách 1945–1989*, Prešov 1999, p. 199.

and, in 1951, sentenced to life imprisonment for treason and espionage for the Vatican. This penalty was later changed to 25 years' imprisonment.²¹ He died on July 17, 1960, on his 72nd birthday, in Leopoldov prison.²² On June 13, 1968, the Greek Catholic Church was re-established in Czechoslovakia.²³

3. Bohemia

On March 16, 1939, after the invasion by German troops, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established. Czechoslovakia's political reorientation towards the Soviet Union took shape at the end of World War II. On April 5, 1945, the establishment of the CSSR was announced in Kosice. On May 13, 1946, the government of Czechoslovakia established diplomatic relations with the Holy See, and Pope Pius XII was able to appoint bishops to all free episcopal sees. On May 26, 1946, parliamentary elections were held in which the communists obtained 40% of the votes; they formed a coalition government, which lasted until 1948. Prime Minister Klement Gottwald directed his policy towards eventually taking power himself. Gottwald and communist activists did not dare openly to oppose the Church, led in Prague by Josef Beran, a former prisoner in German concentration camps.

Things were similar in the diocese of Litoměřice, where another prisoner from Dachau, Štěpán Trochta, became bishop. After the end of the war, communist activists disingenuously presented themselves as defenders of the Church against state repression, took part in religious ceremonies, and promised respect for all believers. In February 1948, a new state constitution was adopted. Klement Gottwald was elected president of the CSSR, and a thanksgiving *Te Deum* was sung in his presence in Prague's cathedral. Until 1948, the Church in Bohemia and Moravia operated in relative peace.²⁴

21 R. Letz, *Postavenie Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi v Česko-Slovensku v rokoch 1945–1968*, in: "Historický časopis" 44 (1996), pp. 262–280; J. Babjak, *Zostali verní. Osudy gréckokatolíckych kňazov*, vol. 1–2, Košice 1998; P. Borza, D. A. Mandzák, *I greco-cattolici nella prima Repubblica slovacca negli anni 1939–1945*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.) *La Chiesa cattolica...*, pp. 863–878.

22 P. Šturák, *Il regime comunista e la Chiesa greco-cattolica. Il beato vescovo Pavol Peter Gojdič*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, pp. 125–126.

23 J. Coranič, *The History of the Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia*, "Folia Historica Cracoviensia" 13 (2007), p. 30.

24 V. Vaško, *Dům na skále*, vol. 1: *Církev zkoušená (1945 – začátek 1950)*, Kostelní Vydří 2004, pp. 239–240.

Josef Beran became the new archbishop in Prague, Josef Karel Matocha (1888–1961)²⁵ in Olomouc, Karel Skoupý in Brno,²⁶ Josef Hlouch in České Budějovice,²⁷ and Štěpán Trochta SDB in Litoměřice.²⁸ After the communists took power in 1948, repression against Czech bishops began. The Archbishop of Olomouc was interned in his residence, where he died on November 2, 1961.²⁹ The auxiliary bishop of Olomouc, František Tomášek (1899–1992), who was imprisoned in Želiv in 1951–1954, suffered persecution. After his release, the authorities allowed him to work as a pastor, but only as the administrator of the rural parish in Moravská Hružová.³⁰

3.1. The State Office for Ecclesiastical Affairs

On October 14, 1949, under Law 218/1949, the Czechoslovak National Assembly created two State Offices for Ecclesiastical Affairs: one for Slovakia (SLOVUC) and the other for Bohemia and Moravia (SUC). These controlled all Church activities.³¹ The important tasks of the new office included financing priests and churches from the state budget, accepting oaths of allegiance to the state, and granting consent to perform religious functions.³² Priests had to take an oath of allegiance to the CSSR before state officials; most of the clergy at least formally submitted to the new law in order to obtain permission to perform priestly work. Due to their opposition to communist ideology, a significant number of priests could no longer perform religious functions. They became labourers or clerks. An example is Cardinal Miroslav Vlk, who was ordained a priest in

25 Joseph Karl Matocha (1888–1961) from March 2, 1947, Archbishop of Olomouc. In 1950, he was interned until his death.

26 Karel Skoupý (1886–1972) from April 30, 1946, bishop in Brno. He was imprisoned from 1950 and released in 1963. In 1968, he returned to pastoral work.

27 Josef Hlouch (1902–1972) from June 25, 1947, bishop of the diocese of České Budějovice. He was imprisoned from 1950; in 1968, he returned to pastoral work.

28 Štěpán Trochta SDB (1905–1974) from November 16, 1947, bishop of the diocese of Litoměřice. In the years 1950–1954, he was interned and sentenced to 25 years in prison. In 1968, he returned to his diocese.

29 J. Jonová, *Consacrati nell'internamento. La persecuzione della gerarchia ecclesiastica nei territori della Repubblica*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, pp. 197–203; J.Z. Charouz, *Biskup – vyznavač Josef Karel Matocha 1888–1961*, Olomouc 1991.

30 J. Šebek, *Cardinali in Cecoslovacchia nel periodo comunista*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, p. 181.

31 S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*, Brno 2007, p. 29.

32 V. Gsovski, *Church and State behind the Iron Curtain. Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania: With an Introduction on the Soviet Union*, New York 1955.

1968. He worked as a pastor in his parish, but 10 years later, he was forbidden to continue. He therefore took a job washing windows, and then worked as an archivist in a bank. Priests who had permission to perform priestly work could not conduct religious activities outside their church building.³³ Priests who ended up working in factories or offices gained awareness of the workers' living conditions and their assessments of the role of the Church in society. For priests, this was an opportunity to bear witness to religion with their lives. They rarely encountered disrespect; workers knew how they were being persecuted for their religious commitment. Direct correspondence with Rome was impossible, but sometimes diplomats helped. There are known cases of correspondence being delivered by Italian or French diplomats.³⁴

Many young men who were not admitted to the state-controlled seminary looked for ways and a suitable place where they could secretly obtain appropriate education and be ordained as priests in another country, for example, Poland or the GDR. However, illegally ordained priests could not apply for permission to perform chaplaincy functions. They, therefore, began to work in hidden Catholic communities.

3.2. Attacks on monastic life

Monasteries occupied an important place in Czech national culture. Monks ran businesses and offered work to local people in agriculture and forestry. In 1949 and 1950, 50 monks were convicted for alleged economic abuse.³⁵ On the night of April 13/14, 1950, there occurred the so-called "Action K" (Monasteries), during which militia units entered 75 men's monasteries, and 876 monks were arrested. The second stage took place on April 27/28, covering another 69 monasteries and 364 monks.³⁶ As part of Operation K, the authorities liquidated all men's monasteries. At night, the monks were taken by bus to collective monasteries, where they were completely isolated from the rest of society.³⁷ The occupation of the monasteries took place very quickly and almost without resistance from the local

33 M. Vlk, *Prefazione*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *La Chiesa cattolica...*, p. 11.

34 J.Z. Charouz, *La Chiesa clandestina. Gli eroi silenziosi*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, p. 212.

35 V. Vlček, *Perzekuce mužských řádů a kongregací komunistickým režimem 1948–1964*, Olomouc 2004, pp. 58–59; P. Tesař, *Ženské řehole v období totality*, in: V. Vlček (ed.), *Ženské řehole za komunismu 1948–1989*, Olomouc 2005, pp. 19–58.

36 S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*, Brno 2007, pp. 153–192.

37 K. Kaplan, *Stát a církev v Československu v letech 1948–1953*, Brno 1993, p. 119.

inhabitants. The most famous places where monks were imprisoned were the monasteries in Želiv, Osek, Bohusodov, Broumov, Hojnice, and Králíky.³⁸

The brutal actions of the communist authorities caused much damage to the health of elderly and sick people. Younger monks were included in volunteer work brigades and forced to attend lectures on Marxism-Leninism. They wore specially prepared clothes, just like prisoners, and were divided into work groups and assigned to the worst ones. The monks who had not yet completed compulsory military service worked in mines, on construction sites, and in logging forests.³⁹ Former monastery buildings were transformed into prisons, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, boarding schools, and youth homes. Some works of art stored in monasteries were donated to museums; others were lost or stolen.⁴⁰ The monks were subjected to a biased media campaign that presented them as a pathological group with ties to Western countries. Monasteries were portrayed as places of laziness where opponents of the socialist state hid.⁴¹ As part of their military service, the monks, who were soon joined by seminarians, were politically persecuted.

From July to September 1950, under Operation “R” (rehoňníčky, i.e., nuns), all existing women’s orders received similar treatment. Only allowed to take essential personal items with them, the nuns were transported to collective monasteries, where they had to continue working in a hostile environment. Most of their buildings continued to serve the needs of society as hospitals, sanatoriums, or retirement homes. The lack of nuns brought negative reactions in hospitals and hospices. Nuns were valued for their dedication; they were employed in difficult areas of health care, such as hospitals for the disabled. Henceforth, they worked in factories and on state farms, where, regardless of their age, they were subjected to hard physical labour. Contrary to the authorities’ expectations, they did not abandon their monastic habits, which, especially now, were a sign of their faith in an atheistic society.⁴² Small groups of women were secretly formed, and in their free

38 V. Vlček, *Neumlčená. Kronika katolické církve v Československu po druhé světové válce*, vol. 2, Praha 1990, pp. 164–165.

39 J. Rybář, *I ricordi di un gesuita affascinato dalla sua Chiesa*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, p. 268.

40 K. Kaplan, J. Váchová, *Akce K – likvidace klášterů v roce 1950. Dokumenty a přehledy., Dokumenty o perzekuci a odporu sv. 4 a sv. 6*, vol. 6, Brno 1994, pp. 101–105

41 J. Mikrut, *La Chiesa cattolica...*, p. 116.

42 A.R. Češíková, *Gli ordini religiosi femminili. Vojtěcha Hasmandová*, in: J. Mikrut (ed.), *Testimoni della fede...*, p. 288.

time, they met to talk and pray together. However, a return to previously known forms of common religious life was impossible until the fall of communism.⁴³

3.3. Obstacles to the education of clergy in Czech seminaries

On July 14, 1950, the Ministry of Education issued a decree reorganizing seminaries and theological studies. The closure of seven theological seminaries was one of the most painful measures. The Higher Education Act No. 58/1950 provided for candidates for the priesthood from Bohemia and Moravia to have one seminary in Litoměřice, access to which depended on the consent of the authorities.⁴⁴ The study program was adopted not by the church authorities, but by the State Office for Cult, which decided on the formalities related to the admission of candidates. The new priests were dependent on state power. Some of them, unfortunately, were involved in the state organization of priests. Each year, 20 candidates could be admitted to the seminary. Lectures also included Marxist philosophy and the socialist theory of society. The class schedule included a daily 10-minute discussion on current topics in the communist press and three talks each week on other political matters. All seminarians had to belong to the Union of Czechoslovak Youth and the Society of Friends of the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ In the seminary, priests loyal to the system were presented to seminarians as role models for what the state expected from them. Each seminarian had to know the line that could not be crossed; then, they could begin to cooperate with the regime. This was openly proposed to them by their professors and tutors. On this subject, we have the interesting account of Cardinal Miroslav Vlk, who graduated from such a communist seminary.⁴⁶

At that time, some young men outside the official seminary were secretly preparing for priestly ordination in various places, studying under the supervision of trusted priests with good theological knowledge. For example, Tomáš Halík was secretly ordained on October 21, 1978, in Erfurt by the Bishop of Berlin, Hugo Aufderbeck (1909–1981). This was during a tourist trip to the DDR, which citizens of the Eastern Bloc countries were allowed to visit. After his ordination, Halík took part in pastoral work in illegal church structures, no one he knew, not

43 J. Pešek, M. Barnovský, *Pod kuratelou moci. Cirkvi na Slovensku v rokoch 1953–1970*, Bratislava 1999, p. 264.

44 V. Vaško, *Dům na skále*, vol. 2: *Církev bojující 1950 – květen 1960*, Kostelní Vydří 2007, p. 227.

45 V. Vaško, *Dům na skále*, vol. 3: *Církev vězněná 1950–1960*, Kostelní Vydří 2008, pp. 15–21.

46 A. Bourde, *Miloslav Vlk a Praga un lavavetri diventa arcivescovo*, Roma 1995, pp. 36–37.

even his mother, was aware that he was a priest. Meanwhile, he worked with drug addicts in a state-owned centre as a psychotherapist.⁴⁷

Most priestly ordinations for candidates from the CSSR were performed by Polish bishops. This happened as part of previously planned and prepared top-secret ceremonies during tourist trips to Poland. In total, between 1958 and 1989, Polish bishops secretly ordained at least 53 priests from Czechoslovakia: 48 Slovaks and 5 Czechs. The vast majority were representatives of religious congregations, primarily Salesians, Capuchins, Verbists, and Jesuits. The most intense period was 1976–1981, when as many as 26 priests from the CSSR were ordained in Poland. These numbers are certainly incomplete, since ordinations took place in secret, in the presence of only the very few necessary witnesses. Hence, few documents survived.⁴⁸

3.4. Secular ceremonies

So-called works useful to society were occasionally organized by communist party activists, usually on Sundays, when masses were celebrated in churches. The purpose of such community service was to mobilize the community to work together rather than participate in religious ceremonies. In accordance with communist ideology, religious celebrations were to be replaced by similar celebrations of a completely secular nature. For this purpose, secular funeral ceremonies were introduced in cemeteries, during which a government official delivered propaganda speeches emphasizing the importance of socialist values for society.

Secular civil marriage ceremonies, previously little known in the CSSR, now took a form similar to religious ceremonies in churches. They took place in town halls or registry offices, where the newlyweds were ceremonially received by the registry official, and even sat in front of a table resembling a church altar. Speeches emphasized the importance of the family for the socialist state. A religious wedding in a church could only take place at the express request of the family, and only after a prior secular ceremony at the registry office. Religious education could, in theory, be conducted in schools from the second to the seventh grade at

⁴⁷ T. Halík, *All meine Wege sind DIR vertraut. Von der Untergrundkirche ins Labyrinth der Freiheit*, Freiburg 2014, p. 117; E. Vybíralová, *Geheime Weihen in der DDR. Zur Geschichte der geheimen Weihen für die Untergrundkirche in der Tschechoslowakei durch deutsche Bischöfe in der Zeit der kommunistischen Diktatur*, “Jahrbuch für mitteldeutsche Ordens- und Kirchengeschichte” 11 (2015), pp. 159–203.

⁴⁸ M. Szumiło, *Tajne święcenia słowackich i czeskich księży w Polsce (1958–1989)*, “Saeculum Christianum” 28 (2021), pp. 208–209; E. Vybíralová, *Tajná svěcení kandidátů z Československa v Polsku*, in: *Skryté působení církvi na Slovensku v letech 1948–1989*, Bratislava 2018, pp. 274–279.

the written request of parents. However, parents knew that there would be negative consequences for them from school officials, since participating in religious classes was tantamount to rejecting socialist values. Registration for religious classes was made by both parents with the school principal between September 3 and 10. Very few clergy were allowed to teach religion at school; lessons consisted of one hour a week at the end of school hours. The list of people registered for religious classes was forwarded by schools to the administrative authorities. For this reason, the number of students enrolled in religious education classes decreased every year. Parents feared difficulties in the workplace and unpleasantness for their children.⁴⁹

4. The tragic fate of the church hierarchy

4.1. Cardinal Josef Beran, Archbishop of Prague

After the destruction of the orders, it was time to break up the church hierarchy. The Archbishop of Prague was an important voice in public discussion. His achievements in defending society during the war were known, as was his internment in the Dachau concentration camp in 1942–1945, where he gained respect among his fellow prisoners.⁵⁰ On November 4, 1946, he was appointed Archbishop of Prague. Initially, he advocated negotiations with the communists in the hope of better cooperation between the state and the Church. For this purpose, in 1948, the CSSR bishops signed a memorandum with the government. However, after taking power on their own, the communists eliminated their political rivals. Clergy and believers who protested against anti-church policies were repressed. In November 1948, Catholic kindergartens were closed, and the following month, Catholic associations were dissolved. On March 22, 1949, the episcopal conference broke off further bilateral negotiations with the state. The situation was particularly difficult for priests who, due to numerous administrative restrictions, could only continue their pastoral work to a limited extent. Such an intense anti-church policy was previously unknown and caused uncertainty among both the church hierarchy and ordinary believers.

49 *Härtere Schläge. Partei und Staat verschärfen den Druck auf die Kirche. Gläubige werden wie Kriminelle behandelt*, "Der Spiegel" 8.1979, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/haertere-schlaege-a-60312db8-0002-0001-0000-000040351237>.

50 M. Propst, *Glaubenszeuge im KZ Dachau. Das Leben und Sterben des Pallottinerpaters Richard Henkes (1900–1945)*, Friedberg 2007, pp. 200–204, 213, 254; S. Vodičková, *Kardynał Josef Beran – dobry pasterz i patriota*, "Fides, Ratio et Patria. Studia Toruńskie" 2 (2015), p. 172.

For the Corpus Christi celebrations in 1951, Beran prepared a pastoral letter critical of the authorities, in which he informed the faithful about religious persecution in the CSSR and encouraged lay people to fight for the basic rights of believers. The service that day in Prague's cathedral was also attended by many security service agents and communist activists. During the archbishop's sermon, the communist activists began to boo and stamp their feet. The service was interrupted, and the archbishop was escorted from the altar to his residence. Catholic holidays were abolished as non-working days, and all diocesan bishops were interned. Many priests who defended their bishops and protested against restrictions on the right to religious freedom were removed from their parishes. From 1950 to 1963, Archbishop Beran lived under house arrest without a court sentence. He was not even allowed to have contact with his immediate family.⁵¹ The archbishop, as we know from his later stories, did not know where he was being held. He was not even allowed to read the communist press.

Vatican negotiations to release the archbishop took place in the spring of 1963. They were run by the papal envoy Agostino Casaroli (1914–1998). The agreement required Archbishop Beran to take the oath of allegiance to the CSSR authorities, which he refused to do in 1963 due to the then prevailing repression against the Church. He was released, but he was not allowed to return to Prague and take up pastoral activities. In the consistory of February 22, 1965, Paul VI appointed him a cardinal. The Pope mentioned the persecution of the Church, recalling the fate of Cardinal Beran and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Archbishop Cardinal Josyf Slipij.⁵² Beran reluctantly accepted the offer to leave the country and go to Rome, where, in September, he delivered a speech on freedom of conscience, in which he encouraged an objective study of Jan Hus in order to avoid further divisions among Czech Christians. His statement at the Second Vatican Council on the importance of religious freedom was noteworthy. His activities abroad were closely monitored by the CSSR authorities, who, due to his statements, accused Vatican diplomats of failing to comply with the agreed conditions for his release from prison. Cardinal Beran died in Rome on May 17, 1969. Despite efforts, the CSSR authorities did not allow his funeral to take place in Prague. With the consent of Paul VI, he was buried in the basement of the Vatican Basilica; a great distinction, since this is a burial place reserved only for popes. In January 2018, due to the beatification process then taking place, his mortal remains were transported to Prague.

51 E. Hrabovec, *L'Ostpolitik vaticana e la Cecoslovacchia*, in: M. De Leonardis (ed.), *Fede e diplomazia: le relazioni internazionali della Santa Sede nell'età contemporanea*, Milano 2014, p. 338.

52 *Josef Cardinal Beran*, <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bberan.html> [accessed: 27.05.2024].

4.2. Štěpán Cardinal Trochta (1905–1974), SDB Ordinary of the diocese of Litoměřice

Štěpán Trochta, after studying theology in Turin, was ordained a priest there on June 22, 1932.⁵³ After returning to Czechoslovakia, he worked as a Salesian in the houses of his congregation. On June 1, 1942, he was arrested and taken to the Dachau concentration camp.⁵⁴ On September 27, 1947, at the age of 42, he was appointed ordinary of the diocese of Litoměřice.⁵⁵ In 1948–1949, he was the spokesman for the Czech bishops in negotiations with the communist authorities, and from 1949 he was under house arrest. In 1950–1953, he was interned at his residence. In 1950, he was forced by the state authorities to appoint Father Eduard Oliva, a loyal communist collaborator, “vicar general of the diocese of Litoměřice.” Oliva held this position until Trochta’s return from prison.⁵⁶ In 1954, Trochta was sentenced to 25 years for high treason and spying for the Vatican.⁵⁷ He was imprisoned in various prisons and labour camps, but was released in 1960. He worked as a labourer, retired in 1962, and lived in a state-owned social welfare home. Despite being watched by the security services, he secretly ordained several new priests.⁵⁸

On September 1, 1968, as part of the “Prague Spring,” Trochta returned to his diocese and again took up the office of bishop of Litoměřice. In a huge surprise for world public opinion, on April 28, 1969, he was appointed cardinal *in pectore* by Paul VI. This information was made public, however, only on March 5, 1973. The cardinal’s nomination was poorly received by the CSSR authorities because their discrimination against the Church was being revealed to the world.⁵⁹ Requiring eye surgery, Trochta stayed in a hospital in Prague, where, due to his heart problems, doctors were forced to give him only local anaesthesia. On April 5, 1974, he was visited at his residence by a religious official and a fierce opponent of religion, Karel Dlabal, who spent hours putting pressure on the ailing hierarch. Trochta, with

53 J. Tomeš (ed.), *Český biografický slovník XX. Století*, vol. 3: Q–Ž, Praha 1999, p. 375.

54 J. Hanuš, *Malý slovník osobností českého katolicismu 20. století s antologií textů*, Brno 2005, pp. 159–160.

55 *Štěpán Trochta*, <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/btrochta.html> [accessed: 26.05.2024].

56 Eduard Oliva (1905–1972) was ordained a priest on June 16, 1935, in Prague. In February 1948, he became a member of the Communist Party and a collaborator of the StB. From 1950 he was vicar general of the Litoměřice diocese. See J. Macek, *Biskupství litoměřické: biskupové a osudy litoměřické diecéze 1655–2005*, Kostelní Vydří 2005, p. 144.

57 V. Vaško, *Dům na skale...*, vol. 2, p. 324.

58 J. Bukovský, *Chiesa del martirio Chiesa della diplomazia. Memorie tra Cecoslovacchia e Vaticano*, Bologna 2009, p. 54.

59 V. Vaško, *Dům na skale...*, vol. 2, p. 326.

difficulty, retreated to his bedroom, where he lost consciousness the next morning. After his health improved temporarily, he was given the sacrament of the sick; he then died. He was 69 years old. Of his 42 years of priestly life, he spent 21 in prison.⁶⁰

The administrative authorities imposed stringent restrictions on the cardinal's funeral. Crowds of believers waited in front of the closed doors of the cathedral, but they were not allowed to participate in the funeral liturgy.⁶¹ Unexpectedly for the authorities, the funeral was attended by an international delegation of the Catholic hierarchy from the countries neighbouring the CSSR: Cardinal Karol Wojtyła from Krakow, Cardinal Franz König from Vienna, Cardinal Alfred Bengsch from Berlin, and bishops Hugo Aufderbeck from Erfurt and Gerhard Schaffran from Dresden. However, they were not allowed to concelebrate Holy Mass.⁶² Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who also wanted to come to the funeral and say goodbye to the heroic cardinal and witness of faith, did not receive an entry visa. Unusually, the funeral procession from the cathedral to the cemetery was banned by the police, for fear of possible protests from the attendees at the funeral ceremony. The Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Wojtyła, had sat in a pew together with other funeral participants who had managed to get inside the cathedral. In front of the grave, Wojtyła, to the astonishment of the police authorities, delivered a short, emotional speech about the life and bravery of the deceased cardinal, without receiving permission to do so.⁶³

4.3. The disintegration of the unity of the clergy

Before parliamentary elections on November 18, 1947, the bishops reminded the clergy of the ban on participating in political life.⁶⁴ This decision was published

60 Sulla figura di Štěpán Trochta si veda: E. Viganó, *Štěpán kardinál Trochta. Životopisná črta a výběr z proslovů a pastýřských listů*, Řím 1984; P. Morava, *Kardinal Stephan Trochta: eine Lebensgeschichte und eine Auswahl aus seinen Ansprachen und Hirtenbriefen*, Thaur/Tirol 1987; M. Báčová-Křížková, J. Korejs, *Kardinál Trochta, mučedník: Terežín, Mauthausen, Dachau*, Nové Město nad Metují 1992; J. Novosad, *Štěpán Trochta – Svědek "T"*, Praha 2001; J. Novosad, *Štěpán Trochta: svědek "T" a všední den – T: studie slov a činů Štěpána kardinála Trochty*, Francova Lhota 2005; J. Macek, *Biskupství litoměřické...*, pp. 128–143; J. Plachý, *Biskup Trochta v hodině velké zkoušky*, "Securitas Imperii" 11 (2005), pp. 129–134, J. Kučera (ed.), *Vyznavač a mučedník Štěpán Trochta*, Praha 2006; P. Koura, *Protinacistická odbojová činnost Štěpána Trochty*, in: P. Marek, J. Hanuš (eds.), *Osobnost v církvi a politice. Čeští a slovenští křesťané ve 20. Století*, Brno 2006, pp. 423–427.

61 S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev...*, p. 33.

62 J. Bukovsky, *Chiesa del martirio...*, p. 55.

63 G. Weigel, *Testimone della speranza. La vita di Giovanni Paolo II, protagonista del secolo*, Milano 1999, pp. 277–278.

64 J. Mikrut, *La Chiesa cattolica...*, p. 86.

on February 9, 1948; on May 3, the bishops added that any priest who stood as a candidate in parliamentary elections would be *ipso facto* suspended from his priestly duties. Some priests ignored this ban, among them Josef Plojhar (1902–1981), an active member of the Czechoslovak People’s Party.⁶⁵ In 1948, Archbishop Beran, therefore forbade Plojhar from performing priestly functions.⁶⁶ However, he continued his political activity. From 1948 to 1968, he served continuously as Minister of Health.⁶⁷ When, in 1956, the CSSR authorities wanted to release Archbishop Beran from prison, Plojhar used his political position to oppose this.

In June 1949, the government created the so-called “Catholic Action,” supported by clergy from the movement of patriotic priests. This organization was completely dependent on the state; its members had to promote a new political system that excluded the Catholic hierarchy. Priests and laypeople did not fully realize that the organization had been created to break the unity of the clergy and the faithful, and that it had nothing to do with the well-known early church organization of the same name. The bishops conveyed to Rome their concern for the unity of the Church, and the Holy See, in a decree of June 20, 1949, condemned Catholic Action. On July 1, 1949, the bishops published a Vatican document threatening excommunication and denial of the sacraments to anyone who propagated communism or collaborated with communists.⁶⁸ A group of priests then distanced themselves from the communist Catholic Action, which gained only scant support among lay people. The party leadership ended the activities of Catholic Action in the spring of 1950.

Groups of clergy in the CSSR cooperated with the authorities. These centred around Fr. Plojhar, who founded the Movement of Priests for Peace⁶⁹ on July 4–6, 1950, in Velehrad.⁷⁰ This organization’s goal was to work for “world peace.” An Italian communist newspaper wrote of Plojhar that, as a sincere and convinced friend of the USSR, he wanted to work with Czech communists to build a just society, free from exploitation and the tyranny of the rich. In 1966, the National Peace

65 *Československá strana lidová* ČSL.

66 Vodičková S., *Uzavírám vás do svého srdce: životopis Josefa kardinála Berana*, Brno 2009, p. 176.

67 S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev...*, pp. 21–22.

68 Text in: AAS 41 (1949), p. 333.

69 *Združenia katolíckych duchovných Pacem in Terris*.

70 See *Cecoslovacchia. Ulteriori sviluppi della persecuzione religiosa*, “La Civiltà Cattolica” 101 (1950), pp. 452–456; T. Klubert, 31. August 1971. *Ustanovujúca schôdza Združenia katolíckych duchovných Pacem in Terris*, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/31-august-1971-ustanovujuca-schodza-zdruzenia-katolickych-duchovnych-pacem-in-terris> [accessed: 26.05.2024].

Committee of the Catholic Clergy (NPCCC)⁷¹ was renamed the Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy (PMCC)⁷². In November 1981, Plojhar died of a heart attack at a party celebrating the October Revolution at the Soviet embassy in Prague – a symbol of the country which, as the Italian newspaper had emphasized, he loved and respected very much.⁷³ In their magazine, *Duchovní pastýř*, priests from this organization advocated the collectivization of agriculture. They emphasized that there was no discrepancy between the Catholic religion and the collective work system, and that Christianity and communism were not mutually exclusive.⁷⁴

After the political changes of 1968, a new organization for priests was created in Czechoslovakia, taking its name from *Pacem in Terris*, an encyclical of Pope John XIII.⁷⁵ The founding meetings of the Association of Catholic Clergy *Pacem in Terris* (ACC PIT)⁷⁶ took place on August 31, 1971, simultaneously in Prague and Bratislava. The chairman of the Czech part of the organization in 1971–1973 was the capitular vicar of the Archdiocese of Olomouc, Josef Vrana (1905–1987);⁷⁷ his Slovak counterpart was Mikuláš Višňovský, dean of the Faculty of Theology in Bratislava. Priests were recruited to join ACC PIT by the StB,⁷⁸ which prepared lists of priests for religious offices.⁷⁹ Members reported on the mood among the clergy and provided information about underground church structures. Ultimately, the association was banned by the Holy See on March 8, 1982, by the decree *Quidam Episcopi*.⁸⁰ However, it was not until December 7, 1989, that its activities were formally ended.⁸¹

71 *Celoštátny mierový výbor katolíckeho duchovenstva* (CMVKD).

72 *Mierové hnutie katolíckeho duchovenstva* (MHKD).

73 L. Baldelli, *L'abate Plojhar: l'uomo che unì crocefisso, falce e martello, Noi comunisti*, <https://noicomunisti.wordpress.com/2017/07/12/labate-plojhar-luomo-che-uni-crocefisso-falce-e-martello> [accessed: 26.05.2024].

74 V. Vaško, *Dům na skale...*, vol. 2, p. 370.

75 "Herderkorrespondenz" 3 (1949/50), p. 443.

76 *Združenia katolíckych duchovných Pacem in terris* (ZKD PIT).

77 Bishop Josef Vrana was the apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Olomouc from 1973 to 1987. He was a loyal collaborator of the communist regime.

78 *Státní bezpečnost* (StB) was established on June 30, 1945.

79 A. Grajewski, *Kompleks Judasza. Kościół zraniony. Chrześcijananie w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej między oporem a kolaboracją*, Poznań 1999, p. 34.

80 AAS 74 (1982), pp. 642–645.

81 T. Klubert, *31. august 1971. Ustanovujúca schôdza Združenia katolíckych duchovných Pacem in Terris*, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/31-august-1971-ustanovujuca-schodza-zdruzenia-katolic-nych-duchovnych-pacem-in-terris> [accessed: 26.05.2024].

Conclusions

Diplomatic cooperation between the Vatican and Czechoslovakia was interrupted after the expulsion of Vatican diplomats from Prague in 1949. In Bohemia and Moravia, an unprecedentedly ruthless persecution of representatives of the Catholic Church then began. By 1961, due to repression, every bishop in Bohemia and Moravia had been arrested; none of them had the required state permit for pastoral activities. In Slovakia, only bishops Ambròz Lazík and Josef Čarský remained free. Throughout the entire period of communism, there was one catechism textbook in force, and a priest could not have a pre-wedding interview or conduct a pre-marital course without the consent of the church affairs office. The aim of the illegally operating Church, independent of the communist authorities, was to build Catholic elites of lay people through meetings, lectures, and popularizing religious materials smuggled from abroad in closed circles. Candidates for the priesthood had almost no opportunities to achieve their goals. In the seminaries that existed, the professors and educators were clergy loyal to the authorities. Priests secretly ordained abroad could only operate in the illegal church. As the authorities expected, decades of ideological pressures and persecution of religions and believers soon resulted in a decline in religious practices. The church communities that were eventually restored were very different from those that had existed before the communist persecution.

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THE FIRST STAGE OF THE COMMUNIST STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, 1945–1956: THE TRAGIC FATE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

Summary

After the end of World War II, Czechoslovakia became a communist state. Until 1948, the country still enjoyed relative peace. After the communist coup in February 1948, all areas of social life were permeated by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The Catholic Church and other smaller Christian communities became enemies of the ideological state. In Slovakia, the Catholic Church was more numerous and had a strong tradition; in Bohemia, it had a more complicated history due to the Hussite Wars, the influence of the Lutheran Reformation, and the Thirty Years' War. After 1918, the Czechoslovak state had been built in opposition to Catholicism according to the slogan, “Down with Rome! Down with Vienna!” From 1948, the communist authorities sought to extinguish all religious activities: educational activities, monastic life, and charitable activities were banned. Research on this period is still quite difficult because religious activists were forced to hide their bravery. This article uses international

literature on the subject to present the first stage of the fight against religion and the tragic fate of the Catholic Church hierarchy.

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church, communist regime, anti-church policy of the USSR

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