

Pehr, Michal: Katolická církev v Československu 1945-1948. Katolíci mezi nacismem a komunismem: Lenin, či Kristus? [The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1945-1948. Catholics between Nazism and Communism: Lenin or Christ?].

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The Catholic Church in immediate postwar Czechoslovakia was at a crossroads. Like the rest of society, it felt the need for change, but its representatives were wary of perceived radicalism. How did the Church operate after the defeat of Nazism? What was its standing within Czechoslovak society, and what was its relationship to socialism and the Communist Party? These are some of the questions that historian Michal Pehr explores in his new monograph.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia is a well-established topic of research in the field of Czech historiography. Its specificity lies in the fact that for many years, its authors and readers were exclusively Catholic themselves.¹ Although Michal Pehr is keenly aware of this phenomenon (p. 17), his new monograph – by far the most thorough depiction of the Catholic Church during the Third Czechoslovak Republic (1945-1948) – will most likely not break this tendency.

The focal point of the author's investigation is the role of the Church during the three years following the war. What was expected of it, and did it have the opportunity to influence – or perhaps even reverse – contemporary developments (p. 12)? By employing a chronological framework and focusing on a selected sample of topics, Pehr endeavours to answer these questions for the period under scrutiny (p. 18, footnote 43). The thematic clusters cover diverse subjects such as the Church's stance during the occupation, its interactions with the Czech Germans, the activity of Catholic media, manifestations of political Catholicism, and the Church's relationship with the Holy See, among others. While certain topics like the events of February 1948 appear as obvious choices, the absence of an explicit rationale behind the selection may prompt readers to question the inclusion or exclusion of certain subjects.

The author's primary intent is to examine the "renaissance" of Catholic life by painting a vivid and compelling image of a vibrant and intellectually stimulating community during the immediate postwar period. He emphasizes that – contrary to later notions of an "atheist country" – the majority of the populace (not just in the Slovak region) was exposed to religiosity in some form or another. Nevertheless, the era was not devoid of conflicts: Despite recognizing the need to adapt, the Church struggled to find its footing within the socialist-leaning framework of the people's democracy. Pehr concludes that amidst these times of profound political upheaval, "the role of the Church has become increasingly important in defending the nation, freedoms and the natural rights of man, and it has become an ally of democratic forces in the rise of totalitarian regimes" (p. 449). However, his narrative does not

¹ *Gjuričová, Adéla: Třikrát o českém katolicismu a katolické církvi [Three times about Czech Catholicism and the Catholic Church]. In: Soudobé dějiny 15 (2008) 3-4, 729-735.*

address the apparent failure of these efforts in light of the communist takeover of 1948.

Compared to previous research, Pehr takes into account a highly varied source base. Particularly impressive is his utilization of a large number of both state and Church archives, thereby setting a high standard for future inquiries into Catholicism-related topics. Furthermore, despite his primary focus on the Czech lands, he avoids the common oversight in Czech historiography of neglecting the Slovak perspective. This inclusion enriches the narrative, leading to a particularly compelling section of the book that delves into the intricate relationship between Czech and Slovak Catholics.

The majority of the book is dedicated to exploring the hierarchy of the Czech Catholic Church as well as its priests and a select few intellectuals, thereby essentially focusing on the elites within the Church. Everyone else seems notably absent, however: With few exceptions, the laity comprising the vast majority of the Church plays almost no role in the narrative. Questions regarding the conflicts, aspirations, identities, alliances, and other aspects of this group remain unanswered. While the promising subtitle “Lenin or Christ?” hints at ideological struggles, the author primarily engages with abstract levels of thought rather than delving into the everyday challenges faced by ordinary Catholics.

It must be noted that this primary focus on elites and elite discourses is entirely legitimate; since Pehr’s decision to follow this route is only implicit and remains unexplained, however, we may question whether it tells the whole story. In his narrative of the struggle between communism and Catholicism, Christ consistently emerges victorious, and any real consensus with the communists is not possible. In the minds of Church elites – with the exception of a few individuals – Lenin never stood a chance, and only the political upheaval of 1948 favoured him or Stalin (p. 451). But zooming out from the Church elites and looking at the masses of Catholics voting for and joining the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, I believe there is also another perspective that the author leaves largely untouched.²

The text is well written and refrains from using unnecessary jargon commonly found in academic discourse. I particularly value the comprehensive nature of the citation apparatus, which allows readers to access a vast array of quotes from primary sources. This feature makes it an invaluable resource for historians interested in following the author’s research. However, I am uncertain whether non-academic readers will share the same sentiment. The frequent appearance of citations, often appearing in a 50-50 ratio with the main text on the book’s pages, may potentially detract from a fluent reading experience.

² In 1953, 63.9% of the members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia were Catholic, which the Party leadership deemed quite problematic. See *Matějka, Ondřej*: “Správný komunista má také být správným křesťanem, jako byli křesťané první”. Vztah československých evangeliků ke komunistické straně Československa 1921-1970 [“A true Communist should also be a true Christian, as the first Christians were”. The relationship between Czechoslovak Evangelicals and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1921-1970]. In: *Kalous, Jan/Kocian, Jiří* (eds.): *Český a slovenský komunismus (1921-2011)* [Czech and Slovak Communism (1921-2011)]. Praha 2012, 284-296.

For readers interested in the history of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, this book will undoubtedly prove to be a valuable addition to their library. For those seeking insight into the broader history of the Third Czechoslovak Republic, it presents a more complex scenario. While the monograph contributes significantly to debates surrounding the nature of the postwar era and sheds light on an important yet often overlooked group, it requires readers to make connections to the larger issues themselves.³ In essence, while we gain a detailed understanding of how the Catholic Church operated from 1945 to 1948, the broader implications of the history of Catholics for understanding the Third Czechoslovak Republic as a whole remain vague at best.

The book offers a comprehensive description of crucial events and the intellectual underpinnings of Roman Catholic elite in Czechoslovakia, making it a meaningful contribution to Czech historiography. Unfortunately, as noted before, I do not think it will capture the interest of a broader non-Catholic academic audience. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that Pehr's inquiry will serve as a significant stepping stone in the ongoing efforts to integrate research on the Catholic Church into mainstream Czech historiography.

Tübingen

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³ For instance, Bradley Abrams' highly recognized work on Czechoslovakia after World War II, which specifically addresses Catholics in this context, is conspicuously absent from Pehr's text. *Abrams, Bradley: The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism.* Lanham/Maryland 2004.