

Comment

I was distressed to read in *Religion in Communist Lands* what seems to me a very biased and distorted account of the big gathering in Velehrad on 7 July, which I attended. I did not go officially, but just hired a car (with four others) in Prague and drove there and back. We were within a few yards of the raised platform (just visible on the picture in *RCL*) from about 5 a.m. until almost noon, so were in a good position to witness the event. I have written a brief description in my report in the current *END Churches Register (European Nuclear Disarmament)* What worries me about the *RCL* version of events is the way both accounts set out to present the occasion as more political than in fact it was. I wonder why they found it necessary to do this, and what purpose is served by such a one-sided presentation. The *samizdat* report is the more faithful, but uses familiar (BBC-type) techniques to colour the facts, e.g.

straight

“The crowd was very self-restrained”

(As one of them, I agree!)

“a less than prominent police presence” (agreed)

slanted

“it enjoyed a relative impunity because of its size”

“the crown retorted” (this over-dramatises what actually happened)

“completely silenced by the people”

“He was often interrupted during his ideological speech”

“His (Filaret’s) speech was free of obligatory references . . .”

“it was forgotten that he represented . . .”

(by whom?)

etc. etc.

Obviously, not being fluent in Czech I cannot comment in detail on what people said. We were helped by two girls who had some English, and told us what was going on as far as they could, but they couldn’t translate everything. Nevertheless, to me this is a very slanted report, even to the extent of being dishonest. The tone of it suggests that the crowd were far more overtly political than in fact they were. The overriding impression I and my companions (none of them naive) got was of a deeply religious occasion, accompanied by a politely resigned attitude to

the somewhat crude propagandising. Filaret “attracted particular attention” because he concentrated on the event’s religious significance, which was a relief after the irrelevancies of Klusák.

The other report, from the Charta priest, is even more distorted, perhaps because the American journalist made it clear that he wanted an “anti-establishment” view to retail to his audience back home. Having said that the event “would have been impossible thirty years ago” the priest hastens to prevent us from drawing the “wrong” conclusions. His picture of the crowd hissing and booing just was not borne out by my experience. There were some hisses, and some calling out, but as I said before the compelling sense of being at a religious event was far more central. How did the priest know “Klusák was furious!” I wonder? This witness contradicts the other by saying “There were many police — often with dogs.” The police we saw (and there were nothing like as many as I’ve seen at CND demos) were quiet, helpful (over parking, etc.) and apparently sympathetic. I saw no dogs. The blocking of traffic was *not* to make people “walk unnecessarily far”, but to make it possible for the shuttle service of buses carrying people to the basilica to get through easily. The witness doesn’t mention these. I have walked further at demonstrations in this country, and felt more police harassment as well. “Despite all this” — all what? Most of it is a conflation of isolated events, as far as I can tell.

I am a relative greenhorn in East European matters. However, I do think that to assume *a priori* that no progress can be made in East-West reconciliation within the existing power-structures is unnecessarily pessimistic; moreover, such assumptions run the risk of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. One can then have the hollow satisfaction of saying “I told you so”, but this does not actually advance what I assume we are all working for, i.e. greater freedom for Christians to practise their faith, both in East and West Europe.

I am aware of the suspicion and hostility with which the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) is viewed by many in the West, and have some grasp of why this is so. As you may know, CPC people were very suspicious of the Seminar*, and at one point did their best to prevent it from taking place. I think it was on the whole a good thing that in the event so many CPC people became involved in it. I think it would be foolish to assume that there is no potential for change or growth in the organisation. One feature of it that has become very clear to me is its diversity, even within East Europe. For instance, in GDR there are some very lively young people in the CPC who are every bit as critical of the hard-liners in their own organisation as we are. I talked with one such group from Jena, who have excellent links with a Dutch group, are doing really good work and

*An international meeting held in Budapest in September 1984 with the title “Towards a theology of peace”. There were about 100 participants from 30 countries.

greatly resent the activities of some émigrés from their own town who have been taken up by West German “peace” activists. They have included END in their strictures, of course, and I think we have sometimes been too ready to listen to voices like Roland Jahn’s* in preference to — and sometimes to the exclusion of — others more prepared to work within the limitations of their own society.

I do not accept “the CPC line” — if there can be said to be such a thing — uncritically. I shall nevertheless be going to their get-together in Essex Hall tomorrow to consider the pros and cons of the Prague Assembly last July. By the way, I wonder what authority the report you printed had for saying “It was forgotten that he (i.e. Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk) represented the delegation of the Prague Christian Peace Conference, organised by the regime to coincide with the Velehrad festivities.” (p. 263). No-one can have “forgotten” it, with a large and obvious platform presence from the CPC Assembly, including the British regional President, Bishop Michael Hare Duke, and Bishop Tóth. I should personally be surprised if the coincidence of dates had any great significance, but if it did one could equally interpret it as affording an opportunity for those attending the CPC event to go also to Velehrad, as the delegation did. There are two sides to most coins of this sort. I don’t believe that the CPC can be said to be “organised by the regime”, except in the sense that the C. of E. is “organised by the regime” here, *mutatis mutandis*.

STEPHEN TUNNICLIFFE

Stephen Tunncliffe describes the report published in *Religion in Communist Lands* (Vol. 13, No. 3) on the Methodian anniversary celebrations held at Velehrad, Czechoslovakia, on 7 July 1985 as a “distressing”, “slanted” and even “dishonest” account of the events as he witnessed them. The report seems to him “a conflation of isolated events”, being clearly politicised (read “anti-communist”) and *a priori* pessimistic for, as he says, “it assumes that no progress can be made in East-West reconciliation.”

Our report was, I hope, a very fair summary of *samizdat* accounts, the language used being that of *samizdat* writers who were themselves part of the crowd. I have personally checked every word used to make sure that we faithfully represented the Czech and Slovak Christians’ point of view. This is our brief and our duty; to lend them a voice which they are denied in their own country.

The impressions conveyed by these *samizdat* sources have been confirmed by a further half-dozen accounts of the event which we have received since publishing our report. These sources depict an extraordinary fête, and give an even bleaker picture of the lengths to

* An artist from Jena who was deported to the Federal Republic in 1984.

which the authorities were prepared to go to “neutralise” the impact of such a large religious gathering on an outwardly secular society. We know that cars on the way to Velehrad were stopped and checked as far away as 150km. The Czech travel agency accepted bookings for Velehrad and then cancelled coaches the night before the event. Trains were stopped or diverted. Mr Tunncliffe saw few police, and says that their presence was less prominent than at many western demonstrations. What he may not have realised is that the 10,000 policemen (everything gets leaked nowadays) who were on duty for the event were mostly in plain clothes. Hundreds of them were in fact recognised, however, by members of the Christian community who were present, and know their interrogators’ faces.

In spite of the disincentives, a crowd totalling between 200,000 and 250,000 gathered and, for the first time in the history of communist Czechoslovakia, enjoyed a relative impunity. This was why, for the first time since the Soviet invasion of 1968, a communist official, the minister for culture, was publicly booed and hissed. Mr Tunncliffe is right when he says that his challenge was trifling in scale and that it did not mar the religious nature of the occasion. The incident was trifling by western standards, but by the standards of a community where Christians live in “apartheid” it was extraordinary. It revealed publicly the strength of the Christian revival in the country and by the same token, showed that it is the communists who, in spite of their present monopoly of power, are living on borrowed time. The problem Mr Tunncliffe faces is one which confronts many genuine and sincere western travellers: seeing is not always believing in the East European context. The only way towards understanding is to step down from the platform of western presuppositions and to share in the sufferings and tribulations of local Christians.

In one thing, however, Mr Tunncliffe is right. The East European Christians are political pessimists. They see no signs that their communist oppressors are any more willing to see genuine progress in East-West reconciliation than they are willing to make concessions towards their subjects. The open air mass at Velehrad was followed by a wave of persecution: so far several hundred people have been interrogated and two Slovak priests have lost their licences for taking young people to Velehrad, while three activists remain imprisoned.

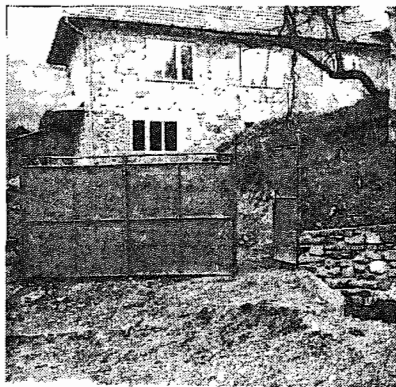
In the face of such facts — and they repeat themselves almost to the point of monotony over the whole period of communist rule anywhere in the world — I find only one thing somewhat strange. Why do Mr Tunncliffe and many others like him, whose sincerity and goodwill I do not doubt for a moment, challenge the oppressed instead of the oppressors? One day they may retort, *Cui bono?*



The Council of Baptist Prisoners' Relatives of the USSR. *Front row, left to right: Zinaida Vil'chinskaya, Alexandra Kozorezova, Serafima Yudintseva, Lyubov' Rumachik. Second row: Lidiya Kryuchkova, Vera Khoreva, Lyubov' Kostyuchenko, Galina Rytikova, Antonina Senkevich. Back row: Ulyana Germanyuk, Nina Skornyakova, Lidiya Bondar.* See Chronicle item on pp. 99-100. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)



Soviet Baptist Yakov Dirksen with his family; Dirksen died in labour camp on 2 June 1985. See article by Lawrence Klippenstein on pp. 17-32. (Photo courtesy of Keston College.)



The former Baptist church in Găujani, appropriated by the Romanian authorities for use as a nursery school. Over the gate the sign still reads “Maranata” (“He will come again”), while over the door the sign reads “Ministry of Education Nursery School, Găujani.”

Petre Popescu, builder and lay pastor of the Găujani Baptist church. See summaries of Romanian *samizdat* on pp. 87-88. (All photos courtesy Keston College.)

