

Chronicle

Czechoslovakia

The political events of last November in Czechoslovakia are generally described by western commentators as a revolution. Czechoslovaks use the same term, but are careful to modify it with the adjectives 'velvet', 'peaceful' or even 'tender'. Their reasoning is clear — revolutions are normally thought of as bloody, violent affairs; theirs, however, was dignified and bloodless, although sparked off by police brutality against student demonstrators. The 17 November demonstration was the catalyst, not the cause of the political changes. Long before there was talk of reform in the Soviet Union, forces for change were at work within Czechoslovak society. In a recent interview with Keston College, Dr Ján Carnogurský, a leading Slovak Catholic activist and now first deputy prime minister of the federal government, claimed that as early as 1948 these forces were at work. Given this, it seems more appropriate to speak of a gradual evolution than a revolution in Czechoslovak society. This chronicle will focus on the part played by the church and religious values in this evolution.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s there was no organised opposition to the communist regime, although a growing number of people, mostly intellectuals, resented the communist monopoly of power and restrictions

on individual liberty. While Christianity, with its emphasis on the worth of the individual offered an alternative set of values to Marxism, the church as an institution was so weakened by external pressure that it could scarcely defend its own rights, let alone those of the citizenry. By the late 1960s the church had adopted a gradual(ist) approach to dealings with the state, the aim being to secure as many concessions as possible through careful negotiation. For the Catholic Church at the time the aim was to build up its depleted hierarchy by appointing new bishops. Communication, rather than confrontation was the chosen method, Christian-Marxist dialogue one of the results. It was consistent with this policy that the churches should have welcomed Dubček's Communist Party Action Programme of May 1968. While it guaranteed greater civic freedom, the Programme intended to preserve the communist party's monopoly. But while gradual changes of the sort envisaged by Dubček may have been totally acceptable to most Czechoslovaks, believers included, in 1989 after four decades of communism, far more radical change was demanded. *Perestroika*, even had the Jakeš government pursued it seriously, was by now inadequate. Public confidence in communist rule

had collapsed, to be replaced by what Carnogurský described as a 'total conviction in all levels of society' that fundamental change was needed and had to be accomplished in as short a time as possible. The fact that religious believers shared this conviction indicates an evolution in their way of thinking: from seeking religious freedom within the existing political system, to a realisation that religious rights are indivisible from human rights and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, necessitated political change.

The origins of a church-based 'opposition' to totalitarian rule in Czechoslovakia can be traced back to the beginning of 'normalisation' in 1969. This period saw the gradual erosion of most of the freedoms the church had acquired in 1968. With the reinstatement of Karel Hruza as head of the state secretariat for church affairs, suffocating restrictions on the church were applied afresh. There was also a device to further weaken the Catholic church by provoking internal division — a state-sponsored peace association of Catholic clergy, *Pacem in Terris*. By 1974 four out of the five bishops supported *PiT*, and the institutional church was effectively in the hands of the state.

The inability of the church to act independently of the state in pursuing its purely religious activities led to the clandestine development of a parallel church. The movement began in Slovakia with the initiation by young intellectuals of church 'circles' or discussion groups. By the 1980s a strong underground church was at work throughout Czechoslovakia, operating with the knowledge and unspoken agreement of certain quarters of the 'official' church. Unlicensed clergy and members of the banned religious orders co-operated with lay people in providing theological education to child-

ren, staging retreats and theological seminars and carrying out charitable work. At the same time certain lay believers were also actively involved in the production of unofficial religious literature. The rise of samizdat in the early 1980s was a response by believers to a chronic shortage of good-quality officially produced religious literature, but it also fulfilled two main needs: it supplied reliable information on church events nationwide and worldwide and provided a forum for discussion within religious circles in Czechoslovakia of theological and moral issues. These two developments are significant not just because they propped up the institutional church and ensured the continuation of its work, but because they were instigated by the laity. Taken together they constituted a healthy sign of resistance to state intrusion in church life, and an assumption of responsibility for the church's future. The Catholic priest Václav Mály viewed the two developments as symptomatic of a change in the Catholic church's mentality, from a 'survival at all costs' mentality to a 'realisation of the need to revitalise, deepen and radiate our Christian values in society'. He goes on:

These purely religious events have an effect on society, even if they are often not perceived as political. They destroy uniformity, strengthen independent thought, defend fundamental rights . . . and create the framework for alternative attitudes towards a variety of human issues.

This change in mentality may not have been caused by, but is likely to have been influenced by the election of a Polish pope in 1978. As John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła brought to the Vatican a knowledge of the problems of life under communism. His experience led to a radical change in Vatican policy towards the socialist governments of eastern Europe —

there would be no more concessions. The new Pope gave a confidence-boost to Czechoslovakia's Catholic church and encouraged its aged leader, Cardinal Tomášek, to become more vocal in his defence of not only religious rights but human rights in general. Although he has remained committed to dialogue, the increasing regularity of Tomášek's statements in support of the beleaguered church and human rights has contributed to a change in the public perception of the Catholic church since the early 1980s. Under Tomášek's influence it has assumed the role of guardian of civil rights and has moved from a peripheral to a central role in society. Respect for Tomášek has grown apace, and he is now widely considered to be 'the second spokesman of the people', next to President Václav Havel.

The first public display of Catholic opposition to the regime was the Velehrad pilgrimage of 1985. At least 150,000 Catholics, Czechs and Slovaks, were present at this act of commemorating the 1100th anniversary of the death of St Methodius. For the first time members of the religious orders dared to appear in their habits, the crowds jeered at minister of culture Klusak and demanded religious rights. Velehrad is an important milestone in the church's recent evolution firstly because it revealed the inability of the communist government to understand the religious phenomenon (Klusak angered the crowds by failing to refer to Cyril and Methodius as saints) and secondly because it reflected a new unity within the church. This unity was most forcibly displayed three years later in the 31-point Catholic petition which 600,000 Czechs and Slovaks signed.

Religion and the personal role of Tomášek have played an important role in unifying the Czechs and Slovaks behind a common goal —

the creation of a free society. But unofficial civic groups in Czechoslovakia, many of which have a Christian involvement, have worked towards the same end. The common efforts of these groups over the past two decades created a feeling of solidarity between Czechs and Slovaks and culminated in the joint action last November of the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak Public Against Violence.

The first major civic initiative was the Charter '77 manifesto. Launched on 1 January 1977, the Charter gained a broadbase of support, its signatories including former communists, intellectuals, workers and members of the Catholic and Protestant churches. Because it managed to bring together representatives of so many different, often opposing, groups Charter '77 commanded the support and respect of many more than its 1,500 membership. Within the Charter movement the Christian wing played an increasingly important part. This was reflected in the tendency for one of the three annually-appointed spokespersons to be a Christian and in a rise in the number of Charter documents dealing with religious issues. Both Charter '77 and its off-shoot VONS, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, brought attention to bear on the lack of religious and civic freedom in Czechoslovakia and publicised individual cases of persecution. There can be little doubt that the publicity given to the arrests and imprisonment of prominent religious activists has advanced the cause of religion in Czechoslovakia. Erika Kadlecová, head of the state secretariat for church affairs during the Prague Spring, believes this publicity contributed to the rise of religion in the 1980s. She writes:

Harassment and sentencing of believers heightens peoples' awareness of their endeavours and

increases their prestige. This is a further, not insignificant impulse for the growth in interest in religion.

This growth in interest in religion during the 1980s, particularly evident amongst the young, intellectuals and city dwellers, may equally reflect a deepening disillusionment with the principles of Marxism-Leninism, and the search for a meaningful alternative ideology. In their search, many looked to Christianity because of its traditional importance both in Slovakia and the Czech lands. But they were also attracted by the moral values — respect for the weak and sick, willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, truth and justice — kept alive by the Christian community. Michaela Freiová, a Czech Catholic activist explains the emergence of religion in these terms:

The totalitarian system consciously and wilfully takes everything from man: it deprives him of God and history, of inherited values and cultural identity . . . freedom. After all this has been taken away there remains some space both in society and in every human soul. And it is this empty space which speaks about God to the young who have been born with their roots already cut off, with their relationships weakened, into the disturbed confusion of remnants and traces of values.

This spiritual vacuum undoubtedly led to a growing awareness in Czechoslovakia that society needed to be reconstructed and that the best basis for this was the Christianity on which European civilisation was built.

Bulgaria

The political demise of Todor Zhivkov on 10 November 1989 came suddenly. Within hours the former Foreign Minister Petur Mladenov had replaced him as leader of the Communist Party, received a congratulatory message from President Gorbachev and declared himself to be a radical reformer and a true partisan of democracy and freedom in Bulgaria. Before his accession, it was rumoured that Mladenov's exposure to constant criticism of Bulgarian policies at international meetings had so frustrated him that he had reached the point of resigning his ministerial post. Whatever his private feelings may have been,

however, he had shown few public signs of being out of step with the collective hard line followed by government colleagues during his eighteen years at the Foreign Ministry. At the time of writing, despite the fact that he has fostered a number of quite far-reaching reformist measures, he is regarded with some suspicion by a significant proportion of the country's population and some informed Bulgarian observers consider that his days may already be numbered.

Under Zhivkov, Bulgarian believers experienced severe restraints and hardships. Despite much lip-service paid to the concepts of