

The Uniate Churches in Czechoslovakia

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The position of the Uniate, or Eastern-rite Catholic, Church was among the issues which enjoyed a brief period of public discussion during the "Prague Spring" of 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The lifting of censorship under Dubcek was the only occasion when the Uniate question was raised in any East European country since the inauguration of the communist regimes.

Suppressed since 1950, the existence of the Czechoslovak¹ Uniate Church was renewed in 1968, and weathered the Soviet invasion to become perhaps the most remarkable surviving fruit of the suppressed democratic movement. In 1948 there was just one Uniate diocese, that of Presov in Slovakia. There were, however, 305,000 adherents massed in this one area, in contrast to the scattered and small Orthodox Church, numbering only 35,000 divided into three dioceses. On 28 April 1950 the union with Rome was abolished and all the Uniates of Czechoslovakia were declared Orthodox. With the outlawing of the Uniate Church, persecution of those who remained faithful to it began, but many continued to attend Latin-rite churches or to hold Uniate meetings in secret. After eighteen years of silence, in 1968 Slovak Uniates began to petition for the re-establishment of their Church. A number of former Uniate priests signed a six-point request for the restoration of privileges and complete freedom of belief. A flood of letters from believers and a debate on the issue in the press led to an official admission of the State's guilt.

The government permitted an open gathering of Uniate representatives to reconstitute their Church. 135 priests and 66 laymen met on 10 April at Kosice, and, in the prevailing mood in Czechoslovakia, were able to go ahead rapidly with their programme. Public opinion in the affected areas was on their side, and even some members of the Orthodox Church recognized the justice of their claims. The government intervened with the decision that each parish should hold an election to decide whether to remain Orthodox or to return to the Uniate Church. It was Gustav Husak, later the Party leader in Czechoslovakia, who approved this measure. There was to be a joint commission of State administrators and representatives of both the Orthodox and the Uniate Churches, whose duty would be to supervise the parish elections within six months. For

Orthodox officials it must have been galling indeed to witness such meetings as that at Circ (Presov Diocese), on 18 June 1968. 120 people attended, listened to a report on the situation, and then voted unanimously, with no abstentions, to return to the Uniate Church. This and many other parishes like it had been nominally Orthodox for a generation. Thus the Uniate Church was resurrected to a vigorous life, with thousands turning out to welcome returning clergy. The climax was reached in early July when Presov Cathedral and the important parish of Kosice were reclaimed.

In general the process of voting and handing over passed off peacefully except for a few incidents of violence on the part of both the Orthodox and the Uniates. The election process was to have been completed by 13 November 1968. In the chaos after the August invasion the democratic process was suspended in some places, although in others voting continued. An extension was granted and further voting took place in 1969. Of the 240 parishes 210 voted. Only five remained faithful to the Orthodox Church. In the 30 parishes where a vote could not be held, a sense of grievance remains and the matter cannot be considered closed. The joint commission was dissolved on 30 June 1969, with the statement that 200 parishes were "sufficient" for the Uniates. A final list of parishes was published by the commission: 205 parishes were attributed to the Uniates and 87 to the Orthodox, but the second figure is artificially inflated, for it presumably includes all Orthodox parishes in Czechoslovakia and not just those in the area where the voting took place.

Once the new regime under Husak was strong enough, it turned its attention to remaining pockets of liberal ideology. The Uniate Church was attacked in 1970 when a violent press campaign was organized against it. Instead of summary action, however, the State established a new joint commission which evolved the principle of "common usage" of churches between Orthodox and Uniates. Uniate clergy had to yield their previously-established right of sole usage of churches, because they were threatened with the closure of the premises if they did not comply. As far as is known, the new principle was adopted by 47 Uniate parishes and 15 Orthodox.

The Uniates were left with a Church spiritually strong, but physically handicapped. The Husak programme might have been expected to eliminate it altogether, had the "normalization" been as rigorously applied to the Church as to other sectors of public life. Yet by 1971 it had about 315,000 members, approximately 90 per cent of its 1948 total of 350,000. Only between ten and fifteen thousand had voluntarily remained Orthodox. Some declared themselves atheists as a result of various pressures

put upon them. The Uniates have not been able to make any provision for the training of clergy, although they can send students to Latin-rite seminaries. Nor have they been able to establish a printing press. But, these are two handicaps which they have in common, in one way or another, with many other Churches in Eastern Europe. Precedent suggests that such handicaps need not cripple the spiritual life of the Church.

Why was the Uniate Church in Czechoslovakia not liquidated for a second time? It is unlikely that we shall ever be able to provide a definite answer to this question. However, three reasons may be advanced and it is possible that all of them played some part. Firstly, though the Communist Party's policy continues to treat religion in a repressive way in the Soviet Union, it is probable that the extreme measures taken against the Church under Stalin – and even to some extent under Khrushchëv – will not be repeated, because they have been demonstrably counter-productive. It is of course conceivable that the Communist Party might once again try to liquidate a Church (after all the Chinese and the Albanians have done it very recently), but in the light of general present-day Kremlin policies it seems unlikely that in that particular sphere of influence the experiment will be repeated. Secondly, and most importantly, the return to the Uniate Church was so nearly unanimous, and had taken place on the crest of such a wave of feeling, that a rebuff to this by force of arms might well have led to some sort of physical resistance. Nowhere else in Czechoslovakia was there quite this combination of religion and nationalism, saltpetre and gunpowder in any situation of repression. However naked was the show of force in Czechoslovakia after 1968, it does seem that considerable steps were taken by the invaders to prevent any uprising. Thirdly, a second forced liquidation would have been a direct affront to the feelings of Catholics, both Latin and Eastern-rite, all over the world. For almost a decade the Soviet Union had been cultivating better relations with the Vatican and the millions of people under its influence all over the world. To have acted directly against the Uniates at this point would have risked setting at nought all that had been so carefully built up. The Vatican had already shown itself willing to keep silent on the sensitive Uniate issue, but it might not have continued to do so in the face of what would undoubtedly have been a series of the most urgent appeals from Eastern Slovakia.