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# **“To make use of the enormous positive and actual potential of the Hussite Movement.”: The role of the Bohemian Reformation in relations between the Czech Protestants and the Communist Regime\***

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Peter Morée (Prague)

In this article I will argue that the international interest, which the Bohemian Reformation attracts until today is, for a significant part, a result of an alliance between the communist regime and leading figures from Czech Protestant circles. As I will show, research on the Bohemian Reformation, especially in publications in foreign languages, was a part of the unwritten arrangement between the two sides, made in the 1950s, which secured survival for the Czech Protestants and legitimacy and propaganda for the communists.

## **The brochure *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today***

In 1954 a brochure was published in Prague in both English and German entitled “Czechoslovak Protestantism Today.” Most of the texts were written by Amedeo Molnár; Josef L. Hromádka wrote the introduction. It was the first publication from Czechoslovakia in foreign languages about Czechoslovak Protestantism since 1948. “I have tried in this booklet to outline briefly the development of the Reformation in Czechoslovakia, to describe how the various Protestant churches are living and working today and to give a résumé of the current activity of Czechoslovak theologians,” wrote Molnár, who at the time was assistant professor at the Comenius Evangelical Theological Faculty, in the Prefatory Note. What follows is at first sight a presentation of the non-Roman Catholic churches and their traditions, meant for an international audience interested in the ecumenical situation in Czechoslovakia. In and of itself such a presentation of the churches in Czechoslovakia was not unique or unusual. Already before the war publications about the ecumenical or religious map were published<sup>1</sup> or included in a broad survey of Protestant churches in Europe edited by the *homo ecumenicus* and peace campaigner

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Míla Liscová, *The Religious Situation in Czechoslovakia* (Prague, 1925).

Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze.<sup>2</sup> Also after the war Czech Protestants had published about their traditions, situation and views for an international audience. The most notable example from that period is a booklet about the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia after the war published on the occasion of the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948.<sup>3</sup> For a small community of Czech Protestants it was not unusual to write about themselves in foreign languages with the aim of gaining sympathy from friends in the ecumenical movement.

The brochure of 1954 has a simple structure. After a foreword by the systematic theologian J. L. Hromádka it offers an overview of the history of Christianity in Czechoslovakia, a brief description of the Protestant churches in the country and a chapter on the church press and Protestant theological faculties.

In his Foreword Hromádka positioned the Protestants in Czechoslovakia in the broader picture of Protestant traditions in the world. From the very outset he stressed the unique character of Czechoslovak Protestantism, which emerged a century before the German or Swiss Reformations.

Protestants in Czechoslovakia are vitally aware of their share in the heritage of the Reformation period. Their forefathers took part in all the struggles to place the Church once again on the ground of the Holy Scripture. One hundred years before the pronouncements of Luther and Zwingli, Czech theologians attempted to reform church order to make it accord with apostolic teaching.<sup>4</sup>

We can't leave unnoticed here, that Hromádka identified all Czechoslovak Protestants with the Bohemian Reformation. Consequently he narrowed Czechoslovak church history down to Czech church history. His unwritten assumption is that Slovak history does not have an independent place next to the church history of the Czech Lands, but instead he included the former in the latter. As such this can be seen as an example of a Czech colonialist approach to Slovak realities within the common state of which there were many similar examples in the political and academic realms of the time.

Hromádka underlined the biblical character of the Bohemian Reformation in its stress on the sole authority of Christ over the church and its allegiance to the Scriptures. "The Law of the Lord and His mercy in Jesus Christ were

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, *Ekklesia. Eine Sammlung von Selbstdarstellungen der christlichen Kirchen*, vv. 13 (Leipzig, 1935–1938). Each volume was divided into several fascicules. Volume 5 (*Die osteuropäischen Länder*) contained a section on the churches in Czechoslovakia (Twentieth instalment).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. František Bednář, *The Transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia from the Ideological and Ecclesiastical Standpoint* (Prague, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today*, 9.

the foundation for all their work.”<sup>5</sup> Because of this return to Scripture, the Czech Protestants could communicate with the Reformation of the sixteenth century on the principles of *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Gratia*. “Together with the men of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations, our forefathers waged a struggle against the tyranny of hierarchy, against the division of the Church into a church of teachers and a church of the taught.”<sup>6</sup>

Much of Hromádka’s introduction is a discussion of the unique character of the Bohemian Reformation and consequently of Czechoslovak Protestantism. He sees the specifics of it in the inherent ecumenicity as professed by the Unity of the Brethren, in its understanding of the authority of Christ, its practical nature concerning dogma and Christian life and its vision of the church as a congregation of pilgrims with an eschatological outlook. Because of its particular understanding of the unity of the church, the Unity of the Brethren was able to embrace other reformation traditions. It did not see itself as the one true church, but as a part of a wider fellowship of the church. Its natural inclination therefore was to look for unity between the several denominations of the Reformation.

Next, Hromádka highlighted the practical focus of the Bohemian Reformation which, according to him, was a result of the perception of faith as humility and service. The theologians of the Brethren were not interested in theological speculation, he wrote, but in the importance of dogmas for everyday life. Essentially, the scope of the Bohemian Reformation according to Hromádka was therefore on the relation between the Scriptures and the concrete situation of the believers.

From this principle point, Hromádka deduced his central hypothesis on the concept of the church in the Bohemian Reformation as a community of pilgrims.

The Reformation Churches of the time – and especially those which were most alive – existed nearly always *in provisorium*. They were never sure that shocks and storms might not come again and again in the near future. Therefore our churches were never able to develop into well-equipped, well-provided-for institutions. There was no time to acquire pomp and privilege. They were truly pilgrims on this earth. This also had unfavourable results for the faith and the life of many members of the church. But it was because of this very fact that our churches never became clerical or official institutions.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of his assurance at the beginning of the introduction that his aim was not to show a better character of the Czechoslovak Protestant tradition

<sup>5</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11.

compared to others Hromádka launched a harsh critique to the churches in the West at this point in his text. The churches that came out of the Reformations of Luther and Calvin lost their eschatological outlook, he said, and became a part of the establishment. “The perspective of the Kingdom of God, of its growth, struggle and final victory was lost in the petrified institutions of the church, theology and dogma.”<sup>8</sup>

In this section of the text there are some close parallels to a statement of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren from 1953 which was also aimed at the international ecumenical audience.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Hromádka was the text’s main author. The idea of a church of pilgrims in Czechoslovakia as opposed to an allegedly powerful, institutionalised church in the West became a central pillar of his theology of post-Constantinianism.<sup>10</sup>

The following citation from the Foreword makes clear what the importance of this pilgrims’ church was to Hromádka. Because of the alleged low grade of institutionalisation and of the roots in the Bohemian Reformation, the Czechoslovak churches were able to develop a positive relation to the revolutionary changes in the country under the leadership of the Communist Party.

The churches in Czechoslovakia today are in the midst of huge and revolutionary social events. They are aware of the fact that we are living on the dividing line of our age. This is no empty exaggeration. All the old order, international and political, social and economic, moral and ecclesiastical, has been shaken in its foundations.<sup>11</sup>

The church has to engage itself in the process, because it is an opportunity “to introduce into the new life the best heritage of the Reformation past, the most profound motifs of the message of the Prophets and Apostles.” It cannot withdraw itself from the “efforts of millions to create a better, a more just and freer social order.”<sup>12</sup> Hromádka expresses a certain understanding of those churches and theologians in the West who reject communism and the revolution in Eastern Europe as a godless development. It comes out of fear, which Christians in the East know as well, but has to be criticised as a weakness of faith. Here he repeated his analysis of the history of the first half of

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Morée, “Theology in the Struggle for Survival of the Church,” in: Július Filo, ed., *Christian World Community and the Cold War* (Bratislava, 2012) 297–317.

<sup>10</sup> Idem., “‘Unsere Kirchen sind die Verkörperung, ein Extrakt der Kleinbürgerlichkeit.’ Die politische Funktion der Idee vom Ende des konstantinischen Zeitalters in der tschechischen Theologie,” in: Klaus Fitschen, Siegfried Hermle, Katharina Kunter, Claudia Lepp and Antje Roggenkamp-Kaufmann, edd., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus. Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1960er und 70er Jahre*, (Göttingen, 2010) 302–325.

<sup>11</sup> *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.

the twentieth century in which liberal and conservative political forces were responsible for the collapse of democracy in the 1930s and the rise of Hitler's Germany. A new power from the East had to appear on the scene to bring the world to a new stage in history.<sup>13</sup>

But this much we can say, that we have been forced by circumstances to do what weakness of faith kept us from doing before: to free ourselves from the burden of dead tradition, from subjugation to the old order, from seeking only personal ease, from personal self-interest and from the temptation to mask the old barren way of life with a religious glitter and pious, sanctimonious declarations. This is a hard and painful process, because it means that one must wrestle with one's self, with one's habits and ways of ease, with the inclination to return to the old, accustomed ways of life. It is not easy to realise, that we are standing before the Lord's Judgement.<sup>14</sup>

In the final paragraph Hromádka once more returns to the role of the Bohemian Reformation in the stance of the Czech Protestants in the issues at stake in the world and in the ecumenical movement. The Reformation tradition prevents the Czech Protestants from sticking to the old order and rejecting the communist regime.

The churches in our country have a rich and inspiring ecumenical past. The co-operation in ecumenical endeavours has its basis in the living heritage of the Reformation in our country and in the desire for association with all congregations of believing Christians throughout the world. They do not want the ecumenical movement to maintain the churches as rigid institutions, do not want them to create a fortress against the profound changes which are going on in the world and to organise crusades against these changes.<sup>15</sup>

The message of Hromádka's introduction is that Czech Protestants, because of their roots and history do not find themselves in opposition to the new communist order but are actively, but not uncritically, engaged in the construction of a new, socialist society.

In the next section of the brochure Amedeo Molnár gives a brief historical survey of the Bohemian Reformation. Here he stresses the complete character of this Reformation which culminated in the *Unitas Fratrum*. The

<sup>13</sup> For this see also Hromádka's speech at the founding Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 "Our Responsibility in the Post-War World," in: *The Church and the International Disorder, An Ecumenical Study Prepared under the Auspices of the World Council of Churches* (London, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Unity was “the glorious echo of the Hussite Revolution,” but it denounced violence.<sup>16</sup> According to Molnár the Unity presented a radicalisation of the teachings of the Taborites, which was best shown in the ideas of the “profound thinker” Petr Chelčický.

Molnár’s presentation of the modern history of Protestantism on the territory of Czechoslovakia since the Patent of Toleration of 1781 copied essentially the communist propaganda concerning its policies to the churches. According to this, during the nineteenth century and even well into the twentieth, the non-Roman Catholic Churches had only been tolerated in Bohemia. Finally, with the communist constitution of 1948 and the church laws of 1949 equality and religious freedom was established and guaranteed legislatively and materially by the state.

The most extensive part of the brochure *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today* is a brief presentation of eight Protestant churches in Czechoslovakia, followed by a survey of the academic teaching and research performed by the theological faculties in Prague and Bratislava. The brochure concludes with a call to be faithful to peace as the answer to “the sinister forces of destruction and death.”<sup>17</sup>

As a presentation of the ecumenical situation in Czechoslovakia the brochure *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today* raises two questions. The first is about the origins of the concept or the construction of Czech(oslovak) Protestantism as a relevant force in society and in relation to the state because of the Bohemian Reformation. Secondly, we have to inquire about the context and aftermath, the *Wirkung* of the brochure. What was its role in the wider context of ecumenical relations during the Cold War?

### **The Bohemian Reformation as the Tradition of Czech Protestantism**

The contention that the Bohemian Reformation had to prove the validity and legitimacy of current developments in the political or ecclesiastical domains was not new. The search for the identity of the Czech Protestants – or the invention of their tradition, to follow Benedict Anderson – started in the nineteenth century with their emancipation from a position of a merely tolerated to an equally respected religious minority. Protestants were eager to stress their special place in the Czech nation by using their theological and historical roots which from the nineteenth century onwards were also identified as the roots of the modern Czech nation as such. The Protestants represented the best Czech national tradition because of their origins.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>18</sup> See Petr Pabian, “Inventing the Hussite Nation: Liberals, Catholics, and Protestants in Conflict over Czech National Identity,” BRRP 6 (2007) 275–282, and idem. “Czech Protestants and National Identity: Commemorating Jan Hus in 1869,” BRRP 7 (2009) 221–228.

The first time this argumentation was used in a substantial way was in 1863, when the first nationwide celebration of the Christianisation of Bohemia and Moravia by Cyril and Methodius took place. It prompted a leading pastor of the Czech (Calvinist) Protestants by the name of Heřman z Tardy to publish a collection of studies, treatises and poems related to the event.<sup>19</sup> The most important section in this publication was an introduction into the history of Czech Protestantism which, for the first time in the modern history of the Protestant minority brought a particular concept to their history: Czech Protestants as the true inheritors of the religious history of the country. For Heřman z Tardy, Cyril and Methodius received their fulfilment in the mission of Jan Hus and the Bohemian Reformation who, in turn, became the foundation for the Protestant church in nineteenth century Bohemia and Moravia.

A second occasion to establish a tradition of Czech Protestants as faithful members of the nation came in 1869 on the occasion of the first celebration of Jan Hus in modern history. The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hus's birth gave an impulse to the nationalist movement in Bohemia, and gave the Protestants a boost in terms of identity and public (or national) significance.

The weekly of the reformed wing of the Protestant church in Bohemia published a call for a Protestant celebration of the anniversary which was to take place in Čáslav on 6 July. A new church building was to be opened – a major event for the small Protestant minority. The statement in the journal of the Calvinist Protestants *Hlasy ze Siona* made connections between the national and the Protestant celebrations:

We would not be proper inheritors of the dying mother, the Unity of the Brethren, neither proper sons of the Czech fatherland at all, if we would not remember especially in those days, the man whom 500 years ago – on 6 July 1369 – God called to the light of life from a Czech mother and put him on Zion, to be a brave and faithful witness. [...] The grateful nation prepares itself to celebrate on 6 July of this year in a way worthy to this great man. For certain, let not the Reformed Church, gathered from the remains of the Unity of the Brethren, this faithful daughter of Hus, stay behind in our nation.<sup>20</sup>

The assertion is straight forward: Czech Protestants share their roots with the modern Czech nation. Both have Jan Hus and (a part of) the Bohemian Reformation as their birth place, and therefore the nation and the Protestant tradition belong to each other. Czech Protestants form the vanguard of the nation and therefore both are inseparably connected.

<sup>19</sup> J. Janata, V. Šubert and Heřman z Tardy, "Památka roku slavnostního 1863 tisícileté památky obracení národu českého na Moravě, Slovensku a v Čechách skrze Cyrila a Metoděje na křesťanství," [Memorial of the Festive Year 1863: a thousand year anniversary of the conversion of the Czech nation in Moravia, Slovakia, and Bohemia through Cyril and Methodius to Christianity] (Prague, 1864).

<sup>20</sup> *Hlasy ze Siona*, 13 (1 July 1869) 1. Author's translation.

On a more massive scale this construction was utilised in the years following the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic. Between the two world wars almost all synods of the main Protestant church in Czechoslovakia, the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (ECCB), repeatedly published statements that the Bohemian Reformation was the source of identity of both the Czech nation and of Czech Protestants.

To give an impression of that, we turn to the founding assembly of the ECCB of December 1918. The designated moderator of the church, Josef Souček said in the first speech at the gathering:

The fates of our nation and of our faith are so inseparably connected, that we always experience the same good and evil. With our fall and because of us falling, the fall of the nation occurred. Hussitism permeated the nation in such a way that only by the annihilation of Hussitism could the nation be annihilated. [...] The renewed Czech state means the overcoming of Bílá hora and its heirs; it is a continuation of the pre-White Mountain situation and of the Hussite state. It is the heir of the Bohemian Reformation just like our church. [...] Therefore our church is the national Czech church in the full sense of the word. Even if there are fewer of us, we are the national church, never the Roman Catholic Church. We are national because of our origin, our traditions, identical with the nation in our fates, humiliation and suffering, in our longings and spirit of freedom and equality.<sup>21</sup>

František Žilka, designated professor of theology at the Hus theological faculty, which would be founded the next year, made it into a matter of the creator. The nation, state and the Protestants are one under God and out of God's will: "If someone would ask: why are you Protestant? – I think we would simply answer: Because I am Czech! [...] And if someone would ask us: why are you Czech? – we would say: besides that God created us as Czechs, we are Czechs because our religion, our Protestantism does not give us other options."<sup>22</sup>

Hromadka in his identification of state affairs and the Bohemian Reformation did not have to invent new traditions. He applied a model available from the time before the Second World War to a new situation, obviously by suggesting a continuity of the periods before and after the war. The Bohemian Reformation had been the main source of argumentation for the Czech Protestants in their relation to the nation and the state before the war and so it was in the 1950s with the communist dictatorship ruling the country.

<sup>21</sup> "Ustavující generální sněm Českobratrské církve evangelické konaný v Praze 17. a 18. prosince 1918," [Constituent General Assembly of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, held in Prague on 17 and 18 December 1918] (Prague, 1918) 12–13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

## The communist regime's utilisation of the Protestants

However, the availability of the model of the relation of the Czech Protestants to the state does not explain what the role of the brochure *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today* was aimed to be. Why was it published in 1954 and what was the context of its appearance? In 1954 no officially printed publications could be produced without the knowledge and consent of the office of the censor.<sup>23</sup> The brochure was printed in the Central Church Publishing House which, contrary to the suggestion of its name, was not a church institution but a part of the state structures for the control of the churches (State Bureau for Church Affairs).

For the Comenius Faculty for Protestant Theology in Prague the practice of communist censorship had created serious trouble. In the years after the establishment of the communist dictatorship in 1948 the state authorities were very reluctant to allow studies of teachers of the faculty to be published. Church historians like Ferdinand Hrejsa or František M. Bartoš had to lobby for a long time until some of their work could finally be published.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes they were successful and saw their work being printed. In other cases the regime never allowed their books to be published. It didn't give its approval to print a book by J. L. Hromádka written in 1949 (most likely as a compilation of his lectures in Princeton during his exile in World War II, which the author saw as an important work) despite Hromádka's defence of communist rule within the Protestant churches themselves.<sup>25</sup>

The policy of the new regime after the communist take-over of February 1948 towards the churches did not take into consideration the character of the Protestant loyalty to the state. Instead, from internal policy documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from the late 1940s, we learn that the regime's preference was rather the Czechoslovak Church which was more reliable and could be used as an alternative to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> In spite of these reservations the ECCB decided to participate in the process of new church legislation, finalised in October 1949, which gave

<sup>23</sup> Karel Kaplan and Dušan Tomášek, "O cenzuře v Československu v letech 1945–1956" [On Censorship in Czechoslovakia in the Years 1945–1956] *Sešity Ústavu pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR*, (Prague, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Archive of the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, Letter of F. Hrejsa to J. L. Hromádka, 7 June 1949, asking for an intervention with the state authorities on behalf of Hrejsa, or the letter of F. M. Bartoš to J. L. Hromádka, 11 May 1960 about difficulties in printing his *Husitská revoluce*.

<sup>25</sup> National Archive, State Bureau for Church Affairs, box 2, sig. 47 – minutes of meetings, Minutes of 29 December 1949 and box 23, Minutes no. 42, meeting of 17 January 1950. Personal Archive of Hromádka, Letter of the Publishing House from October 1950.

<sup>26</sup> Jiří Piškula, 'Německá evangelická církev v Cechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku v letech 1945–1948: Boj o budoucnost církve či o její majetek?' [The German Evangelical Church in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia in 1945–1948: Fight for the future of the Church or her property?] *Cesta církve I* (Prague, 2009) 4–17.

shape to a strict control over the churches. Internally, the Czech Protestants were quite unhappy with the final result of the legislative process, especially because their main concerns were not reflected in the final text. At a synod of the ECCB in spring 1950, Hromádka indicated that in his opinion there was a fair chance that the church had to go into the catacombs, clandestinely, because it would suffer oppression. At the same time, in its public statements the church did not criticise the new laws, but remained loyal to the state under its communist leadership.

In the years between 1950 and 1953 Czech Protestants felt the severe restrictions of communist rule. Representatives of the ECCB could only rarely travel to ecumenical gatherings (including its high representatives like Hromádka) and new theological literature could be printed only occasionally. The church was isolated in both domestic and international fields. Hromádka himself could travel mainly in the framework of the World Peace Council, after he became a member of its board in late 1950.

This communist strategy of a general isolation of the Czech Protestants underwent a complex modification in late 1953 with the arrival of a new leadership in the so-called State Bureau for Church Affairs.<sup>27</sup> The overall aim of the revision was to get rid of unnecessary limitations of church life as they were potentially counterproductive to the regime itself. From now on a more sophisticated approach was to be applied based on the central question of whether the regime could profit from certain church activities. In other words, the aim of the revised church policy was to make optimal use of a certain potential of the churches to underpin the legitimacy of the regime. In this, the Bohemian Reformation had to play a key role.

From the perspective of this new approach, the network of ecumenical contacts of the Czech Protestants was of preeminent interest. The view of the regime of, for example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) had been that this was an instrument in the hands of imperialism and therefore an enemy to the Eastern Block.<sup>28</sup> In the new strategy the WCC became a field where the interests of the regime had to be presented in order to influence the orientation of the WCC. Situations like that of 1950, when the WCC declared its support for the American-led UN intervention in the Korean War, had to be prevented. Consequently, this had to be done by representatives of the Czech and Slovak Protestants, some of whom were in leading positions of the WCC.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Jiří Piškula, "Státní úřad pro věci církevní 1949–1956: Ministerstvo pro kontrolu náboženského života v Československu," [The State Office for Church Affairs 1949–1956: Ministry for the control of religious life in Czechoslovakia] *Církevní dějiny* 4 (2009) 65–72.

<sup>28</sup> See for the concept of this pre-1953 policy the Czech National Archive, Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, (ÚV KSČ), section Čepička, v. 9, archival unit 51, "Návrh na řešení náboženských otázek v ČSR" [Proposal for the solution of religious issues in the Czechoslovak Republic].

<sup>29</sup> The new concept of the church policy of the State Bureau for Church Affairs was approved by the Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Documents can be found in the

The first occasion to apply and test this new policy was the Second General Assembly of the WCC, which took place in Evanston, Illinois in August 1954. The two main aims of the regime were to prevent the assembly from an outspoken pro-American course and to adjust the widespread belief in the Western countries that religion in communist countries was oppressed. The Czechoslovak regime coordinated its efforts closely with its Hungarian counterpart, as only these two Eastern countries were sending delegations to Evanston. The Czecho-Slovak delegation was instructed by representatives of the State Bureau for Church Affairs on several occasions and, once on American soil, was accompanied by a representative of the Czechoslovak Embassy (who was, not surprisingly, also a member of the Czechoslovak Secret Service). Most likely the same happened with the Hungarian delegation.<sup>30</sup>

In order to persuade the delegates to the WCC assembly, the Czechoslovak authorities decided to launch an information campaign about the church situation in Czechoslovakia. In the first place diplomatic representations of Czechoslovakia in North-America (and most probably also in Western Europe) were instructed to distribute the message of the ECCB to ecumenical partners of 1953, which declared loyalty to the regime.<sup>31</sup> The second step was the brochure *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today* which aimed specifically at the delegates of the Evanston assembly of the WCC. The argumentation of both documents was rather simple: As descendants of the oldest Reformation in church history we have the best credentials to speak to the largest ecumenical gathering of the churches of the Reformation on matters of the division of the Cold War. The Protestants in Czechoslovakia, inspired by the Bohemian Reformation, found the courage to adhere to the communist regime because they acknowledge that key elements of communist ideology are a parallel to Christian teachings on eschatology. Therefore, the ecumenical movement should not take the anti-communist position of the United States, but should at least find understanding for the efforts of the communist countries.

There is convincing evidence that the new strategy of the communist authorities in Czechoslovakia worked. In the first place, they were very content

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Czech National Archive, State Bureau for Church Affairs (SÚC), box 3, "Nejdůležitější úkoly v církevní politice vyplývající z vládního prohlášení ze dne 15.9. 1953," [The most important tasks in church policy derived from the cabinet's statement of 15 September 1953], 13 and box 15, Forty-seventh meeting of the collegium 16 December 1953, document registration 265/53-S "Církev v boji za mír," [Churches in the Struggle for Peace] of 10 December 1953 and box 1, conclusions of the collegium no. 17/54 "Směrnice pro další práci SÚC, na základě závěrů z X. sjezdu KSČ," [Regulations for further work of the State Bureau for Church Affairs, based on the conclusions from the tenth congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia].

<sup>30</sup> Jiří Piškula, "Evanston 1954 – první bitva studené války na poli církevním. Příspěvek k interpretaci Josefa L. Hromádky," [Evanston 1954 – The first battle of the Cold War in the field of the church. Contribution to the interpretation of Joseph L. Hromadka] *Církevní dějiny*, 2 (2008) 37–47.

<sup>31</sup> Morée, "Theology in the Struggle for Survival," 307.

with the results of the Assembly. The report of the State Bureau for Church Affairs identified the success of the approach in two areas. In the first place the Assembly had called for a ban on tests of nuclear weapons and secondly, the resolution on discrimination and oppression of Christians did not specifically point to communist states. Critical remarks of the West were much more detailed and focused than were those of the East which used a more general language and were therefore open to various interpretations.

The main aim of reactionary circles in the USA, to turn the Assembly of the WCC into a militant international demonstration against communism, i.e. against the camp of socialism, did not succeed. [...] Also the performances of some of our delegates had a significant echo and favourable influence. [...] Above all Hromádka accomplished a great work, he acted very tactically, persuasively, and his speech to the General Assembly was accepted very favourably by a large majority of the delegates and belonged to the most powerful moments of the conference.<sup>32</sup>

The state authorities concluded that their change in strategy towards the WCC was effective. In their eyes the approach used in Evanston proved that it was not only possible but also successful to pursue the aims of communist foreign policy on the platform of the international ecumenical movement. Czechoslovak churches and their representatives became a part of the diplomatic efforts of the communist state to defend the interests of the Eastern bloc. This is also reflected in the language the authorities used about the delegation both in the preparatory phase as well as the executive phase. The five theologians of the Czechoslovak mission to Evanston are referred to as "our delegation".<sup>33</sup>

To a certain extent we find confirmation of this conclusion of the communist regime in the correspondence between Hromádka and people who met him in Evanston. They wrote how impressed they were by the appearance of Christians from communist countries who acted as free men and openly confessed their faith.

The regime also decided to give its satisfaction with the performance of the delegation a concrete expression. The Czechoslovak delegates to Evanston got a significant financial bonus for the work done at the Assembly. The authorities also understood that for the success of the new strategy towards churches and the ecumenical movement, financial arguments were

<sup>32</sup> National Archive, State Bureau for Church Affairs, box 130, Evanston, no. T 556/54-S "Zpráva o průběhu konference Světové rady církví v Evanstonu" [Report on the Conference of the World Council of Churches in Evanston].

<sup>33</sup> To mention but one example: National Archive, State Bureau for Church Affairs, box 4, Annex to document no. T 267/54-S with the title "The approach of our delegation at international Protestant conferences in the USA in August 1954."

inevitable. They developed a system of bonuses as a motivation for cooperation with the regime which was used for decades after 1954.

### Permanent Platforms

The new concept of communist church policy appeared to be a success. As a result, in the following years, more publications in English and German on Czech Protestantism were printed (e.g. *Yesterday and Today, A Survey of Czechoslovak Protestantism* (1955); *The Church and Theology in Today's Troubled Times* (1956); *Von der Reformation zum Morgen*, (1959)). They all followed the same scheme: the heritage of the Bohemian Reformation is the motivation of the Czech Protestants to be loyal to the new regime and to cooperate with its representatives.

In 1958 this pattern was given a more solid structure. The journal *Communio Viatorum* was launched, which frequently published studies about the Bohemian Reformation written by Molnár, Bartoš or Říčan. Already the first issue paved the way in this direction. Hromádka wrote in his editorial that one of the aims of the journal was to bring the Bohemian Reformation and its heritage to the international forum:

But it is our desire to interpret in the most vital and actual way the great heritage of our own reformation, represented by the figures of Jan Hus, Petr Chelčický, Lukáš of Prague, Jan Blahoslav and John Amos Comenius (Komenský). As heirs of the Hussite movement and of the Unity of the Brethren (Unitas Fratrum) we are guided by their great achievements, but we know that we have to re-discover and to re-interpret our spiritual heritage in our concrete life.<sup>34</sup>

In the same issue Molnár wrote about the pre-Hussite movement and its eschatological expectations as a source of its critical relation to the established church. *Communio Viatorum* was to become the academic part of the combined efforts of the leadership of the Czech Protestants and the communist regime to convince the international ecumenical partners that the identity of Czech Protestants, rooted in the Bohemian Reformation, gave good reason to support the communist regime in its policy for social justice, equality and peace.<sup>35</sup> Also in 1958, the Christian Peace Conference was founded as a political-ecumenical counterpart to the academic defence of the radical changes in the Eastern bloc. Here similar constructions were used in the argumentation of the political orientation of the organisation. In fact, the idea

<sup>34</sup> CV 1,1 (1958) 2.

<sup>35</sup> Peter C. A. Morée, "Fifty years of *Communio Viatorum*: from a Theological Program into a Platform for Theology," CV 50,2 (2008) 126–146.

to establish the Christian Peace Conference was born from an international conference on the anniversary of Jan Hus, organised by the communist regime for propaganda reasons in July 1950.<sup>36</sup>

Until the 1950s the main sources of knowledge about the Bohemian Reformation available in English were studies published early in the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Many of them were written to highlight the alleged special place of the people of Bohemia and Moravia in history and their inherent right for more political autonomy or eventual independence. German books on the Bohemian Reformation focused on its relation to the German Reformation and often tended to deny a unique character to the movement that came out of the work of Milíč of Kroměříž and Jan Hus.<sup>38</sup> During and after World War II, Matthew Spinka had started to publish his work on Hus and other moments from the Bohemian Reformation<sup>39</sup> stressing its reformatory content. He basically tried to compensate the communist interpretation of the Bohemian Reformation by presenting it as a deeply religious movement.

By and large, the situation in the 1950s was that the image of the Bohemian Reformation was coming mainly from a nationalist inspired camp. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s when *Communio Viatorum* published many studies on the Bohemian Reformation and, by that, keeping alive and feeding the interest of the outside world in this remarkable period of religious history. At the heart of these studies stood the compromise between the communist regime and the elite of the Czech Protestants by which Protestant loyalty to the regime was articulated by the stress on the Bohemian Reformation. Or, once again in the words of J. L. Hromádka – this time from his last appearance at a large ecumenical gathering in the year of the Prague Spring:

Now we are confronted with a new situation and we must ask ourselves to what extent we Christians can help our communists and socialists to a better, more human life and to peace. As a Czechoslovak citizen, I think that much depends on what we do in our country that will also be a contribution to world peace. Here we are confronted with a gigantic task: to renew, to reinterpret and further to develop creatively the

<sup>36</sup> Jiří Piškula, “Počátky Křesťanské mírové konference v kontextu zahraniční politiky KSC,” [The origins of the Christian Peace Conference in the context of foreign policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia] *Církevní dějiny* 6 (2010) 53–71.

<sup>37</sup> To mention a few: František Lützwow, *The life & times of Master John Hus* (London, 1909); Jan Herben, *Huss and his followers* (London, 1926); David S. Schaff (trans.), *The Church by John Huss* (New York, 1915); Herbert B. Workman and R. Martin Pope, *Jan Hus, Letters* (London, 1904); William Nathaniel Schwarze, *John Hus, the martyr of Bohemia, a study of the dawn of Protestantism* (New York, 1915).

<sup>38</sup> Exemplary is Johann Loserth, *Hus und Wiclif* (Prague and Leipzig, 1884).

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Matthew Spinka, *John Hus: a biography* (Princeton, 1968).

great work and heritage of the Reformation, of the Middle Ages and of the modern Age, and to do all this on a socialist basis.<sup>40</sup>

In the late 1980s, at the end of the communist rule, the Comenius Faculty for Protestant Theology in Prague organised two conferences on the Bohemian Reformation and its relation to other reformations in Europe. They had to highlight the revolutionary content of what some called “the radical reformation” by stressing the central role of eschatology in their devotional practice. Like in the 1950s the presence of international ecumenical partners had a strong effect of encouragement on the Czech Protestants. Their isolation could be overcome and their identity could be confirmed on the basis of the international interest in the Bohemian Reformation. In this case, however, the state authorities also saw the opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime by utilising the Bohemian Reformation. The head of the Secretariat for Church Affairs, Vladimír Janků, approved of the plans “in order to make use of the enormous positive and actual potential of the Hussite Movement.”<sup>41</sup>

One of the reasons that the Bohemian Reformation received constant and in-depth attention among scholars in Western Europe and North America is directly related to the way the communist regime aimed to manipulate Czech Protestantism and its roots in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international Christian community. The movement evoked by Hus could be sold abroad because of the wilful cooperation of the leaders of the Czech Protestants who were longing for international contacts and recognition. The reasons, ways and content of this utilisation of the Bohemian Reformation might be highly problematical, but they also enabled church members, students and even critics of the regime to be in contact with visiting theologians from Western Europe. Paradoxically, the political manipulation of the Bohemian Reformation during the Cold War also facilitated the encouragement of wider circles of Christians in Czechoslovakia because of what they perceived as a hole in the Iron Curtain. And it evoked the establishment of a permanent interest in the Bohemian Reformation on an academic level. The “potential of the Hussite Movement” was stronger than the agency which planned to manipulate it for its own cause.

<sup>40</sup> Personal Archive of J. L. Hromádka, 3–28, box 6, Excerpts from the speech of J. L. Hromádka at the Third All-Christian Peace Assembly.

<sup>41</sup> National Archive, Secretariat for Church Affairs of the Ministry of Culture, box 276, Comenius Faculty: Lectures and Convocations, Approval of Vladimír Janků of 7 October 1985.