

LUCIAN TURCESCU and LAVINIA STAN**Churches, Memory and Justice in Post-Communism**

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Lavinia Stan, a political science professor at St. Francis Xavier University, explains in the introduction to the book entitled *Churches, Memory and Justice in Post-Communism*, which she co-edited with Lucian Turcescu, a theology professor at Concordia University in Montreal, the reasons for which such studies are extremely necessary in the context of transitional justice and memory politics in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe. While many studies have already been dedicated to the political sphere and the major state actors (politicians, political parties, the judicial system), less research has been conducted into the effects of these measures on civil society groups or other social actors, more precisely on the Church.

The volume analyses seven Central and Eastern European countries – Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania – and five former Soviet Union republics, namely Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The twelve chapters focus on the way in which certain denominations or the dominant Church in each of these countries related to the painful experience they had undergone during the Communist regime. The focus is on determining which of the two possible stands they adopted: claiming to have been victims of the regimes, or admitting past collaboration.

The editors state that each chapter of the book was structured similarly, to avoid discrepancies in terms of scientific method or treatment of the topic, since each of the chapters was written by a different team of contributors and refers to different religious denominations. Consequently, after explaining the state-church relationship in each country, the chapters apply a single set of research questions and draw on comparable research methods, including analysis of church documents, state archives as well as personal interviews with relevant personalities. The objective is to examine both the conduct of the church during the Communist regime, and the extent to which it was affected by transitional justice, including lustration, access to secret files, compensation programs or property restitution.

The book is structured in four parts and certain countries have not been included in the study as specific historical or social contexts in the post-Communist period prevented them from addressing actively their Communist past. Examples of such countries are the former Yugoslavia, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, or Armenia.

In the first part, the study focuses on Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The chapter dedicated to Germany analyses the

Catholic Church and its crucial role in overthrowing the Communist regime in the German Democratic Republic, while highlighting the secret collaboration of many Catholic priests with the Stasi. One of the accusations examined in detail leads the author of this section, Gregor Buß, to the conclusion that although it is undeniable that some priests yielded under the pressure and collaborated with the Stasi, what is laudable is the swift initiative of the German bishops to investigate themselves transparently after 1989 and to publicly share the results.

The topic of the chapter on Poland is announced from the title, “Lustration and the Roman Catholic Church.” A highly controversial issue, lustration, more precisely church lustration, has continued to “consume and divide” (38) the socio-political sphere. For enthusiasts such as Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the fall of the Communist regime should have brought democracy, sovereignty and national rebirth, while most of the society did not seem equally enthusiastic and focused more on reconciliation and unites around the construct of “Polak-Catholic” (27), which projects the Polish nation as exclusively Catholic. Moreover, accusations of collaboration with the Communist regime have been further linked to accusations of sexual abuse and pedophilia, in a scandal that transcends lustration itself.

In Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, the religious institutions (especially the Roman Catholic Church) have problems in dealing with the Communist past. Unlike the Catholic Church in Poland, here the church lacked the political strength or the support from the society to defend itself. As a consequence, some of the clergymen, alongside officials from the Catholic Church’s hierarchy, had to cooperate with the regime to prevent the destruction of the religious institution and to protect its believers. The most important actor in the resistance movement was the so called “underground church” (54), as it held religious activities without the notification or the approval of the state authorities. Knowing how brutal the Communist regime was towards religious affairs in this region, one can state that any type of religious action pursued by clergymen, believers or members of the monastic orders should be considered acts of moral resistance.

In the chapter dedicated to Slovakia, Pavol Jakubcin writes not only about the main religious institution, namely the Roman Catholic Church, but also investigates the situation of the Lutheran Church (Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession), describing how the two coexisted during this period. Like in the Czech Republic, the “secret church” (79) also activated here, clerical members and small communities of believers playing an important role in the history of the church during the 1970s. This phenomenon spread throughout Slovakia in the following years, leading to the publication and distribution of “Christian *samizdat*” (79) texts, alongside other religious literature smuggled from other states. Trying to deal with the Communist past, Slovakia founded the National Memory Institute, which performed “complete and unbiased

evaluations of the Communist period” (87) while disclosing classified documents from the former State Security.

The next part of the book concentrates on The Balkans and focuses firstly on Romania and on the largest religious denomination, the Orthodox Church, and its efforts to hide its ties with the Communist regime, instead of openly assessing its collaboration with the former Securitate, like some other Churches did. Lucian Turcescu begins with a brief history of the Communist regime in this state, followed by a presentation of the so-called “Red Patriarchs” (95) leading the Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist rule, all of whom are accused of collaborating with the former Securitate. The author reveals, however, that in spite of collaboration from the Romanian Orthodox Church’s ranks, thousands of believers, priests or monks who courageously opposed the regime were blackmailed, deported, imprisoned, or killed. Heated debate continues until today regarding the collaboration or resistance of the Church in communism, with focus on Patriarch Justinian, deemed martyr or collaborator, accurately reflecting the social divide regarding this topic.

For Bulgaria, Momchil Metodiev’s conclusion is that the unwillingness of most church officials to overtly deal with their Communist past severely affected the process of religious revival in this country. One of the most conservative church denominations, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, tried to avoid the problems triggered by the uncovering of the secret archives, and it missed the opportunity to come to terms with the past. Even if the secret archives were disclosed, this did not lead to a deeper understanding of the past relationship of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church with the Communist regime.

The chapter focusing on the Albanian Catholic Church presents a radically different situation, as this denomination has been the most oppressed religious community. The Albanian Catholic Church firmly stood against the Communist regime and had no collaborators from the official or lower ranks. The methods used by the Communist regime to suppress the Catholic Church in Albania are described as: “imperare (control over religious denominations),” “dividere (causing conflict among the three main religious communities and discrediting the clergy),” and “exterminare (banishing every form of religious expression)” (137). The climax was reached in 1967 when the Communist Constitution proclaimed Albania as an atheistic state, the inspiration coming from China. Since Albania is a developing democracy, it has become imperative that the state decides on the way it wants to approach its past.

The third part of the book deals with the Baltic Republics. When it comes to Estonia, Atko Remmel and Priit Rohtmets’s observation that today it is one of the most secularized countries in Europe is relevant in the context of analyzing the effects of the Soviet strategies of destroying religious life in the country. The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church managed to survive the Communist regime, although clearly weakened. The strategies employed in

different periods of the Communist regime seem to have been efficient in completely pushing the church outside social life. The activity of this denomination still needs to be reassessed after the fall of communism, although some say that by its mere existence, the church fulfilled its role as part of the resistance.

In Latvia, the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches are the denominations with the most believers, therefore they are under scrutiny in this chapter. Solveiga Krumina-Konkova concludes that both Churches had to collaborate with the Communist Secret Service to stop the persecutions, clergy arrests, and the eradication of parishes. Later, both churches reviewed their role and became essential partners in the National Awakening movement (193). After the fall of communism in Latvia, the lists of KGB secret informers (which encompassed most of the two churches' leaders) were revealed, forcing both the Lutheran and Catholic Churches to be more active in questioning their past.

The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania seems to occupy a privileged place in the gallery of religious institutions under scrutiny in the book, the general perception being that the Church was a genuine stronghold of the opposition. In the context of a very aggressive attack on the institution, combining repression and recruitment of the church leaders, one third of the clergy fell victim. The importance of the underground periodical entitled the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* is also deeply rooted in the cultural memory of the people. Only three months after declaring independence from the Soviet Union, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted the Restitution Act, restoring the status of the Church and created the Lustration Commission. All these seem to have been essential in establishing a model of success in healing the scars left by the Communist regime.

The last part brings together studies about two former European Soviet republics, Russia and Belarus. Like other religious denominations from Eastern Europe, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Orthodox Church did not fully acknowledge its collaboration with the KGB, and it tried to save its image by claiming that the Orthodox Church as a whole, including officials, the clergy and priests, were victims of the Communist repression, claiming they had to make a compromise with the KGB in order for the religious denomination to fulfill its primordial functions. However, most of the clergy were collaborators of the KGB, Russia having the highest number of collaborators so far.

A distinct situation can be found in Belarus. As part of the Bolshevik plan to destroy the Orthodox Church from within, a division was created between the official Belarusian exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the reformers grouped in a movement which demands autocephaly. Like in many other ex-Communist countries, the Orthodox Church in Belarus claimed the status of victim of the Communist oppression, ignoring the results of recent research that

revealed the collaboration of certain heads of the church with the regime, therefore refusing to accept the complexity of the situation.

In conclusion, *Churches, Memory and Justice in Post-Communism* is a fascinating and necessary journey into the past of twelve ex-Communist countries and an exploration of the visible effects of the roles undertaken by different Churches during the Communist rule in shaping the popular attitude towards dictatorship, and repression of fundamental rights such as the right to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The authors of this collection of studies highlight different socio-political standpoints, very carefully approaching the complexity of the topic, while not being afraid of drawing pertinent conclusions. I am confident the book will establish itself as a must read for any future researcher into the field, and it will constitute a valuable resource for a wide range of other domains from sociology to psychology.

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