

Book Review

Milos Trapl, *Political Catholicism and the Czechoslovak people's Party in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938*. (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1995), 151pp.

The author begins by acknowledging that the twenty years' existence of the Czechoslovak Republic between two World Wars was a rather coherent period of Czechoslovak statehood and Czech and Slovak Society. During this period, Czech Catholic political concerns were represented in particular by the Czechoslovak People's Party (Ceskoslovenska strana lidova, hereafter, CSL).

Credited with playing a "very important role as regards the social development of the First Republic," the CSL "belonged to the agents indispensable for the political system of parliamentary democracy." The stated goals of this work outlining the brief historical trajectory of the CSL--creditably accomplished--are twofold: (1) By focussing attention on a significant movement that located itself in the moderate middle ground of the political spectrum, to redress what the author perceives as a preoccupation among historians with the course of extremist political entities; (2) Given the fact of the growing influence of religiously inspired political action in the contemporary scene (supposedly, one may think of the role of the Christian religious right in America, or of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East), to provide an example of "how religion-influenced policy affects the masses."

The credibility of the CSL depended on its ability to be loyal to, but not wholly identified with, the Vatican court; its success depended on the degree to which it could oppose, but not unduly provoke, political counterparts on its right and left in parliament. The CSL did gain popular acceptance and credibility for itself through its assumption of a strident pro-Czechoslovak nationalistic posture (The Vatican had long supported the Hapsburgs in Austria); success was achieved by being flexible in accommodating the initiatives of opposition forces that did not overtly compromise CSL political and economic programs.

As accomplished as it was in dealing with popular perceptions and external political polarities, the CSL ultimately could not maintain internal harmony among its constituency. Its program of so called "Christian solidarity," which expected mutual cooperation between antagonistic classes and social strata based upon Christian ideology and ethics, proved illusory for even the CSL itself. Cultural allegiances put Bohemians, Moravians, and Slovaks at odds. Other than sharing a common ecclesial membership, the industrialized, relatively prosperous and clerically-directed peoples of the western portion of the nation found that they had little in common with rural, impoverished, personally pious easterners. In the 1920s the representatives of Catholic interest groups of the poorest classes left the Party; the small peasant's section first, the Christian-social workers' section later. Difficulty in cooperation was compounded by personality differences among local leaders, as exemplified by the spirited confrontations between the prudent and careful Jan Sramek (Party leader in Moravia) and the ambitious, hot-tempered Adrej Hlinka (of Slovakia). In the end, after fierce internal struggles, the CSL

fused with the totalitarian Party of National Union (Strana narodni jednoty) in November of 1938.

As there is an average of about a dozen errors in spelling, grammar and syntax per page, this text should have been edited by someone whose first language is English. Writing in a first or second language is an issue in the review of Mr. Trapl's work. His definition of "political Catholicism" is the Church "meddling" in public affairs; the Church is said to exist to "take advantage" of its believers; the motivation of Catholic politicians is described in terms of the desire for "exploitation." Are these bald evidences of anti-Catholic proclivities, or are the troublesome terms simply examples of injudicious, harsher-than-intended word choices of one composing in a non-native language? (To assist in lending Mr. Trapl the benefit of the doubt, it can be noted that in his "Literature and Sources" section, he states that he "exploited memoirs and reminiscencies [sic] of contemporaries.") In any case, a prospective reader picking up this book stands to be richly informed about the "what" and "when" of a significant moment in Catholic political activity, if not the "why".

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