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David Doellinger. *Turning Prayers into Protests: Religious-Based Activism and Its Challenge to State Power in Socialist Slovakia and East Germany*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2013. 304 pp. ISBN 978-615-5225-78-9.

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Scholars studying resistance movements under communist rule have focused broadly on internationally visible movements such as samizdat and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia or KOR and Solidarity in Poland. With the exception of Poland, the role of religious beliefs and institutions in opposition movements has been widely understudied, even if some important studies are already available (Beeson [1974] 1982; Ramet 1987, 1998). And yet, religion was among the few spheres in communist regimes where alternative political discourses could be elaborated. David Doellinger's book partly fills this gap, offering an analysis of how the churches in Slovakia and the GDR progressively expanded spaces for action independent of state control, eventually becoming serious challenges to communist rule.

The choice of Slovakia and the GDR is important. In both countries, the communist state engaged from the start in a battle against religion and the church, trying to create a new man, secularized and liberated from what the Communist Party considered "superstitions." To do this, it tried to manipulate religious institutions and erode the people's loyalty to the church. But the results differed in each setting due to differences in denomination (Catholic in Slovakia, Protestant in the GDR) as well as the different nature of church-state relations. In Czechoslovakia, the Catholic Church suffered thorough state repression beginning in the late 1940s, while the Evangelical Church in the GDR maintained autonomy comparable only with the situation in Poland. The two countries differ also in terms of popular religiosity, which is much stronger in Slovakia than in the GDR: in 1988, 36 of 38 districts in Slovakia were predominantly religious, according to a study published by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, while only 37 percent of East Germans considered themselves religious in 1990 (7). And, finally, the nature of independent religious activity was fundamentally different: in Slovakia the church struggled for greater religious freedom, while in the GDR it benefited from relative autonomy and played, from the late 1940s, an important role in resisting communist rule, defending specific issues such as peace, environmental protection, and poverty in the Third World. The contrast between these two countries permits Doellinger to consider the role of both diluted and institutionalized forms of political opposition in Soviet-type societies.

But the story Doellinger offers is not one of party-state policies. Instead, he offers a fine picture of grassroots activities based on broad archival research exploring samizdat, memoirs, interviews with former parish members, local church records,

and materials from the private collections of Slovaks and East Germans involved in oppositional activities, combined with the use of less common sources (the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Archives held by the Open Society Archives in Budapest are in this regard very helpful).

Doellinger rightly focuses on the interplay among social actors, which is key for understanding the challenge that these religious activities represented for the communist state. Indeed, if ruling elites eventually learned that accepting some alternative activities at the margins of the official public sphere was fundamental to maintaining power, they struggled until the very end to keep control over interactions that might occur between these groups, well aware of the fact that the interplay between insurgent organizations could seriously challenge the regime. Indeed, interactions between these nonconformist (though not systematically dissident) activities at the margins could lead to the elaboration of an alternative discourse about general interest that could openly defy the dominant communist ideology.

The question that lies at the heart of Doellinger's analysis is how social movements develop in authoritarian regimes. His work focuses on the activities that functioned as "coordinating mechanisms" between isolated groups and organizations, creating a regular space for social interactions. To put it differently, he concentrates on the sparsely analyzed relation between collective action in public and collective protest in public, allowing independent and isolated protests and discourses to converge in the public sphere and eventually contest state power.

The faith issue provides a particularly relevant entrance, considering that in the 1980s approximately 60 percent of the Slovak population was Catholic and practicing regularly. In the GDR, about 50 percent of the population belonged to the Evangelical Church of Germany. Both churches had strong international ties to other religious institutions, whether it was the Vatican (for Slovakia) or the Evangelical Church in West Germany (for the GDR). Following the works of Froese and Pfaff (2001) and Evans and Boyte ([1986] 2003), Doellinger focuses on "free spaces," which he defines as "settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision" (Evans and Boyte [1986] 2003:17–18). Within these spaces, citizens can engage in public action and participate to the elaboration of the notion of general interest. In communist regimes, community-based organizations played an important role in providing such spaces, whether inside regime structures (working brigades, socialist neighborhoods) or outside of them (church). Whether tolerated by the regime (for the first type of groups) or out of its normative control (for the second), these community-based organizations were spheres of relatively free expression. They eventually defied the dominant political discourse, on the condition that their members start communicating with each other. Religious gatherings such as pilgrimages in Slovakia or Leipzig Monday demonstrations in the GDR made possible connections between otherwise isolated—and thus politically neutralized—groups.

Doellinger puts the spotlight on the final two decades of the regime (and much more, in fact, on the last one). During this period, the churches expanded and the number of believers increased progressively. Attendance at pilgrimages reached new

heights and various social protests and movements helped build bridges between isolated individuals and groups. In both countries believers managed to publish samizdat books and periodicals out of the reach of state control. But there were also differences. The author highlights the more favorable conditions for these underground activities in the GDR than in Slovakia, where state control remained more present over the decades and where believers were forced to construct an underground secret church where they could meet and worship. In the GDR, the Evangelical Protestant Church retained much of its independence, and during the last twenty years of the regime it sponsored local groups defending peace, better environmental policies, and various other social issues.

This bright analysis stressing the transformation of social relations during the 1970s and 1980s helps us to better understand how, despite the social inertia of these years so distinctly described by Václav Havel, Milan Šimečka, or Leczek Kołakowski, new social forces arose and prepared a way out of the system. Their energy became, during the last decade of the regime, one of the sources of the “carnival of revolutions,” as Padraic Kenney (2002) put it.

But at the same time, Doellinger’s focus on late socialism can hide the significance of long-term processes. Indeed, the resurgence of attendance to pilgrimages in Slovakia (Levoča, Velehrad), begun at the end of the 1950s, shows that in spite of systematic repression the regime never succeeded in eradicating faith and that the basis of what happened during the last decade of communist rule was set much earlier. In the GDR, the Evangelical Church managed to preserve much of its autonomy from the very beginning of the regime. Shifting attention from the 1970s–1980s to the late 1950s–early 1960s would help to better explain how the regime, losing its battle against faith, tried desperately to reach a compromise between expectations and reality. It would help to clarify the shift in state policies during the 1960s from open repression to a determination to maintain control over the spheres where individuals and groups could interact. It would better underline the fact that it was the loss of control over these spheres of interaction that contributed significantly to the fall of the regime in the 1980s. In spite of these criticisms, Doellinger’s book will be highly praised as a major contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms leading to the fall of communist regimes.

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