

### **BOOK REVIEW:**

Hanna Diskin: *The Seeds of Triumph. Church and State in Gomulka's Poland.*  
Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2001. 317pp.  
\$43.95 - Reviewed by Szolt Enyedi.

Most classic typologies of church-state relations (e.g. Weber's caesaropapism, theocracy and hierocracy) do not contain a separate label for political systems ruled by explicitly atheist and anticlerical forces. Most classifications of Communist systems, on the other hand, do not leave room for institutional patterns in which a church would play a decisive political role, commanding the support of the bulk of the population and influencing the decisions of the Communist party. Communist Poland, where the Catholic Church has managed to maintain a high level of moral and political power, represents therefore a unique, and theoretically challenging case.

Hanna Diskin has conducted thorough research on the dynamics of church-state relations in Poland after World War II, focusing on the periods of 1945-1948 and 1956-1970. During most of the studied period the Church was under the leadership of Stefan Wyszyński, while the Communist party was led by Władysław Gomułka. Therefore, the narrative of policy-formation and institutional interactions was bound to have a personal angle, although the author is anxious to point out that personal intentions, biographies and prejudices had, at most, a secondary role in the development of events. Readers attracted to symmetric patterns will be delighted to find out that the backgrounds of these two main individual actors overlapped: both were victims of Stalinism and both considered themselves to be patriotic Poles (p. xvii). Their opposition was determined by the fact that they represented (and strongly identified with) two opposing ideological systems, both of which claimed a monopoly of truth.

Next to documenting the changing state policies vis-a-vis the church, the greatest merit of Diskin's book is that it shows how conflict-ridden and pluralistic the supposedly totalitarian Polish political system used to be. Different styles of conflict resolution characterized the different periods, and the policy makers were influenced as much by the experiences of previous crises as by ideological textbooks or by their final goal of absolute domination.

The Communists hoped to domesticate and finally even destroy the church, but could not even dream (as their comrades in other Communist countries) of accomplishing these goals in the foreseeable future. They were clearly aware of the central role the Roman Catholic Church played in forming Polish national identity. Due to the interrupted history of Polish statehood, the Catholic Church provided the nation with the only stable institutional element, and it could turn, therefore, into the almost sole focus of national loyalty. This elevated status was further strengthened by the

country's domination by foreign empires, which had different religious orientations (with the exception of the Catholic Hapsburgs). In the confrontation with the Orthodox Russian empire, Roman Catholicism also symbolized the nation's Western European identity. The oppression of the clergy under the Nazis and under the Communists created around the church the aura of martyrdom, and fostered a popular perception according to which the fate of the nation and of the church was identical. The country's denominational homogeneity (which increased sharply after World War II) and the continuously high level of religiosity of the population provided a secure base for the legitimacy of the church throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Diskin's analysis shows, in spite of this strong legitimacy, the church had a compromise-oriented strategy vis-a-vis the victorious leftist forces after 1945. While it identified them as its ideological enemies, it was looking for mutually acceptable solutions in practical issues. (This cautious attitude did not stop the church from asking the believers not to vote for parties whose principles are opposed to Christianity (i.e. for leftist parties).) One can only speculate what were the reasons behind this cautious attitude. The presence of occupying forces, the personality of Cardinal Hlond and the lack of a reliable political ally (the main political opponent of the Communists was the Peasant Party of Mikolajczyk, a party that used to be anti-clerical) must have all played a role. Interestingly, the position of the Church was somewhat vulnerable even on the issue of nationalism at this time.

The Vatican had refused to acknowledge the new Odera-Neisse borders, and had allowed only interim, and not permanent, apostolic administrators for the "liberated territories". Therefore, the policy of the Roman Catholic Church as such was at odds with the national interests. Pius XII has expressed his pro-German sentiments repeatedly during and after the war, infuriating various segments of the Polish political society. In line with the Pope's attitudes on Polish-German relations and with the Holy See's policies vis-à-vis the new Eastern European powers, the Vatican's yearbooks continued to list western and northern Polish dioceses under the heading of Germany until 1954 (p. 30). This position was particularly sharply criticized by the Communists, who used a nationalistic, anti-German discourse during and after the war.

While the Polish clergy was finally largely successful in dissociating itself from the policies of the Vatican without showing signs of disloyalty (not an easy task within the Roman Catholic Church), the government seized the opportunity, and conducted campaigns to draw the attention of the population to the questionable gestures of the Pope. These attacks fitted into the large scale project of driving a wedge between different layers of the Catholic world: between the Polish episcopate and the Vatican, between the laity and the hierarchy, between the lower clergy and the church's leadership, and between "reactionary" and "patriotic" priests (p. 42).

As part of the divide-and-rule tactics, the government supported renegade branches of the Catholic Church (for example, the so called National Polish Catholic Church) and provided direct material and political help to pro-regime movement such as the famous “Lay Movement of Progressive Catholics”, the PAX. The latter organization showed more Stalinist attitudes during the 1950’s than the Stalinists themselves (p.137).

While continuously trying to weaken the power base of the official church leadership, the Communists were also keen to cultivate a conciliatory image, particularly after the war. Communist leaders attended church ceremonies, and even the army participated in religious parades (p. 52). The state subsidized the restoration of church-buildings, church-land was exempted from land-reforms, crosses were allowed to stay in the classrooms, and religious teaching continued in state schools. The 1950 agreement between the church and the state included state guarantee of religious instruction at all levels of education. These gestures show well the influence of the Polish Catholic Church not only relatively to other churches in the region, but also to other European churches

Parallel to these gestures, however, the Communist leadership gradually moved closer to a totalitarian model. The new constitution of 1952 did not include the Soviet “freedom of anti-religious propaganda” clause but it explicitly stated that “the abuse of freedom of conscience and faith for purposes harmful to the interests of the Polish People’s Republic is punishable by law.” (p. 88).

Censorship became tighter, hundreds of priests and nine bishops were imprisoned (p. 97), and religious instruction in schools almost completely ceased to function. At the same time, the state continued to assist mass pilgrimages and the building of churches, and the Catholic University (Lublin), alone in the region, survived.

It is even more remarkable that the defiant mood of the clergy did not disappear either during these particularly difficult years. Hanna Diskin cites an article from the journal *Tygodnik Powszechny*, February 16, 1952, in which the authors (Stanislaw Stomma and Jerzy Turowicz) justify the agreement between the church and the state with the following words: “The agreement is a practical compromise for coexistence between the church and the Marxist camp which rules the country...it is a non-ideological compromise for coexistence ... which does not abolish the ideological struggle. The agreement...comes to achieve social peace in Poland, to facilitate cooperation between Catholics and Marxists on behalf of the national cause.” (p. 72). This degree of self-confidence and dignity characterized the rhetoric of no other church in the Communist camp. In 1953, when the government demanded a change in the editorial board of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the clergy replied that this decision contravened both the Polish Constitution and the laws of the church. Wyszynski was even reported to say publicly: “The Polish episcopate will defend its faith even at the cost of bloodshed” (p. 74). The

clergy maintained that the church was a more authentic representative of the nation than the government (p. 124).

Due to the turbulence and political reforms of 1956, the power of the church temporarily increased, but the concessions given in these months were soon largely withdrawn. Cardinal Wyszynski, who supported Gomulka in 1956, compared the new policies of the government to the measures of the occupying Germans (p.127).

The combative statements of the church leadership went beyond self-defense of narrow institutional interests. In 1958, for example, not long after leaving prison, Wysinski delivered a speech against the destruction of private property by the Communists (p. 183). This gesture highlights very well the unique character of Roman Catholicism: while the other churches in the region implicitly or explicitly questioned only the worldview and the church-related policies of the Communist regimes, the Catholic church, having a well developed social doctrine, posed a challenge on the level of political and economic principles as well.

But there was one thing that was almost as important for the church as defending its principles and privileges, and that was stability. This “conservative” inclination was particularly obvious at the time when growing political opposition placed the Communist government under pressure. The church, which called for free elections already during the 1970’s (p. 226), watched worriedly the activities of the radical wing of the opposition. After the 1989 elections the church helped Jaruzelski to get the presidency (p. 246).

The analysis of the documents indicates that the Soviet leadership did not determine Polish politics unilaterally in this area, although the Soviet embassy in Warsaw even had a special unit for Polish church-state relations. The Soviet intentions also varied enormously across the years. From time to time (e.g. around 1960), the Soviets even pressed the Polish government towards more pro-church policies.

To add to the complexities of the time, the historical record shows that the Polish government actively lobbied in the Vatican for the nomination of a second Cardinal. This, finally successful effort presumably had the aim of weakening Wyszynski, but it actually helped Karol Wojtyla to emerge as the number two leader of the Catholic Church in Poland. (p. 169)

As opposed to the rest of the Communist world, in Poland Catholic circles were not pushed, for the most part, into the political underground. No church-related Catholic party was allowed to exist, but Catholic individuals were placed on the National Unity list, and they could form a separate club in the parliament (p. 166)

The church was repeatedly asked to show loyalty towards the regime, and, although this aspect is somewhat underplayed in Diskin’s book, in most of the cases the church leaders did indeed support the regime with public gestures. But the pro-regime politicization of the ecclesiastic bodies did not reach the levels of the pre-war Pilsudski era, when, in return for various privileges, the clergy needed to call for voting for the government (p. 45).

Unfortunately, we learn relatively little from the book about the non-official views of the policy makers, particularly as far as their hidden motives and perceived cost-benefit structure is concerned. But some of their cited public statements reveal peculiar attitudes. It seems, for example, that their correct assessment of the church's actual power went together with hopes for ultimately eradicating religion as such. This attitude is well exemplified by a statement of one of the most pro-church members of the Polish Communist leadership: "A blow to the prestige of religion can never be achieved by battle with it, but by the problem burning itself out." (Bienkowski, cited on p. 161)

Diskin is highly critical of the church's behavior after the fall of Communism. The final conclusion of the book is that the church has as much difficulty accepting democracy as did the Communists (p. 248). The post-Communist crisis was indicated by a decline in popular support for the church and a fall in the participation of religious life. (Unfortunately, these processes are not well documented in the book.) Diskin agrees with many observers that the church leadership was "arrogant" (p. 225), that it made a mistake when it demanded from the parliamentary candidates open support for the church's political program (p. 251), or when it directly supported the Catholic Electoral Action. But she also claims that the church has learned from the failure of these initiatives and has come more into tune with the spirit of liberal democracy since 1993.

While many of the grand questions mentioned in the introduction of the book (like "what is the role of the leader in history?") receive no clear answer, Diskin presents a fairly comprehensive account of church-state relations in Communist Poland. The terminology (borrowed from systems theory) is largely without a real function, and the division of subchapters into very short (one-two pages long) subchapters gives a very fragmented reconstruction of historical processes. More disturbingly, there are often references to events and names that are not explained for the reader who is not intimately familiar with contemporary Polish history. For example, on page 19 one finds the sentence: "These statements (of the church) come in response to Cyrankiewicz's attacks, without explaining who Cyrankiewicz was or what attacks he had made. Throughout the text one finds references to various "events", "incidents" and "affairs" (i.e., "Lublin cathedral incident" (p. 95), "the affair of the Stockholm Peace Declaration" (p. 122) "Jasna Gora affair" (p. 122), "Nova Huta events (p. 135), without any user-friendly explanation. Finally, at some places debatable sentences, involving value-judgments are thrown in lightly, without proper justification (e.g. "The church rejected attempts on the part of the so-called leftist intelligentsia to exploit the church to its own ends." p. 238.)

But with all these minor deficiencies, the volume is a recommendable text for anyone interested either in church-state relations, Communism or Polish history.

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