Bruce R. Berglund and Brian Porter-Szűcs, eds.


In recent years, we can witness a certain increase in English literature that deals with various aspects of modern Eastern European history. The historical works, however, which comprehensively study religion and its multifaceted and complex interaction with politics and society, are still rare. The current volume aims to fill this hiatus and open up new paths in the historical research of the region.

The primary goal of the book is to demonstrate the interconnectedness of social and political histories with the history of religion and to emphasize the role of Christianity in Eastern European modernity, and thereby integrating religion into the larger framework of academic research focuses on the region. The volume fulfills this purpose undoubtedly thanks to the strong conceptual foundations, interdisciplinary approaches and the effort to address controversial issues and sheds light on hitherto uncharted topics. The strongest aspect of the volume, however, is that it problematizes such clichés in connection with Eastern Europe, as for instance the image of homogenous Catholic Poland and the church-destroyer communist Romania. The methodological approaches are various, and often multidisciplinary: Galia Valtchinova applies anthropological viewpoints; the inquiry by Katharina Kunther involves theological aspects and the essay by Bruce R. Berglund intersects with geography. In the contributions which focus on “bottom up” topics, like the essays of Natalia Schlikhta, David Doellinger and Anca Sincan, oral history as a device also plays a role.

The essays by Berglund and Brian Porter-Szűcs provide a general framework for the volume by establishing conceptual guidelines which are reflected throughout the book. Both essays emphasize the role of human agency in negotiating the boundaries of political ideologies, religion as well as geographical categories such as Eastern-Europe.

Four papers deal with Christianity from the perspective of its relation to national identities and policies. James Bjork argues that Catholicism in post-war Poland did not enhance national homogenization exclusively, but served as a vehicle of regional diversity as well. James Ramon Felak studies the attempt of the Slovakian Catholic Church to navigate under the new circumstances between 1945 and 1948. He emphasizes that the Slovakian Catholic Church not only had to face the challenges that came with the growing pressure of the soviet-styled communism in post-war Czechoslovakia, but also had to struggle with its strong association with the wartime Tiso-regime. Paul Hanebrink
details in what way interwar Hungarian public life was sacralized by appropriating Christian religious symbols into the political discourse. He argues that the result of this Christianizing process strengthened the secular character of the country, since at the end the vision of Christian Hungary was nothing more than an ethnic or racial identity which opposed any assumed foreign, subversive and foremost of all “Jewish” influence. Martin Putna focuses on the unsuccessful search of Czech Catholic intellectuals for a “fourth path” in the interwar Czechoslovakia, under the pressure and ideological influence of Nazism, Communism and Liberalism. Although the essay deals with a specific and rather marginal social group, not with the ruling consensus as in the case of interwar Hungary, a similar conclusion emerges. The attempt to provide an ideological basis for a conservative, corporatist but non-Nazi state ended up with ultimate submission to Nazi Germany.

The central emphasis of the volume falls on the relationships between Christianity and Communism, which issue is addressed by five essays. What is common in all of them is the effort to show that many more patterns of coexistence between Christianity and communism can be revealed and described by studying specific cases than the superficial antagonism of collaboration and resistance. Natalia Shlikhta shows that West-Ukrainian Greek Catholics applied different tactics towards the forced unification with the Orthodox Church. As she concludes, the solution of those Greek Catholic believers who considered themselves as a distinct Church within the unified Orthodox Church did not differ on the fundamental level from the activity of the catacomb church in maintaining their religious and national identity. Anca Sincan represents a case study of a local negotiation between communist state and faithful that demonstrates that how the multi-faceted relationship between the Romanian state and Churches changed over time in accordance with the shifts in larger state policy. Galia Valtchinova details the case of a Bulgarian seer who found a way to accommodate her activity on the blurred “magical-religious-medical field” in the official ideological framework of the communist state – with the help of the communist authorities. David Doellinger shows that under the specific circumstances of GDR the Lutheran Church was capable of reaching a compromise with the militarized state on the matter of unarmed military service. Katharina Kunter takes into account the theological and political differences in the discourses of East German and Czech Protestants on human rights, and shows that these churches became important sources of alternative ideologies and concepts – regardless of their strong everyday association with the communist regime – by dealing with the issue of human rights.