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# Thematic Issue on the Religion of the Czech Underground under Communism

## Editorial

Zdeněk R. Nešpor – guest editor

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What is known as the Czech underground, a countercultural community of rock musicians, writers and artists, theorists of culture and society, and their followers and supporters, pushed underground during the rule of the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, is relatively well known. At least generally – or better, superficially. This community of great cultural and political significance was analyzed in both Czech<sup>1</sup> and foreign literature,<sup>2</sup> and its main characteristics also found their way into textbooks of history, literary and musical history, and general public knowledge. However, one aspect remained virtually neglected: the religion and religiosity of the Czech underground. Cultural historian Martin C. Putna in his monumental history of Czech Catholic literature – which has gradually spread far beyond both literature and the Catholic denomination – argues that “the reunion of the underground, Christianity and literature in the 1970s and 1980s is arguably the most surprising chapter in the history of Czech Catholic literature, even one of the most original chapters of Czech spiritual history in general ... The phenomenon of spiritual creation in the Czech underground of the normalization era is unique in its concrete form”.<sup>3</sup> The author pointed this out as early as in the early 1990s and has held these views until the recent day,<sup>4</sup> but he remained almost alone. Broader knowledge of the Czech underground’s religiosity is weak, if any. This issue is an attempt to remedy the significant omission.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. JOSEF ALAN (ed.), *Alternativní kultura: Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989* [*Alternative Culture: The Story of the Czech Society 1945–1989*], Praha: Lidové noviny 2001; MAREK ŠVEHLA, *Magor a jeho doba* [*Magor and His Era*], Praha: Torst 2017.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. JONATHAN BOLTON, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, Cambridge (Mass): Harvard UP 2012; TREVER HAGEN, *Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground*, New York: Oxford UP 2019.

<sup>3</sup> MARTIN C. PUTNA, *Česká katolická literatura v kontextech 1945–1989* [*Czech Catholic Literature in Context 1945–1989*], Praha: Torst 2017, p. 727.

<sup>4</sup> MARTIN C. PUTNA, „Mnoho zemí v podzemí: Několik úvah o undergroundu a křesťanství“ [„Many Grounds of the Underground: Some Reflections on the Underground and Christianity“], *Souvislosti* 4 (1, 1993): pp. 14–32; MARTIN C. PUTNA (ed.), *Ivan M. Jirous: Magorské modlitby* [*Ivan M. Jirous: Magor’s Prayers*], Praha: Biblion 2021, pp. 261–290.

On the one hand, the omission is quite surprising. Even the most superficial student of the Czech underground cannot overlook the importance that religion and religious values had for (at least a part of) this movement. Religious songs were heard at underground festivals, and the iconic band The Plastic People of the Universe went through at least one explicitly religious period, culminating in the recording of *Passion* (1978). Underground theorist Ivan Martin Jirous, in his famous “Report on the Third Czech Musical Awakening” (1975), attributed the apocalyptic religiosity not only to the Plastic People and the personally connected DG 307 but also to other authors and performers. Moreover, former Protestant minister Svatopluk Karásek, whose original transformation of American spirituals became one of the most visible manifestations of religious involvement in modern Czech popular culture, joined the community in the first half of the 1970s. However, various elements and manifestations of religion were present not only at top events or in the works of certain religiously involved members of the underground community. Witnesses draw attention to various everyday religious activities or cases of “religion” of a kind among the formerly religiously untouched or churchly “non-musical” persons or communities.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, it is not so strange that almost no one has appropriately dealt with the religion of the Czech underground yet. It is easy to state the importance of religiosity for a part of the underground movement. However, it is far from easy to decipher its causes, concrete manifestations, and social consequences more deeply, especially when we are not faced with a single version of underground religiosity that depended on “official” Christianity. The rich and diverse terrain requires careful research, which has not yet taken place. A special, though certainly also not exhaustive example may be the religiosity of the playwright, dissident and later president Václav Havel,<sup>6</sup> who was part of the underground community for years and who even was an ideological leader of the Plastic People for a while (although in their somewhat weaker period). This issue is precisely the first attempt at such research on the religiosity of the Czech underground under the communist regime.

We must admit that our original plans were somehow broader. Relying on the opportunities of archival and oral historical research, we believed it would be possible to map the area of the reception of the underground in general and its religious components in particular. The field of reception should not include just the specific underground communities that Stárek and Kostúr already addressed<sup>7</sup> but also the “occasional”, less engaged, or temporary followers and recipients, as well as various kinds of supporters and “parallel-runners”. However, we overestimated the possibilities of such research, or rather how demanding personal engagement would be

<sup>5</sup> Many examples in FRANTIŠEK STÁREK ČUŇAS and JIŘÍ KOSTŮR, *Baráky: Souostroví svobody* [Baracks: The Archipelago of Freedom], Praha: Pulchra 2010, e.g. pp. 162, 164.

<sup>6</sup> MARTIN C. PUTNA, *Václav Havel: Duchovní portrét v rámu české kultury* [Václav Havel: A Spiritual Portrait Framed by the Czech Culture], Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla 2011, pp. 141–244. Somehow similar, also quite ambiguous subject would be the underground theorist Ivan Martin Jirous, already mentioned above; see MARTIN C. PUTNA (ed.), *Ivan M. Jirous*, pp. 261–290.

<sup>7</sup> STÁREK ČUŇAS and KOSTŮR, *Baráky*, passim.

without special funding, and thus we gradually lost our potential collaborators. The pandemic of COVID-19 ended the rest, as virtually no research, neither archival, oral historical or sociological, was possible for more than a year. Even worse, many (potential) respondents died and we lost contact with others due to the epidemic. This (and other) part(s) of the topic is still waiting to be studied.

Despite the drawbacks and problems, we hope we have managed to gather enough information to make the first systematic attempt to describe and analyze the religiosity of the Czech underground and that we were able to grasp and present the topic at least relatively well. The reader shall expect a triple view of the topic, differing not only thematically but also methodologically (and generationally). The first article was written by musical historian Aleš Opekar, who also served as a rock and underground music organizer both under communism and after its fall. The author provides a general introduction to the topic of the Czech underground, important especially for foreign or less knowledgeable readers. He begins with the necessary mapping of the quite extensive, but at the same time, one-sided and in some respects problematic literature on the phenomenon. Then the study deals with the term underground itself, how it got into the Czech environment through popular music journalism, and how I. M. Jirous adapted it in a very particular sense. The author also explains the terms of (musical/cultural) alternative and grey zone. In the third part of his article, Opekar describes what other rock music, in addition to the underground, was played in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s to give the reader context, and in conclusion, he provides a reflection on the underground's overlaps with non-rock music and the period after 1989.

The second article was written by a middle-aged cultural historian and sociologist, Zdeněk R. Nešpor, whose "firsthand experience" pertains only to the very end of the underground under the communist regime, but who systematically devoted himself personally and professionally to this music and community from the first years after regime change. Nešpor studies the manifestations of (various types of) religion in underground lyrics, as well as in (temporarily) related musical genres. He first examines the religious, implicitly religious and social sources of interest of musicians and recipient communities in religion, while in the second part of his article, the author shows the types and ways of presenting religious content. Although much of it was derived from ecclesiastical Christianity (which does not mean that it corresponded to specific confessions or pious traditions), he also notes non-Christian forms and alternative spiritualities parallel to any organized religion. Although the article does not pay much attention to the reception of the underground religion and its communities, the author concludes that this phenomenon was among the key manifestations of modern self-oriented spirituality in Czech society.

Last but not least, an article by Monika Soukupová, a PhD candidate in cultural history and the youngest contributor to the issue, deals with the reception of the underground religiosity in a very specific environment – among Evangelical Christians. While both alternative musicians and active Christians had a common enemy in the Communist leadership, they differed significantly in their world-views and means

of resistance, as well as in their understanding of religion and (the forms of) piety. Through the analysis of a newly conducted oral historical material, the author shows that both communities (or somewhat narrower communities within both streams) acted in parallel, without deeper contacts, but even knowledge, and vice versa, with many barriers and mutual prejudices. Their efforts and interests did not meet because they went in discrepant directions and were aimed at different goals (although the situation may have differed in some specific groups of liberally oriented mainline Christians, especially young people).

The set of articles in no way exhausts the topic of religion in the Czech underground under communism. Instead, it collects the existing knowledge and opens up questions and space for further research. If the reader gets closer to this fascinating topic, which is essential also an international perspective, the thematic issue has fulfilled its task.

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