11-3-2016

Bethlehem Chapel: How a Place Can be Reinterpreted by Government

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BETHLEHEM CHAPEL:

HOW A PLACE CAN BE REINTERPRETED BY GOVERNMENT

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

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2016

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ABSTRACT

An important source of legitimacy for all types of government is the creation of or building up of a sense of nationhood for the citizens of the state. This can be achieved in many ways, including through the use of physical nationalist symbols. In my paper, I address this topic by exploring how the Communist government of Czechoslovakia reinterpreted and changed the traditional meaning of the historical Bethlehem Chapel in Prague in order to fit their own ideology. I found that the Communist government emphasized the communal aspects of the Hussite movement and ignored religious associations. My research is primarily historical, with a focus on the role and importance of the Chapel in Czech history and how this significance influenced it's rebuilding by the antireligious Communist government in the early 1950's. This research is significant because it demonstrates how a government encourages nationalism by emphasizing certain aspects of a symbol in order to change its meaning.

Keywords: Nationalism, Czechoslovakia, Communism, Religion

Dedicated to my sister, Janis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: Political Science, International Affairs

Minor Field: Economics

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

For many visitors to the historic city of Prague in the Czech Republic today, there are a number of historical buildings and attractions to visit. This includes landmarks from Prague Castle to the Astronomical Clock in Old Town Square, with many of these locations dating back earlier than the 13th century. One of these buildings, located a few minutes walking distance from Old Town Square, is the moderately sized Bethlehem Chapel. While the structure that stands today was built in the mid-20th century, the significance of the Chapel dates back to the early 15th century. Its importance revolves around its connection to the religious reformist Jan Hus, who preached in the Chapel for over a decade following its construction. Today there are no permanent religious services held in the Chapel, but many events as well as regular tours are held there; the government also occasionally hosts state events in the Chapel. While the history of the building is centuries old, the current building itself is a reconstruction from the 1950s conducted by the Communist government, who had taken power in 1948. Interestingly enough, the atheistic government – whom had been taking active steps against the church even while the Chapel was being rebuilt – had decided to reconstruct the Chapel in order to incorporate its association with Jan Hus into a broader attempt to connect Communist ideology to Jan Hus's teachings and movement. The government had been struggling

with integrating and connecting Communist ideology to Czech identity; while the party

had experienced its strongest support during the last free elections in 1946 prior to their

coup in 1948, they still only managed 38% of the vote in an election with a 94% turnout.[1]

This meant that 62% of the population didn't support the Communist Party and its

platform, and the Party's forceful takeover of the government during the coup didn't

shrink this percentage. This made a societal reform as well as a political and economic

one imperative for the new government. In order to better gain real support and integrate

Communist ideology with society, the party had decided to incorporate existing symbols

and places of Czech identity into Communist identity. For them, the Chapel was an

important enough symbol of existing Czech identity, due to its connection to the

historical reformist Jan Hus, that they could mold it to fit their pursuit of a broader

national identity, despite the inherent conflict between the religious symbolism of the

Chapel and the atheistic ideology of Communism. For my paper, I will take a look at how

the Communist government attempted to reconcile these differences and re-interpret the

traditional meaning of the Chapel to fit the broader national identity it was attempting to

create.

  An important goal for the stability of a government of a state is to develop

multiple sources of legitimacy; which is the right and acceptance of this body to govern a

state. Without legitimacy, a government is at risk of losing support or even completely

losing control over its territory and population. A government can draw upon multiple

sources of legitimacy; the strength of the economy, recognition by outside states, popular

sovereignty or even military might. However, another vital source is the formation of a

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[1] Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver*, Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2010, pg. 142.

coherent identity in support of the state. The Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), an organization of international think tanks and other institutions, notes that a shared identity is vital to legitimize the state, exclaiming: "Such [government] institutions must also resonate with societies in order for them to be considered legitimate and to become embedded in society."[2] States without established governments, states that are newly formed, and states that have recently experienced a regime transformation often face the difficulty of governing a territory filled with a variety of ethnic groups, nations, and ideologies, many of which have their own interests and aspirations that could undermine state stability. This makes forming a more encompassing, coherent national identity that complements the ideology of the state important in the process of unifying the population and more completely assuring the legitimacy of the government. As the GSDRC also notes, a state that is fragmented into multiple competing groups is a state that is constantly weakened by its own citizenry.[3]

For my paper, I will consider how a government uses identity formation through nationalism to provide legitimacy after a regime change; more specifically, my research question revolves around how a new government in an existing state uses previously existing sources and symbols in order to help contribute and create a sense of national identity. For my paper, I want to concentrate on the efforts made to incorporate and reinterpret traditional symbols of Czech identity into the Communist ideology of the new government of Czechoslovakia formed from a coup in 1948. Specifically, I want to

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[2] GSDRC: Applied Knowledge Services. "State-society relations and citizenship: State legitimacy." http://www.gsdrc.org/topic-guides/state-society-relations-and-citizenship/state-legitimacy/
[3] Ibid., "State-society relations and citizenship: Civic trust and socio-political cohesion: overview."

examine the reconstruction and reinterpretation of Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, which started in 1950 and finished in 1954.

So, why is Bethlehem Chapel an interesting case study of the process of reinterpretation by new regimes? Firstly, the Chapel itself is a strong symbol of Czech identity through its association to the religious reformer Jan Hus. Jan Hus lived in the late 14th to early 15th century in Bohemia (part of the traditional Czech Crown lands), and was notable for being one of the first to break from the Catholic Church. His teachings began the Hussite movement, and his death in 1415 at the hands of the Catholics was one of the main causes of the Hussite Wars in the mid-15th century. While nationalism was very different during Hus's time period, this did not prevent him from becoming an important nationalist symbol for Czechs in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of Hus's followers were Czechs from the area known as the Kingdom of Bohemia, and he became an important symbol for Czech national identity throughout the centuries; especially during a nationalist revival while still under Habsburg control in the mid to late 19th century. As the Habsburg Empire weakened and loosened restrictions on ethnic minorities, the Czechs began to revive their language as well as revisit the Hussite era. As Bakke notes, texts and writings on the time period had been restricted to the Catholic perspective. The image of Jan Hus was also brought up as a nationalist symbol during the inter-war period in the early 20th century. Bethlehem Chapel was an especially important symbol of Hus because it was where he carried out many of his early sermons. However, the rebuilding of the Chapel by the Communist government is surprising due to its strong religious association – not only is it a symbol of the religious Hussite movement, but it is the place where Hus shared many of his first sermons. This is

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significant because religion itself was not accepted into communist ideology; it was seen as a barrier between the development of an egalitarian society, and a method used to prevent revolution of the working class. Karl Marx himself describes religion as just a method used by capitalists to exploit the common man, noting: "Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests." The Czech government did not ignore this anti-religious aspect of their ideology and took measures to reduce the importance of religion in society. Luzy and Navratilova note the aggressive campaign carried out against religion by the government: "Before 1989, all public functions of religion were suppressed on purpose, and religion itself was atheistically interpreted and devaluated as a mere 'anachronism'. A large range of priests were imprisoned or executed, church orders were abolished, church property was confiscated and the life of religious organisations was submitted to state surveillance…" Thousands of church dignitaries were arrested, including over 10,000 nuns and 2,000 monks. While there is plenty of literature available on the history of Bethlehem Chapel, there is little literature that looks deeply at the motivations of the Communist government for rebuilding the Chapel, and how they used the Chapel once it was rebuilt. So why would a government that was ideologically opposed to religion use a religious symbol to help build a national identity? What made the Chapel significant to the Communists, despite its religious symbolism? Assuming Jan Hus's legacy not only centered on religion, how did the government emphasize those aspects and de-emphasize Hus's religious legacy? Consideration of these questions will show how the Communist government was able to reinterpret Bethlehem Chapel in order to reduce its religious significance and give it an identity that conformed more closely to what the Communists

wanted it to be. A brief look at some of the challenges that are faced by the latter compared to established ones is also helpful when considering which nationalisms are available for use, which may vary according to the particular circumstances of the state; such as the type of government, process of secession, level of economic development, and ethnic diversity. The literature related to this topic focuses in particular on post-colonial African and Asian states, post-Soviet bloc states, as well as recently independent African and Middle Eastern states. For the purposes of the paper, I will be focusing on examples from Central European states, Czechoslovakia in particular. It is important to explain what is meant by a newly formed state; while there is not a single agreed upon definition, scholars generally include those that are in the first 15-30 years of the their life (although it must be noted that nation building is an on-going process for all states). Most of the focus by scholars is from 1945 to the present, as this period saw the some of the greatest increases of new nation-states compared to the centuries before. However, the creation of new states in Central Europe following World War I is also a point of study.

Before considering nationalism and how a state uses it, it is important to come up with a basic and broad definition of "nation" and "nationalism"[4]. Motyl notes that the concept of nationalism (and also the concept of the nation) is "…a word that resonates with a number of different meanings."[5] The most basic definition describes nationalism as efforts to promote a certain nation, ideology, or state. However, Motyl also notes that it is important to narrow the definition of nationalism based on whom is using it. He gives multiple definitions of nationalism and nationalists, including the pursuit and belief

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[4] Please note that the definition considered is nationalism within the context of how it used by the state.
[5] A.J. Motyl, "The modernity of nationalism: Nations, states, and nation-states in the contemporary world." *Journal of International Affairs* 45, no. 2 (1992): 307.

in a national identity, the pursuit of the nation-state, and the pursuit of the well-being of

the nation above all else.[6][7] Nationalism by a new state often means forming a new

identity by building upon and incorporating already existing national identity. For the

purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on this definition, with specific focus on how a

government uses nationalism for this purpose.

While there are various forms of nationalism, they are often expressed through

similar means. Celebrations, literature, pamphlets, public speeches, education, and

government policy are examples of methods that states use to express and build up

different forms of nationalism and socialize their audience in a particular manner. History

plays an important part in this; historical symbols are often an important part of building

a national identity, and are critical in influencing what type of national identity the state

will decide to pursue. As Claire Sutherland mentions with respect to the influence of

history on types of nationalism, "Nonetheless, the question of origins does matter to how

nationalists and nation-builders define their respective nations."[8] History can also

include important elements of culture and dates in the established or new state, which

helps connect a populace even more to the desired identity of the state. Religious history

and culture of nations within a new state can also serve as an important indicator of what

nationalisms a government might use, whether it be to acknowledge and increase the

influence of religion or, as in the case of Czechoslovakia, to reduce the influence of

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[6] The pursuit and belief in a national identity is the concept that a state should have its own national identity, although it is not mutually exclusive with other national identities within the state. The concept of a nation-state is one where all the citizens of a state identify with the state's national identity. The final point centers on the notion that nationalism promotes the optimal ideals for the well-being and status of the state and its national identity.

[7] Motyl, "The modernity of nationalism," 318.

[8] Claire Sutherland, *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Responses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 23.

religion. Keely Stauter-Halsted also notes the importance of historically significant dates

as a way for the state to express its desired nationalist rhetoric, mentioning "…nations are

commonly characterized as coalescing at particular historical moments from a

combination of uniquely 'modern' forces."[9] It's important to note that the process of

selecting and emphasizing certain figures and events for nationalist purposes is often an

elite driven process, meant to be used to aid in consolidating power through greater

legitimacy. This is evidenced by the fact that states often mold history to fit their needs,

downplaying or building up certain elements of historical figures and events based on the

type of nationalism and the rhetoric of that nationalism that states wish to use. For

example, Cynthia Paces mentions how the new Czech government during the interwar

period in the 1920's initially stressed the importance of the historical figure of Jan Hus, a

protestant religious figure, only to downplay him and encourage St. Wenceslas as another

nationalist figure in order to appeal to the Catholic citizens of the country.[10][11]

For new states, who often lack a concrete and established history to draw upon

and channel nationalist rhetoric through, the challenge of forming a national identity is

even greater. Some new states will choose to cling to any tradition they can find,

attempting to cobble together evidence of a much older nation than what might actually

exist. Weber describes this method of gaining legitimacy as an 'appeal to tradition',

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[9] Keely Stauter-Halsted, "Rural Myth and the Modern Nation," in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Hapsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present*, ed. Maria Bucer and Nancy Wingfield (United States: Purdue University, 2001), 153.

[10] This was necessary due to the fact that the Catholic minority was significant and expressed outrage over the promotion of Jan Hus and apathy by the state towards significant Catholic figures. In order for the new Czech government to maintain stability, they chose to focus more on significant Catholic figures for nationalism imagery – although they did pick and choose what symbols they wanted to focus upon; for example, the patron saints in Wenceslas square were ignored.

[11] Cynthia J. Paces, "Religious Heroes for a Secular State," in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Hapsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present*, ed. Maria Bucer and Nancy Wingfield (United States: Purdue University, 2001), 209.

noting: "…command and obedience are considered to be legitimate if they are in accord with custom or are 'traditional'."[12] An example of this is the significance of the Moravian Empire for Czechs and Slovaks. While Eyal notes how this history has been used recently to promote Slovak state identity, he also notes that it was used to promote shared Czechoslovak identity, due to the fact that parts of present-day Moravia and Slovakia had been within its borders: "…Great Moravia was the 'first common state of Czechs and Slovaks,' i.e. the first 'Czechoslovakia'".[13] As Sutherland also mentions, this focus on local and traditional custom can lead to an unwillingness to welcome foreigners, or even those that are perceived to be outside of the sphere of the perceived nation, and lead to a more exclusive nationalist rhetoric as a whole.[14] When lacking a solid history, new states that had an eventful independence movement will often use the independence process as a source of nationalist imagery.[15]

Newly formed states often face significant challenges to legitimacy and nation-building that can influence their nationalist rhetoric. This is in part caused by the relative instability that surrounds the new government after its assumption of sovereign power of the new territory or from the change of one government system into another. These can includes ethnic divisions, lack of a coherent shared history, and imposition and influence of authority by more powerful outside actors. Brubaker defines a "triangle" of challenges for the newly formed post-Soviet states of Central and Eastern Europe in his book "Nationalism Reframed." First, the idea of a "core nation", or the ethnic group that exists

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[12] Craig Matheson, ""Weber and the Classification of Forms of Legitimacy," *The British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 2 (1987), 207.
[13] Gill Eyal, "Identity and Trauma: Two Forms of the Will to Memory," *History and Memory* 16 (2004), 18.
[14] Sutherland, *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century*, 24.
[15] Some examples of this would include Estonia, the United States, India, etc.

within the state but holds a position of power through its domination of the central government. Brubaker notes that this nation, despite attempting to assert its legitimacy as the dominant nation within the state, is often in a more vulnerable position than at first perceived. This is because of the "legacy of discrimination" that preceded its ownership of the state.[16] A "legacy of discrimination" is the history of subjugation by a non-affiliated government or power on the ethnic group that has assumed power in the new state. The Czech's position in Czechoslovakia is a good example of this; prior to the creation of the Czechoslovak state, the territory had been a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and ruled by the Habsburgs. The dominant ethnic group in this Empire had been Austrians and Germans, and Czechs had been historically subjugated and their culture and language actively attacked by the Habsburgs. The Hussite Movement, connected directly with Jan Hus and Bethlehem Chapel, had been seen as an example of the struggle against this. While they were the dominant ethnic group within Czechoslovakia after its creation, there were still very significant German and Slovak minorities, leaving them in a tough situation within the new country and encouraging the government to more actively promote Czech identity. Brubaker's second side of the triangle is the challenge of "external national homelands". He describes this challenge as one faced by newly formed states when an external, more established state attempts to assert its own influence on members of its national group within the newly formed state, claiming a sense of obligation to "take care" of members located in other states. An external national homeland can also limit participation of a new state in the global community; exerting influence economically as well as politically. Czechoslovakia during the inter-war period

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[16] Rogers Brubaker. "Nationalism refrained: Nationhood and the national question in the new Europe." (UK: Cambridge, 1996), 6.

also experienced this situation with the more powerful country of Germany to a great degree. The new country still had a significant German population, especially in the territory along the border of Germany known as the Sudetenland. Germany, led by Hitler at the time, used their position and apparent concern for the German minorities in this area to annex this Czech territory, and was even able to remove the Czech government from negotiations over the acquisition of the territory. Brubaker's third side of his conceptual triangle is the challenge posed by ethnic minorities within the newly formed state. These minorities, Brubaker attests, often campaign for their own rights and recognition by the state and can sometimes encourage further divisions in society and discourage the pursuit by the state of a more coherent national identity.[17] While established states can also suffer challenges from ethnic divisions, this challenge is often more profound in newly formed states because of the weakness of the central government and "core nation"; as a new state, they have not had enough time to strengthen their legitimacy by socializing their citizens through a shared sense of identity. Again, Czechoslovakia also faced this challenge both during the interwar period as well as after World War II. While the Slovaks had been more willing to work with the Czechs, they still campaigned for greater independence from the central Czech government; the German minority had also encouraged more rights and independence, and many had supported the annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany. After World War II, the Czechs decided to address the impact of this third side of the "triangle" by forcefully expelling former German-speaking Czechoslovak citizens from the country by the millions; actions that were known as the "Beneš Decrees". This increased the power of

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[17] Brubaker, "Nationalism reframed," 6.

the Czechs and allowed them to more easily exert influence over the remaining ethnic minorities in the country.

Another challenge for many newly formed states is the lack of an extensive shared history to draw from for nationalist rhetoric. Established states can draw upon history and cultural practices and imagery for nationalist celebrations, while new states often have a more difficult time finding shared experiences to form an identity. New states are also not able to participate as effectively in global politics compared to older states, as noted by Ejikeme Jombo Nwagwu in his article "New States in World Politics: Prospects and Challenges". While Nwagwu mentions that there are some exceptions, new states generally don't have access to the same resources as established ones[18], and are therefore unable to use global influence to enhance nationalist rhetoric; instead, they must use more locally concentrated forms of nationalism.

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[18] Ejikeme Nwagwu, Ugwueze Ikechukwu. "New States in World Politics: Prospects and Challenges." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science* 19, no. 10 (2014): 1.

CHAPTER TWO:

TYPES OF NATIONALISM USED BY NEW STATES

This will require some consideration of how various forms of nationalism
employed by established states compare with those employed by a new form of
government in others. One of the biggest concerns for new states are ethnic divisions and
social cleavages. Brubaker notes that the dominant or "core" group of new states are
often in a vulnerable position, as they face the prospect of integrating numerous other
existing ethnic minorities within the new state. This makes policies addressing the
integration of these groups vital, and Brubaker outlines two main models of policy.[19]
These models revolve around whether or not the state decides to assimilate certain ethnic
minorities, or whether they decide to dissimilate or "reject" ethnic minorities. Scholarship
on ethnic nationalism in new states tend to revolve around these two nationalist positions.
However, some scholars, such as Smith, criticize Brubaker's models and instead focus on
minority rights and the role of international organizations in shaping the nationalist
rhetoric of new states.[20]

One of the more aggressive forms of ethnic nationalism used is the forced
assimilation of ethnic minorities into the dominant or desired culture. Brubaker defines it

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[19] Brubaker, "Nationalism reframed," 83-84.
[20] David J. Smith, "Framing the National Question in Central and Eastern Europe: A Quadratic
Nexus?" *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 2, no. 1 (2002): 3-16.
http://www.ethnopolitics.org/ethnopolitics/archive/volume_II/issue_1/smith.pdf

as "nationalization is a form of assimilation, that is, of 'making similar': it involves making a target population similar to some reference population, whose putative characteristics are conceived as normative for the citizenry as a whole." Some scholars, such as Galbreath, point out that this is often achieved through government mandated programs, such as education, language assimilation, and other policies that produce restrictions on minority participation in civic culture until they have met certain assimilating requirements. According to Galbreath, the key way a state starts assimilation of minorities is through the promotion of a national language, as he notes that "…it is important to point out that language is the one issue central to the naturalization and education issues." This is because language differences can inhibit communication abilities, making education and other assimilation methods less effective. Minorities will often see this as a challenge to their cultural identity, especially if the state requires that the desired language be taught while excluding teaching of the minority language altogether; however, the nationalizing state often sees this as an important part of the process of integration of a minority community into the dominant identity of the state. In terms of what minority groups are most likely to be chosen for assimilation practices, Brubaker notes that minorities that are seen as more similar to the majority group are more likely to be targeted, while minorities that have a history of dislike by the majority group will not. Brubaker also theorizes that minorities that have a stronger sense of cultural identity are oftentimes much harder to assimilate, and the new state will shape their policies based on this presumption. Assimilation policies tend to be more accepted and effective over time, with governments often "staggering" requirements to allow for more gradual assimilation.

The actions taken by Communist governments after WWII – including the Communist Czech government – are a different example of forced assimilation. Instead of a dominant ethnic group attempting to assimilate ethnic minorities into their culture, the Communist's aim was to create a new culture revolving around socialism ("the new socialist man") and assimilate all ethnic groups into this culture – including the majority group. More directly this included an assault on religious traditions and institutions, which were a significant part of Czech culture and a part of society for the Communists to attempt to subvert. This significance can be seen just through census results alone - according to the 1950 census, carried out only two years after the coup , roughly 92% of responders identified themselves as belonging to a religion or religious denomination (the other 8% either nondenominational or didn't respond), with the vast majority identifying as catholic. The government also addressed other traditions that didn't align with Communist ideology; commemorative holidays created during the inter-war period (such as a holiday recognizing the Battle at White Mountain) were de-emphasized and sometimes replaced by Communist holidays, for example. This strategy was very successful; by the 2001 census, only a little over 20% of respondents identified as religious, with a significant percentage identifying as atheist.

While some states choose forced assimilation, many others choose the opposite – "dissimilation", or rejection, of different minority groups. Brubaker defines dissimilation as: "Far from seeking to make people similar, it prescribes differential treatment on the basis of their presumed fundamental difference. Instead of seeking to alter identities, it takes them as given." Brubaker reasons that this is primarily achieved through a harsh nationalist rhetoric towards the targeted minority group, along with

policies that seek to further separate the group from the identity of the state as well as prevent them from participating in the government or the bourgeoisie. A more extreme example of dissimilation in Czechoslovakia, as mentioned previously, was the forced migration of former German citizens out of the country through the Beneš decrees. The German minority had composed almost 30% of the total population before they were ejected, resulting in a staggering difference in both total population as well as the ethnic makeup of the country once the decrees were carried out. The totalitarian nature of the Communist governments, including in Czechoslovakia, also had an element of dissimilation; while forced assimilation was more often implemented, the government was aggressive against any minority or individual unwilling to assimilate and would execute, imprison, and implement other violent practices against them.

There is a third possible nationalist rhetoric towards minorities that Brubaker touches upon briefly, and admits may be a more successful one. This is the "minority rights" rhetoric; which bears some similarity to the assimilation rhetoric. The key difference between these nationalist methods is that in the minority rights model, minority groups are given special rights and ability to participate in the government instead of being assimilated into the dominant culture; benefits can include their own education institutions, language concessions, and more. It is Brubaker's very brief discussion on this rhetoric that draws criticism from David Smith, who contends that this is a vital rhetoric that deserves more attention. Part of this could be because of a focus on civic nationalism in new democratic states or states experiencing a regime change to a democratic system. A good example would be a shift in focus of the new Czech government that formed in 1990 after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. Despite

their totalitarian past (or perhaps because of), the government rhetoric changed from one that was only accepting of a single ideology to one that promoted the participation of all minorities in the political community. Vaclav Havel, the first president of the fledgling democracy, was an especially loud proponent of this; in his first presidential address in 1990, he paints an idealistic but hopeful picture of a more accepting government and populace: "Masaryk based his politics on morality. Let us try, in a new time and in a new way, to restore this concept of politics. Let us teach ourselves and others that politics should be an expression of a desire to contribute to the happiness of the community rather than of a need to cheat or rape the community." Instead, Smith puts more emphasis on the minority rights model. He stresses that their influence is so important that Brubaker's model should be modified into a "quadratic nexus" to include international organizations as another vital actor. Smith surmises that international organizations are vital because they have the ability to bring attention to minority issues and put pressure on new and developing states (especially weak states, such as those in the Global South) to institute more minority rights.

Often connected with ethnic nationalism but also often considered its own form of nationalism, religion can have an important and profound influence on nationalist rhetoric. Brubaker gives four different viewpoints on the connection between religion and nationalism; that religion is connected to ethnic nationalism, that it is its own form of nationalism, that religion serves to help explain nationalism, and that religion can be a part of all types of nationalism. Brubaker argues that the connection between ethnic nationalism and religion revolves around the similar social structures that each has; namely, as a means of social identification, organizational membership, and political

claims. He argues it is more accurate to consider the relationship of religion and ethnic nationalism in this way as opposed to a more direct comparison. Marsh also seems to agree with this viewpoint; he discusses how religion can function similarly to ethnicity, used as a nationalist device but also a construct that could serve as a divider in society. This view of religion and nationalism may relate more closely to Bethlehem Chapel, as its appeal for Czechs revolved around its religious connection to a protestant reformist, as opposed to Catholic religious identity. This especially contrasted with the dominant Catholic religious identity of the Slovaks.

Brubaker also considers how religion might explain parts of nationalism. He describes this theory as one where religious tradition in a state or community has had a powerful effect on what forms of nationalism developed over time. He points to the influence of Protestantism on English nationalism, Catholicism on Polish, Shintoism on Japanese nationalism, as well as numerous others. Literature has even gone as far as to consider the role religion has played in the development of nationalism itself, arguing that it has been central in the evolution of nationalism. Brubaker not only considers the role of religion in the development of political symbols, but also how significant religious movements and practices influenced nationalism. Brubaker attests that this newer understanding of religion's role in nationalist development supersedes the older argument that nationalism developed as religion declined; this argument revolved around the idea that nationalism was the "antithesis" to religion, becoming more prevalent as religion declined. Recent consideration of the topic, however, argues that the opposite actually occurred, where the earliest forms of nationalism rose with increased religious fervor. Brubaker also discusses the argument that religion is its own distinct form of nationalism,

with its own unique characteristics. In this discussion, he looks at the role of Islam in many Middle Eastern countries and argues that it can fall into this category, although the lines are still grey as to whether or not it completely fits the definition.

The final argument is that religion is so closely related to nationalism that it is a part of it rather than an outside explanation for nationalism. Brubaker points to religious identities that also double as national identities, such as with Jewish and Sikh nations. States that prescribe closely to Sharia law may also be included under this umbrella. Brubaker also notes the case of nationalist political rhetoric in the United States, and how it often contains religious symbolism and language. Brubaker argues, however, that there are some problems with this argument; namely, that particulars of language can make it difficult to determine the level of religious language in nationalist rhetoric, as well as the argument that it's possible nationalism influences religion instead of vice versa. It's difficult to determine whether or not the use of Bethlehem Chapel as a nationalist symbol by a government that was anti-religious in all of its other nationalist imagery fits within this argument. It's hard to contend that the Communist government was heavily influenced by religion due to its secular and aggressive campaign against it, but the fact that it used a religious figure as a nationalist symbol anyways suggests it was influenced by religion to some degree.

The development of civic culture and use of civic nationalism can also be important in legitimizing the new government of a state. New states are often faced with the challenge of encouraging political participation and determining what role civic organizations should play in society – whether they should be centrally controlled by the state or almost serve as an alternate, providing services independent of state control.

Scholars tend to focus on three things when judging what role civic nationalism plays in a new state: the type of government the state has (especially governments with more rigid control vs. governments that are more democratic), the perception of government leaders towards the role of civic culture, as well as the relationship between ethnic and civic nationalism.

The type of government the new state forms has a large impact on the role civic nationalism will play – or if it will be even used at all. Many scholars barely discuss civic nationalism or development of civic culture in new socialist or autocratic states, and some even define civic nationalism as one used exclusively in democracies. For example, Stilz argues that "Civic nationhood is meant to describe a political identity around shared citizenship in a liberal-democratic state." This argument contends that civic culture and nationalism is based around the idea that it promotes an "equal" identity, and is also voluntary, often based around party membership and the role of the leading party versus other minority parties. Therefore, new states that are autocratic centralize civic institutions and force party and government identity instead of allowing voluntary participation. Schoepflin argues that new post-World War II Communist governments "…eliminated all possible civic institution and codes of conduct, it turned these societies into civic deserts where the micro-level patterns of behavior were governed by mistrust and characterized by atomization." It should be noted that this process was not one that happened immediately, but often more gradually. While Communist governments did encourage civic participation, the key difference is that participation was not voluntary. Also, the totalitarian nature of the governments over society and practices of social engineering eliminated the possibility of healthy civic institutions. Alternatively, many

scholars argue that a civic society and nationalism is pivotal for the survival of new democratic governments. Diamond notes that "Democracy - in particular, a healthy liberal democracy - also requires a public that is organized for democracy, socialized to its norms and values, and committed not just to its myriad narrow interests but to larger, common, 'civic,' ends. Such a civic public is only possible with a vibrant 'civil society.'" In a way, new communist governments attempted to build a vibrant "civil society" surrounding the Communist Party in order to tighten their hold on power over their countries, but it lacked the participatory and government-independent nature of many civil societies in democratic states.

One of the most debated and important aspects of the role of civic nationalism is the civic vs. ethnic nationalism debate. The original theory, developed by Hans Kohn, revolved around the difference between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism, also including a regional distinction of the types of nationalism used in Eastern states and Western states. Kohn argues that Western democratic states tend to use civic nationalism while ethnic nationalism dominates Eastern states; and contends that a reliance on ethnic nationalism encourages more firm autocratic rule while civic is associated with democratic governments. Lecours expands upon this definition, noting that ethnic nationalism "views the nation as an organic whole, that is, as a natural and self-regulating social system…" with the distinction being "Civic nationalism does not equate cultural homogeneity with nationhood…it does not define the nation using cultural markers but considers it a community of laws." This argument contends that ethnic nationalism is often more culturally exclusive than civic, which seeks to include all groups in society within the civic culture. The use of Jan Hus and Bethlehem Chapel by the Communist

government seems to support and contradict this view at the same time, due to the usage of Jan Hus as more of an ethnic nationalist symbol and not civic. Jan Hus is a symbol that is significant for Czechs, not other minority ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia such as the Slovaks and the Hungarians. Hus could even be seen as a symbol against the Slovaks, considering the anti-Catholic elements of Hus's identity coupled with the prevalence of Catholicism in the Slovak minority. The Communists used him as a nationalist symbol to appeal to Czechs specifically and try and tie in Hus to their national identity. It supports Kohn's theory that ethnic nationalism is more often used by autocratic governments as the Communist government was autocratic and totalitarian. However, it contradicts Lecour's assumption in that Communist ideology promotes the idea that there are no ethnic distinctions or exclusivity, just communist citizens; the government's use of Hus as a form of ethnic nationalism in order to appeal to Czechs does not completely align with this idea.

Finally, focus on civic nationalism and culture in a new state can also depend on the desires of the political leaders themselves. Some leaders will wish for more centralized government and emphasize ethnic nationalism and other nationalisms, while others value development of civil society and will emphasize civic nationalism. A good example of this would be in the democratic government of Post-Communist Czechoslovakia, where there was disagreement between Vaclav Havel and Vaclav Klaus on the role of civil society. Klaus was an influential figure and politician in the new Czech government as opposed to Havel, whose role as President (largely ceremonial in the new government system) meant he did not have as strong of influence. Fawn notes that "For Havel, civil society was fundamental and was the only way to reconstitute

Czech society," while "Klaus, by contrast, stressed liberal economics…" According to Fawn, Klaus wanted more centralization and saw civil groups as a barrier for the individual to participate in government instead of an important way to develop civic values. Their conflict is a similar one many new democratic states face when trying to determine if a strong civil society is vital for a solid democracy.

While all of these nationalisms are significant for the new regime and can often be connected to other forms of nationalism they used as well as their use of Hus, there is one I want to examine in particular – the reinterpretation and use of already existing symbols in order to increase the legitimacy of the new government. For many new regimes, this is especially important because citizens already have a collective memory and connection to these existing symbols. Wingfield and Bucur note the importance of this memory in the creation of a national culture: "Collective memory…becomes an important process for the creation of community memory and identity, because it is both cultural artifact and practice." As mentioned before, this memory can be associated with a variety of physical symbols – figures, statues, historic places, and others. The challenge for the new government, then, is effectively incorporating these symbols into the broader identity they want to create. This can be quite difficult, as not all symbols necessarily contribute to the desired identity of the state – especially when a state experiences a regime change that is ideologically different – some may even directly challenge it. Incorporating a symbol also often means changing its perception; emphasizing certain characteristics of a symbol while ignoring others

CHAPTER THREE:

THE NEW GOVERNMENT

Prior to the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, Czechoslovakia had not been an independent state since its absorption by the Habsburg Empire centuries before. Even then, it was the first time that a "Czechoslovak" state, made up of traditionally Bohemian and Moravian regions as well as traditional Slovak lands, had existed. While Bohemia and Moravia had functioned under a single ruler, Slovakia had never existed as an independent state and had been tied more closely to Hungary instead of Bohemia and Moravia. The new Czechoslovak government, officially formed in 1918, was a relatively stable, if weak, parliamentary democracy. It was able to carry out multiple elections before the forced annexation of territory by the Germans as a part of the Munich Agreement in 1938 and the invasion and installation of a puppet government for the rest of Czechoslovak territory by the Germans the following year. The country would not gain its independence from the Germans until 1945, and formed a parliamentary democracy yet again and held elections in 1946; in 1948, however, a coup d'e tat by the Communist Party led to a Communist takeover of the Czech government, beginning a regime that would last all the way until its fall after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

The importance of this inter-war period with regards to the Communist government's legitimacy and pursuit of symbolic nationalism in the form of the

rebuilding of Bethlehem Church is the significance of the Communist movement *before*

its takeover of the government. The Communist movement within the democratic

Czechoslovak government, in the interwar period as well as the brief period before their

takeover in 1948, was not insignificant; the party had a strong minority within

Parliament. In the 1925 elections, it was second largest party in terms of seats in the two

parliamentary chambers, holding 12% of seats, with just a one percentage point

difference between it and the majority party, who held 13% of seats.[21] While this

percentage went down in the elections afterwards (but prior to German occupation) the

party was able to consistently maintain at least 10% of the vote. Despite its ban by the

Nazi government during its occupation of Czechoslovakia in World War Two, the party

held its strength, and even gained support; in the 1946 elections (just two years before the

coup) the Communist Party won the majority of seats, gaining 31% of the vote and

almost half of available seats in Parliament.[22] The party's success could have been partly

driven by veiled concessions to the democratic system of the state as well as

capitalization on anti-German and anti-Hungarian feelings within the populace. Klement

Gottwald was party chairman at the time, and his statement of policy as Prime Minister

following the elections reveals these appeals to the public. He states: "The new

Constitution will emphasize that the Republic is a national state of the Czechs and

Slovaks. The transfer of Germans and Hungarians and the resettlement of the border

districts by Czechs and Slovaks must culminate in a constitutional guarantee that only the

Czech and Slovak nations will in future decide in all public and national affairs…" In this

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[21] "Elections in Europe; a Data Handbook," *Reference and Research Book News* 25, no. 4 (2010): Reference and Research Book News, Vol.25, 471.
[22] Ibid.

statement he also makes some concessions, promising that the new constitution would uphold free elections and guarantee civil rights, including rights such as freedom of religion. However, there is some sprinkling of more direct Communist Party policy – Gottwald mentions that "The new Constitution must also embody the great complex of decrees on the nationalization of banking, mines, mineral resources, power and the big and key industries. The new Constitution must disappoint the hopes of all those who believe that the nationalized economic enterprises will be returned to a handful of big capitalists."[23] The USSR's success in liberating Czechoslovakia from German control also improved perceptions of the Communist Party in the country. These tactics and reasons meant that the Communists were effective in their campaign to gain support through the masses, and it was this in part that allowed them to force (relatively peacefully) the creation of a new Communist government in 1948.

However, despite the fact that the Communists were able to capitalize on public support in order to carry out their government takeover, their position was still more tenuous than they had hoped. While the Party had managed to secure 31% of the vote in the 1946 elections, it was still a long way from an absolute majority of 51%. Opposing political parties (such as the Social Democrats) had also been able to put up more resistance than expected, which led to high political tension in the months leading up to the February coup; and while the coup itself was bloodless, many democratic proponents were arrested and the Communists had to forcefully remove current political leaders.[24] National unity was also fairly weak at the time, as the inter-war government had not had

[23] Czechoslovakia. Ministry of Information, *Statement of Policy of the Third Government of the National Front of the Czechs and Slovaks, Made by the Premier, Klement Gottwald, in the Constituent National Assembly, Prague, July 8, 1946:* By Klement Gottwald. 9-12.
[24] Ibid., 118.

a very long period of time to try and form a stronger Czechoslovak national identity

before the German invasion. Also, despite the growth of the Communist Party before the

coup and after, there was still considerable apathy towards the ideology of socialism and

collectivism that made up the core of party values. Zinner notes that motives to join the

party usually revolved around the protection the party could provide as well as the

opportunity, instead of any strong ideological affiliation.[25] This is evidenced through

Wightman's evaluation of recruitment tactics and statistics from before and after the

coup. He notes that the Communist Party had allowed no-restrictions mass recruitment of

individuals right before, during, and for a short time after the coup; this included

recruitment of hundreds of thousands of individuals who had been members of rival

political parties (such as the Social Democrats). As Wightman notes, mass recruitment of

thousands of individuals who had previously professed loyalty to a rival party doesn't

strengthen the ideological aims of the party.[26] Zinner also notes that this lack of a

coherent ideological party identity immediately created significant issues, the most

important which was that "…the Party's ideological and organizational foundations were

seriously weakened."[27] The Catholic Church also posed problems for the government,

although it had been weakened after the German expulsion from Czechoslovakia from

1944-1950. Prominent members of the Church, who were ideologically at odds with the

government, often refused to cooperate with Party demands. Rabas notes in his study of

the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia during that time period how "The

Episcopate and the government began conversations, the aim of which was to bring the

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[25] Paul Zinner, "Problems of Communist Rule in Czechoslovakia." *World Politics* 4, no. 01 (1951): 119.

[26] G. Whightman and A. H. Brown, "Changes in the Levels of Membership and Social Composition of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1945–73." *Soviet Studies* 27, no. 3 (1975): 402-3.

[27] Paul Zinner, "Problems of Communist Rule in Czechoslovakia." World Politics 4, no. 01 (1951): 119.

Catholic Church around to publicly recognize the rule of the Communist Party. However, all the Catholic bishops refused to do this."[28] These issues weakened legitimacy for the government and made it vital for the new Communist regime to form a coherent national identity that revolved around their ideology.

However, the Communists had not started from scratch when considering what existing sources of identity they could use to help build a national identity. During the mid to late 19th century, while still under Habsburg control (albeit weakening control) Czechs in Austria-Hungary saw the stirrings of a nationalist revival. Newspapers, groups, and other frontrunners began renewing old symbols of Czech identity – such as Jan Hus – and advocating for more recognition of these figures. Orzoff details how a Czech newspaper from the time called for nationalist monuments to be built: "The paper campaigned on behalf of patriotic Czech causes such as raising funds to build the National Theater or the monument to Jan Hus, fifteenth-century religious martyr and Czech national hero, in Prague's Old Town Square."[29] This dream would become reality under Tomas Masaryk, the first president of the democratic government of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period of 1918-1939. Masaryk, who had been encouraging the use of Hus as a nationalist symbol, set in motion different projects to commemorate the figure, including a statue of Hus in Old Town Square. Masaryk had deeply valued Hus as an important symbol of Czech identity even before becoming president in 1918; Pace mentions that Masaryk "…wrote and lectured extensively on the

[28] Josef Rabas, "The Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 2, no. 6 (September 1, 1982): 2.
[29] Andrea Orzoff, "'The Literary Organ of Politics': Tomas Masaryk and Political Journalism, 1925-1929." *Slavic Review* 63, no. 2 (2004): 276.

resonance of Hus's teachings for the modern Czech."[30] Unlike the Communist

government, Masaryk valued the religious legacy of Hus and interpreted the Hussite

movement as evidence of the right to rebel against any oppressor.[31] Contained within this

nationalist revival of Jan Hus was something else the Communists thought they could use

– growing anti-Catholicism. For Czech nationalists, Roman Catholic monuments that had

stood for centuries morphed into a reminder of Habsburg oppression, and many were

destroyed during the first few years of the republic, most notably the Marian Column.[32]

Anti-Catholicism was further heightened through its association with German and Nazi

oppression. Paces, in her article on Catholicism in the Second Czechoslovak Republic,

notes how Catholic iconography was used during Nazi occupation to legitimize German

rule over Bohemia and Moravia.[33] Armed with this association of occupation and

Catholicism, as well as the revival of Czech heroes such as Jan Hus, the Communist

government had a base to extend upon for their own nationalist rhetoric. It could

associate itself with "Czech" images and history while claiming that other forces (such as

Catholicism) were not "Czech" and instead foreign influences from the region's history

as an occupied land.

As mentioned before, there are many ways that a new regime might try and

strengthen legitimacy, and the chosen methods are often based on the most pressing

nationalist needs of the new state. For the new government of Czechoslovakia, this

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[30] Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century*, Kindle, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, "Jan Hus and the Modern Czech Nation" paragraph 7.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., "Toppling Columns" paragraph 5.
[33] Paces, Cynthia. "Catholicism and Fascism in the Realm of St. Wenceslas: Politics in the Second Czechoslovak Republic and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia." In *Catholicism and Fascism in Europe 1918 - 1945*, edited by Jan Nelis, Anne Morelli, and Danny Praet, 322.

included forming an identity around the communist ideology, as apathy towards the proclaimed values of the party was undermining the strength of the party itself. Wightman does provide statistics on the demographic makeup of party members before and after the influx of new members as a result of the coup, and notes that the proportion of members who were "blue-collar" workers or agricultural workers fell, while administrative and liberal arts workers increased.[34] This, along with the increase of members who had previously held membership at rival parties, undermined the ideological coherency of the Party. One thing the government focused on in order to achieve more acceptance of Communism, other than reduction of Communist Party membership, was tying the Communist ideology with notable Czech historical figures, especially the figure of Jan Hus, an early Protestant reformer. Hus was significant for his more egalitarian teachings, where he criticized the exclusive nature of higher ups in the Catholic Church. Many of his followers had also practiced socialistic living styles. This is what made Bethlehem Chapel important to the new government, as it was the Chapel from where Hus carried out his sermons and began his teachings.

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[34] G. Whightman and A. H. Brown, "Changes in the Levels of Membership and Social Composition of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1945–73." Soviet Studies 27, no. 3 (1975): 402-3.

CHAPTER FOUR:

SIGNIFICANCE OF BETHLEHEM CHAPEL

Bethlehem Chapel was built in 1391 in the Bohemian city of Prague, notable for

its simple gothic style and large size for the time (it could hold up to 3,000 people). The

Chapel would not gain significance until the appointment of Jan Hus as preacher in 1402,

an academic who had studied and then taught at Charles University in Prague. Hus would

serve as preacher for the Chapel for ten years, before being forcefully expelled from the

Chapel and Prague in 1412 and executed in 1415 by the Catholic Church. Jan Hus's place

as an important figure for Czech identity would be earned through the sermons and

teachings he delivered during his time at the Chapel, which would then provide the

backbone for the Czech Hussite movement and Hussite Wars that began soon after his

death. The Hussite wars not only solidified Jan Hus's place as a Czech hero, but also

gave birth to national figures such as military leader Jan Žižka, King Jirí and Podebrady.

As Fudge notes in his book on the religious and social reform movement that Hus began,

the preacher's legacy is closely tied to the Chapel itself: "Indeed, apart from his fiery

death in Constance more than thirteen years later, Jan Hus remains indissolubly linked

forever with Bethlehem Chapel."[35]

The significance of Hus's sermons revolve around the criticism he expressed

towards many of the practices of the Catholic Church. Hus argued that practices such as

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[35] Thomas A Fudge, *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, 12.

restricting the language of sermons to German or Latin, only allowing the Priest to drink wine during Communion, the use of indulgences, etc. disconnected the common man from faith and activities in the Church. He also argued that these practices increased class and elite divisions in society and restricted the common man's participation in a religion that should be accepting of all people. He expressed this criticism not only through the content of the sermons themselves, but also by delivering all of his sermons in the Czech language. This was significant because, as mentioned before, most Catholic Churches in Prague did not have sermons in Czech. This allowed many common people who did not understand German or Latin to participate in his congregation, and helped attract significantly large crowds. Hus's use of the Czech language also made him linguistically significant, not only because of its unique use in a religious setting but also through revisions he made to the language itself. Fudge notes that "Somewhere in the period from 1406 to 1412 Hus undertook significant revision of the Czech language."[36] Hus was considered a significant advocate for the religious participation of the general masses, and an early Protestant reformist. Uhlir summarizes Hus's historical significance during an interview conducted by Radio Prague, noting: "Jan Hus tried to increase the participation of these common folk in the congregation so they would play a more decisive role in the Church organization."[37] Hus' teachings became incredibly popular during his time at Bethlehem Chapel, and many of his sermons drew such large crowds that the Chapel would be at full capacity.

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[36] Ibid., 14.
[37] "In Search of Jan Hus," Interview by Dominik Jun, *In Search of Jan Hus*. Transcript, Radio Praha. June 07, 2015.

Hus's teachings themselves were a significant part of Czech identity, but what solidified his place in Czech history was his excommunication and execution by the Catholic Church in 1415. During the last few years in his role as Chapel priest, Hus had been taking more aggressive stances against the Church, even declaring executed religious dissenters martyrs. Fudge recalls an event in 1412 where three men were executed by the Church after criticizing the use of indulgences in various Churches in Prague. Following their death, Hus had their bodies brought to Bethlehem Chapel and declared them martyrs.[38] This event and others show Hus's escalating relationship with the Church as well as his growing base of support, and contributed to the Church's decision to execute Hus in 1415. His death helped elevate his figure not only as a prominent religious reformer to that of a martyr, and jumpstarted the radical Hussite movement and Hussite wars, which occurred just a few years later. This movement became very significant for the Czechs, both religiously as well as politically. Early on the movement was fairly successful, with Podebrady (a leader of the movement) being named King in Bohemia after the death of Wenceslaus and the Catholic Church making a few concessions. While the movement would eventually die down and membership in the Hussite church dwindle significantly after Catholic domination in the lands decades later, it still remained an important era for Czech national awareness and identity. Even today, Hus has remained an important source of pride for Czechs; many see him not only as an early protestant reformer but also a hero who challenged an authority that was repressing Czech cultural growth and position in society. Fudge notes: "Both aspects of the life and

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[38] Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 61.

work of Hus bequeathed a legacy to posterity…his name was attached that altered the shape of religion in Bohemian society with reverberations across Europe."[39]

After Hus's death, the presence of Bethlehem Chapel in the minds of the people began to slowly fade. While it still held some prominence during the Hussite Wars, the eventual defeat of the Hussites by the Catholic Church amplified its rate of decline. It was eventually bought out by the Jesuit order in 1661, and then demolished by the late 18th century when the order was suppressed by Joseph II.[40] As mentioned previously, its significance as a national symbol would not be revived until Czech nationalism began to grow in the late 19th century and early 20th century as the grip the Habsburg government held on ethnic minorities weakened along with the power of the government itself. Hus became even more important in the 20th century with the formation of Czechoslovakia. Masaryk, who led the government during this inter-war period, actively promoted Jan Hus by building a statue and staging events.

[39] Ibid., 165.
[40] Burton, Richard D. E. Prague: A Cultural and Literary History. New York: Interlink Books, 2003.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE COMMUNIST APPROACH

Bethlehem Chapel (and its connection to Jan Hus) had many associations that made it an important symbol for Czech identity – religious, linguistic, and cultural. Its importance also manifested through its image as a physical connection to Jan Hus. However, despite the many different meanings and associations the Chapel held, there were certain interpretations the Communists valued above others. While Masaryk had already started projects and used Hus as a nationalist symbol during the interwar period, his focus on the early Protestant religious aspects of Hus's identity wasn't what the Communist government wanted to emphasize. Instead, the first and most important was Jan Hus's challenge and criticism of the wealth of the Catholic Church, as well as condemnation of how the practices of the Church disconnected it from the common people. The new government viewed Hus as a challenger to a class system propagated by the Church, someone who lifted up the socialist idea of more equal participation of the masses (the lower class) in a society dominated by the Church (which they saw as a persecuting upper class). This interpretation was developed and encouraged most aggressively by Zdenek Nejedly, a Czech Communist who became Minister of Education in the new government after 1948. Peter Moree briefly summarizes Nejedly's interpretation of Jan Hus:

> Hus' programme, according to Nejedlý, had three main points. First, Hus
> announced the law of collectivism, which is the principle that everything must be

for the well-being of all, not just of one person. The second principle concerns

property. Hus's criticism of the riches of the church called for a reform of

property which had to be executed with the presupposition that property is not just

there for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of all those who need it.

The third point is the equality of the people, especially of the poor as opposed to

the ruling classes. Hus was not just a source of new religious insights, but also the

propagator of a new social order very similar to the socialist order.[41]

As discussed in the quote, Nejedly saw many of the lessons and criticisms Hus preached

as an early move towards a more socialist society, and a criticism of a society structured

around separation of classes. Hus's use of the Czech language as opposed to German or

Latin, as well as encouragement towards the masses to criticize segregating practices of

the Church, were all seen as a move to lift up the poorer classes against the wealthier

class. He reasoned that Hus saw the use of language and discriminatory practices by the

Catholic Church – where only a certain Catholic figures could participate – as a way to

subdue lower classes and promote the status of the wealthy in society. His movement

against these practices was thus seen as an early movement towards an egalitarian society

and rebellion against a subjugator. This was especially recognized and emphasized by

Czechs during the nationalist movement in the late 19th century through the post-World

War II period, as it paralleled the subjugation by the Germans and Habsburgs that the

Czechs had suffered under during that time.

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[41] Peter Morée, "Not Preaching from the Pulpit, but Marching in the Streets: The communist use of Jan Hus," *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice* 6 (2007): 295.

This was not the only aspect of Jan Hus the Communists focused on; the

revolutionary aspects of the Hussite movement itself was also seen as an early attempt at

fulfilling the Marxist ideal of the lower class rising up against the upper class in order to

reform a classist society into an egalitarian one. Bartos makes a note of the Communist

Party's focus on the Hussite Wars and its association with revolution: "[The Communist

Party] recast the fifteenth-century Hussite wars as a Czech precursor to modern Marxist-

Leninist revolutions… the Chapel stood as a shrine to the native revolutionary tendencies

of the Czech people."[42] The government also attempted to use this revolutionary aspect of

the Hussite Wars for their own nationalist purposes through reinterpretation of the

existing Vitkov Monument, which had been built by the Masaryk government during the

inter-war period. The monument's most notable feature was its statute of Jan Zizka, an

important war hero from the Hussite movement. The Communist government continued

to emphasize this monument, but also took a step further by transforming part of the

monument into a mausoleum for Gottwald following his death.[43] The government

wanted to tie in these revolutionary, anti-class elements of the Hussite movement into the

inherent revolutionary nature of Communism, and argue that the fight against a class

system was an integral part of Czech identity by comparing the Hussite movement to the

Communist takeover. Moree also notes that the government manipulated this

revolutionary interpretation by tying in anti-German and pro-Slav elements to the Hussite

movement as well.[44] The Party also focused on socialist practices of some of Hus's

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[42] Ramona Murphy Bartos, *Libuše's Dream Historic Preservation in Prague, the Czech Republic,* Master's thesis, University of Georgia, 2002. 89-90.
[43] "National Museum – National Memorial on the Vítkov Hill (Národní Muzeum – Národní Památník Na Vítkově)." Prague.eu. http://www.prague.eu/en/object/places/727/national-museum-national-memorial-on-the-vitkov-hill-narodni-muzeum-narodni-pamatnik-na-vitkove.
[44] Moree, "Not Preaching from the Pulpit," 294.

followers during the Hussite movement, namely the radical group at Tabor. The priests and people of Tabor experimented with an early form of egalitarian society, as Fudge notes: "In 1419 several mass gatherings occurred in which elementary communist principles were invoked; everyone was called 'brother' or 'sister' and social distinctions were ignored. Food was shared in common, the richer supplying the poor. No difference was made between 'mine' and 'thine'…"[45] Despite the priests and followers of Tabor being considered a more radical sect of the Hussite movement, the Communists pointed to them as an example of the socialist nature of the conflict. Together with the revolutionary elements of the Hussite wars, the Communists argued that Hus's movement was an early attempt at Communist revolution.

The government not only wanted to emphasize the socialist elements of Hus' legacy, but also promote the anti-Catholic elements. As mentioned before, the government had been trying to take a more active role in reducing religion in society, and the Catholic Church was proving to be a large thorn in the side of the Party by continuing to resist these changes. Rabas argues that this resistance was shown partly through unwillingness by Catholic leadership to accept Communist rule without concessions to the Church.[46] The Communist government also passed several laws that aimed at instituting regulation over churches, nationalizing church property, and reducing the control of the clergy over their own congregations. They also took measures to weaken the Church by arresting prominent leaders – Kaplan notes in his study of the anti-church measures taken by the government in the early 1950s that: "Out of 17 bishops, 13 were

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[45] Thomas Fudge, "`Neither Mine nor Thine': Communist Experiments in Hussite Bohemia." *Canadian Journal of History* 33, no. 1 (April 1998): 26-47.
[46] Rabas, "The Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia," 2.

either in prison or under house arrest; two were forbidden to carry out their duties; one was in enforced isolation and only one auxiliary was still performing his episcopal functions."[47] While laws were a more direct way for the Party to challenge the Catholic Church, they also took ideological measures to promote historically important symbols that had anti-Catholic elements – such as Bethlehem Chapel – to argue that Catholicism was not a core part of Czech identity, but the result of foreign imposition and culture. Jan Hus's criticism and movement against the church that he promoted within Chapel walls, as well as his death at the hands of Church leadership, made Bethlehem Chapel an important symbol for the Communists to use against the Catholic Church in this way. The Church itself had already been weakened by the forced expulsion of millions of Germans from Czechoslovakia, who were mostly Catholic, Rabas notes.[48] Catholicism was also associated with the Habsburgs, another symbol of foreign oppression. There was an especially strong negative association due to the religious suppression of Protestantism by the Catholics in the Empire following the thirty years war. The Communists wanted to take advantage of these anti-German feelings strengthened by Habsburg rule and Nazi occupation by associating it with Catholicism, publicly but also through symbols such as the Chapel.

Despite the wealth of associations – socialist, revolutionary, and anti-Catholic – that the Communists wanted to focus on for the reinterpretation and reconstruction of the Chapel, they were still faced with the difficulty of divorcing the religious meaning from the symbol of Jan Hus. To make matters more difficult, the Chapel was itself a religious

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[47] Karel Kaplan, "Church and State in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1956 Part III," *Religion in Communist Lands* 14, no. 3 (1986): 279.
[48] Ibid.

building, and its significance lay in the fact that it was the place where Jan Hus had delivered his sermons. However, the government still saw the Chapel as an essential enough symbol and connection to Jan Hus that its reconstruction and reinterpretation was approved just a few months following the coup in 1948.

CHAPTER SIX:

RECONSTRUCTION

When the Communist government took power in 1948, it inherited the

responsibility of addressing numerous problems facing the country post-World War II.

While Czechoslovakia experienced less physical damage of property during the war

compared to other Eastern European states, it still faced issues with rebuilding economic

and state institutions that had been under Nazi control during the war. Fear and

resentment towards the Nazi occupation also spurred the government to forcibly expel

millions of Germans and Hungarians as well as place their property under state control.

Additionally, after 1948, the Communist government only increased the pace of

nationalization of economic institutions and private property – all the while facing a

budget crisis.[49] This made it difficult for the government to not only manage the large

amount of businesses and institutions they were taking control of, but also try and create

an adequate compensation system for properties they were nationalizing (although there

were plenty of citizens that were not compensated at all, including expelled Hungarians

and Germans and anyone suspected of collaborating with the Germans while under

occupation).[50]

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[49] Samuel Herman, "War Damage and Nationalization in Eastern Europe." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 16, no. 3 (1951): 514-15.
[50] Ibid., 515.

Despite the budget crisis and difficulties associated with the vastly expanded size of the government, the Party didn't wait long to approve a plan to rebuild Bethlehem Chapel. Just five months after the coup, in July of 1948, a meeting was held with the state's cabinet and Bethlehem Chapel was listed as a part of the agenda. This showed how important reconstruction of Bethlehem Chapel was for the new government, as that same month they had been busy replacing leadership of opposing parties in order to form puppet parties, had successfully absorbed their largest former rival (the Social Democrats) into the Party, and had been continuing the process of working through the additional issues related to nationalization of property.[51] After the plan had been set and funding approved, the state began the process of reconstructing the Chapel.

However, the progression towards rebuilding the Chapel was not smooth. While the state was set on reconstruction of the building, they had to contend with the fact that there were already apartment buildings located at Bethlehem Chapel's historical site. Not only that, but the government had set the precedent during the nationalization process of private property that citizens living within a nationalized property could still remain in their homes, despite the transfer of ownership. In the case of the apartments located on the site where Bethlehem Chapel would be built, however, forced removal of residents and destruction of the apartment buildings would be required.[52] The government, worried about the effect forced removal of residents would have on the image of the Bethlehem Chapel project, decided that they would compensate the owners of the apartments by offering the enormous amount of 12 million Czech crowns in order to encourage them to give up their homes freely – and this was only funding to gain the property, much less

[51] Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, "Architectural Plans" paragraph 1.
[52] Ibid., "Reconstructing Bethlehem Chapel," paragraph 2.

actually rebuild the chapel.[53] Considering the budget crisis the state was experiencing as well as rigid compensation rules for nationalized property of Czech citizens, this was an incredible amount of money to devote to just the beginning stages of the project. Paces does note that the state still used threats and a complicated compensation process to reduce payment amounts, but that their level of cooperation with property owners of the Bethlehem Chapel site was far above average compared to compensation processes of citizens of other nationalized processes.[54] The main effect of the state's willingness to work with and more legitimately obtain the property was a postponement of the project; while initial plans to rebuild the Chapel had started in 1948, actual demolition of the apartment buildings and beginnings of reconstruction didn't start until 1950.

The committee itself was highly focused on accurate and authentic reconstruction of the Chapel. It was led by architect Alois Kubicek, who had been already conducting research for possible reconstruction of the building during the interwar period for Masaryk's government. Unfortunately, the designers had a difficult time finding medieval descriptions and drawings of the Chapel; an excavation was conducted to find fragments of the building that might have shown what materials it was composed of, but it was largely unsuccessful. However, despite difficulty in producing a completely accurate reproduction of the chapel, the designs and builders still attempted to make the new building as close to the original as possible; they even used medieval techniques to produce ceramics and other materials used in the building.[55] The painstaking methods used to try and reproduce the Chapel as possible (with a few alterations) showed not only

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., paragraphs 3-5.
[55] Ibid., "Architectural Plans" paragraph 4.

the government's efforts to honor the memory in order to make it a more effective symbol, but also how important the Chapel was for the leaders of the project. The committee members also made sure to include fragments of the original wall that they had found through an excavation of the site as well as parts that had been included in the razed apartment buildings. This reconstruction as well as initial difficulty in obtaining and demolishing the apartment buildings that had existed in the spot dragged out the project, and it was not completed until 1954, six years after the initial plans had been set in motion.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

TREATMENT OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH

Before a deeper discussion on the methods and events the Communists used to reinterpret the chapel, it must be noted that while the government made efforts to separate religion from the image of Jan Hus, its rhetoric was not entirely secular. As noted by Paces: "…the Communists found it difficult to excise completely the religious meaning of the Hus legend: no matter how many times Czech leaders insisted that Hus had become a secular figure, it remained impossible to ignore that this man had been a Roman Catholic priest, who died proclaiming his Christian faith."[56] After all, it is difficult to remove any religious significance from a building whose original purpose was as a meeting place for the religious.

Faced with this difficulty, the Communists found it easier to make some concessions to the Protestant churches in Prague while still making various statements intended to shift the symbol from an inherently religious one to a more secular one. These concessions were made only to Protestant churches; the anti-clerical association of Hus as well as growing resentment towards Catholics due to their relation to Germans who had been living in the Czech Sudetenland, as well as the Habsburgs, made it easier for the government to reconcile Hus's religious identity with Protestants and not Catholics.

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[56] Ibid., "Bethlehem Chapel", paragraph 5.

Instead, in this early period the Communists decided to allow a little bit of Protestant

religious identity, such as cooperating with some Protestant churches and not targeting

them as harshly, and instead focused efforts on combating the Catholic Church. As

mentioned before, the Party arrested church leaders, nationalized religious schools, and

focused on banning and censoring Catholic publications and writings. They also

nationalized all church property and required that priest's salaries be determined and paid

by the state.[57] While the full extent of nationalization of church property isn't known, the

US State Department reported that the post-Communist Czech government was dealing

with a huge request to return land taken by the Communist government to the Catholic

Church: "The Catholic Church is seeking around 700 buildings and 175,000 hectares of

land; state and local authorities hold most of these properties."[58] While the party's

campaign against the Catholic Church was intense, they did allow some leniency for

certain Protestant churches willing to work with the state. Part of this was because the

Catholic Church policy towards the government was not an accepting one – some

protestant churches (such as the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren [ECCB] and the

Czechoslovak National Church) openly advocated working with the new Communist

government. This willingness to work with the government was not only for self-

preservation; some of the churches – especially the ECCB – saw ideological similarities

between their goals and the goals of the new Czech government. These beliefs revolved

around the Church's concern for social issues, along with the socialism's addressment of

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[57] Ibid., paragraph 6.
[58] "Property Restitution in Central and Eastern Europe," *State Department of the United States*, October 03, 2007. Accessed April 14, 2016. http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/93062.htm.

these issues through a restructuring of society.[59] A paper produced by Cameron outlining

the history of the ECCB (which had formed in 1918 right at the beginning of the first

Czechoslovak government from a merge of two other Protestant churches) noted how the

Church leadership, in those early years after the coup, saw some value in the Communist

ideology: "Hromadka therefore advocated dialogue with the Marxists, arguing that the

Marxist revolution was a revolt against unjust social orders, not against God…This

committee welcomed the new government, anticipating that it would 'preserve the

deepest traditions of freedom and justice' in Czechoslovakia."[60] The ECCB was also

perhaps more willing to support the government due to its connection to Jan Hus.

Cameron notes that "…the new church traces its roots back to the 15th century and the

beginnings of the church reform movement in Bohemia, associated with Jan Hus."[61]

While church leaders were unhappy with the religious crackdown by the government in

the 1950s, they still had a more conciliatory approach towards working with the

government, especially compared with the Catholic Church. For a government with a

shaky sense of national identity, using Protestant churches to promote national identity

through Jan Hus was an effective way to not only encourage anti-clericalism but also get

the attention of citizens who may identify more with the protestant religious aspect of Jan

Hus and the Chapel, especially because of the perception of Catholicism as imposed by

foreign cultures and Protestant as inherently Czech.

The government's atheistic ideology was not forgotten, however; while they may

have been a little more lenient towards some Protestant churches, they did take measures

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[59] Helen Cameron, "Seventy Years of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (1918–88)." Religion in Communist Lands 17, no. 3 (1989): 232.
[60] Helen Cameron, "Seventy Years," 233.
[61] Ibid., 230.

to shift Jan Hus's religious association to a more secular association. Even when the plan

for reconstruction of the Chapel was announced and the Evangelical church gave its

public support for the project, the Party did not allow any church to be a part of the

development of the project and actual reconstruction.[62] Despite allowing some

involvement from Protestant churches, the government's stance that it alone should

control and influence the reconstruction process might have been because of its fear that

the its involvement with the churches might give the Chapel more religious focus. By

maintaining control over the process and mostly shutting out the churches, it also had

more control over the more secular identity it was trying to give Hus. Also, while the

Party did not treat Protestant churches as harshly as Catholic churches and they did

collaborate to a limited degree on the Chapel project, it also applied many of its new

policies (censorship, nationalizing of church property) to Protestant churches as well.

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[62] Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, paragraph 9.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

REINTERPRETATION

Despite the reconstruction committee's pledge to ensure that the reconstruction of the Chapel was as accurate as possible, there were some liberties taken with the Chapel's interior design. Designers - most notably Nejedly – decided to include paintings and murals along the Chapel's walls. This is important because research and documents considering the existence of paints inside of Bethlehem Chapel are very mixed; some are confident that there were paintings and murals inside of the Chapel during Jan Hus's time there, and others ascertain that there is no reasonable evidence that there were any murals. Fudge notes: "That there were pictures on the walls of Bethlehem is not to be doubted," and goes on to argue that images displayed inside the Chapel were most likely textual murals pronouncing Hus's teachings and criticizing the head of the Church in Rome.[63] Others, such as Paces and Pavlicek, argue that it's uncertain if there were any murals or paintings, and if there were there is no concrete record of what they depicted.[64]

This was not much concern for Nejedly, who decided to include murals and paintings inside the Chapel of his and his committee's design and discretion. They included a variety of murals, such as quotes from the Richenthal Chronicle (a text that detailed the Council of Constance in 1415, where the Catholic Church had condemned

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[63] Thomas Fudge, "Art and Propaganda in Hussite Bohemia." *Religio* 1, no. 2 (1993): 138. http://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/124636/2_Religio_1-1993-2_5.pdf.
[64] František Šmahel and Ota Pavlíček. *A Companion to Jan Hus*, Netherlands: Konink, 2015, 390.

and executed Jan Hus), as well as songs and excerpts from the Hussite Bible, scenes from the modern Hussite work "The Jena Codex", as well as a large mural displaying Hus's execution.[65] While these paintings were created in the present day, Nejedly tried to add a more authentic touch by having them produced in a medieval style, and quotations were etched into plaster and projected onto the wall of the Chapel. The only authentic art piece within the Chapel was a fresco remnant found during excavation, and it was framed and kept in its fragmented form for display within the Chapel.[66]

The choices of murals and paintings made by Nejedly and the committee were a method of reinterpretation in of itself. It should be noted that there was some concessions made in terms of religious symbolism with these murals and paintings; as noted above, some of the recreated frescoes concentrated on religious text and images from the Hussite Bible, and many of the images themselves were styled in a medieval religious fashion. However, religious symbolism was not the focus of the various murals created and placed inside the Chapel. Instead, there was a stronger emphasis on the Hussite movement and wars, as well as the excommunication and execution of Jan Hus by the Catholic Church at the Council of Constance. This is evidenced through many of the murals they decided to display – including a depiction of the Hussites in battle against Catholic forces, as well as the various murals depicting scenes and quotations from the Richenthal Chronicle. As noted before, this text revolves around the Council of Constance, where Hus had been burned at the stake by the Catholic Church – showing a continued focus on what sparked the movement itself as well as the anti-Catholic elements of Hus's identity. This focus was even further accentuated through the most striking mural inside the Chapel, a

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[65] Paces, *Prague Panoramas,* "Architectural Plans," paragraph 4.
[66] Ibid.

depiction of Jan Hus being burned at the stake, surrounded by members of the Catholic Church. This mural was placed in the most visible space inside the Chapel, right above the pulpit.[67] The choice by Nejedly to include these murals and quotations, despite being an obvious deviation from the committee's commitment to recreating the Chapel as accurately as possible, showed how he was attempting to shift the Chapel's connection to Jan Hus's religious teachings to a connection to the Hussite war and Jan Hus's death. This was far from Fudge's vision of Chapel walls covered in the religious teachings and criticisms of the Church, produced by Jan Hus himself.[68]

Six years after the government had approved plans to build the Chapel, the building was finally finished. To commemorate this event, the government held an "Opening Ceremony", where many Party officials, government employees, and the public attended. The date of the ceremony was on July 5th, on the anniversary of Jan Hus's death. The ceremony was not wholly secular - members of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and Protestant Czechoslovak Church attended, and even performed various Czech religious hymns.[69] At the ceremony, the Chapel was declared a "National Historic Monument," and Nejedly gave an emotional speech to the many spectators gathered within the new building. While the commemoration of the building of a historic monument was significant, the most important part of this event was Nejedly's speech.

In his speech, Nejedly outlined the significance of the Chapel and of Jan Hus as an early Communist reformer, as well as attempted to reinforce the Party's interpretation of a secularized Hus versus a religiously motivated Hus. He made efforts to include the

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[67] Ibid., paragraph 5.
[68] Fudge, "Art and Propaganda," 138.
[69] Paces, *Prague Panorama*, "Opening Ceremony" paragraph 1.

official Communist interpretation of Hus as a revolutionary and proponent of the abolition of class, and also made note of the Taborites as well as the anti-Catholic aspects of Hus's image. This did not mean that the ceremony and speech was not without concessions to some of the Protestant churches from Prague; as mentioned before, representatives of the ECCB and Protestant Czechoslovak Church were allowed to attend and even perform hymns. The language of the speech itself was also occasionally religious; Nejedly quoted some of Hus's sermons and referred to the abuses of the Catholic Church during the time period as "sins". He also spent a notable amount of time on Hus's criticism of the Catholic Church on their restriction of Communion practices for the common congregation member.[70] Whether or not this religious language was intentional or a result of the difficulty in divorcing religious concepts from the image of Bethlehem Chapel and Jan Hus is not really clear.

Despite religious language peppered throughout his speech, Nejedly did make considerable efforts to paint Hus as a secular figure. He made note of the fact that the Chapel was not a Church, and even argued that the Chapel wasn't even a proper Chapel, quoting some of Hus's writings where the Chapel was only referred to as "Bethlehem". He also argued that structural issues disqualified the Chapel from being such, noting the lack of a cemetery and pointing to a public well that had existed within the Church (which the Communists had made sure to include in the reconstruction).[71] This was important because it showed an effort to reduce the religious significance not of Jan Hus, but the rebuilt location itself. His more substantive argument against the religious association of Hus targeted the goals of the reformist; he made the argument that Hus was

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[70] Ibid., paragraphs 1-5.
[71] Ibid., paragraphs 9-10.

only religiously motivated because of the class system's entrenchment in religion during that time period. He even argued that Hus would not have been religious in the present-day society, and would have instead targeted class systems without religious teachings and criticisms. In this way, he was trying to connect the actions of the government directly to Hus by arguing that a present-day Hus would have targeted the class system and been atheistic as well, as the class system in the current society was not as interwoven into religion as it was in the past. Pace also mentions that Nejedly tried to appeal to the public by including anti-German elements: "But Nejedly also played on modern anti-German sympathies, quoting a fragment of a sixteenth-century song…he used this excerpt to remind his audience subtly of Communist sacrifices during the defeat of Nazi Germany…"[72]

Nejedly not only targeted Czech fears of the Germans, anti-Catholicism, and the legitimacy of the Chapel as a religious building, but also the use of Jan Hus as a national symbol under Masaryk's government during the interwar period. He criticized Masaryk's decision not to rebuild the Chapel, which he argued was an essential part of Czechoslovak national identity, and made sure to refer to the government's capitalist formation within this criticism. Masaryk's government, which was democratic during the inter-war period, had decided to refrain from rebuilding the Chapel due to the fact that the apartments built upon the historical site were privately owned, and they were unwilling to come up with the funds to convince the various owners of the different buildings to sell the property to them.[73] Of course, Nejedly did not mention this fact within his speech nor the fact that the Communist government had paid so much to obtain the buildings (as

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[72] Ibid., paragraph 11.
[73] Ibid., "History of Bethlehem Chapel" paragraph 11.

well as try and coerce the owners), and instead used Masaryk's hesitation to suggest that

the Communist government's dedication to rebuilding the Chapel and promoting Hus's

image meant that it was (ironically) more "Hussite" and nationalistic than Masaryk.[74] He

ended his speech with moving statements about Bethlehem Chapel's significance for

Czech identity, specifically its significance as the source of an early attempt at

Communist rebellion and revolution. He optimistically applauded the Communist

takeover as a final realization of the Czech's early attempts at proletariat revolution, and

marked it as a beginning of a shift to Communist style architecture.[75]

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[74] Ibid., "Opening Ceremony" paragraph 12.
[75] Ibid., paragraph 13.

CHAPTER NINE:

CONCLUSION

Despite Nejedly's view of Bethlehem Chapel as a vital source of Czech identity

and his optimistic view of how the Chapel would be used in the future, the reality was far

more underwhelming. There is barely any evidence of events being held at the Chapel

while it was under Communist ownership (which lasted until about 1987), and in an

interview about the Chapel, Czech historian Sebek notes that it was "closed to the public"

except from "time to time" for the occasional event.[76] An alternative source mentioned by

Hobl describes the Chapel as a busier attraction, noting that it "attracted many visitors

and offered regular tours…"[77] Still, Hobl does note that the Chapel was not used to the

extent the Communists had envisioned. She points this out in her dissertation by

mentioning that the only other event held at the Chapel that was widely published was the

540th anniversary of Hus's death in 1955.[78] It's possible that there were some other

public events and there could have been tours, but it wasn't significant enough for

announcement by the government. It's unclear why the Party put so much effort into the

Chapel, only to hardly use it for larger events. It's possible they had difficulty reconciling

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[76] Jaroslav Sebek, "A Visit to Bethlehem Chapel," Interview by Dominik Jun. *A Visit to Bethlehem Chapel*. Transcript, Radio Praha. July 17, 2012.

[77] Anna Elisabeth Hobl, "Changing the Interpretation of Monuments for the Purpose of Influencing the Czechoslovak Collective Identity through Rudé Právo and Presidential Speeches," Masters diss., Charles University in Prague, Winter 2014/2015, 34.

[78] Ibid., 39.

the religious association of the building, and were worried that allowing it to be used more regularly would remind the public of its religious symbolism; or perhaps they thought that a more effective propaganda tactic would be to allow the building to stand as a monument instead of a functional space (where the religious association might outweigh the narrative the Communists wanted to portray). None the less, The Chapel was only fully reopened to the public in 1992, after the fall of the Communist regime.

Today, the Chapel is owned by the Czech Technical University, who renovated the building and reopened it in 1992 and continue to maintain the building. The Chapel is not used for many formal religious ceremonies (aside from a commemoration of Hus and his teachings on July 5th), but is instead the Ceremonial Hall for the University. Events such as weddings, concerts, and university ceremonies are held there, there are regular tours for visitors, and it is also occasionally used by the Czech Government for special events.[79] While the Chapel still holds a place in Czech memory, it doesn't seem to be as prominent or vital for national identity of the current government as it was for the Communist government in 1954 – other symbols, such as Prague Castle, Old Town Square, and the Astronomical Clock – seem to be more vital symbols for the current government to promote. While it's difficult to judge how successful the Communist government was at reinterpreting the Chapel and the symbol of Jan Hus, perhaps this present day reduced focus on the reformer is a result of lingering confusion on what the Chapel and Jan Hus represented. The contradicting images of a religious Hus and a revolutionary, secular Hus may still have significance in how he is considered today and

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[79] "The Bethlehem Chapel," SUZ Praha. Accessed April 08, 2016. https://www.suz.cvut.cz/en/others/the-bethlehem-chapel.

could hint that the government's reinterpretation could actually have been more successful than at first perceived.

Determining whether or not the reinterpretation was actually successful is a difficult if not impossible task. One thing is clear, however; the reconstruction of Bethlehem Chapel was a fascinating and exceptional event when set against the policy and historical backdrop of the type of government that created it and the time period that it instituted the project. The Communist government in Czechoslovakia was not one that instituted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards religion; they actively campaigned against Churches, nationalized church property and turned them into work, storage, or residential buildings, arrested Church leaders, instituted negative rhetoric against churches in schools and universities, and much more. The government had also been faced with the monumental task of managing a budget while overhauling the economic and political system, nationalizing millions of acres of property, and aiding in the post-World War II recovery. Despite their active campaign against religion, however, the government still found it so important to build this Chapel that they not only reconstructed it within a few years of the coup, but they also spent a considerable sum of money on the project and tried to make it as historically accurate as possible. This ironic policy of a government that otherwise tried to secularize a religious country (and was fairly successful in doing so) illustrates an interesting and unique event, and shows how important nationalism and the use of existing nationalist symbols can be for a new regime.

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