Operation Velehrad, 1950: Communism, Catholicism, and Popular Tradition in Czechoslovakia

During the period of greatest repression of the Catholic Church in Stalinist Czechoslovakia, Communist leaders organized and promoted an official manifestation at Velehrad, which since the mid-nineteenth century had come to represent a Moravian Catholic vision of Czech nationhood that both emphasized popular piety and rural tradition, and connected a peripheral region to the broader Slavic and Christian world. By co-opting a symbol of local, national, and international significance, Communist activists attempted to shift the loyalties of lay believers and rank-and-file priests away from the Catholic hierarchy and toward the new regime and its allies in the Soviet bloc. Operation Velehrad—as local activists dubbed the state-sponsored pilgrimage—reveals the persistence of a little-researched regional tradition of Czech Catholic politics and highlights the rhetorical and ideological flexibility of the Czechoslovak Communist regime during its early years.

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