

## **OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS IN SLOVAKIA**

The event that effectively prompted opposition circles in Slovakia to get organized was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops during the “Prague spring”. From 1968 to 1972, when the situation was being “normalized”, it was mainly intellectual, scientific and media circles as well as the central offices of the State that were subjected to repression.

Numerous artists with links to European avant-garde movements were prevented from exhibiting their works. They came together in an independent network, in which they were joined by the so-called DG (Degenerate Generation), which categorically refused any compromise with the regime. They did not even try to act legally or to obtain support from official publishing firms. DG members worked as warehousemen, stokers, cleaners, etc. and organized underground exhibitions, concerts by “outlawed” musicians and seminars by the “Flying Universities”; the latter had sprung up in Bratislava in 1977-78 and featured lectures by persecuted dissidents, promptly quashed by the secret service. The initiatives of these artists became enormously popular, despite not having any specific political agenda, and were key to the development of the future opposition movement. The work of a *samizdat* – which published clandestine books and magazines – was also very important, as was the formation of certain environmental groups, between the late Seventies and early Eighties.

### **Opposition on the part of civil society**

The political activities of a limited number of intellectuals expelled by the Party in 1969 – the “Civilian opposition group”, who had social democratic and liberal leanings – helped reawaken the population’s conscience and forge important international contacts; its members included numerous Slovakian signatories to Charter ‘77. Civilian opponents of the regime were persecuted but managed to avoid political trials until the spring of 1981, when the secret police stopped a truck carrying magazines and books for the dissidents at the border with Germany: the police soon discovered who the addressees were and 30 people were arrested and imprisoned, despite the lack of any proper investigation. From that moment on, the secret police intensified their surveillance and numerous publishing firms were forced to close down, while a sense of frustration and impotence grew among the general public.

A number of Christian opposition activists cooperated with the civilian dissidents; among them the famous lawyer Jan Carnogoursky, who was banned from exercising his profession after having defended the signatories of Charter ‘77.

A second political group, made up of disenchanted members of the Communist Party who had believed in the 1968 reforms, formed around Alexander Dubcek and continued to hope in the possibility of a change in the system from the top. On 28 October 1974 Dubcek sent a letter to the Federal Assembly in which he denounced systematic human rights violations in the country.

Altogether he wrote 38 protest letters highlighting the persecutions carried out by the regime.

Changes in the USSR in the 1980s encouraged Slovak dissidents to use the underground press to re-engage the party activists expelled in 1969, reiterating

the principles that had inspired the Prague spring and underlining their similarity with Gorbachov's *perestrojka* and *glasnost*.

### **Catholic opposition and the underground Church**

Catholic opposition and the underground Church, which had resulted from the regime's attempts to eliminate the Church and to limit the influence of religion in society, were a vital part of the Slovak opposition movement and the only group that was to grow steadily as time went by. Having failed to divide the church hierarchy from within, in June 1949 the Communists organized a schismatic Catholic Action for a national church independent of the Vatican. In addition, the government guaranteed itself control over the Church by limiting the activities of the diocesan administrations and suppressing religious orders. The Vatican reacted by approving the creation of clandestine structures, headed by bishop Jan Korec, who was ordained in secret. Now banned, the activities of the official Church: monastic orders, the ordination of priests and bishops, lay apostolate, pilgrimages, pastoral work among young people and students, the publication and distribution of the religious *samizdat*, resumed underground thanks to a network of small communities spread out all over Slovak territory. In the 1980s the underground Church and Catholic opposition petitioned the government to respect human rights, including religious rights: at that point the Church came out into the open. In October 1980, during the trial of Jozef Labuda and Emilia Kesegova – charged with “thwarting State control over the churches” – a sizeable group of people openly expressed their solidarity with the defendants and for the first time Charter '77 offered Slovak dissidents organizational support. At the same time the religious *samizdat* also started dealing with political and cultural matters, history, social sciences and education.

### **The role of the Hungarian minority**

A relatively isolated but very active group was the Hungarian minority, linked above all to dissident circles in their native country and sporadically to the Slovak intellectuals. The group's main body was the “Committee for the Defence of Hungarian Minority Rights in Czechoslovakia”, founded in 1978 by Laszlo Nagy, Miklos Duray and Peter Puspoki-Nagy after the intellectuals' protests against the regime's discrimination and assimilation attempts. In addition, programmatic documents sent to Charter '77 were disseminated abroad. The Committee's spokesman, Mikols Duray, was arrested on 10 November 1982 and remained in jail until 22 February 1983. At the end of the following year the Communist Party laid out its new policy for assimilating the Hungarian minority. On 10 May 1984 Duray was once again arrested and ten of his colleagues were subjected to lengthy interrogation. Numerous Czech and Slovak dissidents came to their defence both at home and abroad, although not all of them fully shared his positions, considered excessively nationalist. Duray was released one year later under an amnesty. Relations between the Hungarian opposition and Charter '77 intensified and in 1987 a shared resolution was published, demanding that minority rights should be taken into consideration in international documents. The Hungarian minority's “young liberals” cooperated with the Committee, highlighting the general human rights issue. They were also in touch with the liberal-democratic opposition in Hungary and, under the pretext of returning to their

native country, they traveled to Hungary to take part in meetings organized for students of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia at Budapest's underground "Monday University".