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Christian Publishing in Central and Eastern Europe

It has taken almost two decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain for Central and Eastern European Christianity to become more visible in the world. While in the early nineties some missionaries still thought they were 'bringing God and Christianity' to this region, the realization has dawned in the mean time that the church in its various denominations has existed in these countries for many centuries, has a rich history, tradition and spirituality, and has engaged in various activities, including publishing of Christian resources, for quite some time already. The results of past and current CEE publishing activities are becoming visible to the wider audience not least on WorldCat and Google Books. Collection development nevertheless still remains a challenge as there is little infrastructure to find out what has been and is being published in religious studies and Christianity and, even more difficult yet, how to acquire relevant resources in a cost effective and timely manner.

This article attempts to provide a brief overview of Christian publishing in CEE during the 20th century as well as point out current endeavors. Because it will not be possible to deal with each country individually, the region has been subdivided into smaller areas according to similarities in the existing educational systems, in languages(s) and/or infrastructure. First, the common recent Communist context receives some attention because many current challenges result from this past and are more or less similar for the countries of the region. Then follows a regional overview pointing out special features of each region.

Historical context

The 20th century in CEE is characterized by much political and societal upheaval and the Christian church was certainly not exempt from its effects and from needing to adapt to the changing contexts. While theological education, church life and development and with it also Christian publishing proliferated in historic churches at the beginning of the 20th century (Kool and Penner 2010, 531), two world wars and the legacy of Communist dominance left its destructive marks on the church. Christian publishing, where it was developed, was partly allowed to continue its operations under Communism but fell under heavy censorship and tight restrictions as to the
number of new titles per year and number of copies in an edition. Otherwise, Christian literature was printed and distributed secretly or smuggled into the countries from abroad. Russian Orthodox literature, for example, was still published in France by diaspora theologians and became the first titles after 1990 to appear on library shelves of reinstated or newly developed theological schools in the former Soviet Union.¹ Many evangelical mission agencies were involved in producing and smuggling Bibles, apologetic and devotional literature in various Eastern European languages. For security reasons, such items usually didn't show the publisher or publication year and place.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain effective and efficient Christian publishing developed only slowly. Churches were not prepared for such drastic changes, needed time to re-orient themselves, emerge from their acquired ‘basement mentality’, and develop a vision that went beyond self-sustenance and orientation to the past. While evangelicals did publish large editions to supply demand for mass evangelistic campaigns, publishing was not a priority and did not follow a clear strategy. The print items often had no attractive design and were poor translations of English or German, sometimes French titles. In title selection, the Bible took a high precedence over other books, followed by devotional and children’s literature, literature on marriage and family, with a very small share of theological titles. In Russia, reprints of pre-1917 and émigré Orthodox theologians were the rule in the 1990s for Orthodox as well as Evangelicals.²

Many publishing houses sprang up and went bankrupt a few years later. Books printed by such publishers during the first years after the collapse of Communism are the most difficult to acquire, except if one is lucky to find some leftovers in a dusty shop corner or from individuals. This is true, even though the runs during the first years were usually quite large – they were printed at secular printers who were interested in large editions – and were often paid for by Western funds. The book distribution infrastructure collapsed even for secular publishers during the early nineties and, while historic churches may have been somewhat more successful in rebuilding it and feeding their book production into secular distribution channels, evangelical titles are still difficult to identify, locate and obtain. Much effort, energy and creative imagination is still necessary for a publisher to develop alternative channels for distribution and for librarians to be involved in current awareness and acquisition.

Almost every theological educational institution had started a journal but soon had to realize that the pool of capable authors and the ability and time of such authors to regularly provide quality articles for journal issues were quite limited.³ Such authors were usually involved in several intensive missions at the same time and research and writing, unfortunately, received
the last position in competing attentions. Training and mentoring for national authors and journal editors was offered by Western agencies as well as finances to start up Christian magazines, often in the area of apologetics, spirituality and Christian life as well as women's journals.

Depending on the history of a denomination in CEE, the ratio between translations and titles that are authored by nationals is different (majority churches possibly printing more titles by nationals) but till this day relatively few works by national authors are printed and there is a heavy reliance on translations. These are often alien to the culture, even to the subculture of the church, very different in the quality of translation and discuss issues that are possibly not even relevant in the region. Sustainable publishing decisions cannot ignore the financial aspect and sometimes it is easier to secure support for the translation of a title (because an author or a promoting agency is interested in the production). Some agencies, frustrated with such state of things, explicitly commit their emphasis and support toward the production of titles by national authors.

When discussing the up and downs of Christian publishing in CEE one must also mention the different attitude toward information in this part of the world: information is not as much a commodity to be paid for but rather an agent in changing humanity, as it was presented by the Communist governments, and therefore must be available easily and for free. The countries had and partly still have strong reading cultures and libraries were centers subsidized by the state. So if one needed a book, instead of purchasing it, one would go to a library which had certain titles stocked in large numbers. Even though this is still the practice with textbooks and some other titles it is not true for Christian titles.

The sentiment that information, especially literature which intends to promote Christian life and ideas, must be free makes Christian publishing on investment return very difficult. Also, during the first years after the new freedoms books were part of humanitarian help and were distributed for free by Western agencies. While publishers by now accept the procedures to first secure permissions for translation and copyright laws of these countries have been adapted to protect the intellectual rights of an author, the general population either out of ignorance or out of firm conviction to honor God more than human laws is quite lax about copyright regulations. With the new technologies it is much easier to publish scanned copies of books on the Internet and publishers often have to fight for their rights on books they have produced.

After the financial turn-down in recent years many Christian publishers have drastically reduced the number of new titles produced per year (Pavel Damyan, personal communication, February 2011). To survive, they concentrate on re-prints, if affordable, or on printing Bibles, religious cards
and paraphernalia. Many also bemoan the spiritual down-turn in churches when Christians in order to survive financially or in striving for successful well-situated standing follow in materialistic tendencies. Publishing is still considered mission but produced items are not always relevant to the changing mentality of church goers and even less to the secularized societies around them – they are not always successful in presenting old truths in a simplified way or in “translating” church language into everyday concepts.

The pressure is high to develop new business models, for example, to get away from denominational publishing toward offering a broad spectrum of materials, including Christian titles. Religious publishers use the developing infrastructure to get their titles into secular and Internet bookshops; many have newsletters and a Facebook presence, some have mobile shops on a bus (Ezdra from Ukraine: http://www.ezdra.com/index-6.html). As everywhere in the world, publishers have to face the effects new technologies have on readers, the decreasing interest in books, the reduction of reading time and the ability to enjoy an in-depth book. Some are adopting the ’print on demand’ model and increasingly ebooks in various formats are offered parallel to print titles.

Regional Overviews

1. Visegrád Group

The so called Visegrád Group comprises four neighboring countries: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. They have and continue to cooperate on many political and economic projects, including European integration, securing of energy provision, educational development, library automation, and other areas. However, there are also obvious differences: the Hungarian language substantially differs from the closely related Polish, Czech and Slovak; countries display different levels of religiosity and have different majority Christian denominations with small numbers of evangelicals.

All countries have a long tradition of Catholic monasteries and of theological faculties at universities which were and continue to be involved in Christian publishing. The Jesuit WAM (http://www.wydawnictwowam.pl) may be a good example for a longstanding publisher with a rich tradition and with experience in surviving constant political, economic and spiritual changes. Founded in 1872, it is the oldest Catholic publishing house in Poland. Having adapted after the 1980-1990 landslide changes, it produces Catholic literature in various formats, including e-books (at half the price of the print equivalent), has an online shop beside a traditional shop with qualified personnel. Not all denominational publishers fared as well. University presses with a broad selection of titles in various disciplines, including theology and religious studies, sometimes seem to be better off. While Polish and Hungarian languages offer a somewhat larger market,
Czech and Slovak publishing houses attempt to work together to increase coverage. Many authors, being multi-lingual, publish in English, German or French.

Evangelical publishers have sprung up in the early nineties and are seeking to find their niche with materials on practical Christian life, church ministries, leadership, marriage and family relationships. Their titles are often translated from English, in Hungary also from German. These publishers are rather small and often rely on outside support to maintain book productions for a limited market.

The National Library of Hungary has continued efforts of some librarian enthusiasts to maintain a free electronic library which also includes theological full-text resources (http://mek.oszk.hu). QuestaSoft GmbH, already for over a decade, offers various subscription models to its Central and Eastern European Online Library (www.ceeol.com/index.aspx), a collection of journal articles, including theological titles, in various languages written by CEE authors or about CEE. Having received the support of the Andrew W. Mellon foundation in library automation (Lass and Quandt 1999), these countries have union catalogs that include parish and theological libraries and are a great help in finding published materials. The Polish Catholic library association (www.fides.org.pl/) has also created a union catalog of its members in which links are being added to full-text electronic content.

2. Romanian language countries

There is quite a large market for Romanian language Christian literature, given that the Romanian language is spoken by about 30 million people, of whom a high percentage, at least in Romania, consider themselves Christian (Johnstone 2001, 536). The Eastern Orthodox Church is the majority denomination (about 70% of the population) while the Roman Catholic church and various Protestant denominations account for about 7% each. Unfortunately, there is little cooperation and great distrust between the denominations and so the atmosphere in Christian publishing is one of competition. On the other side, different denominational publishers are finding their market niche and cater to different audiences so that various spiritual and intellectual needs are met.

Because at the collapse of Communism Romania was considered the poorest country in Europe, many Western mission organizations concentrated their efforts, including publishing, especially on this country. Many of the current publishing houses were initiated and financed by Western agencies. Some were able to survive even after Western money trickled away during the financial turn-down. Economic instability, inflation and unemployment are still a great problem. Nevertheless, some estimate
the number of Romanian Christian publishers at about 60 with chances that
Romania could become a center for Christian publishing in Eastern Europe.15

Many young, gifted intellectuals have studied abroad and have earned
academic degrees in theology. Nevertheless, when considering the number
of theology PhDs recently earned by Romanians16 one is surprised at the
continuously high percentage of translated titles and would hope that soon
there would be more theological materials written by nationals.

According to the World Factbook, Moldova even in 2011 remains one of
the poorest countries in Europe. The author is not aware of any Christian
publishing house located in Moldova, except denominational offices printing
some titles from time to time. However, its multi-lingual Christians and
theological schools benefit from publishing efforts of Russian language
publishers (in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus) as well as of Romanian language
publishers (in Romania).

3. Bulgaria and Balkans

Religious publishing in Bulgaria and other Balkan countries is probably
the most disadvantaged in CEE. Even though there was an upsurge of
activities after the new freedoms, economic realities, wars and continuous
political instability weigh heavily on all publishing endeavors, including
Christian publishing.

Orthodox publishers, before other denominations, had a head start in
the early nineties with the Synodal Publishing House of the Bulgarian
Orthodox Church (http://synpress-classic.dveri.bg) and ‘Tavor’, one of the
oldest Orthodox publishers which now is out of business because of
financial difficulties, taking a lead. Other Orthodox publishers followed:
‘Omofor’ in Sofia (www.omophor.com), ‘Vitezda’ in Kostenets and
‘Sintagma’ in Veliko Tarnovo (sintagma@abv.bg). University presses,
especially those of Orthodox universities such as Sofia’s University of St.
Kliment Ohridski (www.uni-sofia.bg), Cyril and Methodius University of
Veliko Tarnovo (www.uni-vt.bg/1/?zid=126), Konstantin Preslavsky
University of Shumen (www.shu-bg.net), publish several religious, primarily
Orthodox, titles per year.

Protestant publishing had started only after the collapse of Communism
and the oldest of these publishing houses look back at 20 years of activities.
The Bulgarian Christian Portal (www.gospelbg.com/publisher) lists four
publishing houses of which Nov Chovek (New Man, www.novchovek.com)
is the largest with some 350 titles, most translated from English. Veren
(www.veren.org) offers about 750 titles for sale in its online store of which
about 60 are their own titles. Other organizations are also involved in
publishing endeavors beside their other ministries such as the Bulgarian
Christian Student Union (www.bhss-org.com/bg/books.php) or Hope for

Balkan countries. Countries which were formerly united under the political entity of Yugoslavia had as their official language Serbo-Croatian which means that today some of the repressed languages are still recuperating and very little publishing goes on in these languages (Christian Publishing 2000, 17). The devastating wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia still have their effects on any area of life, including Christian publishing. Religious communities in Albania are since 1992 successfully regaining a standing in society, after many centuries of Communist rule and after Albania had pronounced itself an atheistic state in 1967. Christian publishing in Albania is slowly being revived, some Albanian Christian titles are also produced in Bulgaria or Western countries and brought into Albania.

4. Baltic States

Most Estonians and Latvians consider themselves Lutheran while Lithuania is predominantly Catholic. However, there are also significant parts of the population who have nothing to do with religion. Each of the countries has a larger pool of a Russian speaking minority who adhere to the Orthodox faith and keep ties with Russia (Altnurme 2010, 548).

During the communist period Christian publishing activities were heavily repressed and resorted to samizdat, copying banned works by hand for private distribution. It seems that the Lithuanian Catholic Church remained strong and independent enough so that a number of magazines with religious contents continued to be distributed underground, maybe even to a higher extent than in any other Soviet republic (Lane 2001, 91).

Ideological control was reduced already in the late 80s and religious publishing became possible. Due to geographic proximity, more freedom, professional know-how and better quality early religious publishing attempts in Russia, especially in St. Petersburg, had a close cooperation with Estonian colleagues.

Because the countries are so small it is difficult to develop a market for materials in the various languages. Many authors, being proficient in English or German, publish their works in these languages, either in the Baltic countries or abroad.
5. Former Soviet Union

Some suggest the year 1990 as the starting point of religious publishing when the Soviet Union adopted a law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious organizations” which permitted religious organizations to officially engage in publishing activities. To be sure, much illegal or censored publishing was going on before that, but the changes in the law caused an explosion in publishing activities. Many subsequent traumatic events, such as the break-up of the Soviet Union into independent states which added problems (currencies, customs, etc.) in distribution channels, the extremely difficult economic circumstances with the default in 1998, high rates of Christian emigration to the US, Israel and Western Europe, the emphasis on national languages against the dominant lingua franca Russian, and others, were turning points in decision processes in Christian publishing in these countries.

Mikhail Nevolin (2005) aptly categorizes the history of Protestant publishing on the territory of the former USSR into three stages. During the first euphoric stage (1988 – turn of the century), after many centuries of secret samizdat, any and every book was acclaimed and appreciated, independently of the quality of its translation, design, paper or content. It took about 10 years until those publishers who survived the transition to a capitalist economy started to consciously select their repertoire, improved translation quality, developed their individual profiles and publishing emphases. Nevolin now looks forward to the third stage when most of the published materials will be produced by national authors and address topics relevant to the local church and its mission.

In the European part of the former Soviet Union each larger denomination has now established their presence on the market and is able to supply churches, educational institutions and bookshops, even across borders, with relevant materials. There are several publishers associations – some along denominational lines – whose goal is to further Christian publishing by facing challenges together. There are also regular Christian and secular book fairs and other events which Christian publishers can use for sales and marketing. Many Internet shops carry Christian publications and offer international delivery, some even accept credit cards. The situation is far more difficult for Christian publishing in the Caucasus former republics (Armenia and Georgia) and in the mainly Islamic Central Asian states.

Kashinskaya has done much valuable groundwork on Russian religious periodicals: beside many overview articles (1996; 2003), under her guidance Aksana Prutskova has created a catalog of religious periodical literature in Russia published between 1990-2006 (Prutskova 2007). The Euro-Asian Accrediting Association, an evangelical association which since 1993 attempts to provide guidance and quality assurance to newly established theological educational institutions, has in the same wake established an
Conclusion

Seismic changes have taken place in Central and Eastern European religious publishing during the last twenty years. The church has reasserted its voice in society, not least through the printed word and its presence on the Internet, and is gaining hearing and influence in spite of attempts to push religion from the public into the private sphere. However, these two decades have also brought never-ending change in ever different areas of life and Christian publishers have been forced to develop ingenious and imaginative solutions for survival. One would wish that increasingly publishers and related professions would be able to focus more on creating an efficient infrastructure for distribution, for current awareness, centralized directories and finding tools, to enable and improve cooperation at least across their own country. In some countries this already effectively happens and other countries will follow.

Much fresh and insightful theological work takes place in the Central and Eastern European church which needs to become visible and accessible to the wider Christian community for mutual stimulation and enrichment. It is to be hoped that the still existing practical inconveniences in finding and acquiring CEE Christian resources will not hinder the Global church to tap into the rich heritage of this part of the world.

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Bibliography


Endnotes

1 Cf. YMCA-Press located in Paris and publishing works by professors and graduates of the St. Sergius Theological Institute, or also the Catholic “Zhizn s Bogom” (Life with God) in Brussels, Belgium.

2 It seems that the Russian Orthodox Church was able to re-organize its publishing activities quite quickly and already in 1999 had a transaction volume of 9 million US dollars (Mitrokhin 2008).

3 Gerry Davey relates the story of how 36 Christian periodicals failed just between August 1991 and March 1992 in Romania (Davey 2000, 8).

4 Cf. for example, continuing efforts by the Magazine Training Institute with Sharon E. Mumper as Director (www.assistnews.net/strategic/s0110068.htm) and lists of magazines in the respective areas (www.magazinetraining.com/MagazineDirectory/EastCentralEuropeFormSovietUnion/). Cf. also Elisabeth Mittelstädt’s involvement as editor-in-chief of the women’s journal ‘Lidia’ and efforts by Media Associates International (www.littworld.org/aroundthe world.asp?r_id=4&p=41&t=47#none).

5 Cf. the EAAA publishing project ‘Bible Pulpit’ (Bibleyskaya Kafedra) which has re-directed its attention to national authors and is partly support by the Mennonite Central Committee, or Langham Partnership International’s long standing commitment to national writers (www.langhampartnership.org/literature/).

6 Subsidies certainly depended on the proximity of the library to the country’s capital. In return, the library collections were censored.

7 Cf., for example, a comment by Arpad Fosztó, president of ‘Link Romania’: “Although there were a lot of Christian publishers after 1992, only those who receive funds from the West have survived. Another problem is that publishers in the West are producing materials in Romania and still distributing them for free, which undermines local publishers.” (Christian Publishing 2000, 5).

8 Cf. for example, the discussion between Roman Nosach, director of the Russian publishing house Murt, and an educator, who is distributing electronic copies of books published by Murt, on intellectual property rights (Nosach 2010). See also a response to the article by (Greenfeld 2011).

9 Says Piotr Waclawik, president of Vocatio Publishing in Warsaw, Poland: “The success of Christian publishing in Poland does not ultimately depend on economic strategies. Sensible investment and management are valuable, but our success really depends on the spiritual development of the Church” (Christian Publishing 2000, 4).

10 Cf. an Orthodox publisher in Russia who believes their mission is not only to fill the hands of missionaries and theologians but also to impress on the general audience the sense of the mystery of faith, awaken further exploration and develop virtue (Nicea Chronicles 2010).
11 The Visegrad Group was formed in 1991 with the goal to more effectively overcome the Communist past of and historic animosities in these countries and easier integrate into wider Europe, see www.visegradgroup.eu.

12 Czech Republic shows the highest level of agnostics and atheists with 62% (second highest in Eastern Europe, after Eastern Germany), Hungary 45%, Slovakia 25% and Poland only 3% (Tomka and Zulehner 1999, 32).

13 While Poland is known for its strong Catholic tradition, Slovakia has 7% Lutherans beside a 2/3 Catholic majority, and while about half of the Hungarian declare themselves to be Catholics there are also 21% Reformed and 7% Lutherans.

14 See entry on Romanian in (Lewis 2003). This number includes the population of Romania, Moldova and the large ethnic groups in Hungary, Serbia, Ukraine and Israel.

15 Romania has a large and growing evangelical population, Europe's fourth largest. The Romanian Evangelical Alliance is an association of about 1.5 million evangelicals.

16 The idea of ecumenism still needs to shed its negative ring, which it acquired during communism, and be accepted among the denominations, cf. (Kool and Penner 2010, 538).  

17 Fosztó quotes Manastireanu as saying: "Orthodox publishers produce titles that compete with Evangelical publishing. Many of these books are of high quality, written by important authors, have solid theological content, and create an interest in theology... People with university degrees are searching for good theological literature. Finding very little of this in Evangelical publishing, they resort to Orthodox and, lately, Catholic publishing." (Christian Publishing 2000, 8).

18 While already before the 1989 revolution state economy was in deep crisis the transition period became even more difficult economically for most Romanians. In the period 1991-1993 the poverty rate was assessed to be between 22% (World Bank 1997) and 39% (Research Institute for Quality of Life, RIQL).


20 Already in January 2007 Danut Manastireanu was able to list 52 doctorates only by evangelical Romanians, cf. http://perichoresis.ro/theologia/images/Theologia/anian%20evangelicals%20with%20doctorates%20in%20theology.pdf.

21 There is an extensive discussion about censorship in Orthodox publishing after the Synod requested on December 25, 2009 that all publications to be distributed through official church channels would first be approved in order to prevent literature of low quality and pseudo-Christian content to get on the market, cf. article by Andrey Dudchenko and the ensuing comments on the Orthodox portal Bogoslovy.ru (Dudchenko 2009). Evaluation of content really is a problem in these transitional market economies, which also the new controversial media law in Hungary attempts to address. However, while the diagnosis may be right, the solution is not that easy:

22 This transition will not be quick and needs to find a healthy balance. One cannot fall into the dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ rejecting titles just because they are written in a different language and accepting poor quality materials just because of the author’s ‘right’ passport. One can also not expect that the pool of authors who can produce quality monographs will grow over night. Some issues overlap
between cultures so why re-invent the wheel if something has already been dealt with brilliantly in a different language?

23 See, for example, the Orthodox Association of publishers and distributors “Orthodox Book” (http://www.pravizdateli.ru/members.php), the Ukrainian Christian Publishers Association (http://ru.axby.org/) or the Association of Catholic publishers in Russia (www.francia.ru/blog/?page_id=34).

24 The Christian portal InVictory (www.invictory.org/sites/) offers links to Russian language publishers (111 entries), libraries and bookstores.