

Slovak Politics and Society on the Brink of 1918-1919

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Slovaks in pre-war Hungary

At the beginning of the 20th century, the current territory of Slovakia was a part of Austria-Hungary. Until the formation of Czechoslovakia, or rather until the exact definition of its borders by the Treaty of Trianon, Slovakia was not strictly defined. While its northern and western borders, and part of its eastern border, were clear and stable (such as Hungary's border with the Austrian dominions of the Czech lands,

Poland and Galicia), the southern borders of Slovakia could not be clearly identified. In earlier documents of the Slovak National Movement, which tried to define Slovakia to achieve its autonomy, Slovakia's southern borders were generally described as an ethnic border between Slovaks and Hungarians in Upper Hungary. Some of the Upper Hungarian counties (the northernmost) appeared to be predominantly Slovak in nature; in the rest, however, Slovaks were considerably mixed with Hungarians. The varied ethnic



Fig. 1: View of Bratislava on the Danube. Postcard from 1923.

composition and intermingling of different ethnic groups in Slovakia, as well as in the entirety of Greater Hungary, had been the result of several hundred years of natural and Hungarian or Austrian state-influenced development, Turkish invasions, numerous external and internal colonisations, economic migration, and national and religious persecutions. In addition to the large and dominant Hungarian community in southern Slovakia and in some northern towns, the country also had a considerable German minority, which was located mainly in three areas (Bratislava and the surrounding area, Upper Nitra and the surroundings of Kremnica – or Hauerland, and Spiš). Larger cities contained numerous Jewish communities and, in the north-eastern part of Slovakia, Ruthenians as well. In 1905, approximately 2.85 million inhabitants lived in the territory of present-day Slovakia. According to their mother tongue, up to 1.7 million were Slovaks (60%), more than 800,000 Hungarians, almost 200,000 Germans, up to 100,000 Ruthenians and other smaller ethnic groups (Croats, Romanians, Bulgarians, Serbs...).¹

The Jews had not yet been reported statistically, but they were most often identified in censuses, according to the language used in their family, as Germans or Hungarians. Slovaks thus formed less than 60% of this area's population. Hungary had about 18 million inhabitants, of which approximately 1.9 million Slovaks used a Slovak language (including Slovaks on the so-called Lower Land, i.e. Hungarian, Romanian, and Vojvodina enclaves). Yet the real number of the Slovaks was a little higher than claimed by official statistics, which were affected by their survey methods and the significant illiteracy or ignorance of common people. By means of a deliberate Magyarisation policy, the proportion of Hungarians in Hungary's population changed from 47% in 1880 to 55% in 1910.²

The Slovaks formed about 12% of Hungary's population (excluding self-administered Croatia). They were part of Austria-Hungary, ruled by the Hungarian nobility and exposed to assimilation tendencies by the modern Kingdom of Hungary. On the one hand, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867, economic (and partly also social) modernisation and development proceeded, but on the other hand, non-Hungarian nationalities suffered national persecution aimed at establishing a homogeneous

Hungarian state. The Hungarian state policymakers were not satisfied with merely enforcing the idea of a Hungarian political nation, but they also tried to change the national identity of its non-Hungarian population on a practical level. They did so by marginalising the national political efforts and the activities of its nationalities (in Slovakia, for example, the abolition of the *Matica slovenská*,³ the minimal representation of Slovaks in the Parliament), and especially through education (the liquidation of Slovak grammar schools, the Apponyi Education Acts of 1907 enforcing Hungarian into the lower types of schools). In addition, various cultural and other pro-Hungarian associations were formed in the Upland (Upper Hungary, Slovakia) in order to promote pro-Hungarian sentiment among the common Slovak people. The Upper Hungary Magyar Educational Society (FEMKE) is a good example: this association, based in Nitra, raised Slovak orphans and children from lower class families into passionate Hungarian patriots. The Hungarian country Slovak Educational Society (Uhorsko-krajinský slovenský vzdelávací spolok), based in Budapest, focused on the Magyarisation of Slovaks by publishing periodicals and books in Slovak (from the base of *Matica slovenská*'s confiscated property). Moreover, Slovaks did not even have support in terms of church autonomy as did Orthodox Romanians or Serbs; both the Catholic and the Evangelical Church were affected by the Magyarisation enforced by the government.

The official political pressure pushed the nationally oriented Slovak elite towards believing in a radical change of statehood. Because their political position and socio-economic situation were not strong enough to create an independent Slovak state, which would have been too weak, national Slovak politicians finally decided to join the Slovak future with the stronger Czech statehood movement, which was also trying to liberate the Czechs from the Austro-Hungary monarchy. This crucial decision was not easy and the path towards creating a new, unique state was still very difficult and long.

Slovak Politics Before the First World War

A brief glance at the Slovak national reality before the First World War does not reveal a very nice picture. A small group of nationally conscious intellec-

tuals was able to encourage just a small part of influential Slovak society. From 1875 to 1892, there were no Slovaks among more than 400 members of the lower house of the Diet of Hungary. And later, because of the Hungarian administration's precautions against the Slovak candidates, the situation continued to look bleak:⁴ in their most successful year, 1906, Slovaks were represented by only seven Diet members; otherwise, the number remained at two or four,⁵ not enough to change anything via constitutional reforms. The situation outside the nationally conscious group of intellectuals was even worse. The small town of Martin was the only centre with any real economic or social significance. Bratislava was more German and Hungarian than Slovak and so had weak relations with the rest of Slovakia. A conscious Slovak identity was present only within a smaller part of the nation, mostly among the intellectuals or emerging bourgeoisie and minor nobility, such as the lords of Turiec county. Large parts of Slovakia, at that time Upper Hungary, although inhabited by Slovaks, were not significantly aware of themselves as a nation.⁶ Numerous inhabitants living in cross-border territories with Poland considered themselves Gorals, and the regions of Zemplín, Abov and Šariš, separate from the bigger towns of Košice or Prešov, were completely untouched by the Slovak national enlightenment.

Before the First World War, there had been no obvious clashes between the Slovak national movement and the Hungarian ruling power, but the apparent peace was illusory.⁷ Even before the war began, the government had on a number of occasions used force, imprisonment or live firing against people at public political meetings. Two of the later most important Slovak political figures, a Catholic priest and a doctor from Ružomberok – Andrej Hlinka (1864-1938) and Vavro Šrobár (1867-1950) – both paid for their pro-Slovak activities. Sixteen Slovaks, including Hlinka and Šrobár, were accused of inciting voters at the Ružomberok polling station and went on trial.⁸ Shortly after, in 1906, the so-called 'tragedy of Černová' occurred. It became synonymous with Slovak oppression not only in the Kingdom of Hungary, but in other European countries. During the consecration of a church in Černová, policemen fired at the crowd, which preferred the consecration to be celebrated by the Slovak Hlinka and refused the official



Fig. 2: Front page of the newspaper *Národné noviny* of 30 July 1914, edited in Turčiansky Svätý Martin, showing the Slovak language version of Emperor Franz Joseph's declaration 'To My Peoples!'

representative, a non-Slovak priest. Fifteen people were shot dead and twelve severely wounded.⁹

In 1907, the government imposed the aforementioned 'Lex Apponyi' (Apponyi Education Law) on the non-Hungarian nations of the Kingdom of Hungary.¹⁰ This law commanded all state-run schools to only use the Hungarian language (Magyar). The teachers were obliged to promote to their students loyalty and patriotism towards the Kingdom of Hungary, and any possible patriotism towards other nations was strictly prohibited.¹¹

Unexpectedly, this Magyarisation effort¹² finally influenced Slovak pro-national politics in a positive way. It mobilised Slovak leaders to act and think about ways of combating this negative political

development.¹³ They designed similar educational activities aimed at ordinary people, the uneducated (illiterate) mass of Slovak peasants and workers, that aimed to influence and turn them into a politically committed and economically active Slovak population by means of changes that would slow yield long-lasting effects.

To support this effort, the Slovak Youth Committee in Budapest began issuing a journal, *Prúdy* (Streams), in line with the older generation of Slovak politics, which had been represented by the *Hlas* (Voice) magazine issued at the turn of the century inspired by Tomáš G. Masaryk's (1850-1937) idea of 'everyday small steps' in national work. The committee also stressed the importance of Czech and Slovak reciprocity and criticised the leadership of the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana) in Martin for their conservatism and traditionalism. Bohdan Pavlů (1883-1938) and Ivan Markovič (1888-1944), later a Social Democratic deputy leader, became the journal's editors. Vavro Šrobár also influenced it with his ideas.

To sum up the situation until the neutralisation of political activities during the First World War: although the Magyarisation politics applied towards the Slovaks were a relatively mild form of oppression when compared to national repression in the Ottoman Empire or the Russian Empire, up to the end of 1914 the government persecuted hundreds of Slovaks for their nationalism, anti-militarism or so-called 'Pan-Slavism'.

These persecutions, together with other forms of political, economical, and cultural suppression, motivated and forced Slovak politicians and politics to consider and think about their options and possible courses of action to shape the future of the nation to be something other than a future under the 'yoke' of Austria-Hungary.

Czecho-Slovak Connections

Unlike the Slovak nation's very weak position in Hungary, the Czechs, who were under the administration of Vienna, were in a much better situation. As a result of negative tendencies in Austrian and, especially, Hungarian governmental policies towards Czechs and Slovaks, these two Slavic, linguistically closest nations of the Monarchy had found their way to each

other. Even before the beginning of the century, the Czech political scene was obviously interested in defending and helping the Slovaks fight Hungarian oppression. The association Czechoslovak Unity (Československá jednota) – and a Slovak students' university club in Prague, Detvan – played a great role in bringing the two nations together nationally and politically. Both nations sought their famous history in the previous, romantic phase of national revival. While searching, they could not miss their common roots in the Great Moravian Empire. Even later, they had occasionally influenced one another, especially culturally. The Slovak Lutherans were still using the Czech language of the 1564 *Kralice Bible* during services. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the mutual interest in knowing each other and in cooperation had grown significantly. Czech culture and business capital found their way into Slovakia, where they were welcomed as they also strengthened Slovak social and economic life.

In Bohemia, the number of scientists professionally interested in Slovakia, especially in terms of literature, ethnography and folklore, had been increasing. In the nearby Moravian town of Hodonín, Czechoslovak Unity organised an ethnographic and economic exhibition about Slovakia, where important contacts were made between Czech and Slovak politicians as well. Czechoslovak Unity also helped to publish many Slovaks' professional and artistic publications, which would otherwise have had no chance of appearing in Hungary, or would have had to be published in Hungarian. The manifestations of cultural and social rapprochement were gradually transferred to the political level, and the Czech members of the Austrian Parliament frequently mentioned the Magyarisation of the Slovaks in Hungary.¹⁴

The idea of co-operation between Slovaks and Czechs was supercharged by the First World War, which crucially weakened the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. With the help of the Entente, the war enabled representatives of the non-governmental national movements to consider leaving the Monarchy. First, in 1915, there was the idea that the leading personality of the Czech exile political scene, Tomáš G. Masaryk, might restore the independent Czech kingdom. Later, the ambition was modified to the creation of a republic, and expanded to include the Slovaks and Ruthenians in this free state, ethnicities



Fig. 3: Poster issued by the Czechoslovak Recruiting Office in New York in 1918 and designed by the Czech artist Vojtěch Preissig (1873-1944), using a verse of the 1844 poem *Dobrovoľnícka* by Janko Matúška (1821-1877), *Už Slovensko vstáva, putá si strháva* (Slovakia is rising, tearing off her hand-cuffs).



Fig. 4: Commemorative plaque in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA), in honour of the Pittsburgh Agreement signed on 31 May 1918, by representatives of the Czech and Slovak political exiles in the USA.

whose country leaders in the US had expressed an interest in creating a new common state on the ruins of the Monarchy, which they predicted would fall during the war. From mid-1918, when the Entente was openly speculating about the post-war disintegration of the Monarchy, the exile headquarters of the Czechoslovak National Council gradually established itself as the future new government of the emerging Czechoslovak state. On 18 October 1918, a declaration on the independence of Czechoslovakia, the Washington Declaration, was published in American daily papers, followed by the official overthrow of the Monarchy in Prague on 28 October and the declaration of the Czechoslovak state on its home territory.

In 1918, the politically relatively 'sleepy' Slovakia's situation changed radically.¹⁵ The numbers of Slovak soldiers deserting, because they refused to

fight for the Monarchy and its war goals, grew for both national and social reasons. They did not return to the front from their vacations and convalescences, but rather escaped into the local mountains where they created the armed force that would serve the oncoming national and social revolution.¹⁶ Some units still on the front even erupted into rebellion, and were violently suppressed (44 Slovak soldiers from Trenčín who revolted in Kragujevac, Serbia, for example, were executed).¹⁷

From the summer of 1918, a gradual but unstoppable dissolution of government power had begun, linked to the deteriorating fortunes of the Monarchy in the war. The domestic Slovak political scene gradually awakened under the influence of foreign actions. At first, at the 1 May Labour Day celebration in Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš, Vavro Šrobár publicly declared the effort of the Slovak nation to create a joint state with the Czechs.¹⁸ Then, in the autumn of 1918, the Slovak political factions under the Slovak National Council officially declared the same in the name of all Slovak political bodies.¹⁹ After the Austro-Hungarian Empire's surrender, the new liberal Hungarian government failed to retain its hold on Hungary's Slovak political scene, even though Mihály Károlyi's (1875-1955) government enforced the Act on the Autonomy of Slovakia.²⁰

Slovakia in the New Czechoslovak State

Slovak politicians, disappointed by Budapest's reluctance to grant the Slovaks even a modicum of national freedom in the previous decades, definitively decided on 30 October 1918 (only two days after the factual declaration of the Czechoslovak state in Prague) to unite their fate with the Czechs in a joint state. All this happened despite the fact that Slovaks and Hungarians had lived alongside each other in Hungary, not happily, but without any outbreaks of violence (as had happened between Poles and Ukrainians, or even between Hungarians and Austrians). In the economic sphere, moreover, Slovakia had become more industrialised during the previous decades thanks to the Hungarian modernisation laws. But none of this could offer the Slovaks such opportunities as a co-government in a new state with a very close Slavic nation that was significantly more economically and socially advanced than backwards



Fig. 5: Signatories of the Declaration of Martin on 30 October 1918. Bottom row (from left to right): Karol A. Medvecký, Ján Vojtaššák, Karol Kmet'ko, Juraj Janoška, Samuel Zoch, Ján Slávik, Vladimír Makovický; middle row: Emil Stodola, Ferdinand Juriga, [unknown], Ivan Dérer, Vladimír Pavel Čobrda; upper row: Jaroslav Ruppeldt, Štefan Krčméry, Emil Beňo.

Hungary, with its semi-medieval socio-political system.²¹

The transition from Hungarian to new Czechoslovak power and order was not easy. The Hungarian government received no support from either the internal security point of view, or in terms of gaining and managing a designated territory. As soon as it was clear that Austria-Hungary had lost the war and the old administration apparatus would be replaced by a new one, the authority and competences of the Hungarian bodies were impeached. Yet new Czechoslovak administrative bodies and offices had not yet formed and they had no authority or power at their disposal to compel the authority.²² Following several months of uncertainty, chaos, and confusion, a 'people's' revolution began. In some places, the remaining elements of police forces, and pro-Hungarian officials, were able to maintain public order, but elsewhere massive attacks broke out targeting prop-

erty and people that symbolised the old era, social or national inequality, and so on.²³

The ordinary people who had borne the brunt of fighting the war (mobilisation, requisition, short supplies, losing loved ones) for four years poured their frustration into 'raids' on richer settlements, farmsteads, manors, shops and homes of wealthier people, former elites and bureaucratic apparatus, and so on. The most common target of these attacks was Jewish property,²⁴ which was easily distinguishable socially and especially culturally. The Jews had been economically and socially prominent, especially during the last decades of the monarchy. They were associated with the rise of dynamic industrialisation, and the rise of trade, banking, and so on, and thus with getting richer. In addition, they were religiously, or more importantly culturally, distinct from the Christian rural working majority. In addition, because of the desire to remain in the decisive Hungarian social



Fig. 6: Celebration meeting of the newly established Czechoslovak Republic, in front of the Jan Hus Monument on Old Town Square in Prague, 1918.

elite and to merge as much as possible with the prevailing government regime so that they were not pushed away by the old establishment, the Jewish community were keen to conform to the fashion for Magyarisation or Germanisation. While this mainly concerned the use of the spoken language, Jewish entrepreneurs, self-employed individuals, businessmen and others who worked for decades to become full-fledged recognised members of the official Hungarian political nation²⁵ were naturally very far from the national-emancipatory ideas of the nationally oriented Slovak intelligentsia and the part of the Slovak peasantry/countryside influenced by it. When the old regime collapsed and a new but not yet established Czechoslovak regime was forming, the brunt of social and national anger thus focused on the Jews²⁶ and their possessions. Masses of people, 'drunk' on the absence of controlling and punishing state power and often led by armed individuals in the front, or rather by experienced former soldiers, deserters and so on, began to pillage everything they felt represented social or national inequality and exploitation.²⁷

In addition to Jewish property, they often plundered the nobility's residences, taking not only food, agricultural equipment and livestock, but everything considered of value from the castles and manor houses. They destroyed, burned or otherwise discarded a great number of cultural valuables, such as larger furniture that they could not take and remove or which they considered impractical and worthless. This wave of violent popular social revolt and revolutionary 'wrath', and the plundering of private and public property, so deterred the incoming representatives of the new Czechoslovak state establishment that decades later, when plans for a coup against the collaborative regime were formed during the Second World War, the participants focused on the need to maintain public order during the coup.²⁸

However, in the first months of 1919, the people's rioting and attacks on the property and offices of the former era gradually stopped and new Czechoslovak bodies and offices began to administrate the country. They also created the armed forces (army, gendarmerie) to secure the protection of general human rights, including the security of private property.²⁹



Fig. 7: Czechoslovak patrol on the Danube Bridge at Komárno, 1919, during the fights against the Hungarian troops.

Ensuring the integrity of the state territory, and establishing the authority of new state bodies and the social systems was much more difficult (in terms of time, material and people).³⁰ The previous social structures, constructed over several hundred years, with clearly demarcated social, economic, cultural, national and political positions for particular social and national groups and populations, had suddenly been overturned. Constructing the new order began during the revolutionary break.

Previous Austro-Hungarian and German-Hungarian elites in Slovakia were suddenly members of a rejected class. The high social status they had previously enjoyed in the monarchy was now a disgrace. Pro-Hungarian and pro-Viennese officials, teachers, public officials and so on were replaced by representatives of the new Czechoslovak power, individuals who had expressed opposition, even resistance, towards the Austro-Hungarian regime during the previous era. They differed not only nationally and politically, but socially as well. The Austrian/German and Hungarian representatives of the nobility or richer senior officials who had been devoted to the monarchy were replaced by Czech, Slovak or Ruthenian/Ukrainian intelligentsia, small entrepreneurs and others who were Republicans and Democrats. It

was only natural that smaller and larger opposition groups should arise from many directions against the newly created Slavic republic, which was literally 'popular'. A huge resistance wave arose, mainly within the territory of Slovakia, the arrival of the so-called Slovak government (delegated in Prague) in Bratislava was accompanied by a great strike and demonstrations by the town's Hungarian and German inhabitants.³¹ Czech, Slovak or Ruthenian-Ukrainian populations each claimed a natural right to their own state, similarly, amid the frenzy of this social and national revolutionary period, the Germans and the Hungarians also demanded their own national-political rights in the new Czechoslovak territory. Overall, they formed almost a third of the population in the Czech lands, Slovakia and Ruthenia. Like the pro-Czechoslovak forces, they also began to form so-called national committees, which represented a transitional revolutionary power with local influence. And, as the Czech, Slovak and Ruthenian-Ukrainian national committee recognised Czechoslovakia, the Germans on the Czech border recognised the notion of a so-called Republic of German Austria,³² the Hungarians directly declared their wish to annex the territory they controlled to Hungary.



Fig. 8 and 9: Bratislava from 26–28 October 1921, the monument to Queen Maria Theresa, accompanied by the statues of a Hungarian nobleman and a Hungarian soldier, created in 1897 by the Hungarian sculptor Jan Fadrusz, was destroyed. These photographs by Marcell Jankovics from 1910 and 1921 show the monument and its destruction.

While in the Czech-German case this national dispute was resolved relatively smoothly, because, in fact, no Republic of German Austria was created and the Czech army, the police and the state authorities asserted their authority in this area relatively easily,³³ the situation in Slovakia and Ruthenia was significantly worse. It was caused by the serious instability within Hungary, triggered by the fall of the liberal pro-Entente governments. And consequently, because of the general resistance to the war's political results and the suggested territorial order for the Carpathian basin area, the Hungarian Bolsheviks came to power. Instrumentalising the attractive idea of Greater Hungary restoration or, at least, the unification/liberation of all Hungarians in the Carpathian basin from the supremacy of different nations, they promoted a socialist revolution in Hungary. Béla Kun's (1886–1938) Hungarian Red Army invaded Slovakia in May and June 1919, and conquered

a considerable part of south and eastern Slovakia. A satellite Slovak Soviet Republic, which proclaimed close cooperation with Budapest and the administration of the country by Soviets,³⁴ was even declared for a short time in the occupied territory of eastern Slovakia in Prešov.³⁵ The threat of losing a big part of Slovakia, or its Bolshevisation, was clearly reversed by the threat of intervention by the Entente Powers against the Hungarian Soviet Republic followed by the withdrawal of the Hungarian Bolsheviks.

It was only after this period of turbulent change, and the fight for the inclusion of post-war Slovakia in Czechoslovakia, that the official social and national revolution, headed by Czechoslovak bodies in Prague, slowly began.³⁶ In contrast with the conservative Hungarian election law, all adults in the Czechoslovak Republic now had the right to vote, including women. An equally important 'revolutionary' law about land reform was adopted, which redistributed

large land properties belonging mainly to the Hungarian nobility to smallholders, mid-ranking peasants and farmers. The extent of this land reform was radical in comparison with what was happening in Hungary and the Balkans. Apart from its social-political aspect, it was aimed at reducing the property held by the principal opponents of the Czechoslovak Republic. The state also gradually adopted progressive school and social reforms/laws (for example, an extended national education system was created, which had been impossible in the Hungarian era). New kinds of employment insurance companies and unemployment benefits were created as well. The relationship between state and church became more liberal. The Czech parts of the Republic in the West gradually implemented a new form of public life. The general modernisation of social life and strongly increased involvement of the masses in cultural and public life were accompanied by the creation of a wide-ranging civic society, which gradually became (with its democratic standards) a 'sad' exception in Central Europe.

Slovakia's transition from Austro-Hungarian to Czechoslovak statehood was not without problems and numerous mistakes by the new Czech and Slovak elites, yet it undoubtedly represented a significant qualitative change from which the country and its Slovak inhabitants were able to profit during the whole 20th century.

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