Book Reviews

James Mace Ward

Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

For Anglophone readers, the world of East Central European collaborator fascism can be difficult to penetrate. James Mace Ward has done a real service to that audience by providing the first in-depth, scholarly biography of the infamous president of wartime Slovakia, Father Jozef Tiso. It is a meticulous piece of empirically-driven scholarship, which seeks to clear the air of a figure who has, in the ideologically ramified circumstances of both Cold War Czechoslovakia (in which the communist regime was happy to shoehorn Tiso into pre-existing Marxist tropes) and post-Wende Slovakia (where efforts were made to cast him as a national martyr) been treated more as an ideological football than as the complicated historical actor that Ward seeks to portray. His attention to chronology and detail – as well as his chosen method of historical biography verging on microhistory – assures that we are provided with a more nuanced, variegated understanding of the man's political options, experiences, and motivations. For this reason alone, Ward has provided a salutary addition to the literature on midcentury European political extremism.

The very fact that there is so little scholarship on Tiso means that, for the non-speaker of Slovak or Hungarian, it is hard to gauge the truth-claims of Ward's investigation. We do not have a corpus of any kind against which to measure his particular approach to his subject. Seemingly aware of this, Ward treads carefully, wishing to place his historical subject carefully and judiciously within the setting of the larger political, social and cultural transformations that Tiso witnessed and would eventually take part in. Be it his commitment to social Catholicism before World War One; his post-1918 anti-communism, so typical of men of the cloth; his turn to accommodationist Slovak nationalism; his prevarication, as Ward sees it, regarding Hitler's encroachment on national sovereignty in 1938; or his obligations to his new Nazi hegemon by way

of increased anti-Semitism during World War Two: All these different phases of Tiso's political development are meant to reveal a man buffeted by external forces more than acting upon those forces. Loathe to affix ready labels to his historical subject, Ward prefers to see Tiso as an opportunist, and an occasionally hapless one at that; a man who, as his contemporary and confrère in Slovak politics Paul Čarnogurský put it, 'would sail down the swiftest stream just to keep his hand on the tiller' (161). In this way Ward finds himself arguing – at least implicitly, since he makes no reference to her work – against Tatjana Tönsmeier, who contends in her German-language monograph on Slovakia and the Third Reich that Slovakia was far from obedient to Nazi higher-ups, and always focused on their own interests.¹

To Ward's credit, this is a beautifully written piece of work. He displays a panache and style that is too rare in historical writing. But along with a fluid literary style more typical of the genre, Ward also gives the reader pause to wonder whether perhaps that chosen genre – and it is more that of political biography than microhistory – does not lead to a certain empathy or even sympathy. We hear for instance of Tiso's 'sensitivity' and his 'constructive work', marked as it was by 'unglamorous, laborious, small steps forward for the nation' (267). The quest to find complication and fracturedness in the individual's choices is salutary for any historian concerned with precision of detail and felicitousness to the historical record – but for Ward, this comes at the expense of broader analysis. This is most obvious in his consideration of Tiso's relationship to fascism. The title of this book alone would, one assumes, lead Ward to conclude that the president-priest was indeed a 'clerico-fascist'. And yet Ward is hesitant to come to this conclusion, using as his evidence repeated moments in Tiso's public speeches where he decries fascism in other countries (96, 114, 148). One is reminded in such moments of Robert Paxton's warning not to take such proclamations *prima facie*, noting for instance the notorious Primo de Rivera's rather implausible claim that he could not possibly be fascist because he was Spanish. Against this, Ward does not delve more deeply into the ideological connection of fascist social thought to Tiso's beloved Catholic corporatism – a connection which Italian Fascists readily acknowledged. Ward's brief foray into the question of comparative fascism at the end of his work leads him to conclude that, against his own book title, Tiso was not fascist because in Germany and Italy fascists replaced God with 'progress' as the supreme measure of good (289). Even if one accepts the older convention that fascist governments

1 Tatjana Tönsmeier, *Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakei 1939–1945: Politischer Alltag zwischen Kooperation und Eigensinn* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003).

were anti-religious, in so arguing Ward ignores other European movements – most obviously Belgium's *Christus Rex* and Romania's *Iron Guard* – where God was squarely in the middle of fascist ideology. It is untenable for Ward to claim that Tiso's esteem for war as 'morally purifying,' a 'fiery hammer' which 'wrought together an entire nation into one camp, one heart, one spirit' (33) could not be fascist because for Tiso war also a matter of 'divine providence'.

Less satisfying still is Ward's treatment of Tiso's anti-Semitism. Against a centuries-long tradition of church hostility to Jews, Ward here and there contends that Tiso's anti-Semitism was not motivated by religious prejudice so much as pragmatism. Ward argues at one point that, as a Czechoslovakian politician in the 1930s, Tiso was 'tenacious in his refusal to jump on the anti-semitic bandwagon' (152). At another point, however, his readers are informed that 'his lack of antisemitic rhetoric in the late 1930s seems more like a maneuver than sincere tolerance' (199). We are apprised of Tiso's singular dislike of Galician Jews, whom he linked with 'filth, disorder and fraud' (33), or his public insistence that 'we are the slaves of the Jews' (43) – yet we are told that by the 1920s Tiso had 'purged antisemitism from his rhetoric' (82). Do such moments demonstrate someone forever shifting with the prevailing political winds? Or is it possible that Tiso was a canny anti-Semite who knew, like Hitler himself, when to soft-peddle his own views? Can Tiso's 'habit of deniability' (10) really account for overseeing the gradual persecution and extermination of over one-hundred thousand Slovakian victims of genocide? Does bending to the prevailing wind explain Tiso's assistance to the Germans in putting down an anti-fascist uprising in 1944, when the inexorable march of the Red Army into Eastern Europe was clear to all?

In the final analysis, Ward's own evidence paints a picture of a consistent anti-Semite, anti-communist, ultra-nationalist, and corporatist. That he was given to nuances of policy and pronouncement from one year to the next does not fundamentally detract from this; nor by itself does it counter the conclusion made by one particular side of the memory wars in contemporary Slovakia. Also, much as with Mussolini himself, demonstrating that Tiso underwent political transformations earlier in his career does not demonstrate that he wasn't a committed fascist later. Ward's otherwise laudable interest in distancing himself from the doctrinaire pronouncements of post-war communists bleeds, in this case, into a larger unwillingness to take the category of fascism more seriously – as is demonstrated by the absence of Paxton, Mann or even Payne from his analysis. The larger problem for Ward – one that reveals itself time again when discussing Tiso's spiritual life and how it intersected with his political choices – is that he continuously views the relationship between

religion and nationalism as one of intrinsic tension. Too much historical scholarship on European fascism has demonstrated – both in theory and ‘on the ground’ – that the relationship was more likely to be marked, even in the Catholic case, by synthesis.

Richard Steigmann-Gall

Kent State University

rsteigma@kent.edu