James Ramon Felak


Felak’s monograph describes a series of conflicts between devout Catholic Slovaks, with whom Felak sympathizes, and their various rivals, painted in varying shades of reprehensibility. Communists are Felak’s primary villains; Czechs, Czechoslovak-minded Slovaks, partisan groups, and Labor unions are antagonists. Slovak Lutherans and the Demokratická strana play a somewhat ambiguous role, particularly after an April 1946 electoral pact with leading Catholics; Felak depicts them mostly as unreliable and ineffective allies of his Catholic protagonists. The narrative begins with the restoration of Czechoslovak statehood in 1945 and ends with the Communist seizure of power in 1948. Apart from a detailed study of educational policy, the analysis focuses mostly on electoral politics and prominent politicians. The source material consists primarily of newspaper editorials and government documents.

Felak describes postwar Slovakia not only from the perspective of pious Catholics, but from the perspective of Catholic piety. When the Revolučné odborové hnutie (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, roh) called on Slovaks to work on a Sunday coinciding with a feast day, for example, Felak claims that any Catholics working on the holiday “violated their church’s and God’s commandment about the Sabbath being reserved for rest.” Such overt evangelism undermines Felak’s authority to speak about the motives of Slovak actors other than priests and religious journalists. One doubts, for example, that the roh introduced the initiative solely or even primarily to present “a dilemma to Catholics,” much less as an “attempt to desecrate Sundays and stigmatize Catholics” (p. 82).

Felak appears unwilling to accept that any Slovak might have opposed the Catholic church from conviction. The analysis seems to conflate the category “devout Catholic Slovaks” with “Catholic Slovaks,” and then with “Slovaks.” Catholic politicians “collaborated with” the Communist party, but “were active” in other parties (p. 34); leftist organizations in Slovakia do not support or sympathize with the Communist Party, they are instead “infiltrated and dominated by Communists” (p. 170). A public figure who writes a newspaper editorial on “the need for religious tolerance” has, in Felak’s telling, shown that he “kept up his service to the Communists through his press activity” (p. 76). Readers may gauge the severity of Felak’s dogmatism from the fact that the public figure in question, Jozef Straka, was himself a priest.
Felak’s book repeatedly affronts basic standards of scholarly objectivity. It describes Communist journalism as “a multi-faceted and multi-layered propaganda campaign” (p. 37), “a virtual all-out assault” (p. 61), and “a rhetorical assault clearly aimed at sowing division” (p. 130). When a speaker for the Union of Slovak Women dares suggest that “clergy must not misuse religion for political goals,” it concludes that “the Communist Assault came broadly across a broad front” (pp. 160–161). Felak perceives “a full frontal assault” against the Catholic Democratic Party (p. 53) even when Communist journalists claim credit for raising priestly salaries. Catholic journalists, meanwhile, “provide guidance” (p. 58), “defended beleaguered Catholics” (p. 98), “defended clergy from attacks” (p. 70), “repelled almost incessant attacks” (p. 73), “pointed out Communist hypocrisy” (p. 50), and “expose the hypocrisy behind Communist attempts to woo Catholics” (p. 57). Prose this partisan undermines the reader’s trust: I found myself feeling suspicious of even Felak’s most plausible factual assertions.

Strident Catholic advocacy particularly undermines Felak’s credibility in a potentially interesting discussion of the highly divisive war crimes trial of Slovakia’s wartime leader, Jozef Tiso, a priest. Felak depicts Tiso as a leader of good will caught in an impossible situation. The Anglophone reading public sometimes fails to appreciate the difficult moral dilemmas that arose under Nazi occupation; the case for Tiso’s regime as the “lesser evil” could perhaps be made. Felak, however, appears to doubt that Tiso’s government did any evil at all: with alarming frequency, the adjective “alleged” accompanies phrases such as “collaborators” or “war crimes” (see e.g., pp. 64, 67, 74, 87, 93).

Felak also seems unwilling to acknowledge that any Slovak could sincerely reject Tiso’s ultimate innocence. At pro-Tiso rallies, “the participants were overwhelmingly common people” (p. 102) inspired by “pious and patriotic sentiments toward and concern for Slovakia’s former priest-president” (p. 101). Demonstrations against Tiso, by contrast, are the work of “partisan groups” seeking not justice or accountability but “a vehicle for attacking the Catholic Church through the Communist influenced trade unions and partisan organizations” (p. 105). Though Felak himself cites a column from Pravda arguing that “Tiso was not on trial for being a priest, but for being the leader and president of a fascist state” (p. 111), he nevertheless argues that Communists sought the death penalty in order to “demonstrate that, in a Slovakia that was approximately 80 percent Catholic ... a Catholic priest could still be hanged” (p. 96).