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NATIONAL TENSION AS A LEVER FOR SEIZURE OF POWER: CZECHS, SLOVAKS, AND COMMUNISTS

When historians and political scientists discuss the affairs of Czechoslovakia, they frequently tend to look upon the country from the vantage point of its capital, Prague. This tendency becomes even more evident when analyzing the Communist seizure of power in February 1948. The focus on Prague at that time is quite legitimate. I wish to argue in this article that the Communists had already gained the upper hand in Slovakia during the fall and winter of 1947. The havoc they wrought in Bratislava's political scene had its repercussions in Prague in February 1948: it smoothed the road of the Communists to the helm, and enabled them to move faster and more safely.

To comprehend this, one must pay close and careful attention to the Communist exploitation and manipulation of Czech and Slovak nationalism. We shall hereafter claim that the Communists, although not free of nationalist drives, successfully played nationalists of both peoples against each other. By blindly following the path of political contest, the nationalists thus fell into a trap which argued doom and the ultimate defeat for Czechoslovak democracy.

First, a few details about Slovakia. In 1918, the Slovaks were by and large a nation of peasants and cottagers. Local industry was insufficient to provide the entire population with its daily bread. Only minimal numbers of the working and middle classes lived in Slovak cities and towns. Divided into Catholics and Protestants, politicians of the one creed harbored an intense dislike of the other creed. Catholics accused Protestant public figures of allying themselves with the Czechs, while the Protestants regarded Catholics as backward, parochial, reactionary, and unfit to lead the nation.

During the war, Catholics staffed most of the positions in the Slovak State; Protestants were heavily represented in the leadership of the anti-Nazi "Slovak National Uprising" in the fall of 1944. The Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, the mainstay of
Slovak Catholic nationalism, was soundly beaten and never recovered. Its members, nicknamed Ludaks, were for all practical purposes barred from public life; the non-Communist activists of the Uprising congregated in the brand-new "Democratic Party" (DP). Despite a Protestant majority in the DP, there were nevertheless several outstanding Catholics at the helm. Veterans of the pre-war Agrarian party—outlawed because of its role during the Second Republic—were also prominent among the DP elite, and as time went by, followers of the defunct Hlinka Party joined the DP, too.

Communists played a prominent part in guiding the Uprising. Ostracized in the past, members of the Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS) now came to the forefront of local political activity. One of the major Communist factions closely followed the lead of the Czech Communists. Because the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCS) wished to see the Republic administered centrally from Prague, the Slovak partisans of CPCS were somewhat lukewarm to the national issue. The other faction, which excelled during the Uprising and had a record of cooperation with the DP elite, was anxious to secure self-determination for its nation within the postwar so-called Third Republic (the so-called "Uprising gains"). On these terms, the "Uprising Generation" Communists found an easy understanding with the "Uprising Generation" Democrats. Yet this was the limit of the understanding: by definition the Democrats represented the propertied classes in Slovakia and the majority of opponents to Communism. CPS offered a home to Communists of any shade, to many workers, poor peasants, and to numerous anti-Fascists faithful to the heritage of the anti-Nazi struggle. CPS and DP were the only two parties in existence in the Slovakia of 1945-46. Before the elections of May 1946, these two parties were joined by two other minute and unimportant political groupings: the Labor Party and the Freedom Party.

The population of Bohemia and Moravia had a choice between four parties: two Marxist, the CPCS and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and two non-Marxist, the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party (CNSP), a nominally socialist, practically bourgeois middle-class body with a long democratic tradition, and the People's Party (PP) representing Czech Catholicism. SDP and CPCS cooperated closely, at least so long as some left-wing personalities stood at the head of the former. Despite the cooperation, however, SDP believed in a democratic parliamentary system and relied on continuous working-class support. After the