The Slovak Right: Conservative or Radical? A Reappraisal*

Slovakia, as a component of the First Czechoslovak Republic, shared a laudable reputation as the only working democracy in Eastern Europe. Yet the sting of reorganization into the first satellite of the Third Reich crippled this reputation. The question emerges: Who was responsible for the Slovak-German cooperation? Inevitably the search for Slovak fascists is initiated.

"Fascism" is a perplexing term. Embodying localized national traditions, the European fascist movements were diverse, dissimilar, and frequently mutually exclusive. The comparison of fascist groups in different countries reveals that, except for vulgar imitations, each organization was distinct, very much aligned with local peculiarities. The term "fascism" also restricts the scope of those issues available for analysis. By discussing, rather, the "radical right," topical limits expand to permit the consideration of more cognitive elements.¹

The First Czechoslovak Republic was a parliamentary democracy, a state based on law (Rechtsstaat) and symbolized by the personality of Professor Thomas G. Masaryk. The Republic only could suffer from a revisionist movement, for it had emerged from World War I satiated. Its social structure was moderately balanced; the economy exhibited relative stability; cultural standards were more than adequate; the state enjoyed respect in the international community. Except for its multiethnic structure, the Republic manifested none of the problems from which fascism burgeoned.

Czechoslovakia's nationality problems are commonly perceived, as is Slovakia's involvement in those difficulties. Slovakia, in many respects, was inferior to Bohemia and Moravia. Slovaks, although overt members of the "state-nation" (die Staatsnation), could not compete with the local Germans—unofficially regarded as secondary citizens—let alone with the Czechs. Yet, despite prejudices, discriminations, deprivations, and rigors inflicted on or tolerated by the Prague government, Slovakia's lot improved steadily, given the conditions of post-World War I Europe. Slovakia, as a part of the state-nation, did not appear superficially to provide fertile soil for the growth of fascism. Nonetheless, in Slovakia between the wars existed several groups that would qualify as "radical right," and some historians have brand-

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ed as fascist the major Slovak political organization, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSPP).

In this paper we will consider two issues: What were the objective conditions conducive to the growth of the Slovak radical right? What were the characteristics of that element of the body politic?

The Economic and Social Structure

The Slovakia that emerged in 1918 as a part of the new Czechoslovakia was a country characterized by low-degree industrialization and a primitive economic system. The country thus suffered not only in absolute terms, but also in comparison with the Czech lands to its west. Rich in neither natural resources nor arable land, the region gained notoriety for its emigration. Agricultural pursuits supported substantial numbers of Slovaks. As the population steadily grew, density per square kilometer and urban inhabitation increased proportionately. Although the majority of economically active persons were males, females progressively augmented the labor force. Yet only a minority of economically active males engaged in non-agricultural pursuits.

Two trends can be discerned from these facts. First, the socio-demographic structure of Slovakia was changing; second, the country remained underdeveloped, yet experienced a process of modernization. Dictating local socio-economic conditions were the populace's heavy pressure on the land and the relative shortage of alternative jobs. Such adverse socio-economic conditions obviously could cause social tension, a phenomenon common in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the process of modernization—certainly evident in the gradual decrease of rural population—precipitated the enlargement of the

3. In 1921 the share was 50.7 percent; in 1930, 46.6 percent; in 1940, 38.3 percent. Faltuň and Průcha, Table 63, p. 277.
4. In 1921 Slovakia counted 2,993,859 residents and in 1930, 3,324,111. Polstorotie, Table 5, p. 54. In 1946, 3,327,803 inhabitants registered for food rates. Polstorotie, Table 18, p. 65.
5. In 1927 the percentage of males in the labor force was 66.6 percent and, in 1930, 64.5 percent. Polstorotie, p. 44.