James Mace Ward


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 Tönsmeyer, 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