

INTRODUCTION

On 28 October 1968 the highest representatives of the Communist Party and the government of Czechoslovakia came to Bratislava Castle to declare that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was to become a federal state consisting of two national republics – a Czech one and a Slovak one. Fifty years after the foundation of Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the First World War, the existence of the Slovaks as a nation entitled to a degree of autonomy was formally recognized. It was recognized in somewhat bizarre circumstances, being one of the few elements of the reform programme of Dubček and his colleagues which was allowed to survive the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia which had occurred two months earlier. The solemn ceremony on 28 October 1968 was marred only by the awareness that foreign troops were present in Czechoslovakia. It was reminiscent of a similar situation almost thirty years earlier when the independent Slovak State was proclaimed on 14 March 1939, after Czechoslovakia had been attacked not by fraternal socialist allies, but by Hitler.

This book describes the modern history of the Slovaks – the four-and-a-half million people who inhabit the eastern part of Czechoslovakia. Like the nine-and-a-half million Czechs in the western part of the country, they are Slavs. Their history is in many respects unusual or even unique. For many centuries they lived under foreign rule, yet they survived this experience with their culture and sense of national identity intact. Before 1918, as part of the sprawling Hapsburg Empire, they were dominated by the Hungarians. After the foundation of Czechoslovakia, they were in the uneasy position of junior partner to the Czechs. Apart from a brief, involuntary and limited ‘independence’ as the Slovak State during the Second World War, the Slovaks remained largely under the control of Prague. The situation was not radically changed by the Communist take-over in 1948. And one may doubt how much the status of Slovakia has changed even now, after the federalization of Czechoslovakia.

Because of this chequered history, one of the themes of this study is necessarily that of cultural survival under foreign domination. The extraordinary persistence of a sense of nationhood was a phenomenon under-estimated by liberal democrats and Communists alike, and is of

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special interest whether viewed from the perspective of political theory or international relations. It has been the fate of Slovaks to be the satellite of other more powerful nations and at present, as before 1918 under the Hungarians, they can in some respects even be called the satellite of a satellite – a position which may be unusual but is hardly enviable. Yet the modern history of the Slovaks is more than one of mere survival. Slovaks have played an important role in many key episodes in Czechoslovak political life. True, Slovak dissatisfaction was probably not very important as a cause of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939 in the face of Hitler's threats and attacks. But in the 1960s Slovak intellectual and political developments had a considerable impact on the advent and character of the 1968 democratization process.

Any attempt to explain Novotný's downfall by one single factor, whether it be the Slovak national one or the economic difficulties of Czechoslovakia, would lead only to vulgar simplifications and shallow generalizations. It may have been only a historical accident that it was a Slovak, Alexander Dubček, who in 1968 succeeded Antonín Novotný as leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party; it was probably less of a coincidence, and more of a carefully manipulated affair, that Dubček's successor in April 1969 was another Slovak Communist, Dr Gustav Husák. But the overall role of Slovaks, and of the Slovak issue, in Czechoslovakia's recent politics has been considerable; it has been studied far too little, and understood hardly at all.

It is perhaps a paradox that nationalism should have played so significant a part in the development of a socialist society. The events and developments described in this book go some way towards explaining why so many Slovaks, including Slovak Communists, resented the centralization of 'socialist Czechoslovakia' as much as that of the pre-war republic. Partly, they resented the extreme Stalinism and orthodoxy of Prague, but the roots of Slovak nationalism go deeper than any particular issue of policy, however momentous and far-reaching its effects. It is one of my conclusions in this study that national sentiment is a normal part of the make-up of human beings, and that this national sentiment prevails irrespective of whether the national group to which an individual belongs lives in its own independent state or not.

One of the main fallacies in classical Marxism has been precisely an under-estimation of the impact of nationalism in all spheres. Marxists insist that they do not preach cosmopolitan universalism and they claim that they fully understand the needs and aspirations of various ethnic groups and nations. Yet Marxist theoretical writ-

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ings have sometimes suggested that nationalism is a somewhat artificial creation, the product of modern capitalist development, rather than a basic fact of life rooted deeply in human nature. The practice of Marxists, and especially of the rulers in the Soviet Union, has often been to ignore the force of nationalism, or else to suppress it in a manner not so very different from that of the Tsars. This study, in attempting to trace the Communist attitude to nationalism, and to define the effects of this attitude as far as the Slovaks are concerned deals in microcosm with a major problem which lies at the heart of the Soviet Union's policies, internal and external.

Frustration of national hopes is one of the basic features of Slovak history, and has done much to determine the Slovak 'national character', if one can speak of such a thing. The sense of frustration felt by many Slovaks springs in large measure from the fact that other bigger nations, including the Czechs, have often let them down. Promises made in solemn terms on solemn occasions have repeatedly been followed by disappointments.

This takes us to the very heart of the Slovak dilemma. As a small nation, the Slovaks have always had to choose which larger grouping they shall belong to or support. Their history is not one of independence but of interdependence. Such was their position in 1848, the year of revolutions in Europe, when they had to decide whether to support the Hungarians or the Hapsburgs. In the event they chose to revolt against the Hungarians, who were their immediate neighbours and more visible oppressors, even though the leader of the Hungarian rebellion was a liberal-minded radical, Lajos Kossuth; the Hapsburgs in Vienna, against whom Kossuth was revolting, represented the forces of reaction and had joined forces with an even more reactionary ally – the Russian Tsar. The Slovaks' revolt in 1848 brought them no gratitude from the Hapsburgs and inevitably resulted in the Hungarians becoming even more suspicious of the Slovaks. Seventy years later, in 1918, the choice for most Slovaks was easier, and therefore less of a dilemma. They expected more from the Czechoslovak Republic than from their Hungarian rulers and their hopes were not altogether misplaced, even if their ambition as a nation remained unfulfilled. In 1938 there was again a dilemma, though one might dispute whether the Slovaks really had a choice. After Munich, and the German invasion of the Czech lands, which of two evils was the lesser one? The so-called independent Slovak State under Hitler, or total occupation by him and his allies or rivals in Hungary and Poland? Again, after the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the 'independent' Slovak State, there were

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difficult dilemmas. The Slovaks were reunited with the Czechs once more in 1945, but in 1948 was there really a choice for either of these national groups between the existing democratic system and the political arrangement dictated by Stalin which replaced it? And in 1968 again there was not even much illusion of choice. In early 1968 the Slovaks at last had leaders whom they trusted to bring about the best solution to Slovak national problems. Expectations ran high; but this only made their frustrations the more desperate when Russia intervened and the Slovaks realized that once again there was no real choice. Although federalization was announced in 1968, and came into effect on 1 January 1969, Slovaks remained apprehensive both about the reality of this measure as far as effective decision-making was concerned, and about the general political situation as Czechoslovakia bowed to Soviet demands.

Although Slovakia's history has hardly been a happy one, this book is in no sense to be interpreted as a plea for some new 'Slovak state' or some simple cure-all for a complicated national and international problem. Moreover, it must be stated explicitly and categorically that the Slovaks have gained a great deal from their incorporation into Czechoslovakia. This has rightly been recognized by many modern Slovak historians. Whatever were the deficiencies of the pre-Munich Czechoslovak Republic in solving the Slovak problem, however unsound has been the theory of one 'Czechoslovak people', most Slovak politicians and historians today admit that the creation of a 'bourgeois' Czechoslovakia in 1918 meant for the Slovaks a positive step in their political, cultural and economic development. For example, L'ubomír Lipták, a progressive Slovak Marxist and a rather patriotically-inclined historian, saw in the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 a real national democratic revolution, even if it had its limits as far as Slovakia was concerned. He wrote in 1968: 'The most conspicuous, self-evident result of the 1918 revolution has been the removal of the most brutal and primitive national oppression. Before the eyes of often surprised contemporaries a process took place which could perhaps be called an external re-Slovakization of Slovakia.'¹

Since the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, the role of Slovakia has been interesting and sometimes controversial. In Slovakia, as in the Czech lands, there was initially very strong opposition to the invasion, and in general this study suggests that any claim that Slovakia was more pro-Russian than the Czech lands,

¹ L'ubomír Lipták, *Slovensko v 20. storočí* (Slovakia in the Twentieth Century), Bratislava, 1968, p. 97.

or more 'normalized', must be treated with extreme caution. In their feelings about the invasion, as in many other matters, Czechs and Slovaks felt themselves inextricably inter-twined. The federalization arrangement is unlikely to affect this basic political attitude, although unquestionably it does have its specific effects and even some potential for future instability. After all, a federalization system containing two component parts is unique and may conceivably be more liable to produce rivalry between the parts than a larger federal structure containing many different national or regional divisions.

However if Slovaks as a whole, even under the federal system, have not reacted to the invasion in a manner markedly different from the people in the Czech lands, it is nevertheless true that the Slovak Communist Party, and many leading Slovak Communist politicians, have played an important and in some respects characteristic role. Since there is no specifically Czech Communist Party (a remarkable and deliberate omission in the structure of federalization), the Slovak Party can at times be one of the most powerful pressure groups within the Czechoslovak Communist Party as a whole, and it has been used as such at several points since the invasion, including the appointment of Husák as First Secretary of the CPCz in 1969.

The roles of the successive First Secretaries of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Dubček and Husák, in fact provide one of the many paradoxes of recent Czechoslovak political life. Both of them are Slovaks, but Dubček was always regarded more as a Communist than a Slovak. Husák, on the other hand, was always more of a Slovak than a Communist, as his many years in prison under Gottwald and Novotný for the crime of 'bourgeois nationalism' indicated. Yet it was Dubček who came to appeal more to the national and political needs of Slovakia than the nationalist Husák. Some of the material presented here on Husák – and especially on Husák's attitude to the Slovak State in the Second World War – may shed some light on his present attitudes; it suggests that Husák may have had a tendency to confuse the illusion of independence with the reality.

Recent developments in Czechoslovakia suggest that once again, despite the principles of federation laid down in the constitution, the Slovaks may be frustrated in their national aspirations – and again by a Slovak in Prague. The Slovaks have often had prime ministers in Prague, in the First Republic and after the Second World War. Most of them tended to be less Slovak than Czechoslovak. Whatever happens in the coming years, it looks as if the Slovaks, as so often in the past, will not be short of dilemmas – and will be less than completely free in responding to them.

I THE SLOVAKS AS A NATION

The long disputed question of whether the Slovaks are a separate nation has by now been answered by all Slovaks in the affirmative. They consider themselves to be a separate national group among the Slav peoples and not merely a branch of the Czechoslovak nation. This is a subjective criterion but, as national sentiment is fundamentally of a subjective nature, this is the most important factor to consider. On the level of objective criteria the Slovaks are a nation too. They speak, and for more than a century have written, in their own language, they inhabit a compact territory, and have their own history, which, for many hundreds of years, was different from that of their closest Slav neighbours, the Czechs. Without attempting to provide a precise definition of a nation, nobody would today seriously question the fact of Slovak nationhood. All theories attempting to deny this have been proved false, artifices put up to serve political purposes, in most cases sinister from the Slovak point of view, and in most cases directed against the interests of the Slovak people.

If we consider the rather broader and looser concept of 'national character', most Czechs would not only admit, but would argue with vehemence, that the Slovaks are different from them. But differences in national character may occur within the same old-established and recognized unified nations, in England, Germany, France or Italy, for example, where patterns of behaviour and attitudes differ between inhabitants of various regions. The most striking example of this is provided by the Germans. They were united into one nation-state only a century ago; before Bismarck the only bond that made them feel German, if such a bond was really felt, was the written language. Even after unification millions of Germans, such as the Austrians and the German-speaking Swiss, remained outside the Hohenzollern Empire. It was only Hitler who attempted to force all Germans, whether or not they lived in the Third Reich, to belong to one homogenous nation.

Unifying tendencies usually originate with the strongest and largest member of the family of similar ethnic groups, which then becomes the nucleus of centralization. In Germany the process of unification started in Prussia. The fact that the men who originally

inspire the idea of unity often come from a peripheral area – Garibaldi was born in Nice, Napoleon in Corsica, Hitler in Austria, Stalin in Georgia, de Gaulle in Lorraine, Pilsudski in Lithuania – does not alter this historical tendency, and may be explained more in terms of psychology than political science.

One attempt at such a movement was the panslav idea. It originated in Tsarist Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century. It never became an official state ideology nor a policy of the Tsars and their governments. It reflected rather an intellectual ferment which had a certain impact on most of the Slav peoples, with the exception of the Poles who lived too close to Russia to be attracted by this basically pro-Russian idea. The smaller immediate neighbour is seldom, if ever, enthusiastic about joining the bigger one. Nevertheless, in the first half of the nineteenth century the Slav nations under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, or at least some of their more articulate intellectual leaders, cherished the idea of belonging to a larger group of nations of the Slav race. They took a certain pride in the fact that the biggest brother of them all, the Russian, was the ruler of a great Empire stretching from the centre of Europe to the Pacific Ocean. In the northern part of Austria there was the former kingdom of Bohemia inhabited by the Czechs; and in the northern part of Hungary, in the region between the Carpathian range of mountains and the river Danube, another Slav people, the Slovaks.

The Czechs had lost their national independence, or more exactly their historical statehood, to the Hapsburgs after the battle of the White Mountain in 1620. The Slovaks had lost theirs seven centuries earlier. After the death of King Svätopluk, they lost their state when, partly due to the rivalry which broke out between his three sons, the territory was invaded by the Magyars (Hungarians) coming from the Central Asian steppes round AD 900. From that time on they were ruled by that Mongol race which settled and acclimatized itself in the Danubian basin, becoming eventually fully European.

This is a very long time for a nation to be under foreign rule. It is unique in Europe. Even the Turkish rule over some Balkan nations, which lasted to the very end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, was a relatively short one. It was remarkable that the Czechs survived three hundred years of Austrian supremacy; it was a miracle that the Slovaks did not lose their national identity during the thousand years of Hungarian rule. To some this historic fact serves as convincing evidence that closely-knit national groups can and usually do survive long years of foreign oppression without having their own nation-states.

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In the nineteenth century, when the pressure from Vienna and Budapest grew stronger, panslavism, the feeling of spiritual and cultural unity with Russia, may offer one of the explanations why the Slav peoples, though ruled by alien races, survived. Among the Czechs and Slovaks the panslav movement was propagated by outstanding men, the poet Ján Kollár and the linguist and historian Pavel Šafárik. Both were Slovaks. They wrote in Czech because until the first half of the nineteenth century Czech was the usual written language of both Czechs and Slovaks. Kollár and Šafárik regarded themselves as Slovaks, but in a situation in which it was not yet clear why there should be a separate written language, or which of the many Slovak dialects should be adopted as such, they saw no reason to give up Czech.

Kollár and Šafárik were enthusiastic advocates of Slav unity but they thought of it more in cultural than political terms, and anyway they would never have dared to propagate any political adherence to Tsarist Russia. They remained loyal subjects and citizens of the Austrian monarchy. Stressing Slav cultural unity and mutuality, Kollár and Šafárik saw no point in tendencies which they thought worked against this aim, tendencies which might provoke disunity. They therefore opposed all the efforts of Slovak leaders like Bernolák, Štúr, Hodža and Hurban to establish a Slovak written language.¹ Kollár and Šafárik argued that it would serve no purpose to create a less accessible written language, which would make for provincialism. They were influenced by the German thinkers Herder and Hegel with their teleological view of history, of human progress. Herder believed that it was the historic mission of the Slav race to fulfil the idea of goodness, the role of the Germans was the realization of truth, while that of the classical world had been the materialization of beauty.

This concept of history left little room for the desire of small nations split into even smaller ones. Why should the Czechs and Slovaks divide into two different nations? Why not instead encourage a movement towards panslav unity under the moral and cultural leadership of the Russians, especially if mankind expected the Slavs to be the bearers of goodness, perhaps the most precious of all human values?

¹ The most prominent of them was L'udovít Štúr (1815–56), a poet, publicist and politician. He was the main advocate of the Central Slovak dialect being adopted as the literary language. This was agreed upon in 1843 after an attempt by a Roman Catholic priest, Anton Bernolák, to introduce the Western dialect had finally been abandoned.

Štúr and his group shared this philosophy rather than opposing it, but they believed that the Slovak people should enter the community of Slav nations as a separate ethnic unit, as a legitimate younger child in the family of which Russia, if not the mother, was the oldest and most powerful brother.

In the spring of 1848, the year which historians call 'the Spring of Nations', Štúr turned against the Hungarians who had revolted against imperial Vienna and the Hapsburg monarchy. The Hungarian democrats and liberal radicals led by Lajos Kossuth – allegedly of Slovak origin – and themselves imbued with their own nationalism, had little understanding for the national aspirations of the Slovaks and other minorities in their part of the Empire. Hungarian nationalism was turned against the Austrian feudal absolutist monarchy. The Slovak leaders thought, mistakenly as it turned out, that by damaging the cause of their immediate masters they might find gratitude and understanding in Vienna. But on the whole their rebellion was not a big affair, it was not even coordinated with the larger movements in Bohemia which were, of course, openly anti-Austrian. The Slovak rebellion was merely a counter-action against the Hungarian revolution which started a few weeks earlier. The Slovak rebels consisted of a few hundred volunteers who were quickly and brutally suppressed by the Hungarians. The subsequent Russian intervention helped to suppress the Hungarian revolt without paying the slightest consideration to the Slovak cause and their Slovak supporters. The Tsar came to help the Austrian Emperor, not the Slav peoples of the Austrian Empire. For him liberal ideas were more dangerous and their suppression of greater importance than his sympathy for the panslav ideals of the period.

Tsarist Russia was a natural and official ally of Imperial Austria. Therefore Štúr thought that, after Vienna, St Petersburg was the place to look for moral and even political support. Slovak national interests seemed to Štúr more important than the liberal democracy proclaimed by the Hungarian insurgents, although Štúr himself was not unsympathetic to democratic and liberal ideas. He expressed his progressive political views frequently in his writings and in his speeches in the Hungarian parliament.

Later it was an embarrassment to Slovak Communists that Marx criticized the Slovak leaders of 1848 because he saw in their anti-Hungarian attitude and their rebellion a betrayal of the democratic and liberal revolution. Marx, the internationalist, could not understand or sympathize with the nationalism of Slovak leaders. For him the fact that the Slovak rebels saw in the Russian Tsar and the

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Austrian Emperor the protectors of their cause, was sufficient reason to condemn their attempt at revolution in 1948 although the Slovak leaders were just as democratically motivated as the Hungarians.

Incidentally, it was the Slovak Communist poet and publicist Ladislav Novomeský who in the 1930s in the pre-war Czechoslovak Republic criticized Marx for his views. Novomeský tried to explain why Marx was wrong, and Štúr right. In the 1950s, when Novomeský was accused and tried for bourgeois nationalism together with Husák and others, his heretical stand against Marx certainly could not have helped him. If it was not directly used as one of the actual charges by the secret police, it was only because they were not sophisticated enough to grasp the full implication of this early political deviation on the part of the old nationalist. However, in the days of Novomeský's trial even official Communist history held Štúr in higher regard than Marx had done. Marx's lack of sympathy for Slovak nationalism was played down and was treated in the way most Marxist historians deal with controversial matters which do not fit their immediate cause and purpose.

From the very beginning the Czechs opposed Štúr's Slovak cultural separatism. They saw in it a weakening of their own struggle for national recognition although it was only much later, in fact only a few years before the First World War, that some Czech politicians started to voice the idea of an independent Czech state. The idea of Czechoslovakia as a common state of Czechs and Slovaks (or Czechoslovaks) only became a political reality when the question of successor states arose after the defeat of the Hapsburg Empire in 1918.

Vienna had never attempted to prevent the Hungarians from Magyarizing their own minorities. The Hungarians were of course hardly a free nation themselves. The growing middle classes in particular were involved in a bitter struggle for the recognition of their Hungarian nationhood – a struggle which ended only in 1867 when the Hapsburg monarchy changed into a dual state, a kind of personal union between Austria and Hungary under a common emperor who was crowned as Hungarian king. For the minorities living in Hungary it meant national and political, if not economic, disaster. The Hungarians were in a minority against the combined number of other nationalities in their part of the common Empire, hence their deliberate policy of Magyarization of other national groups by suppressing their culture and closing their schools.

It was in this period of intensified national oppression that some Slovak intellectuals became politically conscious and active. They began to regard the Czechs in the Austrian half of the monarchy