1 Slovakia, the Slovaks and their history

Dušan Kováč

I

In January 1993 the Slovak Republic became an independent state after the division of Czecho-Slovakia into two states. With an area of 49,000 km^2 and population of 5.3 million, it is one of the smaller European states. The capital of Slovakia is Bratislava with a population of half a million people.[1] The world at large began to take an interest in Slovakia, the Slovaks, and their culture and history only after 1993. Since the history of the Slovaks developed within the framework of the Kingdom of Hungary until 1918, and then within Czechoslovakia, not only the amateur, but also the expert public may ask what the history of Slovakia is. Does such a history really exist?

In fact, Slovakia and the Slovaks have long been a subject of historical scholarship. If we could trace the development of Hungarian historiography, we would find that since various chroniclers were of Slovak ethnic origin (not least Ján of Turiec, the most eminent), Slovakia and especially the Slovak ethnic group have attracted interest. This tradition continued in humanist and Baroque historiography, since the territory of present-day Slovakia formed a substantial part of Habsburg Hungary during this period. The rest of Hungary was under Turkish domination. Interest in Slovakia and the Slovaks was heightened in the period of the Enlightenment, mainly thanks to the formally written defences (*apologias*) of the Slovaks (the earliest-known example is that of Ján Baltazár Magin from 1723) (Fig. 3), which used historical arguments. Also influential was the activity of the distinguished scholar of Slovak origin Matej (Matthias) Bel, who devoted a significant part of his outline of Hungarian history (*Hungariae antiquae et novae prodromus*, 1723) to the development

[1] Bratislava has been the official name of the city only since 1919. Prior to that point the name was only used by Slovak nationalists. This name was derived from the first-known written reference to the castle *Brezalauspurch*. The Latin name was Posonium, the German Preßburg, the Slovak Prešporok, and the Magyar Pozsony, the official name within the Kingdom of Hungary.

of the Slovak ethnic group. The first attempt at a systematic account of the history of the Slovaks appeared in 1780, in the form of Juraj Papánek's *Historia gentis Slavae*. From the end of the eighteenth century, the history of the Slovaks and of Slovakia became the subject of systematic interest.

In the formation of modern Slovakia, history played a key role: the record of a 'glorious past' became a key instrument of national agitation. This history was, however, often simply invented and mythological (using inadequate terms such as 'Old Slovaks' for the period of the eighth and ninth centuries, renaming Great Moravia as Great Slovakia, giving a Slovak identity to the rulers of the region in the Middle Ages and so on).

II

How does recent Slovak historiography tackle what it variously calls Slovak history or the history of Slovakia? This concept has two dimensions: territorial and ethnic. In the territorial sense, the subject of Slovak history is the territory of present-day Slovakia. This means that Slovak historiography, in conjunction with archaeology, devotes attention to the pre-Slavic period, and that it also takes an interest in the ethnic groups that lived in this territory both before and after Slavic settlement, which occurred in the fifth century. These two aspects are, understandably, not identical, and only their synthesis forms the subject called the history of Slovakia.

The past, perceived in this way, as a type of national master narrative, can be found in some works, which are mostly in Slovak and therefore not very accessible to the wider public. In the 1960s, the first attempts were made to produce an academic, synthetic history of Slovakia. This work was unfinished, terminating at the end of the nineteenth century.[2] Twenty years later there emerged a history of Slovakia in seven volumes.[3] Both these synthetic works are, of course, very strongly marked by the time of their creation. After 1989 only two short volumes were produced.[4]

[2] Ľ. Holotík and J. Tibenský (eds.), *Dejiny Slovenska I* [History of Slovakia, vol. I] (Bratislava, 1961); J. Mésároš (ed.), *Dejiny Slovenska II* [History of Slovakia, vol. II] (Bratislava, 1968).
[3] S. Cambel (ed.), *Dejiny Slovenska I–VII* [History of Slovakia, vols. I–VII] (Bratislava, 1985–1992).
[4] D. Kováč, *Dějiny Slovenska* [History of Slovakia] (Prague, 1998, 2007); E. Mannová (ed.), *A Concise History of Slovakia* (Bratislava, 2000).

III

In the Hungarian period, Slovakia had no administrative frontiers. The Kingdom of Hungary was divided into counties (Latin: *comitatus*, Slovak: *župa*, or *stolica*), which did not take the ethnic situation into account. The Slovaks called their country 'Slovensko' (Slovakia) – the term appears in written documents from as early as the fifteenth century but it was not precisely defined. At the time when the first Slovak political programmes were conceived, it was only an ill-defined region 'between the Tatras and the Danube', that is, the region called 'Upper Hungary' in Magyar literature.

The administrative frontiers of Slovakia were created by the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 and confirmed by peace treaties. Since then, Slovakia has existed as an independent administrative territory. Until 1993 this territory was part of the Czechoslovak Republic, which, according to the 1920 constitution and further constitutions until 1968, was a centralised state. Slovakia was regarded as an independent unit – it had its own ministry from 1918 to 1927, and a Land Office (Krajinský úrad) headed by a Land President after 1927 – but it did not have its own legislative assembly, government or other autonomous bodies.

The brief period of the so-called Second Republic from October 1938 to March 1939 was an exception: the post-Munich Czecho-Slovakia in practice changed into a confederative, tripartite state (Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia; Slovakia; Carpatho-Ruthenia). From 1939 to 1945, the Slovak Republic existed as an independent state under German tutelage. However, the borders of this satellite and vassal of Nazi Germany were not identical to those of present-day Slovakia. The greatest change concerned regions in southern Slovakia, which were handed over to Hungary on Hitler's orders, following the Vienna Arbitration of November 1938. In 1943, before the Slovak National Uprising, a new resistance parliament with the name Slovak National Council was constituted. This institution, together with the Board of Commissioners, which formed a sort of embryonic Slovak government, continued to exist after the war. However, the centralist model was also gradually applied in post-war Czechoslovakia, and the Slovak autonomous authorities became impotent appendages of the central authorities in Prague. Communist totalitarianism, established in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, strengthened this centralisation.

A Czechoslovak federation was formally created during the Prague Spring of 1968. The Slovak Republic was formed, with the Slovak National Council as its parliament and a Slovak government. However, after the Warsaw Pact invasion, the federation did not really function. The Slovak authorities continued to operate formally but policies depended on the decisions of the centralised Communist Party, which was not federalised,

and in the end on Moscow which was against any decentralisation or autonomy in the satellite states. The question of the political and administrative division of the state was reopened after 1989. The discussions about the name of the state – whether to write Czecho-Slovakia with a hyphen or Czechoslovakia without one – and about the division of responsibilities between the central government and the two national governments within the framework of the federation ended in 1993 with the division of the state. The quarrel about how to write the state name, which received the ironical sobriquet of the 'hyphen war', observed from outside seemed to be rather comical, but in reality it reflected the different perception of the common Czech–Slovak statehood by the majority of the Czech society on the one hand and majority of the Slovak society on the other.

The division of Czecho-Slovakia was undertaken in a peaceful manner, which was appreciated by the international community. Nevertheless, the two states currently enjoy a very good relationship and mutual co-operation. The Slovak Republic is a member of many international organisations, including the United Nations (UN) and, after some difficulties during the problematic Vladimír Mečiar government, has been a member state of the European Union (EU) since 2004.

IV

The Slovaks began to emerge as a modern nation at the same time as other developed European nations, as part of the spread of European nationalism from the end of the eighteenth century. In the first phase, activity began among the educated strata, who concentrated on cultivating their own language. In the Kingdom of Hungary, Latin was the official language and to a large extent also the literary language up to the early nineteenth century. As a result of Slovaks' linguistic closeness with the Czechs, the idea that the Czechs and Slovaks formed one Czechoslovak nation existed in this period, mainly among Slovak Protestants. However, the Czechs and Slovaks were separated by different historical development. The Czechs developed historically in the Kingdom of Bohemia, while Slovakia formed part of the Hungarian Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen from the eleventh century. There were periods when the two kingdoms had a common monarch, and this situation became permanent from 1526 onwards.[5] Nevertheless they

[5] The year 1526 marks the beginning of the Habsburg monarchy. From this date the Habsburgs were not only princes of the Austrian Lands, but (usually) also Holy Roman Emperors, as well as kings of Bohemia (with Moravia and Silesia) and of Hungary (with Croatia).

always represented independent entities with distinct internal features. Thus, when the Czechs and the Slovaks reached the stage when they were formulating their own political programmes, their differing histories meant that they developed individual plans and aims.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the political programme of the Slovaks aimed to achieve cultural and political-territorial autonomy within the framework of the Kingdom of Hungary. This demand was put in the document *The Demands of the Slovak Nation* during the Revolution of 1848. The *Memorandum of the Slovak Nation* of 1861 contained the same demand. Until the First World War, the Slovaks accepted allegiance to the Crown of Saint Stephen of Hungary, but demanded autonomous rights as an independent nation. They appealed to natural rights but also referred to their national historical development.

The political programme of the Slovaks changed only in the years of the First World War when all the relevant currents of Slovak political life accepted the programme of Czech–Slovak statehood, which came to fruition when the Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918. In the following years, Slovak political goals fluctuated between acceptance of the centralist model and demands for autonomy within the framework of Czechoslovakia. Paradoxically, even in the 1992 parliamentary elections, immediately before the break-up of Czechoslovakia, the small Slovak National Party (with 8 per cent of the vote) was the only Slovak political party advocating an independent Slovak state.

V

The question of the ethno-genesis of the Slovaks is an important one in Slovak historiography. Written documents and especially archaeological evidence clearly demonstrate that the Slovaks are the direct descendants of the 'Old Slavs', who lived in the Carpathian basin from the fifth century. The term 'Old Slavs' does not exist in historical documents, and it emerged in the literature in order to distinguish between these earlier Slavs, who were undifferentiated both ethnically and linguistically, and contemporary separate nations who speak Slavic languages.[6]

[6] The expression 'Slavs' (*Slovania* in Slovak, *Slavyane* in Russian) derived from *slovo* – 'word' in Slovak and Russian. A Slav was able to communicate, to speak – in contrast to the dumb, mute person: *nemý* in Slovak, *nemoi* in Russian. Thus the designation for a German – who could neither understand nor be understood by Slovaks – is *Nemec* in Slovak, *Nemets* in Russian (*német* in Magyar).

The Old Slavs arrived in the Carpathian basin and the Danube region during the so-called migration period. The territory of Slovakia in that time already had a rich history. There is evidence of settlement of people of the Neanderthal type more than 100,000 years ago. Many prehistoric peoples lived on the territory of Slovakia. The Danube was a boundary of the Roman Empire (*limes romanus*). At the time of the Slavic settlement, the country was very thinly populated. The Slavs were very numerous and not very differentiated in language. Their first organisational units were tribes. The territory of Slovakia was probably part of the Slavic tribal union known as Samo's Empire.[7] In the territory of Slovakia itself, Nitra became the centre of another Slavic tribal union under the leadership of Duke Pribina. This Duchy of Nitra became part of the state known from the sources as Great Moravia (*Vel'ká Morava*, *Moravia magna*). At the beginning of the tenth century, after the fall of Great Moravia, the territory of present-day Slovakia gradually became part of the Hungarian state. Ethnic development or differentiation continued among the Slavs. The state framework of the Kingdom of Hungary was important for the development of the Slovaks. The frontiers of the state separated them from the ethnically related Western Slavs – the Poles and Czechs – and resulted in the Slovaks evolving into an individual ethnic entity. The multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary contained Southern Slavs (Croats and Serbs) and Eastern Slavs (Ruthenes), but the Slovaks were the only Western Slavs. In Latin sources they continued to be called Slavi (*Sclavi*), but in Hungary in the Middle Ages this term already unambiguously denoted the Slovaks, since the other ethnic groups had their own specific names in Latin. The native language with its numerous dialects gradually internalised the words 'Slovák' and 'Slovensko' in the Middle Ages. These designations were retained most frequently in geographical names.

The Magyars called the Slovaks *Tőts* and the German colonists called them *Wends* (*Winds*). From the Middle Ages, there were ethnic conflicts in Hungary mainly along ethnic boundaries and in towns. The rulers generally resolved them justly, without ethnic prejudice, as documented in the *Privilegium pro Slavis* (Fig. 2), issued in 1381, by which King Louis I the Great granted the burghers of Slovak origin in Žilina parity representation in the town council with Germans. Sharp ethnic conflicts flowed mainly from the fact that the ethnic groups living in Hungary – Magyars, Germans, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Romanians and others – were linguistically and culturally very different. As a result, ethnic homogenisation of

[7] Samo is described as a Frankish merchant who led the Slavs against the Avars. He was elected ruler in 623 and died in 658.

the country could not succeed, and the Kingdom of Hungary remained a multi-ethnic state until its dissolution in 1918.

The specific situation in the Kingdom of Hungary, including occasional polemics between scholars, created conditions for the formation of a national ideology by the early eighteenth century, that is, before the ideas of the Enlightenment and the later works of Herder and Hegel had begun to exert an influence. From the middle of the nineteenth century the formation of the Slovaks as a separate nation in the ethnic, linguistic and cultural senses was supported by the general acceptance of a standardised Slovak literary language. Politically, the process of nation formation ended in the 1930s.

VI

Thus, Slovak history is the history of a nation but also the history of states. Until 1918 the Slovaks shared a state history with the other nations of the Kingdom of Hungary, and after 1918 with the Czechs and the national minorities in Czechoslovakia. Slovak national history cannot be separated from these state frameworks. On the other hand, there is a specific history of the Slovak people, including the history of Slovakia as a territory. Once in the early period of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Duchy of Nitra formed a sort of separate 'third of the kingdom' administered by a prince – the heir to the throne. In the fourteenth century, in the period of feudal fragmentation, this territory became the domain of important magnates – the Omodej family and Matúš (Matthew) Csák. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the period of the Turkish invasion, the territory of Slovakia formed a substantial part of Habsburg Hungary. Reflecting these traditions and the consciousness of ethnic difference, Slovak representatives produced a national ideology over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; from the middle of the nineteenth century they added a national political programme. Even in the unitary Czechoslovak Republic, Slovakia's territorial integrity was not in doubt.

VII

What, then, are the dominant features or key points of Slovak historical development?

(1) Great Moravia is the oldest important milestone in Slovak tradition. The arrival of the missionaries Cyril and Methodius in Great Moravia is still commemorated with a state holiday in the Slovak Republic. The Slovaks rightly identify with the tradition of Great

Moravia and its cultural heritage because its inhabitants are clearly their ancestors. However, since the differentiation among the Slavs was only beginning in the ninth century, Great Moravia is actually a Slavic tradition, with which the Czechs (Moravians) also identify. It is associated with the invention of the Slavic script and the Slavic liturgy by Cyril and Methodius, which form a general, Slavic-wide heritage still highly regarded by the Eastern Slavs. As to Slovak history, this period constitutes a significant stage in the process of Slovak ethno-genesis. But the evolution of Slovaks into their own ethnic group occurred in the Hungarian era of Slovak history.

(2) After 1526 the Kingdom of Hungary became part of the Habsburg monarchy. As the Turks ruled the greater part of Hungary, Habsburg Hungary consisted effectively of the present territory of Slovakia with Bratislava as the capital and coronation town. This proved to be of great consequence for the history of the territory as well as for the history of the Slovak ethnic group. Humanist and later Baroque literature and the struggle of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation faithfully reflect the process of gradual ethnic awakening of the Slovaks against the background of power and ideological battles.

(3) The process of the formation of the Slovak nation began at the end of the eighteenth century and culminated in the codification of standard literary Slovak in 1843 and the creation of a Slovak political programme in 1845–1848. The peak of this process was the armed uprising of the Slovaks during the Revolution of 1848–1849. In the following years of harsh Magyarisation in the Kingdom of Hungary, the small Slovak cultural and political elite failed in its agitation for cultural and political autonomy, and thus this process came to an end only after 1918.

(4) The years of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) constitute the period of the completion of the formation of the Slovaks as one of the European nations. Moreover, it is also a time of remarkable cultural and educational growth in the whole society.

(5) The Slovak National Uprising of 1944 is undoubtedly the peak in the history of the twentieth century. In the shape of one of the largest armed undertakings to the German rear, it proved that the Slovaks had not come to terms with the domination of their country by Nazi Germany nor with the totalitarian regime set up by the domestic collaborationist government.

The reader will find each of these key points dealt with in this book. The history of Great Moravia is not the subject of a separate chapter, because this history has a wider (not only Slovak) context and is sufficiently

known from other literature.[8] However, the contribution by Ján Steinhübel considers the administrative and political continuity of the Duchy of Nitra from the pre-Great Moravian period to the beginnings of the Hungarian state. Ján Lukačka addresses the question of the continuity of the aristocracy from the Great Moravian period to the period of the Kingdom of Hungary. The rise of towns is treated by Vladimír Segeš, who offers a further examination of medieval society, as the territory of present-day Slovakia constituted the most urbanised part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Humanism, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are considered by Eva Frimmová (cultural-historical aspects) and Viliam Čičaj (political and confessional aspects).

The reader will find the process of formation of the Slovak nation regarding its ideological and political programmatic sides analysed by contributions from Eva Kowalská, Ľudovít Haraksim and Dušan Kováč. Natália Krajčovičová and Valerián Bystrický devote attention to the period 1918–1939. The inquiry of Elisabeth Bakke into Czechoslovakism is also centred on this period even though its concerns go beyond it. Vilém Prečan writes about the Slovak National Uprising, while Ivan Kamenec and Jan Rychlík throw light on its wider internal and external context. For an understanding of contemporary Slovak society and the processes occurring in it, the period after the Second World War is very important. Therefore several concluding studies are devoted to this period, including chapters by Michal Barnovský, Jan Pešek, Stanislav Sikora, Jozef Žatkuliak, Michal Štefanský, and Miroslav Londák and Elena Londáková. The problems of the Magyar minority, discussed by Štefan Šutaj, also lie largely within this period.

Slovakia in History is, like the previous volume *Bohemia in History* (1998, edited by Mikuláš Teich), not a continuous, systematic and chronological Slovak national narrative, but it contains key issues and themes chosen and selected from Slovakia's past and analysed and worked out in detail by specialists. While it is inevitable that facts and events in some chapters of a multi-authored collection will overlap, this structure enables each chapter to be read separately.

VIII

Professional Slovak historiography is still a relatively young science. During the period when many European nations laid down firm foundations for knowledge of their past, that is, in the course of the

[8] For works in English, see G. J. Kovtun, *Czech and Slovak History: An American Bibliography* (Washington, DC, 1996), ch. 6, pp. 87–94.

nineteenth century and especially in its second half, Slovak historiography remained on an amateur level and lacked a systematic approach to researching Slovak society. In the nineteenth century the eminent Slovak Slavist Pavol Jozef Šafárik worked as a professional historian outside Slovakia, mainly in Prague. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the professional archivist Pavol Križko was engaged in researching regional history. Historical research was also undertaken by 'nationalistic enthusiasts' – priests, jurists, journalists and so on, that is, by Slovak intellectuals without professional academic contacts.

In objective terms, this was caused by the unsatisfactory conditions in the Kingdom of Hungary and affected more than just Slovak historiography. The Slovaks lacked any real national cultural infrastructure; by 1918 there were fewer than 300 elementary schools and no *gymnasia* (secondary schools preparing pupils for university) offering instruction in Slovak. The foundations of professional Slovak historiography began to be laid only after the birth of Czechoslovakia, when Comenius University was created in Bratislava. The founding in 1942 of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Arts, in which historiography was well represented, led to further progress in historical research. In 1953 the Slovak Academy of Sciences, including the Institute of History, was founded and became the central research institution in the field of history. More university departments, professional archives and museums were gradually established.[9]

Many of the problems with which Slovak historiography struggles have their roots in the past. For example, Slovak archivists have not yet completed one of their basic tasks – the publication of documents concerning Slovak history. Therefore, many basic sources are accessible only to a narrow circle of specialists who are able to engage in archival work. The interested public has no chance of confronting the various ideologised or mythical constructions produced by publicists and some historians. A comprehensively researched account of Slovak history

[9] For more information, see Dušan Kováč, Adam Hudek and Frank Hadler (eds.), *Vademecum. Contemporary History – Slovakia. A Guide to Archives, Research Institutions, Libraries, Associations and Museums* (Bratislava and Berlin, 2008); E. Mannová and D. P. Daniel (eds.), *A Guide to Historiography in Slovakia* (Bratislava, 1995). For older literature, see V. Jankovič and A. Škorupová, *Bibliografia k dejinám Slovenska. Literatúra vydaná do roku 1965* [Bibliography of Slovak history. Literature published up to 1965] (Bratislava, 1997). After 1989, see A. Sedliaková, *Historiografia na Slovensku 1990–1994* [Historiography in Slovakia 1990–1994] (Bratislava, 1995); Sedliaková, *Slovenská historiografia 1995–1999. Výberová bibliografia* [Slovak historiography 1995–1999. Selected bibliography] (Bratislava, 2000); Sedliaková, *Slovenská historiografia 2000–2004. Výberová bibliografia* [Slovak historiography 2000–2004. Selected bibliography] (Bratislava, 2006).