

# THE PARADOX OF SLOVAK HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE CASE OF THE SLOVAK STATE, 1939-1945

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One of the most controversial issues in contemporary Slovak historiography is to find a suitable place in its history for the Slovak State,<sup>1</sup> which existed from March 1939 to April 1945. Its historical evaluation is either positive or negative, according to the prevailing domestic political climate or international situation. In this paper the author will analyze the issue by examining several representative histories and history textbooks and by comparing their descriptions and evaluations of the Slovak State.

## 1. MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

We may broadly classify the Slovak historiography of the last thirty years into three categories: the Marxist, the nationalist, and the liberal. It is wellknown that until the collapse of Communism in 1989, only Marxist historiography was allowed

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1 This state was named “Slovenský štát [the Slovak State]” in the Law of the Independent Slovak State of March 14th, 1939, and it was officially named “Slovenská republika [the Slovak Republic]” in the Constitution accepted on July 21st of the same year. Marxist historians under the Normalization regime transcribed it as “slovenský štát [with a small small “s”],” usually adding epithets such as “takzvaný [so-called],” “fašistický [fascistic],” or “klérofašistický [clerico-fascistic].” On the other hand, nationalist historians abroad used the name “Slovenský štát [with a capital “S”]” or “Slovenská republika.” After the formation of the Slovak Republic (which has the same official name) in January 1993, they began to use the expression “prvá Slovenská republika [the First Slovak Republic]” to distinguish it from the existing one and perhaps to suggest some kind of continuity between them. Liberal historians usually use the name “Slovenský/slovenský štát [either a or small “s”],” or “Slovenská republika,” but they avoid using the expression “prvá Slovenská republika.”

in Slovakia. It had been imposed in the 1950s, and weakened in the 1960s, but, after the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, it was re-imposed during the so-called period of Normalization after 1970.<sup>2</sup>

First, let us analyze a standard history textbook for high school students, *Dejiny Československa* [A History of Czechoslovakia]. It was published in Bratislava in 1978 and it presented the official interpretation of Slovak history at that time. The period of the Slovak State was dealt with in the chapter “The struggle of the Czech and Slovak nations for freedom in the years 1938-1945” (the author of the chapter was historian Miroslav Kropilák, 1918-1995). The process of the formation of the state in March 1939 was explained in an extremely negative tone:

The Fascistization of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement [in September 1938] and the lack of concern of the Western powers as to the further fate of our country showed that the [Czechoslovak] Republic could not hold out for long. Conflicts between the Prague [central] government and the Tiso [Slovak autonomous] government also promoted this. These circumstances gave Hitler a pretext for interference, an excuse to invade Czechoslovakia and control it. According to the conqueror’s slogan “Divide and rule,” he [Hitler] decided to separate Slovakia from the Czech lands and to give them a seeming independence under the “protection” of the German Empire. Slovak Fascists willingly yielded to Hitler’s instructions, which Tiso received on his visit to Berlin, and on March 14th, 1939, they declared the Slovak State.<sup>3</sup>

The text declares that the Slovak State was “a puppet state” of Hitler and was controlled with the support of domestic “Fascists.” It is worthy of note that the Slovak State was mentioned

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2 For an overview of Slovak historiography in the 20th century see M. Mark Stolarik, “The Painful Birth of Slovak Historiography in the 20th Century,” in *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* (Marburg) 50:2 (2001), pp. 161-187.

3 P. Ratkoš, J. Butvin, M. Kropilák, M. Vartíková, *Dejiny Československa* [A History of Czechoslovakia], 4th edition (Bratislava, 1978), p. 335. The book was published by permission of the Ministry of Education in 1975.

only in the first several pages of the chapter, which were followed by tens of pages in which the author glorified the resistance movements in the country and abroad (especially those led by the Communist Party) and, as the climax, the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. In short, Marxist historiography regarded “the anti-fascist national liberation struggle of the Slovak people led by the Communist Party” as the mainstream. Therefore, it dealt with the Slovak State merely as a background to more important events.

However, one section in which the domestic situation is explained certainly stands out: “After the declaration of the fascist Slovak State, the Ľudák [the People’s Party] bourgeoisie succeeded for a certain time with the help of propaganda in reaching a considerable part of the Slovak nation and for a time inspired the illusion that the Ľudák regime wanted to raise the living standards of the population.”<sup>4</sup>

This kind of periphrasis was part of the typical rhetoric of Marxist historiography. It implied that the Slovak State was, in reality, a complicated phenomenon that could not be understood by one-sided political conviction. However, without concrete descriptions and analyses of the kind of propaganda that affected the various elements of the Slovak nation, the author hurries to conclude that “these illusions fast dissolved.” Needless to say, such terminology and logic does not belong to historical analysis, but to political propaganda.

Let us examine another example of Marxist historiography under the Normalization regime: the academic work, *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia]. The series, edited by the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, was an attempt to synthesize Slovak history. It was published in six volumes from 1985 to 1992 (the seventh and final volume, which should have covered the period after 1960, was never published). In regard to its contents, it is undoubtedly true that “the attempt was characteristic of the time in terms of terminology and, especially, in the ideological deformation of the historical process”

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4 Ibid., p. 339.

(the words of the liberal historian Dušan Kováč).<sup>5</sup> Regardless of such negative moments, it was “the final settlement” of Marxist historiography in Slovakia.

In this series, the fifth volume, published in 1985, covered the period from 1918 (the creation of Czechoslovakia) to 1945 (the end of World War II). One of its chapters is entitled “The fascist Slovak State and the beginning of the anti-fascist struggle of the Slovak people until the summer of 1941.” In the part entitled “The Clerico-fascist state, characteristics of its politics,” which contains about forty pages, the author, once again Miroslav Kropilák, attempts a systematic description and analysis of this period. It is worth mentioning that Marxist historians rarely made such detailed and concrete descriptions and analyses of the Slovak State.

Even so, the process of its formation was evaluated with great severity:

[The Slovak State] did not arise as the logical result of the wide political movement of the Slovak nation, but was a temporary outcome of the imperialistic arrangement of Central Europe and Hitler’s Germany. The Slovak State was declared under strong pressure from Nazi Germany as well as with the agreement and active assistance of the Slovak bourgeoisie, especially their openly separatist and pro-German orientated representatives of the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party. ... The state, Kropilák continues, maintained on the surface attributes of statehood, but was subordinated to German plans, wishes and needs.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, in the section in which the domestic situation was analyzed, one may notice some suggestive expressions with interesting implications:

One of many paradoxes of L’udák politics was that they succeeded in the years 1939-1940 in constructing their totalitarian reactionary regime under the appearance of national unification

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5 D. Kováč, *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia] (Praha, 1998), p. 9.

6 M. Kropilák, ed., *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia], Vol. 5 (1918-1945) (Bratislava, 1985), p. 357-358.

or liberation and in disorienting, thus, for a certain time even many democratically oriented people. ... The Slovak State as a political subject presented, from the standpoint of constitutional law (not of the domestic fascist system and its satellite position to Germany) in the years 1939-1941, an acceptable alternative for the majority of the Slovak population. ... In spite of the permanent social problems of the living standard of the population – especially of the proletariat – Slovakia had in comparison with neighboring countries under German control or occupation [the author here suggests Czech lands and Poland] a relatively better situation.<sup>7</sup>

Reading the academic *Dejiny Slovenska*, one may gain the impression (in spite of the continued use of ideological terminology such as “clerico-fascism”) that the author sought a partial reevaluation of the Slovak State. The author tried to soften the tone of total negation which was characteristic of Marxist historiography until that time.

Nevertheless, the situation at the end of World War II was summarized as follows:

Due to the Slovak National Uprising and the publication of the law of the Slovak National Council of September 1st, 1944, on the restoration of the Czechoslovak Republic, the direct downfall of the Slovak State began in liberated territory. The state existed until the complete liberation of the territory of Slovakia. The Ľudák government existed only with the help of the occupation forces of Nazi Germany. They [the Ľudák government] escaped before the end of the war to Austria, where they were interned by the American occupation authorities. They resigned en masse, because, except for the unsuccessful attempts of individuals, the attitude of the Slovak public was unambiguous in not accepting the clerico-fascist government, and would not even consider the possibility of political activity abroad.<sup>8</sup>

On the basis of this perspective, Marxist historiography threw the Slovak State into “the trash heap of history” without hesitation.

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7 Ibid., p. 362-363.

8 Ibid., p. 546.

## 2. NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

During the period in which Marxist historiography dominated in Slovakia, nationalist historiography, which was written by a small number of Slovak historians abroad, played the role of antithesis to the domestic situation. It presented quite a different view of Slovak history.

The nationalists understood the Slovaks to have played a leading role in the history of Slovakia and saw that history as a process in which Slovaks formed themselves into a modern nation through various historical circumstances. Their premise was that the Slovaks as a nation ultimately aimed to obtain their own nation-state and that such aspirations could be justified by the right of nations to self-determination.

As an example of this viewpoint we analyze here *Slovensko v retrospektíve dejín* [Slovakia in the Retrospective of History], an anthology of articles based on the conference of Slovak historians abroad in Switzerland in 1975. The author of the chapter “Slovakia during World War II – the Slovak Republic” was historian Milan S. Ďurica (born in 1925). Although recognizing that international factors such as the establishment of German hegemony in Central Europe played a decisive role in the formation of an Independent Slovakia in March 1939, and that the independence was forced by Hitler’s initiative, the author emphasized that it was at that moment an inevitable choice to avoid a worse situation. He wrote: “it was already clear that Slovakia had to declare independence, if it did not want to be divided between greedy neighboring countries [he suggests here Germany, Hungary, and Poland].”<sup>9</sup> This argument is often used to defend the formation of the Slovak State (Liberal historians call it the theory of “lesser evil”).

Furthermore, the author focused on the fact that Independent Slovakia, as the first nation-state of the Slovaks, played a number of “positive roles”:

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9 J.M. Rydlo, ed., *Slovensko v retrospektíve dejín* [Slovakia in the Retrospective of History] (Lausanne, 1976), p. 130.

As a whole, Slovak domestic politics during the existence of the Slovak Republic achieved unheard of developments in the fields of civil safety, economic growth, and supply of services, as well as in the field of cultural and social progress ... There was no other six-year period in the history of the Slovaks that contributed as much to the generalization of the national consciousness even among the widest groups of Slovak people and, then, to the definitive acquisition of all the attributes of an independent nation fully conscious of its own inseparable rights as the years of the existence of the Slovak Republic.<sup>10</sup>

Ďurica argues, in a roundabout way, that, in this period, the consciousness of the Slovaks as an independent nation became widespread even among ordinary people.

As to the transfer of Jewish citizens in 1942, which is commonly regarded as an undeniable blot on the history of the Slovak State, the author attached critical comments such as “unconstitutional and morally inexcusable.”<sup>11</sup> But even so, he did not cease to regard the Slovak State as the legitimate regime of this period and to evaluate it positively. It was quite a contrast to the Marxist historiography, which dealt with the state only as background material.

Under the Normalization regime in Slovakia, the works of nationalist historians abroad were prohibited, but after the downfall of Communism in 1989 they began to flow freely into the country. New domestic editions were published and nationalist historians actively began to propagate their viewpoint.

One example of this activity was the publication of the chronology *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov* [A History of Slovakia and Slovaks], whose editor was the above-cited nationalist historian Ďurica. In the prologue of the chronology, which covers the period from the 5th century to 1995, the author explained:

I aspired to select particularly those facts which have a direct connection with the history of Slovakia and Slovaks, with special attention to such realities which prove and confirm the very

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10 Ibid., p. 140.

11 Ibid., p. 139.

old ethnic origin of the Slovak nation, the uninterrupted continuity of their settlement in the territory of Slovakia at least from the second half of the first millennium A. D. up to the present, and mainly the deep historical roots of its statehood, which, in spite of unfavorable power and political circumstances, was always maintained in its memory, and was shown in various periods of historical development in a way which was in harmony with the European stream of thought and with the concrete possibilities of achieving its national desires and realizing its just claims.<sup>12</sup>

This was a typical manifest of the idea of a nation-state which is undoubtedly the ideological backbone of nationalist historiography.

It must be mentioned that the chronology was compiled, according to the author's words in the prologue, as "subsidiary material to supplement and to correct existing current textbooks and handbooks in places where it is necessary." Its second enlarged edition was published under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education and was distributed to primary schools throughout the whole country.

The years 1995-1996, in which the chronology was published, was the period of Vladimír Mečiar's third government and the Minister of Education, herself an historian, was appointed from the Slovak National Party, which was the party of Slovak nationalism. Under such a political situation, the opposition regarded the publication of Ďurica's chronology and its distribution to primary schools as a political scandal, organizing a campaign against it in the press. In March 1997, the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences published a statement titled "A Standpoint on M. S. Ďurica's work, *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov*" (the then director of the Institute of History was Dušan Kováč, and the chairperson of the Scientific Council

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12 M.S. Ďurica, *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov* [A History of Slovakia and Slovaks], 2nd enlarged edition (Bratislava, 1996), p. 3. The first edition was published in 1995 in Košice; *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov v chronologickom prehľade* [A History of Slovakia and Slovaks in Chronological Survey] (Košice, 1995).



of the Institute was Ľubomír Lipták). Furthermore, the description of the transfer of Jewish citizens in 1942 became an international political issue. Even the European Parliament criticized it. In the end, Mečiar's government decided not to use the chronology in schools. On the other hand, Ďurica brought forward counter-arguments to the criticism of the Institute of History, publishing the pamphlet *Priblížit' sa k pravde* [To Approach the Truth].

Every reader of the chronology will notice imbalances in its descriptions. The 2000-year-long Slovak history is summarized in 262 pages of which the period from March 1939 to the spring of 1945 comprises 57 pages. It means that one fifth of the description is offered to the six years of the Slovak State. In answer to the criticism from the Institute of History on this point, Ďurica argued (in the above-mentioned pamphlet) that the purpose of the chronology was "to give more space to events, facts, and individuals about which, during the whole period of the foreign domination over Slovakia [he suggested here mainly the Czechoslovak period], employed historians explained one-sidedly, said nothing, or shamelessly falsified," thus he "gave the most space to this period."<sup>13</sup> This is a typical example of the "subjectivity" of nationalist historiography with regard to the Slovak State. By the way, while the ironical expression "employed historians" implies the Marxist historians under the Normalization regime, it is, at the same time, a euphemistic criticism of the liberal historians of the Institute of History.

### 3. LIBERAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Lastly, let us analyze the descriptions and evaluations of the Slovak State by liberal historiography. This movement formed after the downfall of Communism in the country in 1989.

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13 M.S. Ďurica, *Priblížit' sa k pravde. Reakcia na Stanovisko Historického ústavu Slovenskej akadémie vied k mojej knihe Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov* [To Approach the Truth. Reaction to the Standpoint of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences to my book A History of Slovakia and Slovaks] (Bratislava, 1998), p. 12.

It assumes as the subject of Slovak history, the Slovaks together with the other ethnic groups which lived (and are still living) in the territory of Slovakia. One of the representative liberal historians, Dušan Kováč (born in 1942), declared in the prologue of his *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia] that the subject of the history of Slovakia “is the history of contemporary Slovak territory, combined with the history of the Slovak ethnic group.”<sup>14</sup>

*Dejepis 4 – Slovensko v novom storočí* [History 4 – Slovakia in the new century], a textbook for the 8th grade of elementary school and the 4th grade of high school, which Kováč and other liberal historians edited, is a new visual type of history textbook with plenty of colored illustrations and photographs and maps. The editors tried to describe and explain historical facts in a balanced way, carefully avoiding one-sided one interpretations of controversial issues. Regarding the declaration of independence at the Slovak autonomous parliament on March 14th, 1939, for example, while emphasizing the aspect of “compulsion by Hitler,” they also record that the process was carried out according to legal procedures. Saying that Slovakia’s “inhabitants accepted the formation of the independent state with mixed feelings of fear, hope, relief, and pride,”<sup>15</sup> the editors summarize the whole situation eclectically. As reference materials, both arguments are shown: Alexander Mach’s enthusiastic eyewitness account of the day of the declaration of independence and Peter Zat’ko’s perplexity at the same event.

In Kováč’s monograph, *Dejiny Slovenska*, the period is dealt with in the chapter titled “the Slovak State as a satellite of Hitler’s” in which one may notice several ambiguous expressions suggesting the delicate position of the liberal historians. Let us examine two examples:

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14 Kováč, *Dejiny Slovenska*, p. 5.

15 D. Kováč, I. Kamenec, V. Kratochvíl, *Dejepis 4 – Slovensko v novom storočí* [History 4 – Slovakia in the new century], 2nd edition (Bratislava, 2000), p. 38.

Regardless of the collaboration with Germany and the undemocratic regime, the Slovak statehood found on the part of the public a favorable reaction. It was evident that the situation in the Slovak State was in some regards more favorable than that in the surrounding countries. ... In spite of the complicated war time conditions, the intensive cultural development of Slovakia continued. The University and the Technical College in Bratislava were built up, and the Commercial College was established. In 1942, the Slovak Academy of Arts and Sciences was established. The new generation, which was well prepared in the preceding period [i.e., the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic], took their place in scientific and cultural life and helped the development of Slovak science and art. All of this helped representatives of the Hlinka Slovak People's Party to create an image of the Slovak Republic as an island of peace and welfare.<sup>16</sup>

Then, all of a sudden, the author changes his tone and hurried to add that, for all this, "they could not cover the character of Slovakia's subordination to Germany's intentions, which became all the time more evident."<sup>17</sup>

In the prologue, however, the author emphasized the issue of the evaluation of the Slovak State, offering polemical comments such as the following:

The Slovak State arose by Hitler's order and by his pressure without the active endeavor and will of the Slovaks. The mythologized view of history also had a role in glossing over this reality and in characterizing the Slovak State as the result of a thousand-year-old effort of the Slovaks. ... The whole system of the deformed interpretation of Slovak history by the Ľudáks was an evident step backward from Rapant's positivism in the direction of the nationalist romanticism of the first half of the 19th century. In spite of this, such myths were kept in certain classes of Slovak society and, after 1989 [the year of the downfall of Communism], it experienced a renaissance, being further strengthened after 1993 [the year of independence of the Slovak Republic].<sup>18</sup>

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16 Kováč, *Dejiny Slovenska*, p. 224-225.

17 Ibid., p. 225.

18 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Needless to say, Kováč here is criticizing the above-mentioned interpretations of the nationalist historians.

Lastly, let us analyze *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia], which was written through the collaborative effort of five historians. The author of the chapter “Slovakia in the years of World War II” is another representative liberal historian, Ľubomír Lipták (born in 1930).

In this chapter, one also finds several ambiguous expressions:

the regime in Slovakia until the autumn of 1944 [i.e., until the Slovak National Uprising] was undemocratic and dictatorial, but far “more moderate” than that in Hungary, Romania, and especially in the Independent Croatian State under Ante Pavelić, to say nothing of areas directly occupied by Germany. ... Punishments for treasonable activities were relatively moderate, capital punishment pronounced by courts was not carried out. Labor and concentration camps were severe, but they were not the typical Nazi extermination institutions. ... Inflation was, under the wartime conditions, moderate; the Slovak Koruna was in the surrounding countries the currency in demand ... The independent statehood, obtained for the first time in its history, fascinated many people and even potential opponents of the regime were often employed in the creation of new economic and cultural institutions, schools, and offices.<sup>19</sup>

A discourse on the “positive moments” of the Slovak State is surprising, though it was repeatedly insisted on in the works of nationalist historians abroad for a long time. The point to note is the fact that, today, even liberal historians use this type of discourse in their works, although hesitantly and with certain reservations.

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19 D. Čaplovič, V. Čičaj, D. Kováč, Ľ. Lipták, J. Lukačka, *Dejiny Slovenska* [A History of Slovakia] (Bratislava, 2000), p. 249-254. This is the revised edition of the history: R. Marsina, V. Čičaj, D. Kováč, Ľ. Lipták, *Slovenské dejiny* [A Slovak History] (Martin, 1992). In the chapter written by Lipták we notice only small additions.

#### 4. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Let us summarize the contents of this paper. In Marxist historiography under the Normalization regime, the Slovak State was a priori characterized as “a puppet state” of Nazi Germany. It was not considered (or could not be considered) as a subject of historical analysis. The mainstream of the period 1939-1945 was for them “the anti-fascist national liberation struggle of the Slovak people led by the Communist party” and the Slovak State was dealt with as background material. We should not overlook the fact that, in the 1980s, the Slovak State began to be the subject of more objective historical surveys. But even so, according to the standpoint of anti-fascism and Marxism, the Slovak State itself continued to be evaluated negatively.

Nationalist historiography, which regards Slovaks as the main subject of the history of Slovakia, while recognizing the fact that German intervention was a decisive factor in the formation of the Slovak State, basically evaluates it positively as the first form of statehood to be obtained by the Slovaks. The ideological backbone of this historiography is the theory of the nation-state. They try to “justify” the formation of the state according to the right of self-determination of the nation. However, we are obliged to point out that the co-operation of the Slovak State with fascism, especially the participation in the holocaust of Jewish citizens, is their Achilles’ heel.

The liberal historians always describe the Slovak State with some hesitation, because they want to connect eclectically the standpoint of anti-fascism with the theory of the nation-state. Most historians of this persuasion were trained and built their careers within domestic Marxist historiography. Nevertheless, they try to join the mainstream of European liberal historiography, which stands on a “civic principle” and criticizes (or at least relativizes) the nation-state. Therefore, their evaluation of the Slovak State always has a tone of eclecticism. However, in my opinion, it will be the liberal historians who will provide the most well-balanced historical picture of the Slovak State during 1939-1945.