

Historians in Slovakia on President Tiso: Responsible to What Nation?

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A few months after France and Britain agreed to the reduction of Czechoslovakia's territory in 1938, the remaining Czech lands became a German dominion while Slovakia became a separate country allied with Berlin. Politician and Roman Catholic priest Jozef Tiso became its president. Slovak historians agree today that Tiso was not instrumental in arranging Slovakia's independence. It was Berlin's plan, and Tiso went along with what was an obvious choice at that point. What Slovak historians do not agree on is the balance between the degree to which he went along out of necessity and to what degree he fostered his policies out of preference – Tiso's responsibility for Slovakia's policy during World War II and, in a more general sense, the assessment of Tiso as a politician, person, and a potential icon (negative or positive) in Slovak national awareness, what role his image should play in the national myth of history.

So far, Tiso has had little chance to play any role in it. After Czechoslovakia was recreated by the Allies in 1945, he became the only World War II Slovak politician to be executed.¹ The Communist regime that followed basically swept him under the carpet, along with all the other Slovak pre-Communist politicians of the 20th century. Director of the Historical Institute Dušan Kováč speaks of a "depopulation of Slovak history."² According to historian Ľubomír Lipták,³ on the one hand the Communists worked on a theory of the role of the individual in history, but on the other hand they did not know what to do about real historical figures. While applicable to their non-treatment of Tiso in a certain sense, it is also an overstatement, Communist historians spent a lot of time assigning their party officials prominent places in their versions of national mythology.

After the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which replaced the more liberal Communist leader Alexander Dubček with Gustáv Husák in the top Communist office in the country, any Communist assessment of Tiso became even less

¹ Bratislava, 18 April 1947.

² Dušan Kováč, "Úvodom." In: Valerián Bystrický and Štefan Fano, eds. *Pokus o politický a osobný profil Jozefa Tisu: Zborník materiálov z vedeckého sympózia Častá-Papiernička, 5.-7. mája 1992*. Bratislava: Historický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied, 1992, pp. 9-13.

³ Ľubomír Lipták, "Jozef Tiso – problém slovenskej politiky a slovenskej historiografie." in: Bystrický and Fano, *Pokus...* pp. 14-19.

likely.⁴ There was an obvious potential for and fear of implied comparisons between Husák and Tiso, both of whom coped with, or accommodated, pressure from a neighboring superpower. The question of choosing the lesser evil, which is sometimes seen as relevant to Slovak history even in the 9th century, may ultimately materialize as one of the major defining issues in the Slovak national myth.

As a result, Slovakia emerged from 40 years of Communism with a national myth practically devoid of positive historical political icons. Non-Communists had been obliterated from people's memories, and Communists were disliked. In an opinion poll in 1990, all the Communist figures except Dubček received a negative rating.⁵ There was also one non-Communist politician who received only negative ratings – Jozef Tiso. 12.4% of the polled people said they were ashamed of his historical role, of which they had heard little.

A strong stimulus to change this after the collapse of Communism came from Slovak émigrés in the West where the only works about Tiso had been published, mainly by authors who fled Slovakia after World War II fearing prosecution for their involvement with its Germany-allied administration. Only several of them enjoyed the luxury of making historical research their full-time occupation. They viewed Tiso as one of the most important and respectable politicians in Slovak history. Some of their publications were reissued in Slovakia after 1989.⁶ More neutral or negative accounts of Tiso were published too, especially concerning the deportations of the Jews under his presidency, one by Slovak émigré Ladislav Lipscher⁷ and two by Ivan Kamenec⁸ from the Historical Institute. The Historical Institute, the designated interpreter of Slovak history, was aware its research was seriously lacking in this respect and started to change it. In 1992 the Institute organized a conference about Tiso at which 40 papers were presented. Only half of them were by authors living in Slovakia, and three of those were closer to manifestos than to historical research.⁹

The research papers in the volume represent the range of views of the Slovak historians who pay attention to Tiso. Only three of them (about 17%) argued in favor of Tiso's positive assessment, and two of these three scholars wrote papers about Tiso's attitudes under the Habsburg rule before 1918,¹⁰ not about World War II. They argue against little known criticism that Tiso was pro-Hungarian then and only became pro-Slovak after

⁴ Ivan Kamenec, *Slovenský štát (1939-1945)*. Praha: Anomal, 1992; Lubomír Lipták, "Jozef Tiso..."

⁵ Oľga Gyarfášová, "Občania sú najviac hrdí na A. Dubčeka a hanbia sa najmä za J. Tisa." *Národná obroda*, 9 Aug. 1996; p. 9.

⁶ Konštantín Čulen, *Po Svätoplukovi druhá naša hlava: život Dr. Jozefa Tisu*. Partizánske: Priatelia prezidenta Tisu, 1992; Milan Ďurica, *Jozef Tiso: slovenský kňaz a štátnik*. Martin: Matica Slovenská, 1992; Karol Murín, *Spomienky a svedectvo*. Partizánske: Priatelia prezidenta Tisu, 1992.

⁷ Ladislav Lipscher, *Židia v slovenskom štáte*. Banská Bystrica: Set Press, 1992.

⁸ Ivan Kamenec, *Po stopách tragédie*. Bratislava: Archa, 1991; Kamenec, *Slovenský štát...*

⁹ Bystrický and Fano, *Pokus...*

¹⁰ Róbert Letz, "Vývin slovenského povedomia u Jozefa Tisu do roku 1918." In: Bystrický and Fano *Pokus...* pp. 44-61; Anna Magdolenová, "Idea slovenského národa v politickom snažení Jozefa Tisu." In: Bystrický and Fano, *Pokus...* 249-254.

the creation of Czecho-Slovakia.¹¹ In other words, they do not deal with the issues that always come up in arguments for or against Tiso in Slovak society at large: in the media, in political controversies, or on the internet. Slovak social discourse focuses on Tiso's responsibility for the deportations of the Jews, on his responsibility for a series of controversial political decisions during World War II, and ultimately on the ethical question of his guilt or innocence.

Some Slovak historians make an explicit distinction between the assessment of Tiso's responsibility, which they feel is a historian's job, and his ethical assessment.¹² Except for one, all of those who focus on World War II consider him responsible for a number of controversial decisions. One author, Anna Magdolenová,¹³ recognizes his responsibility for at least several of his controversial decisions, but makes a case for his positive assessment. Her argument offers an insight into the operation of the national-ethnic principle underlying certain cultural and political trends in Slovakia and Central Europe. The same line of reasoning is shared by Róbert Letz,¹⁴ one of the historians who focused on disproving Tiso's alleged pro-Hungarian attitudes before 1918.

The views of these historians are important, because they cannot be explained as potentially defensive attitudes of people who were personally involved in Slovak politics during World War II, both are from younger generations. They differ from émigré authors in that they see a degree of Tiso's responsibility for the deportations. The implicit question then remains that of his guilt or innocence.

It is crucial for their reasoning that, in their view, a nation defined ethnically has the same status as a nation defined politically in some other concepts, i.e., as citizens of a country.¹⁵ While they do not say so explicitly, they assume that a national-ethnic (*národný*) leader's principal responsibility is towards his ethnic nation (*národ*). To simplify substantially, in that view, Tiso was the leader of only the ethnic Slovaks (*slovenský národ*), including, say, those ethnic Slovaks who ended up under Budapest after 1938, and he was merely an incidental administrator for the members of other ethnics, members of other ethnic nations (*národ*), who found themselves in Slovakia.

This implicit parallel in their arguments between the Central European status of the concept of an ethnic nation (*národ*) and the American status of the concept of a political *nation* ("citizenry") is consequential. In a theoretical example, in the political con-

¹¹ The original hyphenated name of the country was subsequently dehyphenated and rehyphenated several times. Martin Votruba, "Czecho-Slovakia or Czechoslovakia?" *Slovak Studies Program, Pitt.edu* <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/qsonhist/spellczechoslovakia.html>

¹² Kováč, "Úvodom."; Kamenec, *Slovenský štát...*

¹³ Magdolenová, "Idea..."

¹⁴ In a discussion, not in the cited article. Róbert Letz, personal interview, Bratislava, 20 Aug. 1996.

¹⁵ The Central European terms *národ* (Slovak and Czech), *naród* (Polish), *nemzet* (Hungarian) and the now rather discredited German *Volk* (which actually came to be used in that meaning first) refer to peoples defined by their language, ethnic attributes, and birth, i.e., populations that exist irrespective of countries and their borders and have been traditionally seen as societies with a higher value than societies defined by citizenship, which is changeable. The words and their derivations are commonly translated as *nation*, *national*, *nationality* to English, but they do not denote citizenship in Central Europe.

cept, a leader who was unable to save his country's tiny neighbor from destruction by a powerful enemy, but still managed to save his *own* country, political nation, is worthy of recognition by his fellow countrymen, by his nation. There is no contradiction between the recognition of such a leader, and at the same time the recognition of the tragedy of the country next door. In the ethnic concept, then, Tiso's primary responsibility was to preserve his ethnic nation, which is not to say that those who hold that view need to see or do see the other ethnic nations as expendable. But whether the other ethnics happened to be in Slovakia or not, they were, so to say, outside of Tiso's conceptual ethnic jurisdiction. In this sense, these historians' perception of Tiso does not depend so much on a degree of his personal or legal responsibility for the deportations. For them, the perception and any evaluation mainly depends on the argument which historians often dislike, i.e., on whether Tiso could have avoided the deportations of the Jews and still preserve *his* ethnic nation – in other words, whether history could have been different.

The issues that are to decide about Tiso's place in Slovak history have so far been chosen by his supporters rather than by his opponents. They deal with his responsibility for the deportations and with the economic well-being or otherwise of the Slovak ethnic nation. At the same time, Tiso's concepts of a nation, society, and its political organization, as well as their application in Slovakia under his leadership, are not explored, nor do they explore his role in history in terms of a politician's responsibility for those under his political jurisdiction regardless of whether the word applied to that population is *citizenry* or *nation*.

To finish, we'll look at what effect these efforts have had. Since the collapse of Communism, Slovak society at large has been exposed to rather marginal but persistent efforts to promote Tiso to the status of a national icon. These efforts are channeled through only a few periodicals reaching a relatively small audience, but also find support in at least one of the ruling coalition parties, the Slovak National Party (SNS).¹⁶ In the spring this year, SNS tried to transfer the Historical Institute from the Academy of Sciences to the *Matica slovenská*, which has been among the co-sponsors of publications promoting Tiso. That could have had an impact on the majority of the historians willing to focus on Tiso, who seem to be interested in producing more scholarship about him, but maintain a critical attitude. Most of the popular periodicals pay little attention to Tiso, but several major newspapers are critical of him, as well as of any public efforts to elevate his status when the occasion arises.

So, how have the Slovaks' views of their past politicians changed over these six years? The most recent opinion poll from August 1996¹⁷ showed more than a 50% drop in the negative ratings of the former communist leaders. They have not become popular instead – none of them is among the personalities people feel proud of. They are simply beginning to disappear in oblivion, the way they themselves had planned it for Tiso and

¹⁶ Slovenská národná strana.

¹⁷ Gyarfášová, "Občania..."

others. Tiso, just like six years ago, is still the only non-Communist politician with no positive rating, and his negative rating has increased to 16%. He has now become *the* historical figure the Slovaks are most ashamed of.¹⁸

¹⁸ An opinion poll still showed the same result a decade after this paper was presented. Zora Bútorová and Oľga Gyarfášová, “Andreja Hlinku vníma verejnosť ako kontroverznú osobnosť. Za zákon o jeho zásluhách by hlasovala iba štvrtina občanov.” *Press release*, Inštitút pre verejné otázky, October 2007.