

# 4

## THE STATE UNDER SIEGE

*Abby Innes*

Assessing the resilience of a state on the basis of its history is not easy at the best of times. Czechoslovakia has, moreover, been so steeped in misfortune that the question of how it stayed together so long is at least as arresting as that of why it fell apart. In its seventy-four years of existence Czechoslovakia emerged from World War I in chaos, weathered multiple ethnic grievances and economic depression, was broken apart in turn by Slovak separatism and by Nazism and was then put back together only to be subjected to forty years of Soviet Communism. After an anti-Communist revolution and three years of social, economic and political disintegration and reform, euphemistically referred to by political scientists as 'transition', the country finally collapsed.

Ascribing Czechoslovakia's downfall to 'the return of history', is therefore, just plain confusing: it implies that a particular aspect of the state's history must have proved fatal, whereas in fact the historical record is one of radically shifting contexts and quite amazing contingency. With a past like this, separation might have resulted not so much from mutual hostility as from the tired indifference of two peoples who, having endured war, fascism and Communism, viewed the bloody national conflict in Yugoslavia with dismay and concluded that they had no wish to follow that path.

This first chapter concentrates explicitly on national provocations before 1989. In considering the issues generally seen as in conflict within Czech and Slovak memory, the purpose is to assess the condition of Czech - Slovak relations over time, and to alert the reader to the fuller implications of post-1989 political rhetoric. This chapter also seeks to identify the extent to which, by 1989, there were any over riding economic, political and military reasons for a common Czech and Slovak state.

### CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1918-38: A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

The Czechoslovak Republic was founded in October 1918 as a union of regions from opposite sides of the Austro-Hungarian tracks. The industrially advanced Czech lands (Bohemia, Silesia and Moravia) came from the Austrian side of the old Habsburg Empire, the still predominantly agrarian Slovakia from the Hungarian<sup>1</sup>.

Before 1918 Czechs and Slovaks had been divided not only legally, administratively and traditionally but in many other ways. Before the Great War the Czech economy was among the most industrialised and urbanised of the Habsburg Empire: Czechoslovakia contributed some 60 per cent of overall taxation revenue, was the industrial powerhouse of the region and employed almost half the Austro-Hungarian Empire's labour-force and boasted a per-capita income not far below that

of Germany<sup>2</sup>. Slovakia, on the other hand, although the most developed area of Hungary, had remained predominantly agrarian and unmodernised under Hungarian tutelage: in 1914 Slovak industrial development was in its infancy.

These very different economies sustained very dissimilar societies in terms of class structure, social mores and traditions, and the contrast was accentuated by religious differences. Slovakia was predominantly and profoundly Catholic, the Czech lands were also more Catholic than Protestant but philosophically anti-clerical, a confirmation of their relative modernity, with its attendant secularisation. When it came to political culture the Czechs were far more conscious of themselves as a mature political nation deserving a state of their own. In this respect the experience of these territories under the deadening hand of imperial rule had proved extremely important. Slovakia under Hungarian rule had suffered greater national repression and isolation than the Czechs had under Austria.

During the nineteenth century Hungary had attempted the systematic assimilation of the Slovak minority and all but crushed Slovakia's attempts at national assertion. The start of the twentieth century brought a further deterioration in the condition of Hungary's national minorities as the Hungarians sought to eliminate self-determinist impulses root and branch. Hungarian was the exclusive language of instruction in all schools after 1907, a potentially fatal blow to Slovak national identity. Before 1918 the Slovak region was never at any stage permitted administrative or economic recognition distinct from other Hungarian regions. It also lacked a major urban centre on which a nationalist-minded intelligentsia might converge.

In comparison with the other minorities within Hungary, the Slovak voice was scarcely audible. The Hungarians had been forced through painful experience to acknowledge Serb and Romanian national movements, but they could never be persuaded that Slovak nationalism was anything more than an aberration which, as Macartney points out, 'they also believed to be curable'<sup>3</sup>. Slovakia's miniature political and intellectual elite (predominantly and disproportionately Protestant<sup>4</sup>) was well aware of its lack of a historic claim to statehood. By 1918 it saw little choice but to appeal directly to the newly vaunted but hardly attainable 'right of self-determination'.

The Czechs, in contrast, possessed by 1918 a strong national tradition as well as a large educated class<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps most importantly, they could also claim ancient statehood in the form of the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Margravate of Moravia, and they had a history of national independence until the outset of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). The Czechs joined the Habsburg monarchy in 1526<sup>6</sup> along with the Hungarians and considered themselves by rights their equal. Angered by the creation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867, the Czechs grew increasingly disillusioned by and hostile to rule from Vienna.

While the Slovaks in the late nineteenth century found themselves under growing threats of total assimilation, the Czechs, the third strongest ethnic group in Austria-Hungary, experienced a cultural and economic renaissance on a sufficient scale to challenge the traditional dominance of Germans in the area. The economic strength

of Bohemia and Moravia brought with it not only a developing middle class but also new and independent Czech institutions - their own bank in 1868, a national theatre in 1881 and university in 1882. Bohemia's capital, Prague, had long been a cosmopolitan and much admired European city and throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century it acted as the locus of an ascendant Czech nationalism. An almost entirely German city until the middle of the nineteenth century, Prague was only 6 per cent German by 1910<sup>7</sup>. In strong contrast to Slovakia, therefore, the Czech National Revival proceeded apace from 1848 to the outbreak of World War I, and through its many cultural and political associations had popularised the Czech aspiration to independence. Slovakia, dominated by the Hungarians for over 1000 years, was in an altogether weaker position in its claims for national recognition, let alone statehood.

What brought two such apparently disparate nations together in 1918? The traditional explanation, presented in the state-building rhetoric of the new Czechoslovakia, was based on the understanding that, as neighbouring Slavs, the Czechs and Slovaks shared deep common roots of culture and language. These supposed commonalities, however, were a constant source of debate. Even the state's founder, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (of Slovak/Moravian origin but born in Slovak Moravia and hence viewed by Slovaks from Slovakia as a Czech!), believed that 'Slovaks and Czechs formed a single nation, separated only by differences in language, history and culture'<sup>8</sup>. If one understands 'nation' to refer to a group of people who believe they are ancestrally related<sup>9</sup>, Masaryk's verdict implied very little kinship indeed. Language, history and culture are, in most circumstances, critical markers of national difference, and with such divisions paralleled by deep social and economic disparities, Czechs and Slovaks would require an overarching common interest if they were to avoid conflict. In 1918, however, such a common interest did, apparently, exist.

A more convincing explanation for Czechoslovakia's existence came from the calculations of the Czech and Slovak political elite and the state-makers of the Paris Peace Conference in 1918, and their understanding of Germans and Hungarians. Czechoslovakia was, to a critical degree, a product of its massive minorities<sup>10</sup>. During the First World War the previously limited business and culture-oriented contacts between Czechs and Slovaks broadened as the two political leaderships joined in mutual support of their respective national claims. Masaryk, the principal initiator of this collaboration, calculated early in the war that neither region was likely to achieve independent statehood alone<sup>11</sup>, nor, if independence was achieved, could they sustain it in the face of those German and Hungarian minorities who would find themselves demoted from overlords to underdogs. It was undoubtedly with such thoughts in mind that Masaryk, as early as 1907, made pointed references to the two million Slovaks in upper Hungary as 'belonging to our nationality', and as 'co-nationals'<sup>12</sup>.

There were also international pressures for the creation of a unified Czechoslovak state, and, concomitantly, for a unified 'Czechoslovak people' to act as the bulwark

against the strength of other minorities. Without the proclamation of a 'Czechoslovak people' Czechoslovakia would have been a state lacking an absolute national majority, and the question might then reasonably have been asked why it should include three million Germans. Without the German territories, however, the Czechoslovak economy would have been considerably weakened<sup>13</sup>. A strong Czechoslovakia constrained Germany, an obvious gain in the eyes of the Great War victors, and the ethnic German territories stood within the natural and historical military border of the Czech lands, as was made all too clear in 1938.

If Czechoslovakia, however, was not to be dependent for life upon the persistent untrustworthiness of its neighbours, it needed to develop a state identity that was not simply about defensible frontiers and economic viability but was also positively attractive to its constituent members. As soon as Czechoslovakia was born, however, the profound inherited differences between Czechs and Slovaks manifested themselves - as friction.

## NATIONAL STEREOTYPES AND THEIR SOURCES

### *The Pittsburgh Agreement, 1918*

One of the most embittering experiences for Slovaks was that as soon as the new state was formed, the language of 'fraternity' prevailing before 1918 translated into a Czech assumption of the role of the older brother. Czechs wore their historic nationhood and economic success as a badge of maturity and deemed their own goals the most appropriate for Slovak development. On the reverse view many Czechs, including those more sympathetic to Slovak particularism, were dismayed at the seemingly endless demands of Slovaks for both improved conditions and greater equality. The Czechs' resentment of Slovak ingratitude and their surprise at the coherence of Slovak nationality - about which they had known little before 1918 - provided fertile ground for unflattering stereotypes on both sides.

To many in Slovakia's political and cultural elite, especially its young Catholic contingent, grievances over the term 'Czechoslovak' arose almost immediately, provoked by the very founding documents of state. On 30 October 1918 a Slovak document - the Martin Declaration - endorsed Czech-Slovak unity but was obscure as to the status of the Slovak nation within a Czechoslovak state<sup>14</sup>. The Martin Declaration, however, came two days after a proclamation of statehood by the Prague National Committee, to which a pro-Czech Slovak representative, Vavro Srobar, was the sole Slovak signatory. The 28th of October duly became the Czechoslovak Republic's official anniversary date. This first declaration, with its minimal Slovak participation, was assumed by Czechs from the outset as legitimating not only a unitary, Prague-centralised state but also membership in a 'Czechoslovak nation' and use of a 'Czechoslovak' language<sup>15</sup>: terms to be found throughout the 1920 constitution. In his opening address to the National Assembly on 14 November 1918,

Prime Minister Karel Kramář explicitly defined Czechoslovakia as a 'Czech state' and welcomed the Slovaks as 'lost sons' who had now 'returned to the nation's fold, where they belong'<sup>16</sup>. When another document, the Pittsburgh Agreement of 30 May 1918, became known in Slovakia in 1919<sup>17</sup>, it provided a focus for those who wished to reassert Slovakia's national rights.

Signed by the future state President, T. G. Masaryk, and by Czech and Slovak emigre groups in the United States, the Pittsburgh Agreement, like the Cleveland Accord of 1915<sup>18</sup>, stipulated a separate administration, parliament, and even courts for Slovakia<sup>19</sup>. According to Masaryk, however, the Agreement was 'concluded to appease a small Slovak faction which was dreaming of God knows what sort of independence for Slovakia... I signed the Convention unhesitatingly as a local understanding between American Czechs and Slovaks upon the policy they were prepared to advocate'<sup>20</sup>. Legally, Masaryk was in the right; the concluding clause of the agreement stated that its US signatories were in no way competent to bind the nation to the Agreement's contents, since only the state itself, following independence, could decide its fate<sup>21</sup>. Though Masaryk had conceded that 'a demand for autonomy is as justifiable as a demand for centralism, and the problem is to find the right relationship between the two'<sup>22</sup>, practical developments in the new Czechoslovakia had already been firmly on the centralist side.

The disparagement of the Pittsburgh Agreement had a decisive impact on party political developments in the new state, resonating, in particular, within the Slovak People's Party (HSPP), hitherto preoccupied by Catholic rights and education. Father Andrej Hlinka, its leader, had promoted and endorsed the principle of Czech-Slovak unity on several occasions before 1918, but he had remained suspicious of Czech anti-clericalism<sup>23</sup> and had argued passionately for Slovakia's distinctiveness after the war. The Agreement tipped the HSPP toward a defensive position of Slovak autonomism, and, as we shall see, this position grew ever more assertive as Slovak grievances mounted through the 1920s and 1930s.

The initial shift toward Slovak autonomism in the HSPP was expressed in the Žilina Memorandum in 1922. The Memorandum accused Prague, and Masaryk in particular, of a breach of faith in failing to implement either the Cleveland or Pittsburgh 'Treaties' - a status these documents had never had, although nationalist histories have long granted it. Thereafter Hlinka campaigned to present Pittsburgh as the ideal and unfairly forsworn guidelines for the reform of the state and for the full recognition of the Slovak nation<sup>24</sup>. The failure of Prague to acknowledge even the spirit of these two Agreements marked them down in Slovak eyes as the first of several instances of broken Czech promises of constitutional equality.

It is important to note that, despite its solid Catholic pedigree and attempts at agitation, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (known as L'udáks or Populists) did not fare as well in the first, 1920 election as subsequent nationalist and L'udák histories have implied. The 1920 election, coinciding with a postwar recession, indicated that 'Czechoslovakia' at this stage remained a feasible project: it revealed a political

consensus across the territory that had every appearance of transcending national differences. Both the Czech and Slovak electorates favoured the left, and 1920 represented the high point in inter-war social democratic support. The social democratic left was loyalist as far as the state was concerned. More preoccupied with social than 'narrow' national questions, they supported multi-national states in principle whilst opposing 'nationalist particularism', accepting that the prioritisation of Slovakia's national grievances could only mean the incitement of additional national tensions. In the early 1920s, moreover, the evidence suggests that Slovaks were more engaged by urgent socio-economic issues than by aspirations to threaten the recently achieved order and the relative freedoms of the Czechoslovak unitary state.

#### *Bureaucracy: the glass ceiling*

The First Republic lost a tremendous opportunity for cohesion by thwarting social mobility for the growing Slovak middle classes and persisting with Czech administrative dominance. No sooner had the Czechs arrived in Slovakia in 1918, it seemed, than they began to replace the Hungarians as administrators and choose Slovak Protestants to assist them, though Protestants represented a small minority in Slovakia, some 18.7 per cent of the population in 1910<sup>25</sup>. Slovakia's governance had immediately fallen to the so-called Slovak 'Hlasists'<sup>26</sup>, close and predominantly Protestant followers of Masaryk. Though it was only a hastily constituted Slovak National Council that had empowered Vavro Šrobár, a leading Hlasist and a Catholic, to represent Slovak interests in Prague, he became the sole Slovak representative on the so-called Czechoslovak National Council<sup>27</sup>. In the Slovak nationalist canon, Šrobár's subsequent advocacy of Prague centralism and Prague's apparent Protestant chauvinist administration marked him thereafter as a traitor to the national cause.

Returning as Minister for Slovakia in December 1918 Šrobár abolished the limited organs of Slovak administrative autonomy that had grown out of the grassroots of Slovak society, using his powers in ways that could only increase hostility to Prague among Slovaks already antagonised by the 'one-nation' principles of Czechoslovakism. Endowed with wide powers of decree and also with units of the Czechoslovak legionnaires, Šrobár dissolved the Slovak National Council (SNC) immediately on coming to office and the local councils, formed under SNC auspices, soon after, in January 1919. Following the first parliamentary elections, Slovakia's special caucus was also dissolved in April 1920<sup>28</sup>, and Šrobár's own administration lasted only until May<sup>29</sup>. Thereafter, Slovak deputies seemed destined to speak from within Czech-dominated, state-wide parties, albeit representing Slovak wings of those parties.

Slovak nationalist historians have naturally emphasised how the Hlasists appointed Czech Protestants to public positions in Slovakia, some of whom undoubtedly viewed themselves as 'bringing enlightenment to a backward country'<sup>30</sup>. Though this

was not another case of 'iron centralism', as Slovak nationalists have subsequently claimed, the security-conscious Hlasists were sufficiently dogmatic in their purging of Hungarianised Slovaks - who, because of the past assimilationist role of the Church, were predominantly Catholic - as to appear anti-Catholic as a matter of policy<sup>31</sup>. In branding as 'Magyarone' those Catholics who had worked for the Budapest government before the war, however, Prague applied a double standard, since in the Czech lands experienced Czechs who had worked for the Viennese government were actually encouraged to offer their services to the new administration<sup>32</sup>.

From the Slovak point of view the Czechoslovak regime thus appeared philosophically and legislatively anti-clerical. Czech politicians seemed bent on separating Church and state, and were quick to nationalise primary and secondary education, previously the preserve of religious authorities. Agrarian reform also threatened the Church estates, and even anti-Hungarian priests in Slovakia found that they were denied the flourishing parishes for which they had hoped. The journalist Ferdinand Peroutka concluded that 'in probably the most complete way, they [the Protestants] excluded Catholic representatives from public service and the enjoyment of glory'<sup>33</sup>. As a consequence, the profoundly conservative, parochial, and socially influential clergy in Slovakia concluded early on that it was they who would have to find a convincing explanation for national inequalities, if Slovakia was not to be radicalised by secular ideas of class and emancipation. When the reality of Slovakia's persistent relative economic backwardness also sank in, support for the Slovak People's Party grew as the division between those who opposed and those who supported Prague rule began to cut more clearly down religious lines.

Undoubtedly it was this religious cleavage that supported the development of a Slovak (political) party belying notions of a single Czechoslovak identity. In another age such a development might have proved sustainable. In 1930s Czechoslovakia, however, Slovak Catholic discontent was an Achilles heel. The Hlinka Slovak People's Party had, by the 1930s, created a strong alliance of co-religionists, frustrated clergy, Catholic laymen, and also 'Magyarone' Slovaks behind the cause of autonomy. Untried as it was, autonomy seemed the idea holding the greatest hope of relief from Czech dominance.

#### *The Hlinka Slovak People's Party (HSPP)*

According to the historian Robert Seton-Watson, Father Andrej Hlinka was a priest 'of the twelfth rather than the twentieth century'<sup>34</sup>. In Czech eyes, Hlinka was too overtly tolerant of the now officially despised 'Magyarone' Slovaks; indeed, he was suspected as prone to Hungarian manipulation. In Catholic Slovakia, by contrast, Hlinka was considered a patriot who had suffered for his efforts against Hungarian repression and had earned Czech animosity only by drawing attention to the iniquities of Czech power. Prague's mistrust and a tendency of the Czechoslovak parliament toward character assassination increasingly marked Hlinka out as Slovakia's *ami du*

#### *Party Strength in the First Republic: Election results by region (% of votes cast)*

	1920	1925	1929	1935
<b>BOHEMIA</b>				
Agrarians	12.4	13.2	13.6	12.7
Social Democrats	22.4	10.4	13.8	12.9
National Socialists	11.2	11.7	13.9	11.6
Czechoslovak Populists	5.6	8.0	6.6	6.0
National Democrats	8.8	5.8	5.2	7.6
Small Tradesmen	2.4	5.2	4.6	6.4
Communists	—	12.6	10.3	9.0
German Parties	32.5	27.0	26.1	28.7
<b>MORAVIA</b>				
Agrarians	12.9	11.5	12.3	14.2
Social Democrats	22.0	9.6	14.8	13.3
National Socialists	6.2	7.0	9.7	9.8
Czechoslovak Populists	18.9	21.3	17.7	15.6
National Democrats	6.2	2.5	3.1	3.9
Small Tradesmen	2.9	4.6	4.3	6.1
Communists	—	11.1	8.9	8.6
German parties	21.3	22.7	21.8	22.2
<b>SLOVAKIA</b>				
Agrarians	18.0	17.4	19.5	17.6
Social Democrats	38.1	4.2	9.5	11.4
National Socialists	2.2	2.6	3.0	3.2
Czechoslovak Populists	17.5	1.3	2.6	2.3
Hlinka Slovak Populists	—	34.3	28.3	30.1
Communists	—	13.9	10.7	13.0
German-Magyar Christian Socialists	18.5	6.9	15.9	14.2

Source: Carol S. Leff, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918–1987* (Princeton, 1988), p. 52.

*peuple* - a powerful position in an era of increasingly radicalised politics across Europe.

By linking a wide range of Slovak grievances to perceptions of Czech religious bias, Hlinka's clerically based party was able to frame a Slovak national agenda literally as an article of religious faith. The party's main political rivals in Slovakia increasingly forfeited support through their relative abstraction from Slovak realities but also because of their continued unwillingness to touch upon national issues in a state with so fragile an ethnic balance. After the social democracy movement divided into warring Communist and Social Democratic Parties between 1920 and 1921 both



groups seemed incapable of noting Slovak difficulties without first appraising them through the prism of international Socialist strategy, a practice diminishing their initial support to a smaller, if consistent, core. The Slovak section of the Agrarians (unified in 1922) might have laid claim to significant support had not their leader, Milan Hodža, established himself as one of Hlinka's main adversaries at the same time as appearing deeply attached to his position and influence in Prague. In 1920, Hodža had gone so far as to prophesy that Czech and Slovak cultures would converge and their languages merge - a recitation of the Czechoslovakist creed. The Czechoslovak People's Party, led by Jan Šrámek, might also have laid claim to Slovak Catholic sympathies had it not fallen out with the Hlinka Party in the early 1920s over religious education. As coalition king-makers between 1921 and 1938, however, Šrámek's populists held so great a stake in the Czechoslovak establishment as to lose the disenchanted Slovak vote almost entirely to Hlinka's L'udáks<sup>35</sup>.

Most of the interwar Czechoslovak cabinets were constituted by Socialist-Agrarian coalitions including all but the National Democrats and the Communist Party<sup>36</sup>. Agrarian-Clerical coalitions governed only between 1925/7 and 1929, and these included not only the National Democrats and eventually the Hlinka Slovak People's Party but also representatives of four out of the seven German groups. This eventual co-option of German parties and the Slovak populists was bought at the cost of 'abandoning extreme centralism, of toning down anti-clerical tendencies and of stiffening tariffs in the interests of the Agrarians'<sup>37</sup>. The price seemed eminently

worth paying to bring the hitherto uncooperative principal minority - the Germans - and the obstructionist HSPP into the state's mainstream. Neither, however, stayed long.

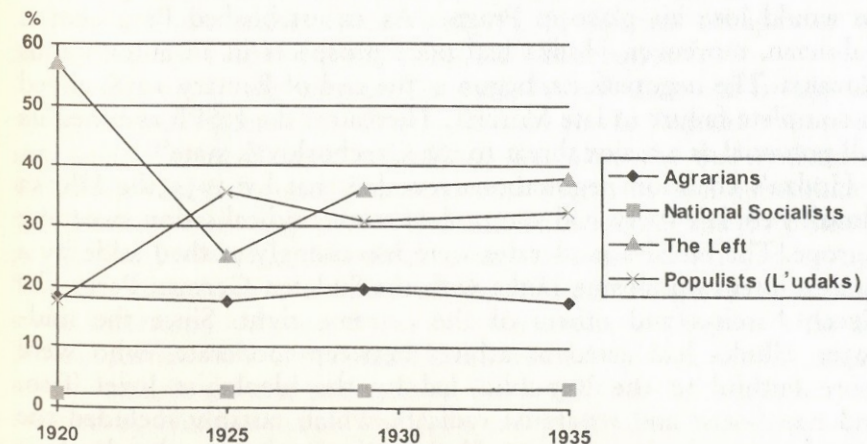
Having emerged as the strongest party in Slovakia, the HSPP demanded greater decentralisation from Prague. In 1927, the county system was abolished and the administration reorganised along provincial lines, creating a 'Slovenská Krajina', which transformed Slovakia from an object to a source of power<sup>38</sup>. Though the HSPP thereafter participated in government (after a full two years of negotiations), the frail accord lasted only until the trial for treason of Hlinka's adviser, Dr Vojtech Tuka, in 1929. The so-called Tuka affair<sup>39</sup> had a fateful impact on the political environment as a whole. It rocked HSPP support, which had wavered following its move into the government coalition, and caused a final breach between the HSPP and all mainstream political groups, bar Šrámek's Populists, despite the brief rapprochement after 1926. Tuka's imprisonment put an end to Hlinka's attempt at constructive engagement with the Czechoslovak political establishment, and the affair pushed the HSPP into a more extremism-prone opposition than they had ever previously entertained<sup>40</sup>. The Depression then improved L'udák electoral fortunes, relatively well attuned to Slovak social and economic grievances as the Hlinka party had become<sup>41</sup>.

#### *The betrayal of Czechoslovakia*

It was a mark of the coalition dynamics in the First Republic and the failure to integrate Slovakia's more outspoken political forces that it was not until the mid-1930s that regional economic disparities were debated in any direct and politically sensitive way<sup>42</sup>. The assumption throughout the 1920s and early 1930s had been that Slovakia would catch up economically with the Czech lands, despite the tendency of Czech industry to treat Slovakia as a colony, left to provide agricultural products, labour and raw materials. Czechoslovakia's initial *laissez-faire* politics had in practice done little positively to advance Slovakia's relatively underdeveloped economy. The state's concern, when it came, was far too late: by the mid-1930s, continuing economic inequality had helped create a convergence of Slovak grievances that looked set to pitch the entire state into crisis.

On 5 November 1935 President Masaryk appointed the Agrarian Milan Hodža as Prime Minister - the only Slovak premier in the history of the First Republic. After the shocking success of the covertly pro-Nazi Sudeten German Party in the 1935 election it was hoped that a Slovak Prime Minister might at least reinforce the core state relationship, leaving Hodža little choice but to open discussions with the Slovak autonomists. He was, however, in a clear bind; for Czechs, his credibility partly depended upon his presumed powers in Slovakia, but if he accepted HSPP demands for economic and administrative concessions and implementation of the Pittsburgh Agreement he would lose his place in Prague. As an established Pragocentric

*Electoral fortunes in Slovakia during the First Republic*



The Left = Social Democrats + Communists + German-Magyar Christian Socialists  
 Populists = Czechoslovak Populists + Hlinka Slovak Populists (L'udáks)

politician, moreover, Hodža had poor prospects in an autonomous Slovakia. The negotiations, begun at the end of January 1936, ended in complete failure in late March<sup>43</sup>. Thereafter the HSPP assumed its full potential as a major threat to the Czechoslovak state<sup>44</sup>.

Hodža's coalition negotiations revealed that by 1935 the Hlinka Slovak People's Party had succumbed to the radicalisation sweeping Europe. The HSPP's moderates were increasingly pushed aside by a faction intent on closing ranks with the Sudeten German Party, the Czech Fascists and others of the extreme right. Since the mid-1930s Hlinka had acted as arbiter between moderates who were more faithful to the Republic, led by the ideologist Jozef Tiso, and neo-fascist and separatist radicals, which notably included the younger party leaders. In 1937, L'udák agitation increased and culminated in anti-Czech demonstrations and accusations that the government had Bolshevised the Republic<sup>45</sup>, citing the May 1935 Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty of Mutual Assistance as evidence. Anti-Czech, anti-Communist and anti-Semitic propaganda became the favoured weaponry of the day<sup>46</sup>. Hlinka's death on 16 August 1938 opened the HSPP fully to the factional contest, and the moderates seemed as good as defeated. The HSPP presented its programme for autonomy - the 'Whitsun Programme' - to parliament on 17 August. Their platform was framed exactly to the demand for 'national self-determination' to be invoked by Hitler's Germany in the Saarland, Austria, and eventually in the Sudetenland: Czechoslovak territory. In the context of the time, therefore, the HSPP aligned itself with the spread of Nazism and the *de facto* destruction of the Czechoslovak state. By September, conditions were moving dramatically in the Populists' favour.

As the extreme right had begun to hold sway, Milan Hodža had attempted a last and desperate acceleration of governmental reforms as a basis for negotiations with Germany, including a new statute of national autonomy, but the time for such efforts had passed. Unwilling to step beyond appeasement of the growing Nazi threat, France and Britain, despite the former's treaty obligations, had made it clear to the Czechoslovak government back on 19 August that it should comply with Hitler's demands for the Sudeten territories. With Czechoslovakia's fate sealed, Slovak L'udák behaviour became transparently pragmatic: when the Polish and Hungarians raised territorial claims on Czechoslovakia in early September, the L'udáks retained the demand for autonomy but decried the prospect of any forceful solution to Czechoslovak statehood. As Hitler's 1 October deadline for handing over the Sudetenland drew closer, L'udák leaders proposed a Polish-Slovak union to forestall the Hungarian occupation of Slovakia in the event of Czechoslovakia's destruction<sup>47</sup>.

The Munich Conference of Germany, Italy, France and Britain on 29 September signed away Czechoslovakia to the German sphere of influence, forcing Prague to cede to Germany the Sudetenland -Czechoslovakia's frontier territories with Germany and her military fortress line - leaving Czechoslovakia unprotected and in Hitler's grasp. On 6 October, Slovakia's centrist parties capitulated to the Slovak autonomists and embraced the Whitsun Programme as their own, informing the new

Syrovy Government in Prague<sup>48</sup> that all Slovak parties now supported Slovak autonomy. The Czechs conceded without debate, besieged by the loss of the Sudetenland and assailed by Hungarian and Polish territorial demands<sup>49</sup>. A nominally 'federalist' Second Czecho-Slovak Republic was established on the same day.

Slovakia's sudden autonomy meant a fundamental shift in regime under a now extremist-ridden HSPP, led since Hlinka's death by Dr Jozef Tiso. Slovak elections were held from which the Communists and Social Democrats were excluded, and all other parties were merged with the L'udáks. Independent associations such as trade unions were swiftly brought under HSPP authority. Tiso meanwhile sought to hold off the independence so desired by the L'udák radicals so as to try to consolidate a measure of economic self-sufficiency<sup>50</sup>. The Czechs' response, military intervention, the suspension of Tiso's government and the introduction of martial law in Slovakia, only hastened the fatal blow from Germany. Tiso was presented with a German ultimatum: Slovakia could assert full independence or suffer Hungary being given a free hand in her former territory. Slovakia duly declared itself independent on 14 March 1939 - becoming, in effect, a Nazi puppet state. On the 15th, the Slovaks requested Hitler's 'protection', and Germany annexed what remained of the Czech lands, establishing the Reich's 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia'<sup>51</sup>.

Slovakia's autonomy, won in 1938 and completed in March 1939, stunned Czechs as a betrayal of Czechoslovakia and of the democratic principles that had flown about the masthead of the new state in 1918. This was a feeling shared by many Slovaks. Though the true level of public support for the HSPP is ultimately hard to judge, there is little evidence that there was a Slovak majority who preferred the resolution of national differences by the dismemberment of the state, let alone the crushing of Czechoslovakia by German forces dictating the installation of Nazism. The early enthusiasm of the Catholic majority in Slovakia should not be interpreted simplistically. As others have explored in great depth, support for the new regime can be attributed either to the perception that Slovakia had finally seized its fate into its own hands or to a genuine hostility to all aspects of the First Republic. There is evidence to support both interpretations<sup>52</sup>, but not to resolve the issue.

#### FIRST REPUBLIC - DOOMED TO FAIL?

In the long term the apparent betrayal of the First Republic produced powerful national stereotypes. Masaryk's frequently overbearing presidential influence had been directed toward fostering progressive and 'state-building' parties whose priority would be 'state', rather than religious, ethnic or even party, interests. The priorities of the Slovak L'udáks had always represented an attack on the Masarykian philosophy as such. Tiso's brand of clerico-fascism provided Czechoslovak history with evidence of Slovak disloyalty and difference, but also of a latent, 'demonic' Slovak nationalism. Subsequently, Czechs have rarely failed to allude to the 'liberal' state's betrayal at moments of Czech-Slovak tension, and for many years afterwards they clearly

expected Slovak acts of atonement and contrition.

For many Slovaks the events of 1938-9 only exacerbated Slovakia's already overlooked frustrations with the inequalities of Czech rule. The failure to grant Slovaks significant autonomy throughout the First Republic had marked Masaryk's establishment notion of 'Czechoslovakia', with an irreducible defect for Slovak pride. Many Slovaks had increasingly felt that Slovakia had been co-opted into a notion of 'Czechoslovak' identity only to safeguard the stability of a Czech-dominated state. This interpretation grew once the rewards accruing to Slovakia for its Czechoslovak status were seen to be inadequate, albeit for different reasons in different quarters. The logic of the state's built-in flaw and the reasoning to which Czechs had recourse between 1918 and 1938 were nevertheless powerful; granting Slovak aspirations to administrative autonomy could trigger irredentist claims by both Germans and Hungarians<sup>53</sup>.

To complicate matters further the 'Slovak question' in the First Republic had been 'triangular', i.e. not simply between Czechs and Slovaks as homogeneous opponents but between Czechs, Slovak autonomists and Slovak integrationists<sup>54</sup>. This triangular relationship would persist, with some variations, after the Second World War and until the state's demise in 1992. The integrationist first generation of 'Czechoslovakists' within Slovakia (among them the bulk of Slovakia's young Protestant intellectuals) had clearly believed that Slovakia could only benefit from the modernising and Westernising influence of the Czech territories and should adopt a suitably loyalist attitude. From the beginning, however, the Czechoslovak project was a hostage to the fortunes of its Slovak population, predominantly Catholic and agrarian as that population for the moment remained: with hindsight, an unlikely seedbed for the visions of progressive, Westernising, and secular intellectuals.

Demographic developments, moreover, worked against assimilation into a homogeneous Czechoslovak identity. The Slovak population had grown rapidly after 1918 through the combined effects of an increase in the Slovak birthrate, a decline in emigration and the re-Slovakisation of the previously Magyarised population. The 1921 census revealed the sweeping away of the apparent Hungarian majority in many Slovak cities. Combined with a continuing process of urbanisation, concentrated in Bratislava and Kosice<sup>55</sup>, and a comprehensive improvement in the entire education structure within Slovakia, conditions had turned to favour those who wished to distinguish the Slovak national identity as sustainable and as distinct from the Czech.

Had the fate of Czechoslovakia been sealed from the start by the mis-equation of its minorities?<sup>56</sup> It is a seductive explanation. The combined imperatives facing Czechoslovakia in 1918 suggest a state besieged, To begin with, Slovak goodwill appeared considerable. The evidence is that the coexistence with and the assistance of the Czechs was initially welcomed by most Slovaks as the realisation of an ethnically natural, economically beneficial, non-assimilationist and relatively non-centralising Slavic state. In these early years Bratislava became the headquarters of new and resuscitated parties, newspapers, home to a national university and other diverse

cultural and educational institutions, able to function with relative freedom<sup>57</sup> and to bear the marks of a capital city. Above all, in terms of its own cultural security, Slovakia won formal demarcation as a distinct territory - for which many Slovaks were undoubtedly grateful. On the down side, the weakness of the Slovak element in Czech collective awareness turned out to be critical.

The term Czechoslovak had become a rich source of contention almost immediately after the states formation: the emergence of the new state in October 1918 was not accompanied by a clear delineation of what the term Czechoslovak meant. Some persons thought it descriptive, others saw it as prescriptive. Some thought it was related to politics, while others cast it solely into the ideological sphere. There was disagreement whether its significance was primarily internal or external. By 1938, the Czechoslovak concept was beginning to give way to recognition of distinct Czech and Slovak nations . . .<sup>58</sup> As the journalist Ferdinand Peroutka put it at the time, how could Slovaks not be antagonised when there did not exist a Czechoslovak nation. How else could one refer to it other than as a demand?<sup>59</sup> The development of national stereotypes and grievances was critical in the demise of the First Republic, but it remained equally the case that the First Republic had been denied any attempt at the constitutional arrangements to which multi-ethnic states may typically, and often successfully, resort. The Czechs discovered the strength of Slovak national identity in the direst geopolitical circumstances imaginable, and there was no hope of remedy when, in Churchill's memorable phrase, the whole equilibrium of Europe [had] been deranged.<sup>60</sup>

## NOTES

1. The Hungarian territory of Ruthenia (Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia) eventually also accrued to Czechoslovakia as an autonomous region, Czechoslovakia seeming the least difficult choice. Ruthenia was administered by a Governor appointed by the Czechoslovak President and, though promised a separate civil administration for 1922, this was still not established when the Czechoslovak Republic fell in 1938. See Seton-Watson (1965), p. 324.
2. Pryor (1973), p. 190.
3. The Serb Orthodox Church acted as a bulwark against Magyar assimilation of Serbs culturally. Moreover, after 1878 an independent Serbia acted as a focus for Serbian identity, just as after 1859 the independent Kingdom of Romania encouraged an independent, indeed Irredentist, Romanian identity Macartney (1968), p. 730.
4. Between 1910 and 1920 Bohemian Catholics began to leave the church in droves, perceiving the Catholic hierarchy to be an instrument of Habsburg oppression. Equally, anti-Magyar Slovak intellectuals who had sought refuge in the Czech education system tended to be from Protestant backgrounds precisely because their Protestantism had rendered them relatively immune to Magyarisation. Leff (1988), p. 19.
5. Seton-Watson (1965), p. 13.
6. In 1526 the Czech Diet elected Ferdinand I, a Habsburg, to the throne. The Czech nobility

- sought the strength of the established pan-European family as a way of reinvigorating the Czech kingdom. Ferdinand, however, proved so strong as to secure the succession of his descendants. Thereafter 'the Czech Diet ceased to elect kings and, instead, accepted them.' Bradley (1971), p. 68.
7. Mason (1997), p. 13.
  8. Skilling (1994), p. 79.
  9. Connor (1994), p. 212.
  10. The First Republic embarked on the interwar period with some three million Germans and three-quarters of a million Magyars - in a population of 13,600,000. By 1930 Czechs constituted 49.9 per cent of the total population; Germans 21.9 per cent; Slovaks 15.9 per cent; Hungarians 4.7 per cent; Ukrainians, Ruthenians and Russians 3.7 per cent; Jews 1.3 per cent and Poles 0.6 per cent: Prucha (1995), p.45.
  11. Bartlova (1995), p. 163.
  12. Skilling (1994), p. 71.
  13. Johnson (1985), p. 53.
  14. The Slovak National Council was viewed domestically as the representative forum of Slovak political feeling, having been reconstituted in May 1918 by the Slovak People's Party, the Social Democrats and the Slovak National Party.
  15. There existed a popular Czech notion that Slovak existed only as a backward form of Czech, which would soon dissolve as Slovak society passed through the modernisation already completed by Czech society, Johnson (1985), pp. 52-3.
  16. Beneš (1973), pp. 73-4.
  17. It should be remembered that these were chaotic postwar times. Bratislava was not occupied until 4 January 1919 and border security between Slovakia and Hungary was not achieved until August and the collapse of the five-month-old Hungarian Bolshevik regime under Béla Kun, a situation not fully stabilised until the Treaty of Trianon of 4 June 1920. Seton-Watson (1965), pp. 322-4.
  18. The Cleveland Accord had already been swept aside. It was a joint declaration by émigré representatives of the Slovak League and the Czech National Association, calling for an independent federated Czechoslovak state. The Accord provided for Slovak autonomy to the extent of its own financial and political administrations and total cultural freedom. As Johnson points out, the significance of the document was that the American Slovaks could claim to represent the Slovak cause in northern Hungary, effectively silenced by the war. Johnson (1985), p. 47.
  19. Jelinek (1983), p. 5.
  20. T. G. Masaryk, *The Making of a State: Memories and Observations 1914-1918* (London: George Alien & Unwin, 1927), p. 208.
  21. Seton-Watson (1965), p. 334.
  22. Masaryk, op. cit., p. 209.
  23. Mamatey (1973), p. 9.
  24. Hlinka agitated for the adoption of the Agreement, making his way to Pans to lobby at the Peace Conference. He was arrested on his return and, untried, was only allowed to return to Slovakia after his election to the Prague Parliament in 1920: Kirschbaum (1983), p. 165.
  25. Leff (1988), p. 21.
  26. The works of Masaryk greatly influenced and shaped the anti-Habsburg feeling of many Slovak students in Prague during the 1890s. The newspaper *Hlas* (Voice) was a mouthpiece of the liberal democrats among the progressive student clubs advocating closer Czech Slovak cooperation on the basis of their common roots
  27. The Council acted as temporary government before the first sitting of the Czechoslovak National Assembly. Bartlova (1995), p. 170.
  28. Before the first elections in 1920 the Czechoslovak National Council apportioned mandates among existing parties according to their results in the last election to the (Habsburg) Reichsrat, held under universal suffrage. This method could not be applied to Slovakia because of the distorting Hungarian franchise, which had left Slovakia with only three deputies. The Czechoslovak National Council therefore, acting on Šrobár's advice, had *nominated* forty-one leading Slovaks, to whom a further fourteen were soon added. This was later criticised, though at the time, according to Seton-Watson, 'it was universally accepted as a graceful compliment': Seton-Watson (1965), p. 317.
  29. Bartlová (1995), p. 171.
  30. Jelinek (1976), p. 5.
  31. Some 70.89 per cent of Slovaks were Roman Catholic and 6.46 Greek Catholic in 1921: Johnson (1985), p. 27.
  32. In the first years of the Republic Slovakia lacked sufficiently educated and politically reliable people to assure fair representation in the prestigious civil service - a legacy of Hungarian rule. By the time the reformed Slovak education system had produced large numbers of competent candidates in the Republic's second decade, however, they too found themselves unable to penetrate into the central administration. This persistent discrimination caused tension amongst Slovakia's educated classes, newly swelled with Catholics as these classes were. Some Czech politicians interpreted this frustration as rank ingratitude for the comprehensive new 'Czechoslovak' education system that had so elevated them, an appraisal which hardly helped matters. As late as 1938, a head count of all those employed in the ministries, together with the office of the president and executive council, totalled 10,825 positions, of which a staggering 123 were occupied by Slovaks; see Bartlova (1995), p. 173.
  33. *Budování státu* Volume 11:1227: in Kirschbaum (1983), p. 161.
  34. Seton-Watson (1965), p. 917.
  35. Beneš (1973), p. 83.
  36. Eduard Beneš's National Socialists, it should be noted, were not Nazis but non-Marxist radicals with a lower-middle and working-class constituency. This secular party was beleaguered by factional infighting and never gained a strong foothold in Slovakia; see Leff (1988), p. 57.
  37. Seton-Watson (1965), p. 330.
  38. The 1927 law gave Slovakia a Provincial President with wide powers and an elected Provincial Assembly. The latter was, however, a throwback to Hungarian practices in that it consisted of two-thirds elected representatives and one-third selected directly by the civil service (ibid., p. 335). This latter third favoured central administration and keeping in line with central government policies, a factor exposing it to the HSPP's dissatisfaction, see Bartlová (1995), p. 174.
  39. In 1928 Hlinka's adviser, Dr Vojtech Tuka, repeated in the Hlinka Party's paper *Slovak* a long-established myth that there existed a potential legal vacuum as a result of a secret clause in the 1918 Martin Declaration stipulating the right of Slovaks, after ten years, to reconsider their decision to enter into a political union with the Czechs. He insisted that if autonomy was not granted by 31 October 1928, Slovakia might go its own way. Tuka was tried for treason as a Hungarian spy and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment (Seton-



- Watson (1965), p. 311). It was only after the war that Czechoslovak historians were able to produce unequivocal evidence proving Tuka's guilt, see Jelinek (1976), p. 10. Released from prison in 1938, Tuka would become Prime Minister of the clerico-fascist Slovak state from March 1939 to September 1944, and clearly and instrumentally pro-Nazi.
40. In-fighting and Comintern dictates led the Communist Party at the time to engage in a leadership purge significant to postwar developments. The new elite centred on a Stalinist cadre around Klement Gottwald; 'young fanatics, whose greatest qualification was their willingness to accept Moscow's orders unconditionally'. At the end of the 1920s the Party presented the vision of a 'Soviet Slovakia' and while highlighting the differences between the Party and the Populists, Gottwald clearly played on L'udák ground. Mere autonomy, said the Communists, would only subject the Slovak worker to the Slovak bourgeoisie. Despite this Slovakia's branch of the Communist Party remained notoriously short of card-carrying members and functionaries during the Great Depression, see Jelinek (1983), pp. 17-25.
41. Jelinek (1976), p. 10.
42. See Johnson (1985), p. 51.
43. Mamatey (1973), p. 157.
44. When Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933 that other marginalized political group, the Communist Party, comprehended at last the true scale of the Nazi threat. Turning from its interminable attacks against the Social Democrats, the Party shifted its priorities to support the 'bourgeois state' and voted for the first time in favour of parts of the state budget. Following Masaryk's resignation in 1935, the Communists voted for Eduard Beneš (as did the L'udáks) rather than propose a candidate of their own. The slogan 'Soviet Slovakia' disappeared (Jelinek, *ibid.*, p. 27), leaving the Hlinka party again alone in calling for Slovak autonomy, but this time with a new resonance.
45. The Communist Party faced tremendous difficulties by this time: they had to demand pro-Slovak changes, for which they were accused of pro-L'udák behaviour. The minorities meanwhile rejected the Communists' brushing aside of self-determination and their apparent born-again Czechoslovakism. As Jelinek concludes, 'Communism was in retreat in the last years of the Republic': Jelinek (1976), p. 3.
46. *ibid.*, pp. 11-16.
47. See Mamatey (1973), p. 164.
48. In the confusion during September, Hodža's government had resigned and President Eduard Beneš appointed a cabinet of experts, led by General Jan Syrový, to replace it.
49. Prochazka (1973), p. 260.
50. The Czech historian Jan Rychlík has described this as a process of 'constructing Slovakia's independence paid for by the Czech taxpayer', a common Czech theme after 1989; see Rychlík (1995) (1995), p. 182.
51. See Mamatey (1973), p. 167.
52. See Leff on this issue (1988), p. 90.
53. The Hungarians and Germans rejected the invitation to participate in the pre-1920 'Revolutionary National Assembly' which wrote the 1920 constitution; see Johnson (1985), p. 60. They boycotted the Parliament, hoping for reunion with Hungary and Austria respectively. When they eventually entered the legislature they were, of course, confronted by laws and principles established by Czechs and Slovaks.
54. For an in-depth discussion, see Leff (1988), pp. 193-211.
55. See Johnson (1985), p. 84.
56. It is equally thought-provoking to ask whether the expulsion of ethnic Germans after the Second World War effectively removed all reason for the existence of Czechoslovakia.
57. See Bartlová (1995), p. 169.
58. Johnson (1985), p. 50.
59. Ferdinand Peroutka, *Budování státu* Volume I, p. 213, in Kirschbaum (1983), p. 170.
60. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm*, Volume I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), p. 294.
- In: Innes, Abby (2001), *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye*, Yale University Press, New Haven, pp. 1-16