

Slovak History

A Short Overview

By Zoltan Balassa

If we wish to acquire a brief overview of the history of the Slovaks, we must primarily concentrate on the second half of the 18th century. It was the period when the small group of Northern Hungarian intelligentsia gradually began to become aware of being unique members of the Slav people, which was different from the others. Hence, let us now skip over the earlier history, except to note that Slovak and Hungarian historiography treats it in divergent fashion. It simply means that significant effort would have to be made to arrive at a mutual and bias-free view of the sources.

With the settlement of the Magyars in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century, the territory of the Slovakia of today -- which at the time did not exist even as an idea -- became an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary and would remain as such until 1918.

The ancestors of the Slovaks appear in the highlands of Hungary around the 13th to 14th century, through migration and resettlement. Other populations also appear: from the west Moravians and Czechs, from the north White Croats, Poles, Lusatian Sorbs, and from the east Ruthenians, Cossacks, Ukrainians and Russians. Slovak linguists are in agreement that the neighboring Slav languages left their imprint on today's Slovak language. Yet, at the same time, there are a number of conflicting opinions among the experts, meaning that there is still a lot of work to be done to clarify the ethno-genesis of the Slovaks. This would be of great interest as it might also shed light on the emergence / appearance of other nationalities. "Historical awareness is a more recent phenomenon -- it dates from the time of the creation of the first nation states" - cautions the Czech historian Vladimír Karbusický.

In spite of migrations and resettlement, during the Middle Ages, 80% of the population of the Kingdom of Hungary consisted of Magyars. Significant ethnic shifts only took place during the 18th century.

The advent of Protestant Reformation in the 16th century reinforced the use of the Czech language among the Protestant Highland Slavs, as that was the language of the liturgy and the Kralicka Bible (published in Moravia in the late 16th century). The first 'Slovak' translation of the Bible (there were, at this time, only dialects) was compiled by the monks of the Kamaldul order (c. 1745-1769); the first Slovak-language Bible was printed much later, around 1825-1832.

The situation was complicated when, after the battle of Mohacs in 1526, the Turks occupied the center portion of the Kingdom of Hungary. The remaining unoccupied northern and western parts were acquired by the Habsburgs. Thus, the highland Slavs became Habsburg subjects, which did not

offer any protection from the predations and ravages of both of the warring parties.

The centre of the northeastern portion of the country became Košice (Hung: Kassa). Between 1604-1711, with minor interruptions, it forms a part of the Transylvanian Principality, Košice occasionally its capital. At the Diet of Torda (1543), the Transylvanian estates enacted religious tolerance, or freedom of conscience -- a first for Europe -- later extended to other religions, also (1552-1579). This was the drawing card which made the Protestant people of the Carpathian Basin overt, or covert, allies of the Transylvanian Principality; this is why the ancestors of the Slovaks were ardent soldiers of the princes against Austria.

After the expulsion of the Turks and the recapture of the capital, Buda in 1686, the entire country was annexed by the Habsburgs, which became the source of ongoing unrest and dissatisfaction.

The research into the early history of the Slovaks runs into difficulties because the Latin of the day never referred to them as Slovaks. The Highland Slovaks were always denoted as Sclavi, Slavus, Sclavorum, Sclavonicum, gentis Slava, and Slavica. The collective noun 'Slovak' first surfaces in Bártfa (Bardejov), then in Moravia, in the first half of the 15th century. The original meaning of the proper noun meant 'Slav'; the "-ak" declension, or ending, also originates from the Czech language. This was the state of affairs until the end of the 18th century. Its present meaning was the work of Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856). Slovaks are, quite simply, the 'national Benjamins' of Central Europe: they were not 'reborn' in the 19th century, they were the creations of the 19th century -- states Peter Sýkora, Slovak biologist. Another difficulty was pointed out by Canadian historian Peter Brock. The ancestors of the Slovaks possessed a unique and independent ethnic identity, which was not, of necessity, the same as a unique and independent national identity, similar to the American Negro, who was always aware of his ethnic uniqueness, yet wished to remain an American.

The northern part of the Kingdom of Hungary was first called as Slavonia in 1512 and it was later in the same century that the area was referred to as 'Slovak lands.' The term 'Slovak (Slovensko)' in its current meaning was defined by Štúr.

Because the number of Slovaks, as a population group, was not great, they felt it important to unite the Slav ethnic groups, leading to the concept of pan-Slavism. We can first find the expression in the works of Jan Herkel' (1826), who used it as an expression covering a literary anthology. It was a Protestant cleric-poet, Jan Kollar (1793-1852) who became a leading proponent of this ideal -- still a political innocent, as yet, but containing the seed of a potential hazard. It later became the foundation for passionate political debate and hate-mongering. All saw the leading power of Slav unity in the largest nation, Russia. Hence, czarist Russia was to be the embodiment of the protector of the Slavic peoples. Even Štúr proposed this in his last work and recommended that the Slovaks adopt the Russian language and Orthodox religion. This, however, led

into a blind alley, as Russia -- whether czars or commissars were in power -- used the idea of pan-Slavism for its own political aims. Those original dreamers of a national (id)entity were completely oblivious to the despotic nature of the Russian state. They were idealistic and naive.

In protection of the terms of the ancient Magyar constitution, several anti-Habsburg movements took up arms against the centralized authority, most of which took place in what is Slovakia today (1604-1711). The ancestors of today's Slovaks took part in these uprisings, on the side of the Transylvanian princes. The uprising / freedom fight of 1848-1849 was a direct continuation of them, with about 100,000 Slovaks fighting alongside the Magyars for Hungary's freedom. It was only a small cabal of intellectuals who endeavored to further their aims by offering to serve the emperor's court. "It is often repeated that the Slovak nation was born in precisely 1848-1849. If this were to be true, then this nation received a gift of a goodly portion of schizophrenia," pointed out Ladislav Szalay, a Slovak publicist, referring to the Slovak-Magyar conflicts that have been the bane of co-existence to the two nations since 1848. The current Slovak country was born and its aspirations tended toward a nation state. Alas, this goal could only be carried out at the expense of others.

In the years previously mentioned, an insignificant number of armed Slovaks turned against the forces fighting for the constitutionality of Hungary but in most cases these were driven off by the Slovaks. "... neither Štúr nor Hurban had any intention of cooperating with the Hungarians," not when the leading echelon of Hungarian politics changed from the oligarchy to a liberal nobility: "they positioned themselves to confrontation both before and after." "Štúr, the politician, led the nation into a long term dead end during the years of 1848-1849." (Ladislav Szalay). For the majority of the Slovaks, the mandatory tithe, manorial labor obligations, equality before the law and freedom of religion were more valued than the vague and imprecise 'national cause.'

The extent and boundary of the national homeland did not become evident for a long time to the Slovak forebears. It only coalesced in 1840 and the demands were formally presented to the emperor during the Freedom Fight of 1848-1849, supported by the court if for no other reason than to weaken the Hungarians, since none of the promises were carried out. A number of demands were grossly exaggerated and not based on reality. The break up of the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary into national (ethnic) parts was bound to fail because, in most places, there was not a clear ethnic boundary to draw. In the case of the Slovaks, carving out an ethnographic area would have resulted in an economically unviable country.

The disparities between the Slovaks and Magyars since the 19th century poisoned the life of the two nations all through the 20th century. They became more numerous with the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. A Slovak linguist, Ludovíta Nováka, said: "... regarding the Hungarian language, a great deal of damage was created by the Czech fuelled hate, through every means possible, against all things Hungarian because this hate was instilled into the Slovak youth, who were, at the time, studying under their supervision." The Czechs,

you see, had to try to legalize Slovakia -- where they were an insignificant minority --, validate annexing Slovakia to Bohemia and Moravia. This reasoning the Slovaks rationalize with an unprovable catastrophic assimilation.

“The proportional change of the ethnic make-up is not only the result of assimilation -- warned the Slovak Ján Hromádka -- but a more complex process.” Influence is exerted by the “least developed sense of national awareness, or rather, many simply changed their ethnicity under the influence of various factors.” At the time, the peasant population did not have a particularly well developed national consciousness.

The population of Slovaks grew by 262,000 (or 16%) -- while in an ‘oppressed’ minority status -- during the 70 years between 1840 and 1910. This does not include the approximately 650,000 Slovaks who emigrated abroad between 1871-1914. Hence, the actual population increase had to have been greater (over 50%). Between 1781 and 1921, the Slovak-Magyar language boundary shifted -- in the Slovak favor. Of the 319 settlements that lay along this boundary, 73 changed their ethnic makeup, 49 of them to the Slovak side (Häfler–Korcák–Kráľ: *Zemepis Československa* [Geography of Czechoslovakia], Prague, 1960, p. 236). This was also underscored by the Slovak ethnographer Ján Csaplovics. Over a period of half a century, the Slovaks ‘lost’ a total of 113 settlements but ‘gained’ 268. At the beginning of the 20th century, of the entire Highlands Slovak population, only 7% spoke Hungarian at any level. Thus, there was no evident threat to Slovak existence. The main problem was that, in the absence of middle and upper schools teaching in the mother tongue, the masses of Slovaks were at a low standard of knowledge and culture. The three church-run schools, although recommended for reorganization, were instead closed. The schools themselves were partly to blame for the situation. Also, that the activities of the *Matica slovenská* [Slovak Mother, or Slovak Bee] were suspended as a result of the publication of numerous pamphlets offensive to Hungarians. Its leadership often used confrontational, non-tactical actions to stoke the differences.

After 1867, when the Kingdom of Hungary got its own government, it enacted in law 1868:XLIV, giving sweeping assurances for the use of minority languages in school, everyday life, in local government and in the courts, and in the area of institutions and religion. With the exception of Switzerland, this law was unique in the world.

In spite of it all, there was a long list of serious problems also waiting for rectification -- especially if we look at those circumstances from a 20th century viewpoint. And yet, the situation of the Slovaks was not so dire as to have to reach for radical means. This is shown by the fact that, at the end of the First World War, the majority of Slovaks did not turn their weapons against their own country, the Kingdom of Hungary.

According to Francois Fejtő, the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was decided a year and a half before the end of the war. But there was another alternative to the transformation: federative union. This option had its supporters in the Viennese court. But the future of Central Europe was not

decided by the people living there -- nobody asked for their ideas or opinions. The countries created out of the rubble of the Monarchy were not nation states, in fact, not even democracies. That is why Czech political scientist Rudolf Kučera said: "At Trianon, and subsequently, the Kingdom of Hungary was destroyed totally needlessly ... We know the chief perpetrators: they were Masaryk, Benes and Goga ..." The worst effect, however, was to detour the nations living here away from the mainstream of European development, which resulted in the utter hopelessness of several generations.

That Slovakia was to become part of Czechoslovakia was decided rather late. Apart from a few self-appointed people representing no one, nobody thought of this solution. But the view among the Czechs was not consistent, either.

On top of it all, the Trianon peace terms saddled this newly formed state with contradictory military-strategic conditions, which exceeded the means of the Czechoslovak state policy concept. This was confirmed by its two time dissolution.

Subsequent to the First World War, the map of Central Europe was redrawn. The situation drove not only the Slovaks but also all the other nations living in the area into a dead end -- at the end of which waited first Hitler, then Stalin.

The First Slovak State took part in the eruption of World War Two when, together with Nazi Germany, it attacked Poland. Although the national Slovak uprising erupted in 1944 but it was not enough to make one forget the previous actions. After 1945, Slovakia once more becomes part of Czechoslovakia and the majority of Slovaks behaved as if collaborators and Nazis have never lived among them.

Following World War Two, Czechoslovakia did not strive for democracy but, rather, ethnocracy. Other than Slavs, everyone was persecuted (the anti-constitutional government program of Kosice and the Benes decrees). In 1948, the Communists took over the power and they ruled until the end of 1989. The 40 years of totalitarian rule was only broken by the 1968 interlude; the Warsaw Pact armies quickly put an end to that attempt. The tragedy lay not in the occupation of the country but rather in the speed with which the members of the two nations, in spite of the initial general resistance, submitted to the communist restoration, led all the way through by a Slovak communist, Gustáv Husák.

In 1989, the Soviet structure collapsed and soon thereafter Slovakia became independent (1993), against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the populace. The anti-Hungarian policy is still bearing fruit (the Malina Hedvig affair, the brutal beating of Hungarian soccer fans in Dunajská Streda (Hung: Dunaszerdahely, etc.) It is unfortunate that Slovaks have got used to defining themselves contrary to someone else and are unable to let go of their real or perceived affronts. Even though this runs counter to their own, and all of Europe's, interests.

Of the entire population of the European Union, 220 million people, or 40%, live in minority status. Thus, in the future, this question must be handled very cautiously at highest European level, since it is a common concern

(Translated by Peter J. Csermely)