

The Hungarian—Czech—Slovak Relationships in Historical Perspective

Based on the essay of Francis S. Wagner, Ph. D., Library of Congress (Ret.)
and recent informations on the situation in Slovakia

The past centuries

During the centuries when both countries, Bohemia and Hungary, lived under the rule of their own national dynasties, no important ties developed between them. The turning point in their history came when the Hungarian House of the Árpáds died out in 1301, the Czech Premysl dynasty became extinct in 1306, and the Polish Piasts came to an end in 1370.

After the dissolution of their native royal houses, Czechs and Hungarians lived under common kings from the Luxenbourg, Jagellonian, and the Habsburg dynasties. The further development of these states seems, on the face of it, to have been similar, yet their political strength and measure of independence was varied. The Czechs' lands, even if autonomous, remained a part of a foreign empire. Poland won its independence after considerable time had elapsed. Hungary's position in this regard — at least *de jure* — can be considered to have been somewhat better. But the growing Turkish menace and the burning at Constance in 1414 of Jan Hus, the outstanding Czech political and religious leader, completely changed the course of history. For years the Hussite wars ranged as far as Upper Hungary and thereby caused serious antagonism in the Czech—Hungarian relations.

Despite the Turkish expansionist policy, all three rulers — instead of making an alliance — fought independently to establish a Central European Empire in the second half of the fifteenth century. Neither Casimir IV of Poland (1447—1492) nor George Podebrad of Bohemia (1457—1471), nor Matthias Corvinus of Hungary (1458—1490), succeeded. On the

contrary, just a while later the Habsburg dynasty began its reign in all three states. The policy of the Vienna Imperial Court, built upon the principle of *divide and conquer*, rendered impossible the formation of any constructive and lasting ties between Bohemia and Hungary.

After the one and a half century long Turkish occupation of Hungary, some parallel occurrences in Hungarian—Czech relations emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. Parallelism between the Magyar [Hungarian] (that is, the 1790—91 Diet), the contemporary Czech, and other developments demonstrated clearly enough that the time was already ripe for a politically minded nationalist awakening.

On the threshold of the period of national awakening in the second half of the eighteenth century, Hungary, as a consequence of the long-lasting Turkish oppression, became a devastated country with a majority population of non-Magyar nationalities. The Germanization decree issued by Emperor Joseph II and the subsequent centralization policy of the Vienna Imperial Court were directed against all non-German nationalities.

After the revolutionary years of 1848—1849, it seemed evident that the outmoded idea of the Habsburg Gesamtmonarchie should be abandoned and the Monarchy should be reorganized on new principles. There were only two alternatives. First Austro-Slavism as propagated by Frantisek Palacky and Karel Havlicek-Borovsky. In Palacky's opinion, Austria would have to be invented if it did not already exist. The second option, which materialized in 1867 in the form of Austro-Hungarian dualism, did not satisfy the Slavic and Rumanian nations. Related political fights entirely poisoned the Czech—Hungarian relationship. According to the Czech plan, the Habsburg monarchy would have been reorganized on the basis of ethnic entities and divisions, and Hungary would have received only its Transdanubian region and the Great Plains; while Upper Hungary (now Slovakia) would have belonged to Bohemia, and so on, as planned by Palacky and Rieger. The Hohenwart Cabinet accepted this plan of federalization but the October 20, 1871 Crown Council rejected it when the Hungarian Prime Minister, Count Gyula Andrassy, intervened.

Andrassy's intervention was tantamount to a decisive pro-German orientation by its support of Bismarkian foreign policy. A significant pro-German step had been taken earlier at the July 18, 1870 Crown Council when Archduke Albrecht and Beust, with the approval of Emperor Franz Joseph, had proposed a military alliance between Austria-Hungary and France to enter the Franco—German war on the side of France. Count Andrassy, however, intervened in favor of neutrality which was then

agreed upon by the Council. These events of utmost importance finalized the German—Austro-Hungarian alliance which determined the position and fate of Austria and Hungary in two world wars. The real motive behind Andrassy's actions was his constant fear of czarist Russia's Pan-Slavic domination in European and world affairs.

The Slavophile Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, also tried to transform the Monarchy in line with the principle of federalization. But his plan could not be carried out for he was assassinated on June 28, 1914, which led to the outbreak of World War I. The lava of extreme nationalism bubbled over on all sides. The outcome of World War I closed the last chapter of the history of the Habsburg monarchy by creating several small successor states which were unable to resist any great power's pressure.

Slovaks in the Kingdom of Hungary

For centuries, until about the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the cohabitation of Slovaks and Magyars did not present any insurmountable difficulties. Slovaks, as did ninety percent of the Magyars, constituted the lower stratum of the society: they were serfs and consequently did not participate in the mainstream of the political life. The way was open however to reach the status of nobility.

The national awakening of the Slovak people was among the earliest of nations, including the politically dominant Magyars. In the beginning, this awakening was based strictly on the cult of the native tongue. The Slovak national consciousness seemingly crystallized during the events of 1848—1849 and even more so in the Memorandum of the Slovak nation dated June 7, 1861. This document requested from the Hungarian Diet the following, among others: that the identity of the Slovak nation and the Slovak national language be recognized by forming a geographical entity called the Slovak Region of Upper Hungary, and that this area which was occupied solidly by Slovaks be constituted of counties demarcated according to nationality.

The governments of Austria-Hungary wanted to protect the unity of the state. Contrary to general belief there was no effective large-scale assimilation because the Slovak masses lived quite isolated in compact settlements.

The deteriorating circumstances were all the more unresponsive to improvement because the coexistence of the Monarchy's nationalities became an issue of world politics between the German-led Central Powers and the Western Allies. Months before the end of World War I, the

Pittsburgh Agreement approved the political program of the union of the Czechs and the Slovaks in the newly-founded state: Czechoslovakia. This was the conclusion of the millenium of Hungarian—Slovak cohabitation as *Andrej Hlinka*, the leader of the *L'udová strana*, said: „The thousand years of marriage to the Magyars failed. We must part”.

The nationality problem in interwar Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was founded as an application of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination. But this newly-founded Republic included — from the standpoint of assimilation — overly large non-Slavic: that is, German and Hungarian minorities. It was very difficult to adjust national minorities to the new conditions, one prime causative factor being the great difference between the historical evolution of the Western and Eastern parts of the Republic. These differences were magnified by ethnic dissimilarities even in the case of the Czechs and the Slovaks. The situation was all the more difficult because compact settlements of ethnic minorities ran along the boundaries of Czechoslovakia which were adjacent to Germany, Hungary and even Poland.

By the summer of 1938, France and the Little Entente had lost their influence in shaping the fate of the region.

Germany's main purpose was the cession to Germany of the Sudeten German territory and the destruction of the Czechoslovak state. In order to reach this goal, Berlin applied various calculated tactics and approaches. From time to time, Germany favored Czechoslovakia, then Hungary and finally ended up in the Munich Four-Power Agreement of September 29, 1938, signed by the heads of the governments of Germany, Italy France and Great Britain. This Agreement proved to be the prelude to the downfall of Czechoslovakia and opened the way toward the fulfilment of Hungarian territorial demands, thereby damaging Czech—Hungarian relations.

The first Slovak State

In the spirit of the Munich Four-Power Agreement, Slovak—Hungarian negotiations started in Komarno (Komárom). The unsuccessful negotiations led on November 2, 1938 to the First Vienna Arbitral Award, signed by Ribbentrop and Ciano, to revise the Czechoslovak—Hungarian boundaries. From then on, Hungarian—Slovak relations deteriorated totally, and to this day no sign of improvement can be detected.

The Slovaks declared their autonomy on October 6, 1938. On March 14, 1939, they seceded from the Czechs and proclaimed an independent Slovak state. On March 23, 1939 they signed a 25 year military treaty with the

German Reich. According to the terms of the treaty Germany was to guarantee the borders of Slovakia and take responsibility for its foreign policy. In return, the Slovak state surrendered its political independence and ceded strategic areas to the German defensive forces.

Thus, the first Slovak state in history accepted a self-imposed vassal status at its inception. This state enclosed almost all ethnic Slovaks within its boundaries. It comprised a territory of 38,116 km² with a population estimated by the Slovak National Bureau of Statistics on December 15, 1940 to be 2,635,564. Of that number c. 150,000 were Germans, 100,000 Hungarians and 100,000 Ruthenians. The Ruthenians, especially the Orthodox Greek clergy, formed a strong opposition to the Slovak state because Slovak public opinion continually urged the assimilation into the Slovak population of the Ruthenians. The c. 90,000 Jews in Slovakia were considered to be a separate ethnic group. They were totally excluded from politics and the professions; they were not permitted to hold weapon, driving, radio or other licences; they were not permitted to enrol in any secondary or tertiary educational institutions. They were entitled to receive only four years' elementary tuition at Jewish schools funded totally by Jewish money.

On June 30, 1940, in the city of Salzburg, the leaders of the Slovak state signed a political treaty with the Germans. On their return, they solemnly announced that Slovakia would become a National Socialist state in every respect and that in their endeavours to that end they would enjoy the full support of the German Reich.

It is well known that the Slovak State of its own volition deported Jews living in Slovakia. They argued that since it was the Jews who had most strongly supported the policy of Hungarianization, they had to get rid of them. It is unfortunate that a leading politician, *Dr. Jozef Tiso*, the Catholic priest who was later convicted as a *war criminal*, tried to adduce religious arguments to support these totally inhuman arrangements. He invented the concept of *Catholic nationalism*. It is incomprehensible why high-ranking dignitaries of the church in Slovakia should today be urging that this priest who was condemned as a war criminal be canonized.

The second Czechoslovakia

As a result of the involvement of the United States, the Germans and their allies lost World War II. But not all her allies were losers. Curiously enough Rumania and Slovakia paraded themselves ostentatiously on the side of the victors; Rumania because at the eleventh hour she had changed sides to the Soviet Union so that she could attack Hungary, while Slovakia



Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka of Slovakia and Ribbentrop,
Foreign Minister of Germany, in Berlin, on 24. 11. 1940

simply vanished. The Slovaks couldn't believe their luck that the victors resurrected Czechoslovakia and without reservation they again become good Czechoslovak citizens and, as required by the dictates of the time, good Communists.

Slovakia again become a part of Czechoslovakia, avoided being punished and labelled for her Nazi past and crimes and could bask in the glory of being on the side of the victors. The one-time National Socialists found refuge in the communist and democratic parties and were able to continue to this very day their policies of intolerance.

The resurrection of Czechoslovakia within its 1938 borders meant that the area of Northern Hungary, with its one million ethnic Hungarians, again become Czechoslovak territory.

In 1945 the Czechoslovak government proclaimed its infamous "Government Programme of Kassa" which declared the collective guilt of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia and regulated their punishment.

Laws were enacted on the forfeiture of citizenship and of the basic human rights of the Hungarians; they were forbidden to use their mother tongue, even in churches, their schools and their cultural institutions were closed down, their personal and their real property was confiscated, they were denied the right to work. Nearly 200,000 people were forced to leave



The second anniversary of the Slovak Republic. From left: Minister Medritzky, Prime Minister Tuka and President Jozef Tiso. Bratislava, 14th March, 1941

their motherland, thousands of Hungarians were confined to concentration camps, tens of thousands were compelled to obligatory domiciles, c. 50,000 civilians — men and women — were transported for several years' forced labour to the USSR. Further hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were forced to deny their nationality. The situation improved only after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Communist Party came into power at that time and changed the direct national oppression to a general political and ideological one. The intention to degrade the Hungarian minority has been built into the State policy of the one-party totalitarian system since the 1960-s.

Starting with the mid-seventies, attempts were made to put an end to the teaching of the Hungarian language in the remaining Hungarian schools.

The present situation

The Hungarians of Czechoslovakia expected the fall of the communist system at the end of 1989 to lead not only to the cessation of political and ideological oppression, but also to usher in an era of democracy and the improvement of the situation of minorities. But that has not happened. There were countless anti-Hungarian demonstrations in Slovakia in 1990 and in the spring of 1991; the Slovak government and the governmental

parties have made more anti-Hungarian statements and taken many anti-Hungarian measures.

One such measure was the Language Bill enacted on October 25, 1990. This prohibits the use of bilingual signs, the registration of Hungarian given names and the use of the Hungarian language in schools.

Every significant political party in Slovakia makes use of nationalism to ensure its popularity and power. This is what the government employs, too, to manipulate public opinion since it is unable to solve its economic problems. They claim there is not sufficient bread for all because the Hungarians eat it all. They have inundated the media with expressions of nationalistic intolerance and articles riddled with historical falsehoods. The Slovak media continuously slander the Hungarian government, accusing it of building up its armaments. Even the Head of State frightens the Slovak people with the possibility of war. All this laying propaganda is turning the Slovaks against their Hungarian fellow citizens.

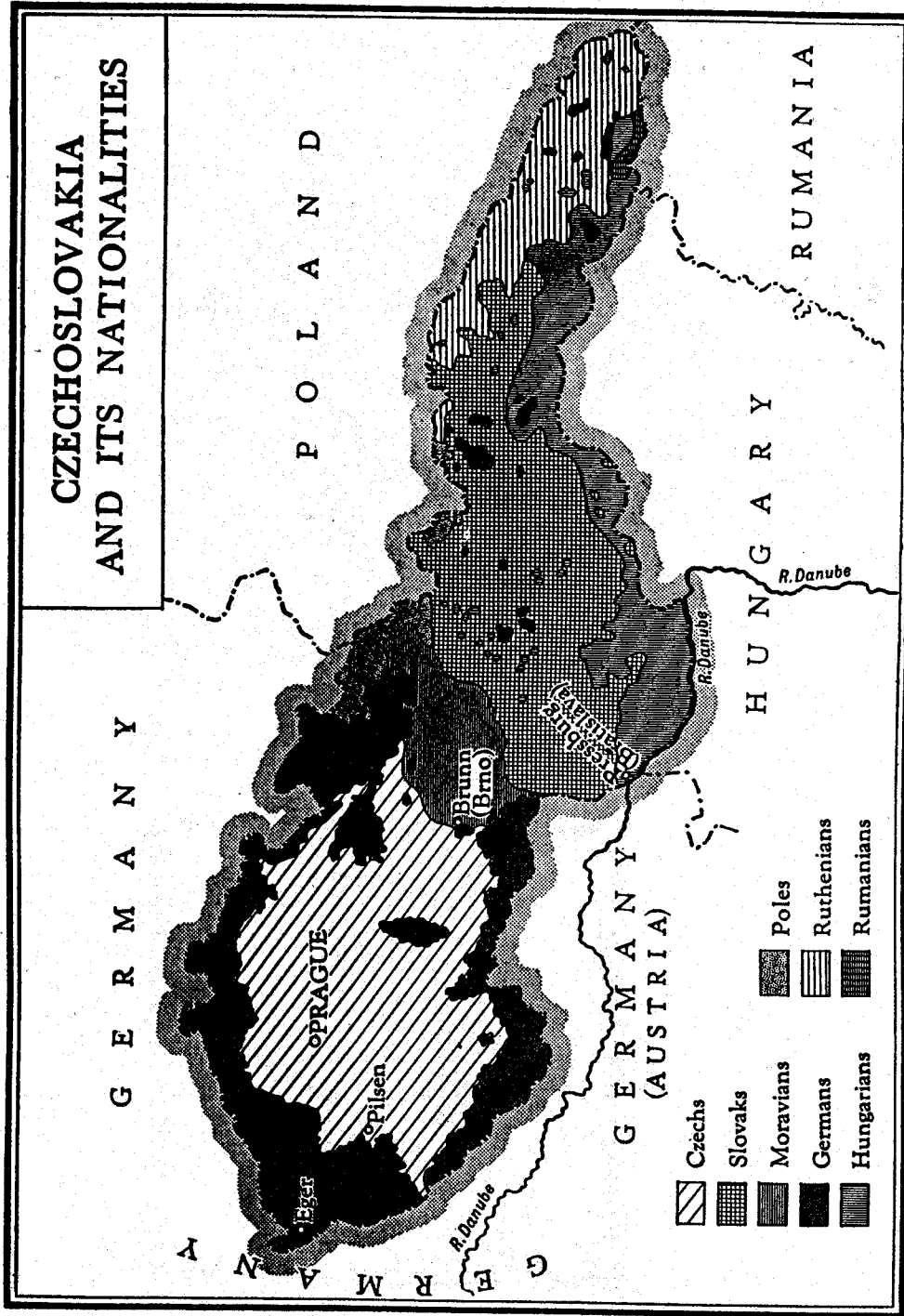
The average Slovak is not well informed concerning their own history and the politics and history of Central Europe, possessing only fragmentary and distorted pieces of information, and is thus unable to respond in a sound way to the current situation. As a consequence, against their will, Slovaks are contributing to a misguided and stunted development. Their attitude is distorted by paying too high a regard to the *nation state* idea and this hinders them from developing economic and other ties with their neighbours. They would like to keep the border completely sealed because it is their obsession that every contact between Hungarians on either side of it serves only to agitate for its revision.

They need the Hungarian territories and want to retain them at all cost, but they bear hatred for the population of those territories and since 1920 it has been their policy to liquidate them.

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Decisions of the great powers and declarations of the inviolability of borders are not sufficient to guarantee peace. Peace must reign in the hearts of peoples living in mutual understanding along the borders. Decisions have to be made not in the capitals but in border villages and on both sides of the border. The right to bring decisions belongs to those who have until now only suffered as a result of the policies of the great powers.

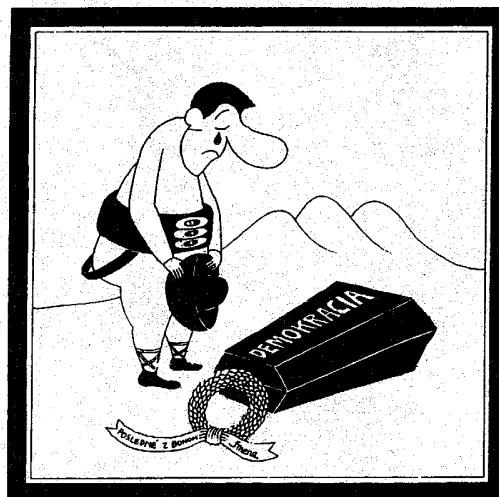
This is the message of the *future*; this is the message of *democracy*.



Map from "Czechoslovakia Within" by Bertram de Colonna,
Thornton Butterworth Ltd., London



Map from "The Lands Between" by Alan Palmer, Weidenfield and Nicolson, London



The last farewell

Cartoonist Marián Vanek depicts the departure of Slovaks from Czechoslovakia (Smena, Bratislava, Vol. 1, No. 1, page 1., January 14, 1993)