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**MASTER'S THESIS**  
**Religion, Conflict and Globalization**

**The Influence of the Wartime Slovak State on the Contemporary  
Nationalist Narratives in Slovakia**

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## **Abstract**

The Slovak state (1939-1945) was an authoritarian regime during which Slovak government collaborated with Nazi Germany and became complicit in the Holocaust. Since the World War II ended, both socialist regime of Czechoslovakia and later democratic Slovak Republic had different approaches to dealing with the heritage of the Slovak state. Especially democracy, with all its challenges, provided a fertile ground for different nationalist political parties and movements and even for the nationalist agenda of the Church representatives. Through symbols, metaphors and even references to that “glorious” past, they aim to alter collective national memory to seize or maintain the power. However, over the years their means of targeting as well as their targets adapted to the current national and global issues and found new “state enemies”. Additionally, Slovak history exhibits how easily people in power can switch ideologies and enemies, and how the idea of Christian nationalism is still to this day a force capable of mobilizing people in the name of fabricated national memory and national belonging.

## **Key words**

nationalism, memory, First Slovak Republic, Jozef Tiso, Catholic Church, minorities

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

*States are sustained by the ideas on which they were born.*<sup>1</sup> This statement attributed to Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk – the first president of the First Czechoslovak Republic that existed from 1918 until 1934 – could be considered a measure stick when evaluating firmness and longevity of a national identity and democracy. Under what conditions was the independent state of Slovakia born in 1939, and what were the main values that drove its formation? The answers to these questions may, to some extent, help answer the same questions, when posed to the present-day Slovakia. While for many people nowadays the current Czech Republic is seen as the inheritor of the First Czechoslovak Republic, the heritage of modern Slovak Republic is stained by the relics of memories and values mediated from the wartime Slovak State and its political representatives.

The period of the First Slovak Republic (1939-1945) is often referred to as a “controversial” time in the history of Slovakia. The Slovak state – only recognized by the Axis powers, i.e., Germany’s allies due to its existence being dependent on Nazi Germany – deported Jews and other “undesirable” inhabitants to Nazi extermination camps, built their own concentration camps in Slovakia, provided military supplies to Germany and adopted antisemitic laws in line with National Socialist ideology. Furthermore, leading political figures such as president of the First Slovak Republic Jozef Tiso and parties (Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party) at that time were closely tied to the Roman Catholic Church, which is predominant Christian tradition in Slovakia to this day. Despite these facts, ordinary people have different recollections of this period ranging from condemnation of the regime for being totalitarian and fascist to its justification for the greater good of the Slovak nation or tendency to blame Germany and ignore the crimes that happened within the Slovak borders.<sup>2</sup> Politicians, nationalist movements and even some church leaders use myth of the Slovak state and its figures intentionally in various ways to achieve their goals. Whether it is to gain popularity online and offline, undermine opponents and critics, or to generate dissatisfaction with “mainline” political parties, recollection of this historical period at public events and spaces or its deliberate concealment, where reflection is necessary, serves some purpose.

Memory can be a repository of valuable information and provide an account of many atrocities that happened in the past. It gives individual or collective warnings in order to prevent repeating past mistakes. On the other hand, creating intentional gaps in memory of people and practicing selective memory can easily distort collective identity and dignity of a nation and further perpetuate social cohesion and complicity with contemporary nationalist ideologies.<sup>3</sup> There are reminders of Slovak state still present in public spaces across Slovakia which bear witness to commemorative optimism and a deliberate or unintentional decision to

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<sup>1</sup> See Šimečka (my translation), *Medzi Slovákmí*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Judt, “The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Dagmar Kusá, “Memory Holes and the Democratic Project,” essay, in *Identities in Flux*, vol. XXII., 53-54 (Kritika & Kontext, 2018), 108.

promote a more convenient but at the same time untrue or at least incomplete version of history.

Whether it is in nostalgia for the significance and lost power of the Catholic Church, through annual commemoration of important dates by public figures that occurs either at historical sites or on social media, or in popular alternative media and among nationalist groups and individuals who keep spreading the myth of once highly prospering country led by strong and virtuous leaders, it is important to question these remnants of history because they might hint at the values Slovakia was built on and explain to what extent the identity of the next (or post-war) generations of Slovaks is linked to the period of the wartime Slovak state.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze how contemporary Slovak nationalist narratives and movements utilize and reinterpret historical events and figures from the First Slovak Republic to legitimize their ideologies and shape the contemporary collective national identity of Slovak people. I would like to identify the most prevalent references and interpretations of the wartime Slovak state among public actors and Church representatives and determine what influence they have had on collective remembrance of the past and formation of modern Slovak national identity. An integral part of this are also discourses and references to the First Slovak Republic by politicians who construct and utilize specific narratives, mental images of the past and nostalgia to manipulate people's opinions through their sense of national identity and memory. These claims, metaphors and myths are utilized to sustain power, justify political actions and gain public support at present and legitimize past collaboration with Nazi Germany. Finally, I am interested in how Slovak nationalist movements and political parties incorporate interpretations of the Catholic Church and its understanding of the Slovak State period and to what extent the Church contributes to the legitimization of nationalist ideology especially through referring to the legacy of main figures of that era.

## *1.2 Literature Review and Significance*

Over the past decades, historians – both Slovak and international – have devoted much time to thorough historical research into specific aspects and characteristics of the Slovak state, its main representatives, and the crimes they committed. The most comprehensive publication about the first president of an independent Slovak state Jozef Tiso was written by James Mace Ward.<sup>4</sup> In it, he portrays Tiso as dedicated to his Christian values and to improving living conditions for Slovak people. However, his entry into politics and his pursuit of a middle path tarnished his faith and original goals, regardless of how noble they may have been. Ward characterized Tiso as a “Christian national socialist” but emphasized that his efforts to combine Christianity with Nazi ideology proved fatal for him.

There were numerous academic articles written on historical events such as anti-Jewish policies enforced by Slovak State, deportations and numbers of victims as well as labor

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<sup>4</sup> James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

camps in Slovakia and the execution of Jozef Tiso.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, there are accounts of the demographic changes in the Slovak capital, antisemitism and ideological relics of Slovak state during the socialist regime and after 1989.<sup>6</sup> These articles prove that after the war Jews became an invisible minority, struggling with yet another series of obstacles that made their lives miserable. At best, they tried to blend in with the crowd and become invisible to state collaborators. Even though the fall of the regime in 1989 brought long-awaited freedom, that only received a public apology from the government in 2021.

From the point of view of political science, an important work is the monograph *Fascism*<sup>7</sup> by Slovak historian Jakub Drábik, which provides a comprehensive analysis of various forms of fascist ideology – its history, evolution and manifestations in various areas of life and across different geographical areas. A separate chapter is dedicated to fascist ideologies in Slovakia during World War II and nowadays. Drábik explains that the HSLS and Slovak state regime, despite their great sympathy for Mussolini, did not coincide with the definition of fascism, Nazis, nor clerical fascism especially until 1938. They were not revolutionary and radical enough, nor did they create a vision of a “new Slovakia” or “new Slovak person”. Tiso’s main goal was to maintain power of the Church and perhaps even the original social and cultural order rather than creating a new order and a new way of thinking that would be a part of a larger homogenous national unit. Slovak state also lacked an elaborate and fixed ideology which would control all political processes. Slovak regime was clearly authoritarian since HSLS was a state party with a monopoly, there was still a very limited political pluralism. Perhaps this confusion regarding the definition of the political establishment is the reason why the collaboration with Nazis and its repercussions are either not taken seriously or being overlooked completely by a segment of society.

Another important publication was written by Hana Kubátová, historian and political scholar. She argues that the authoritarian regime of the Slovak state could not thrive due to the nature of state’s leadership and be sustained only from above. This political establishment and ideology were successful equally because of the ordinary people who were silent when injustices were happening to their neighbors. Kubátová calls the ideology of the Slovak state inspired by Germany’s national socialism *Christian nationalism*. This “leaky or multicolored totalitarianism” that “did not require exclusive authority”<sup>8</sup> appears to be a softer version of Hitler’s Germany and therefore may easily be portrayed as rather innocent. However, this should not be an excuse to overlook the atrocities that took place most often through the reporting of ordinary people. This is how the abstract national socialist ideology was given concrete shape and form in the context of Slovakia. Drawing from the events of the past three decades of the democratic Slovak Republic, this “Christian nationalist” label would be very

<sup>5</sup> See Anton Hruboň, “Budovanie Kultu Jozefa Tisa,” [Building the Cult of Jozef Tiso] *Kultúrne dejiny*, no. 2/2017 (2017): 213–39; Peter Salner, “The Holocaust in Slovakia: The Deportation of 1942 through the Prism of Oral History,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5 (January 1, 2022); Milan Zemko, “Jozef Tiso – Patriot Či Zradca?,” *Soudobé Dějiny*, no. 3+4/2018 (n.d.): 366–76.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Salner, “Socialism and the Jewish Community in Slovakia,” *Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne* 20 (December 21, 2020); Peter Salner, “Anti-Semitism in Slovakia after the Velvet Revolution of 1989,” n.d.; Peter Salner, “Ethnic Polarisation in an Ethnically Homogenous Town,” *Czech Sociological Review*, The Relevance of Ernest Gellner’s Thought Today, 9, no. 2 (2001): 235–346.

<sup>7</sup> Jakub Drábik, *Fašizmus*. [Fascism] 1st ed. Bratislava: Premedia Group s.r.o, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Hana Kubátová, “Introduction,” in *Christian Nationalism, Nation-Building, and the Making of the Holocaust in Slovakia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 1–22.

appropriate when it comes to the populism, nature of electoral campaigns, and interference of religious representatives in political affairs.

Pavel Kosatík is a Czech journalist and writer focusing mostly on the history of Czech Republic. His also published a book about Slovakia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century *Slovenské století* (Slovak Century).<sup>9</sup> In the book, he concludes that Slovakia is a successful story of a country that transformed from an uneducated and apolitical nation to a sovereign democratic country. Although this book is written from a perspective of a Czech historian, it is rare in how it portrays Slovak political development in a positive light, especially considering that they had a worse starting position than the Czechs.

The wartime Slovak State is often described as a “controversial” period in Slovak history. There are many publications that clearly speak of collaboration with Nazi Germany, crimes against Jews, Roma and other minorities that were also affected by discriminatory laws, and documents confirming which individuals collaborated with the regime. At the same time, one can notice a great amount of obscurity on the part of the Catholic Church representatives, questioning or relativizing historical facts, excusing priests – including then President Jozef Tiso – who collaborated with the regime, or taking an ambiguous position on who was considered an “enemy” and who was an “ally” of Slovaks. These attitudes indicate that at least a part of Slovak society has not come to terms with its “clero-fascist” past.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical foundation in which this research is grounded is that of collective memory and nationalism. Memory is not an exact recollection of history as it happened, it is rather an account of the past influenced by a subjective understanding of events. In a collective sense, it is an abstract concept utilized by groups to construct an identity.<sup>10</sup>

Timothy Snyder distinguishes two types of collective memory - mass personal memory and national memory - in connection with the events of 20th century in Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania. Through these cases that are intertwined, Snyder demonstrates that there are several “truths” that can be opposing, yet valid at the same time because of the nature of memory, which is subjective and stems from the uniqueness of human experience even at a collective level. There were scholars who captured oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses of both Slovak state and communist regime. I have briefly mentioned them especially when it comes to the differences between expectations and reality of the Slovak Jews in the post-war period. However, for the purposes of this work, it is more important to focus on national memory, as this type of collective memory presupposes a certain degree of national consciousness - through some sort of political or cultural continuity based on myths, beliefs and prejudices - and intentionally works with it. “National memory is a means of organizing the past such as to preserve the dignity of the group with which we identify, and thus bolsters our pride as individual human beings.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, every nation tries to

<sup>9</sup> Pavel Kosatík, *Slovenské Století* (Praha: Torst, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Aleida Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49–72.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39–58.

invent a story of its origin to defend its existence and importance – being the victims of others, defending themselves righteously against enemies and winning, which seem to have nowadays mobilizing effect in finding voters and defining oneself against new enemies.

Paul Hanebrink also explains, through the example of Hungary, how religion can be utilized not as a “faith or a system of moral values”, but as the opposition towards Judaism and everything Jewish.<sup>12</sup> Both secular nationalists and Christians united against common enemy which was liberalism and capitalism represented historically by their Jewish population. Hungarian case points to a similar case in Slovakia both during World War II and in the present times, in which Christians and nationalists, despite different reasons, often work together against their common enemy. It also supports what Snyder said about *national memory* or history told through heroic stories and myths of centuries long continuity of tradition and defending against “barbarians” and how it can incite deep nationalist sentiments.

Additionally, Snyder mentions prioritizing “sovereignty over memory”<sup>13</sup> as a way of bridging personal animosities of these historically interconnected states. They had their own frictions but managed to overcome them due to an uncertain future and possible threats, for instance, in the form of Russia's imperialist tendencies that would jeopardize their individual sovereignty. This sort of sovereignty should be the goal for every confident and future-oriented nation, however, at times it seems that Slovakia is not entirely clear about its priorities.

When it comes to memory, it is important to also mention forgetting, as politically utilizing memory to achieve specific goals requires omitting other perceptions of reality recorded in the memory that contradict those goals. Ignoring the past through adopting victimhood mentality and blaming Germany for the crimes committed during the Slovak state regime was a common way to avoid feelings of guilt and responsibility in part of society. Furthermore, Slovakia has had a longer and more turbulent path to democratization among its neighboring countries among its neighboring countries.<sup>14</sup> In 2004, it suddenly surprised most of the world when it joined the EU and NATO structures after years of stagnation most of the 1990s. Even though there was no apology to Jews and Roma for war crimes, discrimination against various minorities persisted, and parties with authoritarian tendencies continued to win elections, the war crimes were ignored because confronting them was not necessary for the European integration. Since most of the Jews never returned home and minorities were never the priority of the political programs of any governing parties, except for two relatively small Hungarian parties, it was more comfortable to avoid the past. Slovak state became this distant vague memory that some people believed, or wanted to believe, was resolved during the communist regime.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Hanebrink, “Christianity, Nation, State: The Case of Christian Hungary” in *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe*, NED-New edition, 1, ed. BRUCE R. BERGLUND and BRIAN PORTER-SZÜCS (Central European University Press, 2010), JSTOR.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Nina Pulovičová, “The Unmasterable Past,” in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, ed. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, *The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 549–90.

This strong inclination towards building “a postwar national identity based on memory of victimhood and resistance, occluding from view difficult questions of collusion and complicity in anti-Semitic measures”<sup>15</sup> is particularly present among the church representatives and people whose families benefited from the regime. However, research has shown that it was rather the collective perception of the past, one’s social background and memories that are passed down from generation to generation rather than belonging to a specific economic class that influences how people view and evaluate the communist past.<sup>16</sup> I think this can be said about the attitudes towards the Slovak state as well. It was less about what people owned, but rather about what moral values and consensus about the state regime and who “our” enemies prevailed in each family.

These perspectives on memory and the relationship to the nation also point to the fact that among various societal groups – politicians, clerics, different ethnic minorities as well as ordinary Slovaks – memory, or rather forgetting, as well as the relationship to the nation, had a different function. Politicians and clerics were motivated by power and popularity, while ordinary people desired stability, which could also translate into seeking retribution and blaming others for the past injustices or present discontent.

#### *1.4 Methodology*

This thesis employs qualitative research methods such as content and document analysis as well as case studies from Slovak historical context. I have used printed documents such as political speeches, party manifestos, and pastoral letters for document analysis and digital content such as newspaper articles, social media posts, or broadcast material for content analysis. Case studies were also particularly important especially for understanding changing demographics in Slovakia after the war or how nationalist narratives are effectively spread among ordinary people.<sup>17</sup>

To grasp the underlying intentions, power dynamics and ideology in political speeches and manifestos as well as statements and letters by religious representatives, I will conduct critical discourse analysis. This method will help clarify potential continuities and discontinuities of nationalisms from the period of Slovak state to this day, and it will also expose the utilization of religion within national ideologies and political agendas. It can also prove valuable in demonstrating how national identity is constructed using reoccurring narratives – symbols, images, monuments, places, slogans – that gradually shape into a collective memory.

To see how the ideas and rhetoric of the Slovak state regime reemerged after the war and continue to do so today, it is important to first understand the core principles of the ruling party and its president as well as the socio-political context. Primary sources that I have used include some of Jozef Tiso’s speeches and correspondence between state and church

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<sup>15</sup> Stefan Berger and Bill Niven, “Writing the History of National Memory,” in *Writing the History of Memory*, ed. Stefan Berger and Bill Niven, 1st ed., Writing History (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 149.

<sup>16</sup> Attila Pók, “On the Memory of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe,” in *Writing the History of Memory*, ed. Stefan Berger and Bill Niven, 1st ed., Writing History (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 173–98.

representatives of the Slovak State and Vatican. These testify primarily to the nature of Tiso's beliefs about Slovak nation, its enemies and the importance of religion and demonstrate main priorities of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (*Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana*, HSL'S) when making decisions about the fate of the Slovak Jews. Another important primary source is Homeland Security Catechism (*Rodobranecký katechizmus*)<sup>18</sup>. Even though it was published in the 1920s, its author and founder of Homeland Security (*Rodobrana*) was Vojtech Tuka, who later became Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovak State. Therefore, it could be said that this set of principles was the ideological predecessor of the HSL'S and of Hlinka's Guards (*Hlinkova garda*, HG) – paramilitary organization maintained by HSL'S during the Slovak state.

From the period of the current Slovak Republic, there are statements made by government and church officials, mainly on social media platforms or online on newspaper and television websites. Most political parties, except for Marián Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia (*Ludová strana naše Slovensko*, L'SNS), were able to at least formally condemn the Slovak state, Tiso's policies and its devastating consequences. Nevertheless, they are an interesting subject of research because their statements about what Slovakia's main priorities should be, namely taking care of its own needs and well-being regardless of Russian aggression against Ukraine just across the border, are reminiscent of those from World War II.

## 1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This work, in individual chronologically arranged chapters, is devoted to various regimes in the territory of present-day Slovakia – the wartime Slovak State, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and finally the democratic Slovak Republic. The first chapter aims to lay the foundation for the most important historical events during World War II, which later became part of the process of searching for and (re)defining Slovak identity. Some historians say that different historical periods, state and social systems, and their societal impacts are incomparable because of their time specificity. The manner of verbal expression has also changed and is noticeable especially when comparing primary documents from the war period with today's rhetoric. However, it is obvious upon more detailed examination that these, at first glance, very different regimes have some similarities. Whether these are explicit references to the Slovak State or parallels in form of phrases, similes, myths, and themes that were characteristic of that time and were later repeated in public discourse. Certain continuity has prevailed in politics and in the Church, despite the generational change, and it is important to pay attention to these subtle signs in each period as they can be quite revealing when it comes to the nature of Slovak collective identity and memory.

First chapter focuses on President Jozef Tiso and HSL'S that was in the government throughout World War II and the entire duration of the Slovak state. Tiso's person combined a strong religious and political element. Moreover, by being from the moderate wing, he represented the "lesser evil" and therefore became the reason why his actions and opinions

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<sup>18</sup> Vojtech Tuka (my translation), "Rodobranecký Katechizmus" [Homeland Security Catechism], *Ústredie Rodobrany*, (1928).

were defended by many and even glorified by some. Nevertheless, the reach of his authority and the lack of self-reflection until the end of his life show that he was no better than his more radical colleagues. Equally important are the lukewarm reactions of the Catholic Church representatives to the events in the Slovak State, which in the end, despite some efforts from the Vatican, achieved nothing. The case of the Slovak State proves that the Catholic Church and the leading political representation were able to consolidate power and captivate a large part of the population with hostility towards people of a different ethnicity, nationality or race, who automatically became national enemies.

Second chapter is dedicated to the post-war period of Czechoslovakia from its transition to yet another authoritarian regime – socialism, with the goal of transformation to communism – under the control of the Soviet Union, and after four decades finally to a democratic country.<sup>19</sup> In this period, it is impossible to speak of any objective reflection of the Slovak state, its representatives and the crimes they committed. Socialism was not explicitly targeting Jews that decided to stay in Slovakia, but it was against the expression of any faith, so they were once again forced into a life of obscurity, or in some cases even renounce their religion completely like the rest of the population. The irony was that Christianity was not completely banned and just like during the Slovak State, part of the Church collaborated with the regime. Socialism turned many collaborators of Hitler's Germany into collaborators of the Soviet Union. Even though it might seem like a contradictory act, it only proved that intentions of many people were purely opportunistic. On the other hand, it turned those who did not submit to the regime into heroes, but many of their admirers often turned a blind eye to what these heroes did during the Slovak state.

The third chapter presents cases from the period of the contemporary Slovak Republic. There are politicians and organizations that utilize specific historical figures, monuments and ideas of the Slovak state as the true ideal of "slovakness" that Slovaks should strive for. This intentional use of partial and distorted facts and fabricated memories of the war period for power purposes, whether by political or church representatives, is not frequent but is still present. Although the most exposed nationalist-minded politicians do not explicitly mention the Slovak state, because they would not attract a wide spectrum of voters, one can still observe very similar attitudes and narratives as those of Tiso and HSL'S. What is also noticeable is the lack of self-criticism on the part of the Church and its leaders. This is also reflected in somewhat bizarre cases in which some priests blessed politicians from openly extremist parties or were unable to fully distance themselves from Tiso and other priests who happened to be wartime collaborators.

Regardless of how the regime of the wartime Slovak state is classified from a political point of view, Slovak history is a remarkable example of a continuity of several authoritarian features that seem to have become ingrained in the political culture enough that they have gradually became a national characteristic. Some academics claim that Holocaust would not have happened without the "innocent bystanders", some have used term "on-looker" to imply

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to state here that Czechoslovakia never fully transformed to the communist regime, although the ruling party was called Communist. Therefore, socialist and communist is used in this case interchangeably to refer to the regime of Soviet Union.

some more responsibility for those who witnessed these crimes but remained silent.<sup>20</sup> No matter how we decide to call them, the image of the silent majority – who may disagree but does not show sufficient resistance for various reasons – was present during Slovak state and Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and is still present today. Additionally, Catholic Church, although trying to calm the mood in society on the surface, has played a morally grey role by not being able to clearly name who is the real enemy of Slovakia (and Europe) in the past and today. The fact that there has been no deeper reflection in society and no clear position has been expressed by church authorities about what Slovaks did during the wartime state, who they are today, and where they are headed, is the reason why this topic deserves attention.

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<sup>20</sup> Hana Kubátová and Michal Kubát, “Were There ‘Bystanders’ in Topoľčany? On Concept Formation and the ‘Ladder of Abstraction,’” *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 4 (2018).

## 2. Slovak State (1939-1945)

### 2.1 Priest Against the Jews

Jozef Tiso was the HSL'S party leader since August 1938 and Prime Minister from the day Slovak state was established on 14 March 1939 until he was elected president (as well as the commander-in-chief of the Slovak Army) by the Slovak Parliament on 26 October 1939. He has been the most prominent figure in the history of Slovakia during World War II. He is often remembered for being both a priest and a politician, which is a rare combination, but no less for his highly publicized trial and subsequent death by execution. Details of his life have often been altered and exaggerated by politicians, historians and other groups of people to fit certain ideological agendas and historical narratives about Slovakia and its national identity. Memorial sites dedicated to Tiso, streets named after him or events commemorating his life and death are living testament to how much influence Tiso and his memory have had decades after his death.

To better understand why the person of Jozef Tiso still divides certain groups of society, it is necessary to devote space to his statements, fundamental decisions, and how the people perceived him at the time. At the end of his presidency, Tiso encouraged Slovak people to be loyal to the Slovak state while reminiscing about blissful and magnificent six-year period of their national independence along with cultural boom and socio-economic prosperity. This is one of the reasons why many people defended or at least were reluctant to criticize Tiso's politics. Collaboration with Nazi Germany had some economic benefits for the population of Slovak state. By 1943, there were railways and roads built, and electricity production greatly increased. Additionally, Slovak state became producer of ammunition and supplier of mineral resources and food for Nazi Germany. This was profitable as long as Germany was able to pay for the goods, but at the end of the war they owed Slovak State 7 billion Slovak crowns.<sup>21</sup> However, what is far more horrific are the human causalities tied to this economic profit.

Slovak Government and Tiso often made statements assuring the public and even Vatican that not a single Jew was murdered on their territory, however, that was not correct information.<sup>22</sup> Around 1.000 Jews had been executed by the Nazi troops and Hlinka Guard Emergency Units on Slovak territory by March 1945. While the transition from democratic Czechoslovakia to totalitarian Slovak state occurred without any noticeable resistance, Tiso and Slovak government eventually became responsible for laws against Slovak Jews and other ethnic minorities.

Regulations directed against Slovak Jews began gradually with prohibition of certain professions, but shortly after they became more extreme. Aryanization – the transfer of the Jewish-owned businesses to Slovak ownership – was in its preparation phase since the

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<sup>21</sup> Roman Pataj, "Tiso Židov Nechránil a Nepriniesol Blahobyt (5 Mýtov o Slovenskom Štáte)" ["Tiso Did Not Protect Jews and Did Not Bring Prosperity (5 Myths about the Slovak State)"], *Denník N*, March 13, 2016, <https://dennikn.sk/404421/tiso-zidov-nechranil-nepriniesol-blahobyt-5-myтов-slovenskom-state/>.

<sup>22</sup> In his last speech Tiso claimed that no one died the day Slovak autonomy was declared (October 6, 1938) within Czech Republic or the day Slovak State was established (March 14, 1939) as opposed to the 4th of April 1945 when the Red Army occupied Slovakia. In Jozef Tiso, "Posledný Prejav J. Tisu k Slovenskému Národu z Rakúskeho Kremsmünsteru," [The Last Speech of J. Tisa to the Slovak Nation from Kremsmünster, Austria] in Jozef Tiso - Prejav a Články (1944 - 1947) (Bratislava, 2010).

autumn of 1939. Both radical and moderate members of HSL'S were in agreement on the abolition of Jewish private ownership. Based on the regulation from 1940, more than 2.200 businesses were Aryanized which was the majority. In 1941, Slovak National Assembly issued *Decree 198/1941 on the Legal Status of the Jews – the Jewish Code* – which was signed by the government. It consisted of 270 paragraphs which included definition of Jewishness based on racial origin of the past three generations including the definition of a mixblood Jews who had to adhere to the same regulations. Jews in Slovakia lost their civil rights, they were excluded from all public matters, both socially and economically, and became second class citizens. Although Tiso's signature did not appear on the Aryanization laws or *the Jewish Code*, the following year Tiso (along with the prime minister and few other ministers) signed the *Constitutional Act No 68/1942 on the Resettlement of the Jews* which legalized deportations of Jewish population with the exception of doctors, pharmacists, veterinarians, engineers and other professionals the government may deem necessary to retain. Supporters of Tiso often claim that he prevented large number of Jewish people from being deported. However, based on the statistics of the Ministry for the Interior, he granted 577 directed and 251 indirect exemptions<sup>23</sup>. This means that even though presidential office received 20.000 requests, most of them were rejected.

There were no extermination camps in the Slovak Republic, which could have given the impression that Slovaks did not participate in the killing of Jews. However, there were three labor camps – Sered', Oremov Laz and Nováky – and several so-called “collection” camps that gathered people to eventually deport them to the extermination camps in Poland. By the time the Act on the Resettlement of the Jews was adopted, around 29.000 Jewish people had already been deported from Slovakia to the camps in Poland from the total of 57.752 Jews.<sup>24</sup> Overall, out of 90.000 Jewish people that had lived in the Slovak territory before the war 71.000 were murdered.

## 2.2 Ambiguity of the Church

During World War II there has been a continuous communication between Vatican's representatives and the leading political figures of the Slovak state about the “situation” of Slovak Jews. These records of communication are important primarily for understanding different attitudes towards Jews and the interpretation of the Christian faith. Since September 1940, Giuseppe Burzio – Vatican's diplomat in Bratislava – would regularly inform Vatican about position of the government and the reality of what was happening. Yet, he also stated that the priority was mainly to save “Christian” Jews.<sup>25</sup> Slovak bishops also wrote a letter to Tiso on behalf of “those Catholic families that were affected by *Decree 198/1941 [on the Legal Status of the Jews]*” from 9 September 1941”.<sup>26</sup> On one hand the letter mentioned that

<sup>23</sup> Eduard Nižnanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945* [The Politics of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Slovakia in 1938–1945], (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2016), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Salner, “The Holocaust in Slovakia: The Deportation of 1942 through the Prism of Oral History,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5 (January 1, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Ivan Kamenec, Vilém Prečan, and Stanislav Škovránek, eds., *Vatikán a Slovenská Republika 1939-1945. Dokumenty* (Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 1992), 65.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-66.

“the materialist theory of racism is in direct conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church on the common origin of all people in the one Creator and Father”<sup>27</sup>, however, the main reason was to emphasize the injustice imposed on Christian converts. In April 1942, bishops collectively criticized Jews who got recently baptized only to “receive temporary political or material benefits” instead of converting out of a deep conviction. Although they rejected brutal treatment that Jews had been submitted to in the past by other nations and considered it to be inhumane and contradictory to Christian values, they also emphasized malignant influence of the Slovak Jews on economic, cultural and moral domains. Out of despair, Jewish Community in Bratislava sent a letter to the Pope Pius XII. on behalf of all Slovak Jews (i.e. 90.000), confessing that their property and possessions were taken, and they were condemned to deportations and eventual death. They pleaded with the Pope to influence Tiso’s decision-making and prevent the deportations from happening. But the Pope’s response through letters did not have much impact.

### *2.3 Tiso’s Reputation at Risk*

Tiso walked on thin ice by defending anti-Jewish laws while simultaneously preaching the Christian faith. In one of his speeches, he claimed that “the social principles, interpreted by papal encyclicals, and the principles of national socialism are identical.”<sup>28</sup> This speech caused outrage and became the subject of further conversations between Vatican’s Cardinal Secretary of State Domenico Tardini and Slovak political figures. Tiso would later try to justify his words and at the same time soften their meaning, emphasizing that he only meant the social aspect of the ideology. Since Tiso was not only a representative of the state, but also as a priest, of the Catholic Church, some clerics believed that deportations would cast a bad light on the entire Church. Bishop Pavel Peter Gojdič<sup>29</sup> suggested in his letter to Burzio that Tiso should resign from his post.<sup>30</sup>

More clerics made appeals to Vatican to put pressure on Slovak government to stop with the deportations, while Vatican objected that they did everything they could. They also received false information from Slovak regime that deportations did not happen anymore to prevent Vatican from interfering. However, even the solutions by some representants of Vatican to members of the government would not grant Jews their freedom. According to them, Jews should not be deported to Poland where they would most likely die, but they should remain isolated in the concentration camps within the Slovak state. Many clerics simply argued that Jews should be separated from the people, not based on the “racial principle”, but based on “natural law”.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>29</sup> Gojdič was also known for saving Slovak Jews from deportations. See Peter Borza, “Beyond the Duties of a Bishop - Pavel Gojdič, Righteous among the Nations,” *Nasza Przeszłość* 138 (2022): 315–26.

<sup>30</sup> Ivan Kamenec, Vilém Prečan, and Stanislav Škovránek, eds., *Vatikán a Slovenská Republika 1939–1945. Dokumenty* (Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 1992), 124–126.

## 2.4 A Mythical Leader

To create a complete picture of Tiso, it is essential to look at what was written about him in his time and understand what narratives circulated about him. In a biographical book *Dr. Jozef Tiso* written by Albert Šimončič and Jozef Polčin that was published during Tiso's life in 1941, he is portrayed as a respectable, wise and brave leader in a very expressive manner. This publication serves as an example of how the story of the creation of independent state was part of a narrative that used ostentatious descriptions and biblical metaphors to conceal the crimes committed by the Slovak State and legitimized by Tiso.

The book also includes some of the speeches of Tiso in which he spoke of God's providence in unifying Slovak nation: "God has done great things through me [...] our Slovak nation has, after thousand years, its own rights, government, Assembly, and it is building its own state [...] there hasn't been a generation that was given such a precious gift as we have been given now."<sup>31</sup> What is even more ironic is the emphasis on Christianity and love: "our Slovak State wasn't born out of hate, but out of the great love towards our homeland [...] What needs to be removed from the previous suite, we will remove, not hatefully, fiercely, and crudely but in a Christian way".<sup>32</sup> This is a clear example of how Tiso tried to use the politics of memory and create a national memory from the story of the Slovak nation and its long-awaited independence. Furthermore, in his politics, he instrumentalizes religion for his political goals.

Despite his stylized and exaggerated speeches, there are historians who claim that Tiso was not a charismatic speaker. It is not entirely clear whether Tiso placed himself in this role of the national leader or there simply was not a better person for the role and these circumstances turned him into a leader. Nevertheless, Tiso himself as well as the Slovak state propaganda depicted him as "the father of the Slovak state".<sup>33</sup> Metaphors and expressive epithets addressed to him were also circulated among his critics. Among his opponents from the Communist Party and Democratic Party Tiso was known as Judas, Hitler's servant or traitor.<sup>34</sup>

His presidency lasted until April 1945 when he fled to the exile with other representatives of the Slovak state government where he spent his remaining years before the execution. Even from his exile he managed to impart his interpretation of the events to reassure people of the importance of Slovak autonomy and the righteousness of his actions. His title and former position of a priest might have made him even more capable to leave a long-lasting impression among common Slovak people.

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<sup>31</sup> Albert Šimončič and Jozef Polčin (my translation), *Dr. Jozef Tiso Prvý Prezident Slovenskej Republiky* [Dr. Jozef Tiso First President of the Slovak Republic], (Bratislava: Sváz slovenských kníhkupcov a nakladateľov, 1941), 86.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>33</sup> Anton Hruboň (my translation), "Budovanie Kultu Jozefa Tisa," [Building the Cult of Jozef Tiso] *Kultúrne dejiny*, no. 2/2017 (2017), 218.

<sup>34</sup> Milan Zemko, "Jozef Tiso – Patriot Či Zradca?," [Jozef Tiso – Patriot or Traitor?], *Soudobé Dějiny*, no. 3+4/2018 (n.d.): 366–76.

## 2.5 The Romani Holocaust

Jews are mentioned more often in any historical documents or publications on the topic of Holocaust. This may give the impression that they were the only discriminated ethnic group. However, it is important to mention Roma people especially because are still devalued and ostracized by the state and society today. According to the *Decree of the Ministry of the Interior No 18.635-1c/1940* from June 1940, “the term Gypsy is to be understood as a member of the Gypsy race, descended from it through both parents, who lives a nomadic or settled life, but avoids work.”<sup>35</sup> This very vague definition meant that many already assimilated Roma people could escape persecution by living a “typical” life of a white person. At the same time, it was also easy to classify someone as a “Gypsy” in case they were perceived as undesirable by the majority or someone with power and connections. Some of them also had to relinquish their possessions such as horses and wagons to avoid potential persecution for appearing as “nomads”. Furthermore, Romas were not allowed to travel by public transport, had limited access to public places, and were only allowed to enter towns and villages on specific days and hours. They were repeatedly subjected to humiliating body searches or night raids in their settlements.<sup>36</sup> These discriminatory measures against Roma, were often implemented by members of HG. In addition, the clergy were also not in favor of the Roma. For instance, Bishop Kmeťko described “Gypsies” as “culturally inferior” in his letter to Tiso.<sup>37</sup>

There were several work units and labor camps intended for “antisocial people” which in those times included Romas. They mostly exploited Romani men for the manual labor such as construction of dams, roads, and railway lines. One of the largest “detention” camps was in Dubnica nad Váhom, originally set up in 1942 as a work unit. Its capacity was 300 people but there were more than 700 people including 250 children arms factory. Due to catastrophic conditions an epidemic of typhus emerged in the camp. On February 23, 1945, under the pretext of transporting infected Roma people to the hospital, German soldiers took all these people to the local arms factory where they shot them and buried them in a mass grave. Exhumation, which was done not long after the war was over, proved that 26 bodies were buried in the grave, some of them were buried alive and died of suffocation.<sup>38</sup> When it comes to the total number of Holocaust victims among the Roma population, there are estimations that around thousand people were killed, however, the final number has never been given. This further proves that there was not enough effort and interest in investigating Romani genocide.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Pekár, *KOMENTOVANÉ PRAMENE K DEJINÁM SLOVENSKA 1939 – 1945 [ANNOTATED SOURCES ON THE HISTORY OF SLOVAKIA 1939 – 1945]*, (Košice: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, Filozofická fakulta, 2015), 75.

<sup>36</sup> Vladimír Kroc, “V Neděli Uplyne 80 Let Od Masakru Romů v Dubnici Nad Váhom. Jejich Osudy Stojí ve Stínu Představy Holokaustu, Míni Romistka,” [Sunday marks the 80th anniversary of the Roma Massacre in Dubnica Nad Váhom. Their Destinies Stand in the Shadow of the Image of the Holocaust, says Romist] Dvacet Minut Radiožurnálu, n.d.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

## 2.6 *Czechs and Other (Slovak) Enemies*

In April 1945, in his last public speech in Kremsmünster (Austria), Tiso spoke about fictitious Czechoslovak unity that is trying to seize Slovak nation through the world Bolshevik revolution. Living in exile with other representatives of Slovak state, he compared his fate to Jesus and his family who had to flee from the persecution of Herodotus and claimed that the Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš was installed into the office by the Bolshevik army.<sup>39</sup> Main enemies of the president, ruling party and proponents of an autonomous Slovak state were Czech political representatives and ordinary Czechs who were living and working in Slovakia at that time. Among the enemies were also Slovak citizens who supported the status quo of Czechoslovakia with a greater dominance of Prague and understood this arrangement as beneficial for the Slovak nation.

The Slovak State had to define themselves against Czechs especially given the two decades of their intertwined existence within the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) and relatively large Czech population living and working in Slovakia. They usually worked in state administration, judiciary, army, post office, healthcare, railways, police, but mostly in education. According to Slovaks who were less educated, Czech citizens brought “moral decay” and worldly ideas into very provincial, traditional and religious Slovakia. It was often the case that Czechs seemed to be ignorant of Slovak contexts or did not even try to speak Slovak language at school where they taught, which appeared as demonstration of “cultural superiority and supremacy”. However, employing Czechs had also its benefits as it contributed to building an educated class of Slovaks.<sup>40</sup> However, adherents of an independent Slovak state did not agree with this claim. Both radical and moderate wings of HSL'S demanded swift relocation of as many Czechs as possible to the Czech regions, even those who had lived in Slovakia even as long as two decades. Slovak autonomous government made an agreement with Czech government to deport 9.000 Czech employees working in public office from Slovak to Czech territory, however, by the end of the war only 542 Czech employees remained in Slovakia out of 93.143 Czech citizens that lived in Slovakia at the end of 1938.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.7 *From Trilingual to Monolingual*

The ethnic composition of society can have a great influence on nationalist expressions and hate speech. The example of Bratislava – the largest city within Slovak territory – also shows that stories about the historical continuity of one nation living in one territory over centuries are not entirely true, even if people who were responsible for the expulsion of other nationalities find this story convenient for the realization of their goals.

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<sup>39</sup> Edvard Beneš was elected president of Czechoslovakia from December 1935 until October 1935 following the Munich Agreement. From then he remained president of Czechoslovakia in exile throughout the World War II assuming his office again in April 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Valerián Bystrický (my translation), “Vystúhovanie Českých Štátnych Zamestnancov Zo Slovenska v Rokoch 1938-1939,” [The Emigration of Czech Civil Servants from Slovakia in 1938-1939] in *Od Autonómie k Vzniku Slovenského Štátu* (Bratislava: Historický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied., 2008) 185-186.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 184-185.

According to ethnologist Peter Salner, the decade from 1938 until 1948 was “the turning point in changing the ethnic structure and the production of polarity”.<sup>42</sup> Prior to World War II, Bratislava was known to be a “trilingual” city having an equal number of Slovak, German and Hungarian speaking inhabitants cohabitating peacefully. However, in the 1950 census, the number of Slovak inhabitants increased to 90% due to the repressive measures adopted by the totalitarian regime of the Slovak state. This was also reflected in rather frequent personal animosities displayed in public spaces. Inhabitants of the city either left voluntarily, or they were forced to leave because due to their losing their jobs and properties which were given to the people who worked for and supported the Slovak state regime.

There were also others, who would declare Hungarian, German or Jewish ethnicity in their private life or prior to the war, but during the war they changed their ethnicity by formally converting to Christianity, being christened or marrying a Christian person and changing their names.<sup>43</sup> However, as it was already mentioned, this did not automatically grant these people exemption or acceptance by the regime. This means that not everyone belonging to different nationality had to leave, but if they chose to stay, they had to resort to living in insincerity with their true selves.

## 2.8 *The Ideology of Hlinka’s Party*

HSL’S, the ruling party in those years, besides advocating for Slovak autonomy within Czechoslovakia, was also deeply rooted in Catholic clericalism. The only two party chairmen, Andrej Hlinka and Jozef Tiso, were also Catholic priests who sought to bring their Christian values to the people through politics. It can also be evident in its theological perception of the socio-political reality and dualistic worldview. In this esoteric cosmology viewed within the Slovak context, HSL’S represented all the positive, God-like (Christian) values while its opponents represented the evil or immoral ones.<sup>44</sup>

However, HSL’S was not a homogenous party. It was divided into two wings – moderate wing was represented by Jozef Tiso and leading figures in the radical wing were Vojtech Tuka (prime minister and minister of Foreign Affairs) and Alexander Mach (head of the paramilitary group Hlinka’s Guards). This division often plays a role in attempts to clear Tiso’s name since it was the radical wing that was ideologically closer to the national socialism implying that Tiso prevented more deaths and gave many exemptions. There is no doubt that the radical wing wanted to remove all the Jews from Slovak territory. Nevertheless, no matter of how pure Tiso’s original aims were, it does not justify the number of victims and the scope of damage already caused by the regime of his party and Slovak state which he was the president of. In his only letter to the Pope that mentions the stance of the Slovak state towards the Jewish population, Tiso declares loyalty and expresses gratitude to Germany for recognizing the autonomy of the Slovak state and helping them to eliminate their enemies – Czechs and Jews. He further reassured the Pope that Jewish and Czech inhabitants of Slovak state were thriving until their “unexpected and unfair” uprising against

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>44</sup> Anton Hruboň, “Budovanie Kultu Jozefa Tisa,” [Building the Cult of Jozef Tiso] *Kultúrne dejiny*, no. 2/2017 (2017): 213–39.

the Slovak republic at the end of August 1944. That was when they allegedly asked Germany – their protector – for help.

Despite the popular assumption that the politics of Slovak State and HSL'S was a highly anticipated answer to perpetual yearning of Slovak people for their sovereignty, it was not the case. Even Tiso himself admitted in his speech in November 1942 that “during the former Czechoslovak Republic, Slovaks never talked about state independence, nor did they fight for it. In the past, an honest Slovak was one who did not work for an independent Slovak state, because everyone was convinced that this would bring misfortune to the nation”<sup>45</sup>. It appears that the idea of Slovak independence became only important when HSL'S utilized it as their main mission and unifying element. The party was never highly popular within Czechoslovakia. In the 1935 Czechoslovakia's parliamentary elections HSL'S (as a part of the Slovak autonomous block) received less than 7% of votes in its last parliamentary elections until 1946. However, it appears that turning Slovak sovereignty into their main objective was what helped HSL'S people win in their Slovak “provincial” elections with HSL'S receiving 28.51% of votes.<sup>46</sup> This shows that the idea of the autonomy of the Slovak state began to take root among the people and became part of the story of Slovak national memory.

To get a more ideological understanding of the radical wing within HSL'S, it is perhaps worth examining what preceded it. In 1928, Vojtech Tuka wrote a document called Homeland Security Catechism (in original *Rodobranecký katechizmus*) that was a compilation of the ideas and responsibilities of Homeland Security (in Slovak *Rodobrana*), a Slovak paramilitary organization with ties to the HSL'S. In its own words: “The Homeland Security is to be the backbone of the great body of the Party, it is to fill the Party organism with the spirit of discipline and sacrifice.”<sup>47</sup> Although this organization existed only briefly from 1923 until 1927 when it was dissolved by the Czechoslovak Government, it can be seen as the predecessor of HG operating during the existence of the Slovak state. This document was published one year after its dissolution which suggests that this obstacle did not deter Tuka and his radical-wing colleagues, on the contrary, they planned to remain in power. At the same time, this document also shows that at that time they did not advocate for complete independence of Slovakia, i.e. separation from the Czech Republic, they only demanded a kind of partial independence within the common republic.

Homeland Security proclaimed values of unity, reciprocity, self-sacrifice and honesty, but on the other hand, it took a strong stand against external and internal enemies, even though it is not entirely clear who these enemies are. It even encouraged Slovaks not to trust people of other nations and not let foreigners to come and devour Slovak nation while Slovak people do not have bread, work, and land. A non-Christian person could not become a member of the Nation's Defense since its aim was to fight against those who spread secular and immoral views. The core ideas very much reflect defensive position of the Slovak state government towards the end of the World War II arguing that their greatest moral (and

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<sup>45</sup> Jozef Tiso, “Posledný Prejav J. Tisu k Slovenskému Národu z Rakúskeho Kremsmünsteru,” [The Last Speech of J. Tiso to the Slovak Nation from Kremsmünster, Austria] in *Jozef Tiso - Prejavov a Články (1944 - 1947)* (Bratislava, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Barry Leon Appleby, “The Relations between the Slovaks and the Central Government of the First Czechoslovak Republic 1918-1938” (Glasgow, University of Glasgow, 1975), 325.

<sup>47</sup> Vojtech Tuka, “Rodobranecký katechizmus” [Homeland Security Catechism] (Ústredie Rodobrany, 1928).

biblical) obligation was to love themselves first – as a nation – only then it is possible to love others.

In March 1943 – one day before the fourth anniversary of the Slovak State – Beneš addressed Slovak people from the exile. In his speech, he declared that Tiso's collaboration with Hitler threatens possible re-establishment of Slovakia in the future unstained by its wartime past. The Slovaks lost their reputation as a valuable partner because they betrayed their "brothers" the Czechs, as some Slovaks still like to call them, for the sake of short-term prosperity and, moreover, at the cost of great sacrifices. The following chapter will address how Slovak people dealt or perhaps did not deal with their past during the Soviet communist regime. However, the beginning of this four-decade-long period of Soviet rule inadvertently made Tiso a hero for some believers.

### 3. Czechoslovak Republic

#### 3.1 The Soviet Takeover

For a deeper understanding of the relationship of Slovaks to the church and to their nation, it is necessary to explain how the new totalitarian regime arose. The period of Czechoslovakia from the end of World War II in April 1945 to the so-called Velvet Revolution in the fall of 1989 differed in the way state power was exercised at different times. After the fall of Nazi Germany and the dissolution of the Slovak state, Czechoslovakia's fragile identity needed to reassert itself as a nation and the most viable path seemed to be turning to the Soviet Union for support. This acceptance of communist authoritarianism brought yet another wave of ethnic violence towards minorities and it prevented the process of dealing with past wrongs as well as achieving collective reconciliation after the war. Sovietization of Czechoslovakia did not bring the expected justice or equality often associated with communism, quite the opposite. Many people in leadership positions (especially in administration, culture and justice) lost their jobs and other privileges and their posts were soon filled by members of the communist party loyal to the Soviet regime. When it comes to the loyalty of some church leaders, the pursuit of mono-ethnicity, and the fear of persecution as a means of coercion, it can be said that Soviet socialism followed the regime of the Slovak state.

Košice Government Program<sup>48</sup> (*Košický vládny program*, KVP) adopted on 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1945 was meant to define the post-war organization of Czechoslovakia by creating *National Front* – an association of political parties in Czechoslovakia that would rule over Czechoslovakia. This program eliminated any opposition apart from the six political parties (four Czech and two Slovak) that were part of the Front. The real consequences of the KVP were strengthening of the Communist Party and orientation towards the Soviet Union and its Red Army, nationalization of industries and economy, “slovakization” (which meant also deportation of the German and Hungarian population) as well as punishment of collaborators of the previous regime.

After the war, Beneš returned from exile to his presidential office, where he remained until his resignation in June 1948. The victory of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the 1946 parliamentary elections only consolidated communist power – even though the Democratic Party won in Slovakia – which led to the resignation of 12 ministers from the government in February 1948. Subsequently, they were replaced by representatives of the Communist Party. This *coup d'etat* (of February 25, 1948) marked the definitive establishment of the Communist dictatorship.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Slovak city Košice appears symbolically in this name, as this agreement was reached in March in Moscow. In Martin Groman and Michal Stehlík, “Ako Si Komunisti Pripravili Pôdu Na Ovládnutie Československa. Mýty a Fakty o Košickom Vládnom Programe,” [How the Communists Prepared the Ground for the Takeover of Czechoslovakia. Myths and Facts about the Košice Government Program] *Denik N*, May 13, 2025, <https://dennikn.sk/4610650/ako-si-komunisti-pripravili-podu-na-ovladnutie-ceskoslovenska-myty-a-fakty-o-kosickom-vladnom-programe/?ref=share>.

<sup>49</sup> Ondrej Podolec, “Február 1948 Na Slovensku,” [February 1948 in Slovakia] *Február 1948*, 2018, <https://www.februar1948.sk/sk/februar-1948-na-slovensku/>.

### 3.2 From President to Martyr

Before the communists took power, during the partially democratic Czechoslovak government, the question of Jozef Tiso's future was looming across the society. Tiso's trial took place at the National Court in Bratislava and lasted 171 days.<sup>50</sup> During the process with Tiso, demonstrations occurred on both sides of the spectrum – those who were in favor of Tiso and believed in his innocence and those who believed him to be guilty. There was also an unconfirmed myth circulating among his supporters that President Beneš gave order to the Chairman of the court's senate to execute Tiso. This has never been proven along with many other interpretations of Tiso's last moments as witnessed by his fellow supporters and HSLS party members that aimed to carve Tiso into a brave martyr who fearlessly faced his undeserved sentence. After the verdict was read, Tiso was given the possibility to plea for mercy and according to the communist newspaper *Pravda* he stated: "I am asking out of moral obligation", implying that it is his Christian duty to ask for mercy rather than have his life taken away. Tiso never admitted to being guilty, rather, it seems as like at that point he accepted his fate. The last words Tiso wrote, only few hours before his execution on 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1947, were the following: "May the unity of the nation be purified by my sacrifice. I feel like a martyr for the Slovak nation and the anti-Bolshevik stance."<sup>51</sup> This suggests that he wanted to become a national hero and a martyr, and he would rather choose heroic death than plead guilty and lose this powerful momentum and many of his followers, but it could have also been his authentic conviction of his own righteousness.

Decision of the court to sentence Tiso to death resulted in conflicting views also among contemporary historians and lawyers. "It is often not so much about what the punishment will do to the person as it is about what it will do to society. The method of punishment should bring catharsis; people should feel that the right thing has been done."<sup>52</sup> This quote by Czech publicist Pavel Kosatík aptly characterizes the context of Tiso's death and its long-lasting impact on society. A significant part of society certainly had no peace of mind but rather felt that an unjust ordeal had been conducted. The main point of disagreement even among Tiso's critics was that his execution could potentially lead to the creation of cult or movement around his "sacrificial" death. Instead of that, Tiso could have spent remainder of his life in prison without an imminent social impact on his followers. However, these are only presumptions and given the context of the post-war trials across Europe and the immensity of the crimes committed during the Holocaust, some argue that Tiso's death sentence was reasonable. Slovak court was not the only one sentencing Nazi collaborators to death.

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<sup>50</sup> He was charged on multiple counts – a shared responsibility for the separation of Czechoslovakia, for liquidation of freedom and democracy and establishment of totalitarianism, for the active suppression of the Slovak National Uprising and for pulling of the country into war with Soviet Union and the West and for the involvement in the deportations of Jews. In James Mace Ward, Jozef Tiso: Kňaz, Politik, Kolaborant [Priest, Politician, Collaborator] (Slovart, 2013), 302.

<sup>51</sup> Tiso seemed to justify most of his action by his fight against the bolshevism or communism. His collaboration with Hitler was often perceived by his apologists as a lesser evil if not an outright good.

<sup>52</sup> Pavel Kosatík (my translation), "Spisovateľ Kosatík O Vzťahu Čechov a Slovákov: Ked' Niekto Kritizuje, Neznamená to, Že Sa Vyvyšuje," [Writer Kosatík on the Relationship Between Czechs and Slovaks: When Someone Criticizes, It Doesn't Mean They're Exalting Themselves] Denník N, March 7, 2025, <https://dennikn.sk/4506767/spisovatel-kosatik-o-vztahu-cechov-a-slovakov-ked-niekto-kritizuje-neznamena-to-ze-sa-vyvysuje/>.

However, the fact that a priest was executed had a greater impact on the emotions of the people and a kind of unofficial nationalist “cult” eventually originated from his legacy.

### 3.3 Antisemitism Post-war

Based on the accounts of the Jewish survivors living in the post-war Czechoslovakia, there was a great disillusionment with the new regime, since many saw Soviets as their “liberators” from Nazism or fascism and they might have even fought with communists on the same side in the Slovak National Uprising. However, due to KVP, they often had to resort to “wearing a mask”. Jewish Slovaks that survived Holocaust had to face another upsurge of discrimination when they had to prove that they were neither Germans, nor Hungarians. Furthermore, many religious communities disintegrated due to migrations to Israel, while others that stayed decided not to profess their faith publicly and some even got baptized to become invisible. Families were often reorganized and mixed marriages became more common as they also enabled Jewish people to blend in. Furthermore, there was “the disruption of intergenerational continuity” as many survivors wanted to protect their children by not revealing to them their Jewish ethnicity while others did not want to burden their children with their painful memories and kept to themselves. This *strategy of forgetting*<sup>53</sup> resulted in Jewish people rejecting or being unaware of their traditions and the Jewish community narrowing down.

What was particularly difficult was the feeling of persistent paranoia because it was not entirely clear who was the enemy – neighbors who had taken Jewish properties and estates, those who had guilty conscience about how they had treated Jews during the previous regime, or whoever wanted to improve their position within the Communist Party. Although experiences of Jewish people differed and some appreciated social security, negative aspects significantly prevailed.<sup>54</sup> Cases in which original (Jewish) owners were denied their furniture, valuables or even a winter coat occurred in every Slovak village that they returned to after the war. Hatred towards Jews often resulted in physical attacks and pogroms.

The worst pogrom occurred in Topoľčany in September 1945. Prior World War II, there was “multicultural” atmosphere and people from different ethnic backgrounds had generally good relations among each other. Jewish people had owned businesses, and they had been an integral part of the town’s life. That is why some of the Jewish survivors called their former neighbors “turncoats” since their attitudes changed from friendly to hostile almost overnight. From 3.000 Jewish inhabitants – which was about a third of the total population – that had lived in Topoľčany before the World War II, about 550 survived and returned only to realize that their large properties were stolen by local people or “given” to the poor people and 18% of the Jewish businesses were Aryanized, while the rest were liquidated.<sup>55</sup> Inhabitants of Topoľčany suddenly felt like these Jewish survivors became a threat to their newly improved

<sup>53</sup> Peter Salner, “Socialism and the Jewish Community in Slovakia,” *Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne* 20 (December 21, 2020), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Salner, “Socialism and the Jewish Community in Slovakia,” *Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne* 20 (December 21, 2020), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Hana Kubátová and Michal Kubát, “Were There ‘Bystanders’ in Topoľčany? On Concept Formation and the ‘Ladder of Abstraction,’” *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 4 (2018).

living standards and possessions they claimed their rights to. As a result, they began spreading rumors about the Jews. There were allegations that the Jews planned revenge against Christians, participated in illegal businesses and had better living standards than others. Supposedly, they did not want to engage in ordinary work, they worked in higher positions, and they were better dressed. Some sources also say that they had food rations from the Allies. An often-cited example is that the locals did not like to see a Jewish child with chocolate or nuts on the street.

The situation escalated and violent riot broke out due to accusations made by mothers that a Jewish doctor Dr. Berger was poisoning Christian children through vaccination. Hundreds of residents and people from the countryside ran through the city attacking every Jew they met. Some of them even broke into their apartments. During the first military intervention, several soldiers joined the attacking mass. After the pogrom, 47 people were left injured in the city. Although almost 40 criminal charges were filed against the pogromists, there is not a single mention in the archives that any of them resulted in a proper trial. Most of the accused defended themselves by saying that they were led to the attacks by rumors.<sup>56</sup> This misfortune caused the Jewish community to permanently move out of the town. Furthermore, it took 60 years for inhabitants of Topoľčany to formally acknowledge this crime and apologize which only confirms that during socialism, the war crimes of the Slovak state were not thoroughly clarified and settled. It came late, but it is still one of the few acts of regret for the crimes committed during this period.

### *3.4 Persecutions*

The 1950s and early 1960s were the most brutal times of the communist regime characterized by political trials and persecutions of people from all social classes and professions. During this period alone, more than 71,000 people were wrongfully convicted in Slovakia. A large part consisted of wealthy and politically active citizens (before February 1948) who were among the “defeated classes” as well as members of churches. However, small businesses owners that belonged to the middle class, resistance fighters from World War II and even some communists, who did not conform to the official policies dictated in Moscow, were also subjected to trials.<sup>57</sup> Unlike the Slovak state regime, which was founded on strict principles reminiscent of religion, the absurdity of the communist regime was manifested in a formal and superficial loyalty to the system. This was also reflected in the fabricated trials, where often the orthodox communists themselves ceased to be convenient for Moscow's power goals.

Initially, the ideological motive for the investigation and conduct of these trials was the fight against so-called bourgeois nationalism. This term basically meant that any national interests were elevated above the interests of the Soviet bloc. Based on the example of the

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<sup>56</sup> Dušan Mikušovič, “Čo urobí fáma s davom: Topoľčiansky pogrom proti Židom v septembri 1945,” [What a rumor will do to a crowd: The Topoľčany pogrom against Jews in September 1945] *Denník N*, September 23, 2015, <https://dennikn.sk/248692/co-urobi-fama-davom-topolciansky-pogrom-proti-zidom-septembri-1945/?ref=share>.

<sup>57</sup> Branislav Kinčok, *Politické procesy na Slovensku v rokoch 1948 - 1954*, 1st ed. (Ústav pamäti národa, 2019) 63.

accused former general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czech Republic, Rudolf Slánský, in his process he confessed to activities such as “serving American imperialists”, “conspiratorial espionage activity”, or orchestrating “fascist dictatorship”.<sup>58</sup> Although Slánský was a Czech native and Slovak trials never reached such an amount of international coverage, it is important because it shows how reality was often distorted in such a way that it was not clear whether something was true or false. “In the case of communist officials, everything was never completely made up, and there could always be a grain of truth that was subsequently distorted and adapted.”<sup>59</sup> The death of Stalin and of the first party president of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, in 1953 marked a gradual softening of the brutality of the communist regime, even though political trials never completely disappeared. Slánský and another eleven of the fourteen defendants were of Jewish origin, which was ultimately the reason for their execution. The remaining three defendants received a life sentence. This case was ultimately based on antisemitism and inevitably caused fear in the Jewish community and a wave of anti-Semitic sentiment.

### 3.5 Church Collaborators

Although the Communist Party and its ideology were inherently atheistic, it was crucial that in a country where the Catholic Church held a significant position (as could be observed especially during the period of the Slovak State) the government power had the clergy under its control. At first it was via Catholic Action (*Katolícka akcia*) that was established in 1949. Its aim was to strengthen the Cyril-Methodist tradition in Czechoslovakia, introduce Slavic worship, and prevent the clergy from having contact with the Holy See. The founding conference formally proclaimed loyalty to the Catholic Church and obedience to the church hierarchy, but at the same time protested any orders from abroad. It was supposed to look like a spontaneous movement; however, it was an obvious attempt to create a “national” Church. Church authorities issued a pastoral letter in which they disagreed with the influence of the Catholic Action, which resulted in many incidents where believers defended their priests. According to a report by the Commissioner for Justice, about 22.000 to 25.000 people participated in these riots.<sup>60</sup>

Catholic Action soon ceased to exist due to many riots, however, communists continued to look for ways to take over the Catholic Church. The following year priests who were interested in collaboration with the state began to form Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy (*Mierové hnutie katolíckeho duchovenstva*, MHKD). Some priests initially joined the

<sup>58</sup> (my translation) “Kdo Jinému Jámu Rudolf Slánský,” [To Another Pit Rudolf Slánský], YouTube, June 26, 2025, <https://youtu.be/JY6hzqfMhLA?si=4tqvLf0i28V7kuZ->.

<sup>59</sup> Branislav Kinčok, “Za Oddanosť Režimu Dostal Rudolf Slánský „štátnu Kravatu“. Predtým Aj Vďaka Nemu Skončila Na Šibenici Milada Horáková (Rozhovor),” [Rudolf Slánský Received the "State Tie" for His Loyalty to the Regime. Milada Horáková Was Also Gallowed Thanks to Him (Interview)] Aktuality.sk, December 3, 2022, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/B2vVCz7/za-oddanosť-rezimu-dostal-rudolf-slansky-statnu-kravatu-predtym-aj-vdaka-nemu-skoncila-na-sibenici-milada-horakova-rozhovor/>.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Garek, “10. Jún 1949 – Založenie Štátnej Katolíckej Akcie,” [June 10, 1949 – Founding of the State Catholic Action], Ústav pamäti národa, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/10-jun-1949-%E2%80%93-zalozenie-statnej-katolickej-akcie/>.

association with the aim of gaining benefits for the church, but ultimately this strained their relationships with church leaders, who did not side with the regime and remained loyal to the Vatican. Ultimately, these priests from MHKD only gained functional and financially benefits for themselves. Representatives of the communist regime thus succeeded in breaking the unity among the priests and at the same time spreading ideology among the believers.

Association of Catholic Clergy *Pacem in Terris* (PIT)<sup>61</sup> was established in August 1971 as a way of controlling the church by the Communist Party under the guise of a "peace movement". It was a continuation of the communist interventions and efforts to subjugate church structures from the period before the Prague Spring. PIT strongly resembled Communist Party since it had its own chairman, district and regional committees, and held national conventions every five years. The main mission of PIT was to limit foreign migration and to provide a platform for the activities of clergy that supported state socialism. Even though the membership in this association was not compulsory, priests were still pressured to participate in its events. It is estimated that at least one fourth to one third of all priests in Czechoslovakia were involved in *Pacem in Terris*.<sup>62</sup> In March 1982, Pope John Paul II issued the *Quidam Episcopi* decree that prohibited priests from direct involvement in any organizations that support political parties and anti-church regimes.<sup>63</sup> Pope's disapproval with the movement was a strong impetus for many priests to leave and predicted its end. Nevertheless, some priests remained in it and kept protesting various anti-regime actions such as the Candle Demonstration until December 7, 1989, when the organization officially ceased to function.

### 3.6 Dissent

An opposition to PIT, the underground "illegal" Catholic movement had a strong base during the communist regime, and it gained respect and moral authority of the public. One of the most significant acts of resistance towards Soviet repressions in Czechoslovakia was the Candle Demonstration that took place on 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1988 in Bratislava. Based on various sources between 2.000 and 3.000 people came, however, even more were gathered in nearby streets.<sup>64</sup> It was organized by people from underground and persecuted Catholic groups who considered it necessary to express their position on the regime through this demonstration for religious freedom and human rights. An important aspect was the demand for human rights, which made this event not only religious, but it also assumed much greater, civic significance. During the manifestation there were no speeches or banners, people expressed

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<sup>61</sup> The name *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) was derived from the papal encyclical of the same name on "establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and liberty" issued by Pope John XXIII on 11 April 1963. This new name was meant to help the movement distance itself from the criticism MHKD had received in the past and appear more credible and in line with the Pope.

<sup>62</sup> Jozef Haľko, Komunizmus a Cirkev Mierové hnutie katolíckych duchovných a Združenie katolíckych duchovných „*Pacem in Terris*“ [Communism and the Church The Peace Movement of Catholic Clergy and the Association of Catholic Clergy “*Pacem in Terris*”], [http://www.uski.sk/frames\\_files/ran/2005/ran-2005-1-01.pdf](http://www.uski.sk/frames_files/ran/2005/ran-2005-1-01.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>64</sup> “Sviečková Manifestácia,” [Candle Manifestation] *Čas-opis* 1989, <https://1989.sng.sk/svieckova-manifestacia>.

their disapproval of the regime by praying in silence and holding candles. Even though the protest was quiet and peaceful, the state police used water cannons and dogs to disperse protesters. In addition, some notable Catholic activists such as Ján Čarnogurský or František Mikloško were arrested and interrogated for hours.<sup>65</sup>

Just as there was an abrupt change in the beliefs of some people during the transition between the Slovak State and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, similar cases occurred during the overthrow of the communist regime and the transition to a democratic republic. That is why the case of Ján Čarnogurský, who as a lawyer represented religious activists and political dissidents and was imprisoned during the Velvet Revolution, is an interesting one. In 1987, he initiated *Declaration on the deportations of Jews from Slovakia* together with 23 other dissidents.<sup>66</sup> It was the first official statement, although distributed only illegally, that expressed regret for the crimes of the Slovak state and apology to all the relatives and descendants of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.<sup>67</sup> As soon as he was released from prison, he entered politics as part of the political movement Public Against Violence (*Verejnosc' proti násiliu*, VPN) which consisted of civil activists, artists, scientists, students active during the Velvet Revolution. In 1990, he established political party Christian Democratic Movement (*Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*, KDH) which still exists to this day<sup>68</sup>. In early 2000s, his originally democratic stances began to shift towards defending all Russian policies, highlighting Russia's ability to defend itself against "imperialist American policies". He was also an initiator of the petition against Slovakia's membership in NATO, which he compared to the Slovak state's vassalage to Germany during World War II.<sup>69</sup> This rhetoric resembles that of communist collaborators, not a dissident who fought against and was imprisoned by this regime.

### 3.7 Rebirth of Nationalism

When the euphoria after the fall of the Soviet subsided, the new wave of nationalism emerged simultaneously with disagreements about the official name of the new democratic republic as well as the official language. Discussions on whether the new country should be officially named Czech-Slovak Federal Republic or Czechoslovak Federative Republic were very emotionally heated and later they were referred to as "hyphen war" in the media.<sup>70</sup> In the end it was decided that the official name would be Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and this name was in place until the Slovak Republic was established on January 1, 1993. These disagreements eventually led to the split of the two countries.

In January 1992, according to a survey by the Center for Social Analysis, 77% of Slovak citizens expressed their support for preserving the common state and only 11% were

<sup>65</sup> Filip Vačko, "Ján Čarnogurský. Najprv Disident Proti Komunizmu, Dnes Bojovník Proti Liberalizmu," [Ján Čarnogurský. First a dissident against communism, today a fighter against liberalism] Týždeň, 2020, <https://www.tyzden.sk/spolocnost/69051/lesk-a-bieda-disidenta-carnogurskeho/>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In 1990, the National Council adopted this Declaration unanimously as well.

<sup>68</sup> He served as Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic from April 1991 to June 1992.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Martin M. Šimečka, *Všetko Malo Byť Inak: Slovensko Po Roku 1945* (Centrum environmentálnej a etickej výchovy ŽIVICA, 2020).

in favor of partition. At the same time, 61% of Slovak citizens were convinced that they were “paying the price” for the Czechs.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, it was estimated that if a referendum had been held and had it been valid, the majority in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia would have voted in favor of preserving the common state. Since the federal constitution only allowed the division of Slovakia based on a referendum, Mečiar and Klaus – as Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Czech Republic respectively – bypassed the law by enforcing the constitutional law on partition.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Among the Czech citizens, 91% were for preserving of the common republic and only 6% were against. However, 61% of Czechs also believed that they “pay” for Slovaks. In Marián Balázs, “Ako to bolo s rozdelením Československa,” [How went the division of Czechoslovakia?] *Denník N*, August 9, 2017, <https://dennikn.sk/875084/ako-to-bolo-s-rozdelenim-ceskoslovenska/?ref=share>.

<sup>72</sup> For instance, Martin M. Šimečka, an author and a well-known critic of the communist regime who was also one of the members of VPN, believes it was inevitable due to the persisting feelings of neglect from the side of the Slovak people by the Czechoslovak government seating in Prague and consisting mostly of Czechs not fully understanding Slovak demands and concerns and not treating them as equal partners in the federation. In Ján Štrasser and Martin M. Šimečka, *Život Na Tekutých Pieskoch: Rozhovory S Martinom M. Šimečkom* [Life on Quicksand: Conversations with Martin M. Šimečka] (Bratislava: N Press, 2024), 173.

## 4. Slovak Republic (1993 - present)

The period of independent Slovakia is also the beginning of Slovak nationalism, when Slovak citizens can no longer rely on Czech or blame them for their discontent. For the first time, Slovaks can freely express themselves on the topic of the Slovak state, the crimes of their ancestors, or their own collaborationist past. Whether they do so and how they confront discriminatory statements and actions similar to those that appeared during totalitarian regimes will also determine their further development.

### 4.1 Mečiarism

In the history of independent Slovakia, 1990s are associated with mafia, drugs, and “mečiarism” – the style of governance that was characteristic of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. He was mostly known for asserting absolute legitimacy of the winning party, in this case Movement for Democratic Slovakia (*Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko*, HZDS), and his populist rhetorics targeted against the opposition, media and minorities. Mečiar verbally and sometimes even physically attacked journalists who questioned or criticized his political machinations. This improper behavior was also adopted by HZDS supporters, who were known for their hostile and even aggressive defending of their leader.

Mečiar was an example of how some people, despite collaborating with the communist party, rose to power even after the fall of the regime. From a leading legal position in a glass company, when it suddenly became clear after the general strike that the regime would fall, he switched sides and left for VPN. Its founding members - students, artists, environmental activists - overthrew the Communist Party but they were not interested in becoming politicians, especially after 40 years of totalitarian rule and general distrust of political establishment and its structures. Since they did not have any experience with choosing candidates for political positions, they chose Mečiar for the position of Minister of the Interior since he seemed to be the most capable. According to other former members, he “knew everything” and was an exceptionally gifted speaker. However, it soon became clear that Mečiar’s knowledge of “things” had a damaging side. According to Fedor Gál, one of the founders of VPN, Mečiar “misused confidential information to blackmail and manipulate people,” and secretly built his support base inside the VPN, which later developed into the HZDS.<sup>73</sup>

In March 1994, President Kováč in his first report on the state of the republic dared to criticize Mečiar from his representative position: “Many point to the autocratic way of governing the Prime Minister. Anyone who expresses a different opinion, a different position, is gradually disloyal, lacking solidarity and ultimately a traitor. The conflict in the ruling party has, unfortunately, spread to the entire society.” Kováč further expressed his “serious reservations about the style and ethics of Mr. Mečiar’s political work, his way of governing”

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<sup>73</sup> Mečiar (*The Lust for Power*), documentary (Asociace českých filmových klubů, 2017).

and admitted suspicion of attempts to discredit him and prematurely remove him from office as president.<sup>74</sup>

Mečiar was dismissed from his position of the Prime Minister twice. Perhaps the greatest evidence of his authoritarian ambitions was the so-called Slovak “Night of Long Knives”, which took place in November 1994. During a parliamentary session that lasted almost 23 hours continuously, coalition took over all the departments and parliamentary committees that normally belong to the opposition parties and secured its majority there. In addition, Mečiar’s government also took control of the entire state as the coalition managed to dismiss the Council of Slovak Television, the Council of Slovak Radio, the chairman and vice-chairmen of the Supreme Audit Office, and the Prosecutor General overnight. Overall, 38 people were dismissed from important state positions, while representatives of the HZDS, Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana*, SNS), and Union of the Workers of Slovakia (*Združenie robotníkov Slovenska*) took their places. Despite this, Mečiar managed to retain the favor of the people who supported and voted for him. It seemed as if by taking these unconstitutional steps he seemed even more invincible and appealing for HZDS won parliamentary elections four times, although in 1998 and 2002 it was unable to form a government.

In 1997, director Mário Homolka captured the atmosphere when Vladimír Mečiar was at the peak as the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic.<sup>75</sup> His short documentary film named Natives (*Rodáci*) begins with a mass in honor of Jozef Tiso served outside on the street in the presence of several dozen senior citizens. The place of the mass was in Bratislava, as one woman explains that they are next to the wall behind which the gallows stood. In the presence of a gilded bust of Tiso, candles with the Slovak emblem and the motto of the HSLSS “True to themselves, unitedly forward!”, believers recall the events surrounding Tiso’s execution, resembling how Christians recall the events associated with the crucifixion of Christ on Easter. After the mass statements by participants were made saying that Tiso being falsely sentenced to death by Lutherans, while some else said that “criminals are heroes, while real martyrs are called criminals”.

The documentary also shows a scene from a protest for the state language law<sup>76</sup>, where several hundred people from different cities with HZDS banners are gathered in front of the Slovak Parliament and at one point they are shouting, “long live Mečiar”. A moment later, angry protest participants complain about Hungarians who are allegedly causing trouble. The Hungarian minority has been the most numerous in Slovakia, which is why it became the object of verbal attacks by nationalist parties, especially SNS. Strong anti-Hungarian rhetoric associated with historical grievances was characteristic of the SNS, especially in the 1990s and 2000s. These militant and xenophobic statements did not have to reflect real aspirations of SNS or the government, but it was enough to rouse crowds of people who were naturally angry at the high crime rates or economic inequality after the transition from the equality

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<sup>74</sup> Michal Kováč, “Správa o stave republiky,” [Report on the state of the Republic] SME, September 3, 1994, <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/20346142/sprava-michala-kovaca-ktorou-polozil-vladu-vladimira-meciara.html>.

<sup>75</sup> One year later, his HZDS party, despite winning in the parliamentary elections, for the first time did not manage to form the government.

<sup>76</sup> Rodáci [Natives], 1997, <https://www.tyzden.sk/filmy/4/rodaci/>.

artificially maintained by the Soviet regime. Suddenly, it was Hungarians living in Slovakia who were responsible for people's discontent.

#### 4.2 Neo-Nazis and Neofascists

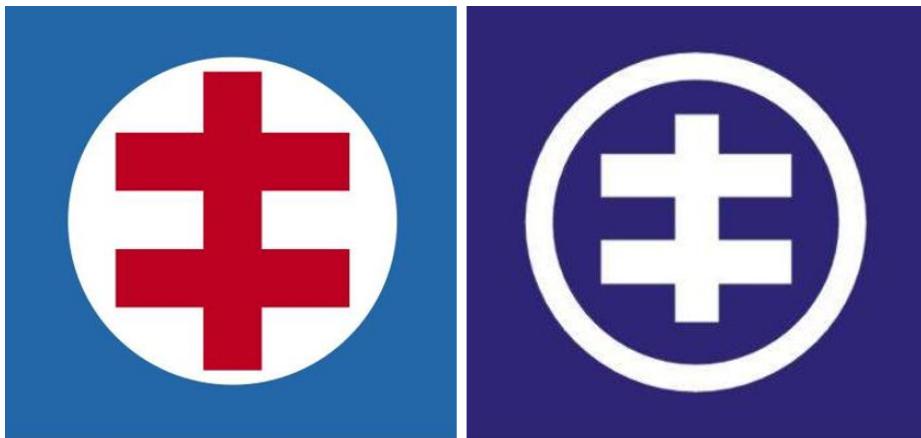
In 2010, Marián Kotleba established a political party also known as Kotlebovci, or Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia (*Ludová strana Naše Slovensko*, L'SNS). This party was a continuation of Kotleba's preceding civic activities and his civil society group Slovak Togetherness (*Slovenská popolost'*, SP) which was dissolved by the Supreme Court for its anticonstitutional stances after registering as a political party in 2005.<sup>77</sup> Kotleba was also accused of several crimes, for instance when he was distributing flyers with slogans "antisocial gypsy parasites" or when he used Slovak version of a Nazi salute "On guard!" (Na stráž!) that was characteristic of HG during the Slovak state.<sup>78</sup> L'SNS became the first right-wing neo-Nazi party that became quite popular in several elections in the era of independent Slovak Republic. Some pre-election polls even suggested that the party would win among first-time voters, or voters under 30 years old.

On their official website, in the mission and vision section of the party, they claim the main goal is social justice, independence from the foreign corporations and national security as the state keeps protecting "antisocial" people instead of decent citizens and favours "decadence from the West". Furthermore, L'SNS was founded on 3 pillars: Christian, national and social. What is obvious at first glance, is the similarity of the flags of SP and L'SNS with those of HG. Former member of the party Milan Uhrík said about their aesthetic changes in L'SNS emblem: "We replaced the original isosceles double cross with the Cyril-Methodist double cross, which is also in the national emblem of the Slovak Republic. We did this to clearly distance ourselves from all connections with fascism, Nazism and any similar 'isms'..."

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<sup>77</sup> *Slovenská Pospolitosť* (SP) was banned as a political party and therefore did not participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Afterwards it functioned as an organisation with a brief interruption when..

<sup>78</sup> Dušan Mikušovič (my translation), „„Na stráž!” je problém, povedal súd v rozsudku, ktorý si kotlebovci tak pochvalovali,“ [““On guard!” is a problem, said the court in the ruling that the Kotlebs praised so much.”] *Denník N*, July 17, 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1529210/na-straz-je-problem-povedal-sud-v-rozsudku-ktory-si-kotlebovci-tak-pochvalovali/>.



On the left there is the *Hlinka's Guard* flag, on the right is the *Slovak Pospolitosť* (SP) flag.



The same double cross from the *Hlinka's Guards* is on the emblem of SP and ĽSNS.<sup>79</sup>

Republic (Republika) was a political party established as an alternative to ĽSNS by its former member Milan Uhrík in 2021. Even though they do not dress in uniforms similar to the paramilitary organization HG or their symbolism as is customary in the ĽSNS, do not publicly defend the Holocaust, and do not present themselves with extremist statements, it is a very deliberate choice, as they do not want to risk criminalization or dissolution. With this strategy, they also try to be attractive, especially to young voters, and to attract a wider spectrum of people. On the website of the party, there is a statement regarding the First Slovak Republic and Tiso:

We consider the establishment of the First Slovak Republic to be the best solution in the given historical period, because if the First Slovak Republic had not been established, Slovakia would have been divided between Hungary and Poland. Even though the first Slovak Republic was a satellite of Nazi Germany and many tragedies occurred during its

<sup>79</sup> Ján Benčík, “Ako kotlebovci premaľovali firmu,” [How the Kotlebists repainted the company] Newspaper, *Denník N* (blog), March 28, 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1079204/ako-kotlebovci-premalovali-firmu/>.

existence (just like in every state that was caught in World War II), we consider this moment in history to be an undoubted historical milestone in the struggle for the identity of our nation [...] We are convinced that in that difficult time he [Tiso] did everything he could to protect Slovakia as much as possible.<sup>80</sup>

Republic tries to acknowledge the atrocities that happened during the Slovak state; however, they still defend Tiso's decisions and consider the Slovak establishment the best solution and a significant moment in the history of the country. This is a common argument among Tiso's supporters as well as among the Church representatives.

#### *4.3 Church and Self-reflection*

The Slovak Catholic Church is formally respected institution, given that more than half of the population claims adherence to the Roman Catholic Church. This makes some statements, or even no statements, about the collaboration of certain leading priests with the communist regime or their defenses of Tiso even more problematic.

Archbishop Ján Sokol, aside from collaborating with State Security during the communist period<sup>81</sup>, attended a commemorative ceremony on the 66th anniversary of the Slovak State. There he blessed Marián Kotleba, then leader of SP – the party that has been later dissolved for being unconstitutional. Sokol also attended a book launch of Milan Ďurica's biography of Tiso, which was criticized by historians for claiming Tiso was unjustly executed and suggest he should be beatified. Sokol is known for his public statements on the Slovak state regime and Jozef Tiso. In his positive recollections of the regime streamed on television broadcast, he talked about prosperity that he remembered as a boy and improvement of the financial situation in his family.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> (my translation) “Naše Názory – Vysvetľujeme Hoaxy O Republike,” [Our Opinions – Explaining the Hoaxes About the Republic], REPUBLIKA, n.d., <https://www.hnutie-republika.sk/nazory/#prva-slovenska-republika>.

<sup>81</sup> The registration protocols of the agency and operational units of the State Security and Military Counterintelligence registered Ján Sokol as an agent. In “Registračné protokoly agentúrnych a operatívnych zväzkov Štátnej bezpečnosti a vojenskej kontrarozviedky” [Registration protocols of agency and operational units of State Security and Military Counterintelligence] *Ústav pamäti národa*, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/projekty/regpro/vysledky-vyhľadavania/?priezvisko=Sokol&meno=Ján>.

<sup>82</sup> Bohdan Kopčák, “Ln: Za Tisa Bolo Dobre,” SME, January 5, 2007, <https://svet.sme.sk/c/3079481/ln-za-tisa-bolo-dobre.html>.



Ján Sokol celebrated the mass for Jozef Tiso in 2008.<sup>83</sup>

Another cleric who recently commented on the figure of Tiso in Slovak history is current Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Košice and chair of Conference of Slovak Bishops Bernard Bober. He is the highest appointed cleric in the Catholic Church within Slovakia. In April 2025, he was asked whether the Catholic Church has dealt with and reflected upon the period of Slovak state especially having a priest as its president and his answer was that “it is hard to say, but probably not”.<sup>84</sup> Particularly problematic were his unclear and ambiguous stances when he said that even though Tiso failed in certain things, he cannot defend himself. According to Bober, measures against the Jews were bad but he wasn’t certain whether Tiso could do anything about it. He also claimed that when it comes to this period there is no consensus – “true, critical assessment of that period and the president’s performance” – among the historians and “some things have not been fully explained yet”. He suggested forming groups that would examine this period in depth and bring some hidden things to the surface; however, he did not want to take the initiative saying that it is not only a religious but also a political matter.

Subsequently, several historians responded to the archbishop’s views regarding the Slovak State, and they objected to his claims that there was objectively not enough information for a historical evaluation of history. According to historian Miloslav Szabó, it is the role of the church during the Slovak state that has not been examined and processed. One of the reasons might be limited access to church or episcopal archives. Hana Kubátová called Archbishop Bober’s statements as “relativization”, while Anton Hruboň said that is either ignorance or deliberate attempt to divert attention from historical facts.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Neprizeral som sa ked’ rástol Kotleba’ [I Did Not Look Around When Kotleba Rose], Denník N, February 16, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1759416/neprizeral-som-sa-ked-rastol-kotleba/?ref=share>.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Hanák (my translation), “NA ROVINU - Bernard Bober | Aktuality (Epizóda 28/25),” podcast, NA ROVINU, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/MT07TU6/bernard-bober-konklave-zrejmee-zvoli-frantiskovho-nasledovnika-aj-ked-nie-vsetci-knazi-prijali-jeho-liniu-rozhovor/>.

Bishop Vojtaššák's case is another example of the inability of the Catholic Church to confront the past in its entirety. He has statues, plaques, squares and streets across the country. There is even a school named after him. This visibility shows that there is clearly not enough effort to strive for objectivity on the part of religious leaders towards the public when it comes to his legacy. Contradictions in the perception of Vojtaššák can also be seen in a recent dispute from Dolný Kubín, a town where Vojtaššák has a square named after him. Prosecutor of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Slovak Republic Peter Mihál who protested stating that it is "unacceptable and contrary to the law" since the square "is named after a representative of the regime of the Slovak Republic from 1939 to 1945 or another regime based on fascist or Nazi ideology."<sup>85</sup> The MPs did not comply with the prosecutor's request for renaming the square. Additionally, Christian Democratic Party was outraged and published a statement defending the bishop for his many years of service, helping those in need, and imprisonment during the communist regime. The statement ends by saying that Vojtaššák is one of the most prominent figures in the Church in Slovakia.

There were two attempts at beatification of Ján Vojtaššák – in 2003 and 2021 – which were not successful. Expert on Judaism Jaroslav Franek hypothesizes that beatification is "an effort by the Slovak Catholic authorities to obtain compensation for the beatification of the executed President Jozef Tiso, who, as the top political representative of the fascist regime, is now unacceptable even to the Vatican."<sup>86</sup> Regardless of the true intentions behind stances of the Catholic Church and other avid defendants and admirers of Vojtaššák, through these attitudes the church is losing its moral authority and integrity when it comes to providing the direction on other sensitive issues that polarize society, such as minority rights, domestic violence, and women's reproductive rights.

In March 2025, a significant symbolic act took place on the part of Bishop František Trstenský, when, at a televised mass, he apologized for sins committed against, among others, Jews and other nationalities. Bishop Trstenský took down his mitre and lay face down barefoot before the cross. He "called on the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church to kneel before God and ask for forgiveness for the past and present sins."<sup>87</sup> Bishop Trstenský asked for repentance for the sins of the Church ministers, sins against the other churches and faiths, Jewish, German, Romani people, and other nations and cultures as well as for sins against civil freedom and human dignity. At the end of the liturgy believers asked for forgiveness and blessings for those whom the Church had wronged in the past.

In an interview, Trstenský was asked about his opinion on Tiso's politics. He stated that as a president, Tiso bears responsibility, and his decisions were not correct. However, he also added that he cannot say whether Tiso is culpable because it is only between him and God.

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<sup>85</sup> TASR (my translation), "Prokurátor nesúhlasí s pomenovaním námestia v Dolnom Kubíne po biskupovi Vojtaššákovi," [The prosecutor disagrees with naming the square in Dolny Kubin after Bishop Vojtaššák] *Pravda*, April 22, 2025, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/regiony/clanok/749303-prokurator-nesuhlasi-s-pomenovanim-namestia-v-dolnom-kubine-po-biskupovi-vojtassakovi/>.

<sup>86</sup> Jaro Franek, "Kauza Biskupa Jána Vojtaššáka," [Bishop Ján Vojtaššák Case] *Holokaust*, August 7, 2011, <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/clanky-z-ros-chodese/ros-chodes-2001/leden-10/kauza-biskupa-jana-vojtassaka/>.

<sup>87</sup> TK KBS (my translation), "Spišský Biskup František Trstenský Vyzval k Očisteniu Pamäti a Pokániu," [Bishop František Trstenský of Spiš Calls for Purification of Memory and Repentance], Tlačová kancelária Konferencie Biskupov Slovenska, March 7, 2025, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cisloclanku=20250307074>.

Furthermore, when asked about the foreign politics of Fico and his government, he did not feel qualified to make any public statements about how politics in general besides being content with Slovakia's membership in EU and NATO. According to him "foreign policies are the outcome of those political powers who win the elections."<sup>88</sup>

Even though Catholic Church expressed through symbolic acts of repentance and some of their public statements, that they regret what happened during the Holocaust, they never mentioned Tiso and how parts of society, some of them Catholics, celebrate his legacy at Catholic masses. Statements of the Catholic Church were very apologetic and made excuses on the behalf of the Slovak state Church leaders: "Catholic and Evangelical bishops warned responsible political figures against applying the racial principle to the legislation of the time."<sup>89</sup> In 2024, Archbishop Bober stated that "the Church also participated in the events of that time"<sup>90</sup>, he also did not want to evaluate the past and left it to the historians as was the case with Tiso. This further raises questions about whether the Catholic Church should have done more, as it also does not comment on historians' statements about the responsibility of Tiso or Vojtaššák.



Bishop František Trstenský asking for repentance for the past and present sins in the Spiš Diocese.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> František Trstenský (my translation), "Biskup F. Trstenský: 'Jozef Tiso nesie zodpovednosť. Nechám naňom, ako si to vydiskutuje s Bohom,'" [Bishop F. Trstenský: 'Jozef Tiso bears responsibility. I will leave it to him to discuss it with God'], 360tka, November 6, 2025.

<sup>89</sup> TK KBS (my translation), "Stanoviská biskupov, vyhlásenia a ďalšie správy k tragédii holokaustu," [Bishops' statements, statements and other messages on the tragedy of the Holocaust], Tlačová kancelária Konferencie Biskupov Slovenska, September 13, 2021, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cisloclanku=20210913093>.

<sup>90</sup> Bernard Bober (my translation), "Predseda KBS: Holokaust sa týka aj cirkvi – ospravedlňujeme sa," [KBS Chairman: The Holocaust also concerns the church – we apologize,"], Tlačová kancelária Konferencie Biskupov Slovenska, January 26, 2024, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cisloclanku=20240126001>.

<sup>91</sup> TV Lux, *Postoj*, March 7, 2025, <https://svetkrestanstva.postoj.sk/172092/slovensky-biskup-urobil-gesto-ktore-by-mali-nasledovat-aj-ini-ba-vlastne-vsetci>.

#### 4.4 Street, Statue and Plaques

Public monuments are an important part of collective memory because people's reaction to them says a lot about how they perceive their national history. All the monuments of Tiso are located in smaller towns or villages in rural areas and therefore, they may seem insignificant, however, only upon deeper investigation it becomes clear that these monuments as well as the debates they incite are great representations of how Tiso's memory persists to this day.

In 1993, local government of Varín – a village located in northern Slovakia – named one of the streets after Jozef Tiso.<sup>92</sup> Before World War II, 25 Jewish families lived in Varín, but after the war, no one returned home. This fact may be the reason why the street was named after Tiso. If the residents themselves became complicit in Aryanization who moved into Jewish homes and took their property, Tiso Street could have served them as a justification for the actions of their ancestors and as confirmation of their correctness. According to the chronicler of the village, the majority of Varín residents accepted the establishment of the Slovak State after the division of Czechoslovakia with joy and enthusiasm, except for a few "czechoslovakists" who allegedly intimidated conscious citizens. Since 2018, Lenka Ticháková, a former member of village council who also lives on the street names after Tiso, has first tried to convince locals to change its name. When she failed, she submitted a proposal to the municipal council which decided to resolve this problem through a referendum.<sup>93</sup> After an invalid referendum, her ongoing initiative was met with misunderstanding and even hostility when her neighbors would tell her to move away. Only after the Attorney General filed a lawsuit and the administrative court ruled in his favor, members of the municipality began to negotiate a change. Only from 1 January 2025 Dr. Jozef Tiso Street has been officially renamed to Mons. Jozefa Noga Street.

The only statue of Tiso is in a village named Čakajovce. There, in the Pantheon of Slovak Officials, stands Tiso among five other important Slovak figures. However, the official website of the village fails to mention the sixth statue. When asked about removal of the statue, mayor of the village did not want to share his opinion. He simply left the decision to the authorities who said it is not illegal and to the MPs who approved the statue. However, the statue itself is not the only form of remembrance of Tiso and his regime in the village. Every year in March, the Slovak Revival Movement (*Slovenské hnutie obrody*) organizes nationwide celebrations of the anniversary of the establishment of the wartime Slovak state in Čakajovce. They lay wreaths at the statue, sing the actual anthem as well as the anthem of the Slovak State and have a cultural program.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Tiso also had no previous connection to Varín. What is even more astonishing is that the village had been previously named after its native Ladislav Pfliegl, who died fighting in the Czechoslovak army for the USSR during the SNP.

<sup>93</sup> At that time, 360 residents voted in favor of renaming the street, and 1,053 residents out of a total of 3,036 eligible voters voted against renaming the street.

<sup>94</sup> Jana Alexová, "Socha Tisa či ulica pomenovaná po ňom? Tu to ľudia berú normálne," [Statue of Tisa or a street named after him? People here take it for granted], *SME*, June 26, 2020, <https://kultura.sme.sk/c/22432794/nevieme-neriesime-to-neprekaza-nam-to-sochy-ludakov-medzi-obyvatelmi-vasne-nevyvolavaju.html>.

Another important place for Tiso's followers is his birth house in Bytča.<sup>95</sup> Half of this property is owned by Bytča, another half is owned by Slovak Historical Society (*Slovenský dejepisný spolok*) – a civic association, close to the L'SNS<sup>96</sup>, that is dedicated to preserving Tiso's memory and has tried to acquire ownership of this building already several times. The house was according to its caretaker transformed into a museum in 1996, with original furniture and Tiso's personal belongings.<sup>97</sup> In 2024, a longtime MP Július Kozák claimed that the city will not sell this property to this association, although they are trying to sell it, and the association is not willing to resign from the fight for their "headquarters". Kozák also said that the house is already a place of "worship" for Tiso's admirers where they come together during important anniversaries. It is uncertain how long the MPs will be able to resist the association's efforts, as there are also its supporters among them. However, whenever these attempts have occurred, there has also been a strong response from individuals and organizations (such as *Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters*) who disagree with the house being publicly used to promote Tiso's "legacy" and are willing to protest it.<sup>98</sup>

Apart from protests, some activists have expressed their disapproval with the utilization of Tiso's house for his remembrance by destroying the memorial plaque that hangs on it. As a result, the administrator of the website about Jozef Tiso wrote an expressive response in which he called for prayers for their enemies and voiced a desire for "a Slovakia where a family is created by only one man and one woman, a Slovakia in which sodomy and abortion are mortal sins! Slovakia not uprooted from its roots, but faithful and devoted to its Slovakness according to the will of God. Simply – that we desire a Slovak Slovakia and a Catholic Slovakia!"<sup>99</sup> This resembles Tiso's speeches in which he talked about defending Slovak state from its enemies and their immorality while preserving Catholic faith. However, emphasis on traditional family, i.e. a union between a man and a woman, as well as rejecting abortions are recent variations in representation of Slovak nationalism over the past few decades. These supporters of traditionalism and "slovakism" rooted in Christianity are fighting against new enemies today - LGBTQ+ people, Muslims and women's reproductive rights – more than against Jews, Czechs and Roma.

#### 4.5 Tiso in School Textbooks and National Television

When it became clear that the far right was gaining popularity among first-time voters, some history teachers felt the need to comment on the textbooks they had to teach from: "If

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<sup>95</sup> Bytča is one of five places – the others are in Hlboké Nad Váhom, Oščadnica, Rajec, and Žilina – where plaques remembering Jozef Tiso can be found. Tiso's birthplace in Bytča is also the destination of an annual pilgrimage that starts in Rajec.

<sup>96</sup> Spokesperson of the association is a caretaker of the house and ran for Kotleba's L'SNS in the past.

<sup>97</sup> There is no information about the actual functionality of the museum or whether it is possible to visit it. However, on the website dedicated to Tiso (<https://jozeftiso.sk/14-rdpt>), there are contact information of the caretaker.

<sup>98</sup> Michal Katuška, "V Bytči sa opäť aktivizujú stúpenci Tisa. Chcú ovládnuť jeho rodny dom," [Tiso's supporters are active again in Bytča. They want to take over his birthplace], *SME*, April 22, 2024, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23320003/v-bytci-sa-opat-aktivizuju-stupenci-tisa-chcuc-ovladnut-jeho-rodny-dom.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Igor Cagán (my translation), "Zvesili sme pamätnú tabuľu Mons. Jozefovi Tisovi vo Veľkej Bytči." [We hung a memorial plaque to Monsignor Jozef Tiso in Veľká Bytča], *Jozef Tiso* (blog), n.d.

the problem is not addressed and we continue to teach children from these books, we will grow up with a generation of neo-Nazis.”<sup>100</sup> The author of history book for high school students, Róbert Letz, is trying to justify the actions of Jozef Tiso. This book was approved by the Ministry of Education and had to undergo long procedure; therefore, it is even more concerning that nobody raised any criticism or disapproval. Director of the Museum of Jewish Culture claims that Letz was also inspired by other history authors, such as Milan Ďurica, who trivialize Holocaust and crimes of the Slovak state.

It is important to mention that Ďurica was also a Catholic priest believing that Slovak state was a peaceful, humane and Catholic country. His book *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov* (History of Slovakia and Slovaks) was intentionally placed into educational curriculum in the early 1990s to prevent the spread of the Czech version of history.<sup>101</sup> According to the office of the Bratislava-Trnava Archdiocese, this book was well received as “unique in the history of the Slovak nation. The first of the published histories raises national consciousness, which is so weak especially among the younger generation.”<sup>102</sup> Currently, no books by authors who defended Tiso, or the legacy of his regime are used in schools. However, the very fact that these books were used in the past may have had consequences for the uncritical electorate of far-right parties when it comes to this part of history. At the same time, it is important to remember that governments also try to change national memory and maintain power in this way. Mečiar’s government approved Ďurica’s textbooks, and similar initiatives may be repeated in the future as a strategy of adapting collective memory to political goals.

Another medium through which Tiso reached many people was Slovak Television, which has been the source of many controversies and has not had a reputation as an objective medium since the mečiarism era. Between 2018 and 2019, a television series was broadcasted on a nationwide state-owned Slovak Television. The poll was supposed to show who the 100 greatest Slovaks in the country's history were. First ten personalities on the poll would have a documentary dedicated to them with experts discussing the significance of the given personality and their positive traits. Television introduced three teasers featuring three famous figures from the history who could potentially be part of the poll. In one of the teasers, there is the HSLS daily newspaper *Slovák* with Tiso on the front page accompanied by the question “War criminal or martyr?”<sup>103</sup> This decision almost gives the impression that the television is advising its viewers who they should vote for.

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<sup>100</sup> Nikola Bučeková (my translation), “Zmanipulované dejiny v školských učebniciach,” [Manipulated history in school textbooks], *Pravda*, October 3, 2016, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/386194-zmanipulovane-dejiny-v-skolskych-ucebniciach/>.

<sup>101</sup> Jaro Franek, “Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov Milana Ďuricu,” [History of Slovakia and Slovaks by Milan Ďurica], Holokaust, August 7, 2011, <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/clanky-z-ros-chodese/ros-chodes-1997/zari-13/dejiny-slovenska-a-slovakov-milana-duricu/>.

<sup>102</sup> (my translation), “Historický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied o príručke M. S. Ďuricu *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov*,” [Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences on the manual by M. S. Ďuricu History of Slovakia and Slovaks], SME, June 11, 1997, <https://www.sme.sk/c/2077676/historicky-ustav-slovenskej-akademie-vied-o-prirucke-m-s-duricu-dejiny-slovenska-a-slovakov.html>.

<sup>103</sup> (my translation), *Najväčší Slovák na RTVS - upútavka s Jozefom Tisom* [The Greatest Slovak on RTVS - ad with Jozef Tiso], advertisement, *Najväčší Slovák* (YouTube: RTVS, 2018), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RNHkUTb\\_eQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RNHkUTb_eQ).

According to the program director Čapák, Tiso's name resonates in society and his name was chosen for the television spot by the marketing team.<sup>104</sup> Čapák has been a guest on an online radio *Slobodný vysielač* (Free transmitter) several times, which is popular especially among fans of conspiracy theories and alternative information. In 2018, in one of its discussions he agreed with then Prime Minister Robert Fico's criticism of non-governmental organizations and a so-called "coup" organized from abroad by George Soros in favor of foreign (or western) interests.<sup>105</sup> Similar narratives are being disseminated by the supporters of Robert Fico and his left-wing nationalist and populist party Smer (Direction-Social Democracy) as well as SNS, LSNS, Republic, and other smaller nationalist parties. Alternative media platforms and nationalist political parties argue for the need for balanced reporting that provide different perspectives, explicitly stating that the information provided by established mainstream media is manipulated by the "West".



Advertisement of Čapák as a potential candidate for the "Greatest Slovak" poll.

#### 4.6 Analogies and Metaphors

Although the past does not repeat itself, it allows us to observe many explicit similarities between the past and the present that seem to resonate in society. While Tiso was seen by his supporters as the "father" of the first independent Slovak state, Vladimír Mečiar liked to position himself into a role of the "father" of Slovak Republic after its separation from Czech Republic in 1993. Similarly to Tiso's claims about peaceful taking of power in

<sup>104</sup> Marek Čapák, Tiso ako Najväčší Slovák? Nechceme pred ním zatvárať oči, vratí programový šéf RTVS [Tiso as the Greatest Slovak? We don't want to close our eyes to him, says RTVS programming chief], interview by Marek Hudec, SME, October 23, 2018, <https://kultura.sme.sk/c/20944484/tiso-ako-najvacsi-slovak-nechceme-pred-nim-zatvarat-oci-vravi-programovy-sef-rtvs.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Miroslava Kernová, "Nový programový šéf RTVS Čapák perlí v konšpiračnom Slobodnom vysielači" [New RTVS program director Čapák says gibberish in the conspiracy-ridden Slobodný vysielač], *Denník N*, April 6, 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1141856/novy-programovy-sef-rtvs-tapak-perli-v-konspiracionom-slobodnom-vysielaici/>.

1935, the photo of Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus and Slovak Prime Minister Mečiar may also suggest a very casual split of two countries after more than four decades.



On 26 August 1992 Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus met in Brno to decide on the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.<sup>106</sup>

Rather than a natural separation and an inevitable creation of a sovereign Slovak Republic this event should be characterized as enforced by the government seeking their own nationalist agenda. When asked during a documentary *Mečiar* whether he regretted the fight for Slovak independence and the division of the country, Mečiar compared himself (among other Slovak figures) to Jozef Tiso, who was hanged. However, that he did not end up as badly in Slovak history.<sup>107</sup> In 2017, he said that the question of Jozef Tiso and Slovak state is a “taboo” in Slovak society. Despite Tiso’s mistakes and merits, that he does not want to elaborate on, one of the ways of breaking the silence on the topic and reaching a reconciliation would be to pay respects to Tiso at his grave.<sup>108</sup> This is an example of how many political but also religious leaders often distort reality. They admit to some mistakes being made in the past in a very unclear manner; however, they still do not possess a sense of accountability. In this case, paying respects at a grave of the war criminal is not the acceptable way to reconcile with the past.

Slovak Prime Minister Fico is the most recent case of historical parallel that appears before the spectators. Fico has visited Russian President Vladimir Putin two times since Russian’s Invasion to Ukraine started. Soon after his first visit in December 2024 became public, a wave of protests spread across the country and some also expressed their disapproval on social media. There were several instances of photo collages in which Tiso’s meeting with Hitler was compared to Fico’s meeting with Putin.

<sup>106</sup> TASR, Denník N, August 26, 1992, <https://dennikn.sk/2916695/meciar-a-klaus-diskutovali-po-30-rokoch-o-zaniku-federacie-z-televiznej-debaty-odisli-predcasne/>.

<sup>107</sup> *Mečiar (The Lust for Power)*, documentary (Asociace českých filmových klubů, 2017).

<sup>108</sup> Vladimír Mečiar, “Mečiar o Tisovi.” [Mečiar on Tiso] Mojevideo, January 6, 2018, [https://www.mojevideo.sk/video/2c05e/meciar\\_o\\_tisovi.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.mojevideo.sk/video/2c05e/meciar_o_tisovi.html#google_vignette).



This photo collage was posted on 9 May 2025 when Fico visited Putin in Kremlin for the Victory Day Celebrations.<sup>109</sup>  
 Below is a photo of Hitler greeting Tiso in October 1941.

There are obvious differences when it comes to the Slovak State regime of Tiso and Slovak governments led by Mečiar and Fico. First and foremost, Mečiar and Fico are not responsible for deporting a significant part of a minority to “death” camps. Secondly, geopolitical situation of the Slovak state was very different since the war was happening in across the European continent. Fico did not meet with Putin to prevent him from seizing Slovakia, neither does Slovakia benefit financially from this “friendship”, but Fico as a former member of the Communist Party has been a long-term admirer of Soviet Union and later Russia and he knows how to utilize the “image” of Russia as a great empire that would protect its “brotherly nations” from the damaging influence of the west. There are still many people who lived in the socialist times and despite the enforced Soviet ideology and lack of freedom, they remember the economic equality, low unemployment and general stability in comparison to the uncertainties of the liberal democracy. The same could be said of the

<sup>109</sup> Jukub Filo (@jakub.filo). “Je to hanba.” [It is a shame.] *Instagram*, May 8, 2025.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/DJbG7jKtxze/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWF1ZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DJbG7jKtxze/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWF1ZA==)

Slovaks who remember the Slovak state as an establishment economically advantageous for ethnic Slovaks.

Survey from 2018 can also serve as an aid for evaluation of collective memory among Slovak population. From 21 events on the list, there are several events that are related to the period of World War II: Slovak National Uprising (1944), Slovak autonomy within Czechoslovakia (1938), Munich Agreement (1938), Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939-1945), and First Slovak Republic (1939-1945). The Uprising received the most favorable reactions with 63% of the respondents seeing it as a positive event and only 8% seeing it as a negative event in Slovak history. However, it is also important to look at the “both positive and negative” category which could be also perceived as being undecided or having hesitant or even conflicting feelings about an event. While the Slovak republic was seen as disagreeable by 46% of respondents, 23% saw it as both positive and negative and 18% as positive, while additional 13% were not sure. The report concluded that Slovaks tended to be more reserved (in comparison to Czechs) and rather ambivalent in their assessment of historical events and politicians.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps their perception of the Slovak state serves as an example for all how uncertain or even contradicting attitudes when it comes to probably the darkest and surely the most blood-stained period in the history of autonomous Slovak republic. It might also be the reason why this period is still being somewhat naïvely characterized as “controversial”.

Memories, or mediated memory, operate throughout society in different ways. There are also people who perceive these parallels in the past, not only material values. This photo collage and its comparison of the recent meeting of Fico and Putin with Tiso and Hitler in the past had a mobilizing effect on a large segment of people. It forced them to recall the horrifying events of World War II and remember that past can easily “repeat itself” and in this collage it looks like, in fact, the history repeated itself. Naturally, the idea of historical repetition is an oversimplification, but points to the influential power of historical parallels and metaphors.

#### *4.7 Cultural and Ethical Issues*

Since 2010s, populist and conservative parties shifted the targets of their attacks from ethnic minorities primarily to LGBTQ+ people and migrants. It should be mentioned that the phrase “cultural and ethical” topics, issues or even wars have become a popular collocation in everyday speech, primarily involving topics such as the rights of LGBTQ+ people, the right to abortion, and sex education in schools. These topics have become a stumbling block in situations when pro-democratic parties were expected to unite against nationalists, populists and extremists. These cultural and ethical issues are often expected to be put aside and compromised on to be able to form a pro-European coalition because other areas such as justice, economy or healthcare are more urgent.

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<sup>110</sup> Zora Bútorová and Paulína Tabery, “Osudové osmičky vo vedomí slovenskej a českej verejnosti: udalosti, obdobia, osobnosti 20. a 21. storočia” [The fateful eights in the consciousness of the Slovak and Czech public: events, periods, personalities of the 20th and 21st centuries], (Bratislava: Sociologický ústav SAV, IVO, CVVM, SOÚ AV ČR, v.v.i., November 6, 2018).

In 2015, European migrant crises became part of the public debate in Slovakia, even though it was never the target country of the refugees from the Middle East. This topic quickly became the main theme of the campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2016. Slovakia received only 476 asylum application in 2015 and 2016 combined, while approved were 175 applications<sup>111</sup> in total and 149 of these refugees were Assyrian Christians from Iraq.<sup>112</sup> During these years Fico was the Prime Minister, and these numbers are the result of his hostility towards Islam and the possibility of Muslim immigrants coming to Slovakia. Catholic Church has tried to reassure people by debunking the most common myths about refugees from the Middle East. It said that refugees are not terrorists and many of them are Christians, which supported the government's decision to grant asylum mainly to Christians. It also refuted the claim that refugees cost the state a lot of money and take people's jobs.<sup>113</sup> Despite this, Slovakia still is one of the least accepting countries when it comes to immigrants in the European Union. This animosity revives similar sentiments such as those of Slovaks towards Jews, people of a different religion, on the basis that they were simply different.



Billboard of Marian Kotleba's far right LSNS with a slogan "STOP immigrants!"<sup>114</sup>

A long-term hostile environment towards LGBTI people, especially from politicians who often publicly use derogatory terms towards this minority to gain popularity and support

<sup>111</sup> These statistics can be found on the website of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (<https://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>).

<sup>112</sup> Dušan Mikušovič, "Časť z asýrskych kresťanov, ktorí prišli na Slovensko z Iraku, sa vrátila domov," [Some of the Assyrian Christians who came to Slovakia from Iraq have returned home], Denník N, May 7, 2016, <https://dennikn.sk/462831/cast-asyrskych-krestanov-ktori-prisli-slovensko-iraku-sa-vratila-domov/>.

<sup>113</sup> SITA, "Cirkev rozoslala letáky o utečencoch," SME, August 9, 2015, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7955243/cirkev-rozoslala-letaky-o-utecencoch.html>.

<sup>114</sup> "Islamophobia in Eastern Europe: Slovakia and the Politics of Hate", <https://www.connections.clio-online.net/article/id/fda-133254>.

from voters, resulted in the first ever terrorist attack in Slovakia. In October 2022, a 19-year-old radicalized man shot three queer people, two of whom died, outside an LGBTQ+ bar *Tepláreň* in Bratislava. Later, the investigation proved that the attacker was part of an international extremist group, and after the attack he published a manifesto against Jews and LGBTQ+ people, in which the author calls for violence against these groups because he considers them enemies of the white race.<sup>115</sup> This homophobic attack has sparked a wave of solidarity and greater awareness of the issue and the need for education in the field of LGBTQ+ rights among people who were previously liberal. However, nothing has changed among politicians and other conservative groups who were known for their homophobic statements. Furthermore, Archbishop of Trnava Ján Orosch expressed distrust towards the victims when he asked, in his internal letter to bishops in his dioceses, how many times there was an anti-drug raid in the bar and whether those victims were innocent. This circular letter was not meant to be read publicly to the believers; however, it was meant to provide guidance for the bishops, and this message clearly had homophobic overtones. Archbishop also added that besides Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, we are also plagued by other threats, such as “Christian liberalism” or the “ideology of gender equality”.<sup>116</sup>

These statements are not unique among Christian leaders, representatives of Christian organizations, or political movements. In September 2023, during the peak of the parliamentary election campaign Milan Majerský, the chairman of KDH, compared LGBTQ+ “ideology” to corruption: “Both corruption and LGBTI+ can destroy a nation as such”, which later he apologized for and explained that he did not mean specific people, but the ideology that is a misfortune.<sup>117</sup> KDH was founded shortly after the revolution in 1990 and began as a grouping of many believers who were part of the underground church and could not practice their faith publicly during socialism. Because this party has had a reputation since its inception as a fighter for freedom and democracy, its ambivalent statements about possible cooperation with Fico's party Smer – the successor to the Communist Party – or the nationalist SNS, in the name of protecting traditional family and values, arouses mixed feelings in society. For some pro-European voters, the KDH has become a sellout, for others it is a lesser evil or even an acceptable choice for “traditional” values without selling themselves out by voting for nationalist parties.

After the elections, Robert Fico came to power for the fourth time, and with him the nationalist SNS. Besides many abrupt changes in laws, strategic partnerships and layoffs of

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<sup>115</sup> Lucia Osvaldová and Matúš Zdút, “Útočníka zo Zámockej našli mŕtveho, k streľbe sa prihlásil na Twitteri, pári hodín predtým zverejnili manifest proti židom a LGBTI,” [The attacker from Zámocká was found dead, he claimed responsibility for the shooting on Twitter, a few hours earlier he had published a manifesto against Jews and LGBTI people], *Denník N*, December 13, 2022, <https://dennikn.sk/3052833/k-strelbe-na-zamockej-sa-prihlasil-muz-na-twitteri-par-hodin-predtym-zverejnili-manifest-proti-zidom-a-lgbti/>.

<sup>116</sup> Denisa Gdovinova (my translation), “Trnavský arcibiskup Orosch poslal knazom obežník, v ktorom pochybuje, či obete útoku na Zámockej boli nevinné,” [Trnava Archbishop Orosch sent a circular to priests in which he doubts whether the victims of the attack on Zámocká were innocent], *Denník N*, November 4, 2022, <https://dennikn.sk/3092625/trnavsky-arcibiskup-orosch-poslal-knazom-obeznik-v-kotorom-pochybuje-ci-obete-utoku-na-zamockej-boli-nevinne/>.

<sup>117</sup> Miro Kern (my translation), “Majerský označil LGBTI+ ľudí za pliagu. Neskôr sa ospravedlnil, že nemyslel ľudí, ale ideológiu,” [Majerský called LGBTI+ people a plague. He later apologized that he didn't mean people, but an ideology.], *Denník N*, September 3, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3549839/kollar-a-danko-sa-tvrdo-hadali-kdh-odmieta-program-ps-a-pellegrini-s-ficom-v-prieskume-predbehli-prezidentku/>.

inconvenient people, since the beginning of 2025 Fico has become persistent in changing some aspects of the constitution. The amended constitution should recognize only two genders – male and female – and “declare the sovereignty of Slovakia on the issue of national identity”.<sup>118</sup> This attempt to exert national identity over commitments to the international law and European Union is perceived negatively by international organizations and European institutions. However, the Conference of Slovak Bishops issued a public statement in which it expressed opposing views: “We welcome this initiative and the discussion on proposals to strengthen freedom of conscience, education, upbringing, and the protection of human dignity.”<sup>119</sup> In this case, it is the position of the entire Catholic Church in Slovakia, which makes this statement even more weighty than the positions of individual bishops, for instance, regarding the historical grievances and Tiso. Furthermore, church leaders should not express their so positions in such explicit manner that might potentially influence the results of the vote.

Bishop emeritus Bezák described the changes to the constitution as a “biological law” and compared it to the racial laws that expelled Jews from Slovak territory during World War II. He also said that “this interweaving of religion and politics is dangerous” as politicians want to gain popularity on these topics rather than having a genuine interest in the church.<sup>120</sup> This suggests that clerics are willing to give their seal of approval to any political party that wants to pass laws in accordance with their “traditional” family agenda and is not willing to examine original intentions behind these political and power initiatives.

The symbolical intermingling of religion and politics is also evident when looking closely at dates and holidays. There was a proposal that the amendment would symbolically come into effect on July 5, 2025, the Saints Cyril and Methodius Day. This day is both a religious and cultural holiday that commemorates the arrival of two Byzantine missionaries and brothers – Cyril and Methodius – who brought Christianity and Glagolitic script to Great Moravia in 9<sup>th</sup> century. During the celebrations of Cyril and Methodius in the previous year, Fico publicly spoke about possible changes to the constitution that are necessary to protect Slovak traditions with the aim of preserving historical continuity. “We must together build a dam against the senseless progressive and liberal ideologies that are spreading like cancer. These ideologies are damaging this country; these ideologies arose perhaps only the day before yesterday.”<sup>121</sup> In his speech, Fico also mentioned the “normality” norm given by the legacy of Cyril and Methodius.

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<sup>118</sup> Ján Mazák, “Novela ústavy je zbytočná – vykopávame otvorené dvere alebo si koledujeme o sankcie,” [The constitutional amendment is useless – we are kicking open doors or begging for sanctions], *Denník N*, May 30, 2025, <https://dennikn.sk/4665584/novela-ustavy-je-zbytocna-vykopavame-otvorene-dvere-alebo-si-koledujeme-o-sankcie/>.

<sup>119</sup> TK KBS (my translation), “Vyhľásenie katolíckych biskupov k diskusii o ústavnoprávnych otázkach,” [Statement by Catholic bishops on the debate on constitutional issues], TK KBS, June 13, 2025, <https://m.tkkbs.sk/mview.php?cisloclanku=20250613002>.

<sup>120</sup> Richard Dírer (my translation), “R. Bezák: Zmena ústavy mi pripomína rasové zákony” [R. Bezák: The constitutional amendment reminds me of racial laws], YouTube, Dírerov Filter, June 20, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGBBqkZkP34&t=1590s>.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Fico (my translation), “Robert Fico: ‘ak by mi to môj zdravotný stav umožnil, išiel by som s Orbánom do Kyjeva aj do Moskvy,’” [Robert Fico: “If my health allowed it, I would go with Orbán to Kiev and Moscow”], broadcast (TV OTV, July 5, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RwDW3abq0k>.

A very practical case of “normalization” in the current government has been the politics of Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová. Before assuming her office, she was a publicly known face of the disinformation internet television *Slovan* (Slav) where she would spread false claims about refugees or vaccination. She entered the government as a nominee of the nationalist SNS and she made it clear quite early how she perceives the future of Slovak culture: “The culture of the Slovak people should be Slovak and no other. We tolerate other national cultures, but our culture is not a mixture of other cultures.”<sup>122</sup> These beliefs were put into practice when she, without substantial reason, replaced the directors of the main cultural institutions in Slovakia with unknown people without experience in the field of culture and art, or even her personal acquaintances.

Šimkovičová’s homophobic beliefs were not only manifested through cancellation of fundings for all LGBTQ+ organizations and censorship of queer artists who are world-renowned, but also in her public statements that were also racist: “We heterosexuals can create the future because we can create children. Europe is dying out; new children are not being born. Because there is an LGBTI pressure and, strangely enough, it is among the white races.”<sup>123</sup> This reference to the white race is specifically reminiscent of the Nazi ideology about the supremacy of the white race and homosexuality being a threat to reproductive capacity of the nation. These ideas were the main impetus for the exclusion of several groups of society and their subsequent death during the World War II.

After members of the governments realized that the proposal would not pass by one vote, voting on the constitutional amendment about two sexes and the sovereignty of national identity has been postponed to September of this year. If this proposal is approved, the possibility of using “national identity” as a conscientious objection can open the way to a boundless and extremist form of nationalism. It is similar in the case of advocates of unlimited freedom of speech, among which are Fico and Šimkovičová, that supported the right of free speech for a flat-earther while undermining the rights of ethnic minorities or LGBTQ+ people.

#### 4.8 Remembering

Despite the fact that many parallels arouse unpleasant feelings due to symbols and motifs that are reminiscent of totalitarian regimes and their return in the form of various contemporary forms of nationalism, there are also people who try to mitigate these signs and try to find a way out of what seems like a cycle of repetition. Among the rarest and somewhat peculiar attempts to bridge the great gap between present-day national socialists and those affected by the Holocaust was the book *Cez ploty* (Through the Fences)<sup>124</sup> by Fedor Gál, a

<sup>122</sup> Martina Šimkovičová (my translation), “Ministerka kultúry Martina Šimkovičová (SNS) povedala, že kultúra slovenského ľudu má byť slovenská a žiadna iná” [Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová (SNS) said that the culture of the Slovak people should be Slovak and no other], *Denník N*, November 6, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/3662882/?ref=share>.

<sup>123</sup> Marek Biró (my translation), “Biela rasa vymiera kvôli LGBTI, tvrdí Martina Šimkovičová. Podobá sa to na neonacistickú konšpiráciu” [The white race is dying out because of LGBTI, claims Martina Šimkovičová. It resembles a neo-Nazi conspiracy], *Aktuality*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/osnpNHL/biela-rasa-vymiera-kvoly-lgbti-tvrdi-martina-simkovicova-podoba-sa-to-na-neonacisticku-konspiraciu/>.

<sup>124</sup> Fedor Gál and Matej, *Cez Ploty* [Through the Fences], (Bratislava: Absynt, 2016).

Slovak Jewish sociologist, who was born in Theresienstadt Ghetto in 1945. The book consists of a correspondence between him and a neo-Nazi man which had lasted for sixteen years but eventually ended as Gál believed the conversation was not constructive anymore. It might seem to be an insignificant achievement considering that there are groups of nationalists and “worshippers” of the Slovak state that are loud and obtrusive and Gál himself emigrated to Czech Republic due to antisemitism and public hatred he received for participating in VPN. Nevertheless, it still shows that individuals who are empathetic enough and willing to understand each other, are able to conduct a respectful conversation despite diametrically different opinions and grasp of historical facts. At the same time, this book provides a look inside the individuals who are part of these movements and shows that personality, past experiences and social background influence how they perceive society as well as history.

Gál was also the founder of the *Vrba-Wetzler Memorial*. Originating in 2014, the aim of this annual pilgrimage of 130 kilometers has been to commemorate two Slovak Jews – Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler – who escaped in April 1944 Auschwitz concentration camp and walked to Žilina on foot to give their witness account about the number of victims and thorough description of the life in Auschwitz.<sup>125</sup> This event every year attracts participants from Slovakia and abroad, Jews and non-Jews, people of all age categories, who walk together for a week, recalling the events that took place in the places where they are currently located by reading Vrba’s and Wetzler’s memoirs, and building a kind of community of people united by the need to remember and reflect on the past. In this era of immense exposure to the terrors of the past visually through museums, memorial places, and visual media that are dedicated to the memory Holocaust, when it is appropriate to ask whether these monuments still have an emotional effect on people, walking the path may have a deeper and multidimensional meaning for the participants.

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<sup>125</sup> Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba, “Správa Alfréda Wetzlera a Rudolfa Vrbu” [Message of Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba] (Ústav pamäti národa, 1944), <https://www.upn.gov.sk/sprava-alfreda-wetzlera-a-rudolfa-vrbu-1944/>.

## 5. Discussion and Results

This research set out to understand intersections of memory and nationalism within the historical context of changing political regimes in the territory of contemporary Slovakia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today. There are many publications that describe historical events of the Slovak state and its participation in the Holocaust, as well as the crimes of the Communist Party and its collaborators during the era of socialism. However, examining these regimes through the prism of collective memory adds a broader and more complex dimension to these historical events. The lived human experience of war crimes, myths of the “golden” age or ruthless enemies who pose a threat can have a greater, although not necessarily positive, influence on the course of history and national affinity in a country than mere historical facts.

Drawing on Timothy Snyder's concept of *collective memory*, I predominantly focused on how *national memory* is used, abused and distorted in the hands of the ruling party, politicians, religious leaders, and even ordinary inhabitants of the country. The wartime Slovak state is often referred to as the First Slovak Republic and this period also marks the beginning of Slovak nationalism as we know it today. President Jozef Tiso intentionally created divisions and turned Czechs, Jews, or Roma inhabitants of Slovakia into state enemies by calling them exploiters, Bolsheviks or antisocial to strengthen Slovak belonging and identity. However, these malignant rhetorics and actions were not present only among politicians. For instance, as Hana Kubátová explains these attitudes were present even in the Eastern and rural regions of the country. Furthermore, based on the biography of Tiso that was already published during his life, stories about his positive characteristics and noble goals confirms that these exaggerated narratives about the course of his life were already circulating among some people. In all these cases national memory was employed through these myths of resilient Slovak nation, threats of Magyarization and Tiso's predestination to be a wise and great leader to make people believe in the story of Slovakia national consciousness.

During the socialist era of Czechoslovakia, many dissident communities formed across the country and cooperated to dismantle the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union. This consensus in moral priorities and values that gave an impression of undivided “opposition” consisting of Christians, environmental activists, artists and intellectuals, in other words, both secular and religious people, ended with the advent of democracy. Was this unity among dissent superficially maintained by the sterility and uniformity of the communist regime or was their civil rights advocacy a genuine demand? I suppose these questions would deserve more in-depth research into the intentions and beliefs of these groups and their members, but nowadays collaboration across liberal and conservative groups seems to be impossible. This development supports the claim that “self-described Christian political parties that emerged from old anti-communist dissidents have been shifting increasingly towards authoritarian nationalist agendas”, at least in the case of KDH and other “Christian” parties that were formed later. Once civic and religious groups lost their common enemy and gained freedom to defend their own causes, their alliance became unprofitable and irrelevant. For Christians this meant defending “traditional” marriage, conscientious objection, and restricting access to

abortion or sexual education in schools and many of their future cooperations became subordinate to these goals.

There are solitary examples from among publicly known Christian activists, such as František Mikloško or Archbishop emeritus Róbert Bezák, who are convinced that the radicalization and legitimization of populist nationalists by Christian parties is contrary to the values of the 1989 Revolution or to the Christian faith.

There are also people like Fedor Gál, survivors of the Holocaust or organizations, who raise awareness to the crimes that were committed and as well as to the current threats of fascist and Nazi ideology, which is on the rise. However, the activities of these individuals and groups are often focused on combating ethnic discrimination, as was the case during the Slovak state, while other groups – women, LGBTQ+, or Muslim immigrants from the Middle East – targeted by today's extremists do not receive as much attention. Furthermore, Christian groups and activists often advocate for only human rights issues that are consistent with Christian ethics and natural law. However, as this research has shown, some clerics during the Slovak State also justified the segregation of Jews as part of the natural law.

After the four decades of the Soviet rule, the era of democracy saw a rise in national pride and the need to separate from the Czech Republic, which always had a certain aura of superiority. Czechs also displayed a real misunderstanding of Slovak demands. Many years under the totalitarian regime meant dissent's resistance to state structures and institutions, something that former communists, who suddenly turned into nationalist opportunists, embraced very willingly. It is also interesting to see how different church denominations can unite against cultural and ethical issues and favor candidates they would not vote for otherwise. In 2010s, the term "dam against progressivism" began to be used informally to express the threat of secular and progressive trends coming from the West and destroying long-lived traditions of Slovakia.

Selective memory proved to be a problem, for instance, when it comes to Christian parties or Church leaders. The case of Bishop Ján Vojtaššák demonstrates that significant portion of Catholics ignore the fact that Vojtaššák was instrumental in the Aryanization. Instead, they only focus on the fact that he was persecuted and imprisoned by the regime during communism and some even suggested his beatification. Another case of forgetting is Ján Čarnogurský, who connected Catholic and liberal dissent before and during the Velvet Revolution, when the clear aim was to dismantle authoritarianism of the Soviet Union in Slovakia. He also initiated *Declaration on the Deportations of Jews from Slovakia*, while soon after the Revolution, he began to vehemently identify with Russian (foreign) policies. Finally, there is the indecisiveness, when it comes to the Church leaders. For instance, their reluctance to comment on foreign policy or the orientation of the Róbert Fico's government towards Russia may appear as impartiality, but it also suggests forgetting or ignoring the authoritarian regimes of the past and the damage they have caused.

There has been an ongoing discussion among academics on how to label the Slovak state regime on the far-right spectrum. Term clerical fascism clearly dominates public debate. Ward named Tiso a "Christian national socialist"<sup>126</sup>, while for Kubátová the regime rather

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<sup>126</sup> James Mace Ward, *Jozef Tiso: Kňaz, politik, kolaborant* [Priest, Politician, Collaborator] (Slovat, 2013), 334.

bore signs of “Christian nationalism”<sup>127</sup>. Apart from four decades of Czechoslovakia, Christian nationalism describes very well not only the era of the Slovak state, but also recent nationalist tendencies. Politicians emphasizing Cyril and Methodius centuries-old tradition and continuity of culture and Christian faith and Church leaders undermining the LGBTQ+ and women’s rights and supporting the government in restrictions towards these minorities often resembles the Church during the World War II. Then, many religious leaders either supported governmental policies or remained silent in critical social issues. This demonstrates a lack of solid moral grounding, or perhaps their loyalty being simply subordinated to the political parties grounded in traditional family values.

This research offers an insight into the employment of collective memory as a driving force for nationalist movements. It is through commemorative masses in honor of Tiso, vague apologetic statements about Tiso's presidency and Vojtaššák made by Catholic representatives as well as publishing incomplete facts about the Slovak State or Tiso, in the media or in school textbooks, that this historical period is still relativized and heritage of the Slovak state is present today. However, there are also implicit traces of the Slovak state, such as blaming the enemies (Brussels or the West), dehumanizing minorities verbally or legally, and Fico going to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin. These instances become a reminder, that even though people will never repeat the World War II or the communist regime, there are the same aims and motives driving their actions and words as in the past – to have power of their nation, their archdiocese or neighborhood.

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<sup>127</sup> Hana Kubátová, “Introduction,” in *Christian Nationalism, Nation-Building, and the Making of the Holocaust in Slovakia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 8.

## 6. Conclusion

When examining the values on which present-day Slovakia was established, there is a strong emphasis on building a sovereign nation with the side effects that are common for such an ambitious endeavor. There have been many moments of friction between versions of national memory that different actors wanted to enforce on Slovak people. State representatives, religious leaders, activists, ordinary people, minorities – they all have different substantially different perception of their national identities and values. Sometimes these groups' objectives aligned for the common goal, but there were also moments when these actors exploited each other in favor of one's own goals.

Slovak Catholic Church, specifically, has undergone a lot of tensions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its political transformations. Its amalgamation of opportunistic agendas and somewhat genuine faith founded on traditional family values can be seen as a deviation for a potential future advance of the Church as such. Furthermore, its selectively political statements on the topic of the Slovak state or current issues may suit some, who are in favor of the nationalist politics, but it excludes and intimidates those, who do not approve of merging nationalism and religion. It should not be forgotten that religious representatives carry responsibility – towards all believers – amid political and social upheavals that is no lesser than that of politicians towards the citizens or those complicit in Aryanization towards their neighbors.

Cases mentioned in this work have shown that explicit references to the authoritarian regime of the Slovak state have been rather sporadic since the establishment of the democratic Slovakia. Neofascist ideas are no longer only the domain of parties and groups that publicly proclaim the ideas of the Slovak state and the political ideology of Jozef Tiso. The present-day nationalism with strong Christian influences has changed its dress code to become acceptable to a wider spectrum of people. Nationalist ideas are becoming more mainstream, included even in daily rhetorics of left- and right-wing populist political parties that have been in the government for years and had been previously known for being democratic. The enemy has changed and assumed more abstract contours and nationalism itself – whose goal is to protect what is *ours* – has been harder to dispute as it acquired the form of an “ethical issue”. Church leaders, anti-nationalist politicians and human rights activists need to be aware of these shifts to tackle these attitudes.

The aim of this dissertation was to analyse the influence of the Slovak state on the contemporary nationalism in Slovakia today as well as investigate other possible references to the nationalism in the socialist regime of Czechoslovakia. The Slovak state regime is often perceived as a solved problem, however, when from time to time political or religious representatives mention this historical period, it often incites public debate on whether Slovaks have dealt with their past thoroughly. This research has shown many forms in which Christian nationalism is still present, not in a form of an authoritarian regime *per se*, but in form of democracy that is being contested through censorship of minorities, verbal discrimination on social media, or creation of non-existent enemies. The past shows that to compete with the national memory of present-day populists – former communists turned pro-Russian nationalists – it is necessary for both religious and secular people to reconcile with

the past by fighting for the human rights together again and redefining national memory into a *story* that can include everyone who identifies as Slovak.

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