

Ethnicity and Nationalism in Contemporary Czechoslovakia

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Historical background

The forefathers of contemporary Czechs and Slovaks were members of the same political entity for the first time during the Great Moravian Empire, which at its peak, toward the end of the ninth century, was larger than present-day Czechoslovakia. After the empire's fall at the beginning of the tenth century, its Czech-speaking western part began a thousand-year-long separate historical development. In the course of the eleventh century present-day Slovakia became an integral part of the Hungarian state. Political and economic power was in the hands of Magyars and Magyarized Slovaks or, especially in cities, of Germans. When the Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918, a full third of its inhabitants claimed a nationality other than Czech or Slovak, and in 1930 there still were more citizens of German nationality than there were Slovaks (3,306,099 to 2,295,067). Although the constitution of 1920 granted the Slovak language legal equality with Czech, it refrained from settling the question of whether or not the two were separate and coequal languages. Instead, the constitution set forth the idea of Czechoslovak linguistic unity. According to this concept there existed only one language--the Czechoslovak language--common to both peoples, and this "state" and "official" language was accorded legal primacy over the languages spoken by the several minorities of the republic (especially German, Magyar, Ukrainian, and Polish). The construct of the Czechoslovak language was said to consist of two versions, Czech and Slovak--an interpretation linked to the earlier concept of a unitary Czechoslovak nation, or people, to which the preamble of the country's constitution made categorical reference. The fictional ethnic unity of the Czechs and Slovaks Czechoslovakism--served during World War I as a useful ideological foundation for those working toward bringing together the Czechs and Slovaks in a new independent Czechoslovak state. Unfortunately, Czechoslovakism was at least in part based on a denial of Slovak ethnic identity. Despite being equal under the law, the Slovaks in Czechoslovakia proved to be at a disadvantage, especially before World War II. The Czechs made little effort to conceal their conviction that their own culture-language and literature in particular--was far superior to Slovak culture. Asymmetry in cultural relations between the Czechs and Slovaks was paralleled

in their economic relations. The Slovak industrial economy, little developed to begin with, stagnated during much of the interwar period. Although in 1937 Slovakia's population, including its minorities, amounted to 24 percent of the republic's total, its share of the country's industrial production was only about 8 percent. The contribution of Slovak agriculture was only slightly more favorable. In short, Slovakia was considered by the Czechs as a mere appendage to the Czech economy.

Voices demanding Slovak self-government began to be heard even before the post-World War I peace treaties were signed, and the movement toward autonomy became one of the chief planks in the platform of the Slovak People's Party as early as 1919. The measures taken by the central government in Prague in response to the situation turned out to be largely formal. When in the autumn of 1938 Nazi Germany forced Czechoslovakia to cede its German-speaking frontier territory, the Slovaks declared themselves autonomous within the paralyzed Czecho-Slovak state. A month later Hungary annexed a large portion of southern Slovakia, home to a sizable Magyar minority, and on March 14, 1939, one day before Nazi troops began occupying what was left of the Czech-speaking part of the republic, Slovakia proclaimed itself an independent state.

Apologists for the establishment of the wartime Slovak state, which maintained nominal independence at the cost of subservience to the Third Reich, argue that the alternatives to independence at the time would have been disastrous for Slovakia: German occupation, or the return of Hungarian hegemony, or--still worse--the partitioning of Slovakia among Germany, Hungary, and possibly Poland. They further point out that the Czechs lost their independence without firing a shot as a result of their mistaken foreign policy, and that under such circumstances the gaining of limited independence by the Slovaks can hardly be considered a betrayal of the Czechs.

The post-World War II republic

The thorny question of how relations between the Czechs and Slovaks should be ordered after the war began to be discussed by their political leaders in exile soon after World War II began. Suggested solutions ranged from perpetuating the prewar arrangement (the preference of the Czechoslovak president in exile, Edvard Benes) to partial Slovak autonomy to federation to

full Slovak independence to a "soviet Slovakia." A measure of Slovak self-government was guaranteed in the program of the new Czechoslovak government proclaimed at Kosice in April 1945, just as the war in Europe was ending, but within a year the authority of the Slovak National Council had weakened and become subordinated to the central Czechoslovak government. Some strengthening of the Slovak position took place in the late 1950s, but the new socialist constitution proclaimed on July 11, 1960, made it possible to centralize state power once again.

The asymmetry which characterized Czech-Slovak relations during the 1960s proved an irritant to both peoples. The Slovaks came to view their national organs as appendages to the central government (which in fact they were) and most of the legislation as reflecting and serving Czech interests. On the other hand, many Czechs considered the existence of Slovak institutions that had no corresponding Czech counterparts as undue privileges granted the Slovaks (for example, the Slovak Academy of Sciences). In January 1968, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, under pressure from the Slovaks, finally reacted to the mounting expressions of dissatisfaction, and on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia (October 28, 1968), the Czechoslovak National Assembly approved federalization, to become effective as of January 1, 1969. From that date on until 1990, the republic was made up of the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic, each of which had exclusive jurisdiction in primary and secondary education, national culture, health, internal commerce, and several other areas. But the tendency to concentrate power in the federal organs at the expense of the jurisdiction of the individual republics was not halted. In 1971 Gustav Husak, a Slovak who would later become president, stressed the necessity of creating "a single Czechoslovak consciousness founded on our socialist order."

Despite the disposition of the numerically stronger Czechs to call the tune, not all postwar developments were to Slovakia's disadvantage, the Slovak economy being the prime example. Compared to the Czech lands, the per capita gross industrial output of Slovakia in 1937 was 27 percent, but thirty-five years later, in 1972, it had risen to 70 percent. Agricultural output in Slovakia also rose significantly after the war even though the proportion of mountainous or submontane areas there is greater than in the Czech lands.

The contemporary situation

The "velvet" revolution of November 1989, which ended forty-two years of Communist rule, reopened the question of the Czech-Slovak relationship, but this time the regained freedom of expression has made it impossible to keep the disagreement out of public view and vigorous open discussion.

The new president of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, a very fair and perceptive man, has been well aware of the ethnic problem from the beginning. He acknowledged it in a speech in Bratislava early in January 1990 when he said, "I consider it my task, and not only mine but the task of all of us, to see to it that the 1968 federation, which in no time turned out to be merely administrative within the framework of a totalitarian system, changes to an authentic federation whose two nations have agreed to live together because they want to rather than because they have been forced to." One of the first issues to be taken up was a terminological one, but one nonetheless passionately argued by both sides-how to rename the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Havel's earliest suggestion was simply to leave out the word Socialist from the official title Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. However, this was not enough for the Slovaks, in whose opinion the name Czechoslovak does not adequately express the equality and ethnic distinctness of the two peoples. It is indeed true that the compound Czechoslovak has caused many foreigners to use the term Czech, the first component of the compound, to mean Czechoslovak. However, it is also true that Czechoslovak does mean Czech and Slovak that the name has been in use since 1918, and that the Czechs, mentioned first, outnumber the Slovaks by about two to one. After much discussion and several votes in the Federal Assembly, during which the names Czechoslovak Federative Republic and CzechoSlovak Republic (with a hyphen) were rejected, the country was renamed Czech and Slovak Federative Republic.

Equal ethnic billing, however, is not the main focus of Slovak national concern. A highly vocal minority, in part influenced and supported by some Slovak separatists who left Slovakia in 1945 because they were tainted by collaboration with the German-controlled wartime Slovak government, hopes to gain independence for their country. The majority of Slovaks insist that they not be considered as peripheral by the Czechs and the federal government in Prague and that they begin to be taken seriously as a nation in its own right.

Since the national election in June, 1990, the division between the two federal republics has been widening. To alleviate the situation, representatives of the federal, Czech, and Slovak governments met behind closed doors in Trencianske Teplice at the beginning of August. Very little has been made public about what agreements, if any, were reached, but a strengthening of the federation is not likely to bring the two peoples closer together. The premier of the Slovak Republic has said that "we do not want to break up our common statehood but we must unequivocally state that the model of relations between the Czechs and Slovaks in a common state has not been satisfactory thus far for either the Slovaks or the Czechs." Government officials, especially Slovak, have stressed that only strong republics can strengthen the federation, and have argued, for example, for a Slovak ministry of foreign affairs, even though defense, finances, and foreign policy are invariably matters reserved for federal administration. However, one may also expect that the stronger the two republics become, the more difficult it will be for them to formulate mutually acceptable policies. During the late summer of 1990, nine Slovak political parties published a seven-point declaration which in essence called for an independent Slovak state. As late as the beginning of December, all political parties of the governing coalition in Slovakia were ready to propose to the Slovak government that it proclaim the sovereignty of Slovak laws over federal laws. If this had happened, the delayed but urgently needed economic reform would have been endangered, and potential investment from abroad greatly discouraged. Only the intervention of President Havel in mid-December brought about a compromise: the division of power between the two republics was defined and a bill to that effect was passed by the Federal Assembly.

On May 3, 1990, the formerly dissident Moravian writer Ludvik Vaculik published in the weekly *Literarni noviny* an article titled "Our Slovak problem." "Roughly speaking," he wrote, "our debt [to the Slovaks] is that we were glad to acquire Slovak territory physically and mentally, but failed to acquire as a matter of course Slovak perception, feeling, and thinking The Slovaks' complaint against us has deeper roots in my opinion, the Slovaks are not sufficiently prepared for an independent relationship with other nations on the basis of equal rights [because] they never had their own state." Vaculik concluded his essay by suggesting that if the Slovaks secede from the federation it would undoubtedly teach them a lesson and he added that there may even be an advantage for the Czechs if secession should happen. Subsequent issues of the weekly brought many letters from both Czechs and Slovaks in response to Vaculik's

frank analysis of the ethnic problem. A good many writers maintain hope that in the end Czechoslovakia will remain a common country for the two distinct but closely related ethnic groups. Some writers are quite critical of the Slovaks. One woman wrote, "May Slovakia be mature! ... May it be free! And may it learn, without putting the blame on others and without being patronized by the Czechs, what sacrifices are needed to pay for freedom And may my heart endure it!" And a man wrote, "If we have to have this 'federalization,' then I would suggest having it as follows," accompanying the statement by a drawing showing the Czech lands federated with Austria, and Slovakia with Hungary. Some of my own informants were quite direct and said that if the Slovaks wanted to be independent, no one should try to keep the present republic together, and "good riddance!"

While the problem of serious ethnic misunderstanding has given rise to vexing political and cultural discussions, one should not forget what some outstanding Czech writers (for example, Karel Capek) were saying already in the 1920s. They disapproved of the creation of artificial Czechoslovakism and urged Bohemian, Moravian, and Slovakian regionalism as a protection against separatism. Only after a healthy regionalism had developed could one create an indestructible framework such as an empire or a state. They also warned against centralism, of which the Czechs rather than the Slovaks were guilty between the two wars.

In the course of this century, nationalist movements in Europe have lost much of their force. This has been in part due to the increasing economic interdependence of one region on another, and in Eastern Europe also due to the internationalist character of the Communist rule. Even though some of the ethnic groups in Eastern Europe began having nationalist aspirations during the past several decades, outright national separatism was not a viable option to strive for under the pre-1989 political conditions. There is no question of a distinct Slovak ethnicity: the Slovaks have their own language and a well defined territory, the bulk of their history is distinct from that of the Czechs, and their attitudes are markedly different from those of the pragmatic and cautious Czechs. Recent developments elsewhere in Eastern Europe, especially the U.S.S.R and Yugoslavia, have encouraged the Slovaks to seek either maximum autonomy in a joint country with the Czechs, or complete independence. It is not easy to predict what will happen ultimately, but it is likely that the matter will be resolved, one way or the other, in the relatively near future. The majority of Slovaks still appear to favor an authentic federation, and, in the words of the Czech prime minister, "The basis for a federation is the will of both nations to live

together. The forms that common life will take can be negotiated." However, it appears to many that the longer it takes to define the relationship between the Czechs and Slovaks to the satisfaction of both nations, the less chance there will be for the federation to survive.