



Robert Aspeslagh, Hans Renner, Hans van der Meulen, eds. *Im historischen WÖ¼rgegriff: Die Beziehungen zwischen Ungarn und der Slowakei in der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1994. 180 pp. DM 48,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7890-3290-5.



Reviewed by Hugh Agnew (George Washington University)

Published on HABSBURG (October, 1996)

Dialogue or Parallel Monologue? Hungarian and Slovak Scholars on their Mutual Relations

In November 1992, the Clingdael Institute for International Relations and the Department for Central and East European History at the University of Groningen jointly sponsored a symposium in The Hague on the theme “Relations between Hungary and Slovakia: Past, Present and Future.” The present volume contains revised contributions originally presented at this conference (together with one commissioned by the editors later), whose authors include scholars from Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, and the Netherlands. Though the articles are printed without any references, the editors have assembled a ten-page bibliography covering—somewhat eclectically—the literature dealing with their themes, and there are three maps. The whole volume has a brief introduction by the OSCE’s High Commissioner for Minority Affairs, Max van der Stoel.

The contributions range widely over key issues in the Slovak-Hungarian relationship, falling into three broad periods: up to the end of the Second World War, from 1945 to 1989, and since 1989, especially with respect to the breakup of the Czecho-Slovak federation and the emergence of an independent Slovak Republic. The edi-

tors compare the relationship between Slovaks and Hungarians to the more familiar “conflictual association” (as historian Jan Kren called it) between Czechs and Germans, and express the hope that their volume will help address the comparative lack of literature for a Western audience on this equally important issue.

While in many ways this book helps fulfill that hope, overall the reader is left with the realization that such works often have a relatively short “half-life.” In the two years since publication (four since the original symposium) much of the material included in the contributions dealing with *Zeitgeschichte* has lost relevance as new issues have superseded old ones. The general theme, however, remains significant—as the recently signed Slovak-Hungarian and Romanian-Hungarian treaties, and the surrounding political discussions in Hungary and between Hungary and its neighbors, show. With the foregoing reservations, this volume makes two useful contributions. In the historical essays it provides concise summaries of significant aspects of the relationship between Slovaks and Hungarians in the past, while also illuminating certain key differences in approach to the problem

among scholars from the two nations. In the papers devoted to contemporary policy issues, these differences of approach emerge even more clearly.

The four essays covering aspects of the relationship up to the end of the Second World War produce intriguing contrasts. Laszlo Szarka's discussion of the policies of the Hungarian governments under Dualism focuses on the processes and consequences of industrialization as well as the political and cultural policies of the Budapest regime towards the Slovaks. His conclusions represent a summary of his longer monograph, recently published in Hungarian and reviewed on HABSBERG.[1] In contrast, Dusan Kovac casts his net widely, characterizing the Hungarian kingdom up to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century as a multinational state, which was then affected by the development of early nationalism among the Hungarian nobility. As a result, the ethnically tolerant but socially limited concept of the political *natio hungarica*, the noble political nation, was replaced by an idea of political nation that depended on the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the non-Magyar peoples in Hungary. Meanwhile, the cultural and political development of the Slovaks (and other non-Magyars) led them to raise demands for recognition as a separate political and national entity that were only realized by the breakup of the millennial Hungarian kingdom.

The picture of the development of relations between the new Czechoslovakia and interwar Hungary presented by Juraj Fabian stresses the relatively good situation of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, which—in spite of all its faults, including underlying problems in the Czech-Slovak relationship—was relatively successful at preserving a pluralistic political system guaranteeing significant national rights to its minorities. In contrast, according to Fabian, the Horthy regime and even its democratic opponents could not free themselves from the desire to reconstruct the lands of St. Stephen's Crown, whether through cooperation with Hitler or by asserting a unique Magyar mission as the leading element in a reorganized, democratic Danubian basin. The brief comments of Imre Molnar introduce a new villain into the picture, namely the Czechs. It was their imperial ambitions that worked not only to swallow up the Slovaks into a state-supported "Czechoslovak" political nation, but to create a picture of the Hungarian government and nation as the natural enemy of the Slovaks, as the Germans were to the Czechs. The position of the Hungarian minority, presented quite positively in Fabian's article, suddenly seems much less satisfactory, as Molnar stresses their lack of a university and the in-

completeness of the educational system in Magyar at the lower levels.

The contributions dealing with the period between the Second World War and 1989 show less stark contrasts, as well as a general agreement on the major elements that should be included. These four papers concentrate predominantly on the years 1945-1948, dealing with the years after about 1950 in a much more sketchy fashion. The postwar program outlined in the Kosice program of 1945, the question of the collective guilt of the Magyar (and German) population of the restored republic, the proposal for an exchange of populations, and the program of re-Slovakization are all issues touched upon by the authors. The consequences of the creation of a Soviet-dominated Communist bloc on Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations and the situation of the Magyar minority in Slovakia is another theme each author mentions. The loosening of conditions during 1968 affected also the lives of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, while the years of "normalization" ended with the development of some cooperation in intellectual and dissident circles, for instance against the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam project. The authors, Dagmar Cierna-Lantayova, Peter Tamaska, Gyula Popely, and Jozef Jablonicky, look on the changes of 1989 as a great opportunity for a new phase in the relationships between the Hungarian and Slovak states, and between Hungarians and Slovaks.

The rest of the contributions (ten essays) deal with aspects of this new phase, circling around questions of state to state relations between Hungary and the CSFR and the newly independent Slovakia, the impact of post-1989 changes on the status of the minorities including the question of OSCE influence, and the security dimensions of the minority question and Slovak-Hungarian relations. Slovak and Hungarian contributors tend to differ in the way they view the problem of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam project, the problem of the status of minorities under the new Slovak constitution (including the question of language rights and education) and the politics of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) of Vladimir Meciar. Among the Western contributors, Hans Renner provides a chronological summary of relations between the CSFR and Hungary between 1989 and 1992, covering ground that is now well-known. Robert Aspeslagh, in a comparative analysis that includes comments about the Hungarian communities in Transylvania in Romania and Vojvodina in the Serbian part of rump Yugoslavia, suggests that developments at the time of writing made the application of Lijphart's "consociational" model [2] problematic. In his view, the Slovaks, Romanians and

Serbs were too reluctant to recognize the Hungarian linguistic and cultural community, while the Hungarians by stressing above all demands for territorial autonomy were waving a red flag in front of their non-Hungarian fellow-citizens. Aspeslagh expresses the hope that the Hungarian leadership will concentrate on questions of language use and education, and place calls for autonomy in the background. Hans van der Meulen's analysis of the OSCE's contribution to minority protection recognizes limitations, but still hopefully asserts that "the work of the last few years regarding protection of minorities threatened with oppression is certainly not without results" (p. 129). Not exactly a ringing endorsement of the role of the Helsinki process under contemporary conditions? Similar optimistic tones sound in Theo van den Doel's discussion of the future of security cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. He suggests forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in security issues, seeing in an expanded Visegrad group of countries a prospect for fruitful cooperation and confidence-building experiences among its members. Again, this is perhaps over-optimistic. Developments since the time of writing suggest that the hopes placed in the Visegrad group or the Pentagonale by van den Doel and other contributors were misplaced, and that it is only the expansion of NATO and the EU that provide both leverage for Western European governments in matters concerning state-to-state and minority relations in the East Central European region, and prospects for cooperation among the states of the region on security matters.

This book leaves the reader with an open-ended final impression, as do most of the contributions dealing with contemporary issues. Nearly every contributor stresses the importance of compromise, open-mindedness, and

mutual give-and-take. Several authors, however, imply doubts about the presence or lack of the necessary political will to achieve these goals on the part of several major political actors, such as Slovak premier Meciar, the speakers for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia such as Miklos Duray, or Hungarian politicians like Istvan Csurka. While the two years since publication have demonstrated some progress, the fact remains that minority issues continue to be a major source of potential difficulty in the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary. As Jablonicky notes in his contribution, "the road to understanding is a continuous process, and we will constantly be surprised by new problems and not infrequently placed into seemingly irresolvable situations" (p. 73). But the present situation, as recognized by Peter Tamaska among others, offers better prospects for positive developments than at any other time during the last forty years, as long as "we accept the ancient wisdom that the future belongs to the living, and the dead should bury their dead" (p. 59). Whether the decisive resolve exists to break for good the historical stranglehold in which Slovak-Hungarian relations have been locked still remains an unanswered question.

Notes

[1]. The review of Szarka's book, *Szlovak nemzeti fejlodes-magyar nemzetisegi politika 1867-1918*. (Pozsony: Kalligram Konyvkiado, 1995), and the lively forum about it that followed, are archived on the HABSBURG website at <http://h-net2.msu.edu/~{}habsweb/archives/threads/szarka.html> 2. Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Hugh Agnew. Review of Aspeslagh, Robert; Renner, Hans; Meulen, Hans van der, eds., *Im historischen WöÄrgegriff: Die Beziehungen zwischen Ungarn und der Slowakei in der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=630>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.