

FR. TISO - A MUCH MALIGNED PRIEST

Looked at from a distance, the wartime rulers of Slovakia appear as one entity. But a close look shows two very different opposing factions sharing power - one backed by Germany with a neo-Nazi ideology and led by Vojteck Tuka - the other a coalition of Slovak politicians led by Fr. Josef Tiso and supported by the bishops.

In 1945 Russia established a Communist government in Slovakia. It was not popular and resistance was centred around Tiso and the Catholic Church. To discredit the Church, the Communists accused Fr. Tiso of being responsible for the anti-Semitic crimes of the Tuka faction. The Slovaks rejected this lie but it was accepted abroad. Many history books in the West still picture Tiso as a fascist dictatorial anti-Semitic fanatic. To understand Tiso's position it is necessary to know some Slovak history.

WITHIN THE HUNGARIAN EMPIRE

For generations Slovakia had been ruled by Hungary and the Hungarians had tried to destroy the Slovak language and culture. This had led to the growth of a strong Slovak nationalism. Both the Hungarians and Slovaks were mainly rural peoples. So the Hungarian aristocracy encouraged Jewish immigration so as to form an urban middle class. By tradition Jews lived in urban areas and educated themselves for urban employment such as law, finance, medicine, trade and industrial development.

By adopting the Hungarian language and culture, the Jews became integrated into Hungarian life. But in Slovakia this caused resentment. This Hungarian speaking hard working Jewish middle class, administering the towns, owning industry, involved in education and intellectual life, were seen as agents of a dominating foreign power. As the towns prospered and grew, the resentment deepened.

AUTONOMY WITHIN CZECHOSLOVAKIA (TISO AS PRIME MINISTER)

In 1918 the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dismembered and Slovakia became part of Czechoslovakia. With the promise of autonomy, the Slovaks entertained great hopes that their language and culture would be able to recover and develop. But the more numerous Czechs voted for Socialist governments keen on central control and uniformity. They imposed the Czech language and culture on the Slovaks by flooding the country with Czech teachers, judges and administrators (such as post office, railway and public health employees). Of 139 generals in the army, one was Slovak. Few Slovak Professors were appointed to Bratislava University, although many Slovaks were qualified. The Czech teachers promoted secularism to undermine the religious beliefs (Catholic and Protestant) of Slovak children.

On 22nd September 1938 Hungary demanded areas of southern Slovakia and the city of Bratislava, while Poland made claims to northern areas. A conference of Germany, Britain, France and Italy was established to decide on the disputes. Bratislava was the Slovak capital, but was near to the border with Hungary. It had minorities of Hungarians, Jews and Germans. Economic, historical and family ties influenced the preferences of the population, so the Slovaks feared it would be awarded to Hungary.

On October 6th 1938 the eight largest Slovak parties coalesced into the Unity Party to face the foreign threats. Autonomy within Czecho-Slovakia was declared and Tiso elected as Prime Minister. The Czechs reluctantly accepted this new situation.

On November 2nd, the international conference awarded southern areas to Hungary and small northern areas to Poland, but Bratislava was left for the Slovaks.

In December 1938 thousands of Czech teachers, legal personnel and administrators were sent home. Elections were also held in December and, on 18th January, parliament re-elected Tiso as Prime Minister.

‘INDEPENDENCE’ UNDER GERMAN ‘PROTECTION’

In March 1939 Hitler wanted to destroy Czechoslovakia, so invited Fr. Tiso to Berlin to tell him that Hungary was about to invade Slovakia. He added that if Slovakia immediately declared her independence from Czecho-Slovakia, Germany would protect her. The next day, 14th March, the Slovak parliament unanimously ‘chose’ independence.

There had been no time to learn how independent Slovakia would be. But a condition of Slovakia being ‘protected’ was that; “The Slovak Government will always conduct its foreign policy in close consultation with the German Government”. In theory she was to be free regarding internal affairs, but in reality German ‘advisors’ were appointed in many spheres of public life. As Germany considered she was fighting international Jewry, relations with Jews were treated as part of foreign policy.

In July 1939 a democratic Constitution was ratified by a public vote in support of the Unity Party and, in August, Parliament elected Tiso to be President. The country spent the following months in establishing itself while trying to limit German influence.

Hitler was hoping Vojtech Tuka, leader of the pro-German anti-Semitic faction, would seize control and replace Tiso. But, when after two years this had not occurred, Hitler called Tiso to Salzburg. He ordered him, under threat of invasion, to appoint Tuka as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, with Alexander Mach as Interior Minister. Although Tiso remained as President his power after the 28th July 1940 was very limited.

COMMENT

We can see that the period when Tiso was a major force in Slovak politics was the 26 months from 6th October 1938 till 28th July 1940. So let us look at the accusations that he showed himself to be anti-Semitic during this period.

JEWISH ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

As explained above, by the time Czechoslovakia was formed there was widespread resentment towards the Hungarian Jews. Also a violent anti-Semitic faction, aiming to expel the Jews from Slovakia, had emerged under the leadership of Tuka.

After gaining freedom from Hungary in 1918, the resentment could have been expected to die away but, with the establishment of Czechoslovakia, middle class Jews found they had much in common with Czech urban society. This led to the view that these Jews were co-operating with the Czech in their attempt to destroy Slovak culture. At the same time poor Jews allied themselves politically with the pro-Czech, centralised government in Prague. So both sections of the Jewish community again came to be seen as agents of anti-Slovak policies.

An event during the autumn of 1938 had the effect of radicalising Slovak public opinion. Hungary was demanding southern Slovakia and Bratislava. And when the international Conference sat to judge the dispute, the Slovaks feared they would lose both. At this critical and emotive time many Jews, using their economic, intellectual and political influence, campaigned to cede both to Hungary.

Jews were not numerous in Slovakia, but the rich Hungarian speaking Jewish middle class owned nearly half the national wealth, including 90% of the textile industry and similar proportions of the wood and alcohol industries. Jews constituted 72% of lawyers, 64% of doctors, 58% of restaurant and tavern owners, and 37% of merchants and over half of National Bank employees. It was this situation that enabled this small number of Jews to have an exceptional influence in the intellectual and political life of the country.

The campaign was unsuccessful and the Slovaks retained Bratislava. But this action had exacerbated feelings against the Jewish community. Many remembered that this middle class had been established by the Hungarians to rule the Slovaks. It had now used its influence to support the Hungarians against the Slovaks. This was at the same time the Slovaks were sending home the Czechs, who had been imposed on them.

This growing resentment against the Jewish community was not based on racial or religious anti-Semitism. But Tiso, as President, realised he had to counter the upsurge in support for Tuka.

In a conversation with the Papal Nuncio on 14 April 1939, Tiso said that the Jewish action regarding Bratislava had made his work of opposing the anti-Semite demands difficult. At this time the Church was helping Tiso by holding meetings to condemn racial and religious anti-Semitism.

Eventually, laws inspired by Tiso were passed on 25th October 1939. They aimed to satisfy public opinion and parliament, and thereby de-fuse rising support for Tuka's anti-Semites. At the same time, they aimed to respect the human rights of Jews as individuals.

The laws stipulated that 51% of shares in Jewish owned firms had to be sold to Slovaks. The proprietor would be free to decide to whom he sold – thereby providing the opportunity to chose a friendly buyer or buyers and exclude anti-Semites. Tiso deliberately made known his plan early so owners could arrange sales without undue haste. The price would be the market value and the owner, who would stay as director, would be free to invest the proceeds wherever he wished, including abroad.

The number of Jews affected by this law was not large, but a second law limiting Jewish entry into the middle class professions affected more. The aim was to gradually reduce the Jewish proportion to 4%. The same percentage law was applied to the 150 000 Germans and 50 000 Czechs.

Whether this was the best solution of the problem is a matter of opinion. But it shows that Tiso was trying to be as fair as possible to the Jewish individuals concerned, while satisfying Slovak public opinion and Parliament.

In his 1947 'trial' Tiso said that he did not regret the laws as they protected the rights of the Slovaks. He agreed he had set out to limit Jewish economic power but never in a brutal, or inhuman way, nor out of racial hatred. He wanted to give the Slovaks nation what rightfully belonged to it

TISO SPOKE OUT TO PREVENT ANTI-SEMITIC VIOLENCE

In October 1938 tensions were high on the 8th when Tiso gave his first speech following the declaration of independence. The international Conference in Vienna was deciding the fate of southern Slovakia and Bratislava. The campaign by the pro-Hungarian Bratislava Jews was causing a rise in anti-Semitism, so during his speech Tiso stressed that there should be no anti-Semitic arbitrary acts

In an interview with the Telegraph on 12 Feb 1939 Tiso said the Jewish question would be solved in a just, social and human way. He added that he supported the Zionist wish to establish a Jewish home in Palestine.

On 21st February 1939, he praised the Slovak people for not physically attacking Jews, but waiting for a just and legal solution to their grievances.

COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA

With the aid of Marxist sympathisers, the Communists succeeded in painting a picture in Western minds of Tiso being a rabid racist. So today when news items concerning anti-Semitic acts in Slovakia are recalled, readers presume that Tiso was responsible. It is therefore necessary to provide examples of how ignorance of the background to events was used by the Communists to defame Tiso.

1. In March 1939 there was wide spread attacks on Jews and their property.

Background:

Just previously, in a broadcast on the 15th, Tiso had warned those planning anti-Semitic acts that if they committed them, they would be prosecuted.

The London Times of 17th March 1939 reported that it was the Nazis and some Hlinka Guards that had carried out the attacks. The neo-Nazis at this time were winning the struggle for control of the Hlinka Guard youth organization.

2. In the middle of August 1939 a large mob looted and demolished homes and shops in the Jewish quarter of Bratislava. Synagogues were ransacked and vandalised, and people injured. It was four hours before the police intervened.

Background: The London Times of July 3rd, 14th and August 31st. reported the mob consisted of ‘Germans with a smattering of Slovaks’. It was generally assumed that Karmasin, leader of the German minority, had inspired the pogrom, on the pretext that Jews had attacked members of his German Storm Troopers the day previously. The police, due to the Czechs having been sent home, had insufficient officers. Also, the German Gestapo had moved into the police command offices

3. Jews were expelled from administrative positions.

Background: The London Times of 30th August 1939 reported that ‘the Germans occupied most of the administrative posts’. This report does not make it clear whether these Germans were from Germany or had been recruited locally to replace the Czechs. Whichever it was, Tiso was not responsible for the dismissals.

4. On the first day of September 1939 Jews were expelled from the Slovak army.

Background: Following protracted negotiations, a German-Slovak military treaty had been signed. The Slovaks were allowed to decide the size of their army, and the Germans would not have a legal right to station troops in Slovakia without permission. But in times of danger the Supreme Commander of the German army would assume overall command of the Slovak armed forces. According to the Germans, a dangerous situation had developed in August because Poland was preparing to invade.

With the Slovak army under German overall control, situations could arise where a German soldier would have to salute a Jewish Slovak officer. So the Germans made the Slovaks dismiss Jews and allocate them to serving their period of conscription in labour detachments. It is no coincidence that the dismissals came just 20 days after the signing of the military treaty. This incident indicates that previously, when the Slovaks were in control of the army, there were Jewish officers.

5. While these anti-Semites acts were reported in the Western Media, the quiet counter actions by Tiso and his allies were not.

- a) Immediately after the declaration of independence, Tiso appointed Jozef Kirschbaum, a Catholic youth leader, as Party Secretary. At the same time he appointed another dedicated Catholic, Ferdinand Durcansky, as Minister of Interior and Foreign Affairs. A German agent reported that, following the broadcast of a speech by Hitler, both remained seated during the playing of the German national anthem
- b) In September a German agent blamed Kirschbaum for informing the police when Germans were preparing a surprise attack on the Jews.
- c) In October Kirschbaum was accused of having helped 160 Jews avoid conscription for work service.

- d) In October Kirschbaum also replaced the pro-German editor of the official Government newspaper with a known anti-German
- e) A German agent reported that during demonstrations on 2nd November 1939, anniversary of the Vienna awards, Hungarian and German shops were damaged, without police intervention. Yet the demonstrators against the Jews were faced with strong police intervention. Interior Minister Durcansky was blamed for this.
- f). In July 1940 a German agent reported that Durcansky and Kirschbaum belonged to the Catholic Nastup group. “Soon after the declaration of independence there developed a power struggle between this group and the active pro-German fighters of the Hlinka Guard ...”
- g). Mach was also commander of the Hlinka Guard. But in May 1940, Tiso replaced him with Frantisek Galan, a friend of Kirschbaum and a keen Catholic
- h). A pro-German priest complained to a German agent that:
“The Tiso government, whose leading hand is Durcansky, is attempting by all means with the help of the Catholic faith to influence the mood in Slovakia against the Reich”.
- i). Another agent reported in May: “the current regime can correctly be called a clerical-liberal regime ...” He went on to warn Berlin not to be fooled by friendly statements and parades which were a cover for anti-German moves.
- j). A report on the 9th June reads: “ The political influence of the Catholic Church is constantly increasing.” ... “In all ministries an attempt is being made to eliminate the influence of the Germans”.

COMMENT

Although most of the world, including Britain, France and The Soviet Union, recognised Slovak independence, its freedom was limited by being a ‘protectorate’ of Germany. It was not free to pursue its own foreign policy and German ‘advisors’ sat in many government departments. According to the London Times of Aug 31, 1939, German Military Courts had been established throughout Slovakia. Even today Slovaks debate whether the country was truly independent between 1939-1945.

This semi-independence under German ‘protection’ was forced on Slovakia against the will of Tiso and parliament. But Tiso used this strange situation to minimise German influence while working for full independence. Saying one thing in public, while promoting the opposite in secret, was felt to be necessary. But after the war, this practice made it easy to confuse those in the West not aware of the complicated situation.

28th JULY 1940 - HITLER INTERVENES

From Oct 1939 till July 1940 life was comparatively calm in Slovakia. Although Hitler was not satisfied with Tiso's policies and his friendship with the Jews, he wanted Tuka's pro-German group to gain power without direct German intervention. This didn't occur and, when Tiso in a speech on 30th June, stated that the Slovaks did not need a foreign ideology and Mach was demoted, Hitler intervened.

Under threat of invasion, Hitler forced Tiso to appoint Tuka as Foreign Minister as well as Prime Minister and Mach as Interior Minister, leaving Tiso with little power.

On Sept 10th 1940, the Tuka dominated parliament passed: *The Jewish Code*. This contained humiliating and discriminating regulations together with plans for the transportation of Jews to what the Germans described as a new Jewish city in Poland.

Tiso, as President, refused to sign *The Jewish Code*, but it was enforced without his signature. Some bishops urged him to resign but he knew that Tuka would take his place and Nazify education and the whole of society. Other Church leaders and Jewish representatives urged him to stay as President. He decided to stay.

Fr. Tiso found that as President, he was able to use two clauses of the Code to exempt some Jews from its regulations and this he did. Protests by Tiso, the bishops and the Holy See delayed the proposed transportation for seventeen months.

But on 7th March 1942, Mach used his paramilitary units to transport 52 000 Jews in 8 weeks. But it was becoming known that death, not resettlement, awaited those being transported. So Tiso was able to persuade Parliament to change the Constitution. This was achieved on May 15th and, using his increased powers, Tiso stopped the transportations and authorised tens of thousands of exceptions from the regulations.

In February 1944, Tuka and Mach resigned and Tiso appointed new Ministers who rescinded *The Code*. As Germany was losing the war, she could not afford troops to intervene. In August 1944 a Russian provoked uprising led to German troops entering the country and, once there, Tiso and his government had little authority outside the capital. Laws to help arrest the Jews had to be passed, but government officials helped the International Red Cross, the Slovak Red Cross and the Church to hide Jews. But the Germans found and deported 13,500. Tiso's protests were ignored.

In 1947 the Communists, in a widely publicised show-trial, transferred all the blame for anti-Semitic actions onto Tiso. Being a Catholic priest, they could use the 'trial' for anti-Church propaganda throughout Europe. Fr. Tiso was found 'guilty' and, with the help of left-wing opinion formers in the West, his reputation was destroyed abroad.

Fr. Tiso, who opposed the persecutions and deportations, was executed. Alexander Mach, who carried out the 1942 deportations, was sentenced to 30 years in prison and released after 20.

NOTES: For further background see Chapter VII, Sections v and vi in our longer, referenced publication: 'FR TISO, SLOVAKIA & HITLER', available at www.churchinhistory.org. Also see 'Addendum' at end of the publication.