



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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James Mace Ward
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Topic of research

Jozef Tiso (1887–1947) is arguably the most controversial Slovak in history. As president of the 1939–1945 Slovak Republic, this Roman Catholic priest sanctioned the deportation of approximately 58,000 Jews to German-occupied Poland, thus literally embodying one of the most infamous intersections of Catholicism and fascism. His defenders nonetheless argue that he protected Jews and was a democrat at heart. Such diametrically opposed views of Tiso not only characterize social debate in Slovakia about him today, but were commonplace during his lifetime. For example, during the 1918–1938 First Czechoslovak Republic, when he and his party waged a twenty-year battle for Slovak autonomy, the Prague press portrayed him both as a fanatic hater of all things Czech, and as a constructive partner in governing. To a similar degree of contradiction, his Slovak contemporaries clashed over his nationalist pedigree and the sincerity of his piety. For his Slovak enemies, he was a national renegade who sought to return Slovakia to Hungarian subjugation, an astounding religious hypocrite with a “morally perverse character”. His Slovak admirers, in contrast, typically described him as a “tireless worker for the Slovak nation” and as a “flawless” cleric. Over a half century after his death, he remains the only executed war criminal that people seriously propose as a Catholic saint.

My project looks at Tiso’s life, memory, and historiography. Its aim is to untangle the contradictions that characterize his life and to understand the dynamics of the controversy surrounding him.

Relevance and contribution to field

Since no reliable, comprehensive study on Tiso exists, the immediate contribution of my work is empirical; it promises to fill long-standing gaps in our knowledge of Tiso and to make sense of contradictory evidence. In addition to experts on Eastern Europe, scholars of such diverse topics as empire, identity, nationalism, fascism, political Catholicism, theology, collaboration, resistance, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and war crimes trials should all find my biography of Tiso useful.

The secondary focus of my work—his memory and historiography—should be of special interest for policy experts and those interested in post-Communist transformations. Whether as the object of ultranationalist adulation, as the subject of a public opinion poll, or as the title character in an award-winning play, Tiso is a perennial topic of uneasy discourse for Slovaks. The day I left Slovakia in late August 2005, for example, he graced the cover of a leading national weekly in the guise of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull. This current discussion about Tiso echoes an aggressive attempt to rehabilitate him that Slovak émigrés launched in 1989, coincident with the collapse of Communism. It took Slovak and Western liberals nearly a decade to shut that attempt down. They did so through educating the Slovak public about Tiso's record as a war criminal and collaborator, but also by persuading most Slovaks that Tiso's rehabilitation threatened democratization in Slovakia and stymied the country's aspirations for European integration. While the campaign to rehabilitate Tiso has subsequently gone underground, nearly a quarter of Slovak society continues to hold positive attitudes toward him. My work will help explain the durability of Tiso's appeal, evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign to prevent his rehabilitation, and make recommendations on how to approach similar challenges in the future.

Finally, my research also raises theoretical questions on how historians deal with moral subjects. Tiso is a unique moral problem, the only priest to lead a national state that enthusiastically participated in the destruction of its Jewry. Thus, the moral claims of Catholicism, Slovak nationalism, and the Holocaust collide more dramatically in his life than in any other. Histories of Tiso are frequently strident defenses or condemnations of him, or—for those who feel a moral viewpoint obscures the clarity of analysis—passionless narratives that ostensibly seek not to judge, but only to understand. My work will problematize each of these strategies for analyzing moral subjects and, I hope, propose an alternative approach that utilizes multiple moral viewpoints. If I am successful, historians who deal with similar subjects that have powerful moral meaning may find my methods useful.

Approach and research methodology

Except for my interest in reconciling moral viewpoints with historical analysis, there is nothing noteworthy about my methodology. I simply try to read every document that I can find and then piece together what I have learned into a coherent whole. I search especially far and wide for sources. During this

research trip (which was also supported by a Fulbright-Hayes grant), I worked in 26 different archives or libraries, including 18 in Slovakia,¹ three in the Czech Republic,² two in Hungary,³ and three in Austria.⁴ The kinds of documents I collected included government and Church administrative documents, diplomatic and party correspondence, school records, private letters, unpublished memoirs, and extensive press coverage. Reading all of these will be a challenge, as their languages include Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, Polish, Italian, Latin, French, Ukrainian, and Serbian.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

I returned with over 200 kilograms of documents and books, plus a laptop crammed full of electronic records and files. So far, I have only skimmed much of this material. Thus, though I have found a tremendous number of relevant primary sources, I hesitate to speculate too quickly on exactly what they mean, particularly since my goal is to clear away confusion and controversy about Tiso rather than to compound it. In place of preliminary conclusions, I offer a pair of tentative theses that reflect my current thinking about Tiso.

Both of these theses, which I will discuss shortly, emerge from a parallel, symmetrical pattern in Tiso's life, in which remarkably similar experiences were repeated twenty years apart. As was common for a generation of Europeans, of course, the main experience repeated here was world war. Tiso served in the First World War as a field curate in a brutal (but for him brief) frontline campaign, in the Second, as commander-in-chief of a minor Axis army that later revolted against him. Besides these two wars, however, Tiso's life also was framed by parallel experiences of revolution, occupation, collaboration, state building, Jewish persecution, Hungarian irredentism, and Communist invasion.

Tiso first went through these experiences in 1918–1919, when he worked to transform his town of Nyitra, Hungary, into Nitra, Czechoslovakia. As a prominent cleric and ethnic Slovak who had, as late as 1916, been a conspicuous proponent of multinational Hungary, Tiso co-negotiated the occupation of the town by an army unit of mainly Czech soldiers, ostensibly to restore order in the wake of a revolution that he had helped to fan. He then worked closely with Czechoslovak authorities to consolidate control over the town by erasing its Hungarian character through "Slovakization." At the same time, he waged a strident anti-Semitic campaign that even proposed to kick the Jews out of Slovakia. From the viewpoint of the town's Hungarians (a substantial portion of whom were also Jews), Tiso was a collaborator and traitor, and many

¹ Univerzitná knižnica (Bratislava); Slovenský národný archív (Bratislava); Archív Slovenského rozhlasu (Bratislava); Historický ústav and Ústredná knižnica, Slovenská akadémia vied (Bratislava); Slovenský filmový ústav (Bratislava); Štátny archív v Bratislave (Bratislava); Slovenská národná knižnica, Archív literatúry a umenia, and Národný biografický ústav (Martin); Štátny archív v Nitre (Nitra); Štátny archív v Nitre, pobočka Nitra (Nitra); Diecézny archív v Nitre (Nitra); Štátny archív v Nitre, pobočka Topoľčany (Topoľčany); Štátny archív v Bytči (Bytča); Štátny archív v Bytči, pobočka Žilina (Žilina); Archív Spolku sv. Vojtecha (Trnava); Archív RK Farského úradu v Bánovciach nad Bebravou (Bánovce nad Bebravou).

² Archiv Parlamentu ČR, Národní archiv, and Národní knihovna/Klementinum (Prague).

³ Országos Széchényi Könyvtár and Magyar Országos Levéltár (Budapest).

⁴ Pázmáneum, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, and Archiv der Universität Wien (Vienna).

of them longed for Nitra to return to Hungary. Their wishes almost became reality in the summer of 1919, when the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic invaded Slovakia and nearly captured Nitra, forcing Tiso to flee for his life.

During 1938–1945, in comparison, Tiso fundamentally repeated all of these experiences in a national, rather than local, context. In 1938, he led a political revolt to transform Slovakia into an autonomous province within Czechoslovakia. He immediately then had to confront an irredentist Hungary, which successfully reclaimed a wide swath of southern Slovakia through German-Italian arbitration. Nine months later, despite professing loyalty to Czechoslovakia only days before, he played a key role in helping Hitler to create a semi-independent Slovakia and, by default, to occupy the Czech lands. Over the next six years, Tiso worked closely with the Germans to build Slovakia into a viable state, a process accompanied by an anti-Semitic campaign that this time coincided with the Holocaust. In 1944, as the Slovak state began to disintegrate, Tiso sanctioned the German occupation of his country and the ruthless suppression of a national uprising—once more, as in 1918, ostensibly to restore order. Finally, in 1945, he fled for his life again before advancing Soviet troops.

The first thesis that emerges from examining these parallels in Tiso's life is an understanding of him as a lifelong collaborator: before 1918 with the Hungarians, between 1918 and 1939 with the Czechs, and after 1939 with the Germans. While students of Slovakia sometimes disagree over whether the first and even last part of this trilogy was collaboration, they unanimously agree that Tiso's relationship with the Czechs was instead liberation. I argue that liberation here is a moral claim that obscures a fundamental continuity in Tiso's life. Believing that Slovaks were unprepared for statehood, Tiso always employed a more powerful "brother" nation to act as a patron and shield. Many of those who counted Tiso among their ranks, however, saw these brothers as the enemy. In each case, Tiso's relationship with the predecessor brother nation helps to illuminate the course he took with its successor. Conceiving of Tiso as a lifelong collaborator also begs the pivotal question of why his most benign collaboration, with the Czechs, was his most contentious.

Tiso's parallel state-building experiences, in turn, suggest the second thesis: that the *Gleichschaltung* that he carried through in 1938 had both Nazi and Czechoslovak roots. Deportations, disenfranchisement, the reconstruction of state administration along ethnic lines, the banning of leftist parties, censorship, political arrest, and the seizure of Jewish property were features not only of Tiso's 1938–1939 autonomous Slovakia, but also of the 1918–1919 consolidation of the Czechoslovak state. While the second incarnation of these phenomena was always harsher, more extensive, and more violent, the similarities between these two periods in Tiso's life are striking and challenge traditional interpretations of his later actions as entirely Nazi-inspired.

Suggestions for future research agendas

With the federalization of Czechoslovakia in fall 1938, the easternmost section of the country, Ruthenia, also gained autonomy. Its prime minister was another priest-politician in the Tiso mold, the Ukrainian Avgustyn Voloshyn

(1874–1945). As I cannot think of any major Czechoslovak interwar politician more neglected in current scholarship, I would especially welcome a new study on him and his autonomy movement in Ruthenia.

Suggestions for the US Policy Community

In the early 1990s, experts on East Central Europe could rely on *The Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines* (a press survey) to keep abreast of developments in the region. After the 2004 wave of European Union expansion, *Newslines* stopped covering Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. I am unaware of any alternatives for this service that have since emerged. I therefore suggest that the United States develop a new press survey, modeled on the *Newslines*, for these four countries.