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The Fate of German and Hungarian Minorities in Czechoslovakia after World War II

Half a century has passed since the oppression of the German and Hungarian minorities could start in Czechoslovakia with the support of the victorious great powers after World War II, for these ethnic groups could not be defended by the defeated mother nations.

Although this historical fact, which is still painful and injurious to us, has a literature enough for a library, when today mention is made of this, the facts are often cited incorrectly and imperfectly. And this happens in spite of the fact that after the political transformations, publications, studies, and journalism appeared not only in Slovakia but also in Hungary on the distress of the Hungarian minority and the minorities in general, which are mostly free from the influence of the attitude of the earlier communist-Marxist decades. It is relevantly present among the shortcomings that these works scarcely deal with the fate of the German minority, though the Czechoslovak attitude came down to the practice in connection to the Sudeten Germans in a way that almost all of the domestic German population—ranked as of fascist sentiments—was deported. The methods used against them were even more radical than what the Hungarians encountered. There was only one historian found—Ján Mlynárik—who declared at the 4th joint meeting of the Federal Assembly in July 1990: ‘An offence has been committed after the war against the Carpathian and Sudeten Germans who were driven from here by our gestapism. The Hungarians suffered violence as well. I demand the abrogation of those presidential decrees of that period, which provided the legal basis for this and made this possible. We cannot go to Europe with such a burden...’

The attitude toward and the manifestations in connection to the Hungarian question were decisively influenced by the actual situation at the front and the political judgement on Hungary in the years of World War II. Thus, we can find a wide spectrum of ‘solutions’ starting from the tolerance toward minorities and the recognition of their rights, to the idea of deportation and transfer. Among historical literature, we can read about this primarily in the book of Kálmán Janics (*Homeless Years*). It was Gyula Illyés to write the preface to its first, 1979 Western German publication.

Eduard Beneš, who never hid that he was followed Machiavellianism in the political struggle, had a crucial part in the formation of the prevailing Czechoslovak standpoint. Given that he had full powers in the Czechoslovak National Committee with its headquarters in London, it is understandable that his influence was always felt in the matters of his country. We have at our disposal a number of characteristic examples that illustrate the ‘turnarounds’ of Beneš and his emigrant companions with respect to the Hungarian question. We can read the following in the first ceremonial declaration of October 17, 1939 of the Czechoslovak National Committee in Paris: ‘In the spirit of Masaryk and Stefanik, we are determined to fight for and defend a free and democratic Czechoslovakian Republic,

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a republic, which will be fair to every ethnicity of the country ... and is built upon the same right and equal obligations of every citizen.' (excerpt chosen by the author, K. V.)

When the government of Great Britain recognized the provisional government formed from the Czechoslovak National Committee and the assign of President Eduard Beneš, the president proclaimed the following democratic principles toward the minorities of his country in his first message on July 24, 1940: 'I hereby solemnly proclaim these democratic and legal principles, and emphasize that these principles are valid for every member of the nation.' Beneš showed 'flexibility' even in connection to the Hungarian-Slovak border issue until the break out of the Soviet-German war, when he stated on April 5, 1940: 'As for myself, I believe that we will not regain our former borders in Slovakia completely, but it is really not in our interest to spoil our relations again with the Hungarians because of this. And especially not, because this is justified by the behaviour of the Slovaks in the past and in the present.' This comment of Beneš was uttered in the time of the Teleki government when—as it is known—Hungary not only preserved its neutrality but upon the invasion of Poland (which meant the beginning of World War II) refused the request of Hitler who wanted to use the Hungarian railway system for this military operation. At the same time, however, Slovakia of Tiso took part in the assault on Poland on the side of the Nazi troops. Thus, it is no wonder that the emigrant Czechoslovak government in London disapproved of the pro-German behaviour of the Slovakia of that time. In the same manner, even the Slovak Clementis—later Czechoslovak deputy minister of foreign affairs—wrote in his book entitled *Messages from London*: 'They (that is, the Slovaks, K. V.) throw themselves upon the members of a fraternal nation in their deranged deformation...'

However, the war of Hitler started against the Soviet Union made its influence felt on the standpoints of the Czechoslovak emigration regarding the minorities. As soon as the government of Great Britain endorsed the plan of Beneš and his colleagues in September 1942 on the deportation of Germans from Czechoslovakia, the fate of the more than 3 million Sudeten Germans was sealed. Beneš wrote in a letter of his addressed to Social Democrat Representative Wilhelm Jaksch—who was also spending his exile in London—that he entertained a similar standpoint in the 'solution' of this matter in case of the Hungarian minority as well. Notwithstanding this, we have to point it out that England—in spite of the repeated requests of Beneš—did not take up this idea.

Beneš received the consent of the Soviet government already in the summer of 1943 to the transfer solution of the Sudeten German question. As opposed to this, at the audience of Beneš at Roosevelt during his sojourn in the US, the American president was not willing to discuss the removal of Hungarians and in those times Moscow had not endorsed the Czechoslovak plan on the deportation of Hungarians either.

In spite of this, Beneš emphasized it at the discussion with the leaders of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPCz): the method of transfer will be enforced on the Hungarians as well. It will be facilitated by the fact that they would be able to exchange the Hungarians of Slovakia and the Slovaks of Hungary. This misleading manoeuvre did not want to take into account the fact that in case of a possible population exchange three-quarters of a million Hungarians could not have been exchanged for the supposed two hundred thousand

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Slovaks. In any case, Gottwald, Secretary General of the CPCz, underlined it in his report of December 21, 1943 sent to the communist group in London (Clementis, Novomesky) that by the end of the political 'purging' operation after the war, 'the Czechoslovak Republic would have to become a Slav nation state'. Moreover, in May 1944, the Czechoslovak Party Secretary General adopted the need for open violence against the Hungarian minority. Characteristically, it was Gottwald to draft in March 1945 the infamous Chapter 8 of the Košice Program on the collective deprivation of minorities of their rights.

As opposed to this, we can find Karol Smidke, President of the Slovak National Council, who stated back in 1944 during his negotiations in Moscow: 'as opposed to Germans, Hungarians behaved themselves well, most of them are democrats...'. Similarly, we can read it in an intelligence report of the time that Laco Novomesky, Slovak writer and politician declared: 'Many Hungarians remained more faithful to our Republic than any of the Slovaks or Czechs... We must not leave and betray them in the fight'. However, when the outcome of the war had been practically decided and the military operations started for the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Gustáv Husák—the would-be president—pronounced this: 'The Slovak peasants and workers, who had been expelled from the rich southern lands and driven into the nooks of mountains, had to regain this ancient Slovak territory...' Thus, Husák was willing to falsify history in order to be able to remove the Hungarian peasantry from its ancient land, the Csallóköz (Žitný Ostrov), with a future population exchange.

As far as the fate of the Hungarians of Upper Hungary is concerned, we have to deal, first of all, with its diplomatic history antecedents and those measures, which were adopted by the Slovak National Council before the Košice 'Legislation' of the Beneš government.

A number of anti-Hungarian and German measures appeared in the last years of the war—before the establishment of the government program of Beneš. Thus, for example, the decree adopted by the Slovak National Council on September 6, 1944, which terminated the schools of Hungarian and German language of instruction in Slovakia with the exception of primary schools founded before November 1938. At the same time, it prohibited that the congregations recognized by the State hold the religious services in German and Hungarian at those places, where this was introduced after the first Vienna Award (November 2, 1938).

According to the decree issued on February 21, 1945, every agricultural property, which was in the possession of ethnic Hungarians who were not Czechoslovak citizens on November 1, 1938, was confiscated without compensation for the purpose of land reform.

The Beneš emigration—unfortunately—received 'encouragement' from Slovakia for the future anti-Hungarian measures even back during the wartime years. Thus, we can refer e.g. to the letter of Radakovic, an agrarian party politician, who wrote to Beneš to London in 1943: 'There is hatred towards Hungary in Slovakia; discussions are going on about how it would be possible to eliminate the Hungarian influence, even at the cost of moving the Hungarians from Central Europe to the regions of the Ural.'

However, the anti-Hungarian feelings had a forum even within the Communist Party. E.g. Karol Smidke wrote this about the ethnic Hungarian founding member of the

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Czechoslovak Communist Party, István Major, in 1945: 'Comrade Gottwald directed my attention to the fact that the candidacy of comrade Major would have to be thought over by the committee, for the presidential decree declared that those could not be members of parliament who were not Slavs. Given that comrade Major declared himself a Hungarian during his work in the parliament, the party cannot assume this responsibility.'

We have to point out that the anti-Hungarian and German decrees of the Slovak National Council were backed up by the agreement, which came about between President Beneš and Gottwald, Party Secretary General back in December 1943, concerning the final solution on the fate of the Hungarian and German minorities. The aim was, even back then, the creation of the Czechoslovak nation state. Nation state without minorities. And it was on this basis that the set of radical measures were produced against the two ethnic minority groups. Decree no. 1945/4 of the Slovak National Council was issued in this spirit on February 27, 1945: it was on the confiscation and the earliest possible repatriation of the lands of Germans, Hungarians, and the traitors of the Slovak people. The decree concerned first of all the properties of the German and Hungarian big landowners and, in general, the properties in possession of the two minorities. It was typical that the Slovak Cambel Samuel commented the decree of the Slovak National Council: 'The Slovak National Council realised a historical truth as the Slovak land passed into the possession of the Slovak people from the hands of the old oppressors.'

It was revealing that already the Hlinkova Garda discussed the idea of deportation and deprivation of rights. For example, the official paper of the Hlinka Guard, the *Gardista* wrote it on April 19, 1943, summing up the politics of Sano Mach and Tiso fascism: 'We call out for the removal of the Czechs, the deportation of the Jews, the arrest of the Roma one by one, and the deprivation of the rights of the Hungarians.' In connection to this, the history of the Czech and Slovak relations in World War II could be a separate subject, of which even the Czech and the Slovak press hardly wrote anything. With regard to this, we can find the following sentence in the aforementioned work of Kálmán Janics: 'After Munich, the State of Tiso expelled 120.000 Czech inhabitants from Slovakia.'

With respect to minorities, there is another point, which deserves attention. It is the attitude toward the Jews especially on the part of the Slovaks. After the fate of the deported Jews had become well-known, that the following opinion could appear on the Jewish question in the *Československé Listy* of Moscow on July 15, 1944: 'It is clear that as far as the Czechoslovak citizens of Jewish origin are concerned, those Jews, who feel themselves Germans or Hungarians, have to count upon the measures enforced against the Germans and the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. The elimination of anti-Semitism does not mean that we grant some special condition for the Jewish population if it had reported on being German or Hungarian. Similarly, it must not be allowed either that the Jewish ethnicity cover the German or Hungarian character. The abolishment of anti-Semitism must not mean that the national Slav character of the future Czechoslovak republic is permitted to be violated.'

It was after these antecedents that the staff of the Czechoslovak emigration travelled to Moscow to conclude their negotiations there (March 31, 1945), enter the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic, and assume power symbolically in Košice (Kassa) on April

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4. That is, the Czechoslovak government was formed during their trip under the lead of the Fierlinger. The next day, on April 5, they proclaimed in the provisional capital of Czechoslovakia of that time the infamous Košice Government Program that consisted of 16 chapters. According to it, the following measures were taken for the deprivation of rights:

- the properties of the Hungarians were placed under State supervision;
- the Hungarian civil servants were dismissed and their pension cancelled;
- the use of Hungarian was prohibited at the religious ceremonies;
- the Hungarian priests were expelled from Slovakia;
- the Hungarian students were banned from the universities;
- the Hungarian cultural and social organisations were dissolved and their properties confiscated;
- Hungarians could be thrown out of their houses and flats without compensation;
- the shops and workshops of Hungarians were administered by a sequestrator;
- the bank deposits of the Hungarians were frozen;
- the use of Hungarian language was prohibited in the public offices;
- the publication of Hungarian papers or books was prohibited;
- Hungarians could not have a radio;
- Hungarians could not bring a civil action against anybody and could not be the appellant;
- Hungarians could be employed for public work at any time, anywhere and for any time—in the name of national interest.

After these antecedents, Beneš declared on the day of victory, on May 9, 1945: 'The majority of Germans and Hungarians have to leave from here. This is our final decision... Our people cannot live in a common home with the Germans and Hungarians.' Klement Gottwald, Secretary General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party stated in the radio almost simultaneously with the President: 'We deprive the Germans and Hungarians, who sinned against our peoples, from their citizenship and punish them severely.'

After the proclamation and execution of the Beneš decrees, Zoltán Fábry wrote his moving memorandum entitled '*The accused begins to speak*' in his solitude in Stósz. He commented on it later saying that 'if there is a writing which was born in the solitude of four walls, in complete isolation, that this is it...'

The memorandum recorded on paper the disgraceful and barbaric deprivation of rights of the Hungarians of Slovakia. It was written for the Czech and Slovak intellectuals. And it demanded honesty and justice in that inhuman period. After he had sent the lines of the 'accused' to his Czech and Slovak fellow writers and received no reply, he had to remark: 'I received no answer, understanding or help to my letter asking for help in eighty typewritten pages and of which the Slovak translation was sent, beside the leading politicians, to every significant figure of the Czech and Slovak intellectuals. Not even an arguing letter of counter opinion! And this was the most awful in all this: the universal silence and indifference, the total absence of echoes, the complete unconcern, the complete impassiveness!'

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Zoltán Fábry not only demanded justice in 1946 but he asked questions too. He could do it: his humanist commitment gave him the right to ask questions. And the historic questions were drafted like this: why do the winners trample first of all on the ethnic Hungarian group of Slovakia? Why does the Hungarian minority happen to be the one on whom they take revenge when its writers and intellectuals passed the examination of integrity courageously and fairly in the period between the world wars and during the war? Why do they afflict the Hungarians of Slovakia whose only political leader, János Esterházy, had dared to oppose on his own the flood of anti-Semitism in the Parliament in Bratislava? Let us say about him that he was arrested by a Soviet patrol in Bratislava on April 6, 1945, the day after the Košice program had been declared. His capture was accidental because the Soviet patrols were then collecting the people for public work. Although he was released after the interrogation on April 18, he went up to Husák commissioner of internal affairs on April 20 to be at his disposal. The next delusion of Esterházy came then, for Husák put him on arrest, which began the afflictions of the leader of the Hungarians of Upper Hungary. That is, he was taken from prison to prison, and at last to Moscow—as it turned out—together with several other Hungarians of Bratislava. Mihály Csáky and Tibor Naumann were among them. When they reached Ljubjanka, it turned out that Aleksandr Solženicyn, the would-be Nobel Prize winner world famous writer, was among his fellow prisoners.

Even before the execution of the Beneš decrees, unparallel in the history of Europe, the Hungarians of Bratislava became the first victims of the cruel measures. During the irremediable operation in Bratislava in May 1945, some 90% of the Hungarian population was driven out of the city in the direction of Ligetfalú (Petržalka, Engerau), with half an hour granted for them for packing. What the situation was of the Hungarians expelled, it is authentically proved—beside other sources—by the following confidential report of dr. Gustáv Niepel, Slovak physician: 'The ones deported to Ligetfalú were supplied not even with the most basic things, their clothing was inadequate, and their food insufficient which showed especially in case of the little children, among whom many were destined to die of hunger...'

This was only the overture of the retaliatory campaign against Germans and Hungarians. In spite of the fact that the English Lord Runciman wrote in his report in 1938 after his mission to Prague preceding the Munich decision, that 'the lack of understanding, intolerance, and discrimination' had characterized the behaviour of the Czech authorities toward the Sudeten Germans. And as far as the atrocities during the German occupation are concerned, not the Sudeten Germans were responsible for that. Nonetheless, the Czech armed men arrived to Landskroun on May 17, 1945, forced their victims to lie down in the fishpond in front of the town hall and they shot them to death there. In Usti nad Labem, the Czechs, together with the Soviet occupiers, murdered some thousand Germans on June 30, 1945, because of an explosion in one of the factories. Atrocities were numberless in the Sudeten parts. Here people were killed with the iron of the lanterns, there those were shot into the ditch who fell behind in the death march. The situation became so unbearable that hundreds of the intimidated, violated, and robbed Germans did not see other way out but to choose suicide. We believe

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that the conclusion of Vilém Hejl, Czech historian does not seem to be an exaggeration: 'the barbaric ferocity committed against the Germans—captives, civilians, women, and children—after May 1945 is an inseparable part of the legal and moral aspect of the portrait of Czechoslovakia...'

The educated and democratic States and nations forgot it that the Sudeten Germans were not only the people of K. H. Frank and Konrád Heinlein but also the poet Reiner Maria Rilke, the writer Franz Kafka, and the raging reporter, Egon Erwin Kisch. But also the father of genetics, J. G. Mendel was born there, the researcher of psychology, Sigmund Freud, the well-known composer, Gustav Mahler, and we could enumerate many more famous persons.

When the Czechoslovak government was not satisfied with the proclamation and the execution of the Beneš decrees, the expulsion of the Hungarians of south Slovakia started to Czech-Moravian territories according to Presidential Decree no. 88. We know it primarily from the book of Katalin Vadkerty that in 1945, the trains took the Hungarian public workers to Prague, Kolin, Jicin, Tabor, Bencsov, Pilsen, Pardubice, Č. Budejovice, and Zlin. The operation was called labour force recruitment but it was carried out with the participation of armed forces: people and families were carried off with the help of military lorries and mostly in cattle trucks and goods trains. At the same time, the personal and real properties of the 'war criminals' were confiscated. In this manner, more than 44.000 persons were deported from the southern districts of Slovakia up to Bohemia. The deportations caused panic among the Hungarians of Upper Hungary. Many fled to Hungary in terror while others wanted to make their way through the iced Danube and drowned in the river.

After the aforementioned deportations, given that the deportation of the Hungarian population to Bohemia had not been impeded by the victorious great powers, the Beneš government succeeded in making the Hungarian government consent to the offer of the Czechoslovak government on the negotiations about the population exchange. At last, Minister of Foreign Affairs, János Gyöngyösi unconditionally signed the Convention on the Hungarian–Czechoslovak Population Exchange on 27 February, 1946. It happened thus that 76.616 Hungarians moved to Hungary and 60.257 Slovaks to Slovakia in the framework of the population exchange after that the Czechoslovak government had not managed to attain at international fora the unilateral deportation of 200.000 Hungarians to Hungary. Besides them, about 10.000 fled to Hungary afraid of the deportations.

As far as the economic and social aspect of the population exchange is concerned, it is worth remarking that the Hungarians left behind in Slovakia 160.000 cadastral acres of land as opposed to the 15.000 acres of the Slovaks leaving Hungary. The Hungarians left 15.700 houses in Slovakia while the Slovaks left 4.400 houses in Hungary.

There was one more calamity awaiting the Hungarians of Slovakia. Also the so-called re-slovakisation can be connected to the Košice Program and the Beneš Decree no. 33/1945. According to this, the public notice of the Office of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs of July 17, 1946, ordered the re-slovakisation of the population. It stated that those could report on being an ethnic Slovak who declared themselves to be ethnic Slovaks at the 1930 census or who felt they belonged to this ethnicity. As the Hungarians,

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who had been deprived of their rights, duly feared the afflictions accompanying deportation and homelessness they defended themselves and their families when—gaining time for survival—300.000 of them declared themselves to be Slovaks. Thus, only 367.733 persons said they were Hungarians at the 1950 census. As opposed to this, 533.934 in 1961, and according to the 1981 figures, the number of Hungarians was 586.741. (Without counting those of Hungarian mother tongue!)

When today, the Hungarians of Slovakia—despite the Hungarian-Slovak Basic Treaty—have to fight for the sake of their survival for their mother tongue rights, schools, cultural institutions, and against the administrative divisions of Mečiar, we believe Miklós Duray is right: 'In order that the Hungarians of Upper Hungary attain complete equality before the law within the framework of the Slovak State power, the support of the Euro-Atlantic organizations and the obtainment of international guarantees is indispensable. A historical change in the life of the Hungarians of Upper Hungary is conceivable only in this case.'

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