
RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS OF THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY IN SLOVAKIA IN THE YEARS 1918–1938

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Abstract

A religious sphere can be included among the activities of a large group of Hungarian minority in the Czechoslovak Republic during the interwar period. Confessional issues related to the Hungarian minority reflected political and social development and an overall ratio of the state and churches. An attitude of the Republic towards churches was contradictory. The Holy See replaced episcopacy after the Treaty of Trianon had been signed. The Hungarians formed a substantial part of a member base of the Reformed Church that was problematically searching for its place in the new conditions.

Keywords: Hungarian minority, Czechoslovak Republic, confessionalism

1. Introduction

On the ruins of monarchies, that ended up among defeated great powers after World War I and the Russian Empire that was eliminated from the fight due to internal instability even before the final war conflict ended, new ‘national’ states were established. Their creators referred not only to the historical right but also to the right of self-determination. In fact, most of the new states had the boundaries within which a number of nations and nationalities lived. The newly established Czechoslovak Republic could have been a good example.

More than a million Hungarians got into a minority position regardless of their will, after the Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918. The Hungarian population had to get used to a new, minority identity, new conditions and status. The decision of the powers about becoming a minority was understood by a part of population as a grievance and thus they agreed with the requirements for revision of the boundaries. Therefore, they were getting into conflict with the integrity of the state they were living in, as well as with the state power [1]. Hungarian minority in the Republic responded to the change of boundaries by promoting an irredentist conception of relationship towards the Republic [2].

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The life conditions, as well as the identity of the Hungarian minority were in the interwar Czechoslovak Republic governed by legal standards that guaranteed civic equality, political self-fulfilment, school education and cultural life in the native language, while the state favoured civic principles. These rights were fully and intensively utilized by the Hungarian minority. Despite the convenient conditions of its development in a pluralistic democracy, however, for the two decades of existence of Czechoslovakia and in a tortuous national policy, inappropriate and even discriminatory moments arose – and not only in relation to the Hungarian minority. The problems in relation to ethnic Hungarians were reflected especially in economic and social spheres. Furthermore, the land reform of the 1920s expressed a national-political goal with an attempt to get rid of Hungarian language in the regions of southern Slovakia. The Hungarian inhabitants experienced injustice also regarding the issue of personnel policy in the field of public administration, the issue of nationality, prohibition to use their own national symbols [3]. The number of Hungarian population in the interwar censuses was gradually decreasing, as part of Magyarized population was naturally returning to the original Slovak nationality, and because of assimilation policy and migration. According to the population census conducted in 1921, 650 597 inhabitants belonged to Hungarian nationality, which is 21.7% of the Slovak population. The census in 1930 recorded 585 434 inhabitants of Hungarian nationality in Slovakia, i.e. they formed 17.6% of population [4].

During the year 1920, a noticeable migration wave of the Hungarian minority was recorded. Due to the existential problems and not pledging allegiance to the new Republic, 105 000 Hungarians were forced to leave the country and the Czechoslovak authorities refused to grant citizenship to more than 40 000 Hungarians [5], including the Hungarian clergy. The Hungarians inhabited a contiguous territory along the southern border, and in some districts, formed the majority population with the representation of over 80% [6].

2. Religious conditions of the Hungarian minority in the interwar Czechoslovakia (1918–1939)

Confessional issues related to the Hungarian minority partially and properly reflected political and social development, as well as the overall ratio of the state and the churches. The First Act of National Committee after the proclamation of the Czechoslovak Republic on 28 October 1918, so called a receptive norm, temporarily set legal continuity with the existing Austro-Hungarian Empire. Besides, a receptive norm took over a previously established legal form of cult affairs. The Kingdom of Hungary distinguished between traditional Churches (recognized by a legal standard of higher legal force) and legally recognized Churches (by a legal standard of lower legal force). The first ones were permitted by an autonomous law, as they had previously been in operation for a long time. These were the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession (Lutherans), the

Reformed Church (Calvinists), the Israeli Confession of both directions. The Catholic Church performed as a dominant state Church, among all of them. Legally recognized Churches were recognized by a legal standard of lower legal force. In practice, these Churches were not eligible for congrua until 1926. Soon, however, the need to make changes in the structure of some of the Churches arose. In 1918, Henrik Geduly, a bishop of the Evangelical Church, appealed through a pastoral letter to Slovak believers to remain in the bond of the Hungarian Church. Besides Henrik Geduly, other two pro-Hungarian oriented bishops were at the head of this Church in Slovakia. The government promptly intervened against them and since January 1919, they were prohibited to perform rights and responsibilities associated with their ranks, and consequently emigrated (hence for many years they were spreading anti-Czechoslovak propaganda). However, during 1919–1924, the Protestants emerged from the Hungarian organisations on the territorial and national principle and thus, domestic Churches were established - among them, the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession [7]. In 1924, the Hungarian Evangelical Alliance in Slovakia was established. Until 1923, the Hungarian Protestants of a Church Committee in Samorin and Komarno remained out of national Church organisation, as brachial authorities tried to expel Béla Halmi, a pastor from Czechoslovakia, after he refused to pledge allegiance to the Republic. The Czechoslovak institutions refrained from that only after the protests from abroad [8].

The majority of population in Slovakia belonged to the Roman Catholics and during the interwar period, the ratio of this religion remained at the level of 71%. The second largest group recorded was the Evangelic Church of the Augsburg Confession, with more than 12% of believers. The Greek Catholic Church, mainly associated with that of the Ruthenian ethnic group, amounted to approximately 6.5%. Regarding these confessions, confessional structure of Hungarians in Slovakia did not vary from the structure of Slovak majority, in particular [9].

Synergetic links of ethnic and religious identity, in case of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, was reflected in the Reformed Church that was problematically seeking its position in the new conditions. After Czechoslovakia was established, the ratio of this Church rapidly declined (the number of Calvins in Slovakia decreased below 5%). A substantial part of the member base of this religion consisted of persons who claimed Hungarian nationality. In comparison with 1910, the number of the believers who belonged to the Reformed church decreased by more than 13 000, to about 144-145 000 persons. The difference was caused due to the departure of its believers out of the territory of Slovakia [9, p. 202].

Based on the §2 Act No. 64/1918 Coll., of 10 December 1918, the civil, municipal and clerical dignitaries, officials and employees of the former Kingdom of Hungary were temporarily kept in their offices, under the conditions they pledged allegiance to the Czechoslovak Republic. The state offices understood this act as a confirmation of clergymen's loyalty to the Czechoslovak

Republic. The vast majority of Calvins expressed a negative attitude towards the Czechoslovak state. Financial support from the government was conditional on the fact that they would establish an independent Slovak seniority and the clergy would pledge allegiance to the Republic. Due to long hesitations of Calvinist clergy over meeting these requirements, the Ministry for Administration in Slovakia paid out only children allowances (not the wages) to the parsons. Ecclesiastical authorities, even after Trianon, asked for help in Budapest. On 16 September 1920, during the meeting of Calvins in Rimavska Sobota, its participants demonstrated for being directed by the General Convent in Budapest. When they found out that the Czechoslovak authorities will not provide them with wages or financial support for the parishes, the Calvins, influenced by lower clergy, decided to negotiate with the institutions of the Czechoslovak Republic. In 1921, following the agreement of representatives of the Reformed Church with the Minister for Administration of Slovakia, they closed a deal to cast off the influence of the Church hierarchy in Hungary. Soon, the Calvinist clergymen, as well as the priests of other confessions, were forced to pledge allegiance. Following this act, they began to receive regular wages and in 1923, an independent Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia was established. A protracted problem of this Church was a shortage of Slovak cleric adolescents. An individual Slovak seniority was set up by Calvins in 1928, after long and almost hopeless delays [8, p. 106-108]. The state, despite the fact that its Church constitution was not formally ratified during the entire interwar period, agreed with the reorganisation of religious congregations, establishment of schools and prints.

As we have already mentioned, based on the language law of 29 February 1920, the members of ethnic minorities were educated in their own language at schools and their cultural institutions were administered in the language of the minority. At that time, 70 newspapers and magazines were published in Hungarian language. In 1926, there were 695 primary schools and several minority secondary schools with the education in Hungarian language [10]. In practice, there was the analogy in liturgical services, as well. The Czechoslovak national politics gave ecclesiastical authorities the possibility to implement Hungarian language in the church services and accompanying actions.

As a result of historical development, the relationship of the state towards the Roman Catholic Church in Slovakia was dominant. While setting the borders during the Paris Peace Conference, the borders of church districts were not considered. Many dioceses had their head offices abroad and on the contrary, the Czechoslovak ordinaries interfered with their power abroad. Before 1918, the Hungarian government was appointing bishops, who claimed themselves to be of Hungarian nationality (some of them did not even speak Slovak), to the Slovak episcopates. These bishops subsequently used to send priests without any knowledge of Slovak language to purely Slovak parishes. Slovak language was being eliminated not only from schools but also from churches. The Slovak priests were often relocated and persecuted [11].

Regarding Church hierarchy, Church administration and the organisation of Catholic Church in Slovakia, after the Czechoslovak Republic was established, remained unchanged. At the beginning of 1919, the Bishop's offices in Slovakia were in the hands of Hungarian bishops or vicars who refused to put up with the fall of the Hungarian Kingdom and they instructed their priests in the same way. Augustín Fischer-Colbrie, a bishop from Cassovia, who refused a forced Magyarization in the past and upheld for persecuted priests from Slovakia, was an exception. *“Hungarian bishops tried to, even at the last minute, and even after constitution of a proper Czechoslovak state administration, break our union with the Czechs, they appointed their henchmen to the ecclesiastical ranks and offices and transported Church valuables to Hungary. ... By a real vacation of the majority of Slovak dioceses, the ecclesiastical authority did not even pass into the hands of nationally approved prelates. As a matter of fact, those who were leaving appointed their alternates in their own image, ... and only after long negotiations, they appointed real Slovak pontifical deputies in Trnava, Spis and Banska Bystrica. In this long-lasting interregnum, national education of clerical adolescents suffered a lot ... there was a noticeable lack of clergy.”* [12].

This situation was tried to be changed by the activists from among Slovak Catholic clergy, who in November 1918 founded Clerical council, seeking for consolidation of the religious situation through creation of Catholic autonomy in Slovakia. Besides Slovak priests, the pressure on Hungarian episcopate was pushed by the state apparatus, as well. As the result, the bishops of Nitra and Banska Bystrica were forced to leave their offices, the other ordinaries died in a short time (bishops of Roznava, Kosice and Spis). Stefan Novak, a Greek-Catholic bishop of Presov eparchy, who refused to pledge allegiance to the new Republic, had previously immigrated to Hungary [11]. Similar situation occurred in several abbeys and monastic societies. The state had to promptly respond to the transport of Church property to Hungary. Since 1919, protection against its transport and thieving was determined by several orders of the Minister for Administration of Slovakia. These were administered by commissions chaired by a member of episcopacy of the specific territory.

The Treaty of Trianon, the peace agreement signed on 4 June, defined the borders of Czechoslovakia. In 1921, the Pope responded by establishing official diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia and by appointing three Slovak bishops. Following this act, other dioceses in Slovakia were gradually filled by new bishops [12]. However, considerable obstacles of legal, personal, and partially political character still remained a key problem in stabilizing intra-clerical life in the following years. The bishop was in some of the issues bound to the approval of a chapter, even though there were only 12 Slovaks out of 54 canons in Slovakia in 1928. Many parishes, even purely Slovak, were occupied by Hungarian clergy. In Bratislava, with 60% of Catholics claiming Czechoslovak nationality in 1928, only in one of five church districts *“the requirements of Slovak believers were in some ways met ...Material, religious-scholastic and personal affairs of the Catholic believers are in the hands of*

church committee (mostly non-Slovak) and the church taxes, mostly paid by Czechoslovak believers, are almost entirely spent on Hungaro-German education. ...Even the cloistered orders, slowly and with difficulties, emancipate themselves from beneath foreign, non-Slovak influence and from the unions of head offices in Pest and Vienna.” [13] Many priests were of Hungarian nationality and even though they had pledged allegiance to the Republic, they did not want to give up their pro-Hungarian way of thinking.

A whole series of questions indicates a significant incongruity of the state towards religious life, whether it is an urgent requirement of many political parties to separate state from the Church or the establishment of Cyril and Methodius Catholic Theological Faculty in Olomouc and Huss Evangelical Theological Faculty in Prague (both of them funded by the state) or Marriage Law of 1919, in which the state retained the right of Churches to substitute activities of state authorities. The thoughts of political representations related to separation of the Church from the state, that still has not been realized, were influenced by several arguments about positive and negative consequences. For example, the loss of influence over the appointment of high-rank Church dignitaries would enable a nomination of pro-Hungarian oriented bishops in Slovakia and Ruthenia that would markedly strengthen separatism at the time. Without the state supervision, cleric education could have been unfavourable for the state [7, p. 64-65]. These problems indicated a complex jurisdictional relationship between the Church and temporal power.

The Constitution of 1920 contained regulations that modified relationship of the state and Churches – freedom of conscience and confession allowed entire religious freedom, equality of all confessions and others. Other laws were handling the most urgent religious - political issues but it was impossible to process some of them without the cooperation of Vatican – especially regarding the division of Church property and delimitation of dioceses which were considerably important for the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia. The interventions to the religious education were equally important. The Congrua Law (that modified salaries for clergy) adopted in 1926, separated congrual churches and parishes (the state provided clergy with a monthly financial income to ensure their existential minimum) and the ones that were subsidized (the state provided churches with the subsidies). The congrual churches in Slovakia included the Catholic Church, the Evangelic Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Reformed Evangelic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Jewish religious communities.

Multiannual negotiations with the Roman Curia led to the adoption of Modus Vivendi in 1928. Modus Vivendi set that no part of the Republic will be subordinated to an ordinary based abroad and no diocese shall exceed national borders. The agreement also handled Church property administration. Regarding the issue of nomination rights - the Prague's government had to be notified of the names of dignitaries before they were appointed by the Holy See, in order to make sure it did not have any objections to the selected persons. One of the agreement's articles set a pledge of allegiance to Czechoslovakia that needed to

be performed by the ordinaries after being nominated by curia and before accession to their offices. Even the clergy had to pledge allegiance to the Republic.

The activities related to delimitation of dioceses lasted until 1933. It was necessary to settle with the Hungarian claims for parts of church properties in Slovakia. Delimitation and subsidy plans were in the following period assessed by Vatican that suggested its implementation in two stages. At the first stage, an outer delimitation of dioceses should have been performed, i.e. to flatten them with the boundaries. Furthermore, Vatican wanted to take care of retraction of Hungarian accusations submitted to the Court of Arbitration in Haag against the Republic due to church properties, in case the Prague government permits the issue of Hungarian demands to be negotiated by a special Vatican authority. In 1937, a papal bull on outer delimitation of Czechoslovak dioceses was promulgated. The discrepancies in boundaries, even towards Hungary, were brought into conformity. The events in the period 1938–1939 did not allow to perform the second step – an inner delimitation. The Hungarians did not want to accept changes of church districts in Slovakia and Ruthenia for a long time as they considered this change to be a real breakup of the former Hungarian Kingdom [7, p. 66-69].

A contemporary legislation of Czechoslovakia created quite favourable conditions for usage of mother tongue in education, culture and religious ceremonies. To sing Hungarian national anthem and some religious songs with the irredentist undertone in public and in the churches was considered to be punishable. According to Act No. 50/1923 Coll., § 14, it was a misdemeanour of public peace disturbance. Despite an existing ban, public singing of Hungarian national anthem occurred quite frequently, which led to the numerous incidents. It was nothing extraordinary to sing the Hungarian anthem at the end of masses in church, mainly during Hungarian feasts, which the offices considered as a seditious provocation followed by police investigation. The most noted incident happened on 9 October 1938, when the crowd of Hungarians living in Bratislava gathered in front of the Franciscan Church singing Hungarian anthem and shouting different slogans. The gathering broke out into a procession walking through the old town and subsequently got into skirmishes with disapprovingly responsive Slovaks. The procession was scattered by the police, at last [14]. Churches and Hungarian worships served as meeting points of Hungarian residents who openly expressed their political desires during this turbulent period [15].

A fellow - feeling among 'all Hungarians' is also demonstrated by commemoration of Saint Stephen's tradition. The local Hungarian press emphasized: "*Wherever Hungarians have lived to date, on 20 August, churches will become overcrowded*" [16]. Festive sermons, dedicated to the first king of the Hungarian Kingdom, published in Hungarian opposition journals in Slovakia, presented him as a transcendent guarantee of bright future. It was beyond the power of Czechoslovak authorities to eliminate Saint Stephen's tradition. At first, the commemoration was transformed from a religious-public

(national) holiday to purely religious celebrations (to venerate Saint Stephen as the founder of the ecclesiastical province or the patron of church). Czechoslovakia applied an important argument saying, that the feast of Saint Stephen is in a religious calendar stated in different time (2 September) which limited a scope of traditional celebrations, as well [17]. An essential role was played by a circular letter of Richard Osvald, a vicar general from Trnava (later acting as a chairman of Matica Slovenska and a senator of Slovak People's Party) of August 4, 1919 saying that 20 August was never defined by Church as a feast and in that time, not even secular laws ordered to refrain from work. Based on the circular letter, masses and sermons sung on 20th of August were banned and sermons held in Hungarian language in the Slovak regions were prohibited [Fond Krajinský úrad, Slovak National Archive, 26, 15104/1930 prez]. This regulation provided an opportunity of disciplinary action towards those clergymen from the whole territory of Esztergom Archdiocese located in Czechoslovakia, who observed the feast and it meant an important change in celebrating 20th of August as the Saint Stephen's Day in the entire Slovakia. Since 1931, it was generally prohibited to commemorate Saint. Stephen on this day also in patronal churches, declaring that Slovakia had already become a part of the new state and therefore there was no reason to commemorate the feast, celebrated by the Catholic Church on 2 September, on that day [Fond Krajinský úrad, Slovak National Archive, 30].

Even though a new ecclesiastical authority in Slovakia was trying to meet requirements of the Czechoslovak government, it could not afford to make any radical interventions with regard to the believers who often demanded observance of old Church traditions. Following the intervention of ecclesiastical authority, the state authorities came with some measurements. However, in the initial period, we could note certain persistence in the traditional observance of feast in the regions with large representation of ethnic Hungarians that was perceived as a demonstrative seditious activity in the new state's conditions. Consequently, it led into conflicts with the state power. The feast celebration was most often expressed by observance of labour rest and an abundant participation in masses, especially of the elderly and women (even people who did not often go to church). The representatives of other confessions expressed a respective reverence to the patron in their own churches, as well. In some places, where the security authorities had initially suspected the population of sedition, it was found out they were just following the long-standing traditions, with no intention to provoke [17, p. 234]. Even though the episcopate never gave permission to celebrate 20 August as a votive feast, in 1931, bishop Pavol Jantausch, an administrator from Trnava, stood up for several parish administrators who solemnly celebrated this feast at the request of believers. Based on the correspondence of Apostolic administrative in Trnava, they were accused of celebrating a working day as a feast day and thus, people were forced to go to church and celebrate the Hungarian patron. It was the reason why a priest was accused of committing an inappropriate action as he arose public nuisance of Slovak and Czech inhabitants [Fond Krajinský úrad, Slovak

National Archive, 30]. To a great extent, the inhabitants stopped attending celebrations, as many Hungarians in Slovakia retreated from outer manifestations that provoked state authorities in order to avoid accusations of irredentism and consequently, to avoid penalization and retorsions [17, p. 234].

The interests of the Hungarian community, besides Budapest, were mostly promoted by their own political parties represented in parliament. The strongest political party of ethnic Hungarians was the Provincial Christian-Socialist Party. Despite differentiated political structure of the Hungarian population on one hand, its strong confessional linking was expressed on the other hand. The fact, that Catholic associations played a role in the birth of this conservative party was reflected in the profile of its member base. Most of the members were of Roman-Catholic confession. The ideological foundation of the program was a Christian social teaching, whose principles were inherent in the papal encyclicals - *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno*. Its requirements in the economic field led to the preservation of economic positions not only regarding Hungarian businessmen but also Catholic Church. The party also supported church schools and was establishing Christian associations [18]. Since the beginning of 1930s, the party was paralyzed by serious internal misunderstandings caused by opposition behaviour of Catholic priests who were involved in the party. The Catholic clergy criticized Géza Szüllő, a party chairman, regarding closer cooperation with the predominantly protestant Hungarian National Party. Following the resignation of Szüllő from the post of a chairman in 1932, the cleric wing proposed to occupy a vacant position by their candidate. However, the interest of Budapest governmental garniture won and János Esterházy was elected a new chairman. The Catholic churchmanship played an important role in life of the most significant Hungarian politician in Slovakia. The need to underline loyalty to Christian confession and morale became part of his political written speeches. The Member of Parliament was accepted not only by Slovak bishops but was also in contact with Vatican. His remarks, covering this topic, talked about ethnic Hungarian believers in Slovakia and their establishments, especially the issues of the Benedictine Order in Komarno and the Premonstratesian Order in Jasov [19]. Esterházy gradually managed to reconcile quarrelling 'civil' and 'clerical' fractions within the party and to prepare it for a merger with its competitor. However, the expectations of political cooperation with Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, based on the common action of Slovak and Hungarian clergy, were not realized [20].

The second strongest party in the interwar period was the Hungarian National Party, whose members explicitly belonged to the Protestant churches, mainly Calvinism. Confessional question was a disturbing moment in the process of political integration of ethnic Hungarians [21]. Both parties finally merged in 1936, after the constraint of Budapest. In the representation of Hungarians (as in the Czech and Slovak Catholic parties), the Czechoslovak parliament nearly always consisted of a certain number of priests [22].

The governmental movements in Europe in the late thirties [23] enabled Hitler to resolve so called Czechoslovak question, assisted by Hungarian government circles in their permanent effort to change Trianon borders [24]. Significant territorial changes, heading to abridgment of Slovak territory, began with the arbitration of German and Italian government on November 2, 1938 in Vienna [25]. A few months later, Hitler totally destroyed the Czechoslovak Republic, and for his personal gain allowed to create the Slovak State (March 14, 1939). Its political system created differentiated conditions for the existence of its ethnic minorities.

3. Conclusion

The interwar Czechoslovakia was based on the civic principle of understanding of the liberal state. Following the initial problems, the government was looking for a common consensus with the Churches. Ethnic minorities could perform religious life, unless they respected the changed political conditions. However, many members of the Hungarian minority, clergy as well, could not reconcile with their status.

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