



SLOVAKS THROUGH THE CENTURY

1918 1944 1968 1989 1993 2018

The Slovak endeavours to become a modern nation and equal partner to other nations culminated in the late 20th century. The Slovak journey was a speeded-up history of the century that took shape under the influence of national-historical, pan-European and global movements after the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War.

There are several key stages in Slovakia's modern history: beginning with the First World War and the founding of Czechoslovakia, followed by the twenty years of the inter-war period of the democratic Czechoslovak Republic, then the wartime Slovak Republic of 1939-1945. The brief interlude of limited democracy from 1945 to 1948 was followed by forty years of communist rule from 1948 to 1989. After roughly two years of Slovakia being part of the Czechoslovak Federation from 1990 to 1992, the first democratic and sovereign Slovak Republic was founded in 1993 following the peaceful separation from the Czech part. Each stage has a number of defining moments: the creation of a common state of Czechs and Slovaks in 1918; the Munich Agreement and the Vienna Arbitration of 1938; the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising in 1944; the communist coup in 1948; the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in 1968; the Velvet Revolution in 1989; the integration of the Slovak Republic into the Euro-Atlantic structures of NATO and the European Union in 2004; and the adoption of the common European currency in 2009.

1918 **Creation of the Common State of Czechs and Slovaks**

The First World War led to a fundamental change in the way the Czech and especially Slovak questions were dealt with. From the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy,



Milan Rastislav Štefánik, co-founder of the Czechoslovak Republic, diplomat, scientist, general of the French army

which had included both the Czech and Slovak peoples, the optimal solution seemed to be the creation of a joint state of Czechs and Slovaks. Although the exile resistance had played an important role in its inception, the clear political agenda for Slovakia's future was drawn up by the Slovak political elite at the end of May 1918 in Turčiansky Svätý Martin, where the strategic lines of Slovak politics were decided upon: a definitive break with Austria-Hungary and, following Woodrow Wilson's declaration of the right to self-determination, backing for the creation of an independent Czechoslovak state. The decision taken in Martin was preceded by the efforts of the Slovak and Czech community in America (the Cleveland and Pittsburgh

following Woodrow Wilson's declaration of the right to self-determination, backing for the creation of an independent Czechoslovak state. The decision taken in Martin was preceded by the efforts of the Slovak and Czech community in America (the Cleveland and Pittsburgh



Milan R. Štefánik with American Slovaks and Czechs in front of the Capitol in Washington, D. C., USA



Štefan Osuský,
Czechoslovak minister
to France and League of
Nations delegate

concluded. For Slovakia and the Slovaks in Czechoslovakia, the peace treaty with Hungary signed in Trianon on 4 June 1920 was crucial. One of the signatories was the Slovak diplomat Štefan Osuský. The Treaty of Trianon defined the border with Hungary and confirmed the existence of the Czechoslovak Republic in law.

1938 Munich Agreement and Vienna Arbitration

The Munich Agreement of 29 September 1938 between the four great powers – Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France – ceded the Sudetenland to Germany, while the Vienna Arbitration of 2 November between Germany and Italy handed the southern area of Slovakia to Hungary by diktat. Both settlements diminished Czechoslovakia territorially, prompting the quick and dramatic end of the Republic. The declaration of the independent Slovak State and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia followed. Despite the circumstances and its status as a satellite of the German Third Reich, the Slovak State was the embodiment of the idea of a Slovak independent nation state. Nonetheless, it was a totalitarian political entity. Parliamentarism, democracy and civil liberties were suppressed, while Slovak nationalism, a Christian world view and the leader principle were all celebrated in political life. The adoption of the Jewish Code systematically stripped Slovak Jews of their civil, political and economic rights, leading in 1942 to their mass deportation, which culminated in the Nazi final solution of the ‘Jewish question’ in concentration camps.

The wartime Slovak State collaborated with the Third Reich until the very last moment, not only promoting Hitler’s criminal plans, but also the criminal methods

he used to implement them, and it acted against the goals of the anti-Hitler coalition. Not surprisingly, strong resistance developed in Slovakia.

1944 Slovak National Uprising

In 1943, the various Slovak resistance movements united to form the Slovak National Council and concluded the Christmas Agreement—the programme of the anti-fascist movement in Slovakia. The illegal Slovak National Council operated within the Slovak army, the government and the political, economic and judicial institutions of the Slovak State, which co-operated to organize the anti-fascist uprising. The uprising started in late August 1944, when the German army began occupying Slovak territory. The driving force behind it was the rebel army, partisan groups and local people. Following the military suppression of the uprising, guerrilla warfare continued until the arrival of the Red Army in the spring of 1945. The military defeat of the rebels was also accompanied by severe reprisals, leading to mass executions of the population and the burning of villages. To this day, Kremnička, Nemecká, Ostrý Grúň, Kľak and other villages are synonymous with the Nazi atrocities.

The Slovak National Uprising, among the largest anti-Nazi revolts of the Second World War in strategic and military terms, clearly signalled that the Slovaks had joined the anti-Hitler coalition fighting for the survival of European



DEATH TO NAZISM, a period poster

civilization. They radically distanced themselves from the Slovak State, its crimes and its collaboration with the Third Reich, identifying instead with the values and traditions of democratic Europe. The Slovak National Uprising not only foresaw a constitutional renewal of the common state of the Czechs and Slovaks on the principle

of 'to be equal with the equal', which would become the basis for the future federal arrangements in the Czechoslovak Republic, but also a continuum of the tradition of democratic political forces working together. The day the Slovak National Uprising began – 29 August 1944 – was therefore made a national holiday in 1992, and the national and European tradition of the struggle against the Nazis became part of the independent Slovak Republic's fundamental democratic tradition after 1993.

1945 Post-war Development

The history of Slovakia, from its liberation from Nazi Germany in 1945 to the fall of the communist regime in 1989, includes two self-contained periods, both known as the 'People's Democracy'. This was the name of the regime in place after the liberation of Slovakia from 1945 to February 1948 and then, the rule of the communist party, from the February coup of 1948 until November 1989. The People's Democracy from 1945 to 1948 was a transient and hybrid political regime. It is most commonly described as a political system with a closed and restricted democracy and limited pluralism. In national terms, the most important encounter between the forces of democracy and totalitarianism took place in February 1948 in Prague. The Communists used the government crisis of the time to assume political power. The 'non-violent' political coup of 25 February 1948 was the work of non-constitutional forces. It led to the incorporation of Czechoslovakia and its domestic political regime into the Soviet bloc in Europe. The Cold War divided East from West. The years 1948 and 1989 mark the beginning and end of the long Czech and Slovak communist era, which was characterized by a communist experiment along Soviet lines that emerged, evolved and terminated in a past that is gone forever.



Vladimír Clementis,
politician, left-wing
intellectual, journalist

1968 **Dubček's Czechoslovak (Prague) Spring**

After the initial dogmatic and sectarian period, when the Stalinist 'builders' of communism dominated politics with the far-reaching economic, social and moral failures that entailed, the communist experiment in Czechoslovakia was given another chance in the late 1960s, when a movement for democratization and modernization emerged. The symbol and living legend of this movement, known as "socialism with a human



Alexander Dubček, father of Czechoslovakia's reform communism and symbol of the Czechoslovak (Prague) Spring

face", was reform politician Alexander Dubček. Under his leadership, the shift towards democratization awakened civil society in Czechoslovakia, which Moscow watched with concern from the outset. Had Moscow shown any weakness or failure to act, it would have undermined its interests as a superpower. Czechoslovakia had to be brought back 'into the fold', or a domino effect could affect the other Eastern bloc countries.

Within a few months, the Soviet leadership had issued several statements, calling on Prague to deal quickly and effectively with the "counter-revolutionary situation".

August 1968 Invasion

At the beginning of August 1968, communist party leaders of the Eastern bloc states met in Bratislava to adopt a declaration stating that "supporting, protecting and consolidating socialist achievements is the common international duty of all socialist countries". This declaration was referred to as Brezhnev's doctrine of limited sovereignty. At the same meeting, the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was given a letter of invitation, signed by five conservative Czechoslovak communists, including Vasil Biľak on behalf of the Slovaks. Although rebellious Czechoslovakia would have been dealt with by force anyway,



The invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, a man baring his chest on Šafárik Square in Bratislava, photograph by Ladislav Bielik. The picture went all round the world

this “letter by the Five” gave the subsequent military invasion a semblance of legality and legitimacy.

The invasion by five Warsaw Pact armies – USSR, Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria – followed during the night of 20 to 21 August 1968. The population encountered it with spontaneous resistance, watching in horror the overnight occupation of a sovereign country by three hundred thousand foreign troops, more than six thousand tanks and support vehicles, four thousand artillery pieces and one thousand aircraft. It was the largest show of armed aggression in Europe since the Second World War. It forcibly stopped the democratic process and set the stage for its reversal. The Czechoslovak communist regime entered into a period known as normalization, heralding the end of the communist experiment in Europe.

In Slovakia, the process of democratization was strengthened by the past years of struggling for emancipation and Slovak national equality with the Czechs. Although this struggle for equality had been repressed, it fed into the legitimate requests for a federal constitutional arrangement. Ultimately, the Slovaks succeeded in their efforts. On 27 October 1968, the National Assembly of Czechoslovakia adopted the Czechoslovak Constitutional Act on the Czechoslovak Federation, which, among other things, stated “The Czech and Slovak peoples ...recognizing the inalienable right to



President Ludvík Svoboda signing the law on the Czechoslovak Federation in Bratislava Castle, 1968

self-determination including division... have agreed to establish the Czechoslovak federation". On 30 October 1968, the Constitutional Act for the Czechoslovak Federation was ceremonially signed at Bratislava Castle. In 1987, the Slovak equivalent of the Czech-dominated Charter 77 movement was the samizdat publication of Bratislava/nahlas, a supplement on green issues by environmentalists, which was a clear statement about the position of members of the alternative cultural scene. In the eyes of the communist regime, a real anti-regime action was the candlelight rally on Hviezdoslav Square, Bratislava, on 25 March 1988, which was held to draw the regime's attention to its failure to observe human, civil and religious rights. The regime's repressive and brutal retaliation against the peaceful gathering of five thousand citizens provoked a global response, causing embarrassment and an international scandal.



Candlelight rally in Bratislava, 1988

1989 Velvet Revolution

By the late 1980s, the crisis of 'real socialism' and twenty years of 'normalization' in Czechoslovakia had come to a head, in no small part due to Gorbachev's perestroika. In the summer of 1989, tensions were escalating in society, partly in response to events in neighbouring Eastern bloc countries, and it was only a matter of time before the discontent in Czechoslovakia would explode. The final spark was the violent suppression of a student demonstration on 17 November 1989 in Prague. The Velvet Revolution ushered in a new stage in the lives of Slovaks and Czechs. In November 1989, important tasks awaited Slovak and Czech society: on the one hand, they had to deal with the communist regime, and, on the other, they had key political, social and economic goals to fulfil to change society. The driving force for democratic change in Slovakia was the civil movement Public Against Violence, whose slogan was "A Chance for Slovakia". The new political conditions also meant that there was a chance to finally solve the question of the constitutional arrangements and position of the Slovaks within the common state.

1993 Founding of Democratic Slovak Republic

Following the adoption of the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Slovak Republic by the Slovak National Council in July 1992 and the Constitution of the Slovak Republic on 1 September 1992 in Bratislava, the leaders of the political parties in the Czech lands and Slovakia in charge of the parliaments agreed on a timetable for the peaceful division of the common state. On 1 January 1993, two new independent sovereign states were founded in the centre of Europe: the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic. Politicians and citizens of the Slovak Republic faced the new challenges of making sure that the country had all the institutions of independent statehood; they had to create a foreign service, strengthen the foundations of the independent state, build a democratic and pluralistic political system, manage the social and economic transformation, keep pace with the integrating European



Ban Ki-moon, General Secretary of the UN, and Slovak President Andrej Kiska

Community, create conditions for the fundamental modernization of Slovakia and raise it to something approaching Western European levels.

In January 1993, Slovakia became a member of the UN; at the end of June 1993, the young state joined the Council of Europe, and in October 1993, it signed an agreement on its association with the European Community. The Slovak Republic's journey towards full membership of the Atlantic alliance, NATO, was not an easy one: it took ten years. On 1 May 2004, Slovakia joined the European Union, as all its efforts to engage with the European integration process came to fruition. The successful conclusion of the Slovak's European 'story' was later reflected in three crucial events: membership of the Schengen zone at the start of 2008; the adoption of the euro, Europe's single currency in January 2009; and, the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2016. Today, Slovakia is firmly part of democratic Europe.



Donald Tusk, President of the EU Council, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker at a summit in Bratislava



GOOD IDEA SLOVAKIA



MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Department of Public Diplomacy
www.mzv.sk



INSTITUTE OF HISTORY
SLOVAK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

© Slavomír Michálek, 2018
www.history.sav.sk

© Design: Peter Rašla, 2018

Photos:

- © Archive of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic
- © UN Photo/Rick Bajornas
- © Archive of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
- © Bedřich Schreiber
- © Military History Archives of the Slovak Republic