Slovak nationalism and the lessons learned from the history of the Slovak state, 1939-1945

Tatjana Tönsmeyer, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Almost immediately after the fall of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Slovakia started a discussion on the historical place of its history in the years of World War II. Watching the scene – especially from the outside – one could get the impression that the Czech lands discussed “democracy”, while Slovakia debated “nationalism”.

To understand this discussion one has to turn once more to the years of the Second World War and the history of German-Slovak-relations: On 14 March 1939 the Slovak state came into being. Only some days later the Slovak government signed the “Treaty of Protection” and a protocol on co-operation in financial and economic matters. As a consequence, Slovakia was labelled a German vassal state and the government a puppet regime.

But is this really the whole story? I think there are some questions still not answered. For example: What did the Germans do to influence the Slovak government? How did the Slovak politicians react to this German “input”? How did both sides perceive each other? Were there any guidelines that directed German and Slovak action?

To answer these questions one should take a closer look at the so-called German advisers. The first thing one comes across is that the advisers were not yet sent to Bratislava in the spring of 1939 but with a few exceptions only in the summer of 1940. In the months in between Berlin had some opportunities to be astonished at the behaviour of the Slovak government. Bratislava acted on her own and, one can say, rather stubbornly on behalf of her interests. This is true for example as far as the German zone of protection in Western Slovakia or the peace-time strength of the Slovakian army is concerned.

We are used to see Slovakia as a German satellite *par excellence*, but if we look into our sources in more detail we will find a lot of hints that Slovak politicians rejected those German ideas which in their view interfered with internal Slovak affairs. The case of the peace-time strength of the Slovakian army is quite illustrative in this respect because Slovak officials fought so stubbornly for their version that in the end Hitler himself had to interfere. He met Slovak demands to a great extent in order to secure Western Slovakia as an area of deployment for his military plans against Poland.

To cut a long story short – Berlin was really astonished at the Slovak obstinacy. I can almost hear officials in the German Foreign Ministry talking about Slovakia
and saying: “What, the hell, are they doing? Don’t they know what they are expected to do?” – To inform the Slovaks about the rules of the game, Berlin wanted to send advisers to Bratislava. The so-called Salzburg dictate was an ideal opportunity to realise this idea.

But I would like to underline that we have to see ‘Salzburg’ in a broader context and not only as a question of German-Slovak-relations. We have to take the German victory over France into account. And we should not forget that, among others, Hungarian and Romanian statesmen also talked to Hitler and Ribbentrop, around the date of the Salzburg negotiations. So what these talks were all about was a closer integration of the south-eastern European countries into the German sphere of influence. Slovakia was to be bound to this German sphere of influence by means of the already mentioned advisers.

Their duty was “Die Steuerung aller Vorgänge des slowakischen staatlichen, politischen und völkischen Lebens im Reichsinteresse” – to secure German interests in all parts of the political and public life in Slovakia. To achieve this the advisers were sent to Slovakia. There were experts for the police, for the so-called “Jewish question”, for the Hlinka Party and her youth organisation, for economics, agriculture and forests. The Slovak National Bank had its adviser, the Slovak army and the office of propaganda. Further technical experts dealt with the Slovak railways, postal service and construction of streets. One should mention, and I would like to stress this point, that the advisers were not “weisungsberechtigt”, that is to say that they had no formal command over their Slovak counterparts. Slovakia, at least from the outside, should look like an independent state.

This image of Slovak independence was quite important to Berlin. Several German papers emphasised that the advisers should stay in the background to achieve this. They had to adjust themselves to the customs of the country. This included: “Sonntagskirchgang, auch wenn’s schwerfällt” – “Going to church on Sunday – even if one finds it hard.”

We can summarise that the advisers should influence Slovak political and social affairs according to the interests of Berlin, but they had no formal command over their Slovak counterparts because Slovakia should be regarded as an independent state. Another point we have to mention is that the advisers were experts in their fields. Contrary to the occupation areas where the German army took all the stuff it could get the advisers usually had an university degree and professional experience.

As far as their task in Slovakia was concerned they seemed to think that they could achieve it best if the Slovak government adjusted its institutions to the German model. They wanted to build up a political police along the lines of the Gestapo, and the Waffen-SS seemed to be a good model for the Slovak Hlinka-Guard. The same was true for the NSDAP and the HJ as an example for the
Hlinka Party and its youth organisation. German rules should make Slovak propaganda, work and aryranization bureaucracy more efficient.

The advisers were convinced - this is obvious from their papers - that they helped a young state. They thought their work to be a kind of well-intended foreign aid, firmly grounded in a mutual identity of interests with Slovakia as a part of the German “Lebensraum”. Therefore they sought to achieve a “deep and durable connection of the Slovak destiny with the German one”.

But, to their annoyance, the advisers had to realise that the Slovak government did not always comply with their suggestions. They complained that the Slovaks “had no friendly word about the German performance”. (“kein freundliches Wort für die deutschen Leistungen haben”) And what really made them angry was when the Slovak administration took the work of the advisers “and pretended this to be their own creation” (“als ob es ihre eigene Leistung wäre”). These complaints can be found virtually from the first to the last report. The advisers realised some kind of frictions leading to inefficiency, but they could not explain it.

Up to now we have focussed mainly on the German advisers. I think it is time now to switch to a Slovak perspective. We all know that the inner-Slovak struggle for power between Tiso and Tuka opened up the possibility for Berlin to interfere in Slovak affairs. In this sense the Salzburg dictate was intended to strengthen the position of Tuka. Another step in this direction was that the German envoy was named personal adviser of the Slovak minister of foreign affairs, Tuka.

And it was Tuka who always was a willing listener to the advisers and whom they turned to in case of any problem. Asked about the Slovak politicians, Wisliceny, adviser on the so-called “Jewish question”, mentioned Tuka as the “most serious” one. It is in line with these statements that in November 1940 Tuka, after signing the three-power agreement told his German colleague Ribbentrop that the advisers had proven themselves in a splendid way and the whole country is satisfied with them.

But not only Tuka was pleased by the advisers. Altogether – and this may be surprising – the Slovak side reacted pragmatically to their actions. The Slovak government was well aware of the fact that the young state had a lot of problems and therefore several German proposals were warmly welcomed. But the majority of the Slovak politicians knew quite well what kind of help they did seek. We can sum it up like this: The Slovak side accepted transfer of know-how and deeply resisted transfer of ideology. We can talk about transfer of know-how when Slovak officials toured German institutions, learned about the police work of the Gestapo in lectures or discussed questions of work organisation with experts from the Deutsche Arbeitsfront – all this suggested and organised by the advisers.

Another example of transfer of know-how is that the advisers drafted parliamentary bills to install Slovak institutions like the offices for propaganda or for
aryanization. Even the request of the Slovak Minister of Interior and Chief of the Hlinka-Guard, Alexander Mach fitted into this context. He asked "the close friends from the SS" ("die befreundete SS") to help with setting up a concentration camp in Slovakia.

The Slovak state can be described as authoritarian, nationalistic and anti-Jewish. Its politicians wanted to put these "values" – as they saw it – into practice. With this orientation there were several points of contact with Nazi Germany and in these cases German advise was welcomed as transfer of know-how.

A totally different picture emerges if we talk about those advisers who wanted to influence the organisation of the Slovak nation. I would like to quote the Slovak president Tiso to show how extremely important the ruling Hlinka Party was to him: "The party is the nation, and the nation is the party. The nation speaks through the party, and the party thinks for the nation. What is of harm to the nation, is forbidden by the party ... The party cannot go wrong, if she always acts in the best interest of the nation."

The Slovak politicians wanted to protect this extremely important institution from any German influence. Therefore Tiso named one of his true followers, Gejza Medrický, secretary-general of the Hlinka-Party. He did this exactly when the German adviser on the Party arrived in Bratislava. Medrický and his colleagues did their best to make it really hard for the adviser to do his job. They forget to inform him about meetings. They forget to send him an interpreter. They forbade him to take material from the archive of the party wandering whether this would be allowed in the archive of the NSDAP and so on. When the German adviser complained about their behaviour, they apologised and promised that it would not happen again. But as far as the adviser was concerned nothing changed for the better, so that in the end the German Foreign Ministry called him back because he really had no chance to fulfil his duty. He was not the only one to be called back: The same happened to his colleagues who wanted to give advise to the Hlinka youth organisation and the Slovak labour service. The Slovak politicians saw themselves as patriots and thought it their duty to shelter Slovak society from Nazi influence. Therefore they refused transfer of ideology firmly and successfully.

If we want to sum up the activities of the advisers in Slovakia we have to conclude that the Slovak side responded quite pragmatically. They accepted advise that fitted in with their authoritarian, nationalistic and anti-Jewish understanding of their own politics, but rejected everything what they thought foreign infiltration. It is essential not to forget that at the same time the Slovak government, as a German ally, co-operated willingly with Berlin as far as economic and military issues were concerned.

It is this ambivalence, co-operation in some issues on the one hand and self-confidence in choosing and rejecting German advise on the other, that led to the fact that memory, as far as the years of World War II are concerned, is ambiva-
lent, too. Survey results from the 1990s prove this: 30% of the Slovaks thought that the Slovak state during World War II had more positive than negative sides, another 30% thought that there were more negative sides, 28% had no opinion. This is more or less in line with answers to the question about the former president Tiso. 42% thought he was a negative figure, 29% thought that he was a positive figure and the same percentage considered him an ambiguous figure. The question about the holocaust is part of this complex, too: Two out of three Slovaks acknowledged that Jews suffered more during the years of World War II than Slovaks. But 18% could not acknowledge this and 19% answered that they were not sufficiently informed.

These survey results could be interpreted as sheer ignorance or nationalism – which might be true at least in some cases – but in my opinion it is something different that is crucial here: These results have to do with a memory that wants to cut out all the ambivalence the Slovak state in the years of the Second World War stands for. One tradition focuses on co-operation with the ‘Third Reich’ and on the persecution and deportation of the Jewish population. The other tradition focuses on the reserve vis-à-vis the advisers and the Slovak achievements in building up a state. The state itself and its president are seen in a positive light. Quite automatically this tradition is compelled to justify the persecution and deportation of Slovak citizens of Jewish origin. This can be seen in the high figure of 18% of Slovaks who are not able to acknowledge Jewish suffering during WW II.

What is tricky with these two traditions of memory is that they both cut out certain areas – so both are incomplete. If modern Slovakia wants to end fruitless debates between the ones who cannot hear and the ones who cannot see it is essential to acknowledge the ambivalence of this state: Collaboration with the ‘Third Reich’ and coping with German influence. This has to include acknowledgement of the fact that it was the Slovak government who sent Jewish citizens into forced labour camps, accepting their certain death.

Slovakia in the years of World War II was certainly less a vassal state than we have assumed up to recently. But modern Slovak society is still bound by memory to this state. Freeing itself seems to be possible only if it will fuse both traditions of memory without neglecting the Slovak contribution to the persecution of the Jewish population.