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Slovak National Communism in Interwar Czechoslovakia

Juraj Benko  and Adam Hudek 

Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia

Corresponding author: Adam Hudek; Email: Adam.Hudek@savba.sk

Abstract

Slovak national communism as a specific approach to the problem of Czech-Slovak relations gained a significant position within the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia soon after its establishment in 1921. This article analyzes the foundations of this phenomenon and the evolving attitudes of the first generation of Slovak communist intellectuals and Party functionaries. The article's primary focus is on the Slovak communists' views regarding the official state doctrine of a unified Czechoslovak nation, Czech-Slovak relations, and the issue of Slovak autonomy. The study highlights the significant external influences, particularly the directives of the Communist International and the pre-existing national stereotypes, that shaped the worldview and nationalist tendencies of Slovak communists.

Keywords: Central Europe; Interwar; Communist Party; Nationalism; Nation-building

Introduction

In the analysis of the communist movements in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), the questions of nationalism and patriotism maintain a strong presence. Systematically contesting the interpretations of communism, especially Stalinism, as an alien “anti-national revolution” (Mevis 2009; Kopeček 2012) reshaped the discussions concerning its development. It has become clear that the communist party ideologists and Marxist intellectuals did not perceive the nationalist discourse only pragmatically as an instrument in their legitimization efforts. For a significant part of the communist elite, nationalism was essential to their ideological self-identification. Communism, in their understanding, was not a program of one party but the culmination of efforts that originated in the national emancipation movements of the 19th century. As Martin Mevis (2009, 14) points out, “communist regimes did not burn their national flags but emblazoned them with communist symbols.” In the words of Bradley F. Abrams (2005, 91), the struggle for a socialist project was, to a large extent, a “struggle for the soul of the nation.” Yannis Sygkelos (2011, 3) claims that “evidence has emerged of a systematic and widespread adoption of nationalism by Marxist parties before the Second World War.”

The article aims to demonstrate this process on the example of the nationalist tendencies held by the first generational cohorts of Slovak communist intellectuals and functionaries in interwar Czechoslovakia. The study traces the views of the forming Slovak communist movement towards the official state doctrine of a united Czechoslovak nation, the relations between Czechs and Slovaks, the problem of Slovak autonomy, and the position of Hungarian/Magyar¹ communists in Slovakia. Perceptions of the changing national policy of the central coordinating agency, the

Communist International (Comintern), controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union towards Czechoslovakia, also played a significant role.

The article analyses the foundations of the strong tradition of Slovak national communism, which significantly influenced the development of post-war communist Czechoslovakia.

The concept of “national communism” is essential in this analysis. As an analytical term, it often refers to policies of communist parties in the Eastern Bloc, attempting to abandon the forced Stalinist uniformity, “a positive reevaluation of the patriotic legacy,” and “the use of the concept of national sovereignty as a legitimizing device” (Trencsényi et al. 2018, 13) According to Erik Van Ree (2001, 301): “National communism puts the interests of the particular state above those of the bloc as a whole.” The authors of this study define this term as the effort of communist parties to apply the universalist Marxist-Leninist ideology to individual national conditions to gain popularity, legitimacy, and political capital by utilizing nationalist sentiments. It was either done as a tactical approach or on the basis of a genuine belief that communism and nationalism have to work in symbiosis. National communism typically asserts that class and national issues are of equal importance. It presents Marxism-Leninism as the sole viable path toward complete national emancipation or declares nationalism as a specific manifestation of class struggle. The Slovak case shows that, at least in the interwar period, the “positive reevaluation of the patriotic heritage” was not essential for creating a national communist program.

In texts dealing with early Soviet Union (USSR) history, the term national bolshevism is used in a similar context to national communism (Brandenberger 2002). The authors of the study agree with Van Ree’s (2001, 302) view that national bolshevism is a subcategory of national communism: “Simply put, some national communisms were National Bolshevik.” While national bolshevism is generally seen more as a fusion of Marxism-Leninism and the “Great Power” tradition of tsarist Russia (Brandenberger 2002, 6–7) or Germany (Van Ree 2001, 292–296), national communism can be considered “the communism of the oppressed nations” (Gurevitz 1980, xii–xiii) This definition is closer to Czechoslovak reality; therefore, this study will use the term national communism.

Despite rejecting Russian nationalism, early Bolsheviks in Russia systematically promoted the national consciousness of ethnic minorities from the former empire to confront the rising tide of nationalism (Martin 2001, 1). In the early 1920s, the Soviet Bolsheviks introduced the policy of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*), which attempted to involve non-Russian ethnic groups and their elites in constructing the socialist order. The symbiotic relationship between communism and nationalism was thus officially created. However, it largely awakened centrifugal tendencies – especially in the form of national communism (Liber 1991, 15–23). The influence it gained, especially in Soviet Ukraine and Central Asian republics, threatened the central power’s authority and the state’s unity. The early 1930s, therefore, brought about a resurgence of Russian nationalism as Stalin abandoned proletarian internationalism in favor of “national Bolshevism.” David Brandenberger (2002, 2) calls this turn a “tacit acknowledgment of the superiority of populist, nativist, and even nationalist rallying calls over propaganda oriented around utopian idealism.” It also marked the beginning of the suppression of the national communisms of other Soviet nations and nationalities in the name of the struggle against “bourgeois nationalism” which culminated during the “Great Terror” of the late 1930s (Martin 2001, 422–431).

In parallel, the nationalist impulses found fertile ground in communist movements outside the USSR. It was due to the Comintern’s policy of actively encouraging separatist tendencies in the multinational states of Central and Eastern Europe. Although it was a highly pragmatic policy aimed at provoking revolutionary unrest, it inevitably brought the national question into the politics of the communist parties in the region as a significant issue.

At first, the national question was not of fundamental importance to the communists in Czechoslovakia. However, the ethnic heterogeneity of the state and the Czechoslovak Communist Party required them to make tactical and strategic decisions on the national question as early as the first half of the 1920s. The national question and protest against the center gained a strong radical appeal in multiethnic states, which could not leave the Communists indifferent. The conflict

between the center and the periphery that characterized the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was merely transformed after 1918. Although the idea of the nation-state became the main legitimizing narrative of post-Versailles CEE, it only partially appealed to ethnic peripheries such as Slovakia in Czechoslovakia, and it certainly could not gain the support of the Hungarian and German minorities.

In Czechoslovakia, as in other new CEE states, nationalism was the strongest trump card, and those who did not play it wisely lost political traction. Among Czechoslovak communists, the idea of proletarian internationalism and the perception of patriotism as a highly reactionary ideology did not gain ground as it did in the USSR. National identity remained an important concept, and the traditional national animosities and affinities in the CEE region were carried over into the newly formed communist parties. Their leaders promised to create regimes that would naturally reflect national identity (Kemp 1999, 96).

The Communists began to exploit the radical potential of the national question in the 1920s, at first encouraged by social radicalism and later consciously and programmatically guided by the Comintern's policies. Nevertheless, they did not mindlessly and automatically accept the Comintern's demands. They adapted them to their plans and had clear limits in national politics that they would not cross.

The study examines two basic approaches to national sentiment within the interwar communist movement. Especially in the 1930s, pragmatism was typical of both the policy of the Comintern and the leading functionaries in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). It saw nationalism as a mere tool for speeding up the revolution. It was to be encouraged when it was useful to the development of the communist movement and suppressed when it ran counter to those interests: "Insofar as the slogan of national self-determination could support the Revolution and the Soviet Union, the communists would advance it promoting, at the same time, nationalism" (Sygkelos 2011, 14) The second position considered nationalism a natural part of the communist ideology. Its proponents believed it was impossible to build communism without solving the national questions. They held the view, concisely formulated in the mid-1950s by the communist intellectual Milovan Djilas, that if any communist regime was to be sustained, it had to become national because communism could exist only as "national communism" (Djilas 157, 174)

In the ethnically heterogeneous environment of Central and Eastern Europe, national communism was not only concerned with national emancipation but also with hostility against the "Negative Others." Thus, since the early 1920s, many Slovak communists perceived the activities of their Hungarian comrades as just another variant of Hungarian irredenta. On the other hand, already in the second half of the 1920s, Czech party members perceived certain activities of communists in Slovakia as manifestations of "bourgeois nationalism" that placed national considerations above class interests.

It should be emphasized, however, that the attitudes of the national communists in the interwar period were firmly rooted in the Marxist-Leninist theoretical conception of the nation. They were also convinced that a definitive solution to the national question lay beyond the horizon of social revolution.

The study of the emergence of Slovak national communism requires an analysis of the relations and connections between "genuine" and "pragmatic" nationalism. These relations were constantly in flux and influenced by external factors, such as Comintern policy or developments in Czechoslovakia, as well as internal factors like the party struggles. As Hilde Katrine Haug (2012, 6) notes, the communist engagement with the nation had to do above all with how to mobilize support for the communist cause. Opinions on this question varied within the communist movement, and it was even more complicated in the multiethnic states.

The multinational KSC in multinational Czechoslovakia became a vital playground for national communism. Interwar KSC was one of the most numerous but also most ethnically heterogeneous communist parties in Europe. At the same time, however, the party was dominated by Czechs and Germans. Slovaks, Ruthenians and Hungarians were in a distinct minority.

Slovakia, the former Upper Hungary that became part of Czechoslovakia after 1918, remained a contested periphery during the interwar period. The comparison of the Slovak case with Ukraine in various connotations appeared in the statements of both Hungarian and Slovak communists. Although the Slovak representation in the Party did not by far reflect the number of Slovaks in the state, strong nationalist tendencies, which manifested in the Slovak communist movement, strongly influenced the development of the KSC.

The problem of communist elites' national politics in CEE's multiethnic and multinational states was not limited to Czechoslovakia. Yugoslavia and Bulgaria are similar case studies with similar problems. However, one crucial difference makes studying the Czechoslovak interwar movement particularly interesting.

Communist parties in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were banned in the early 1920s. They became persecuted, small fringe sects whose influence on domestic politics was marginal (Sygkelos 2011, 29–36; Haug 2012, 18–36). In interwar Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party operated legally and successfully until the second half of 1938. Most of the time, it functioned as a mass party with the support of affiliated organizations and numerous sympathizers among intellectuals and artists. It published a variety of newspapers and magazines. Although it was in considerable political isolation, its members and supporters actively participated in debates on crucial issues concerning the functioning of the state. The programmatic and ideological transformations of the Party program had real political implications and were part of a broader social, political, and intellectual debates. These discussions had a significant impact on the formation of the phenomenon of Slovak national communism and the overall approach to the national question among the communist elites.

Slovak Socialist Movement Before the First World War

Marx and Engels left many questions unanswered for their followers, including when the support for national movements is justified and whether all nations have a right to exist (Kemp 1999, 31). They considered some nations to be progressive or reactionary en bloc, although according to their theory, such characteristics could only be attributed to certain social classes. For Marx, nationalism was valuable only when it promoted bourgeois revolutions and the creation of large economic units. In his view, there was nothing positive about the right to self-determination of small, “non-historical nations” (Kemp 1999, 4–5). According to Marx and Engels, the Slovaks and Czechs' emancipatory efforts during the 1848 and 1849 impeded progress. As a result, it was in the best interest of these small nations to assimilate with the Germans or Magyars as soon as possible (Marx and Engels 1975, 70–71).

Lenin approached the national question unorthodoxly and pragmatically, interpreting Marxism and Bolshevik doctrine to achieve his political goals (Connor 1989, 30). Lenin's recognition of the right of all nations to self-determination up to secession was only a step toward eliminating national conflicts which constituted a fundamental obstacle to proletarian internationalism (Kemp 1999, 47–48). While in Soviet Russia, responsiveness to national emancipation efforts was supposed to promote the integration of the periphery and national reconciliation, in the capitalist world, according to Leninist strategy, it was supposed to have the opposite – radicalizing – effect. Shortly after the formation of the communist movement, the Comintern began to assert a more precise and universal position on this issue. Support for national self-determination to the point of secession became an integral part of Comintern policy, encouraging national divisions within states to promote the development of capitalism toward socialism. This policy allowed communist parties to pull society in the desired revolutionary direction. Since the 1920s, Czechoslovakia has been a prime example of this tactic.

For the CEE radical left, the problem of the relationship between nationalism and communism opened a wide space for different interpretations. In the new states that emerged after 1918 on the basis of the right to national self-determination but remaining ethnically mixed formations, debates

about conceptions of state and nation-building could not be avoided (Kopeček 2012, 123). Although significant groups within the radical left had international perspectives, in the long run, it was impossible to ignore the national question as a mere bourgeois illusion.

The relationship between Marxism and the national question in Czechoslovakia came to the fore immediately after 1918 and remained an integral part of (not only) Slovak communist thought. The problem of relations between Czechs and Slovaks played a fundamental role throughout the existence of the common state. According to historian Yeshayahu Jelinek, the communist solution to the “Slovak question” in the 1920s offered several different approaches: the doctrines of the Czechoslovak nation, Austro-Marxism, Bukharin-like proletarian nationalism, the rigid internationalism proclaimed by Rosa Luxemburg, and the Leninist slogan of the right of nations to self-determination up to secession mixed with demands for autonomy, a cantonal system, a federal arrangement, and a program for a Soviet Slovakia (Jelinek 1975, 65–85). Since its foundation, political struggles in the KSČ have often been drawn along national lines. The fundamental dividing topic of the discussions on the Slovak side was the question of centralism versus autonomy (Rupnik 2002, 56).

The position of the Slovak radical left on the national question was shaped before the First World War within the Social Democratic Party of Hungary founded in 1890. The modernization and industrialization of the Kingdom of Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century were accompanied by intensive linguistic assimilation of non-Magyar ethnic groups. Deficits in the democratization process (compared to the Austrian part of the monarchy) allowed for the harsh persecution of socialist and democratic movements, as well as national-emancipation activities of non-Magyar ethnic groups, which the ruling political elites regarded as a threat to the preservation of the status quo (Murber 2020, 14–15). The cultural marginalization of the Slovaks and the persecution of their nationalist activists significantly slowed down the formation of a modern Slovak national identity concept and political differentiation within this “national community”.

Due to the absence of urban centers with a higher concentration of industrial workers, the Slovak socialist movement formed outside present-day Slovakia. Slovak workers were politicized mainly in Budapest. Before the First World War, more than a third of the country’s proletariat and more than half of the workers in the big industries were concentrated in the Hungarian capital, including thousands of pauperized Slovak-speaking workers (Janos 1982, 150–151). In the industrial centers, they were introduced to the socialist movement by the Social Democratic Party of Hungary.

Hungarian social democracy was pivotal in the struggle for democratic political reform. However, it resisted attempts to differentiate its structures along national lines. The driving forces behind this were Magyar nationalism and the internationalist imperative of Marxist doctrine. This synergy enabled the justification of assimilation and Magyarization as “progressive” tendencies, promoting the homogeneity of the working class and strengthening the “cultural level of the workers’ movement” (Van Duin 2009, 118). However, for a significant number of non-Magyar workers’ activists from the ethnic peripheries of the country, the national question and linguistic rights became an important part of their political aspirations and their own identity. Slovak socialist activists were aware that the language barrier made socialist doctrine incomprehensible to the non-Magyar and non-German part of the proletariat. Therefore, they tried to address the Slovak workers in their native language. This effort met with disapproval in the Hungarian social democratic headquarters, despite reassurances that there was “no chauvinism, no Panslavism” behind the use of Slovak, but only the practical need to speak to the workers in their native language (Fišák 1914, 3).

However, the Marxist erudition of Slovak activists was low due to their lack of education and the absence of socialist texts in their mother tongue. The Czech social democrats, who were linguistically close, provided inspiration and long-term support for the efforts of Slovak socialists. The help of experienced socialists from the more liberal Austrian part of the monarchy proved instrumental. The Czech element significantly impacted the Slovak socialist movement in the late 19th century regarding personnel and resources (Zapletal 1969, 24). This influence persisted after 1918 and influenced the establishment of the Slovak communist movement.

Nevertheless, at the turn of the 20th century, forming an alliance with Slovak intelligentsia was still crucial. Intellectuals have traditionally played a significant role in the production of ideological discourse, strategy in the political struggle, and organization management during the era of mass politics. While the middle-class intellectuals in the German, Magyar, or Czech movements were increasingly involved in the socialist movement in the decades before the war, the radical left in the Slovak milieu faced a lack of theoreticians and ideologists. Slovak labor activists noted with regret: “The Slovak intelligentsia is avoiding us more and more (Ruttkey 1997, 236).”

The aggressive Magyarization drastically reduced the numbers of Slovak middle-class intelligentsia. Any deeper political split in its ranks would have threatened its very existence. In an ethnically Slovak, sparsely urbanized, strongly Catholic, and culturally conservative environment, open support for the socialists meant voluntary social marginalization. Despite Slovak socialists’ affinity for the “Slovak question,” socialism was considered a foreign element in the Slovak milieu, an import from the German, Magyar, Jewish, or Czech environment. Milan Hodža, a prominent Slovak politician, exemplified a typical attitude towards the socialist ideas. He expressed sympathy for workers’ materialist ideology but considered it trivial compared to the noble struggle for national emancipation (Hodža 1898, 23).

In general, the Slovak elites perceived the proletariat as a potential for mass support of the national movement. The alliance between Slovak socialists and the Slovak intelligentsia strengthened only after the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. The Slovak radical left was thus shaped by the reserved attitude of the leaders of both the Hungarian socialist and Slovak nationalist movements. The Social Democratic Party of Hungary rejected attempts at national differentiation as an anachronism. The Slovak nationalists, on the other hand, perceived the social question only in the context of the struggle for national emancipation and resisted deeper ideological differentiation.

Impact of the Hungarian Soviet Republic

The establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 represented a pivotal moment in realizing Czech and Slovak social democratic aspirations. The new state introduced universal suffrage, and the social democrats assumed positions within the government. The subsequent advancement of the revolution towards socialism appeared to be a matter of securing enough votes in the next elections. The prominent position of social democracy in Slovakia was reflected in the rapid influx of members from among the intellectual elites. The price that Slovak and Czech socialists had to pay was political moderation. Slovak social democrats took the side of order and stabilization in the turbulent post-war years. The Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party became staunch supporter of the political system of the Czechoslovak Republic and ardent advocate of Czechoslovakism, the thesis that Czechs and Slovaks form one Czechoslovak nation with a common culture and history.

However, the influential and numerous socialists of Hungarian ethnicity who found themselves in Czechoslovakia as a result of the newly established borders viewed the new situation very differently. For them, the dissolution of the Kingdom of Hungary was a difficult-to-accept tragedy. During the interwar period, members of the Hungarian nationality represented approximately 20% of the population in Slovakia and 5% of the Czechoslovak population (Tóth, Novotný and Stehlík 2012, 60). The Hungarians constituted a significant proportion of the urban population, workers, and radical socialist leaders in Slovakia. Consequently, the Hungarian element gained a solid and influential position in the emerging communist movement in Slovakia.

In Czechoslovakia, the Slovak population constituted 14% of the total population and Slovakia was a peripheral and poor region within the state. For the new Republic, however, this region and its Slavic population were of crucial importance. Only by uniting with the Slovaks could the Czechs claim that the Republic was a nation-state dominated by the Czechoslovak people. However, throughout the whole interwar period, Hungary contested the territory of Slovakia. The disagreement with the Czechoslovak concept and demands for Slovak autonomy were therefore perceived by the ruling, predominantly Czech political elites as a direct threat to the existence of the state. In

addition, the economic backwardness, national issues, and contested status, made the territory of Slovakia an ideal setting for radical, revolutionary political movements to flourish.

The sudden political moderation of the Czechoslovak social democracy drew criticism from Slovak and Czech left-wing radicals. Soon after the founding of the Republic, a conviction began to form in the Slovak population that the Prague government did not care for the peripheral, non-Czech regions. The critical social situation, the visible manifestations of discontent that locally escalated into violence and looting, the weak central government, and the activities of Bolshevik agitators from Russia (Benko 2012, 107–109) created the preconditions for the “revolutionary path.”

However, the left-wing radicals were more successful in neighboring Hungary, where in March 1919, the Hungarian communists, under Béla Kun’s leadership, established the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In an effort to export the revolution and overthrow the “imperialist post-war peace dictate,” the Hungarian Red Army succeeded in occupying portions of eastern and southern Slovakia. This 1919 incursion resulted in establishing the Slovak Soviet Republic between June and July of that year. The course of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia had a profound impact on Kun and his associates, who perceived parallels with the events unfolding in Central Europe. Endre Rudnyánszky (1919, 415), a representative of the Hungarian communists in Moscow, viewed the occupation of Slovakia as a potential acquisition of a “Hungarian Ukraine”: “The Hungarian proletariat was confronted with a similar challenge to the Russian proletariat, that is, to persuade the workers of the former Hungarian kingdom that the Hungarian proletariat did not intend to oppress them and that their sole means of defending themselves from foreign capitalism lay in forming a federative Soviet with the Hungarian proletariat. Following this rationale, Hungary established its first Ukraine–Soviet Slovakia.” Rudnyánszky employed Stalin’s argument that the efforts of border regions to secede from the former Russian Empire following the Bolshevik victory were counterrevolutionary, as any such region would inevitably fall under the yoke of imperialism (Velychenko 2015, 4).

The Hungarian regime officially endorsed the restoration of the pre-1918 borders employing Marxist and internationalist principles. Its objective was to emancipate the proletariat in the former Kingdom of Hungary and restore it as a “natural” economic and political unit. Despite not openly declaring nationalist motives, Kun was able to exploit nationalist sentiment connected to the Hungarian Kingdom to mobilize forces and justify his struggle against what he perceived as Entente and Czech imperialism in Slovakia. Many officers serving in the Hungarian Red Army were more motivated by patriotic motives for restoring a “Greater Hungary” than Kun’s Bolshevik rhetoric (Michela 2009, 35).

The propaganda of the Hungarian communists in Slovakia was not as successful as expected in Budapest. In Slovakia, the reaction to the military incursion depended on the national rather than class affiliation. The actions of the Hungarian Bolsheviks received support from social democratic structures oriented towards Budapest. Even the left-radical Slovak and Czech social democrats firmly supported the Czechoslovak Republic. The euphoria of the establishment of Czechoslovakia and the traditional anti-Magyar resentment overshadowed the propaganda about Czech imperialism. Czech and Slovak radical socialists had high hopes for Czechoslovakia and refused to exchange it for the idea of a communist Hungary (Benko 2012, 146).

The brief episode of the Hungarian and Slovak Soviet Republics left a contradictory picture of communism in the Czechoslovak population. The events of 1919 made it possible to link the Bolshevik threat with Hungarian irredentism and efforts to destroy Czechoslovakia. In the eyes of its opponents, the communist ideology threatened not only the traditional social and economic order of the world but also the newly acquired national freedom of the Slovaks. As a result, Czechoslovak President Thomas Garrigue Masaryk stated that Hungarian Bolshevism strengthened the position of Czechoslovak statehood both externally and internally (Šolle 1994, 206).

The association of Bolshevism with the destruction of the post-Versailles order significantly impacted the politics of the KSC in subsequent years. During the 1920s, the Party attempted to

avoid placing undue emphasis on radical solutions to the national question. In particular, it grappled with the issue of the right to self-determination, which implied the potential dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Such statements provoked a more severe response from state authorities than the “utopian” social-revolutionary rhetoric. Furthermore, the communist elites in the party leadership were not interested in following the path to illegality taken by their counterparts in most of the countries of CEE.

Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the Slovak Question till the mid-1920s

The growing divergence between the moderate and radical wings among Czechoslovak social democrats led to the formation of the Communist Party in 1921, a process that occurred relatively late compared to the neighboring countries. In addition to pressure from the membership and regional structures, the process was accelerated by Hungarian emissaries of the Comintern, including Béla Kun, who urged Czech radical social democrats to establish a communist party as soon as possible (Benko 2016, 883–884). Prior to the formation of the KSČ, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia-German section had already been established (Vrba 2022, 183–197). In January 1921, the Marxist Left of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus held a congress that endorsed joining the Comintern and approved the establishment of the Communist Party in Slovakia (Suda 1980, 45). The German section and the Slovak Communist Party were merely provisional organizations that promptly merged with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia upon its establishment. The KSČ became the third largest communist party in the world in terms of membership, after the Russian and German ones.

The leadership of the KSČ pragmatically accepted the changes that occurred after 1918. In contrast to the Comintern but similarly to Yugoslavia, domestic communists perceived the establishment of the new state as a progressive event. While they condemned the Czech bourgeoisie’s colonial approach towards national minorities and Slovakia, they had a positive view of the idea of the Czechoslovak nation. The founding figure of the KSČ, Bohumír Šmeral, an experienced leftist politician and renowned theoretician of socialism, did not attach any fundamental importance to the national question. As the Party’s ideological leader, Šmeral espoused the “Czech way towards communism,” which eschewed the violent revolutionary methods employed in Hungary, Germany, and Russia (Rupnik 2002, 75; Jelinek 1975, 75). He believed that Czechoslovakia constituted an optimal environment for the proletariat to attain victory through a non-violent, peaceful revolution. To this end, Šmeral underscored the significance of a sizable and ideologically unified communist party. He emphasized that the KSČ must seize the Republic rather than destroy it (Šuchová 2011, 236).

The initial Comintern politics demonstrated a reserved attitude towards the post-Versailles borders, including the Czechoslovak ones. This attitude was reinforced by the veterans of the Hungarian Revolution of 1919, who gained influential positions in the Comintern apparatus. Their belief that Hungary was a natural economic unit, destined to be part of a future socialist Europe, influenced Comintern leader Grigory Zinoviev (Šuchová 2006, 30–31).

However, the aspiration for a socialist Hungary, which included Slovakia, provoked a nationalist response among Slovak communists. The concern that the dissolution of Czechoslovakia would result in the re-unification of Hungary shaped the attitude of ethnically Slovak communists towards the nascent state in the first half of the 1920s.

Their leading figure, Július Verčák, was a prominent communist functionary, a founder of KSČ, and a member of its leadership. In 1920, at the age of 26, he was a member of a Czechoslovak trade union delegation to Soviet Russia to negotiate with Zinoviev. He discovered that the Comintern leadership preferred the concept of great socialist Hungary over Czechoslovakia (Archives of National Museum in Prague, f. Július Verčák). During the Convention of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1921, Verčák openly expressed his disapproval of such visions (Ustavující a slučovací sjezd 1958, 178): “I would especially appeal to our delegates who will attend the congress

of the Communist International to dispel all the erroneous opinions which have taken hold of the minds there, (...) as a result of certain Hungarian influences. They [Comintern functionaries] are misinformed about Slovakia. Slovakia does not pursue anti-Czech goals, and Slovakia will not become “the Hungarian Ukraine”.

Although the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922 proclaimed the right of self-determination up to and including separation, the KSČ leadership emphasized the importance of maintaining the unity of Czechoslovakia. This stance was reinforced by the openly irredentist policy of the Hungarian conservative and authoritarian regime under Admiral Miklós Horthy, who made no secret of his desire to restore the Kingdom of Hungary in its original size. The KSČ explicitly ruled out the possibility of Slovak autonomy, stating that it would “serve as a cloak for the endeavor to exclude the Slovak people from their cultural community with the Czech people” (Fowkes 2008, 210). According to Slovak communists: “Because we do not have enough intelligentsia from our nation, it is impossible for us to agree to autonomy and we must reject it and openly call those who proclaim it traitors to Slovakia” (Autonómia Slovenska 1921, 2).

One of the enduring deficiencies of the Slovak communist movement was the lack of intellectuals and educated functionaries. In response, the KSČ sought to bolster its ranks by recruiting from the Czech lands. This strategy was not exclusive to the KSČ; in the 1920s, due to a dearth of suitable candidates, it was implemented across all sectors of Slovak society, including culture, education, administration, and the judiciary. Experienced left-wing radicals, trade unionists, and later young Czech communists were brought to Slovakia as “intellectual help.” One of them was the future General Secretary of the KSČ, Klement Gottwald. Despite his young age, this functionary from the Moravian countryside became an administrator of the communist press. He soon demonstrated his skill and agility as a journalist and became a close collaborator of Verčík.

Nonetheless, the number of arrivals from the Czech lands was insufficient to meet the demands of Slovak communists for experienced leaders. At the Second Congress of the KSČ, a similar complaint was voiced as a quarter of a century ago, namely that the Slovak intelligentsia is shunning radical left-wing politics (Protokol 2. řádného sjezdu 1983, 557). The intelligentsia in Slovakia did not undergo the same process of radicalization that occurred in Hungary, Germany, and Austria following the war’s end. None of the Slovak intelligentsia members emulated their Hungarian counterparts and became a “tribune of the revolutionary masses.” The poet Ladislav Novomeský, one of the first Slovak communist intellectuals, concluded that, while the Czech national intelligentsia was “at least inclined and willing to accept the rule of the Czech proletariat” after 1918, the Slovak one was characterized by “a fear of the nation that, like the older intelligentsia, commanded them to close themselves off from other, new ideas that were not registered in the nationalist vocabulary” (Novomeský 1993b, 89–91).

The conviction that the older generation of Slovak intellectuals had failed due to their provincial traditionalism and national limitations significantly shaped how the emerging group of Slovak Marxist intellectuals perceived Slovak nationalism. They sympathized with the Slovak elites’ struggle for national rights in the late 19th century but believed that such policies were no longer acceptable after the establishment of Czechoslovakia. They regarded it as a harmful anachronism and a fundamental misunderstanding of the new state’s challenges.

In 1924, Verčík enthusiastically reported that he had won for the Party the first 15 Slovak university students who were studying in Prague and “working actively for proletarian culture” (Robotnícke hnutie Slovákov v USA (1905) 1921–1930). The group, which constituted the core of the emerging generation of Slovak communist intelligentsia, formed in 1924 in Prague, the largest Czechoslovak city and the principal meeting point of liberals and leftist intellectuals. Named after the journal DAV, which was established as a platform of the leftwing, Marxist literary avant-garde, its founders and main contributors were known as “Davists.” The Slovak word “dav” means “crowd” and refers to the worker masses and collectivism of the radical left. A small, yet active group created a stir in both Slovak and Czech cultures.

Despite their unreserved sympathy for the communist idea, the Davists' initial loose relationship with the Communist Party gradually intensified. By the end of the 1920s, they were established KSCĎ members and worked mainly as journalists in the Party press. The Davists presented distinct, highly critical views on the role of the Slovak intelligentsia in the new situation after 1918. The initial cohort of communist intellectuals perceived traditional Slovak political topics as regressive, maintaining the "serf mentality" of the Slovak common man (Novomeský 1993a, 107). For young intellectuals sympathetic to communism, the Slovak national tradition impeded the advancement of modernity and progress. Consequently, they advocated for its immediate abandonment. In 1923, Vladimír Clementis, the future ideological leader of the Davists, argued in the journal *Mladé Slovensko* (Young Slovakia) (1923, 68–69) that excessive attachment to the "legacy of the past" leads to "constant repetition of mistakes and falling behind." The Davists contended that the Slovak ills primarily stemmed from social and economic factors and identified nationalism and autonomism, advanced by the conservative-clerical Slovak People's Party (Ludaks), as the principal threats to Slovak development.

The Davists perceived themselves as the sole element of Slovak intellectual life to effectively resist the reactionary influence of Slovak culture. They attributed this resistance to the progressive influences of Hungarian, Jewish, and Czech cultures on their intellectual development. Those educated in Hungarian culture introduced revolutionary, progressive ideas, while the Davists of Jewish origin contributed to internationalism. The Czech element facilitated contacts with prominent left-wing intellectuals and communist student associations such as Prolektult and Kostufra (Chorváth 1970, 261).

In rejecting tradition, the national past, and Slovak nationalism, the Davists appeared to emulate the early Soviet Bolsheviks as described by David Brandenberger (2002, 17–19). However, the Davists rejected only Slovak patriotic ideas. On the other hand, they wholeheartedly supported the concept of a Czechoslovak nation. According to Clementis (1923, 68), Czechoslovakism provided a "correct solution to the Czechoslovak question," directly linking Slovaks with the more progressive Czech milieu, which helped accelerate the elimination of Slovak cultural and ideological backwardness. The Davist sincere Czechoslovak patriotism followed the atmosphere of the Prague communist avant-garde. However, it emerged when the atmosphere within the Slovak functionary core and the international communist movement significantly transformed. Consequently, in the mid-1920s, when the Comintern underscored the pivotal role of the national question in the revolutionary movement, the perspectives of the KSCĎ center in Prague, Slovak communist leadership, and the Davists began to diverge.

Towards the Slovak National Communism

At the time of the founding of the KSCĎ, Slovak communists were unequivocal in their support of a unitary republic. They declared that although every nation has the right to "self-government," the current situation precluded any form of Slovak autonomy, which would only serve to disrupt the "centralist movement of the proletariat" (*Autonómia Slovenska* 1921, 2). However, the leading functionaries in Slovakia were skeptical of the idea of a Czechoslovak nation and presented their support for the Czechoslovak Republic only conditionally as the best available protection against Hungarian claims: "We are the last ones who would consider ourselves patriots, but we always choose the lesser of the two evils, and that is the Czechoslovak Republic over Horthy. We have not yet lost faith that this state can be transformed into a socialist, communist state, even though we are regarded as traitors – wreckers of the Republic" (*Autonómia Slovenska* 1921, 1). This statement contained an implicit threat. If Slovak communists lost faith in the possibility of socialist transformation, their opinion on the survival of Czechoslovakia and the manner of solving the Czech-Slovak relationship would change.

The patience of Verčík and his colleagues with the position of Slovakia, both at the level of the state and the Party, was exhausted by 1924. Their radicalizing views on the Slovak question were

fueled by their strong discontent with the KSČ leadership in Prague. While the Communist Party retained a revolutionary image, this was mainly in rhetoric. In practice, it adapted to the functioning of the Republic's party system. Šmeral advocated for gathering revolutionary forces for future offensives (Čihák 1981, 119), yet the officials in the poorer eastern regions of the Republic considered this deliberate inaction. Slovaks, Ruthenians, Hungarian immigrants, and Czech radicals who came to Slovakia felt that the Party leadership lacked interest in developing regional structures in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus.

In Slovakia, it became evident that the radical left formed in markedly different circumstances than in the Czech lands. Shortly after the establishment of the state, the nature of the Slovak political landscape began to be strongly influenced by the delayed "formation of a modern Slovak national identity concept" and the asymmetrical relationship between Slovakia and the Czech lands. The results of the inaugural democratic elections in Slovakia in 1920 reflected the post-war social radicalism and building optimism. For the first and last time in the interwar period, social democratic parties (Czechoslovak and Hungarian-German) emerged triumphant in Slovakia, securing 43% of the votes (Statistická příručka 1920, 102).

The municipal (1923) and parliamentary (1925) elections marked the ascendance of radical nationalism and populism. The conservative-clerical leader of the Ludaks, Andrej Hlinka, proclaimed the transformation of "red Slovakia" into "white." The Ludaks were adept at capitalizing on the key cleavages that shaped and rapidly differentiated domestic politics following the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. These included the conflict between church and state, town and country, and the increasingly visible conflict between the center and periphery. They also demonstrated an understanding of how to exploit social contradictions politically. The Ludaks addressed issues related to the dismantling of industry, unemployment, emigration, and dissatisfaction with the results of the land reform through a nationalist vocabulary, portraying these as problems of Slovakia's unequal and colonial position within the state and Czech exploitation. Autonomy for Slovakia became an essential program of Ludak politics.

The "Slovak question" became a dominant issue on the political scene at the beginning of the interwar period. The successes of the Ludaks showed that it was an important source of political capital. At the same time, national radicalism was seen as a promising political strategy in a disaffected Slovakia. The image of colonial exploitation of Slovakia by the Czech ruling circles (political and economic) resonated very well with protest movements and opposition parties in Slovakia. Together with Slovak and Hungarian nationalists, the radical left worked hard to popularize this image. In the first half of the 1920s, Slovak, Hungarian and Ruthenian communists presented Slovakia as a colonial prey of the economic interests of the Czech bourgeoisie.

In light of Ludak's successes after 1923, Slovak communists became increasingly aware of the need for an effective national program. Verčík suggested that if the communists were to succeed in Slovakia, they would have to win the argument over the settlement of Czech-Slovak relations. He proposed a new communist national program that saw autonomism as a specific expression of the Slovak people's class struggle against the Czech bourgeoisie and its domestic allies. Verčík and Gottwald explained that the Ludaks exploited this genuine working-class movement only because of the mistakes of the Party leadership (Kramer and Mlynárik 1965, 423–443).

Political competition had a significant impact on these programmatic changes. The new national program of the Slovak functionaries was designed to attract new voters. In contrast, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, working in illegality, abandoned its support for a unitary state and the principle of *narodno jedinstvo* (national oneness), similar to Czechoslovakism, only gradually between 1926 and 1928 (Haug 2012, 29).

The potential of the "Slovak national question" was significantly enhanced by the fact that a significant portion of the communist membership in Slovakia consisted of radical activists with minimal to no previous political socialization within the social democratic movement. These individuals were not ideologically anchored, and alongside the communist chiliasm, they supported many other radical protest positions. Anti-Czech and anti-Hungarian nationalism, protest against

the Prague center, opposition to democracy, and anti-Semitism were natural components of their belief system, absorbed from the Slovak cultural and political milieu. We can agree with the words of a representative of the young, educated generation of social democrats, who unflatteringly assessed the Marxist foundations of Slovak communism: “The Communist Party was a continuation of the pseudo-revolutionary mood that was whipped up by the Upheaval [dissolution of Kingdom of Hungary]. It did not arise due to the contradictions between Marxists and reformists. It was merely the logical continuation of the political naivety that manifested in post-revolutionary looting” (Benau, 1933, 26).

The political careers of several Slovak communist renegades, such as Ludo Koreň, Vinco Mihalus, and Štefan Darula prove that the Slovak communist movement had shallow ideological roots. For them, the conflict between the Prague center and the Slovak periphery, at the Party and the State level, was the most important factor. They believed that in Slovakia, national antagonisms prevailed over class antagonisms. After leaving the Communist Party, they searched for other radical movements to accommodate their revolutionary attitude and temperament. Autonomist, separatist, and fascist groups welcomed them. As the newspaper of the fascist party “National League of Jiří Stříbrný” wrote about the new reinforcement from Slovakia, the former member of the KSC, Štefan Darula: “He had constant clashes with the leadership of the Party, which could not forgive him for his national self-confidence (...) He hated the Jewish-Hungarian-German elements around him and fought them wherever he could” (Za Darulu 1927, 3).

The Slovak communists’ radicalism, nationalism, and political naivety were effectively utilized by the Comintern leadership to radicalize the KSC politics. Moscow’s uncompromising attitude toward social-democratic residues and the national question appealed to Slovak, Hungarian, and Ruthenian radicals. Together with the Czech and German “ultra-leftists,” they unflinchingly followed the Comintern’s line and became a hammer against the moderate leadership of the Communist Party (Šuchová 2006, 43–44) Verčík was elected a member of the Comintern Executive and appointed to the Commission on the Colonial and National Question at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924. He participated in drafting the Resolution on the National Question of Central Europe and the Balkans, which unequivocally stated that Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Greece were new small imperialist states that had become centers of national oppression (Resolution 1924, 682) The Resolution declared that Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were states comprised many nationalities. In the Czechoslovak case, the document stated that besides the Czech nation, the state comprised the following nationalities: Slovak, German, Magyar, Ukrainian,² and Polish. The Congress obliged the Czechoslovak communists “to particularly support the fight of the Slovaks for their independence and untiringly strive to release this movement from the influence of the bourgeoisie” (Resolution 1924, 684). However, the Resolution also granted the right to self-determination to Hungarians and Ukrainians (Ruthenians) in Czechoslovakia.

In response, the Second Congress of KSC in 1924 officially denounced Czechoslovakism as an opportunist mistake and formally accepted the absolute right of Slovaks to self-determination. The idea of the Czechoslovak nation was condemned as a “cover for colonial exploitation and the bloody repression of Slovakia and Transcarpathian Ukraine” (Protokol 2. řádného sjezdu 1983, 31). However, Šmeral’s group in the KSC leadership criticized the practical implications of the absolute right to self-determination, which would lead to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia. Šmeral openly warned against mechanically transferring solutions from one state to another without examining their specific conditions.

The Comintern politics was not particularly concerned about the fates of the CEE states and their socio-political context or the needs of domestic communists. The main goal was the ruthless utilization of national policy as a destructive tool to speed up the revolution. In June of 1924, Zinoviev made his stance clear in a speech: “What we ask is that those of our parties in countries where the national question is important should learn how to use the nationalist element against the bourgeois regime. Our parties must try to set in the movement against the government those

elements which are naturally discontented’—as the Russian party had stirred up Ukrainian nationalists against Kerensky (...) we did exploit their discontent for the good of the proletarian revolution” (Manifesto to the Peoples of the East 1960, 158).

After the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, the conflict between the right and left wings of the KSC took a strong national accent. The nationalities—including the Slovaks—were on the radical “left,” and the Czech communists were on the moderate “right.” The Comintern Executive supported the radicals, but its endorsement was conditional. Furthermore, the radical faction lacked support within the KSC and among the Communist deputies in the Czechoslovak National Assembly. Following the Second Congress of the KSC, several Slovak, Hungarian, and Ruthenian radicals were appointed to the leadership based on the recommendation of the Comintern. Verčík served as the party’s innermost leadership member for a few months. However, as he later recalled, the non-Czech members were accused of nationalist deviation, and the Czech workers were incited against the “Hungarian-Ukrainian-Slovak-German dictatorship in the Czechoslovak Communist Party” (Šuchová 2006, 46).

The Slovak radicals did not come into conflict only with the KSC leadership but also with the emerging Slovak communist intellectuals. Verčík was disappointed by the criticism from the Davists, whom he had previously welcomed with great enthusiasm. In the first issue of the journal DAV, in an article On the National Question, Vladimír Clementis (1924, 2–4) echoed Šmeral’s arguments about the “mechanical transfer of solutions” and accused Verčík of uncritically adopting the theses of the “Moscow Commission.” Clementis stated that Verčík was not concerned about the consequences of this policy, which might lead to temporary successes but would ultimately cause irreparable damage to the “united Czechoslovak nation.”

Clementis claimed that Lenin’s advocacy for the national liberation rights of small, oppressed nations did not extend to Slovakia because Slovak nationalism was not bourgeois-liberal but reactionary-clerical. Clementis’ argument drew on Marx’s and Engels’ ideas about the unproductive aspirations of small nations, which should instead focus on linking with their larger, more progressive neighbors. In his perception, these were exclusively the Czechs.

Clementis used Stalin’s definition of a nation to support his argument that while the Slovaks are not and probably would never become a nation, a Czechoslovak nation could form in the future. The Davist leader ended his article by advising the communists to oppose the bourgeois government in Slovakia in a strictly class-based manner without emphasizing its Czech identity. They should take advantage of the anti-Czech sentiment in Slovakia but avoid competing with the Slovak autonomists in the nationalist field.

The Davists’ arguments were much closer to Šmeral’s group in the KSC than the radicals among the Slovak functionaries. They firmly opposed autonomist and secessionist sentiments in Slovakia and were able to combine Marxist internationalism with true Czechoslovak patriotism and a belief in a united Czechoslovak nation. All the plans and programs of the Davists were strictly based on the existence of the Czechoslovak Republic, and they refused to consider any other alternative. Even the fundamental revolutionary moment in the development of Slovakia – the Hungarian Soviet Republic invasion – was perceived exclusively as a possibility for the emergence of a socialist Czechoslovakia (Faltán 1968, 53). However, the Davists shared with Verčík’s group a distrust of the Hungarian Communists operating in Slovakia, whom they accused of Hungarian chauvinism (Pamflet 1924, 49).

Verčík was unequivocal in his criticism of the Davists’ attitudes, labeling them “little students who want to lecture Moscow” (Archives of National Museum in Prague, f. Július Verčík). He failed to recognize that their criticism echoed his arguments from the early 1920s – that autonomism could aid Hungarian irredenta, Slovakia was not ready for independence, and the Slovak people did not want it.

The Comintern resolution on the national question gave Davists and Šmeral some support. Comintern Presidium member Dmitri Manuilsky made it clear that accepting the theses on the right of peoples to self-determination up to secession did not mean Slovak or German communists

should support the partition of Czechoslovakia along ethnic lines. Communists of all nationalities had to fight first and foremost against the chauvinism of their bourgeoisie (Protokoll 1924, 1003). In October 1924, the Comintern Executive Committee further clarified the national question in Czechoslovakia. The KSC was instructed to promote a federal solution to the national problem. However, it was emphasized that national issues would only disappear after the successful revolution (Protokoll 1924, 1053). The federation of equal and independent Workers' and Peasants' Republics became the new, universal solution, which the Comintern also recommended to the communist parties in the Balkans (Resolution 1924, 683).

For the KSC leadership, this meant that, at the price of compromises and concessions, it contained the offensive from the periphery. In less than half a year, the "ultra-leftists" from Slovakia, as Zinoviev called them in 1925 (Jelinek 1975, 81), were removed from the Party leadership under various pretexts and accusations. The first attempt at Bolshevization, which aimed to entirely subordinate the Communist Party to the Comintern executive and adapt it to the Soviet model, failed.

A year later, the first attempt at a Slovak national communist program also failed. Even after the moderation of radical Comintern calls for emancipation to the point of secession, communists in Slovakia still had a significant reason to radicalize their nationalist stance. It was the ongoing rivalry with the Ludaks. The Slovak communists' efforts to exploit the explosive potential of the national question culminated in 1926. The Ludaks negotiated to enter the government and moderated their attacks on Prague. Gottwald, supported by Verčík, decided to take up the baton of national radicalism in Slovakia. Under the leadership of these two functionaries, a faction of communists in Slovakia began to move toward national communism.

In July 1926, their nationalist and anti-Czech agitation led to the publication of a demagogic manifesto entitled "Get Out of Slovakia!" in Slovak, Hungarian and Ukrainian. Gottwald wrote it and Verčík, who was in prison when it was drafted, approved it later. The Manifesto summarized the hypercritical narrative of the previous years regarding Slovakia's position within the Republic. It declared that Slovakia was being exploited as a colony by the Czech bourgeoisie, supported by the state apparatus. Gottwald and Verčík called for a referendum on Slovakia's position within the Republic and acknowledged the possibility of its independence (Benko and Hudek 2022, 320–321). The Manifesto combined pragmatism with genuine nationalism. Gottwald's main aim likely was to surpass the demands of the Ludaks and present the Communists as the main protest party in Slovakia. At the same time, "Get Out of Slovakia!" undoubtedly reflected the genuine disillusionment of Verčík and his associates with developments in Czechoslovakia as well as in the KSC.

However, the Czech core of the Party principally refused the separatist tendencies in Czechoslovakia. The KSC leadership was not interested in destabilizing Czechoslovakia or encouraging national radicalization. The communist press did not endorse or promote the Manifesto. In addition, the state authorities also intervened strongly against its spread in Slovakia (Pleva, 1962, 137). As a result, in a couple of weeks, the document ended in complete oblivion.

"Get Out of Slovakia!" was released at a time when the "national theses" had lost their significance in the communist movement. The KSC functionaries were clear that Comintern's instructions clarified that the Party was not forced to fight for the disintegration of the state it sought to dominate. Zinoviev was removed from the Comintern, and a new, dogmatic line, characterized by Stalin's influence, was on the horizon. Its primary focus was the conflicting line of "class against class" and, within it, the struggle against social democracy. Furthermore, it turned out that the nationalist or separatist outbursts of the communists were counterproductive because they incited a strong reaction from the state authorities.

As the pressure from Moscow to promote the national question diminished and the pressure from the state repressive organs increased, the KSC leadership's interest in the Slovak question declined. Gottwald, now an influential member of the Party leadership and Moscow's main trump card in the new attempt to Bolshevize the KSC, understood the changes and stopped using the "Slovak card."

Meanwhile, Verčík became a scapegoat and was severely criticized in 1928 and 1929 for the alleged mistakes and shortcomings of the Slovak communist movement. Verčík's ultra-left critics, Eduard Urx and Eugen (Jenő) Klinger, from the Davist group, accused him of drafting the Get Out Manifesto and promoting bourgeois nationalism. Gottwald remained silent (Mlynárik 1994, 341–360). After he and his compatriots took over the KSČ at its Fifth Congress in 1929 and subordinated it completely to Stalin's directives, Verčík left the party. The Bolshevized KSČ lost about two-thirds of its membership, including most of its founding figures from Slovakia (Suda 1980, 119).

National Turn of the Slovak Marxist Intellectuals

The thoroughly Bolshevized, centralized KSČ had no place for the troublesome radicals from the periphery and their voluntarist activities. It did not mean, however, that the new party leadership did not want to instrumentalize the national question. However, it did it differently, using the Slovak communist intellectuals. The Davist group was always very close to Gottwald in terms of age and opinion. Unlike Verčík, Gottwald did not underestimate the potential of the theorizing young communist intellectuals and realized they could be useful for communist propaganda in Slovakia. He allowed the Davists to write and edit the communist press, which brought them closer to the KSČ and won their loyalty and support. The benefits of this alliance became apparent in 1929. The Davists fully recognized Gottwald's authority over the Party, embraced the new Stalinist direction, and consistently supported the new chairman against criticism from prominent Czech communist intellectuals (Vévoda 2012, 24–31).

The Davists humbly accepted that they had no influence on the Party's policies and had fully engaged in reproducing the new orthodoxy. The KSČ leadership did not need them to mobilize the proletariat; it could effectively do so without their help. The Davists' real potential was in recruiting and mobilizing their social, generational, and educational strata. Communist intellectuals were to appeal primarily to and mobilize its young and politically indifferent members.

One of the ways to do this was to present solutions to the problem of Czech-Slovak relations that could compete with the program of the autonomists. Davists such as Ladislav Novomeský or Vladimír Clementis had a sincere, passionate, and growing interest in the national question. Despite initial resistance, by the end of the 1920s, they accepted the Comintern line and the KSČ decision to condemn Czechoslovakism. The impact of the Great Depression on Czechoslovakia contributed significantly to their decision. In the early 1930s, several Davists concluded that Slovakia needed a different approach than the Czech lands to solve its economic and social problems. They believed that Czechoslovakia should be viewed as a state of two separate but equal nations with different needs in various areas of their development.

The Davists were encouraged by the Sixth Congress of the KSČ, which, in 1931, reemphasized the importance of the nationalist agenda in the Party's policy regarding the non-Czech territories of the Republic (*Na cestě k bolševismu* 1930, 106). The Soviet Union's federal structure became the model for solving the national question. National politics was one of the main features of the positive image of the USSR, even after Stalin ended the experiment with "national communisms" in the early 1930s (Brandenberger and Zelenov 2014, 859). Communist propaganda celebrated the political, economic, and cultural modernization of the non-Russian peoples of the USSR. The Soviet reality embodied the exemplary and final fulfillment of the "right of peoples to self-determination." Bohumír Šmeral, who became a Comintern functionary in 1933, also revised his positions in this direction. He saw the only satisfactory solution to the national question in the socialist revolution and the subsequent establishment of a socialist federation of free nations on the Soviet model. In his article in DAV, he encouraged "constant study of the practical measures of the Soviet country in the field of national policy" (Šmeral 1933, 100). The Davists followed his advice. They did not give up their Czechoslovak patriotism but changed their assumptions and advocated for a federal solution to Czech-Slovak relations.

Davists noticed a shift toward national Bolshevism in Stalin's policies during the early 1930s. In November 1930, Clementis participated in a congress of revolutionary and proletarian writers in Kharkiv. There he observed criticism of the sectarian approach towards cultural heritage and the traditional values of the past (Drug 1965, 61). Back home, Clementis informed other Davists about changes in the Soviet cultural policy. Some of them started to rethink their previous rejection of Slovak "bourgeois culture." Instead of trying to overcome national traditions with the help of the Czechs, they focused on developing the progressive aspects of these traditions and even protecting them from stronger neighbors. However, the positive stance towards the patriotic legacy was not absolute. The Davists still accepted the condemnatory theses of Marx and Engels about the small Slavic nations, which had turned against the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 because of national egoism. According to Novomeský (1933, 41), the only means of atoning for these sins was a new "revolution of the proletariat and peasants, which will wash away the old transgression of the Slavs."

Not all Davists agreed with the national turn. Ultra-leftists Eugen Klinger and Eduard Urx harshly criticized attempts at a "tactical approach to enemies," which they perceived as un-Marxist (Drug 1965, 51). Nevertheless, for Slovak communist intellectuals, the early 1930s marked a significant shift toward national communism. Among the younger generation, the question of Slovak national emancipation was already an essential part of their worldview. The demand for a "just solution of Czech-Slovak relations" in the form of a federal state became a routine demand that did not provoke the disapproval of the KSC leadership. It allowed the Davists to further elaborate and publicly discuss the concept of Slovak national communism. It was also because the national question lost its volatility for KSC leadership. In addition to eliminating the rightists, Trotskyists and ultra-leftists, Gottwald also got rid of the nationalists among the Slovak and Hungarian functionaries. As a result, the national question ceased to be a source of unwanted conflict within the KSC, at least temporarily.

After the personnel changes, new loyal functionaries represented the Party in Slovakia. They formed the backbone of Gottwald's leadership, had no national agenda of their own and were not bothered by centralism (Rychlík 2012, 306). In the following decade, the central bodies of the KSC had a monopoly on national politics and used it exclusively in the sphere of propaganda and agitation. The Slovak question served as a tool for escalating social tensions. The Davists and their younger colleagues dutifully and actively played their assigned roles in this scenario. However, they did not influence the political decision-making process in the Party.

Slovak Question After the Anti-fascist Turn

The Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935 marked a decisive shift in the KSC's stance on the Republic and the Czech-Slovak relationship. Fascism emerged as the primary threat, and the communist movement responded by forming national fronts made up of all anti-fascist groups. The communists began promoting national reconciliation rather than encouraging national separatism. In 1936, the KSC Congress adopted the "tactics of the united popular front." The Party definitively left the narrative about Slovakia's subordination, exploitation, and colonial status to the Ludaks. Instead, the communist functionaries advocated for strengthening the bond between nations and nationalities in Czechoslovakia and opposed the Slovak autonomist movement (Pospíšil 1937, 457). This meant returning arguments from the early 1920s in favor of preserving Czechoslovakia. The Davists' unwavering Czechoslovak patriotism and their vision for resolving Czech-Slovak relations in party politics gained considerable traction.

Although the Party's focus on resolving the national question within the existing regime was only a form of general declaration, it inspired the Slovak members of the Party and, in particular, the Davists to introduce a new plan for the Slovak question. In May 1937, the Slovak Communists presented the Plan for the Economic, Social, and Cultural Uplift of Slovakia (Plán 1980, 331–348). It represented the most extensive program on the national question in the KSC and the most comprehensive manifesto on the Slovak question that the Slovak communists drafted in the

interwar period. The Plan included a comprehensive list of measures designed to guarantee the “general economic, social, and cultural flourishing” of Slovakia. Notably, it did not condition the path to prosperity by following the Soviet model or social revolution, even in a hint.

The Plan proposed the “equalization” of the Czech lands with the aim of improving the social status of the poorest strata, deepening democracy, eliminating economic backwardness, and developing the school system. The national question in Slovakia was transformed from a source of conflict to a unifying force, providing the foundation for the collaboration of democratic, anti-fascist forces in the form of Czechoslovak national communism.

The Davists stood up for the Plan and disseminated it through the communist press. From their perspective, solving the Czech-Slovak relations was inextricably linked to the defense of the Republic. They considered the strengthening of Slovakia to be a crucial political, economic, and cultural factor in maintaining the unity of Czechoslovakia. Clementis and Novomeský, who had previously expressed criticism of the “bourgeois republic,” advanced the Czechoslovak patriotism of the democratic state. They emphasized that its survival was “the most Slovak question” and that “the Slovak nation lives and dies with the Czechoslovak Republic” (Bystrický 1985, 853). At this time, the Davists had already gradually established themselves as a significant presence in Slovak political discourse. The election of Clementis to the National Assembly in 1935 reinforced this influence. Their political and cultural agenda increasingly resonated with the Slovak cultural community. Additionally, a significant proportion of the public began to espouse similar views on the Czech-Slovak relationship and the Soviet Union’s role in international politics.

However, due to the rapidly evolving domestic and foreign political landscape, the Plan failed to gain prominence in Party politics. Since the mid-1930s, the pressing issue of the German minority and the pressure from Nazi Germany has been a dominant concern for both the Czechoslovak government and the KSČ leadership, overshadowing the Slovak question. Ultimately, the Plan suffered a similar fate to the “Get Out of Slovakia!” Manifesto. It remained a declaration that did not achieve the anticipated impact within the centers of power in the Party and the state. Nevertheless, it served as the foundation for the political perspective of Slovak communist intellectuals in the future.

The KSČ leadership and its functionary elite stuck to generic declarations and left the formulation of the national program to loyal Slovak communist intellectuals. Unlike Verčík’s and Gottwald’s program of 1924–1926, the Davists did not go against the Party center and fulfilled its expectations. Although they adhered to the Marxist-Leninist axiom that the national question could be definitely resolved only after the final victory of the proletariat, their activities resonated in the intellectual milieu, stimulating debate and creating a more attractive, less sectarian and dogmatic image of the communist movement. A significant example was the Davists’ participation in the young Slovak intelligentsia meeting in June 1932. Clementis, on behalf of the communist intelligentsia, demanded that national and social exploitation be considered equally serious. He also proposed an alliance with the Slovak bourgeoisie against the Czech-German bourgeoisie supposedly colonizing Slovakia (Clementis 1932, 93).

The Davists’ position outside real party politics, the freedom of thought associated with it, and their virtual monopoly on Czech-Slovak relations had unexpected consequences. Slovak communist intellectuals were allowed to formulate a program of Slovak national communism. As it turned out later, this was not just an intellectual exercise, although it may have looked that way in the context of interwar Czechoslovak and KSČ policies. During the Second World War, however, the theses of Slovak national communism, which were directly related to the experiences of the interwar period, became the basis not only of the program of the Slovak communists but also of the united Slovak anti-fascist coalition. At the same time, its authors among the Davists and their younger compatriots, left the safe haven of politically relatively insignificant party intellectuals and moved directly to the turbulent center of postwar Czechoslovak politics.

Conclusion

During the first decade of Czechoslovakia's existence, the beliefs and opinions of Slovak communist functionaries and intellectuals underwent several significant changes. These had a strong and lasting impact on the political and ideological direction of the KSČ, often contradicting the official positions of the Party leadership. The delay in formation of a modern national identity concept significantly influenced Slovak politics, shaping its emotions and nature. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Slovak question was an important source of political capital. The Communists began to exploit its radical potential in the 1920s, at first encouraged by social radicalism and later deliberately and programmatically under the control of the Comintern.

From the outset, the KSČ's approach to national issues was a synthesis of pragmatism and "genuine" national sentiments. An analysis of the first generational cohort of Slovak communist intellectuals and functionaries reveals that the national question was an integral aspect of their worldview. Furthermore, the formation of the Czechoslovak communist movement was influenced by an intellectual tradition that relied heavily on pre-existing national stereotypes. The Slovak case resulted in a degree of suspicion towards the Hungarian communists. However, the historically positive perception of the Czech environment led to support for the idea of a Czechoslovak state and the concept of a Czechoslovak nation. However, the experience with the functioning of Czechoslovakia and the Prague Party leadership gradually led to much more critical stances. A focus on the conflict between the center and the periphery, both in the state and the Party, became an enduring characteristic of Slovak communism throughout the existence of the KSČ.

Pragmatism was a prominent feature of the Comintern's policy. It involved the utilization of nationalist sentiments to stimulate revolutionary sentiments, regardless of the intentions and views of individual communist parties. The Comintern policy significantly influenced the evolution of the KSČ's national program. Following Comintern directives, the Party rejected the concept of a unified Czechoslovak nation and adopted a markedly adversarial stance towards the state in which it operated. The deliberate support of leftist radicals from minority nations within the Communist Party led to manifestations of national communism in Slovakia as early as the mid-1920s, roughly corresponding to the developing national communisms in the Soviet Union. Slovak, Hungarian, and Soviet officials were aware of these parallels and employed them in various ways in their statements.

However, the limitations of adhering to Comintern's requirements became apparent during this period. The majority of the Party leadership and Marxist intellectuals were unwilling to endorse the active support for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia under the slogan of the right of Slovaks, Hungarians, and Ruthenians to self-determination until secession.

The functioning of the KSČ reflected that it was operating legally within the framework of a democratic regime. Consequently, party functionaries faced dilemmas their comrades working underground did not have to address. The leadership of the KSČ was thus willing to moderate certain aspects of their program that were perceived as a threat to the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia.

One of the consequences of the Bolshevization of the Party in 1929 was the departure of the Slovak nationalists and their replacement by a new group of functionaries with no interest in the question of Czech-Slovak relations. However, in contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union, the KSČ did not attempt to suppress manifestations of national communism. In the early 1930s, the KSČ's national program shifted from tangible political action to agitation and propaganda. The Slovak question became the primary concern of Slovak communist intellectuals, who developed it with the tacit approval of the Party leadership. As a result of their genuine conviction that the Communist Party's program required a just solution (primarily) to Czech-Slovak relations, they became the creators of the enduring Slovak national communism program and the leading advocates of Czechoslovak federalization during the 1930s. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia and Davist's increasing involvement in the anti-fascist resistance in Slovakia during World War II

provided the necessary conditions for them to transform their aspirations into a realistic political program.

National activism constituted a significant aspect of Slovak communism that persisted over time. Despite the efforts of those involved to align themselves with Moscow's policies, maintaining this alignment proved to be a delicate balancing act, particularly when they moved from harmless intellectual outbursts to political ambitions. Nevertheless, during the 1930s, the Davist intellectuals were acutely aware of the unresolved Czechoslovak relationship and encountered no difficulties with the Party leadership. Conversely, they assisted the Party by enhancing the public image of Czechoslovak communism among Slovak intellectuals. It is unlikely that they could have foreseen that these activities would be used as crucial evidence in their indictment and subsequent conviction for the crime of "bourgeois nationalism" in the early 1950s.

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Notes

- 1 For the era prior to 1918, we are using the term Magyar (as Hungarians call themselves in their language) as a synonym for ethnic Hungarian nation. In the multiethnic Kingdom of Hungary, all its citizens were called Hungarians, regardless of their ethnicity.
- 2 In Comintern texts, the population of Subcarpathian Rus was referred to as Ukrainians. The KSČ therefore followed the Soviet model and referred to Ruthenians as Ukrainians and to Subcarpathian Rus as Transcarpathian Ukraine.

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