

SLOVAKIA IN THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Anton Špiesz

Thanks to its advantageous geographical situation, abundance of natural resources, and industrious population, as well as the influence of the most advanced European cultures, Slovakia was for centuries among the socially

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and economically most highly developed areas of Europe. Excavations have shown that already during the time of the Greater Moravian Empire, the Slovaks had achieved a high cultural level. When the Magyars subdued and incorporated the Slovaks into their state, they adopted many of the Slovak forms of social and economic life. Under the influence of the German eastern settlement of the 13th and 14th centuries, not only did free towns develop, but also a productive, efficient peasantry not constricted by patriarchal forms of life and economy; for this peasant class the acceptance of the hereditary rental right was of inestimable importance. At the same time, handicrafts, mining, agriculture and commerce all flourished.

Of great economic importance in the late medieval period was mining, whose chief output was based on silver, gold and copper deposits. The biggest European copper mine at the end of the 15th century was in Neusohl; it was owned by the local feudal lord, Johannes Thurzo, and the German House of Fugger.

Hegemony over Slovak economic life in this period was in the hands of the German inhabitants, who were active as mining entrepreneurs, traders and merchants, and made up the largest contingent of artisans. For the Slovaks, the economic and social conditions of the German co-inhabitants represented a model which they eagerly sought to emulate; they had thus fully adopted as their own the social constitution of the West.

In the modern period, the Slovaks gradually displaced the Germans in controlling economic activity. Only in the field of commerce were they unable to achieve any significant position. Mining came into state hands in the modern era, but continued to play an important role in economic history until it gradually decayed in the early 19th century. Feudal lords had their share in agricultural production in the modern period, but the peasants remained the chief producers. As for the urban situation, there were in the modern period in Slovakia a number of smaller towns; with the exception of Preßburg and Schemnitz none of them had more than 10000 inhabitants.

The period of most intensive development of Slovak economic life in the modern era was the 18th century. It was at this time that the first manufactories were established, the largest being the Francis of Lorraine calico manufactory, one of the biggest in all Europe. But in the 19th century, Slovakia could not keep pace with the industrial development of the Danube area. Only as a result of the present socialist industrialization is Slovakia again approaching the industrial level of the West European countries.