

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE PROGRAM OF THE
SLOVAK PEOPLE'S PARTY PRIOR TO 1938

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The Slovak People's Party, founded in December 1918 by the priest Andrej Hlinka from Rosenberg, was soon driven into opposition by the religious policy of the first Czechoslovak government under Kramář. Religious and economic considerations, compounded by personal clashes, led from 1919 on to a dangerous aggravation of the basic differences of view between the „regime Slovaks“ and the Catholics represented by the SPP, on national questions and those of religious and economic policy. By dint of his untiring efforts, Hlinka succeeded in creating a genuine „people's party“, with a sizeable body of members and voters. This party demanded ever more insistently

„national autonomy“ for Slovakia and also introduced in the house of representatives in Prague — without success — a number of bills aimed at the practical achievement of this aim. They called for the transformation of Slovakia into a self-administered entity within the ČSR, with a parliament of its own, an independent executive, and full administrative sovereignty. Until 1938, all points of grievance, whether they concerned the national, religious, administrative, economic or cultural sectors, were concealed under the general demand for „national autonomy“ and for „realization of the Pittsburgh Agreement“. The union of the Czechs and Slovaks into a single polity was up to 1938 not subjected to any fundamental challenge by the SPP. The broadening of a policy of autonomy into a „policy of sovereignty“ in 1938—39 was thus possible only after Hlinka's death and through the active participation of neighbouring states that were interested in the dissolution of the ČSR.

It was left to the Party ideologists to fuse into a single entity the religious and national aspects in order to give the SPP's program the necessary grounding in a *Weltanschauung*. Still, striking differences can be found in the views of various Party leaders on the two main components — Catholicism and nationalism. Tiso, the representative of the moderate wing of the Party, developed, along the lines of Ignaz Seipel and Othmar Spann's *Ständestaat* ideology, a rather unorthodox conservative Catholic doctrine of state and society; Vojtech Tuka, on the other hand, developed his concepts on the basis of an aggressive nationalism and the repudiation of parliamentary democracy.

Though the SPP was never able to win an absolute majority of the Slovak voters for its program in the elections to the regional assembly or the parliament, it nevertheless had strong support among the Slovak people. It was able to double its share of the vote between 1920 and 1935, but never obtained more than 32% of the vote in Slovakia. Still there can hardly be any doubt that from the beginning of 1938 on, the majority of the Slovak people considered the main points of the SPP's program — self-administration for Slovakia and a broad cultural autonomy — as justified, and gave them their support.

If the policy of the Czechoslovak government toward Slovakia had been a little more flexible, a just settlement acceptable to both sides probably could have been reached up to mid-1937, and certainly up to the end of 1936. But the shortsightedness of Presidents Masaryk and Beneš prevented the domestic pacification of Slovakia while there was still enough time. The concessions made by the Hodža government were too halting, came too late, and were too much a response to pressure; they offended the pride of the Slovaks, were not far-reaching enough, and already contained the seeds of further new demands. When the government finally came up with constructive proposals in 1938, the domestic and international situation had already changed so much, under the impact of Hitler's intransigent policy toward Czechoslovakia, that the SPP could no longer be put off with only limited

promises. The crisis of 1938 brought the latent, smouldering conflict between the government and the Slovak autonomists out into the open. Due to lack of understanding on the part of its opponents, the autonomy policy of the SPP quickly became in 1938—39 a „policy of sovereignty“ of Germanophile nationalists which helped destroy the ČSR in March 1939.