

Although a Priest, Tiso Was “No Saint”

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A collaborator and traitor, or martyr and head of the first independent Slovak state since the ninth century? Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest and the wartime president of Slovakia, still belongs to the contested figures of modern Central European history. James Ward presents the first comprehensive and balanced assessment of Tiso, going well beyond a pure biography of the only Catholic priest who ever served as president of a nation-state and offering a careful analysis of his political decisions during the war. Ward follows Tiso’s footsteps from elementary school in the Hungarian Felvidék province (contemporary Slovakia) to his postwar trial for collaboration with Nazi Germany, betraying interwar Czechoslovakia, and persecution of the Jewish population in Slovakia. In the first chapters the author delves into Tiso’s evolving ideological outlook from 1918 to 1939. Toward the end Ward traces the battles over the memory of Tiso among exiled Slovak nationalists, the general public, and professional historians ever since his execution in April 1947.

Tiso has often been presented as an authoritarian ruler who molded Slovakia to his “Christian-National socialist” image (p. 289). Contesting this simplification, Ward depicts Tiso as a wavering person, even an opportunist, who started his career as a graduate of the Catholic Pázmáneum in Vienna (as József Tiszó), supported the Hungarian regime in Slovakia, and promoted the interests of the Catholic Church above all others. After the revolution of 1918, he entered the democratic competition as a proponent of Slovak nationalism in liberal multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia, a country not to his liking, especially because of its alleged suppression of Slovak autonomy, strong socialist movement, and secularization aimed primarily against the Catholic Church. In politics Tiso followed a dual Christian-social and Slovak-nationalist program, increasingly emphasizing a nationalistic discourse and abandoning his activities on behalf of the Church. Despite the often-used labels, Tiso belonged to the moderate Slovak nation-

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Deň Hlinkovej mládeže v Bánovciach nad Bebravou, 15. 6. 1941

alists in the Hlinka Slovak People's Party (Ľudáci) especially from 1926 on, aiming to enter the Czechoslovak government.

After two years as minister for public health and physical education (1927-1929), Tiso stepped down following treason accusations against Ľudák radical Vojtech Tuka, who was sentenced to fifteen years for his dealings with Hungary. Tiso spent the 1930s balancing between party radicals who demanded an unconditional struggle for Slovak autonomy, and his desire not to destroy the Czechoslovak republic—the best safeguard against Hungarian irredentism.

It was only with the changing international situation in the late 1930s that Tiso moved to the radical side pushing for Slovak autonomy. Ward argues that the general radicalization of the Slovak populists after 1938 blurred the borders between the moderates and radicals (p. 289). Slovakia did indeed gain autonomy on October 6, 1938—one week after the Munich Agreement was signed and the first Czechoslovak Republic was destroyed; Tiso became its first prime minister. On March 13, 1939, Tiso visited Berlin, where Hitler pressured him to declare Slovakia's independence and thus proclaim the death of Czecho-Slovakia. The way in which he achieved Slovak nationalist goals, however, inevitably linked Slovak "independence" to the fate of Hitler's empire and drew Slovakia into the impending world war. Tiso was elected president of Slovakia in October 1939, shortly after having



Jozef Teslík: Z Hlinkovej výstavy v Bratislave, 2. 11. 1939

involved Slovakia as the only country allied with Hitler to take part in the invasion of Poland. The fact that Poland was both Slavic and Catholic gave the lie to Tiso's professed principles.

In the heated debate over Tiso's wartime collaboration Ward stands on the middle ground, providing convincing observations concerning the influences underlying Tiso's fateful decision to share Germany's path. Czechoslovakia's recent indifference to Slovakia's problems, and its consignment of Slovak politicians to secondary roles, also needs to be acknowledged. Tiso was under pressure from the Slovak radicals, especially Vojtech Tuka and Alexander Mach. Hungary might have swallowed all of Slovakia had the latter not obtained German protection. With the *fait accompli* of Hitler's destruction of Czechoslovakia and the abandonment of the country by its Western allies, Tiso chose the path that seemed to ensure independent Slovak national and religious development. For helping Hitler dismantle the Czecho-Slovak state, Tiso did in fact earn German guarantees for his state (minus, of course, the southern fringes assigned to Hungary).

All this notwithstanding, Ward confirms that the crimes of the Slovak state between 1939 and 1945 would not have been possible without Tiso's support. Regardless of his efforts to deny direct responsibility, Tiso in many cases initiated and actively contributed (the war against the USSR, the Holocaust). He publicly endorsed the German occupation of Slovakia in August 1944 and the ensuing suppression of the (pro-Czechoslovak)

Slovak National Uprising. That uprising had been a shock for Tiso, pulling him even deeper into total dependence on Nazi Germany, as symbolized in Tiso's public decoration of Waffen-SS soldiers who helped suppress the rebellion.

Ward devotes special attention to one of the worst crimes of the Tiso regime, the deportation between March and October 1942 of almost 60,000 Slovak Jews to certain death in occupied Poland. Ward traces Tiso's confrontation with Jewry and Judaism from his early childhood. Tiso clearly assimilated anti-Jewish prejudices, accusing Jews of exploiting the Slovak people, of sympathizing with Soviet Communism, and even of siding with Hungary against Slovakia. Yet having in 1919 accepted the rules of parliamentary democracy, Tiso evidently abandoned anti-Jewish discourse—in contrast to the radical wing of the populist movement. But he reincorporated it into his agenda in the late 1930s, and in November 1938 he became co-initiator of one of first expulsions of Jews in Central Europe prior to the war. Almost 7,500 Slovak Jews were driven into the newly Hungarian territory as “punishment” for the German-sponsored Vienna Award that had forced Slovakia to cede their districts to Hungary. Although in 1940 Tiso abandoned the “solution” of the “Jewish Question” to the Slovak radicals, Ward proves Tiso's involvement in preparation of the 1942 deportations. Although Tiso had the right to grant exemptions, only 650 Jews—mostly those in intermarriages or economically indispensable—were saved. Tiso was aware of the fate awaiting the Jews in the Nazis' hands, but ignored the intelligence and the protests coming from the Vatican. “They say [that] our policy is not Christian. I say that it is Christian” (p. 214). Under the slogan “Slovakia for the Slovaks” Tiso pursued promised social change and modernization. But because he could not turn against the Hungarians, Germans, or indeed Lutherans, the Jews were the only part of the population whose segregation and dispossession was feasible. That twisted road led inevitably to Auschwitz.

Ward's biography is an essential resource for everybody interested not only in the history of twentieth-century Slovakia, but also Catholic-social politics, Central European nationalism, the Holocaust, and even memory studies. A compelling read, it offers new avenues for understanding the life and myths surrounding the life of a controversial Central European statesman. Tiso remained a priest for his entire life and in 1918 became a politician who helped set the direction of mainstream Slovak national politics for three decades. However, the pursuit of his ideals led Tiso to collaborationism and ultimately the gallows. Ward masterfully documents the decisions and activities that elevated him to the presidential office, but later brought about his downfall. Although a priest, Tiso was “no saint.”