

Corpulent vessel

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2013*

It is a rare political figure who is reprehensible both for his opportunism and his dogmatism, but then it is a rare president who is also an ordained priest. Such was Jozef Tiso, leader of Slovakia during its spell as a German *Schutzstaat* (protected state) from 1939 to 1945. As James Mace Ward argues in his definitive account, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator, Tiso* was guided throughout his life by a set of deeply held values, but was also a talented Machiavellian able to reconcile those values to the exigencies of power.

Tiso, born in 1887 when Slovakia was under Hungarian control, was at heart and by education a Christian-Social corporatist, not an outright fascist. As depicted by Ward and other scholars such as Tom Lorman, he probably would have been content to operate within the bounds of the socio-economic system sketched by Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* encyclical of 1931, and to have done so in an autonomous Slovakia formally still attached to Czech-speaking Bohemia and Moravia. His priority was the improvement of morals through progressive development, which could be boiled down to Catholic schools, good works and infrastructure projects. Ward shows that Tiso long harboured anti-Semitism but voiced it only in revolutionary times, such as 1918-20 and again twenty years later; that it went into politically pragmatic remission does not mean it was never sincere.

By disposition Tiso was best suited to local government; he happily doubled as town treasurer of his parish, Bánovce nad Bebravou. Events, often subtle and sudden, created opportunities for him to rise to national leadership, but also tested his commitment to the Catholic Church's teachings and hierarchy. Ward masterfully reconstructs the factional differences and power struggles over which Tiso presided, showing that he was never truly the moderate he may have liked to think he was or wanted to appear to be. Instead, he placed himself always as the indispensable median point between actual moderates and Nazifying radicals. With time and German pressure, the moderates fell away, the spectrum narrowed and Tiso's median had to shift towards the extreme. Even while he constituted the Slovak

* Review of *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* by James Mace Ward. Originally published in *Times Literary Supplement* on October 25, 2013.

state as best he could on corporatist principles, he ultimately chose a path of defying his ecclesiastical superiors, not least the bishops who urged him to resign in 1944.

Acute political instinct guided Tiso to ensure, whenever possible, the deniability of any deed that contravened the Church's instructions or natural law, or that might be politically damaging. Only the dogged archival work carried out by Ward in all the relevant languages can reconstruct Tiso's responsibility at key moments, especially those that decided the fate of Slovakia's Jews. Ward's research also turns up Tiso's stubborn determination not to show remorse, even when rebuked by the Holy Father or when it might have saved him from execution after the war. As the judge who would send him to the gallows remarked, "You either have a hard conscience or else no conscience at all".

In many regards, Tiso is a difficult subject for a biography. As Ward reports, there is no trove of surviving diaries or private correspondence to take us into Tiso's inner world. Thoroughly immersed from childhood in various institutions (seminary, party, government), he never emerges as an individual, even after painstaking study of his published words and other people's memoirs. We can only wonder what psychic strain may have been inflicted by the need to operate in Hungarian- and German-dominated society in his youth and then, aged thirty-one, to try to pass as an ardent Slovak. Priest, Politician, Collaborator is not so much a story of a man as it is a history of a set of ideas and attitudes for which Tiso was a corpulent vessel.

James Mace Ward concludes with a compelling account of Tiso's unsatisfactory postwar trial and botched execution, and the battle among scholars in Slovakia and in exile over his place in history. Thanks to that exchange, and the work of Ivan Kamenec and Eduard Nižňanský in particular, Tiso can now be viewed by Slovaks in all his complexity without being rehabilitated. The gist of his life is captured by Ward in an audience given by Pius XII to the Slovak representative at the Vatican, Karol Sidor, in June 1945. Sidor, urging the Pope to lobby the Allies to spare Tiso, mentioned in his defence the many "meritorious acts" he had performed as president and the better life he had provided his countrymen. "And what's left from all of this?" the Pope replied.



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