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EFFORTS OF HLINKA’S SLOVAK PEOPLE’S PARTY TO CONTROL PUBLIC SPACES IN SLOVAKIA (1939–1945): THE EXAMPLE OF THE CITY OF NITRA[1]

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Abstract: *Public spaces underwent significant changes during WWII. The leading political power in Slovakia at that time was the Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party. Although it had never achieved a majority in the elections over the previous 20 years, it considered itself the unique political representative of the Slovak nation. Representatives of the party employed various tools to seize control of public spaces and to exclude opponents defined according to political, ideological, social, and racial elements. This paper presents the effort of the regional state apparatus to control public spaces, focusing on the city of Nitra. The research is based on archival sources and focuses on the renaming of streets and other utilities, the introduction of new holidays and festivities, and the removal of symbols and statues connected to the previous regime.*

Keywords: *public spaces; Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party; Slovakia (1939–1945); authoritarian regimes.*

Introduction

The history of Slovakia from 1939 to 1945 has received significant attention in historiography. While much research focuses on the nationwide situation and on the actions of the state apparatus, this study aims to examine the impact of state decisions on public spaces at the regional level. Using the city of Nitra as an example, the paper explores how state regulations influenced public spaces during this period, providing insights applicable to the wider context of Slovakia. The results may serve as a basis for more extensive research on public spaces in the country in the period 1939–1945.

On 14 March 1939, the independence of Slovakia was declared. The regime that was incorporated on its territory took over numerous patterns and inspirations from regimes in Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. The state was independent only formally (similar to independent Croatia), with the government closely cooperating with Germany, the so-called “protector,” fulfilling expectations, recommendations and even orders from it and its advisors. Slovakia is usually referred to as a buffer state of Nazi Germany [**Hradská, K., Kamenec, I.** 2015; **Tönsmeyer, T.** 2003; **Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A., Hetényi, M., Arpáš, R.** 2018; **Kamenec, I.** 1992; **Kováč, D.** 2006]. As for the regime, it is usually

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referred to as an authoritative regime. The ruling political party was Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSLS) [**Bystrický, V.** 2008; **Letz, R., Mulík, P., Bartlová, A.** 2006; **Lipták, Ľ.** 1992; **Lorman, T.** 2019; **Arpáš, R.** 2011]. The party became dominant on Slovak territory after the declaration of Slovak autonomy (6 October 1938) and the Munich Conference (30 October 1938). In the period between October 1938 and March 1939, extensive and fundamental changes in the political system ensued [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A.** 2023]. The ruling Hlinka's Slovak People's Party consolidated power by dismantling mechanisms of pluralist democracy and by tightening control over state administration at the regional level. The spectrum of political parties shrank in the wake of state regulations, dissolving certain political parties. In the following period, appointment instead of election became the way to occupy a post, based on the appointee's attitudes to the changing circumstances. The fact that there was one ruling party was also reflected in state administration, and the party and state (administrative) offices were closely, usually personally, interconnected. Government commissioners were appointed in the municipal administration. This resulted in the reinforcement of the government's authority and concentration of power among certain members of the party at the regional level. This step meant the liquidation of local self-government [**Pekár, M.** 2008, pp. 161–169; **Baka, I.** 2010, p. 16; **Podolec, O.** 2003, p. 647; **Fiamová, M.** 2020; **Hetényi, M., Mikulášová, A., Palárik, M.** 2021, pp. 40–44; **Pekár, M.** 2020, pp. 95–100; **Pekár, M., Tokárová, Z.** 2019, pp. 145–147]. Active representatives of other parties and organizations were persecuted. Constant monitoring, random raids and interrogations were not exceptional. Germany should have served as a model in various branches of life. Public space played a significant role in Nazi Germany, and various attempts to dominate in public spaces were made [**Hagen, J.** 2008; **Hagen, J., Ostergren, R. C.** 2020; **McSpadden, J.** 2022; **Birdsall, C.** 2012]. Similar approaches may also be identified on Slovak territory [**Fogelová, P., Pekár, M.** 2021]. However, this topic has not received comprehensive attention in Slovak historiography. This study offers an insight into the various attempts to dominate and alter public and urban spaces, using the example of the city of Nitra in the period 1939–1945.

Terminological Occupation of Public Spaces

The first obvious intervention into public spaces was the process of renaming them. It started shortly after the declaration of Slovak autonomy in October 1938. In December the same year, the municipal board of Nitra decided to rename several streets and one square [**State Archive Nitra, F. City Office Nitra, Box 116, I. No. 231**, A Decree of the Municipal Board of the City of Nitra, 1 December 1938]. Exclusive streets in the centre were selected, implicitly indicating a separation from the past. The names of personalities connected to the process of declaring the independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918 were changed. The previous *W. Wilson Street* and part of *Masaryk Street* were renamed to *Andrej Hlinka Street*. Woodrow Wilson was the 28th US president, in office from 1913 to 1921. His positive acknowledgement in Czechoslovakia stemmed from his support of the nation's self-determination right during WWI. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was the founder and first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, in office between 1918 and 1935. These were replaced by Andrej Hlinka, a Catholic priest, politician, founder and leader of the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party. Also, the name of the second president of Czechoslovakia, Edvard Beneš (in office from 1935 to 1938), who was a close co-worker of Masaryk and Minister of Foreign Affairs in the period 1918–1935, was replaced. *Beneš Square* was named after *Andrej Hlinka* as well.

At the same time, the crucial date from the previous two decades was replaced with a new date, marking a milestone in the history of the Slovak nation according to contemporary interpretation. The *Street of 28 October*, originally commemorating the declaration of the Czechoslovak state in 1918, was renamed the *Street of 6 October*, celebrating the declaration of Slovak autonomy in 1938. The symbolic separation from the united Czechoslovak state began shortly after the declaration of autonomy, although the common state existed until March 1939.

This process continued after the declaration of the Slovak state on 14 March 1939. The complete separation from the previous democratic system and ideas of the common Czechoslovak state

followed. Names such as Tomáš G. Masaryk, Edvard Beneš, and names of prominent Jewish patrons, interwar mayors became a matter of change. Figures who were politically and nationally "reliable" and connected with the fight for independence of the Slovak nation should have prevailed. The most extensive proposal to change the names of public spaces in Nitra was filed one week after the declaration of independence. The local branch of the German Party was also involved and made an appeal for at least one street in Nitra to be named after Adolf Hitler [**State Archive Nitra, F. City Office Nitra, Box 116, I. No. 231**, A Decree of the Municipal Board of the City of Nitra, 27 April 1939]. The proposal was adopted and Hitler's name replaced Masaryk's, which was a clear political signal. In general, it might be stated that, when changing names of public spaces, the following procedure was usually kept: a person was replaced with a "more suitable" person, an association with another association, an event with another event. There was a special decree, issued in 1940, with a list of suitable personalities [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A.** 2016a]. In the environment of the Nitra County, names related to Great Moravia and Cyrillo-Methodian traditions were often used. This was due to fact that, in the 9th century, Nitra was one of the main centres of Great Moravia where the mission of the Thessalonian brothers was carried out. In the year 880, the city was declared as a seat of the new Nitra bishopric by Pope John VIII [**Hetényi, M., Ivanič, P.** 2013, pp. 59–64], which was the first bishopric on Slovak territory. This historical context and the fact that numerous members of the ruling party were Catholic priests caused the frequent usage of urbanonyms referring to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition and to the Great Moravian period. The renaming of streets and squares reflected shifts in historical narratives and political approaches towards events and personalities.

Physical Occupation of Public Spaces

Already after the declaration of Slovak autonomy, there was an attempt to change the calendar of official holidays. Some of them remained, others were completely removed. The rhetoric associated with their celebration underwent a complete change, and several new holiday occasions were also added to the calendar. Celebrations presented a digression from the everyday routine as they created the feeling of togetherness and a common experience. At the same time, manifestations, parades and marches made it possible to *occupy public spaces physically*. Critics may perceive them as frightening, particularly due to their mass character. Based on the model of Nazi Germany, the focus was on effectiveness, creating an atmosphere using different means such as music, slogans, lights, colours, or symbols. All of it should have contributed to creating a new collective memory [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A.** 2016b].

Crucial attention was paid to 14 March – the day of the declaration of the state [**Kamenec, I.** 2012, pp. 208–223]. The declaration itself was not carried out in a festive atmosphere. It was a pragmatic decision after considering the existing international situation. From the very beginning, official representatives of the state preferred the theory of establishing the state based on the will of the Slovak nation, understating the role of Germany. The declaration of the state was actually presented as a day of state renewal. The architects of official history narratives intentionally crafted a narrative depicting Slovakia as a continuum dating back to the era of Great Moravia (9th century), whereas 14 March was, according to this perception, a logical outcome of the process of *historical development* [**Michela, M.** 2010, p. 541].

Throughout the years, this scenario was only slightly modified, while the forms and course of celebrations remained consistent. These celebrations typically took three days in Nitra. Local branches of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party were responsible for preparing them. The possible disruption of the course of celebrations, mainly unexpected statements, raised concerns. Celebrations and anniversaries also provide an opportunity to express opposition or disagreement with the regime. The most common form was the distribution of leaflets and signs with anti-state slogans or symbols, or even the oral expression of dissatisfaction. Despite an effort by the regime to activate as many people as possible, the number of celebration participants decreased every year. This loss of interest was not limited to the audience, but also extended to representatives of pro-regime organizations. In this context, the year 1944 is significant. The public and official state representatives could not ignore the fact that the Eastern front had moved to the Carpathians in March. In June 1941, the Slovak army joined the Wehrmacht in the

military attack on the Soviet Union. The development of the military situation since the beginning of 1944 and failures in previous months have also raised concerns (the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk) [**Baka, I.** 2019, pp. 39–128]. These failures contributed to apathy and to a decreasing interest in taking part in the official events. It became obvious in connection with the 5th anniversary of the declaration of the state in 1944. In March 1944, the governmental commissioner of the city of Nitra appealed to the public's *civic duty* to celebrate this holiday [**State Archive Nitra, F. District Office Nitra, Box 8**, Celebrations of 14 March 1944, Document No. 23/1944, 23 February 1944]. It was compulsory to fly a flag on each house for three days. The windows of all shops had to be decorated with images of national leaders, as well as of martyrs. Participation in the procession through the city was not left to chance. The obligation to take part in the celebration was addressed to wide groups of citizens. Members of the party, local authorities, directors of enterprises, and school directors were expected to serve as examples and to actively participate in the preparation of the celebrations. The chosen programme contained all verified attributes: choral singing, participation of the audience, speeches, poetry reading, procession. Participants in the procession were asked to prepare signs and posters with slogans announced in advance [**State Archive Nitra, F. District Office Nitra, Box 8**, District Organization of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, Detailed Programme]. The local branch of Hlinka's party faced serious problems securing the participation and had to make efforts to organize the event. Local representatives criticized the lack of interest and the lassitude towards politics.

Great attention in the calendar of holidays was devoted to the commemoration of important persons. For example, the name day (19 March) and birthday (13 October) of Slovak President Jozef Tiso were celebrated [**Ward, J. M.** 2013; **Kamenec, I.** 1998; **Hruboň, A.** 2022]. Relatively large space was given to the celebration of Adolf Hitler's birthday on 20 April, especially during the first years of existence of the independent state [**Slovak National Archive Bratislava**, **F**. **604, Box 51**, Various Celebrations and Processions; **Box 100**, Hitler's Birthday Celebrations]. It consisted of a torchlight procession, while Hitler and his merits were emphasized. During this celebration, cities were usually decorated with German flags, and shop windows were decorated with pictures of Adolf Hitler. Smaller celebrations were held to honour the birthday and name day of Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka. An irreplaceable spot in the official calendar was devoted to commemorating the death of Andrej Hlinka, the founder of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, († 1938). Celebrations commemorating the Saints Cyril and Methodius had a special position in Nitra. This approach was in accordance with the efforts to highlight the Great Moravian heritage and roots of church organization on Slovak territory [**State Archive Nitra, F. The Municipal Notary Public Office in Nitra, Box 7**, Various Instructions Concerning Cyril and Methodius's Commemoration]. The interest and willingness to participate in celebrations and in the events connected with them was decreasing with the increasing number of defeats by the Axis Power countries on the war fronts. The public was getting more and more tired of these frequently organized celebrations, all with a similar programme. The case of Nitra exemplifies difficulties in securing sufficient participation and efforts to avoid personal attendance. The regime's attempts to enforce participation in official events faced challenges, indicating waning support for the regime.

Symbolic Occupation of Public Spaces

The regime exerted pressure on public spaces through the handling of sculptures, monuments, and memorials. Especially the case of the sculpture of President T. G. Masaryk is significant. His sculpture was placed in Nitra in 1927. On 22 December 1938, a brass statue of him in the city centre was knocked off its pedestal. This act had a symbolic and political meaning. There was reasonable suspicion that it was committed by members of Hlinka's Guard, although the incident was not carefully investigated. There was no interest in repairing and remounting the statue [**Military Central Archive Prague, f. Ministry of National Defence, Box 13027, No. 597/3**; Nitra, Monument of President T. G. Masaryk, Overthrown]. The first Czechoslovak president did not fit into the new political situation in Slovakia.

Czechoslovak symbols were liquidated shortly after the declaration of independence of the Slovak state on 14–15 March 1939. It was related to the removal of plaques with the Czechoslovak coat of

arms. Uniform symbols were also removed. At the beginning of 1940, the government representatives stated that the process of removal of old symbols was insufficient. Private, public, and state offices and enterprises kept various notices in Czech, and the usage of the symbol of the former Czechoslovak Republic persisted on buildings and official documents. The Czechoslovak symbols were often only repainted with Slovak colours or covered with a piece of canvas or planks. Therefore, the district chief in Nitra ordered a consistent remedy of the situation. The pictures of Czechoslovak presidents had to be burned, and metal statues had to be handed in to the state mint. If the objects were of a certain artistic value, they were offered to local museums for storage [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A.** 2018, pp. 528–529].

Other symbols became the focus of attention as well. On 9 September 1941, the Jewish Code was enacted [**Decree, 9 September 1941**]. It was a government decree defining Jews according to racial criteria, liquidating the rest of civil rights and creating conditions for later deportations. According to this Code, Jewish prayer rooms and synagogues had to be modified in a way that it would not be obvious that they were cult places. The Star of David disappeared from public spaces. 1941 saw the first official appeals to make a list of all Christian sacred monuments that might have been problematic, including those in churches. Pictures and statues representing the Holy Crown of Hungary, the Star of David, and Jewish (Hebrew) symbols used in Christian churches were considered unsuitable. In general, St. Stephen and other saints (St. Emeric, St. Elizabeth, St. Ladislaus), who were labelled as Hungarians coming from the Hungarian royal dynasty of the Árpáds, were considered problematic [**Michela, M.** 2013, pp. 97–110]. The question of the artistic and financial value of these monuments and objects also became the centre of attention. However, this issue was handled by clerks lacking expertise in art history. Typically, they were unable to determine the actual historical and artistic significance of the objects examined.

The most sensitive places were churches and monuments located in the city centre. For example, the plague column in the city centre from the early 18th century was deemed problematic. On its pedestal, there were statues of St. Stephen, St. Ladislaus, and St. Emeric, with the symbolic Holy Crown of Hungary on their heads. The crown has a small golden cross at its top. During the 17th century, the crown was damaged, and since then, the cross has been left in a slanted position. Nowadays, the relic is easily recognizable thanks to this. Additionally, monuments, paintings, and other artistic designs have been incorporating the slanted position of the cross since that time. However, this was considered a symbol of Hungary and the Hungarian Kingdom which, given the political circumstances and bilateral Slovak–Hungarian relations, was regarded as unacceptable. Due to instructions, the Holy Crown of Hungary on the saints' heads had to be made more *neutral*. This was intended to adjust the cross into a straight position. The plague column mentioned was renovated during the first half of 1944, and the cross on the crown was restored into a straight position [**State Archive Nitra, F. The Municipal Notary Public Office in Nitra, Box 7**, A Letter from the Police Department of Nitra Addressed to the Municipal Notary Public Office in Nitra on 12 August 1943]. Another example is the case with the painting at the Church of St. Stephen. This 18th-century painting of the patron, located on the main altar, was found problematic. In the work, St. Stephen is holding a cushion with the symbols of the Kingdom of Hungary in his hands. The Hungarian coat of arms is depicted by his legs. The recommendation was to repaint the image, so that the saint would raise his hand in a gesture of praying. The coat of arms was supposed to be repainted with the Slovak coat of arms. In this case, the local priest refused to make these changes long enough to save the painting. The priest repeatedly postponed the required adjustments, requested additional explanations of the instructions, and intentionally missed the deadlines provided. As a result, no changes were made in the painting until the end of WWII.

A total of 55 cases at issue were listed in the Nitra County. Among the saints, the sculptural or painting depiction of St. Stephen (25 cases), St. Ladislaus (11 cases), St. Imrich (10 cases) and St. Elizabeth (2 cases) were identified. Saints were traditionally depicted with Hungarian symbols. Coats of arms marked as Hungarian (6 cases), and flags featuring Hungarian symbols, inscriptions, or depictions of saints (5 cases), appeared less frequently [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A.** 2018, p. 539]. An effort to review symbols was not always successful. Usually, it was due to the disapproval of church representatives. The solution was to hide or cover a particular object. The removal of the statues of saints

aroused various reactions among residents. In some cases, local church authorities reported an outrage of believers as far as the objects in churches were concerned [**State Archive Nitra, F. Nitra County III, Box 67**, A Letter by Priest Rudolf Bílek to the Notary Office, dated 4 October 1943].

It may be assumed that the majority of problematic objects was removed (or hidden) from the public spaces by the end of 1944. However, the attempts of state authorities to remove symbols were not always successful. This was often due to the disapproval of church representatives who refused to obey decisions made by secular offices. At the local level, the solution on how to get round the instructions was to hide or cover a particular object, or use bureaucratic procedures to postpone the implementation of the regulations until the entire procedure was officially stopped, or other, more urgent problems occurred.

Racial and Social Interference into Public Spaces

Regulations targeted at racial and social groups, particularly Jews and Roma, restricted their presence in public spaces. Expulsions, bans on cultural events, and discriminatory measures aimed at these groups demonstrated the regime's discriminatory policies. The regulations on the lustration of public spaces *in a racial sense* had serious consequences. The most visible changes were related to the expulsion of Jewish inhabitants. They owned a significant portion of shops and enterprises in the city centre. Traditional names of shops (many times names of the owners) on the front façades of the buildings were removed, and inscriptions prohibiting the entrance of Jews began to appear more often. A decree banning Jews to live in certain parts of the city came into force at the end of 1940. It also banned them from renting flats in these localities. At the end of February 1941, Jews were not allowed to walk the streets and public spaces freely [**Palárik, M., Mikulášová, A., Hetényi, M., Arpáš, R.** 2018, pp. 169–172]. In several weeks, they were forbidden to organize cultural events, and in the following months, they were permanently expelled from the public spaces in town. Numerous decrees, regulations and restrictions were used. They first concerned the visual presence of the Jewish population in public spaces and then, in a short time, the physical presence as well.

Various regulations had an impact on other groups of inhabitants, too. Young people strolling on public streets was restricted in May 1941 in all municipalities of the Nitra County. Each inhabitant had to have some identification document, which could be an ID card with a photo, a passport, or a testimony of citizenship. Besides Jews, increased attention was paid to Roma, prostitutes, the homeless, beggars, gamblers on the streets. Foreigners in the city were also suspicious. As of June 1941, people staying in Nitra for more than 12 hours had to register at the gendarmerie station.

Conclusions

In the period 1939–1945, the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party made extensive efforts to control public spaces in Slovakia. These efforts included terminological, physical, and symbolic occupation of public spaces, as well as regulations targeting racial and social groups. The first terminological occupation of public spaces was manifested by the large renaming of streets, parks and other utilities, followed by physical occupation demonstrated by the introduction of new holidays and festivities accompanied by countless marches, parades, and speeches, strictly controlling the participation of the citizens and narratives in public speeches. During this period, it was obvious that there was a declining interest to take part in the events. Part of the efforts also included symbolic occupation, represented by the removal of unsuitable symbols and statues linked to the previous regime or undesirable personalities. The symbols and statues connected to the Czechoslovak Republic and to the Hungarian Kingdom were considered undesirable. The efforts were not always successful. Often the custodians of the monuments resisted until the entire procedure was officially stopped. Regulations in public spaces based on social and racial arguments attacking the Jewish and Roma presence in the city centres and surrounding areas were also significant. While the regime implemented various measures to assert control, resistance from local authorities and the public sometimes hindered their effectiveness. All in all, the study sheds light on the complex dynamics of power and resistance in public spaces during this turbulent period in Slovak history.

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