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The Forgotten Activists: Czechoslovakia's Slovakian Dissident Movement

Abstract. The Slovak dissident movement's role in the downfall of communism in Czechoslovakia has often been underemphasized in favor of a greater focus on its more well-known Czech counterpart. However, an examination of this resistance movement's motivations gives a critical insight into the immense cultural differences between the Czechs and Slovaks, which would contribute to Czechoslovakia's eventual dissolution. Ethnic as well as religious grievances motivated Slovak dissidents' acts of defiance against the Communist regime, which repressed religious institutions such as the Catholic Church. These factors would slowly erode Communist officials' hold on power, as they saw their authority publicly challenged by large segments of the population.

Keywords: *Slovak dissident movement, the late 1980s, Czechs, Slovaks, civil society, Slovak activists, the Catholic Church's religious activities, the downfall of communism in Czechoslovakia.*

The peoples of Eastern Europe faced political uncertainty as well as economic precarity as their respective governments began to unravel in the late 1980s. Despite the communist orientation of these regimes, their citizens often attempted to retain aspects of the past which were reminders of a less oppressive period. Ethnic groups which had not acquired their own homelands following the emergence of the Iron Curtain were particularly involved in the creation of cultural spaces free from state surveillance. The Slovaks were one such people who attempted to combat the state's efforts to create a society free of reactionary nationalist tendencies. They succeeded in remaining ethnically distinct in the face of challenges posed by the Czechoslovakian government, which many viewed as privileging Czechs to the detriment of Slovaks. Many Slovaks defied the regime's persecution of organized religion by participating in pilgrimages as well as religious protests. Slovak activists attempted to maintain historical buildings which were being neglected by the authorities. They used these political efforts to rally the populace once the regime's allies had been forced to surrender their authority. Slovak activists' commitment to preserving their cultural and religious traditions created an environment of anticommunist hostility which would undermine the communist regime's hold on power.

Catholic activism in favor of greater religious freedom in Slovakia played a significant role in toppling the communist regime. Under the Husak regime, the Catholic Church's religious activities were curtailed, an attempt to reduce this institution's influence over society. Members of religious orders were unable to fulfill various responsibilities such as taking care of the elderly in nursing homes as well as instructing students in religious education. The Church's autonomy was continuously violated by the state, which did not allow the Holy See to appoint its own

bishops.¹ Religious oppression united Slovak dissidents due to Catholicism's large following in Slovakia, where sixty percent of the population identified with the faith.² The nation's religious composition caused civil society to become less secular in its outlook, drawing on centuries-old religious traditions unlike its Czech counterpart. Civil society's ability to rally devout Catholics against militant secularism was noted by Slovak dissident Jan Carnogursky, "In Slovakia, the leaders of the movement were ordinary people in the church and only a few intellectuals."³ The movement's ability to channel the public's frustrations at attacks on the Catholic faith into demonstrations made it a formidable force. These protests caused the regime to be confronted with a genuine opposition which was willing to openly criticize its abuses. A critical mass of Slovaks, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, had partaken in activities which challenged the state's efforts to create an atheist society. Open displays of religious fervor such as the throngs (estimated at 230,000) who flocked to Levoca's Catholic shrine in the summer of 1987 further undermined the government's legitimacy.⁴ The regime was forced to realize that it could not create model Communists out of its Slovak citizens, who stubbornly clung on to ethnic boundary markers such as their religion. This overt desire among Slovaks to remain first and foremost pious Catholics helped force the state to guarantee greater religious freedom, paving the way for the Communists' downfall.

A heightened focus on national conservation helped to create an anticommunist atmosphere in Slovakia. The communist regime had attempted to reshape the nation in the name of progress, demolishing many historical buildings or refusing to maintain them. The latter fate befell many traditional wooden homes (drevenice), which were neglected by public officials concerned with eliminating any remnants of a pre-communist period. The state's policies were noted with concern by one anonymous ecologically minded individual, who feared the effects of the regime's vision for the nation, "Folk architecture was really a symbol of the past that needed to be refused by society. After 1948, the state encouraged the refusal of everything older."⁵ Frustrated by the government's attitudes, a group of Slovak ecological activists formed SZOPK ZO 6 in 1977 to preserve such cultural monuments. They resisted the pressures of modernity by traveling to the countryside several times a year, where they lived a life devoid of modern technology. For these activists, rural areas were places untouched by harmful state created ills such as pollution.⁶ In the countryside, community bonds had survived in contrast to the artificial class-based solidarity which existed in urban areas such as Bratislava. Activists had rediscovered authentic Slovak culture, albeit one which orthodox communists would deride as a sign of economic backwardness. These activities as well as revitalization efforts caused SZOPK ZO 6 to gain a considerable following, especially among intellectuals who were outraged by the regime's

¹ Sabrina Petra Ramet, "The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1948–1991," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 24, no. 4 (1991): 377-393, 387.

² Brenda Fowler, "Upheaval in the East; for Hidden Slovak Dissidents, a Guide," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 8, 1989), <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/08/world/upheaval-in-the-east-for-hidden-slovak-dissidents-a-guide.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sabrina Petra Ramet, "The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1948–1991," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 24, no. 4 (1991): 377-393, 388.

⁵ Edward Snajdr, "Hatchets versus the Hammer and Sickle," in *Nature Protests: The End of Ecology in Slovakia* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 48-73, 56.

⁶ Ibid., 57.

dismissive views of Slovak identity. The organization's popularity among influential segments of society laid the groundwork for the emergence of an explicit anticommunist group, the Public Against Violence.⁷ Nationalist grievances were channeled into an organization which could unite the masses. SZOPK had been responsible for creating the intellectual foundations necessary for truly effective resistance against the state. In doing so, it had bridged the divide between the cities and rural areas, leading to mass collective action by Slovaks in November of 1989. These mass demonstrations and strikes by Slovaks as well as Czechs revealed a unified front, spelling the regime's demise.

The collapse of Honecker's authoritarian regime contributed to a greater willingness among Slovaks to openly express their frustrations with the state. Honecker's government, like the Czechoslovak one, was fundamentally reactionary, unwilling to enact any political reforms. Both regimes had ruthlessly suppressed dissent at a time when other Eastern Bloc nations were becoming more politically open. For many Slovaks, Honecker's resignation signified that freedom was attainable regardless of the Communist leadership's uncompromising attitudes in the face of social upheavals. Through East Germany's predicament, Eastern Europe's regimes were revealed to be relatively weak, incapable of successfully withstanding challenges to their authority.⁸ This inability to count upon state terror as well as Soviet backing helped to inspire a spirit of resistance among many Slovaks, whose dissident activities had mainly been clandestine in nature. The masses began to see themselves as agents of their own political destiny instead of citizens at the mercy of a government which ruthlessly violated their human rights. The Slovaks' fear of the secret police was lessened given their East German counterparts' ability to liberate themselves from communist tyranny. Such political changes caused the population to view political activism in a more positive light, enabling various segments of society to defy a hated regime. Slovak dissidents capitalized on their prior efforts to create autonomous spaces which preserved aspects of their culture marginalized by the communists. The downfall of East Germany's hardliner showed that a political alternative which derived its legitimacy from the masses could overcome the regime's intransigence. A government faced with such mass mobilization was unable to appease the people's demands without abandoning its political vision, a problem which became accentuated during the general strike organized by both Czechs and Slovaks in November of 1989. One western diplomat explained the regime's inability to counter these forces of opposition, "One wants to avoid overexcitement, but the party has clearly fallen apart, except for some cardboard faces who meet every other day. It has no program and no response to the strike, except wishing it away."⁹ The dissident movement had overcome public apathy in its aim to create a brighter national future for Slovaks.

The quest for liberty haunted many Eastern Europeans during the latter half of the twentieth century. Communism had deprived these peoples of the ability to freely express themselves and elect governments which represented the popular will. The fact that certain

⁷ Edward Snajdr, "Bratislava Aloud," in *Nature Protests: The End of Ecology in Slovakia* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008), 74-97, 88.

⁸ Sharon L. Wolchik, "Czechoslovakia's 'Velvet Revolution,'" *Current History* 89, no. 551 (December 1990): 413-416, 413.

⁹ R. W. Apple, "Throngs in Streets: Country Is Brought to a Standstill in a Rebuke to the Communists Clamor in the East: A Nation Teeters Strike by Millions Increases Pressure on the Czech Party," *The New York Times*, November 28, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/110340853/pageviewPDF>, 1.

ethnic groups had been denied their own national aspirations created further challenges. The Slovak citizens of Czechoslovakia were faced with two of these problems. The regime's actions threatened their status as an ethnically distinct people. In response to the state's hostility towards Catholicism, many Slovaks organized demonstrations supporting religious liberty. They attempted to preserve material aspects of their culture. Widespread anticommunist sentiments were exploited by dissidents once Czechoslovakia's East German neighbor witnessed a significant political development. Slovak dissidents' desires to defend their cultural and religious institutions helped to fan the flames of public resentment that would result in the communist government's downfall.

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