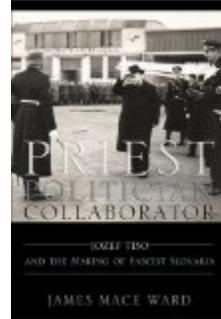


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James Mace Ward. *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. 362 S. ISBN 978-0-8014-4988-8.

Reviewed by Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe  
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## J.M. Ward: Priest, Politician, Collaborator

James Mace Ward portrays, in an elegantly written biography, the intriguing and manifold life of the only polyglot priest in the history of the modern Western world who ruled a collaborationist state, contributed to the destruction of several thousand Jews, reconciled Nazism with Catholicism and perceived the world in terms of race. Before becoming the leader of the Slovakian fascist movement, Tiso – the son of Felvidék or Upper Hungary – frequently signed his name in its Hungarian form: József Tiszó, and was much less certain about his national identity than his later role as the leader of the Slovak people would suggest. To explain the intriguing history of the “soldier of God,” Ward combines Tiso’s life with the history of twentieth century Slovakia, the Slovak revolutionary far-right movement, the Holocaust in Slovakia and the Tiso cult after his death in the Slovak diaspora, in communist Czechoslovakia and in post-communist Slovakia. Although masterfully written, Ward’s biography suffers from the lack of a theoretical background and of the contextualization of the Slovak far-right movement along with other such movements in this part of Europe.

Tiso lived the first part of his life in the Kingdom of Hungary and in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism provided the eager, energetic, pious and disciplined citizen of Transleithania with an identity and worldview and enthused him with a lifelong mission. After a Catholic grammar and middle school, Tiso spent four years in the Catholic seminary in Nyitra and continued his education in Fin de Siècle Vienna (15-18, 21) where he hid his sentiments for Slovakia and preferred

to be perceived as a loyal citizen of the Kingdom of Hungary. His favorite book was Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* which condemned fleshly corruptions of the world and stressed spirituality over materialism (22). While living in Vienna, Tiso, similar to Hitler, was influenced by Karl Lueger’s Christian Socialism and anti-semitic politics (24). Between 1910 and 1914, Tiso was a priest in three Felvidék towns. At that time he became a social activist who cofounded the Slovak bank (29-30).

In August 1914 Tiso went into battle together with a regiment of the Central Powers. He gave “comforting and compassionate words” to the wounded but his service already finished in October 1914 as he was diagnosed with nephritis. In his war diary Tiso presented himself as a fervent Catholic and a personable idealist who disliked the Galician Jews (31-33). During the last half of the war Tiso began to align himself with Slovak nationalism (35) and discovered in himself a forcibly denationalized Slovak who, however, could quickly recover his true Slovak identity (37). Soon after this discovery he became the most dynamic Christian Social politician in town. From that time on he tried to be in the middle of things and dominate the situation. On 1 December 1918, he stood up at a Christian Social assembly and sang “Hail to Slovakia!”, thereby amazing the crowd who did not pay any attention to the fact that there were some Slovaks in town (39). Simultaneously, he integrated antisemitism into his Christian-nationalist revolutionary ideas, argued in his newspaper Nitra that Slovaks are the “slaves of Jews” (40-43) and joined the Ludáks or the Sollovak People’s Party, headed by the charismatic priest Andrej Hlinka (48).

After the First World War Slovakia did not become a part of Hungary again but of Czechoslovakia, one of the few European democratic states. Czechs were in general better educated and more prosperous than the Slovaks who felt that the Czechs did not respect Slovak religious traditions and were deeply annoyed by the anticlerical Czech sport organization Sokol, the cult of the "heretic" Jan Hus and the collective admiration paid to Tomáš Masaryk (64-65, 85). In these circumstances Ludáks and Tiso wanted to shield their pious people from the corruptive influence of the Czechs. They struggled for a Slovak and Catholic autonomy (66). Because his sacerdotal career collided with his political one, Tiso decided to become a professional politician, (72) in order that he could better capture the attention of the masses and unify them into a disciplined camp (81). In terms of antisemitism, he seems to have learned something from his vicious antisemitic escapades and stopped blaming and attacking his Jewish co-citizens (87). Among the Ludáks, Tiso opposed the radicals such as Vojtech Tuka, the founder of a Slovak Blackshirts or Home Guard. Although he deeply disliked the Social Democrats and progressive Czechs, he alternated between collaborating with and opposing the Czech rulers (84). In 1927 the "soldier of God" even became the Czechoslovak minister of public health and physical education, spending his Prague nights in a monk's cell.

The crisis and demise of democratic Czechoslovakia meant the prosperity of Tiso's fascistized Slovak People's Army. The international crisis and geopolitical situation made Hitler a very important ally of Tiso. Hitler saw in the Slovak Vodca an ally, although before 1938 the Führer rarely thought about Slovakia. The Chancellor of Germany treated the "soldier of God" cordially and with respect and there seems to have been a spiritual link between these two sons of the Hapsburg Monarchy (184) who apparently had not met in Lueger's Vienna. Hitler's fiftieth birthday became a quasi-state Holiday in Tiso's Slovakia (185). The two men were allied in their hatred of Czechoslovakia, to democracy and to Jews. Although Tiso condemned the German Gleichschaltung he introduced very similar reforms in Slovakia. Simultaneously – like a typical East Central European fascist – he denied fascistizing his country while referring to his policies as "our very own" (svojský) or uniquely Slovak and argued that the Hlinka Guard is not a carbon copy of the German brown shirts because they attended Holy Masses (199). The Slovak fascist greeting "Na stráž!" (Be on Guard!) did not differ substantially from the German "Heil Hitler!" nor from other popular fascist greetings in

this region of Europe such as "Glory to Ukraine!" (203). Tiso's most popular slogans and concepts were "one nation, one party and one leader," "Slovakia for Slovaks," the "New Slovakia" and the conviction that Slovakia will become a "modern state in the spirit of national socialism." He also introduced diverse fascist rituals and enjoyed himself at fascist rallies at which the Slovaks celebrated national unification (169, 220). In 1941 Hitler and Ribbentrop helped the clerical-fascist leader prevent a coup of the radical faction of the Slovak People's Party under the leadership of Tuka, which strengthened Tiso's position and cult of personality (217-218).

The genocidal policies toward the Jews proceeded similarly as in Germany but was slightly and more cautiously postponed. First the Slovak government revoked Jewish rights, fired Jewish civilians, and aryanized Jewish property which was presented as an integral part of the plan to build a Slovak middle class (165, 214, 221). Then the center for solving the Jewish Question of Tiso's government saw Jews shipped to the Germans who annihilated them (167, 229-239). Despite Tiso's expectations aryanization and the annihilation of the Jews brought about an economic fiasco to the clerical-fascist state (221). Shipping Jews to territories occupied by Germans was for Tiso and other Catholic Slovaks a problem in terms of Catholic morality (185). Nevertheless, the innovative priest also found a solution to this dilemma. He justified his antisemitic and genocidal policies with the idea that Slovaks needed to solve the Jewish Question not because it was a question of "faith and ethics" but because of its "economic and social significance" for Slovakia. A social question, according to this logic, cannot violate Christian moral principles (185-186). Tiso's reforms also struck against the Czechs, many of whom were expelled from Slovakia (169, 186). Pius XII was troubled about the behavior of the antisemitic and fascist Slovak priest, not so much because of Tiso's contribution to the Holocaust but because in 1939 Slovakia attacked Poland, a pre-dominantly Catholic country (191-194).

A turning point in Tiso's cult resulted in his execution on 18 April, which was conducted by the Czechoslovak authorities. Tiso's comrades in arms such as Ďurčan-ský – who was sentenced to death together with Tiso – turned his Vodca into a hero and martyr. The communist Czechoslovak propaganda attacked Tiso in every possible way and did not pay much attention to the Holocaust. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Tiso cult reappeared in Slovakia but was challenged by some Slovak historians without evaporating in general (246-283).

Ward has written a comprehensible, well researched, authoritative, and eloquent biography which is a great contribution to the literature on Tiso and fascist Slovakia. Only a few aspects of the book appear to be problematic. One of them is the lack of theoretical background. The reader does not learn what fascism was and in which sense or why Tiso was a fascist or a clerical fascist, or what the specifics of Slovakian fascism were. Ward rather avoids using these terms and subjects, possibly because they appeared in the repertoire of Soviet propaganda. The only theoretician of fascism who is briefly

mentioned in the monograph is Zeev Sternhell. For this reason Ward cannot explain Tiso's charisma and also the charisma of the movement. Furthermore the study suffers from a lack of contextualization or relations to the history of other similar movements in this region such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, the Ustasha or Iron Guard. Nevertheless, despite these few imperfections historians and interested laymen will certainly enjoy and appreciate this very readable and valuable contribution to the growing literature on this important topic.

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