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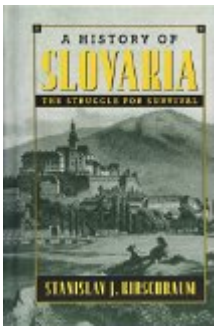
Stanislav J. Kirschbaum. *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. xvi + 350 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-10403-0.



Reviewed by Owen V. Johnson

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The emergence or re-emergence of new states in Central and Eastern Europe as the Communist systems collapsed led the editors at St. Martin's Press to commission a series of histories of some of the new countries, including Slovenia, Belarus, and the Baltic States, countries for which there was very little in the way of English-language historical surveys. At one of the annual meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, word was floating about that St. Martin's was looking for an author for a history of Slovakia.

Stanislav Kirschbaum, a professor of political science and coordinator of the International Studies Program at York University, Glendon College, Toronto, appears to have answered their call. He brings to the book a background of interest in ethnic affairs. He imbibed the Slovak experience from childhood, his father having at one time held important Slovak student and diplomatic posts, before being forced to emigrate at the end of World War II. The younger Kirschbaum is well schooled in languages, moving easily among French, German, English, Czech, and Slovak (though apparently not Hungarian). He recognizes the limits his background imposes: "A political scientist who ventures into the bailiwick of historians does so at his own peril.... [T]he works I would rely upon are limited.... If I aimed to write a history of Slovakia and the Slovaks, then it was preferable that I pursue a theme, according to the precepts of my own discipline" (p. ix). He defines the theme as the Slovak struggle for survival.

In twelve chapters he surveys elements of the history of "the Slovaks" from the arrival of the Celts in 500 B.C. to the breakup of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992. There is no doubt that such a book is needed, given that most previous attempts in English at histories of Slovakia have been characterized by politics and ethnic pride. This book is better than what came previously, but it suffers from many shortcomings. Since the author is not a historian, he fails to apply the rigorous examination of sources that characterizes good historical research. With the exception of some reports by French and British diplomats, there are almost no original sources. Kirschbaum instead uses secondary sources of varying quality. He draws very

little from the work on Habsburg history published during the last twenty-five years, particularly publications whose focus is the empire as a whole. He depends heavily on C. A. Macartney and the history of Hungary edited by Peter F. Sugar[1] for his understanding of Hungarian history. He focuses primarily on politics, reminding the reader of books written several decades ago that lacked sufficient attention to social or economic issues. The book focuses on politics at the center, so one gets very little of the variety of Slovak regional histories. There is almost nothing on the history of the minorities who reside in today's Slovakia, i.e. the Ruthenes, Poles, Hungarians, and Ukrainians. Women are no more than a footnote. There is practically nothing on the sizeable Romany population. Most significantly, the author writes not about Slovakia, but about "the Slovaks," a nation whose roots he finds in the Great Moravian Empire. His failure to distinguish between Slovakia and the Slovaks is clear when he writes, "[T]he Republic of Slovakia ... covers the territory that the Slovaks have always inhabited" (p. 9). He finds the history of the Slovaks inspirational, ascribing those aspects of Slovak history that mght be criticized to the acts of individuals who had been corrupted by non-Slovak ideas.

In his introductory chapter, Kirschbaum seeks to explain why there has been so little writing in Western languages on Slovak history. He approves of emigre historian Jozef Mikus' explanation that deliberate Czech activity has been involved, including the writings and political activity of Tomas G. Masaryk, founding father of Czechoslovakia. There is no doubt that Masaryk articulated the idea of a Czechoslovak nation at the end of World War I to justify the making of a state that otherwise might well have not been recognized by the men of Versailles. Not to have made that argument could have left Slovakia as part of Hungary, where it had suffered considerable oppression since the Ausgleich. But based on his personal familiarity with the issue, Masaryk clearly recognized that, while Czechs and Slovaks shared some history and values, they were distinct groups of people. Other Czech politicians did not make the distinction, but usually because the Czech-Slovak question was low on their agendas and they knew or cared little about the subject. Kirschbaum is right to comment that there was no Slovak historian of the stature of Frantisek Palacky. But it was not just stature. Palacky was accessible in German and well known in Germany. For too long, too few Slovaks had adequate training in historical research and too little support to do the research. Some of the Slovaks who attempted survey histories, such as Frantisek Hrusovsky and Jozef Skultety, were more writers and publicists than historians. This is a distinction that Kirschbaum does not adequately make in the introduction, and this failure bedevils his use of sources throughout the book. From books and articles written by persons of non-Slovak background he draws mostly facts. His interpretations he takes from Slovak historians.

Chapter 1 provides a brief survey of the geography and the people, as well as a brief summary of the "pre-history" and the arrival of the Celts, the German Tribes, Romans, Slavs, and Avars. Chapter 2 focuses on the Great Moravian Empire. Kirschbaum acknowledges that the empire was relatively short-lived (75 years), but he cites Slovak historians to argue that it contributed mightily to the oral and cultural traditions of the Slovak nation. He cites favorably the historical synthesis of Slovak historians who wrote in 1993 that in the founding of the Principality of Nitra, which became the eastern part of the Great Moravian Empire, "we have to accept that the nation-creating process ... of its inhabitants was complete and we can speak of a Slovak nation from that moment on" (p. 25). Although he acknowledges that the Great Moravian Empire included both Moravia and today's western Slovakia, he again cites Slovak historians that "only the Slovaks have kept their own national (and not only) territorial identity to this day" (p. 36).

Chapter 3 covers the Middle Ages, that is, according to Kirschbaum, the period from the arrival of the Magyars to the Habsburg ascent to the Hungarian throne. The following chapter is curiously titled "The Habsburg Empire," even though it covers only until the end of the eighteenth century when the Slovaks, writes Kirschbaum, "launched their national awakening" (p. 88). Although he dances around the issue, there are strong hints that the Reformation had little impact in Slovakia, and that citizens of Slovakia who were converted to Protestantism were not true Slovaks. Chapter 5 on the national awakening contains a discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attempts to codify the Slovak language, including the debate about whether the central or western Slovak dialect should serve as the basis of modern Slovak. These debates, Kirschbaum avers, "wasted valuable time" (p. 108). Linguists will surely find Kirschbaum's assumptions about the permanence and uniformity of language a little odd. While members of the Slovak cultural elite may have reached agreement on a common dialect to serve as the basis for a codified Slovak, he ignores the enormous variety of dialects from something closely akin to Czech in the west to local dialects in the east and north that blend imperceptibly into Polish or Ukrainian or Ruthenian or Russian. Part of this chapter provides a who's who of the Slovak national movement, including where various of the Slovak leaders attended high school or took their vows as priests. We even learn (p. 103) that the writer Jan Botto was "a life-long bachelor."

Chapters 6 and 7 detail "the politics of survival" and "the struggle for nationhood," covering the period from the French Revolution to the creation of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I. This is mostly the history of the elite as representatives of "the Slovaks." There is mention of the famine in Hungary in 1817-18 that "struck a number of Eastern Slovak villages where some 40,000 peopled died" (p. 111) and a note about the cholera epidemic that broke out in 1831 and the resultant peasant uprisings there (also p. 111), but otherwise the peasants are invisible. In 1848-49, the Slovaks "failed to achieve their political goals and their uprising had not been one of epic proportions, yet at the same time they had given notice that they were no longer an 'amorphous nation' but a force to be reckoned with" (p. 122). We learn that "amateur choirs were successful" (p. 140), whatever that might mean. Kirschbaum dates massive emigration to the United States and Canada from the 1870s, a date some years earlier than most historians would acknowledge.

The most problematic chapters deal with the twentieth century. They are publicistic history, with explanation and interpretation whose roots were in the political debates of their day. As I read these chapters, I found myself making countering arguments on practically every paragraph. Kirschbaum goes farther than most emigre writers when he calls the holocaust in Slovakia "one of the saddest episodes" (p. 196) in the history of the World War II Slovak State, but in most of the following discussion he rationalizes what transpired. The Slovak People's Party, led by Andrej Hlinka, is defined as the true representative of the Slovak nation, even though it never won a majority in a democratic election. Communist rule is seen largely as oppression by "the Czechs," with little credit given for the economic and social development in Czechoslovakia that is generally viewed in Slovakia as very positive. Scholars and students alike would be well advised not to use these chapters, but instead to draw on the more detailed studies by such people as Carol Skalnik Leff and James Felak.

Although the author's preference for the use of the term Czecho-Slovakia instead of Czechoslovakia is understandable, the use of old Slovak city names on contemporary maps (e.g., Liptovsky Svaty Mikulas and Turciansky Svaty Martin) is jarring. The publisher appears to have decided to leave out most diacritical markings for Slovak

names, although they are used on Norwegian ones!

In a conversation shortly before the end of Czechoslovakia, Jan Carnogursky, head of the Slovak Christian Democratic Party, remarked to me that the problem with Slovak history was that it was gray. Heroes were hard to find so they had to be created. This led to a tendency, he said, to whitewash uncomfortable historical records. Kirschbaum has created here an imagined community that many Slovaks will find inspirational and that will serve as justification for the creation of an independent Slovakia at the end of 1992. It reflects the history that many people in Slovakia believe to have happened. It is the story that is being taught in Slovak schools. It helps us understand the nature of political life in Slovakia today. But it is not satisfactory as a scholarly history.

This is a premature historical synthesis. The historian who writes the next historical survey of Slovakia will need to familiarize herself or himself with the broad range of historical scholarship not only on Slovakia and Central Europe, but on modernization, identity and social change, and then challenge the traditional national chronicle. Until then we will find our students relying on Kirschbaum.

Note

[1]. Peter F. Sugar, ed., *A History of Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

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