Hitler’s Priests in Slovakia?
On the Convergence of Catholicism and Fascism in Nazi “New Europe”

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Catholicism and fascism. Research into the connections between these different phenomena, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, has its own history. Immediately after the Second World War, Catholicism became for many Marxist contemporaries the most striking form of “clerical fascism” – a concept that served as a tool for ideologically motivated polemics, directed particularly against the Catholic hierarchy and collaborators in Central and Southeastern Europe. Yet, the term was also used up to the 1970s by non-Marxist historians. This changed during the 1980s, when despite numerous “points of agreement” between fascism and Catholicism, they were now supposed to have been fully

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incompatible due to the unbridgeable differences in terms of ideology, the relationship between state and church, and education policy. According to Richard J. Wolff and Jörg K. Hoensch, the more revolutionary the regime appeared, the less support it enjoyed from the Church.³

This view on the relationship between Catholicism and fascism prevailed in some aspects until very recently.⁴ There are only a few recent studies which have taken a different approach to this issue. Derek Hastings investigated the vulnerability of a certain stratum of Bavarian reform Catholics to early National Socialism.⁵ Similar patterns could be observed among the Italian “clerico-fascists”, a group of Catholic politicians who expected assistance from Mussolini in enforcing their common anti-left struggle and, in a broader sense, in their Catholic re-Christianization efforts.⁶ The shared Bolshevik enemy ensured that the Pope himself, as well as his officials and diplomats, were exposed to the “fascist temptation” while differentiating between anti-clericals and allegedly pro-Catholic factions within Mussolini’s and Hitler’s parties respectively.⁷ The initial enthusiasm of many interwar European Catholics for fascist movements and regimes may thus provide evidence for David Roberts’s recent claim about the essential


⁷ See CHAMEDES, Giuliana: A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Vatican’s Struggle to Remake Christian Europe. Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press 2019, p. 139. The term “fascist temptation” was coined independently by Giuliana Chamedes and me. (See SZABÓ, Míloslav: Klérofašisti: Slovenskí kňazi a pokušenie radikálnej politiky (1935–1945). Bratislava, Slovart 2019. This study is based in part on my book.)
“openness, uncertainty, and fluidity of the era” which, in Catholic circles, fed illusions that a status quo with the radical Right could have been attained.\textsuperscript{8}

The first serious attempt to re-conceptualize “clerical fascism” was made by the British historian Roger Griffin. Based on Italian historian Emilio Gentile’s distinction between politicized religion and the sacralization of politics, Griffin’s definition restricts the usage of “clerical fascism” to situations in which agents of organized religions or churches were closely involved with secular and “revolutionary” fascist ideology or even strove for the “syntheses” or “hybridizations” of the two. In the former case, they succumbed to the temptation of a fascist “rebirth” while ignoring its secular and revolutionary substance because they believed that common enemies – Bolshevism, materialism, freemasonry and the Jews – guaranteed the best ideological balance. Griffin identified such “collusion” in the conditions of the wartime Slovak State and the Independent State of Croatia. A different situation arises when “collusion” makes room for “identification and synthesis”. Here Griffin refers primarily to the so-called “German Christians” who tried to merge Nazi ideology with German Protestantism.\textsuperscript{9} Ultimately, from his reconceptualization of the term “clerical fascism”, Griffin arrives at conclusions that should also be adopted by other historians. Among which, the most significant for further research of “clerical fascism” seems to be the question of agency. According to Griffin, the term should not denote a regime as a whole, but rather its factions or individual actors and collaborators.\textsuperscript{10}

Griffin’s conceptualization of “clerical fascism” was recently revised by the Slovak historian Hana Kubátová and the Czech political scientist Michal Kubát.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast to Griffin, Kubátová and Kubát argue that “clerical fascism” is an authentic and comprehensive concept, encompassing all levels of politics: ideology, actors and the regime. They criticize Griffin’s concept because it allegedly narrows the issue to the level of agency, that is, to the clergymen. However, Kubátová and Kubát do not consider that the Catholic Church in particular simply did not merge with fascism anywhere, at any level of the concept of the political


system to which they refer.\textsuperscript{12} As mentioned above, Griffin does not suggest the term “clerical fascism” to analyze the phenomena of the sacralization of politics, but rather the politicization of religion. We should not confuse the concept of “clerical fascism” with the concept of political religions.\textsuperscript{13} This does not mean that there are no intrusions and interactions between the two areas; quite the contrary. To precisely understand these hybrid forms, according to Griffin, it is necessary and useful to focus on the level of actors.

Another problem with Kubátová and Kubát’s reconceptualization is the somewhat vague understanding of fascism. They do not seem to be entirely convinced about the usefulness of Griffin’s definition: the “fascist minimum” or synthesis of revolutionary “palingenesis” with ultra-nationalism.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, they do not refer to any other theory of fascism. Instead, they offer a rather undifferentiated self-definition. According to them, fascism “can exist in any undemocratic regime that exhibits (subscribes to) elements of generic fascist ideology or exhibits (subscribes to) the systematic elements of a particular Italian fascist regime, even if not directly ‘fascist’ in the sense of copying the Italian model”.\textsuperscript{15} Fascism (and “clerical fascism”) can thus already be identified on the basis of supposedly typical elements such as “dictatorship”, “strong corporativism” and a “leadership principle and a state-party that represents the state and speaks for the nation”.\textsuperscript{16} What is fascist about these characteristics that we do not find in the Catholic authoritarian regimes of the time? The authors acknowledge that “[b] ridging Catholicism and fascism was not an easy task”.\textsuperscript{17} However, applying the term “thin ideology” in the “coming together of Christian (or religious) and fascist principles” cannot be a solution, because we still do not know what is essentially “fascist” (or “Christian”) about it.\textsuperscript{18}

Even in light of this reconceptualization, it is clear that a more dynamic method is needed that would allow us to capture the dynamics of fascistization. Using the example of the Slovak State like Kubátová and Kubát, I show in this article how clergymen turned into fascists. This does not mean that I ignore the Slovak State’s ideology or the regime of the Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana, HSĽS), both of which were secular despite the reference to religion in the constitution and the high number of Catholic priests in the ranks

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 739–741.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 742.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 746.
of the HSĽS. Nor do I argue that the politicization of religion in order to sacralize politics must have come from the clergymen in every case. The Slovak historian Anton Hruboň has shown that attempts to instrumentalize Catholicism for a fascist political religion were first made by the Slovak Prime Minister and collaborator of Nazi Germany Vojtech Tuka (1880–1946), who, in the 1920s, tried to form the first fascist paramilitary organization, Rodobrana, as a quasi-religious order with its own liturgy, pilgrimages and sacraments. The aim of this study is rather to analyze the fascistization of the Catholic clergy, which, despite the secular character of the wartime Slovak State regime, was an important political actor.

The recent historical debate on the relationship between Catholicism and fascism using the example of Jozef Tiso (1887–1947), the leading HSĽS politician and later Slovak president, can serve as a starting point for the investigation of this issue. The wartime Slovak State, also known as the “First” Slovak Republic, in reality a satellite of Nazi Germany, came into being after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1939. The regime of the Slovak State was from the outset associated with Catholicism, mostly because Jozef Tiso was himself a Catholic priest. After the Second World War and the establishment of communist rule, the term “clerical fascism” was often used when talking about the regime of the HSĽS. However, in his comprehensive biography of Jozef Tiso, the American historian James Mace Ward rejects “clerical fascism” as a tool for explaining Tiso’s ideology. Instead, Ward suggests a new term, “Christian-National Socialist”, which expresses the paradox of Tiso’s simultaneous commitment to Catholic conservatism and secular ultranationalist/fascist “progressivism”.

This article is not primarily concerned with ascertaining whether Jozef Tiso could extract himself from this dilemma. Following the British historian Aristotle Kallis’s approach, I instead illuminate the growing “fascistization’ of a conservative-authoritarian-religious platform from within/above […] rather than […]

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20 The Slovak State was the official name from the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 until the adoption of the Slovak Constitution in June 1939. It was then officially called the Slovak Republic.


22 Ward, James Mace: Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia. Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press 2013, p. 289. No clear consensus exists even about whether the HSĽS regime in Slovakia was fascist or not. For an overview see Szabó, M.: For God and Nation.
the genesis of an independent fascist constituency in Slovakia”. What gave momentum to this process was the ideological affinity in terms of Catholic social teachings misunderstood as “Slovak National Socialism” (slovenský národný socialismus) and the invocation of a shared “enemy”. An analysis of the fascistization of Catholic social doctrine reveals the dynamic moment that is lacking even in recent research into such hybrid forms of fascism. Although this fascistization did not ultimately result in “strong corporativism”, which Kubát and Kubátová claim in the Slovak case to have been a specific fascist feature, it is more important than the oft vague appeals to Christianity to understand the Slovak variant of “clerical fascism”. In addition, following Roger Griffin’s approach, if we wish to verify the adequacy of the concept of “clerical fascism”, we must move away from the realm of pure concepts and ask who conveyed these concepts. Jozef Tiso was indeed not the only Slovak “clerico-fascist”.

A Matter of Agency: The “Clerico-Fascists”

In a later study, Roger Griffin applied his conclusions specifically to Catholicism, further stressing its ideological incompatibility with “revolutionary” fascism. Surprisingly, he did not take into account newer works, which to a significant extent fulfilled his request to focus on individual “clerico-fascists” – especially Kevin Spicer’s Hitler’s Priests, which deals with a rather small group within the German Catholic clergy, who actively supported Hitler and, in some cases, even spread Nazi ideology without rescinding their Catholic identity. Spicer’s approach was further developed by the German historian Thomas Forstner, who distinguishes between two types of “brown priests”. To a certain extent, they correspond to Griffin’s differentiation on the level of ideology and theology: on the one hand, there were attempts to achieve consensus and display loyalty to the state, while on the other there was active collaboration. The first group agreed with the important points of Nazi doctrine but did not identify with it as a whole. The motives for attempts at consensus and displays of loyalty were typically na-


nationalism, issues of social justice, anti-communism and antisemitism. Leaders of the German Catholic Church tolerated such displays to a large extent and those priests thus had little interest in leaving the Church, unlike a very small group of active collaborators.27

Whereas Spicer and Forstner focused primarily on active Nazi collaborators within the German Catholic clergy, the considerably larger section of “clerical fellow-travelers” and “clerical opportunists” received much less attention.28 In this context, the Slovak historian Samuel Trizuljak’s reference to James Chappel’s recent investigation of “paternal Catholic modernism” sheds more light on the motivations of such “clerical fellow-travelers”.29 Chappel's argument is based on the selective approach of German Catholics – among them several prominent clerics and theologians – to “totalitarianism”.30 While Bolshevism remained a specter, they perceived Nazism more benevolently. Chappel explained this through the manner in which German Catholic paternalists projected onto Nazism the idea of a secular “Western” state guaranteeing religious freedoms and rights, which allowed them to overlook the brutal trampling of the rights of minorities that culminated in the genocide of the Jews and the Roma. The American historian did not hesitate to label German Catholic paternalists as convinced National Socialists (“millions of Catholics learned to be Nazis”).31 Without referencing their studies, Chappel eventually comes to a similar conclusion as Spicer and Forstner. Distinguishing between a few fascist extremists and the large mass of the Catholic intelligentsia – and this also applies to the clergy – he exposes to varying degrees to the temptation of fascism: “Paternal Catholic modernism, as a model, cannot really help us to understand committed fascists or ultranationalists, who were rather marginal in the Church. It helps us to understand, though, the more mainstream view that there was at least no inherent conflict between Catholicism and the new style of dictatorial rule, and that some form of fascism should


31 Ibid., p. 93.
to be welcomed, if cautiously, as an antidote to Communism and as a spiritually healthy form of modernity.” 32

The “paternal Catholic modernist’s” inclination towards fascism is reflected in the “Christian-National Socialist” category as proposed by James Ward to characterize Jozef Tiso, which may be a suitable tool to analyze the hybridization of Catholic and fascist discourses in the context of the Slovak State. 33 Ward took Jozef Tiso’s Christian Social roots seriously which were, under the impact of the “fascist effect” (as defined by Kallis), transformed into a sort of “nationalist socialism” in the sense that the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell applied the term to French fascism. 34 However, Ward’s proposed category needs to be refined to encompass the dynamics of fascistization. 35 It should therefore be complemented by the analysis of how “paternal Catholic modernists” turned into, or were at least heading into the direction of being, “clerico-fascists”.

In what follows, I first outline the context of Slovak “clerico-fascism”. Then, I investigate how Catholic social teachings were distorted to what Tiso and other Slovak “clerico-fascists” called “Slovak National Socialism”. 36 Specifically, I examine the position of the Slovak “clerico-fascists” within the European New Right and, last but not least, in light of the “centrality of corporatism at that time”, particularly whether they were offering their own “third way,” an alternative to both liberal capitalism and the socialist planned economy. 37 Unlike David Roberts, who suggests that in Austria between 1933 and 1938 “a more deeply symbiotic or even synergistic relationship” existed between fascism and Catholicism, 38 in the Slovak case we encounter different constellations. What inspired the “Christian National Socialist” Jozef Tiso to go far beyond Catholic social teachings and corporatism toward the ultranationalist “rebirth” or the creation of a “New Man”? 39

39 John Pollard argues that the analytical use of the concept “clerical fascism” is indeed justified because both interwar fascists and Christians aimed at a collective “rebirth”, whether in nationalist-racist – as in Griffin’s theory of fascism – or in spiritual-social terms. Catholics
Because of the Nazi rejection of genuine corporatism, which was the real point of reference for Tiso, the answers will have to be found within the Nazi semantics of “work”. This category appears to be central to my understanding of the specifically Slovak form of “clerical fascism” because it oscillated and mediated between the modernized social doctrine of the Church and the racist ideas of the national community (Volksgemeinschaft).

Who Were the Slovak “Clerico-Fascists”?

Surprisingly, the results of systematic historical research into the agency of “clerical fascism” are hardly available for areas outside of the German-speaking world. This is striking not least of all regarding Slovakia, where a relatively high percentage of Catholic priests could already be found among the ranks of the HSLS during the interwar period. Its founder and leader was the Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), whom the party was named after. The HSLS was a successor of the prewar Slovak People’s Party (Slovenská Íudová strana, SĽS), which in 1905 seceded from the Catholic People’s Party (Katolíkú néppárt) which was founded at the end of the nineteenth century in the Kingdom of Hungary as a response to the liberal legislature of the Hungarian government. Its Slovak representatives and supporters displayed a multiclass identity in which loyalty towards

in particular had hoped they would achieve such a rebirth with the help of fascist and far-right movements and regimes. (POLLARD, J. F.: “Clerical Fascism”, pp. 222–223.)


the Catholic Church was mixed with Hungarian (not Magyar) patriotism and an awareness of ethnic and linguistic belonging to the Slovaks. After the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the formation of Czechoslovakia, in which Slovaks were officially a part of the Czechoslovak nation, the Slovak clergy only gradually lost its loyalty to the Holy Crown of Hungary – despite early cases in which the HSLS severed all links with some Hungarian irredentists. Starting out as a mostly religiously motivated opposition to the secular political culture of the Czechoslovak elites, the HSLS became a religious ethnic party requesting political autonomy for the Slovak people. Especially in the second half of the 1930s, more radical steps were being called for in its ranks, with authoritarian regimes such as that in Italy or in neighbouring Poland serving as models, later followed by a turn towards Nazi Germany. Accompanied by an ideological radicalization through the creeds of anti-communism and antisemitism, this trend culminated in the proclamation of Slovak autonomy in the autumn of 1938 following the annexation of the Sudetenland as a result of the Munich Agreement. On March 14, 1939, the Slovak State was formed, a satellite of Nazi Germany from the very beginning – conforming to it in foreign as well as to a significant extent in domestic policies.

In the ranks of the HSLS, now the state party, there was still a large number of Catholic priests. The episcopate welcomed the new regime at first, expecting its lost positions in the education system to be reinstated and, through the Catholic Action inaugurated by Pius XI, also anticipating to be granted a decisive influence on the regulation of society and the oversight of culture. At the same time, they were worried by the activities of politically active priests, whose responsibility inevitably extended to the institution as a whole. This was the case not only for bishop Ján Vojtaššák (1977–1965), who held a seat on the State Council (Štátna rada) – a sort of second chamber of parliament – where he failed to clearly condemn the persecution and deportation of Slovak Jews, but also for

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a high number of priest deputies. Their numbers were gradually reduced, but many of them continued to hold high positions within the HSĽS structure.

Representatives of the Catholic Church endorsed the Slovak nationalism on which the HSĽS ideology was built. Most of the clerical intellectuals belonged to its conservative wing, which emphasized an autonomous and non-chauvinistic Catholic Slovak nationalism. However, politically active priests had become increasingly radicalized since the declaration of autonomy. This tendency intensified in the summer of 1940, when Adolf Hitler started putting pressure on leading Slovak politicians on account of their excessive autonomy, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. During negotiations in Salzburg between Hitler and his Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop on the one side, and President Tiso, Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka, and the commander of the paramilitary Hlinka Guard (Hlinkova garda), Alexander Mach, on the other, the Nazis supported the so-called radical wing of the HSĽS. However, President Tiso retained his position. It is possible that Hitler was banking on a power struggle similar to that between the state and party authorities in Germany, where a stronger actor could assert himself. If so, his calculation largely worked: Tiso’s so-called moderate wing became increasingly radicalized in this struggle and, in the end, he did indeed succeed in winning over the radicals. James Ward called this tactic “driving out one nail with another”: “In countering the ‘new course’, Tiso strove to posit an alternative while building bridges to his [radical] opponents.” The “Slovak National Socialism” declared by Tuka became the common programme, although Tiso simultaneously coined the term “People’s Slovakia” (Ľudové Slovensko).

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53 WARD, J. M.: Priest, Politician, Collaborator, p. 213.
he specifically had in mind was an ethnically clean Slovakia, which he also concrectized by using the German term *völkisch*.

After Nazi Germany’s intervention in 1940 in the internal political structure of the Slovak State in order to support the pro-German course, the notion of “Slovak National Socialism” took root also among the clergy, though with an emphasis on social politics based on the Nazi model and usually without explicit racism – although not without antisemitism – as befitting Hitler’s own motto, “Nazism is not for export”. Therefore, in what sense and to what extent can we speak of “Hitler’s priests” in Slovakia with regard to the religiously coloured nationalism of the majority of Slovak clergymen? Alongside the general euphoria caused by the propaganda showing Hitler and German Nazism as guarantors of Slovak statehood and national “survival”, we need to take into account personal motivations and troubles as well as political ambitions. Moreover, anti-communism and antisemitism, which lured many “clerico-fascists” into adopting the language of National Socialism, were significant integrating factors. Added to this was the aversion to clericalism on the part of the Nazi allies, represented in Slovakia not least by the advisor to the Hlinka Guard, Viktor Nageler, who came to Slovakia in the aftermath of the Salzburg negotiations in the summer of 1940. All these factors, alongside pressure from church leaders, could result in either the moderation or radicalization of individual clerics. The declaration of “Slovak National Socialism” in 1940 therefore had the effect of either strengthening or weakening their loyalty case by case. On the ideological level, this meant a gradual detachment from or, on the contrary, an even closer adherence to the Nazi model, including racism and eugenics.

The clerics discussed below were by no means the only “clerico-fascists” among the Catholic clergy, although for most of them loyalty to the church seems to have outweighed the tendency toward radicalization. The research thus far does not permit us to make any definitive judgments about the number of “clerico-fascists” in Slovakia, but most of those who were functionaries of the HSLS probably

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became radicalized to some extent.\textsuperscript{56} Therefore, the present study is intended to stimulate further research.

From Catholic Estates to the \textit{Völkisch} Community of “Work”: The “Clerical Fascist” Ideology of Jozef Tiso

Although paying lip service to Catholic social teachings, from 1940 onwards Jozef Tiso promoted its fascistization. In 1939, in an interview with the German Catholic journal \textit{Schönere Zukunft}, Tiso announced that “the Slovak State [would] be built up on the basis of the papal encyclical ‘Quadragesimo Anno’”\textsuperscript{57}. This meant the organization of Slovak society into professional bodies that would bring together employers and employees. The implementation of this idea was met with incomprehension at the higher levels of government and in the Chambers of Commerce.\textsuperscript{58} Ultimately, a constitutional reform in accordance with Catholic corporatism as proposed in the encyclical or, more precisely, in the Austrian and Portuguese constitutions, did not succeed in Slovakia, for the most part due to the aversion of Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{59} The proclamation of “Slovak National Socialism” in the summer of 1940 prompted Tiso’s move toward ultra-nationalism and


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Archiv bezpečnostních složek} (ABS), Prague, fond (f.) Sbírka mikrofilmů [Collection of Microfilms], signature (sign.) 144–6–96–237, National Archives Microcopy, No T 175: Records of the Reichleader of the SS and Chief of the German Police [Reichsführer der SS und Chef der deutschen Polizei], Washington 1958, excerpt from an interview with Jozef Tiso. \textit{Quadragesimo Anno} was an encyclical of Pope Pius XI on the reconstruction of social order issued on 15 May 1931. The encyclical was the basis for corporate reforms in several countries, notably in Austria and in Portugal. (See [Pope Pius XI] Quadragesimo Anno. In: \textit{Encyclicals} [online]. The Holy See, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. [Accessed 2022-07-25.] Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html.


potentially even toward racism in the sense of the German term **völkisch**, which he used frequently.  

Surprisingly, Tiso did not deliver a public speech at the anniversary celebration of the *Quadragesimo Anno* in Bratislava in early 1941. He instead took the ban of the Christian trade unions later that year as an opportunity to provide clarity about his own views on corporatism. Tiso now distinguished between a “wrong” international corporatism and the allegedly only true corporatism, which he equated with National Socialism.  

And not only that, but he also characterized this distortion as the implementation of the *Quadragesimo Anno*. Tiso still emphasized natural law and individual freedom and criticized leftist collectivism, yet at the same time, he praised the **völkisch** principle, that is “folklorism, tribalism, and – if you will – also racialism [**ľudovosť, kmeňovosť a – keď chceme – aj rasovosť**].”

In 1942, the regime of the Slovak State attained the pinnacle of its power: the “Jewish question” seemed to have been “solved” through the deportation of two thirds of Slovak Jews to the Nazi concentration and death camps, while a special act of parliament established the HSLS as the state party and Tiso as its “Leader” (*Vodca*).  

Last but not least, the establishment of the so-called Slovak Working Community (*Slovenská pracujúca pospolitost*) compensated for the non-existent constitutional reform. This organization, in its structure vaguely reminiscent of corporatist professional groups, was completely subordinated to the HSLS with its compulsory membership. The new “Leader” Tiso claimed the credit for himself. Indeed, since 1939 he had already defined the Slovak nation as “a collective of working men” and as “a Slovak working community”. Only three years later, however, he wanted the HSLS, with the assistance of the Slovak Working Community, to exercise totalitarian control over every Slovak. Consequently,

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The President of the Slovak state, Jozef Tiso (1887–1947) speaking at a rally in Banská Bystrica in 1939.

Author unknown / © Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, Slovak National Archives, Fund Slovak Press Office, photo 01065.
Tiso admitted that neither Catholic corporatism nor a copy of German rule was emerging in Slovakia but rather “a combination of both systems.”

Along with his departure from corporatism, Tiso stressed the role of “work” in forming the Slovak national community. From this moment on, there was not much left of Christian solidarism and compassion: “In both Germany and Italy, a new kind of organization of their respective national communities is emerging. This new line curses capitalism by accentuating the value of work; it will stop emphasizing equality and freedom, a lethal weapon in the hands of the small and the weak; instead it will elevate work and duty to the community.” From 1942 onwards, a veritable cult of work developed in Slovakia, with President Tiso among its most active promoters. As in Nazi Germany, the cult of work was intended to perform two specific tasks: it had to integrate productive fellow Slovaks into one collective, while it was also to discipline, exploit, or even exclude the unproductive or simply “alien” others, especially Jews, Sinti and Roma from the national community.

The fascistization of Catholic corporatism in Tiso’s ideology took place within a broader semantic framework. First, it was accompanied by a shift toward statism. Prior to the establishment of quasi-independent Slovakia in 1939, Tiso, in accordance with Catholic teachings, used to put the people/nation (národ) ahead of the state. Within a short period following the establishment of new Slovakia, however, Tiso distorted the Catholic state theory to claim not a “totality of the state” but rather a “totalitarian state order” (totalitné zriadenie štátu) on behalf of the people/nation. Accordingly, Tiso described his state as a “People’s/Racial Slovakia” (ľudové Slovensko; die völkische Slowakei), a part of fascist “New Europe.”

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67 Ibid., p. 558.
68 In accordance with another prominent Catholic priest and HSLS ideologist, Štefan Polakovič, from whom, however, Tiso originally differed in his understanding of the nation. (See LENČÉŠOVÁ, M.: The Concept of “Nation” and “National Community” in the Thinking of Štefan Polakovič, pp. 79–85.) In this respect, Tiso seems to have been an inspiration for Polakovič who promoted his cult since 1939.
73 Ibid., p. 247.
With the gradually increasing racialization of Slovak nationalism, the Slovak State became an object of adoration and worship. Tiso and other Slovak “clerico-fascists” approved a soft version of eugenics as early as February 1939. According to Tiso, the Slovak nation had to “stand the test in a biological sense” and to this end he called for the accumulation of its “biological capital”. Slovaks counted among the “racially precious” nations because they had an “assimilation power” – probably the alleged capacity to “Slovakize” non-Slovak minorities living in the country – comparable with the Germans.

The “new Slovak man” was to be based on “biology, a leading science in the contemporary world”. He who believed in authority and family was to be “purified” from individualism and liberalism. The ideology of the “new Slovak man” was the ultimate culmination of Tiso’s fascistization: The “new Slovak man” united in himself both völkisch ultra-nationalism and the Nazisque semantics of “work”. His “reeducation”, or more accurately “rebirth”, was the ultimate goal: “The first biological condition for a better life in Slovakia is more work. We will therefore soon pass a law on the obligation to work. A natural consequence of it will be another law on the demand for work. We will be happy if this rebirth [predom] of Slovakia comes true as soon as possible.”

Occasionally, Tiso tried to achieve a genuine “clerico-fascist” synthesis. This was the case in the summer of 1940 with his commitment to “Slovak National Socialism”. Referring to John 3:1-21 (“You Must Be Born Again”), Tiso demanded from his audience a “rebirth in the spirit of the new Slovakia”: “Is it possible to combine the programme of Christ with the programme of National Socialism? For the old it is not possible. Those who want to understand must be born again. Of water and the Spirit. [...] The water of the National Socialist unification will wash away the old internationalists, Judeo-Bolsheviks and Marxists. As the Führer Adolf Hitler put it at the outbreak of the war: this war is a social, not an imperialist one. It is a struggle against plutocracies and Marxism. This war is waged on behalf of such principles, it means the doom of all capitalism and all Bolshevism.”

Tiso praised Hitler for having “saved” the Slovak people time and again. He adhered to the German term völkisch and thus, at least indirectly, also to Hitler’s

74 Ibid., p. 81. See DR. K. K. [Karol Körper]: Zdravie. In: Slovenská Pravda (7. 3. 1939), no page numbers.
76 Ibid., p. 303.
77 Ibid., p. 226.
78 Ibid., pp. 129, 187.
79 Ibid., p. 226.
80 Ibid., p. 267.
racist worldview. In comparison with other “National Socialist sects”, however, Tiso justified Hitler as a lesser evil.\footnote{Ibid., p. 324.} Tiso – as did his Slovak-German fellow priest and politician Josef Steinhübel – thereby pursued a strategy which during the 1930s was also applied by the Austrian “brown bishop” Alois Hudal (1885–1963), who appeared to have distinguished between the “conservative Catholic” Adolf Hitler and the anti-Christian Nazi “leftists” such as Alfred Rosenberg.\footnote{See SZABÓ, Miloslav: “Klerikale Nationalsozialisten” und “Klerikalfaschisten” an der Peripherie NS-Deutschlands: Der Fall Slowakei. In: BLASCHKE, Olaf – GRÖssBÖLTING, Thomas (eds.): Was glaubten die Deutschen zwischen 1933 und 1945? Religion und Politik im Nationalsozialismus. Frankfurt am Main, Campus 2020, pp. 283–309.} Vatican officials and diplomats had already adopted this strategy in the early 1930s due to their anti-Bolshevik turn.\footnote{CHAMEDES, G.: A Twentieth Century Crusade, p. 139.}

A striking facet of Jozef Tiso’s fascistization of the Christian Social outlook relates to antisemitism. James Ward has persuasively shown that Tiso launched attacks against Jews only in “revolutionary” times of uncertainty in the aftermath of the First World War and on the eve of the Second World War. Besides “opportunism”, Ward identified social, anti-modern and nationalist motives behind Tiso’s antisemitism: “Jews” were blamed for promoting capitalism, liberalism and/or socialism and were accused of exploiting the “Slovak people”.\footnote{WARD, J. M.: Priest, Politician, Collaborator, p. 63.} However, what should be regarded as truly new and fascist about Tiso’s antisemitism during the period of “Slovak National Socialism” is the link between the quasi-theological justification of exclusionary antisemitism and the semantics of national “work”.


Simultaneously, Tiso was eager to create the impression that he was mounting a campaign against capitalism. This is why he emphasized an opposition between “unproductive” capitalism and “productive” national work. What counted
was “not international, de-personalized capital, embodied by the worship of gold, but a collective of individuals who work with joy for the benefit of their people/nation and state”. Tiso encoded this genuine National Socialist opposition into the antisemitic contrast of “enslaving Jewish gold” versus “releasing work”, which inevitably ennobled the fascist “New Man”.

A Broken Trajectory? Karol Körper’s, Ladislav Hanus’s, and Viliam Ries’s Fluctuation between Fascism, Anti-Modernism and Nazism

As indicated above, Jozef Tiso was by no means the only Catholic priest active in radical politics in the wartime Slovak State, albeit without question he was the most prominent one. At the same time, Tiso also acted as the main ideologue of the HSĽS regime, who dared to justify theoretically the fascistization of Catholic social teachings. Other politicized Slovak clerics, including seemingly genuine “Nazi priests”, were in this respect rather vague, even though they were no less radical. Generally, they all favoured the alleged social aspects of Nazism over its inherent racism. However, the situation differed with regard to another crucial factor: the mobilizing potential of the anti-Bolshevist “crusade”. Along with the issue of “Slovak National Socialism” the shared Bolshevist enemy reflected the dynamic nature of the “clerical fascist” agency. The examples of three lesser-known Slovak Catholic priests illustrates their fluctuation between related, but in many respects still distinct concepts of “moderate” Italian-style Fascism, “paternal Catholic modernism” and Nazism.

As early as the 1920s, Catholic priests took an active part in building the first Slovak fascist movement. By 1926, Benito Mussolini had secured sufficient power in Italy and his fascist ideas began to land on fertile soil in Czechoslovakia as well. In Slovakia, the most explicit propagators of the Italian model of fascism were primarily the supporters of Rodobrana, a paramilitary organization established in 1923 as the security troops of the HSĽS. Its devout founder, the lawyer and later Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak State Vojtech Tuka, adorned with Christian symbolism and martyrdom rituals. Black uniforms, military discipline, the Slovak double cross and attacks

88 Ibid., p. 357.
89 On Tuka see LORMAN, T.: The Making of the Slovak People’s Party, pp. 188–192. Among other things, Tuka founded the “Society of Worshipers of the Holy Blood of Christ” (Združenie ctiteľov Svätej krví Kristovej), which was supposed to worship a relic held in the monastery in
against alleged enemies of Christian Slovakia, primarily Czechs and Jews, as well as the “revolutionary”, anti-socialist and anti-communist activism of Rodobrana, present a clear shift towards fascism in contrast to the conservatism of the HSLS. Several clerics, former members of Rodobrana, grew into prominent “clerico-fascists” during the Slovak State. Among them, the priest and politician Karol Körper (1894–1969) exemplifies the ambitions and failures of these hybrid religious-political roles.90

Like Tiso, Körper was socialized in the old Kingdom of Hungary but quickly adapted to the new Czechoslovak reality. He became one of the organizers of the officially apolitical Catholic Action, which was to strengthen the position of the Church among laypeople, often blending with political radicalism for young activists. A model for such political activism in this period was clearly Italian fascism, which Körper proclaimed to be “a global principle”, a victorious revolt against liberal democracy.91 Rodobrana’s combination of political activism also enthralled Körper.92

Körper’s activism entered a new, decisive phase in the second half of the 1930s when he was active as the leading commentator for the HSLS newspapers. He wrote extensive editorials in which he mainly dealt with the Bolshevik threat, which he kept portraying as the work of the “Jews”.93 Similarly to other politically radicalized Catholics of his time, Körper adopted racist vocabulary in his aversion to Jews.94 In May 1938, he addressed the Slovak public with his “solution” to the “Jewish question”. In his programme, Körper recommended limiting the

Hronský Beňadík, the place where members of Rodobrana took their vows. (See HRUBOŇ, A.: Pioneers of Clerical Fascism?, pp. 139–142.)


94 Paradoxically, he did so not by referring to anti-Christian Nazi Germany, but to the United States of America. Körper actually saw racial segregation only in the USA in the autumn of 1937, when together with Jozef Tiso and other delegates of the largest Slovak Catholic organization, the St. Vojtech (Adalbert) Society, he took part in a tour of the USA attempting to renew ties with Slovak emigrants who clearly had no issues with this dark side of American democracy.
Karol Körper (1894–1969) on the left of the tribune during a 1939 rally of the Hlinka Transport Guard in Bratislava. In the background, the double-cross symbol of the Slovak state is displayed, above which stands the Hlinka Guards' salute “Na stráž!” [On Guard].

Author unknown / © The Archive of the Prison and Judicial Guard Corps in Leopoldov.
permission for Jews to live within the territory of Slovakia as well as their property and occupational rights.\textsuperscript{95}

Along with antisemitism, Körper also subscribed to the “expectations of the leader” that were common throughout Europe then.\textsuperscript{96} In relation to Nazism, Körper was torn at first: on the one hand, he welcomed anti-communism and antisemitism as a fundamental part of the National Socialist “worldview”, yet on the other he dismissed the “new religion of race and blood” as “brown Bolshevism”, in line with the papal encyclicals.\textsuperscript{97} However, Körper became more acquiescent immediately following the proclamation of Slovak autonomy in the autumn of 1938. He welcomed the gravitation of Slovak Germans to Nazism, since at this point it was, in his opinion, a healthy principle based on the unity of a people and their leader. Körper, who as late as 1937 had criticized Nazism, succumbed within only a few months to the glimmer of German power: “Here, in our free Slovakia, the swastika is just as much a symbol of national revival and new life as the Slovak double cross.”\textsuperscript{98}

After the proclamation of the Slovak State, he paid tribute to the Führer as a guarantor of Slovak statehood.\textsuperscript{99} Körper celebrated the fascist leaders Mussolini and Hitler in several editorials.\textsuperscript{100} In this regard, parallels were frequently made between the victory of the leader principle and the cult of Christ the King, introduced by Pius XI in 1925 as a counterweight to secular rulers and secularism. Körper saw Christ the King as a symbol of both Slovak nationalism and its martial leaders, primarily President Jozef Tiso.\textsuperscript{101}

Many priests were joining the Hlinka Guard, which was to perform tasks that later fell to the Slovak army, as early as the autumn of 1938. Following the cue of Tiso’s government, the “main spiritual administration” (hlavná duchovná správa) of the Hlinka Guard was established – a sort of military vicarage tasked with

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{96} See HAYNES, Rebecca (ed.): In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe. London, Tauris 2011.
\textsuperscript{97} DR. K. K. [Karol Körper]: Protijed. In: Slovenská pravda (5. 3. 1937), no page number.
\textsuperscript{100} DR. K. K. [IDEM]: Adolf Hitler. In: Ibid. (20. 4. 1939), no page number.
\textsuperscript{101} DR. K. K. [IDEM]: Brezany. In: Ibid. (25. 8. 1939), no page number. The conjunction of the priestly and political offices did not seem to pose an issue for Körper. On the contrary, the principles of unquestioned authority and obedience, which was typical for both the Catholic Church hierarchy and contemporary fascism, resulted here in a successful synthesis. (DR. K. K. [IDEM]: Vodcovstvo. In: Ibid. (6. 9. 1939), no page number; see also DR. K. K. [IDEM]: Vodca. In: Ibid. (7. 10. 1939), no page number.)
\end{footnotes}
the spiritual care of the paramilitary unit – which Karol Körper chaired. The Church leadership supported and safeguarded these attempts. The main task of the Hlinka Guard’s spiritual administration – in which Protestants also had their representatives – was supposed to be the “moral-religious upbringing” of officers and the rank-and-file. Körper continued to mix religion and politics and considered the Hlinka Guard to be a tool of the Catholic Action. In his position as head spiritual administrator of the Hlinka Guard, Körper even held regular speeches on the radio. Mixing religion with radical politics reached its apex here

102 KÖRPER, Karol: Kňazi do služieb Hlinkovej gardy. In: Slovák (5. 3. 1939), no page number.
103 This fact attracted the attention of Nazi intelligence bodies in Vienna, who observed this development with resentment as they saw an ideological ally in the Hlinka Guard. (Bundesarchiv, Berlin, f. Deutsche Polizeidienststellen in der Slowakei, R 70-Slowakei, file 112.)
and we can confidently denote Körper’s activities in the Hlinka Guard in 1939
and 1940 as one of the peaks of Slovak “clerical fascism”. 104

In Körper’s eyes, love and forgiveness were not the only principles of Chris-
tianity. The Archangel Michael did not hesitate to raise a weapon and punish its
enemies. In the Apocalypse of John, it is Michael who defeats Satan in the form
of a dragon and casts him into Hell. It is not surprising, then, that the Archangel
Michael became a symbol of ecclesia militans, the militant Church, and a patron
saint of soldiers. Similarly to the Orthodox Romanian fascists who converged in
the Legions of Archangel Michael, in Körper’s case this was a variation on the
heroic “Aryan Christ” as propagated by radical German Protestants. 105 Naturally,
as a loyal Catholic priest Karol Körper could not follow this creed specifically,
but he did display publicly and fearlessly his awe for secular German heroism. 106

Out of gratitude to the Nazis for the establishment of the Slovak State, nu-
merous clerics in its initial years nurtured the illusion that it would be possible
to come to an agreement with the totalitarian state and its Nazi protector in line
with the Italian model. They became aware of the difficulty of this plan only af-
ter the Salzburg negotiations between Hitler and Slovak representatives in the
summer of 1940, when it was clear that the Nazis did not intend to tolerate “the-
cracy” in Slovakia. Instead, they strengthened the position of the fascist wing
of Vojtech Tuka and the commander of the Hlinka Guard Alexander Mach (1902–
1980). From the outset, the Church in Slovakia and its politicizing representatives
became a thorn in the side of their Nazi ally, or more accurately of the Nazi in-
telligence services, even though it only had a limited impact on clergy positions
not least because of the popularity and political influence of President Tiso. On
the other hand, the Church started to defend itself against the influence of rad-
cial representatives of the state through the restored Catholic Action. 107

The spiritual administrator of the Hlinka Guard, Karol Körper, became a vic-
tim of power transfers and even his odes to Hitler as an instrument of the Divine
could not help him. The new Nazi advisor SS-Sturmbannführer Viktor Nageler
decided to form a racial elite group from the Hlinka Guard – a sort of vanguard

104 In particular, the politicization of the Catholic Action corresponds to John Pollard’s dy-
namic understanding of “clerical fascism” (see fn. 9).

105 See HESCHEL, Susannah: The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and Bible in Nazi Ger-

106 KÖRPER, Karol: Vojna je súdom Božím. In: Slovák (16. 7. 1940), no page number. Körper’s bishop
Karol Kmeťko took offence at his radicalism as early as 1938. (See the review: HOLEC, Roman: Szabó,
Miloslav: Klérofašisti. Slovenskí kňazi a pokušenie radikálnej politiky (1935–1945). In: Ju-
daica et Holocaustica, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2019), pp. 85–89.) For later years, we do not possess any simi-
lar record.

to Germanization of suitable material, the racial roots of which were thought to be buried under Slavic “silt”.\textsuperscript{108}

Although Körper, sought to stress his heroic and anti-Jewish Christianity, Nageler and other Nazis still viewed him as an unreliable and corrupt priest unwilling to part with the Church.\textsuperscript{109} After an accusation of corruption by the periodical \textit{Gardista}, Körper resigned from his office as spiritual administrator of the Hlinka Guard. He continued, however, to praise the “leader” and one-party state in public speeches and even kept appealing to the Slovak population to bring sacrifices, glorifying Hitler and the Wehrmacht as guarantors of Slovak national existence and seeing the war as a form of spiritual “purification”.\textsuperscript{110}

The era of “Slovak National Socialism” lasted until 1942, when Tiso was finally able to stabilize his power at the expense of Tuka and Mach. Throughout the entire year of 1941, it seemed that Hitler would become the master over the continent. Similarly to the war propaganda in several Nazi satellites and the military priests of the Wehrmacht, Tiso and Körper praised the war against the Soviet Union as a new “crusade”.\textsuperscript{111} At the same time, Catholic efforts to support the Christian family model and its biological and socio-economic reproduction – which, according to the Vatican, were threatened mainly by Soviet Russia and its fifth columns in Europe, the Communist Parties – were met by the HSLS regime. In March 1941, one of the milestones of “paternalist Catholic modernization” was reached: the Slovak Parliament adopted the Fetus Protection Act, banning abortions and contraception.\textsuperscript{112}

In this situation, the Slovak episcopate decided to clarify the relationship between Catholicism and Nazism once and for all. The bishops commissioned the theologian Ladislav Hanus (1907–1994) to deal with this task. Hanus was to give a lecture about “Religion in New Europe” at a conference organized by the Hlinka


\textsuperscript{109} Körper himself was suspected to be of “Jewish origin”.


\textsuperscript{111} See FAULKNER ROSSI, Lauren: \textit{Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation}. Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press 2015, pp. 185–191; ZRÍNSKY, K.: Vítazstvo ducha v misiách; TISO, J.: \textit{Prejavy a články}, Vol. 2, p. 371. Tiso compared the “infection of Bolshevism” with a “festering boil” which German and Slovak soldiers were going to “cut out” (ibid., p. 400).

Guard in November 1941.\textsuperscript{113} Hanus, who had studied theology in Innsbruck was widely regarded as an expert in the field of German literature, philosophy and art. Consequently, he expected German culture to spearhead the spiritual renewal of the Christian West. After his return from Austria in the late 1930s, however, Hanus became a committed Slovak nationalist. He was acknowledged as an orator and as such during 1940 and 1941 he even endeavored to distinguish himself as an ideologue of “Slovak National Socialism”.

Despite being fundamentally shaped by German theology, Hanus embodies the contradictions of East Central Europe with its different historical experiences. In the years of building the so-called Slovak National Socialism, he preached in one breath the integral humanism of the anti-fascist Jacques Maritain – an antitotalitarian philosopher whom James Chappel places among the second type of “Fraternal Catholic modernism”\textsuperscript{114} – and discipline in the name of a “racial/people’s state” partly and consciously based on the Nazi model of the Volksstaat. In Hanus’s case, therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of anti-modernism. The latter was characterized in East Central Europe by an increased acceleration and syncretic character of political thought. Attitudes such as antimodern anti-totalitarianism were not unique here, but a second, “dark” wave of national revivalism, characterized by exclusive, quasi-biological fantasies of national growth and health at the expense of national enemies, was also typical.\textsuperscript{115}

Although an admirer of Maritain, and despite his relative reticence concerning antisemitism,\textsuperscript{116} Hanus pleaded for a paternalist Slovak version of Hitler’s Volksstaat.\textsuperscript{117} Under the influence of another theologian, Romano Guardini, who


\textsuperscript{114} See CHAPPEL, J.: Catholic Modern, pp. 108–143.


\textsuperscript{116} From the period of the Slovak State, we do not have any manifestations of Hanus’s antisemitism, but during his studies in Innsbruck he also propagated typically Catholic antisemitic theses about the domination of modern culture by the materialistic Jews and their allegedly disruptive influence on the religious and national community. (HANUS, Ladislav: Erich Maria Remarque: Na Západe nič nového. In: Rozvoj, Vol. 7, No. 5 (1930), p. 99.)

appreciated qualities such as aura, charisma and the pathos of youth requiring submission under spiritual authority, Hanus had even earlier become acquainted with the atmosphere of the German “conservative revolution”. All this was mirrored by his view of a re-Christianization within the framework of Hitler’s New Order which was to follow the declining liberal era and its alleged fatal spawn – Bolshevism.

If the First World War marked the end of the decadent modern age, Hanus viewed the current one as the culmination of a conservative revolution marked by Catholicism and National Socialism. Hanus placed the historical significance of the two phenomena on almost the same level – at least in the sense that “National Socialism” was to pave the way for Catholicism.

In his lecture given at the conference of the Hlinka Guard in November 1941, Hanus stated more precisely what Hitler and National Socialism, from a Catholic point of view, were expected to do and allow. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, a genuine “revolution” had gained momentum, which Hanus – although there is no evidence that he really spoke on behalf of the Slovak Catholic hierarchy and President Tiso, as the Nazi rapporteur claimed, but it appears likely – saw as a new impetus for the question of what the “religious face of the new Europe” would look like. According to Hanus, the New Europe under the leadership of the fascists had definitively buried its predecessor, the democratic “so-called Versailles Europe”, the embodiment of Masaryk’s “World Revolution”, which allegedly violated natural law in both the social and national senses by enforcing capitalism and communism, and thus respectively by suppressing national rights.

What, then, was the attitude of National Socialism towards Christianity? Hanus called upon his audience to believe the reassurances of President Tiso, after a visit to Hitler’s headquarters in October 1941, “that the Führer is for the application of natural law, or ‘divine order’ in the New Europe”. Hanus’s conclusions about natural law can certainly be read as an indirect critique of Nazi, or

rather totalitarian injustice. Hanus clearly seemed to express uncertainty about the “true” nature of Nazism, but then relativized his doubts by celebrating Nazi “achievements”. This ambiguous style and syntax are characteristic of the whole text. “Criticism” on the basis of natural law is constantly balanced, meaning weakened, by “confidence” in the building of “National Socialism,” which was also justified by natural law.\footnote{The Slovak expression for natural law is prirodzené právo. Significantly, the reporter translated it into German as natürliches Recht, not as Naturrecht, which connoted positively with Nazi legal scholars. It is possible that Hanus alluded to these nuances intentionally.}

This would manifest itself in the text as soon as Hanus moves from theological arguments to ideological ones, which happens repeatedly. Significantly, the diction changes when Hanus stops talking about the right to life and turns to the “right to private property”. It is clear here that his critique of totalitarianism – as with other “paternalists” – was in fact directed against Bolshevism, while National Socialism was in this context presented as a guarantor of natural law. Hitler’s victory in the war against Bolshevism was therefore, according to Hanus, a basic precondition on which everything else rested: “The German army and the allied troops of Europe as a whole became an instrument of Providence. We are delighted about this fact most of all.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 82.}

Even so, the successor of Christ’s work was the Church, which Hanus connected – like the German “paternalists”\footnote{See CHAPPEL, J.: Catholic Modern, pp. 92–105.} – to Europe and to the “West”. He immediately used these symbols to attack the Soviet Union, “a state that has really programmatically renounced Christianity. This not only disconnected it from Europe, but created an isolated inferno from the rest of the world.”\footnote{HANUS, L.: Náboženská tvár novej Európy, p. 85.} According to Hanus, communist nihilism was also a memento of National Socialism: “The whole work of the New Europe will depend on the attitude towards Christianity.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 86.} At this point, Hanus took Hitler and Tiso at their words: “He who proclaims the Christian programme assumes his full responsibility and the judgment of this view. There is an absolute evil that allows no compromise and demands martyrdom rather than a departure from the principle. Only relative evil can be justified by the circumstance of ‘minus malum’ [a minor evil].”\footnote{Ibid.}

Referencing Christian “openness to the world” and in anticipation of the victory of National Socialism, and despite of all his criticisms of racism, Hanus eventually offered Hitler “help” in the name of Catholicism. He spoke directly...
Hitler’s Priests in Slovakia?

Ladislav Hanus’s Catholic anti-modernism was largely influenced by his German teachers and confidants and was the reason for his temporary ingratiation with Nazism. Soon, however, it was time for him to wake up and make place for genuine “clerico-fascists”.

To a certain extent, Körper’s and Hanus’s positions were taken over by another Catholic priest, Viliam Ries (1906–1989). Just like Hanus, Ries studied theology in Innsbruck and initially did not engage in politics. He wrote poems under the pseudonym Ivan Javor and published them in HSLS journals and Catholic cultural periodicals. This changed during the second half of the 1930s, when he became a member of the city council in Banská Štiavnica for the HSLS and an editor of its weekly journal, Štiavničan. Ries’s activities illustrate how “Slovak National Socialism” was imbued with radicalism. From 1939 onwards, articles frequently appeared in Štiavničan criticizing government social policies and demanding social justice, especially for local miners. As a priest and commander of the Hlinka Guard in his parish of Svätý Anton, Ries invoked the ire of the authorities with his social radicalism, which resulted in his transfer to an outlying rectory. He was eventually suspended from his priesthood at the beginning of 1942 and subsequently moved to Bratislava.

In Bratislava, Ries became the editor of a new magazine, Náš Baj (Our Struggle), which was supposed to be a platform for expressing the radical opinions of Slovak supporters of Nazism. Viktor Nageler, who was sent to Slovakia as an advisor to the Hlinka Guard after the Salzburg negotiations in the summer of 1940 and subsequently ousted Karol Körper from his position, considered the magazine as a weapon in strengthening the “Nordic race”. Nageler regarded the Hlinka guardsmen as descendants of Germans from the times before the arrival of the Slavs. An awareness of their racial identity was therefore to be strengthened by courses and by Náš baj, since all other Slovak media were subject to “pan-Slavic,
clerical and Jewish-liberal” influences. This was an opportunity for the “healthy” elements in the Hlinka Guard, to whom the journal Náš boj, led by Ries, was supposed to provide spiritual guidance.\footnote{Bundesarchiv, Berlin, f. Persönlicher Stab Reichsführer-SS, NS [Nationalsozialismus] 19, file 3843, pp. 5–9.}

Although the founders of Náš boj proclaimed their intention to fight against clericalism, they were in fact quite reserved in this regard – and since they were Slovak nationalists, they did not adopt the anti-Slavic agenda of the Nazis. Instead, this most radical political journal was dominated by propaganda on the coexistence of fascist and nationalist regimes in the “New Europe” under the reign of Berlin. In addition, National Socialism was to once again discover its social roots when Nazi Germany presented itself as a model of achieving social reconciliation between workers and their former exploiters, who were supposedly united by a common national (racial) interest. The primary ideological connection between German and Slovak National Socialists lay, however, in radical antisemitism, which – as rendered by Náš boj – did not fall behind the German model in almost any aspect, with the exception of the anti-Slavic dimension. All aforementioned instances were brought together by the contributions and publications of Ries, who was a secret agent on the payroll of the Nazi intelligence services responsible for monitoring Slovak clericalism.\footnote{Ibid.} As a former priest and poet, he did not hesitate to misuse Christian holy days for antisemitic and war propaganda.\footnote{JAVOR, Ivan [Viliam Ries]: Požehnané Narodenie. In: Náš boj, Vol. 1 (1942/43), p. 158; IDEM: List Ježiškovi. In: Ibid., Vol. 2 (1943/44), p. 111; IDEM: Rozhovor s Bohom: Vianoce 1944. In: Ibid., Vol. 3 (1944/45), p. 101.}

Ries represents the extreme pole of the spectrum of Slovak “clerico-fascists” insofar as he moved from a Catholic social doctrine to racist eugenics.\footnote{On eugenics in the wartime Slovak state see HRUBOŇ, Anton: Creating the Paradigm of “New Nation”: Eugenic Thinking and the Culture of Racial-Hygiene in the Slovak State. In: Fascism, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2021), pp. 275–297.} In a series of articles on the founder of genetics, Gregor Mendel – not forgetting to point out that Mendel was a Catholic priest by profession – Ries emphasized the function of genetics not only for the individual but especially for the collective health of the nation and the race.\footnote{Ibid., p. 293.} He inferred that bad traits were inherited through race mixing, which he diagnosed as the cause of racial decay, “Asiatic” Russia as a deterrent example.\footnote{RIES-JAVOR, Viliam: K psychologii východného priestoru. In: Náš boj, Vol. 1 (1942/43), pp. 316–318.} He considered the contradiction between Europe’s West
and East to be no longer spiritual and civilizational in nature, as did Hanus, but as a constellation of irreconcilable racial struggles, where Christianity no longer had any function but the mediated one of victim invocation and secular martyrdom.

Conclusions

The ideas and activities of Jozef Tiso, Karol Körper, Ladislav Hanus and Viliam Ries correspond to the typology of “clerical fascists” and “brown” priests as suggested by Thomas Forstner and Roger Griffin, respectively. In comparison to the German-speaking “Hitler’s priests”, however, the Slovak context shows significant idiosyncrasies. Tendencies towards Nazi ideology were limited, even though politicized Slovak clerics occasionally used racist semantics. Their glorification of Hitler and Nazism resulted from the specific Slovak circumstances, in which political Catholicism and its “culture wars” against liberalism and modernity became an ideological base for secular nationalism. Still, both the transformation of Catholic social teachings and campaigns against Bolshevism show that fascistization had a faster and more extensive impact on Slovak Catholic nationalists than has been assumed even recently.137

Especially the spiritual guide of the Hlinka Guard, Karol Körper, and the Catholic anti-modernist, Ladislav Hanus, naively expected anti-Church Nazism to guarantee Catholic conservatism, although it soon became evident that the Italian model could not rule in Slovakia due to the Nazi aversion to it. However, Körper and Tiso were able to rejoice over the attack against the Soviet Union in 1941 as a new “crusade”. Despite the condemnation of Nazi racism and “paganism”, Hanus, possibly on behalf of the episcopate, also could not help but confuse re-Christianization efforts with Hitler’s war of annihilation. Of course, Catholic anti-modernism should not be mistaken for “clerical fascism”, yet its representatives were far from being prepared for the “fascist temptation”.

The attempts to achieve a “synthesis” of Catholicism and Nazism reveal the specific aspects of the historical context of the Nazi New Order as well. In the shadow of the Third Reich, both political Catholicism and Slovak nationalism were partially to be fascistized. Ideologically, this tendency is illustrated by Körper’s heroization of Christianity, and even more strikingly by Tiso’s Nazification of Catholic social teachings. Tiso eventually distorted its characteristics and turned them into their opposites: the reduction of the role of the state to totalitarian

137 Most recently, Thomas Lorman has acknowledged only the efforts of radicals within the ranks of the HSĽS who had tried to “place it on a path of fascism even though [they] never reached that destination”. (LORMAN, T.: The Making of the Slovak People’s Party, p. 188.)
statism; of humanity – if only towards their own co-religionists – to particular ultra-nationalism and racism; and of solidarism to a disciplining and exclusion on behalf of völkisch “work”. In light of the alleged centrality of corporatism for the fascist era in current research, it is surprising that Tiso’s ideological transformation remains to a large extent unexplored.\(^{138}\)

Christian Social heritage and anti-Bolshevism were relevant to the radicalization of other Slovak “clerico-fascists,” too. Ries in particular seemed to consider Nazism as a continuation or a derivative of social Catholicism and the Judeo-Bolshevik myth. Ries’s fascistization, however, occurred suddenly, without ideological ambitions comparable to Tiso’s, and in a much more radical manner than was the case with Körper. It is worth pondering, however, to what extent this was intended to weaken the suspicions of clericalism that were constantly fed by the Nazi authorities. Correspondingly, the fascistization of Tiso, Körper and Ries had different consequences.

The lives and fates of Körper and Ries crossed after the Second World War, as they were both sentenced for high treason and imprisoned in the same jail. Furthermore, they were again connected by religion, since Viliam Ries repented his sins and the new bishop annulled his excommunication and allowed him to serve the masses.\(^ {139}\) However, mutual mindsets, in particular a tendency to martyrdom, seem more important than overlapping biographies. Their downsides include the ignorance of the misery of the real victims, to which these “clerico-fascists” contributed with their propaganda and political activities. These tendencies were deepened due to the execution of Tiso for high treason and for war crimes and even more so due to the persecution of the Churches – including Hanus – by the communist regime established in Czechoslovakia after 1948. Communist campaigns against “clerico-fascism” thus discredited an important aspect of Slovak history with their ideological parochialism and biases.

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Abstract:
This paper deals with the fascistization of Catholic clergy on the eastern periphery of the Nazi “New Europe”, specifically within the Slovak State (1939–1945), a Nazi satellite in East Central Europe. In reference to recent historiographical debates, “clerico-fascism” serves here as a tool for an analysis of the ideology of the most prominent Slovak “clerico-fascist”, the president and Catholic priest Jozef Tiso (1887–1947). Specifically, it examines the transformation of social Catholicism into an instrument of fascist discipline. In addition, the article examines the fascistization of three other Slovak clerics: Karol Körper (1894–1969), Ladislav Hanus (1907–1994) and Viliam Ries (1906–1989). Focusing on individual agencies of both moderate and radical “clerico-fascists” on the basis of the regime of Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party during the Second World War, the article seeks an explanation for political and religious radicalization in East Central Europe during the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords:
Slovakia; Slovak State (1939–1945); Czechoslovakia; Catholicism; Catholic clergy; Fascism; “clerico-Fascism”; fascistization; Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party; Second World War; political radicalization; Jozef Tiso; Karol Körper; Ladislav Hanus; Viliam Ries

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