

Agrarian Problems in Slovakia, 1848-1918

An Historiographic Essay

by Mark STOLARIK *

Major literature concerning agrarian problems in nineteenth century Slovakia rarely appeared before 1948 and too often after that date it served to promote Marxist ideology. French, British and Magyar observers either buried nineteenth century Slovak history in the larger confines of Hungarian history or else they focused on political problems and downgraded others. Slovak historians, preoccupied with the survival of their nation in the Czechoslovak Republic between 1918 and 1948 concentrated on political history and left the agrarian story largely untold. The communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 finally brought social history to the forefront and with it Marxist interpretations that varied in intensity according to the orthodoxy or liberalism of the government in power.

One of the first monographs touching upon the agrarian crisis in nineteenth century Hungary (which included Slovakia) appeared in 1909. That year Gabriel Louis Jaray published *La Question sociale et le Socialisme en Hongrie*.¹ This French publicist, while concentrating on the rise of socialism in Hungary, noticed the peasant's dilemma. He observed that from 1848 to 1900 the peasants kept losing land while the nobles and church kept gaining it. He proclaimed the agricultural crisis to be the most important problem in the Kingdom. Jaray, however, did not follow up his keen observation. He devoted only one-third of his book to the agrarian problem and the rest to the more peripheral issue of socialism in Hungary's infant industries. He did not differentiate between the various nationalities of Hungary. He also accepted the erroneous aristocratic propaganda that Law IX of 1848, which abolished serfdom in the Kingdom, gave the peasants all the land that they had worked before. The nobles supposedly did not benefit from this law. Finally, he failed to perceive the close link between social and nationality problems in Hungary.

The British historian R.W. Seton-Watson, recognized the problems that nationalism raised in Central Europe, but this kept him from adequately treating the agrarian question. In 1908 he published *Racial Problems in Hungary*, a book that described the oppression of Hungary's minorities by the ruling Magyars.² He concentrated on the attempt of the

* Department of History, Cleveland State University.

¹ Paris, 1909.

² London, 1908.

Magyars to assimilate the Slovaks and, hence, only touched on agrarian issues. In a later work entitled *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks*, Seton-Watson again concentrated on politics because he feared for the future of the Czechoslovak Republic.³ Writing in the midst of World War II and disappointed with the Slovaks because they had joined the Germans in destroying the first Czechoslovak Republic, Seton-Watson dedicated his book to “the Czech people, loyal and steadfast.” He again analysed chiefly the political factors that had driven these two nations apart and only touched on the agrarian problem in Slovakia.

C.A. Macartney, another British historian of Central Europe, concerned himself with agrarian issues but only in a general way and almost exclusively with the Magyars. In his *Hungary*, published in 1934, he devoted one chapter to the ever-worsening plight of the peasants from the 1514 revolt to the abolition of serfdom in 1848.⁴ However, besides curiously referring to certain Slavic peasants as “primeval earth worshippers,” to German peasants as “warm and sunny” and to the Magyars as “wild, oriental,” he added little to the story of social problems in Hungary. He pointed out that the land-hungry peasants took their revenge upon the landlords in 1918 when revolution swept the country. However, the specter of Béla Kun’s communism frightened the peasants into an uneasy alliance with the nobles and land-reform in post-war years remained only a dream. Macartney purposely ignored the non-Magyar peasants in this book and thus limited its usefulness.

In his recent *Habsburg Empire, 1790-1918*, Macartney made up for this deficiency but his linguistic limitations prevented him from treating each nationality adequately.⁵ Although he spoke of Slovak peasants at scattered points throughout the book, Macartney failed to consult any of the latest Slovak Marxist works on the subject. Indeed, he scoffed at such “tribal history.”

Magyar historians also dealt with the agrarian problem in Hungary before 1918 but they either failed to differentiate between the nationalities or else acted as apologists for the ruling aristocracy. Géza Schütz, in his *La Situation matérielle des classes laborieuses en Hongrie avant la guerre, 1890-1913*, published between the wars, focused on the entire Kingdom.⁶ Using chiefly census reports he found that in this period a peasant family of four earned only 446 crowns a year while it needed 405 to buy the bare necessities. The family of four working in industry fared even worse — it earned 1,070 crowns a year but needed 1,285 to support itself. Schütz attributed these miserable conditions to the incomplete abolition of serf-

³ London, 1943.

⁴ London, 1934.

⁵ New York, 1969.

⁶ Geneva, 1930.

dom in 1848 and to the Hungarian government's unconcern for the lot of the worker. Contract labour, Schütz continued, replaced the legal "robot" of serfdom and by 1900 some peasants worked more days on noble land than had their forefathers. The central government only regulated such "new serfdom," it did nothing to prevent it. Emigration provided the only escape from Hungary's oppression of the peasants and workers, Schütz concluded. Had he also considered whether or not the various nationalities fared differently under these conditions, his contribution would have increased immeasurably.

László Valkó, in "Hungary's Agrarian Policy Before the War," presented a far less scholarly treatment.⁷ Writing at the height of Hungary's conservative inter-war period, he actually defended the nobles and their privileges. Incredibly he asserted that the nobles had voluntarily and willingly renounced their privileges and had recognized the peasants as equals in 1848. Only the "foreign" system of "entail," Valkó added, kept the inequalities alive in the Kingdom. He admitted the need for land reform in Hungary but cautioned against "revolution" because it did not produce the "desired results." Although the work of Schütz and Valkó differed greatly in value, both ignored the non-Magyar nationalities and, hence, for adequate treatment of the Slovaks one has to depend on Slovak-language sources.

Surprisingly enough, Slovak histories of the agrarian problem before 1918 are rare. A pioneer and, indeed, almost the only historian of agrarian problems in Slovakia before this date was Stefan Janšák. This remarkable Slovak noble (most such nobles were Magyarized by 1914), who showed great sympathy for the peasants in his *Slovensko v dobe uhorského feudalizmu* (Slovakia in the Era of Hungarian Feudalism),⁸ summarized his views for Western readers in an article entitled "The Land Question in Slovakia."⁹ Calling for land reform in post-war Czechoslovakia, Janšák traced the agrarian problem back to 1526 when the Turks occupied all of Hungary except Slovakia. Refugee Magyar nobles settled the unoccupied region and lived off the toil of the serfs. Since the latter had to pay taxes on their land and the nobles did not, the nobles tried to seize as much serf land as possible. This action reduced the amount of state revenue destined for Vienna and increased the amount going into the coffers of the nobility from non-taxable, non-serf land. To halt this theft of serf land and, hence, imperial revenue, Maria Theresa standardized serf holdings in 1778. It was largely a dead letter for already 75,000 noble families held 97 per cent of all the cultivated land in Hungary. Janšák added that the 1848 revolution, while freeing the serf, robbed him economically. The peasants (former

⁷ *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 1 (1936): 346-55.

⁸ Bratislava, 1932.

⁹ *Slavonic Review*, 8 (1929): 612-26.

serfs) received only the urbarial lands standardized by Maria Theresa and not the total land that they had worked. Thus they received only three to eleven per cent (depending on the region) of all cultivated land in Slovakia. Two-thirds of the serfs were made landless by their "emancipation" in 1848.

Between Janšák's history and Marxist works in the 1950's there stands a great gulf. Slovak historians between 1918 and 1948 generally concentrated on political history. The new Czechoslovak state and the relations of the Czechs with the Slovaks preoccupied their efforts. Hence, František Hrušovský, in his *Slovenské dejiny (Slovak History)*¹⁰ and František Bokes, in *Dejiny Slovákov a Slovenska od najstarších čias po oslobodenie (A History of the Slovaks and Slovakia from Earliest Times to the Liberation)*¹¹ concentrated almost exclusively on political history and had little to say about agrarian problems.

After the 1948 communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, national histories came into disfavor and social history blossomed. Collectivization of land demanded a Marxist explanation and serious social and economic histories, dealing with the agrarian problem in nineteenth century Slovakia, appeared for the first time.

Endre Arató, a Magyar historian, took the initial step with an article entitled "K hospodárskym dejinám Slovenska od r. 1849 do 1900" (Economic History of Slovakia from 1849 to 1900).¹² Writing in *Historický časopis*, official organ of the newly-established Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Arató presented a standard Marxist interpretation that reflected the Stalinist régime then in power in Czechoslovakia. The first section of the article dealt with the inability of the Slovak bourgeoisie to establish a native industry. Austrian, Magyar and Jewish capital, he declared, found its way only into extractive industries and any heavy goods produced in Slovakia were exported. In addition, the small group of Slovak entrepreneurs also happened to be that nation's political leaders and the ruling Magyars seized upon this fact to denounce them as "Pan-Slavs" and to over-tax them, revoke their business licenses and harrass them with legal proceedings.

In the second part Arató described the agrarian problem and its relation to emigration. He blamed the drop in wheat prices of 1880 on cheap American grain and on the "feudal" exploitation of the land in Hungary, although he did not elaborate on these issues. He pointed out that owners of large estates introduced new methods of farming which called for more enclosures, more machines, fewer field-hands and lower wages. Only large

¹⁰ Turčianský Svätý Martin, 1939.

¹¹ Bratislava, 1946.

¹² *Historický časopis*, 1 (1953): 431-90.

landholders and "kulaks" (a term he borrowed from Soviet historians) could borrow money from banks for the purchase of more land. Small landholders — the vast majority of the peasants — could no longer make a living on their plots and, hence, they began to look for work elsewhere, either on the large estates of the lowlands or, more often, in America where wages were much higher than in Hungary. Having made a good start in describing the economic plight of nineteenth century Slovaks, Arató then weakened his article with an irrational conclusion. He accused Slovak bourgeois leaders, who had tried to help peasants by forming co-operatives, of fearing, exploiting and oppressing them. This contradicted an earlier statement of his that the Slovak bourgeoisie could not function viably because of Magyar oppression.

Július Mésároš, a Slovak historian, presented a far more sophisticated treatment of the peasant dilemma in his *Roľnícka a národnostná otázka na Slovensku, 1848-1900* (*The Agrarian and National Question in Slovakia, 1848-1900*), published a few years later.¹³ Dealing exclusively with agrarian and national problems, he declared the 1848 "bourgeois" revolution was incomplete because it forced the abolition of "feudalism" as a reform and not as a revolutionary measure. Thus, "feudal" holdovers kept the peasants impoverished, the bourgeoisie impotent and the Magyar nobility in complete control of the country. Mésároš introduced to Slovak historiography the theory that the Slovak bourgeoisie fought the Magyars in the wrong way. He pointed out that Ludovít Štúr and other middle-class leaders in 1848 acted correctly in seeking the total abolition of "feudalism" and the equitable division of land among the peasants. After Štúr's death, however, the bourgeoisie abandoned this truly revolutionary program, ignored the plight of the peasants and simply demanded national rights. Without broad peasant support this program failed. Only the socialists, Mésároš added, had a truly revolutionary and democratic plan but they had not the strength to carry it out in the nineteenth century.

Mésároš' thesis raised some very important points but it neglected others. Following Marxist teaching, he defined everything before 1848 as "feudal" and everything after as "capitalist." He did not appreciate the distinction between feudalism and manorialism and the fact that the former had been in various stages of disintegration in Hungary long before 1848. He also failed to notice that the socialists in Hungary in the nineteenth century were chiefly Magyars or Jews and included but few Slovaks.

Zoltán Sárközi, a Magyar historian in 1964, elaborated one aspect of the agrarian problem: the landless agricultural labourer. In his "Príspevok k dejinám slovenských poľnohospodarských sezónnych robotníkov, 1848-1914" (*Contributions to the History of Slovak Seasonal*

¹³ Bratislava, 1959.

Agricultural Labourers, 1848-1914), Sárközi pointed out that after 1848 thousands of Slovaks migrated yearly to the Magyar lowlands and sought work on the estates of the aristocrats.¹⁴ Initially they suffered great hardships from the low pay and by 1891 they and their Magyar compatriots staged a great strike. Instead of getting relief these agricultural proletarians found the central government passing legislation against a repetition of such strikes. By 1898 every agricultural labourer in Hungary had to sign a yearly contract with his employer and he could not break it upon pain of prosecution. Rejecting this "new serfdom," many peasants now decided to seek work in America.

The problem of emigration and its consequences attracted specialists in the new study of historical demography. Ján Svetoň in 1956 decided to estimate, in his "Slovenské vystaĥovalectvo v období uhorského kapitalizmu" (Slovak Emigration in the Era of Hungarian Capitalism), the number of Slovaks who emigrated between 1869 and 1910.¹⁵ Since Hungarian emigration statistics began only in 1899, he arrived at his estimate that 600,000 Slovaks left by comparing the population increase with the number of births versus deaths. The mass exodus, Svetoň concluded, greatly deformed the remaining population of 2,000,000 in Slovakia. First of all, Slovakia's share of the population of Hungary dropped from 18.1% to 15.9% between 1869 and 1910. Since most of those leaving initially were men aged fifteen to fifty-nine, Slovakia had a larger proportion of old men, single women and widows than the rest of Hungary. Women and children took the places of the men in the fields who had left for America.

Ján Hanzlík, another demographer, followed Svetoň's lead and probed even more deeply into the causes and effects of emigration. In his "Slovenské vystaĥovalectvo na prahu imperialismu" (Slovak Emigration on the Threshold of Imperialism), he refined Svetoň's methodology by using Hungarian village census returns, and found that between 1899 and 1913 Slovakia lost 7.5% of her overall population gain because of emigration.¹⁶ He concluded rather naively that greedy capitalists in Hungary caused this emigration by refusing to build industry in the impoverished districts of Slovakia.

In a later article entitled "Vývoj obyvateľstva na Slovensku v období 1869-1961" (Slovak Population Development, 1869-1961), published on the eve of the Dubček era, Hanzlík expanded his thesis.¹⁷ He completed a detailed survey of all census returns of Slovakia from 1715 to 1961 and found that from 1851 to 1961 Slovakia lost half her natural population in-

¹⁴ *Historický časopis*, 12 (1964): 75-103.

¹⁵ *Ekonomický časopis*, 4 (1956): 171-91.

¹⁶ *Geografický časopis*, 13 (1961): 195-211.

¹⁷ *Geografický časopis*, 19 (1967): 3-28 plus map.

crease due to emigration. He painstakingly plotted his findings on an impressively large-scale map to show precisely which districts (and these run in the hundreds) lost the most people and which lost the least. For the loss of population to 1918 he blamed the Magyars but for the loss since 1918 he blamed the Czech-dominated government in Prague. Hanzlík accused the Czechs of having used Slovakia as an agricultural colony from 1918 to 1961 even though the hilly nature of the country did not lend itself to agriculture. Even under the socialist banner from 1948 to 1961, the Czechs retarded Slovakia's industrial growth and preferred to have her supply 400,000 people to work the factories of the Czech lands. Hanzlík demanded that the Czechs halt this economic imperialism immediately and build more factories in Slovakia.

By 1970, however, Hanzlík had changed his tune. In his "Začiatky vystahovalectva zo Slovenska do USA a jeho priebeh až do roku 1918, jeho príčiny a následky" (The Beginnings of Slovak Emigration to the United States, Its Causes and Consequences to 1918), Hanzlík repeated his previous findings and summarized the work of other historians of emigration but he no longer accused the Czechs of any wrong-doing.¹⁸ The return of Czechoslovakia to Marxist orthodoxy following the Russian invasion of 1968 probably prevented Hanzlík from writing such "bourgeois nationalist" heresy.

Even though Slovak scholars continue to embellish their works with Marxist ideology, there are indications that this practice may be downplayed in the future. A recent article by Vladimír Zuberec entitled "Formovanie slovenského agrarného hnutia v rokoch 1900-1918" (The Formation of the Slovak Agrarian Movement in 1900-1918) seems to point in this direction.¹⁹ In discussing the rise of the Agrarian Party in Slovakia before 1918, Zuberec stressed the cooperation between certain middle-class writers like Milan Hodža and rich organizers of co-operatives such as Pavol Blaho who returned to the peasantry as a base for political action. Zuberec omitted pejorative terms such as "kulaks" when referring to rich peasants, he even mentioned Andrej Hlinka and Karol Sidor, two "non-persons" in Marxist historiography of the last twenty years and he came to two startling conclusions. First of all, he saw so much promise and strength in the co-operative movement organized by Blaho that he seriously doubted that the Magyars could have assimilated the Slovaks as Seton-Watson and Macartney always believed. Secondly, he labelled the Agrarian Party as definitely "Czechoslovak" because it united with the Czech Agrarian Party in calling for independence in 1917 and thereafter it remained under Czech domination. Should someone treat Andrej Hlinka's

¹⁸ in *Začiatky českej a slovenskej emigrácie do USA (The Beginnings of Czech and Slovak Emigration to the U.S.A.)*, ed. by Josef POLIŠENSKÝ (Bratislava: 1970): 49-96.

¹⁹ *Historický časopis*, 20 (1972): 205-46.

People's Party in the same objective fashion in the future, Slovak historiography will have taken a turn for the better with social and political history finally complementing one another.

Not only did social history and demography flourish in Slovakia after 1948 but regional studies also came into their own. Ladislav Tajták established himself as an authority on emigration from eastern Slovakia by publishing an article entitled "Východoslovenské vysťahovalectvo do prvej svetovej vojny" (Eastern Slovak Emigration to the First World War) in the newly-established journal of eastern Slovak studies — *Nové obzory*.²⁰ Focusing on the four counties of Sáriš, Spiš, Abov and Zemplín, Tajták located the area of initial emigration and outlined its causes. He found that landless cotters from the Topľa river valley in Sáriš, desperate for work, emigrated to America in the early 1870's and began the massive emigration from this area. Eastern Slovakia, he added, led all other regions in emigration with 50% of all the people leaving between 1881 and 1910. Most of them had little or no land, most were in debt and America seemed the only avenue of escape.

Since Tajták wrote this article in 1961, just as Czechoslovakia adopted a new Constitution featuring political centralism and Marxist orthodoxy, it suffered from too much ideology. Bowing to the Party line, he stressed the tiny socialist movement among American Slovaks and ignored the much larger fraternal-benefit societies. He declared, without a shred of evidence, that many American Slovaks returned home "avowed socialists." He then digressed to the Seventh Congress of the Second International held in Stuttgart in 1907 which proclaimed emigration a "good thing" because it supposedly broke down national barriers and promoted "worker's solidarity" and he naturally declared that the capitalist Czechoslovak Republic did not solve the problem of emigration — socialism did. Thus, misdirected Marxist ideology again weakened a fine article.

Tajták's work revealed a new interest among Slovak historians in regional studies and, as a result, they began to hold regional conferences. One such meeting took place in Košice in 1962 and focused exclusively on eastern Slovakia. Sponsored by the Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, this conference attracted the best minds from all over the country. It initially resulted in a compendium of articles which included works by Ján Hanzlík and Július Mésároš. Hanzlík, in his "Vysťahovalectvo z východného Slovenska od druhej polovici 19. storočia do roku 1918" (Emigration from Eastern Slovakia from the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century to 1918), applied his demographic talents to analysing the causes and consequences of emigration and again blamed the

²⁰ *Nové obzory*, 3 (1961): 221-47.

problem on lack of industry in eastern Slovakia.²¹ Mésároš, in his "Rolnícka otázka na východnom Slovensku v 19. storočí" (The Agrarian Question in Eastern Slovakia in the Nineteenth Century), focused on the counties of Spiš and Abov and elaborated on his former charges that the 1848 abolition of serfdom was incomplete.²² One example of the "feudal holdovers" in these two counties was the existence of "free villages" which collectively still owned serfs and which were unaffected by the 1848 abolition of serfdom. Mésároš called for more intensive regional studies in the future to clear up the whole story of social conditions in nineteenth century Slovakia.

Slovak historiography thus, has come a long way in the last half-century. Early histories of the peasantry, largely written by Westerners, either ignored the Slovaks as independent entities or else concentrated excessively on their political problems. Slovak historians themselves largely ignored their own social history between 1918 and 1948 because the political fate of the Slovak nation in the Czechoslovak Republic preoccupied them.

After the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, social history blossomed but at the expense of political history. Encumbered at first with frequently inappropriate premises, Slovak historians gradually attained a high degree of sophistication in writing their social history, including the use of demography and regional studies. The intensity of Marxist interpretations in historical articles seems to have been directly proportional to the intensity of the Marxist ideology of the régime in power. Hopefully future works of social history will be as free from political ideology as possible.

Slovak historians should also broaden their use of sources. Although they have made good use of county and city archives, they have virtually ignored church archives. These materials have been available to scholars since the state seized them in 1952. Roman Catholic archives often predate secular ones and contain excellent, if yet uncatalogued, reports of the activities of parishioners of virtually every village and city of Slovakia since the early sixteenth century. Archdeacons, who had the task of reporting on conditions in villages in their yearly inspection visits, often prepared excellent analyses of the levels of education, of religiosity, of wealth and enterprise of villagers in their dioceses. Thus far no historian have made use of these archives. Indeed, no historian has yet written about the role of the churches in the social structure of Slovakia, of their opposition to or support for the revolution of 1848 and of their stand on

²¹ in *Príspevky k dejinám východného Slovenska* (Contributions to the History of Eastern Slovakia), ed. by Ludovít HOLOŤK (Bratislava: 1964): 220-32.

²² In *ibid.*, 177-93.

the agrarian and nationality questions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although Slovaks have begun to study the urbanization and emigration of their countrymen in the nineteenth century, they have not yet studied the influence of returning emigrés from America. Nor have they yet studied how "American" Slovaks, who returned, affected the economic and political standing of their countrymen during the most intense period of Magyarization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historians have also yet to demonstrate how these returning emigrés resettled at home, how much land they bought and how they prospered.

Finally, when the regional studies approach completion, historians will have to compare the situation of the Slovaks to other nationalities in Hungary and in Europe. The relative wealth, levels of industry, kinds of jobs, social stratification and education of the Slovaks will have to be compared with the other ethnic groups in Hungary and Europe. Only with such a composite picture will the agrarian history of Slovakia at length acquire real meaning.