

Slovak National Narrative and Hungarian National Narrative as a Part of the Slovak- Hungarian Socio-political Discourse

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Since the early modern age, European historiography has been developing in an atmosphere of conflict among national narratives, Euro centrism, and universalism.¹ In modern times, when European thinking was controlled by nationalism, the national narrative began to prevail in historical thinking and historical works.

The French Revolution of 1789 meant a significant turn not only in European political history, but also in the history of culture and thinking. The Enlightenment was replaced by Romanticism, being basically a negation of the Enlightenment and Rationalism in many fundamental aspects. Concurrently, a fight for the seizure of control of the world, at first a European and subsequently an extra-European one, began through the Napoleonic wars. Colonial expansion drew attention again to extra-European civilisations, nonetheless, the world of thoughts was ruled, on the one hand, by Euro centrism (Europe was conquering the world) and on the other hand, by nationalism (the idea of the nation state).

¹ More on the topic in: Dušan Kováč: *O historiografii a spoločnosti*, Bratislava 2010, pp. 17 – 30.

It was in this time that the concept of the nation as a decisive power of historical development occurred. Surprisingly, Herder and Hegel came to it almost at the same time. Nations pass the baton in history, and since a teleological concept about the historical process dominated, every new nation picking up the baton brought humankind to a higher level of development. Herder² was openly writing about the future of the Slavs, however Slovak Hegelians, especially Ľudovít Štúr, over-interpreted Hegel's ideas³ and thus felt entitled and ready to pick up the baton.

Thus, the nineteenth century became the century of “national narrative” writing. Not only individuals, but whole national historiographies commenced to concentrate on the history of the “nation state.” As a paradox, the professionalization of historiography significantly contributed to the strengthening of the position of national history research and its implementation. Because professionalization required basic archival research, a great amount of archival materials concerning individual national histories were discovered. But this method could not be used for a world, universal history. The extensive research and publishing of medieval sources were used as a basis for national history writing. Supported due to professional and, without a doubt, political interest, i.e. promotion of the German political unity, German historiography had priority and, in a certain sense, dominance. Publication of the monumental edition of medieval sources, *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, widely used not only by German historians even today, began in 1819. The objective of the edition was the formation of a German national identity through a critical edition of medieval sources, which represented a novelty in European conditions of that time. A critical approach and extensive apparatus provided this utilitarian ideological, and at the same time political objective, with a scientific background. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, i.e. the First Empire, was characterised by German

2 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784-91 (4 Teile)

3 G.W.F. Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. 1830/31.

history as a German “nation state”. Its dissolution, representing a decline from this perspective, called for modern restoration, what German liberals understood as a task they should perform for the sake of history. In Prussia, fighting against Austria for dominance in the German alliance, the University of Berlin, founded in 1810, established historiography as an academic discipline. Declaring from the beginning that the teaching of history required combination with research, historiography served only to support national goals. During the time that Romanticism was reaching its peak, and the period of the “spring of nations” no one considered historiography inappropriate or contrary to scientific principles. Professional critical historiography desired to be distinguished from historical fiction and imaginative literature written by amateurs and writers. It is vital to say that this attempt was not quite successful until the end of the nineteenth century. The French, English, and subsequently other nations started to follow the Germans in the proceeding and publishing of medieval documents concerning national history. An unfinished Slovak collection of historical materials and documents can be viewed also as another belated manifestation of this initiative.

It was only natural that this tendency in historiography affected the whole of central European historiography – that is historiography during the Habsburg Monarchy, as well. However, while German historiography confirmed the “German national statehood” and supported the concept of a common history, i.e. a common German national narrative in the German cultural area, national narratives of nations in the Habsburg Monarchy did not follow the existing state framework. Quite the contrary, they violated it.

Although an attempt to form an Austrian state (national) history spanning from the times of the Enlightenment to the twentieth century occurred in the German-Austrian area, those taking place thanks to the initiative and under the patronage of a political power during either the Metternich's or Bach's absolutism were remarkable. In the latter case, it resulted in the foundation of the Austrian Institute of Historical Research in 1854. The history of this institution can be

used for illustrative description of how difficult it was to harmonise professional historiography, based on a critical examination of sources, with the political directives which followed (and still do so in our area) the instrumentalisation and mythologisation of history.⁴ Attempts to form a “Habsburg” state history applying the principle of the national narrative were not successful. Nonetheless, national narratives based on the historical development of individual ethnic groups broke through. The Slovak and Hungarian national narratives represented such national stories.

The Slovak national narrative began to form as early as the first half of the eighteenth century, which might be surprising to someone. After the termination of uprisings in the Kingdom of Hungary, and the expulsion of Turks from the kingdom, King Charles III decided after a long period to summon the Diet of Hungary. On this occasion, the Hungarian lawyer and Trnava University professor, Mihály Bencsik, published a document in which he withheld the right of representatives of the city of Trenčín to participate in the diet, explaining that citizens of Trenčín were descendants of the conquered Svätopluk's people and could not be rightful citizens of the country. Although, particularly the participation of representatives of Trenčín was mentioned, this reasoning concerned all ethnic Slovaks. The priest from Dubnica, Ján Baltazár Magin, reacted to this document through a relatively long and ironic response titled “*Trne, čiže obrana... (Thorns or Defence...)*.”⁵ Magin refuted Bencsik's

4 Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg, Vaterländisches Gemeingefühl und nationale Charaktere. Die kaiserliche Regierung im Neoabsolutismus und die Erfindung einer österreichischen Nationalgeschichte, in: Nationalgeschichte als Artefakt. Zum Paradigma “Nationalstaat” in den Historiographien Deutschlands, Italiens und Österreichs Herausgegeben von Hans Peter Hye, Brigitte Mazol, Jan Paul Niederkorn. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2009, pp. 133-178.

5 Ján Baltazár Magin, Murices...sive apologia pro inclyto comitatu trenchiniensi. 1723 (In fact, the book was published no sooner than 1728 and responded to Mihaly Bencsik's document, *Novissime diaeta*, from 1721.)

reasoning, questioned it from the perspective of law and supported his defence also with Roman law. According to Magin, the Romans gradually granted Roman civil rights to citizens of remote provinces, which he believed to be the only proper means of keeping peace in the empire. However, Magin continued in his defence and used historical reasoning as well. Contrary to Roman provinces, the ethnic Slovaks, that is the “descendants of the conquered Svätopluk's people” are the original inhabitants of the country who had never been conquered and who had been equal inhabitants of the Hungarian multi-ethnic state from the beginning. Thus, Magin included historical reasoning, which finally became a controversial issue of the Slovak and Hungarian national narratives, in the political discourse.

The Bencsik-Magin polemic represented a typical nationalistic polemic, a dispute regarding who arrived earlier in the Carpathian Basin and what rights the ethnic groups should have in the so-called nation state. It was a nationalistic conflict taking place during the pre-nationalistic period. It can also be termed a proto-nationalistic conflict, since the reasoning applied in the dispute from the parties involved was the typical of nationalism and its dominant concept, the “nation state.” However, this event can be easily explained by pointing to the fact that ethnic conflicts sporadically occurred in the multi-ethnic state even in the Middle Ages.

In Magin's – or the Slovak reasoning – there emerged an element which became dominant in his work for a long time: the defence, i.e. apologia of the Slovaks. A significant role in this apologia was played by history and especially the interpretation of history. The reasoning included an element of the old Slovak historicity: they inhabited the Carpathian Basin before the Hungarians and hospitably accepted the Hungarians as new inhabitants of the region. So, it was this historical reasoning which substantially contradicted the conquest theory, spread in the Hungarian ethnic environment from which Bencsik came from. The Magin apologia was followed by other apologies by Slovaks throughout the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well. They always included historical reasoning, and

therefore the apologia became one of the main characteristic features of the formation of Slovak national historiography. This feature is found even in the academic works of such Slovak historiographers as Fraňo Vít'azoslav Sasinek and Július Botto.

After the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, a new concept of a single Czechoslovak nation appeared in the formation of the Slovak national narrative. During World War I, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Milan Rastislav Štefánik,⁶ creators of the Czecho-Slovak state, worked with this concept within the resistance movement. In that period, the concept of a united Czechoslovak nation had a pragmatic objective: it served as reasoning for Triple Entente politicians persuading them to agree with the division of Austria-Hungary and the formation of a Czecho-Slovak state. Masaryk's and Štefánik's reasoning also included historical references. In fact, it should not have been the formation of a new state, but the restoration of a state which had existed in the past and been destroyed by the Hungarian invasion. The historical common state of the Czechs and Slovaks represented the Great Moravian Empire. Thus, the Czechoslovak state should have been the restored state of the Czechoslovak nation and its history should have represented the Czechoslovak national narrative. The pragmatic political reasoning turned into a new historical concept.

Owing to the fact that during the time of the existence of the first Czechoslovak Republic many historical documents concerning Slovak history had yet to be discovered, and Slovak historiography lacked a professional basis, a new "national narrative" could only exist if known facts from Slovak history were added to the Czech national

6 The memorandum of October, 1914 written by R.W. Seton-Watson on the grounds of talks with Masaryk. The original document in: National Archives, London (Public Record Office) hereinafter as NAL, Foreign Office, hereinafter as FO, 371/1900, pp. 115-124; Masarykovo memorandum Independent Bohemia z apríla 1915. The original document in: NAL, FO 371, 2241, p. 97 – 103; Štefánikovo memorandum z apríla 1916: Kováč. D. ed., Štefánikovo talianske memorandum z apríla 1916, in: Historický časopis 48, 2000, No.3, pp. 517 – 533.

narrative. A gradual professionalization of Slovak historiography, at first through Comenius University, and later also on the basis of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and other institutions, also included research into historical sources and their gradual publishing. Thus, it emerged that Slovak history shared plenty of common phases and elements with Czech history. However, they have different dynamics and internal periodization in many historical periods: for example, the period of the Hussite revolution and Hussite wars, and then the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia, terminating the war in 1648 although the conflict between the Hungarian nobility (cooperating with the Turks) and the House of Habsburg continued in the Kingdom of Hungary until the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Despite the publication of a common synthesis of Czechoslovak history,⁷ the Slovak national narrative, also processed in a synthetic academic History of Slovakia,⁸ was simultaneously under formation. In this way, the Slovak national narrative had several common as well as controversial elements with the Hungarian national narrative, since Slovak history before 1918 could not be fully understood or explained without the Hungarian historical framework.

Contrary to the Slovak national narrative, the Hungarian national narrative became the subject of professional interest among historiographers working at universities in the nineteenth century, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was established as early as 1825. In this way, the Hungarian national narrative identified with the Hungarian state interpreted as the national state of the Magyars. Such interpretation of Hungarian history resembled the concepts of histories of other European nations: the Germans, Czechs, Poles, and others, whose concepts understood the “nation states” in the Middle

7 Přehled československých dějin. Díl I. Do roku 1848, Praha 1960; Díl II. svazek 1. 1848 – 1900, svazek 2. 1900-1918, Praha 1960; Díl III. 1918-1945, Praha 1960; Přehled dějin Československa I/1 [do r. 1526], Praha 1980.

8 Dejiny Slovenska I. Od najstarších čias do roku 1848, Bratislava 1961; Dejiny Slovenska II. 1848 – 1900, Bratislava 1968; Dejiny Slovenska I – VI., Bratislava 1985 – 1992.

Ages as the historical predecessors of modern states. In the case of the Poles, this concept worked as a motivator for the restoration of the Polish state.

The Hungarian national narrative was grounded in so-called double land-taking, and the leader of the Huns, Attila, was considered a predecessor or a kind of John the Baptist of the Hungarian national state. After the establishment of the Kingdom of Hungary, this state had already been unequivocally interpreted as the Magyar national state, and the history of the Magyars had been identified with the history of the Kingdom of Hungary. Modern syntheses accepted the fact that the Kingdom of Hungary also included other ethnic groups, but denied them the attributes of a nation and defined them only as nationality (*nemzetiség*). This concept represented a basis also for the extensive synthetic history of the Kingdom of Hungary from the 1970s and 1980s.⁹ Although one can find two approaches within Hungarian historiography – one based on the concept of a multi-ethnic national state, and the other advancing the concept of a single ethnic cultural nation¹⁰ – this fact affected the national master narrative only peripherally. Despite the fact that the latest Hungarian historiography has overcome this historical stereotype in several works, the concept of the identification of the history of the Kingdom of Hungary with the Magyar national narrative has remained dominant in the Hungarian national consciousness.

And it is this issue that has caused conflict between the Slovak national narrative and the Hungarian national narrative, in spite of the fact that both nations had lived together within the common Hungarian state for centuries. The Slovak and Hungarian national narrative thus became one of the main topics, or basically the dominant topic of the Slovak - Hungarian discourse. In studying the gradual formation of these two national narratives, one can easily discover that each national narrative has since its beginnings

9 Magyarország története tíz kötetben, Budapest 1974 - 1988

10 Jenő Szűcs, *Nation und Geschichte*, Köln-Wien, 1981.

already become a part of the formation of a national ideology and national agitation. Although the national narratives were created as professional history concepts, they have participated in the formation of national ideology, as the Bencsik-Magin polemics prove, since at least the proto-nationalistic period. The formation of modern nations which took place in central Europe throughout the nineteenth century and continued intensively in the following century required historical reasoning from historiography. However, this was not something unusual in Europe, since the entirety of European historiography was grounded on the nation formation process. The conflicting nature of the Slovak and Hungarian discourse is intensified by a different interpretation of the same “state narrative.”

Not being by far only of a professional character, the Slovak and Hungarian discourse includes several topics which might be viewed as dominant. The topic of the beginning represents the first of these. Where do we come from, what was “our beginning” like? These were and are questions which might seem remote at first sight, but played a significant role within the discussion concerning the history of the twentieth century. Although it may seem absurd, even today one encounters the proposition that the legitimacy of national existence depends on the fact of who first settled in the Carpathian Basin. The topic of the beginning has always concerned two aspects: the beginning of settlement and the beginning of the state. While the state, either in the form of the old kingdom of Árpád or the one of St. Stephen, is vital for Hungarian historiography, Slovak historiography stresses especially the continuity of settlement from the first arrival of the Slavs to the Carpathian Basin in the fifth century. Although searching for “old Slovaks” in the Great Moravian Empire and attempts to “crown” Svätopluk the king of the old Slovaks represent the contemporary discourse among Slovaks, it is rather a subject of mythologizing the national narrative by supporters of King Svätopluk. Nonetheless, historical myths usually resonate more intensively in society than professional historiography thinks.

The nation and class struggle is a remarkable topic of discourse

which, however, nowadays does not draw the attention of either the professional community or the public. During the time when Hungarian and Slovak historiographies were advancing a so-called Marxist-Leninist view, the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Slovak Soviet Republic in 1919 were frequently discussed topics. In spite of the fact that it represented one of many attempts at trying to save the integrity of the Kingdom of Hungary under the pretext of world revolution, the proposition that the Slovak Soviet Republic was the first socialist revolution in the territory of Czechoslovakia started to be advanced within Slovak historiography based on the intervention of state authorities. This tendency was equally supported also by Hungarian historiography, again on the grounds of the command of representatives of the communist power. Nonetheless, these discussions gradually ceased to exist after the 1980s, as both parties came to the idea that this ideological concept could not be substantiated through basic historical evidence.

The state, nation and, people embodies a significant and up-to-date topic of discourse. The Hungarian national narrative is unequivocally based on the Hungarian state, thus the national narrative is identified with that of the state. Nevertheless, the state framework, created after 1526 by the formation of the Habsburg Monarchy, is irrelevant to the national narrative. Although the Vienna policy is a topic that broader historiography is dealing with, Hungarian historiography views it as an “external” topic. In fact, the state, nation, and people within this historical concept become a single, almost homogeneous, whole. Certain differences showed more in Hungarian society, where, in spite of harsh criticism of Protestants in the historiography, the Catholic elite frequently took the side of the House of Habsburg.¹¹ Slovak historiography accepted the Hungarian state framework as a space from within which the Slovak

11 Árpád v. Klimó, *Nation, Konfession, Geschichte: Zur nationalen Geschichtskultur Ungarns im europäischen Kontext (1860-1948)*, München 2003.

national narrative was taking place from the eleventh century to 1918. However, it considered the state to be only the space, not the subject of historical development. In a certain sense, the Habsburg Monarchy as a whole also represented a framework for Slovak history. Thus, the Slovak elite led by Ľudovít Štúr and Jozef Miloslav Hurban during the revolution of 1848-1849 could stand up against the Hungarian revolution and support Vienna. Even in this case, political concepts dominated the historical narrative and gave it their own, nationalistic dimension. Until the first half of the nineteenth century when the first political programmes started to emerge in Slovak politics, no plan concerning the formation of a Slovak state can be found, only the concept of Slovak statehood. Until World War I, Slovak political programmes respected the Kingdom of Hungary as the state framework within which the Slovaks as an independent nation could have their cultural and linguistic autonomy.¹² Štúr followed Hegelian concepts identically to Lajos Kossuth; nonetheless, he developed Hegel's philosophy of history in the Slavic spirit. And this is where the crucial misunderstanding finally leading to a serious conflict commenced. And the situation did not change in the following decades. During the preparation of the Memorandum of the Slovak Nation in 1861, Štefan Marko Daxner, its main author and significant ideologist of the Slovak national movement, explicitly stated in his brochure, *Voice from Slovakia*, that we (i.e. the Slovaks) recognise this state (i.e. the Kingdom of Hungary) only to such extent as it recognises us.¹³ This statement, unequivocally placing the nation above the state, represented an inconceivable concept for Hungarian society, where the nation became the state. After World War II, when the so-called Marxist concept of history started to dominate in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the new concept of people also entered the historical and social discourse. It was a welcomed opportunity to break away from

12 Dušan Kováč, The Slovak political programme: from Hungarian patriotism to Czecho-Slovak state, in: Mikuláš Teich, Dušan Kováč and Martin D. Brown, *Slovakia in History*, Cambridge 2011, p.120 – 136.

13 Štefan Marko Daxner, *Hlas zo Slovenska, Pešť 1861*

the gentry-burgers phenomenon of *natio hungarica* and to identify the Slovak nation with the Slovak people. In the 1970s, essays by the Slovak writer, Vladimír Mináč, titled *The Kindling of Embers*,¹⁴ where this tendency was fully expressed, began to emerge. The myth that the Slovak nation had never gone to war, or destroyed anything, but rather only created things with hardworking hands, thus came into existence. The people, especially in connection with the term “working,” played a special role in Hungarian historiography of the time, but did not substantially violate the concept of Hungarian national history in the Middle Ages and modern age.

Probably the most controversial topic in the historical, as well as social, Slovak and Hungarian discourse is that of the peace treaties after World War I. In the case of Hungary, one can speak literally of the Trianon trauma. Without a doubt, this trauma arose from the identification of the Hungarian nation with the state which suddenly ceased to exist. “Lost historical greatness,” resulting only from the given approach to history, vanished together with the non-existing state. That is why even nowadays in professional literature one can encounter a non-acceptance of the “unfair” peace.¹⁵ These tendencies can be found in the periodical, *Trianoni Szemle*, published by a special institute in charge of research concerning Trianon,¹⁶ and the magazine, *Nagy Magyarország* (Great Hungary). An allusion to the non-acceptance of the Treaty of Trianon is included in the new Hungarian constitution, as well, in its initial section titled “The Oath of the Hungarians.” However, existing as well as professional literature only rarely includes criticism of nationally intolerant Hungarian policy, causing the estrangement of elite of non-Hungarian nations from the state. Magyarisation became a subject of criticism of politicians at the time, especially of Oszkar Jászi. His criticism can be found also

14 Vladimír Mináč, *Dúchanie do pahrieb*, Bratislava 1972

15 More on the topic in: Roman Holec: *Trianonské rituály alebo úvahy nad niektorými javmi v maďarskej historiografii*, *Historický časopis* 58, 2010, No.2, pp. 291 – 312.

16 *Trianoni kutató intézet* (Trianon Research Institute)

in the works of the inter-war historiographer, Gyula Szekfű,¹⁷ and other historiographers up to the present day. Nevertheless, the critical attitude towards Magyarisation is seldom connected with the Treaty of Trianon and the idea that historiography has primarily seen the Hungarian policy in the Kingdom of Hungary as wrong. However, older professional literature, as well as contemporary Hungarian historiography, assigns guilt for the break-up of the Kingdom of Hungary to an international conspiracy of Freemasons, Jews, etc. As far as World War I is concerned, for a long time there existed the proposition that the Triple Entente powers planned to break up the Kingdom of Hungary, which does not quite correspond to reality, and which should have also “protected” Hungarian policy within the Kingdom of Hungary.¹⁸ This attitude can be understood only if we realize that it was the congruence of the Hungarian national society with the Kingdom of Hungary that affected the historical consciousness of the Hungarian society formed intensively for decades by the state, schools, media, and culture. On the other hand, Trianon does not represent a topic for the Slovaks. A majority of the Slovak public accept the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic as a way out from the national oppression within the Kingdom of Hungary. Nonetheless, this acceptance is connected in the Slovak historical consciousness with the resistance movement during World War I. Trianon represented only one of the treaties defining the Slovak southern border.¹⁹ During anniversaries of the signing of the Trianon peace treaty, Slovak nationalists criticise Slovak society as being indifferent toward Trianon and not commemorating

17 See mainly Gyula Szekfű, *Három nemzetek és ami utána következik*, Budapest 1938 (5th edition).

18 More on the topic in: Ignác Romsics (ed.), *Mítoszok, legendák, tévhitek a 20. Századi magyar történelemről*, Budapest 2003

19 However, new works have recently emerged in the professional literature: Miroslav Michela, *Pod heslom integrity. Slovenská otázka v politike Maďarska 1918 – 1921*, Bratislava 2009; Miroslav Michela – László Vörös a kol., *Rozpad Uhorska a trianonská mierová zmluva*, Bratislava 2013

it as a significant anniversary of the liberation of Slovakia. This criticism is rather rare and does not inspire great emotion in Slovak society. After 1989, a real chance to hold a professional discussion emerged. For this purpose, representatives of the historical institutes of the Slovak and Hungarian Academy of Sciences met in Veľké Vozokany in 1990. Some conclusions of the discussions have been implemented successfully. Nonetheless, in some issues, both parties showed tendencies which brought historical research and historical consciousness back to the inter-war period. It is clear that Slovak and Hungarian nationalists cannot discuss Trianon seriously. Factual discussion, therefore, depends mainly on the extent to which the Slovak and Hungarian societies can eliminate in their own discourses, held purely among the Slovaks and purely among the Hungarians, nationalistic tendencies based on playing the victim.²⁰

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