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THE VELVET DIVORCE: SLOVAKIA'S DIVORCEMENT OF HER ABUSIVE SPOUSE

STEVEN C. PAGE

Only three years after the Velvet Revolution and the peaceful fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, Czechs and Slovaks peacefully parted ways on 31 December 1992. Most research has attributed Czech and Slovak nationalist, linguistic, historical, and political differences to be the impetus of this separation, known as the Velvet Divorce. This study, however, will argue that the Slovak perception of oppression by foreigners was the major stimulus of the Velvet Divorce, evidenced by other previous Slovak autonomy movements.

On 17 November 1989, actors from Prague theaters and political dissidents defiantly gathered and protested against the Czechoslovak communist regime. During the next ten days, in what later came to be known as the Velvet Revolution, these anti-regime protests quickly spread from Prague's large Václavské náměstí to other smaller town squares throughout the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. As the protests spread, university students joined the movement. These protestors courageously, yet peacefully, rattled their keys, signifying their disapproval of the oppressive policies of the regime. Subsequently, at the end of November, Communism officially ended in Czechoslovakia with little or no conflict.

Following the Velvet Revolution and the peaceful fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, democratic elections were held. The Czechoslovak people elected Vaclav Havel as their new president: a playwright, political dissident, and key player in communism's demise in Czechoslovakia. Slowly the new government instated democratic institutions and began to privatize state-run industries. After more than forty years of oppressive communist dictatorship, the Czechoslovak people had finally begun their arduous journey to democracy.

The early nineties were a new, dynamic, and exciting time for Czechoslovakia. The people sought political stability amid the Czechoslovak pursuit of democracy. Regrettably, political stability remained elusive, and instability, caused by differences in Czech and Slovak approaches to political and economic reform, prevailed. Eventually, on 31 December 1992, the Czechs and Slovaks peacefully parted ways. This separation, known as the Velvet Divorce, ended a relationship of over seventy years.

Few researchers have thoroughly examined the causation of the Velvet Divorce, and they have generally limited their analyses to the
political atmosphere of Czechoslovakia from the Velvet Revolution to the Velvet Divorce. They attributed Czech and Slovak nationalistic, linguistic, historical, and political differences to be the impetus of the Velvet Divorce. Existing research gives a partial and superficial explanation of the centrifugal force that dissolved the Czechoslovak Federal Republic. The Slovak perception of oppression by foreigners was a major stimulus of the Velvet Divorce; this perception is evidenced in other Slovak autonomy movements during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Second World War, the subsequent communist period, and the time following the Velvet Revolution.

AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE AND MAGYAR OPPRESSION

In the eleventh century A.D., the Hungarian Empire was rapidly expanding as it acquired new lands for the imperial crown. Hungarian King Steven conquered the Slovak people, and Slovakia was absorbed in the Hungarian Empire (Leff 1997, 7). The Slovaks became subservient to their oppressive Hungarian overlords. For over nine centuries the Slovak people could not overthrow Hungarian rule. In the 1848 revolution and later in 1861, the Slovaks pursued their program and insisted that they

Were to be given a semi-independent state within the framework of Hungary, i.e. Hungary was to be federalized on the basis of nationality.... Naturally, the Slovak demands were absolutely incompatible with the aims of the Hungarian [rulers], which were to transform Hungary into a modern Magyar state.... Therefore the Slovak demand for an autonomous territory...was rejected. (Rychlik 1995, 100)

Slovak autonomy remained elusive because they lacked the political clout within the Hungarian Empire and the support of other powerful nations.

In 1867 Slovakia's subservient role was validated by the Austrian Empire's formation of a dual monarchy with the Hungarian Empire. Concomitantly, Hungarian attempts to Magyarize the Slovak people reaffirmed their minor role in this great European empire. For example, Hungarian was the lingua franca within the Slovak realm of the Empire. The Hungarians prohibited the use of the Slovak language and the teaching of Slovak culture and history in schools. Slovaks who refused to assimilate could not pursue advanced education or the careers of their choice (Leff 1997, 7). The Slovak people had to assimilate and become Hungarian for a modern Magyar state to become a reality. Magyarization reaffirmed the Slovak perception of oppression. To be Slovak was anathema. The social and political conditions within the Austro-Hungarian Empire provided virtually no hope for Slovak autonomy.

THE FIRST CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC: A "PRAGOCENTRIC" REPUBLIC

World War I marked the end of great European empires and the birth of new states. Czechoslovakia arose from the fall of the impervious Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1918, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk became president of the fledgling Czechoslovak state, which consisted of three major regions: Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia. This inexperienced state was by no means united. A lack of homogeneity in its constituent regions resulted directly from their separate histories. Bohemia and Moravia, comprising the Czech Republic, had maintained relations with Germanic peoples for nearly a millennium. In contrast, Slovakia unwillingly had closer ties with the Magyar. The ethnic composition of the lands provides evidence of the former ties of these regions. Researchers, studying the 1921 Czechoslovak census, have found that 22% of Slovakia's populace were Hungarian and 31% of the population of the Czech Lands were Sudeten Germans (Kučera and Pavlík 1995, 15). Indeed, Czechoslovakia was formed from "the debris of the Austro-Hungarian Empire" (Pehe 1992, 16). The new state was a giant conglomerate of ethnically diverse peoples: Bohemians, Moravians, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and Ruthenians.

The separate histories of the Czechs and Slovaks did not provide for a firm foundation upon which to build a new nation. The most
The difference between the people was the mutually intelligible Czech and Slovak languages. However, larger differences existed. Slovaks enjoyed a more agrarian lifestyle, and Czechs were more urbanized. Slovaks were religiously active. In contrast, a trend toward atheism prevailed among the Czech people. Surprisingly, these two distinct nations chose to unite.

“The birth of Czechoslovakia...was of immense importance for the Czech and Slovak nations, especially for the Slovaks...though both nations welcomed the new state, each had a different concept of it” (Rychlík 1995, 102). The Slovaks envisioned a loosely united confederation of Czecho-Slovakia composed of two sovereign regions. They perceived unification to be beneficial; relative autonomy was foreseen under Masaryk's Czechoslovakia. The Slovaks sought to free themselves from oppression. However, the Czechs had a different vision. They envisioned a unitary state governed in Prague by Czechs. To Slovak dismay, the new state was a "Pragocentric" republic controlled by Czechs. In 1921, the Slovak newspaper Slovenský týždenník wrote:

Let us not speak about a Czechoslovak nation. We are either Czechs or Slovaks, but we cannot be Czechoslovaks. We are citizens of a Czechoslovak state, we have a common Czechoslovak state administration, but we are two nations. (Felak 1990, 145)

The Slovaks wanted independence. Their desire to separate themselves from the Czechs resulted from perceived oppression. Czech dominance in Czechoslovakia helped “to nurture the stereotype of Slovak inferiority” (Ule 1999, 333). The Slovaks quickly realized that a union with their Slavic relatives reaffirmed the “inferiority” they had previously experienced with the Magyar.

“During the two decades of the First Republic, it became apparent that nearly everyone was dissatisfied with a unitary state of two constituent nations and minorities—except the Czechs” (Leff 1997, 25). The Slovak dissatisfaction with Czechoslovakia caused many Slovak leaders, such as Monsignor Andrej Hlinka and Father Jozef Tiso, to seek the foundation of Slovakia as an autonomous Christian nationalist state. The Slovaks could not tolerate another era of oppression and “inferiority.” Czechoslovakia was not the state the Slovak nation had envisioned. Much of the Slovak intelligentsia felt that “the Czechs were bent on eventually assimilating the Slovak community” (Goldman 1999, 5). Just as the Hungarians had sought to Magyarize the Slovaks, now the Czechs sought to “Czechize” the Slovaks. Attempted cultural assimilation greatly fueled the fires of demand for autonomy.

Slovakia: A Nazi State—Nominal Autonomy

The occupation of the Czech Lands by Nazi Germany beginning 6 October 1938 finally provided Slovakia with nominal autonomy. However, it was not until 14 March 1939 that Slovakia, under Hitler’s pressure, formally declared her independence (Mlynárík 1993, 28). Father Tiso became Slovakia's first president. Under Tiso’s rule, Slovakia was only a Nazi puppet state run by oppression and other dictatorial means. To ensure control of Slovakia, Hitler stationed troops in the Vah Valley near Budapest and on the Austrian side of the Danube (Goldman 1999, 7). With Hitler watching and controlling her actions, Slovakia had not obtained the autonomy she had sought.

Under the rule of Tiso. Slovakia followed the mandates of Hitler. Slovakia participated in Nazi Germany's Drang nach Osten by assisting the Germans in their takeover of Poland. Slovak Storm Troopers, the Hlinka Guard, were known for stealing Jewish property (Ule 1996, 333-4). Tiso’s regime deported thousands of Jews to death camps (Mlynárík 1993, 29). Paradoxically, the Slovaks had hoped to gain autonomy, but they believed they must collude with the Germans to attain it. However, collaboration only caused continued foreign domination of the Slovak people. True independence was not found in fascism. Many Slovaks realized that the Nazi state was merely a continuation of foreign dominance furthering their perception of oppression. By 1943, anti-Tiso movements arose throughout Slovakia (Goldman 1999, 8). This was ultimately a third failed attempt at autonomy.
COMMUNISM: CZECH OPPRESSION AND MUSCOVITE RULE

In 1945 the Allies defeated Germany and reestablished the ante-bellum status quo in Czechoslovakia, namely a Pragocentric Czechoslovak state. To the Czechs, Czechoslovakia had never ceased to exist; conversely, to the Slovaks, a semi-autonomous Slovakia was their perception of reality. By 1948, the democratic Czechoslovak government was replaced by a communist regime. The Slovak people were generally opposed to the Czechoslovak communist regime; it allowed for Soviet rule and further Czech dominance.

By the early 1950s post-World War II Czechoslovakia had become a satellite of Moscow, with a Soviet-style monolithic dictatorship committed to the introduction of economic and social policies developed by Stalin in the Soviet Union.... The communist leadership in Prague acted with the approval of the Kremlin. (Goldman 1999, 11-2)

Though Communism helped to alleviate many of the tensions between the Czech and Slovak peoples—forty years of oppressive communist leadership forced the Slovaks, Moravians, Czechs, and other ethnic groups of Czechoslovakia to coalesce into a fairly unified nation—the Slovaks still had not attained the autonomy they sought. Rather, control was switched from fascist Berlin to communist Moscow.

Once again, the Czechs dominated the Slovaks in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. From 1948–68 Slovaks accounted for 82 of 585 appointees to the Czechoslovak corps diplomatique. Additionally, in 1968 only 3.7% of government personnel were Slovak (Goldman 1999, 12–3). Slovak interests could not be justly addressed in such conditions of Czech dominance; the communist Czech government was content with the status quo. Czech dominance during Communism only perpetuated the Slovak perception of oppression.

THE VELVET DIVORCE: THE END TO OPPRESSION

The bloodless Velvet Revolution on 17 November 1989 inaugurated a new journey to democracy for the Czechoslovak state. Communism had ended, and the Czechoslovaks were free again. Initially the Czechs and Slovaks shared a common course; however, this course markedly changed as time passed. "After the non-Communist government took office, Czechs and Slovaks began to disagree over political and economic issues. The disagreements blocked the adoption of a new constitution and slowed economic reform" (Wolchik 2001, 1214).

To the West it seemed that Czechs and Slovaks only differed economically and politically; however, other differences existed. In fact, Slovakia’s history of oppression and disputes over differences in history, language, and culture led to a sudden resurgence in Slovak nationalism (Abercrombie 1993, 10–1; Pehe 1992, 16). Slovak nationalism had always existed, but democracy provided the means for the Slovaks to express their feelings, beliefs, and political agenda. Slovaks were no longer “inferior.” In 1991, the Slovaks wrote in the Czechoslovak newspaper Lidové noviny: “We favor a looser cooperating confederation of two sovereign republics with confederative principles, with sufficient advantages and sliding extent of jurisdiction” (Ule 1996, 341). A Pragocentric republic would no longer suffice. The Slovaks insisted that their voice be heard in the new Czechoslovak democracy. Many Czechs disagreed with the Slovak stance, and the government reached an impasse.

In 1990–91 Slovak politicians began discussions about dissolving the Czechoslovak state. A breakup appeared inevitable. Not all were pleased with the Slovak politicians’ choice to part ways, so they initiated a campaign to have the people rather than the politicians decide the fate of the country.... Within a month, petitions with over 2 million signatures, including 200,000 from Slovakia, were collected in support of a referendum.... Alas, as was to be expected, the parliament could not reach a consensus on the wording of the referendum. The public resulted to a novel, unique way of expressing its will in what became known as the "light-bulb referendum." At 7:40 p.m. on November 24, 1991, those in favor of saving Czechoslovakia switched on two
100-watt bulbs. The sudden increase in energy consumption registered the following unscientific results: support for the federation in the Czech Republic was expressed by 2.7 million households (8.1 million population, 80 percent of the total), and in the Slovak Republic in 450,000 households (1.35 million population, 37 percent of the total). (Uče 1996, 344)

Though the "light-bulb referendum" was unofficial and unscientific, the Slovak will was made known. The Czechs wanted unity; the Slovaks wanted svrchnovnost' (sovereignty).

In July 1992, Slovak politicians declared Slovakia a sovereign state free of Czech rule. The Slovaks had finally attained svrchnovnost'. Czech politicians realized that the two nations would never again be one. The formal dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Divorce, occurred at midnight on 31 December 1992. After nearly one thousand years, the Slovaks could rule themselves. Svrchnovnost'! To be Slovak was no longer anathema; rather, Slovak citizenship was a source of pride. The Slovaks were free from the Magyars, Germans, Soviets, and Czechs. Oppression had ended. The Slovak nation was subject to no one.

UNDERSTANDING THE VELVET DIVORCE

Westerners may feel inclined to question the causation of the Velvet Divorce. After all, the Czechs and Slovaks bear a great deal of resemblance and appear to be one people. Many Westerners may ask: Wasn't the fall of Communism the actual cause of the Velvet Divorce? The answer is clearly yes, but with the caveat that the Velvet Revolution cannot be viewed as anything more than the superficial stimulus of the Velvet Divorce.

The Velvet Revolution opened many unhealed wounds. Whereas some wounds resulted from Czech-Slovak interaction, other wounds resulted directly from Magyar-Slovak, German-Slovak, and Russian-Slovak interaction. The historical, linguistic, ethnic, and political differences led to a sudden rise in Slovak nationalism and awareness of the recurring role of oppression in Slovak history. The Slovaks adamantly declared that they were no longer subordinate to Czechs or any other people. The Slovaks wanted Czecho-Slovakia (that is, a state consisting of two equally autonomous republics), but the Czechs wanted Czechoslovakia (namely, a Pragocentric state). The Slovak awareness of oppression contributed to the Slovak desire to be independent. The Czech government attempted to hinder the breakup, but the relationship was irreparable.

In the late twentieth century the former Eastern bloc has exemplified the role of political change in defining a region. The proverbial fall of the Iron Curtain, which marked the dawn of a new era of autonomy and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, was the impetus of much modern European change. Despite the newly acquired democratic freedoms in Europe, few strong cohesive forces bound the region's peoples together. Rather, balkanization, a powerfully destructive centrifugal force, prevailed. The once powerful and ominous Soviet Union disintegrated into many new states: the Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, to name a few. Many once communist states have disappeared, forming over a dozen new democratic states: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and others. Furthermore, Communism's demise resulted in the end of oppressive eras. Indeed, the pursuit of actual freedom from oppression is evidenced in the esoteric breakup of Czechoslovakia: the Velvet Divorce–Slovakia's divorcement of her oppressive and psychologically abusive spouse.

Steven Clark Page is a senior from Orem, Utah, majoring in international studies. After graduation, he will pursue a joint MA in Czech studies and a master of public affairs at Indiana University at Bloomington.

WORKS CITED


