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# ASPECTS OF THE HOLOCAUST DURING THE SLOVAK AUTONOMY PERIOD

(October 6, 1938, to March 14, 1939)

**Madeline Vadkerty**

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*"At least we are clear about our Jews. We know they are our enemies not only in world view, but also in politics. The Jews are against the autonomy of Slovakia! We will remember this well and at the right time, we will remind the Jews of it."*  
*Slovák* (newspaper), May 18, 1938<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This angry diatribe was a response to an announcement made by Czechoslovakia's Jewish Party in the spring of 1938 opposing Slovak separatism. Only a few months later, Slovakia's autonomists would have ample opportunity to make good on their promise. The Autonomous Land of Slovakia, which lasted from October 6, 1938, until March 14, 1939, was ostensibly conceived as part of a federalized Czecho-Slovakia.<sup>2</sup> However, this brief, relatively unknown period came to an end when Germany abrogated the Munich Agreement,<sup>3</sup> which it had signed with France, England, and Italy on September 29, 1938. The Nazis occupied the Czech lands on March 15, 1939, effectively partitioning Czechoslovakia. They established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia on the following day, and Slovakia became an "independent" state on March 14, 1939.

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<sup>1</sup> *Slovák*, May 28, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> During Autonomy, Czechoslovakia was spelled Czecho-Slovakia.

<sup>3</sup> The Munich Agreement forced Czechoslovakia to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. By appeasing the Nazis, England and France hoped, unsuccessfully, to avoid war. See Appendix II – Map of Sudetenland – Munich Agreement.

In reality, however, it became a Nazi satellite that would eagerly persecute and deport its Jewish citizens in 1942.<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1937, Hitler had revealed his plan to dismember Czechoslovakia when he met with Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya.<sup>5</sup> Without waiting for the final break up of Czechoslovakia, the Germans encouraged the formation of an autonomous government in the Slovak capital of Bratislava.<sup>6</sup> The Autonomy Period was thus an integral component of the Nazis' territorial and political designs.<sup>7</sup>

The rapid political developments that took place under Autonomy were to set the stage for the Holocaust in Slovakia.<sup>8</sup> The Slovaks' first attempts to create anti-Jewish legislation, define who was a Jew, and establish a "Committee for the Solution of the Jewish Question,"<sup>9</sup> all took place precisely within this brief, pre-state span.<sup>10</sup>

On November 4 - 5, 1938, thousands of "poor or stateless" Jews were transported to the no man's land between the newly drawn Hungarian and Slovak border resulting from the First Vienna Award.<sup>11</sup> The loss of territory represented a humiliating foreign policy setback for the Slovaks. The regime needed a scapegoat in order to conceal its discomfiture in front of their followers. Given these and other developments, this author suggests that this troubling time period deserves a greater emphasis in Holocaust discourse.

This article will describe some of the origins of antisemitism in Slovakia, the anti-Jewish persecution that took place there during the Autonomy Period, and Jewish responses to the deterioration of their social status. It will also discuss why this five-month interval remains relatively underemphasized in Holocaust-related historiography. Studying the Autonomy Period

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<sup>4</sup> There were two waves of deportations in Slovakia: The first was under Slovak auspices from March 25-October 20, 1942. A second wave of deportations took place under Nazi control in 1944-1945 after the Slovak National Uprising, an anti-fascist revolt which triggered the Nazi occupation of Slovakia.

<sup>5</sup> James Mace Ward, "The 1938 First Vienna Award and the Holocaust in Slovakia," in the *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews, Third Edition, Volume II* (New Haven, Yale University Press 2003), p. 766, and Wörmann via Weizsäcker to Ribbentrop, October 5, 1938, NG-3056.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that after the *Anschluss* with Austria on March 12, 1938, the Danube River constituted the German-Slovak border.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 1 – Timeline of Events.

<sup>9</sup> In January of 1939, the Sidor Committee was created to coordinate the response to the so-called "Jewish problem." It was headed by Karol Sidor, a minister in the Czecho-Slovak government and leader of the Hlinka Guard. There was too little time to create any substantive directives. The Sidor Committee continued its work after the establishment of the Slovak State. See Ivan Kamenec, *On the Trail of Tragedy: The Holocaust in Slovakia* (Bratislava, H & H Publishers, 2007), pp. 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> James Mace Ward, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> See map in Appendix III – First Vienna Award.

engenders several salient questions. How can increased scholarship about this topic better equip scholars to answer larger questions about the etiology of the Holocaust in Slovakia? How does acknowledging the significance of this history allow us, albeit with hindsight, to better grasp some of the warning signs of an impending genocide? Learning about the antisemitic persecution that took place during this period and bringing it into enhanced discourse displays the fervor of Slovak nationalists to curry favor with the Nazis—as well as the Nazis’ cynical calculus in their regional dealings with Slovakia and its neighbors. It also offers an opportunity to neutralize persistent myths surrounding the personage of Jozef Tiso,<sup>12</sup> who remains a controversial figure in modern Slovakia.<sup>13</sup> Examining this period in greater depth illustrates why 1938 represents a critical watershed in the Nazi era, where converging, complex developments coalesced in a way that paved the way for the Holocaust.

### **Antisemitism, the Persecution of Slovakia’s Jewish Population during Autonomy, and Jewish Responses**

Antisemitism was not a new phenomenon in Slovakia and can be traced back to the Middle Ages and beyond. Looking at the more recent past, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867,<sup>14</sup> Jews became equal citizens in the eyes of the state. The Hungarian Parliament passed an Act of Emancipation for Jews that same year, mainly for the purpose of economic development, which was beneficial for the Jewish population. A year later, Hungary's Nationality Act was issued as part of an active policy of magyarization (Hungarianization). However, it did not affect Jews, who were considered a religious group and not a national group. Jews thrived under these new conditions, but ethnic and national groups, such as the Slovaks who were subjected to the new legislation, possessed only limited linguistic and cultural rights.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), a Roman Catholic priest, was the Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior of the Autonomous Land of Slovakia and subsequently the President of the Slovak State from 1939 to 1945. On April 15, 1947, the Czechoslovak National Court (*Národný súd* - NS) sentenced him to death and hanged him for "state treason, betrayal of the antifascist partisan insurrection and collaboration with Nazism." See James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Tiso’s apologists claim that he saved many Jewish lives thanks to his power to grant presidential exemptions. It exceeds the scope of this article to explain the process for awarding exemptions. For more information, see: James Mace Ward, "People Who Deserve It": Jozef Tiso and the Presidential Exemption." *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 4 (2002): 571–601. doi:10.1080/00905992.2002.10540508.

<sup>14</sup> The compromise created the dual monarchy of Austria and Hungary out of the Hapsburg monarchy whereby the Kingdom of Hungary was able to act independently of the Austrian Empire.

<sup>15</sup> Ivan Kamenec, *On the Trail of Tragedy: The Holocaust in Slovakia* (Bratislava, H & H Publishers, 2007), p. 21.

As capitalism advanced in Hungary, Jews became prosperous in banking, commerce, industry, crafts, and agricultural production. They also became successful physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, and veterinarians. The gap in wealth and status between Jews, who were successful in the economic arena, and the poorer, agrarian Slovaks was noticeable and became a source of resentment. Jews living in Slovakia had the option of either identifying with the ruling Hungarian nation or with the Slovak nation which was, at the same time, waging an unequal struggle for recognition as a separate national entity against the official Hungarian policy. Most Jews were oriented toward Hungary from the linguistic and national points of view, opting not to identify with the fate of an economically and socially suppressed nation. The Slovak nation could not fully develop itself under Hungarian dominance.<sup>16</sup>

The charge that Jews were either Hungarians or served Hungarian interests became commonplace in the Slovak press.<sup>17</sup> Antisemitism of an economic-defensive and national anti-Hungarian character rose throughout Slovak society. When Czechoslovakia was formed in the wake of World War I, there was a convergence of the Jewish and Slovak populations, but the twenty-year period of Czechoslovak democracy was too short to achieve any significant inroads in terms of Jewish assimilation with the Slovak population. In addition, Zionism was making headway in Slovakia in the 1930's. Zionists were loyal to Czechoslovakia but rejected any form of national assimilation.<sup>18</sup>

By the latter half of the 1930's, refugees from many countries (especially Germany, Austria, and Poland) had concentrated in Czecho-Slovakia. The capital of Bratislava, thanks to its location on the Danube River, became the westernmost harbor in non-Nazified Europe where it was possible to sail to Romania and then on to Palestine. The city became a center for Jewish refugees desperately trying to escape from Europe. By January 1939, approximately 3,000 refugees, including 1,200 Hungarians and Slovaks without Slovak citizenship, were concentrated in Slovakia.<sup>19</sup>

As nationalist zeal grew, leaders promised that solving the so-called "Jewish problem" would overcome the country's economic and social woes.<sup>20</sup> When Autonomy was officially

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<sup>16</sup> See Ivan Kamenec, pp. 19 – 32.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Kamenec, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Yeshayahu Andrej Jelínek, *Star of David under Tatra Mountains* (English language translation: Bratislava, Slovak National Museum of Jewish Culture, 2020), p. 297.

<sup>20</sup> Kamenec, p. 34.

declared in Žilina, a 10-point manifesto extolled the dawn of a new Slovakia and “its struggle against the Marxist-Jewish ideology of subversion and violence.”<sup>21</sup> Pavol Čarnogurský, a member of the new regime, stated in his memoirs that “...it was logical that a wave of joy and enthusiasm erupted. Anyone who thinks back on the evening of October 6 will find only evidence and testimony everywhere that there had never been such a moment in Slovak history.”<sup>22</sup>

Not everyone shared this view. The political atmosphere rapidly became overtly hostile toward Jews and other groups, such as Czechs, progressives, or anyone else who did not support the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party.<sup>23</sup> After October 7<sup>th</sup>, pogroms erupted in several Slovak cities, and angry mobs smashed the windows of Jewish shops and homes shouting anti-Jewish slogans. As one Holocaust survivor explained, “Things became worse under Autonomy, because that was when the antisemitism became visible...”<sup>24</sup>

Slovak ethnologist Monika Vrzgulová gathered 200 eyewitness testimonies relating to the Autonomy Period in order to assess how Jewish survivors structured their personal memories and perceptions about the societal changes that were taking place during this period. The interviewees described feelings of exclusion along with other emotions including uncertainty, anxiety, fear, a sense of abandonment, disappointment, and an awareness of their newly lowered social status. Preexisting social norms were rapidly being replaced with new, openly, sanctioned hostile norms of behavior, and Jews were recast as an out-group that was subjected to antisemitism in daily life.<sup>25</sup> Some also recalled the terror they faced at the hands of the Hlinka Guard in their testimonies.<sup>26</sup> This nationalist paramilitary organization successfully consolidated its power during this interval.

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<sup>21</sup> Martina Fiamová and Michala Lônčíková, “Autonómia Slovenska 1938-1939: Počiatočná fáza a perzekuúcií (Úvod)” (Slovak Autonomy 1938 – 1939: Initial Phase and Persecution – Forward), in *Forum Historiae*, 2019, roč 13, č. 1, p. 2. This article also explains how the Autonomous Land of Slovakia became established, as well as the persecution of Czechs who were living in the territory.

<sup>22</sup> Pavol Čarnogurský, *6. október 1938* (Bratislava, Veda, 1993), p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Salner, “Židia v období autonómie Slovenska (6.10.1938 – 14.3. 1939)” (Jews during Slovakia’s Autonomy Period) in Miloš Pojar, Blanka Soukupová, and Marie Zahradníková, (eds.), *Židovská menšina za druhej republiky* (The Jewish Minority in the Second Republic), (Prague, Židovské muzeum, 2007), p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (USC SF VHA), A. R. born in Ružemberok in 1911, Interview Code: 27473, no segments, see fragment from 17:59 to 57:19.

<sup>25</sup> Monika Vrzgulová, “Sociálna zmena v biografických naratívach obyvateľov dnešného Slovenska: Od Mníchova po 14. Marec, 1939” (Social Change in the Biographical Narratives of Inhabitants of Modern Day Slovakia: From Munich to March 1939), in *Forum Historiae*, 2019, roč. 13, č. 1, pp. 131-143.

<sup>26</sup> The Hlinka Guard was a paramilitary militia that carried out antisemitic measures on the ground including the confiscation of Jewish property, running concentration centers in Slovakia for Jews, and accompanying Jews to the transports in the Slovak State. They wore black uniforms and made the Hitler salute. See: [https://portal.ehri-project.eu/authorities/ehri\\_cb-397](https://portal.ehri-project.eu/authorities/ehri_cb-397) and the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* / R. Rozett, S. Spector. – Jerusalem, 2006.

The political leadership made it known that the solution to the Jewish question was an important component of its ideology. Limiting the influence of Jews in business and commerce became a significant priority. Professional associations leveraged the new situation to suppress competition. The Society of Lawyers wanted a quota for Jews, and the Association of Slovak Physicians advocated for the removal of all Jewish physicians for 25 years. A boycott of Jewish businesses was organized in several Slovak cities in the autumn of 1938.<sup>27</sup> On October 29, 1938, the government banned Sunday sales. Proposals for steps to liquidate Jewish businesses, or place them in the hands of trustees, were the forerunners of the aryianization<sup>28</sup> process that would take place after the establishment of the Slovak State. Lists were drawn up of innkeepers, chimney cleaners, and bar owners requesting information on ethnicity, religion, and citizenship.<sup>29</sup> The caseloads for Jewish judges dried up.<sup>30</sup> Other proposals being circulated at the time included defining who was a Jew, conditions for the residence of Jews in Slovakia, the export of Jewish property when they emigrated, the property of Jewish landowners, the revision of small business licenses, medical, pharmacy, advocacy practices, and the employment of Jews in public service.<sup>31</sup> The effort to bring about the Jews' social death<sup>32</sup> was clearly underway.

Harsh anti-Jewish propaganda and strident public rhetoric characterized the Autonomy Period. For example, Alexander Mach<sup>33</sup> made a speech in Rišňovce on February 5, 1939, where he stated, "With the Jews, who have gold, jewelry, wealth, they made order everywhere and we will do it with them....those who do not work here will not even eat here."<sup>34</sup> Shrill anti-Jewish leaflets, like the one distributed on the night of February 14-15, 1939, in Piešťany stated, "We ask foreigners to leave, for the last hour has struck. We are at the end of our patience, woe unto he who does not obey!"<sup>35</sup> The Reich Radio Station in Vienna promoted the dissolution of Czecho-Slovakia

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p. 267, *Dictionary of the Holocaust: Biography, geography, and terminology* / E.J. Epstein, P. Rosen. – Westport, 1997. p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> Salner, p. 137.

<sup>28</sup> The official name for the process of transferring Jewish businesses and property into non-Jewish hands during the regime of the Slovak State.

<sup>29</sup> Fiamová and Lónčíková, p. 4. This list would eventually be used as the basis of Government Decree 40/1939 after the establishment of the Slovak State in March 1939 and aimed toward removing Jews from professions involving bar keeping.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Kamenec, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> I use this term as defined by Claudia Card in "Genocide and Social Death," *Hypatia*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Mach (1902 – 1980) was a Slovak nationalist politician and Nazi sympathizer.

<sup>34</sup> Salner, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> The original document is located in *Krajinský úrad – Prezídium*, Box 298, file 17501/39 prez. This fond is closed until further notice and unavailable to the public so that the Slovak National Archive can create a new inventory.

in public opinion<sup>36</sup> and broadcasted alarming anti-Jewish messages. In a broadcast dated December 23, 1938, called “Protect Your Children!” for example, the Reich radio announcer intoned,

Christmas is approaching, and we recall our fond childhood memories...unaware of the evil and filth in this world. The most beautiful part of a Christian child is the ‘purity of his soul’...The Jew has the Devil in his blood which becomes activated during childhood...We can show you countless examples of 10-12-year-old Jews who spread the message of the Devil among Christian children...This is why we need to keep Jewish children out of Christian schools and public places like swimming pools and playgrounds. Separate them! We must safeguard the future of our people...<sup>37</sup>

The Jewish community attempted to navigate its deteriorating predicament. One option was to profess its loyalty, another was to protest, and the third was emigration—legally or illegally.<sup>38</sup> When Autonomy was declared, the Jewish Party<sup>39</sup> of the Slovak Region (*Židovská strana pre Slovenskú krajinu*) issued a congratulatory telegram. Party leaders also visited Jozef Tiso, who became head of the government<sup>40</sup> and Minister of the Interior in the December 1938 parliamentary elections, to express the “loyalty of the Jewish inhabitants of Slovakia and their willingness to cooperate in the healthy development of the homeland and the peaceful coexistence of all citizens.”<sup>41</sup> Ordered to cease its activity on November 25, 1938, the Jewish leadership reinvented itself and became the Jewish Central Office (*Židovská ústredná úradovňa*).<sup>42</sup> On January 21, 1939, it organized a conference in Žilina for 400 participants and 200 guests. The participants issued a statement that “all Jewish fellow-citizens place all their abilities at the service of the economic reconstruction of Slovakia, so that their business activities can be directed with understanding for the needs of the Slovak nation.”<sup>43</sup> Because of its purportedly Zionist orientation, Orthodox Jews did not participate in the conference. They wrote their own separate communication to Tiso on January 6, 1939, stating that their aim was to “cooperate and participate in the great work of

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<sup>36</sup> Michala Lõncikova, “The Jew is and always Will Be Our Greatest Enemy! Antisemitism in Slovak Radio Broadcast from the Reich’s Vienna Radio Station,” in *Forum Historiae*, 2019, roč. 13, č. 1, p. 144.

<sup>37</sup> L’udovit’ Mutňanský, “Tu rišský vysielateľ Viedeň, Boj vo Svetom éteri o slovensku pravdu a budúcnosť Wien 1938 – 1939” (The Reich’s Vienna Radio Broadcast Station: Battle for the Airwaves of the World in the Name of Slovak Truth and the Future), Vienna 1938 – 1939). (Vienna, Lichtner, 1939).

<sup>38</sup> See Salner, pp. 132-145.

<sup>39</sup> The Jewish Party was ordered to end its activities on November 25, 1938. Other political parties, including the Jewish Party, would not be dissolved until January 1939.

<sup>40</sup> The Slovak word *predseda* is similar to that of a premier, prime minister or president, but the Autonomous Land of Slovakia was still part of Czecho-Slovakia, so I elected to describe his role as head of the government.

<sup>41</sup> Slovak National Archive, Police Directorate (*Policajně riaditeľ’stvo* – PR), Mat. 63/2.

<sup>42</sup> Kamenec, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



building the new Slovakia.”<sup>44</sup> Both organizations helped Jews with emigration, but were otherwise ineffective.

On the eve of the signing of the First Vienna Award, on November 2, 1938, a group of 300 to 500 Jews held a demonstration in central Bratislava advocating that the city become part of Hungary. This scandalized the Slovak public, making Jews an identifiable target when Hungarian prerogatives superseded those of Czecho-Slovakia in the negotiations.

### **The First Vienna Award<sup>45</sup>**

The First Vienna Award forced Czecho-Slovakia to cede a large swath of territory along Slovakia’s southern border, allowing Hungary to annex territory that it had lost as a result of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. This brought 10,390 square kilometers and 879,697 inhabitants, of which 45,292 were Jews, under Hungarian jurisdiction.<sup>46</sup> This land was considered the most fertile in Slovakia and was known as Slovakia’s breadbasket.<sup>47</sup> During the negotiations, Slovak politician Ferdinand Ďurčanský<sup>48</sup> promised Hermann Göring, hoping to minimize territorial attrition, that an independent Slovak nation would model its Jewish policies on the Nuremberg Laws. However, his entreaty was fruitless. The redrawn border represented a humiliating foreign policy setback for the Slovaks. The Jews were to shoulder the blame for this blow. However, time was of the essence, because the Hungarian government was preparing the imminent takeover of the new border.

### **The Transport of Jews to No Man’s Land**

On November 3, 1938, Tiso, with the help of Adolf Eichmann and others, devised a plan to transport poor Jews to the southern Slovak border, later including foreign Jews. This was not the first expulsion of Jews in Europe that had taken place that year with Nazi involvement. Only a

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> To learn more about the First Vienna Award and its centrality to the Holocaust, see James Mace Ward, “The 1938 First Vienna Award and the Holocaust in Slovakia” in the *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 76 – 108. doi: 10.1093/hgs/dev004

<sup>46</sup> Salner, p. 133.

<sup>47</sup> Ward, p. 91.

<sup>48</sup> Ferdinand Ďurčanský (1906-1974), was a Slovak politician and Minister of Home and Foreign Affairs in the Slovak state who advocated vigorously for Slovak independence. He lost his post in July 1940 at the Salzburg Conference, after being accused of pursuing foreign policy objectives that were not favored by the Nazis. At the Salzburg Conference, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joachim Von Ribbentrop informed Slovak President Tiso that Slovakia was part of Germany’s *Lebensraum*, which gave the Nazis the right to intervene in the country’s internal affairs. See: Jerome S. Legge, “Collaboration, Intelligence, and the Holocaust: Ferdinand Ďurčanský, Slovak Nationalism, and the Gehlen Organization,” *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32 (2018) (2): 224–248.

few days earlier, 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship had been forcibly and brutally expelled from the Reich in the *Polenaktion*.<sup>49</sup> Other examples include the expulsion of Jews from Austria after the *Anschluss*,<sup>50</sup> and from the Sudetenland into Czechoslovakia after the signing of the Munich Agreement.<sup>51</sup>

Tiso empowered Slovak radical, Jozef Faláth, to organize the transport of Jews to the no man's land between Hungary and Czecho-Slovakia in cooperation with Adolf Eichmann and others. Faláth issued contradictory and vague communications, sowing chaos and confusion.<sup>52</sup> The order had stipulated that "all police offices and gendarmerie stations, as well as the heads of Hlinka Guard units, were to detain property-less Jews in their districts and transport them a minimum of 20 km. over the new border." Jews were to be left with a "reasonable meal allowance of CZK 50 per person."<sup>53</sup> Wealthy Jews were to be detained to prevent them from fleeing with their assets.<sup>54</sup> Some local jurisdictions were not prepared logistically to carry out the instructions because of truck shortages, especially on such short notice, contributing to the disorder.<sup>55</sup>

The Jewish men, women and children who were caught in this dragnet were forced to endure the inclement fall weather in the open, with no food, shelter, or other means to alleviate their predicament.<sup>56</sup> People who lived in the area tried to help the hapless Jews.

Had they not helped, the Jews would have died of hunger, cold, and shame. But people helped. They brought food, warm clothes, some sails, tents, and a discarded furniture truck where they put some straw. The neediest came to the truck: A man with a bleeding stomach, a woman about to give birth, another woman who gave birth in a field, her newborn wrapped in donated rags, an old man who is lame and a blind man who was sitting on a pile of straw in a corner.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See: <https://www.holocaust.cz/en/history/events/the-expulsion-of-polish-jews-from-germany/>.

<sup>50</sup> See: Doron Rabinovici, *Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna*, (Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 26 – 86.

<sup>51</sup> See: Wolf Grüner, "Von der Kollektivausweisung zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland (1938 – 1945)" in *Neue Perspektiven und Dokumente*. In Christoph Dieckmann, Birthe Kundrus, Beate Meyer (eds.) *Die Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland: Pläne, Praxis, Reaktionen 1938-1945* (Göttingen, Wallstein, 2004, pp. 21- 62.

<sup>52</sup> Ward, pp. 92- 93.

<sup>53</sup> Eduard Nižňanský, *Holokaust na Slovensku, Obdobie autonómie 6.10.1938-14.3.1939 – Dokumenty*, Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, Zväzok 3 (The Holocaust in Slovakia: Autonomy Period – Documents). (Bratislava, Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 2001), p. 228.

<sup>54</sup> Kamenec, p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> See Appendix IV. - Photograph of Miloslav encampment in no man's land.

<sup>57</sup> Veronika, Slnková, "'Židovská otázka' na úrovni mesta – Trnava v období atonómia Slovenska" (The Jewish Question on the Municipal Level – Trnava during the Autonomy Period), in *Studia historica Nitriensia* V., 1996, p. 76.

One man, Egon Schwarz, described his experiences in his autobiography:

When we walked two or three hundred meters into this land, there emerged tired looking sleepless figures, there were more and more of them. We could see the Slovak border and behind us there was a string of Hungarian border guards who would not let us turn back. Between them there was a thick demarcation line, a technical term for a zone created by the shift of international borders. We were nobodies in a no man's land.<sup>58</sup>

The man and his family had, like so many others, been caught by the Hlinka Guard in the middle of the night. First, they were brought to the police station by bus, and then loaded into trucks.<sup>59</sup> Schwarz was young and capable of working for food by chopping down trees.

Succumbing to political pressure, Tiso issued a new order to exempt Jews with Czechoslovakian citizenship from the transports, creating further chaos. In several cases, the second order was never even received by local jurisdictions because of faulty phone lines. Three days later, Tiso canceled the operation, but in the interim, thousands of Jews remained trapped in the no man's land. The Hungarians attempted to return them, but Slovakia refused to accept the deportees.<sup>60</sup> Jewish organizations provided aid and material support and intervened with the authorities. After December 8<sup>th</sup>, those Jews who had a home in Slovakia returned to their communities, but for some it would take weeks.

The developments and expulsions that took place in 1938 represent an important turning point as we seek to assess how the Autonomy Period contributed to the Holocaust in Slovakia. The scapegoating and expulsion of Jews as a targeted minority, coupled with the humiliation experienced by the regime resulting from border shifts and the perceived need for revenge blended in an ominous and complex fashion. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben contends that citizenship in the modern state is not automatic based on birthplace, but something that the government can confer or deny based on perceived merit.<sup>61</sup> Evelyn Lindner, a specialist in human

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<sup>58</sup> Michal Frankl, quoting Egon Schwarz, "*Unfreiwillige Wanderjahre. Auf der Flucht vor Hitler durch drei Kontinente*. (München: Beck, 2009), p. 69 in *Země Nikoho 1938 Deportace za hranice občanství* (in Czech) (No Man's Land 1938: Deportations of Citizens across the Border) in *Forum Historiae*, 2019, roč. 13, č. 1, p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Slovak National Archive (Slovenský národný archív), Krajský úrad v Bratislave, Box 309, file 70581/38 "Zpráva policajneho riaditeľstva, November 5, 1938, and quoted by Michal Frankl, *Země Nikoho 1938, Deportace za hranice občanství*" (in Czech) (No Man's Land 1938: Deportations of Citizens across the Border) in *Forum Historiae*, 2019, roč. 13, č. 1, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> Salner, p. 135.

<sup>61</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 1-12.

dignity and humiliation studies,<sup>62</sup> posits that humiliation enables perpetrators to view themselves as victims and that this sense of humiliation can serve as a driver of genocide. In this case, the Autonomous regime claimed that it had been victimized by the loss of territory by the Jews, which was in fact caused by geopolitics and Hungary's advantageous position at the negotiating table. Slovak scholar Eduard Nižňanský opines that the xenophobic orientation of the regime, and "being the victim," led to hatred and engendered a callous and inhumane "solution (in Slovakia)."<sup>63</sup> American historian James Mace Ward posits that the border revision set the stage for the Holocaust, due to the connection between border changes and ethnic cleansing.<sup>64</sup> He also states that the insecurity and instability caused by the shifting border generated Slovakia's perceived need to "Slovakize" its cities.<sup>65</sup> These and the tragic nexus of other factors offer compelling early warning signs that are identifiable with hindsight as harbingers of genocide, making 1938 a pivotal year in many respects. However, this is often overlooked in scholarship.

## Historiography

From the post-war period until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, some notable texts in Slovak and Czech about the Autonomy Period appeared during the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>66</sup> A couple of works in German were also published during this time.<sup>67</sup> These publications mention the Jewish minority only peripherally, focusing mainly on political developments and the characteristics of the authoritarian regime.

Though many publications about the period have appeared over the years, two seminal works engage specifically with the anti-Jewish persecution of the period. *Po Stopách tragedie* (On the Trail of Tragedy) was written by Ivan Kamenec, a Slovak historian. This foundational work was written in 1971 but could not be published until 1991 due to communist censorship. It was

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<sup>62</sup> See Evelin G. Lindner, "Genocide, Humiliation, and Inferiority: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," in *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Theory in Theory and Practice*, eds. Nicholas A. Robbins and Adam Jones (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009), pp. 138-158.

<sup>63</sup> Eduard Nižňanský, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Ward, "The 1938 First Vienna Award and the Holocaust in Slovakia," *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 95.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Vietor, *Dejiny okupácie južného Slovenska* (Bratislava, 1968), Miloš Hájek: *Od Mnichova k 15. Březnu* (Praha, 1959), L'ubomír Lipták: "Autonómia Slovenskej krajiny od Mnichova k 14. Marc." In *Odboj a revoluce*, IV, 1966, č. 5, Lórant Tilkovszky: *Južne Slovensko v rokoch 1938 – 1945* (Martin, Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1972).

<sup>67</sup> Oskar Neumann: *Im Schatten des Todes* (Tel Aviv, 1956), Hans Bodensieck: "Das Dritte Reich und die Lage der Juden in der Tschecho-Slowakei nach München," in *Vierteljahrhefte für Zeitgeschichte*, IX, 1961, n. 3.

translated into English and published in 2007 by a private, now defunct, publishing house. It is out of print and did not receive wide distribution. Kamenec's work was later incorporated into *The Holocaust in Slovakia: The Autonomy Period – Documents (October 6, 1938, to March 14, 1939)* (*Holokaust na Slovensku: Obdobie autonómie 6.10.1938 – 14.3.1939: Dokumenty*). This tome, which serves a scholarly audience, is a collection of archival documents compiled by Slovak scholar Eduard Nižňanský.<sup>68</sup>

Regional studies and new, interdisciplinary approaches have built on these seminal works, offering an organic interpretation of archival sources, survivor testimonies, and ego-documents to explore what this tragic interval portended for Slovak Jewry. *Forum Historiae* magazine devoted an issue in 2019 about Autonomy based on a conference hosted by the Holocaust Documentation Center in Bratislava in 2018.<sup>69</sup>

For example, Czech historian Michal Frankl portrays the deportations as a transnational event, offering a social and spatial analysis of the expulsions to no man's land. He states that Jews were expelled to a social, stateless space that was characterized by a lack of social structures.<sup>70</sup> It was a space of exclusion and abandonment or territorialized statelessness; an unstable and shifting space, and a place where Jews were kept in limbo.<sup>71</sup> Frankl's research also challenges some long held assumptions. For example, he suggests that Eduard Nižňanský's estimate that 7,500 Jews were expelled into no man's land is overstated, positing that the number may be closer to 4,000.<sup>72</sup> However, the actual total will probably never be fully ascertained. In 2015, James Mace Ward linked the expulsion of Jews to no man's land and Slovak-Hungarian relations, delving into the role of border changes as a precursor to genocide. Though the list of sources provided in this article is not exhaustive, these scholars, in addition to others I have quoted in this article, have advanced the field and updated what is known about Autonomy. Seeking ways to bring this information into greater discourse, in Slovak and in other languages, would be most desirable.

Why is this period overlooked? Some theories might include:

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<sup>68</sup> Eduard Nižňanský, *Holokaust na Slovensku: Obdobie Autonómie 6.10.1938 – 14.3.1939 Dokumenty* (The Holocaust in Slovakia: The Autonomy Period 6.10.1938 – 14.3.1939, Documents) (Bratislava, Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 2001).

<sup>69</sup><https://www.ehri-project.eu/report-ehri-workshop-slovak-autonomy-1938-%E2%80%93-1939-initial-phase-holocaust-and-persecution>.

<sup>70</sup> Michal Frankl, p. 92.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

- Though the political developments of the period are well covered in the historiography, the number of texts in English about this period is relatively small. The majority of scholarly work about Autonomy is in Slovak. There is a handful of publications in Czech, German, and English, many of which are no longer in print.
- Another factor might be that, even though the period itself was dramatic, the persecution and deportation of Jews would not become deadly in Slovakia until three and a half years later. Though inhumane, no one perished in the no man's land debacle. There remain more pressing issues concerning Slovakia's culpability in the Holocaust to explore.
- Though new anti-Jewish regulations were issued during this interlude, the Autonomous Slovak parliament passed no acts of antisemitic legislation. There were practical reasons other than the brevity of the regime that explain this: England had offered funds and loans to Czecho-slovakia on the condition that there be no discriminatory racial legislation passed, which impeded such steps.
- The period itself was brief when viewed within the larger context of the Nazi era.
- The persecution of Jews during Autonomy Period is a complex subject to research. Source material is scattered among archives all over the country. Record keeping for the period was poor or nonexistent in some places, further hampering study. Many existing documents have not been surveyed. Though additional research is needed, the Autonomous Land of Slovakia was officially part of Czechoslovakia's First Republic and not part of the Slovak wartime state, meaning that additional resources may be located in files pertaining to interwar Czechoslovakia that await discovery.
- The level of complexity associated with the Autonomy Period does not necessarily lend itself to a ready transition into discourse, and as a result, the Autonomy Period has mainly remained the province of historians.

## Conclusion

When contemplating the significance of the Autonomy Period, it is important to consider the onslaught of anti-Jewish regulations, the rapid change in societal norms, the harsh official rhetoric, and the relentless propaganda that were unleashed against Slovak Jews as the Hlinka

Slovak People's Party consolidated its grip on power. The transports into no man's land underscored the Jews' precarious position. Remembering victims' voices from the period allows us to see the human dimension of the tragedy that loomed:

*In the fall of 1938, all of the Jews from Hungary and Poland who did not have (Slovak) citizenship or any residency papers were taken away. We were in the first group of vehicles, and they took us over the Hungarian border...I remember that my older brother had one or two blankets and we stayed in a haystack. We were there for ten or fourteen days. There were many families there, dozens and dozens. Then, a political decision was made, and we went back home. We got to our house and there was nothing there. Not even a spoon. The neighbors had taken everything.*<sup>73</sup> Z.B.

The sudden loss of rights and expulsion of unwanted Jews during Autonomy Period was not a minor, isolated episode. The transports to no man's land were one of several expulsions of Jews that took place in 1938 in Eastern and Central Europe, meaning that they were integral to Nazi ideology at that time. It was the year when Nazi ideology viewed expulsion and the attendant loss of citizens' rights as an acceptable solution for the persecution of perceived enemies.<sup>74</sup>

Though it failed from a logistical perspective, the deportations of Slovak Jews to no man's land succeeded in the sense that it clearly signaled that no gentle fate awaited Slovak Jewry. In 1942, the Slovak State would deport nearly 58,000 Jews to occupied Poland between March 25<sup>th</sup> and October 20<sup>th</sup>, and the transports to no man's land were a dress rehearsal for sad events yet to come.

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<sup>73</sup> Z. B. was a man born in 1932 in Humenne. He made this quote during an interview conducted in 2006 as part of a research project on children during the Holocaust. See Monika Vrzgulová, *Deti holokaustu* (Children of the Holocaust). (Bratislava, Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2007), pp. 53-62.

<sup>74</sup> See Jacob Toury, "From Forced Emigration to Expulsion - the Jewish Exodus over the Non-Slavic Borders of the Reich as a Prelude to the 'Final Solution,'" *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 17, (1987), pp. 51-92.

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Timeline of Events

Appendix II – Munich Agreement Map

Appendix III – Map of First Vienna Award

Appendix IV – Photo of Jewish refugee camp in No Man's Land

### Appendix 1: Timeline of Events

September 29, 1938 – The Munich Agreement is signed by England, France, Germany, and Italy. It stipulates that Czechoslovakia cede the Sudetenland to Germany in exchange for Hitler's promise that this arrangement will avert a war.

October 6, 1938 – Official declaration of Slovak Autonomy.

November 2, 1938 – The First Vienna Award makes major changes to the Hungarian-Slovak border.

March 14, 1939 – Autonomy ends, the Slovak State is established.

March 15, 1939 – The Nazis abrogate the Munich Agreement by invading the Czech lands and create the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

### Appendix II - Munich Agreement Map – Sudetenland

Please note: There is a slight inaccuracy in this map in that what is now a part of modern-day Bratislava and the Devin Castle Area were also handed over to the Nazis as part of the Agreement, making Germany Slovakia's immediate neighbor.





Source: <https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/10188/where-exactly-was-the-sudetenland>

### Appendix III – Map of First Vienna Award



Source: <https://kafkadesk.org/2021/11/02/on-this-day-in-1938-the-first-vienna-award-forced-czechoslovakia-to-surrender-territory-to-hungary/>

### Appendix IV – Photo of Jewish Refugee Camp in No Man's Land



Source: <https://plus.sme.sk/c/20935690/ziadne-vyvrcholenie-snah-slovakov-iba-dalsia-hanba.html>

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