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COMMEMORATIVE CONUNDRUMS:
THE CREATION OF NATIONAL DAY CALENDARS
IN INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY

The end of the First World War resulted in the breakup of Austria-Hungary and the creation of a number of new nation-states from its ashes, including Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Independence meant that these newly created countries were free – obliged even – to develop their own official national political cultures and to construct their own historical narratives. An important role in this effort was played by the establishment of national days, through which the official state view of national history and future aspirations could be reflected. The function of these official narratives and of the accompanying national day commemorations was twofold: to help justify the existence of the new state to the outside world, in particular by accentuating historical origins that reached back to medieval times; and to act as a unifying force for the population of the new state, which was not always homogenous.

In this article, I investigate the creation of the national day calendars for interwar Czechoslovakia and Hungary and assess the extent to which they were successful: did they help forge a sense of unity and thus assist in the process of nation-building, or did the attempt to impose a certain level of cultural homogeneity simply exacerbate already existing fault-lines within the new state? This article is also a comparative study of two Habsburg successor states that shared similar post-empire trajectories. In his introductory essay to a volume on commemorations in the central European states, Emil Brix argues that even after the breakup of the Habsburg Empire and the creation of independent nation-states, “public commemorations [...], at least in their form and function, continued to be interrelated with one another”.¹ As I will show, the forms and functions of national days in Czechoslovakia and Hungary after 1918 did indeed share many commonalities – but it is particularly in relation to the differences and divergences between them where the interesting questions arise.²

¹ *Brix, Emil: Kontinuität und Wandel im öffentlichen Gedenken in den Staaten Mitteleuropas. In: Brix, Emil/Stekl, Hannes (eds.): Der Kampf um das Gedächtnis: Öffentliche Gedenktage in Mitteleuropa. Wien 1997, 13-21, here 13.*

² Over the past two decades, there has been a surge in research into various aspects of collective identity and memory in Central and Eastern Europe. See for example: *Csáky, Moritz/Mannová, Elena (eds.): Collective Identities in Central Europe in Modern Times. Bratislava 1999.* – *Gerő, András: Képzelt Történelem: Fejezetek a magyar szimbolikus politika XIX-XX. századi történetéből [Imagined History: Chapters from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Hungarian Symbolic Politics]. Budapest 2004.* – *Rak, Jiří: Bývalí Čechové: české historické mýty a stereotypy [They were Czechs: Czech Historical Myths and Stereotypes]. Jinočany 1994.* – *Macura, Vladimír: Masarykovy boty a jiné semi(o)fejetony [Masaryk's Boots and Other Semi[o]-Sketches]. Praha 1993.*

In Czechoslovakia, the question was not just one of how and by whom national days should be commemorated, but also what dates should be chosen. The authorities in Prague selected the dates they preferred, but this created tension not just amongst minorities but also amongst the Slovaks. By contrast, in Hungary the process can be described as a relatively straightforward one, especially given that the template for Hungarian national days was already available from the second half of the 19th century and that the dates to be selected were more or less obvious. The Treaty of Trianon (1920), which established the Kingdom of Hungary's borders, resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the country's territory and almost 65% of its population to its neighbours, including a large chunk to Czechoslovakia.³ This meant that Hungary had now become an ethnically homogenous state, and as such did not have to deal with the same complexities as Czechoslovakia, which was plagued by ethnic cleavages.⁴ However, it also meant that over 3 million Hungarians now found themselves living as minority populations in Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Hence, while the commemoration of national days in Hungary was a relatively problem-free issue, this did not mean that the situation was comfortable for all Hungarians. The large Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia (or the *Felvidék* in Hungarian) was forced into the position of choosing whether to commemorate Hungarian national days – most of which were banned – or to show their loyalty (albeit on a forced basis) to their new state, Czechoslovakia.

National day commemorations are rich cultural symbols, involving their actual “performance”, the participation of the public, the economic and organisational aspects of their actual staging, as well as the messages and historical narratives that they convey.⁵ My primary interest in this article, however, is limited to the arguments and rhetoric that surrounded the creation of the official national day calendars in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the interwar period.⁶ Hence, I concentrate on

³ *Romsics, Ignác: Magyarország Története a XX. Században [Hungary in the Twentieth Century]. Budapest 2005, 145-147.*

⁴ For the ethnic profile of interwar Hungary see *ibid.* 145. – For Czechoslovakia see: *Leff, Carol Skalnik: National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918-1987. Princeton, Guildford 1988, 16.*

⁵ The literature on what a national day is is rather sparse and the concept – with some exceptions – is usually discussed under the heading of commemorations and traditions. Some key works include: *Connerton, Paul: How Societies Remember. Cambridge 1989.* – *Gilis, John R. (ed.): Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity. Princeton 1994.* – *Hobsbawm, Eric: Introduction: Invention of Traditions. In Hobsbawm/Ranger Terrence (eds.): The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge 1993, 1-14.* – *McCrone, David/McPherson, Gayle (eds.): National Days: Constructing and Mobilising National Identity. Basingstoke, New York 2009.* See especially the Introduction on 1-9 and the concluding chapter on 212-221, both written by the editors of the volume. – *Schwartz, Barry: The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory. In: Social Forces 61 (1982) no. 2, 374-402.* – *Zerubavel, Eviatar: Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past. Chicago 2004.*

⁶ I use the term national day for a number of reasons. In Hungary this was the official term. Although in Czechoslovakia two terms were used – state holiday (for 28 October only) and memorable days – the days were often referred to as national days in popular discourse. Moreover, the term national day calendar is more apt for both Hungary and Czecho-

analysing the official discourse of the Czech and Hungarian establishment, making occasional forays into the reception of these official national days by the Slovaks and by the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.⁷

Creating the Czechoslovak Official National Day Calendar

Interwar Czechoslovakia had five official “national days”, not counting religious feast days. These were: 28 October (which commemorated the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918); Jan Hus Day; St Wenceslas Day; Saints Cyril and Methodius Day; and 1 May.⁸ Aside from religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, public holidays were divided into two categories: the state holiday celebrated on 28 October (*státní svátek*) on the one hand and memorial days (*památné dny*) on the other.

The first law on the national days of independent Czechoslovakia was passed in 1919, giving 28 October, the anniversary of the establishment of Czechoslovakia the previous year, the status of a state holiday – thus making it the most important national day.⁹ The draft legislation was presented to the Assembly by František Weyr, a leading member of the Czech National Democratic Party, who argued that introducing 28 October as a state holiday would serve a double purpose. Firstly, there was the need to establish 28 October as a day of commemoration, the first non-religious, state-wide commemoration.¹⁰ Secondly, doing so would mark a significant break in tradition as the previous law of the Habsburg monarchy, which the Czechs – unlike the Hungarians – were obliged to follow, did not recognise secular national days, but only religious feast days. But, Weyr argued, a modern state requires celebrations not linked to the Church in order to underline the separation between

slovakia. In Hungary, the state did not include all the Hungarians to whom the national days were addressed. In Czechoslovakia, 28 October was the only national day that it was expected everyone in the whole state would celebrate – this was even enforced by Paragraph 3 of the 1925 national day law, which I will discuss below – while in Slovakia the feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius was also commemorated.

⁷ For the German minority in Czechoslovakia and their reaction to some of the national day commemorations see, for example: *Wingfield*, Nancy: *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*. Cambridge/MA, London 2007, 172-174.

⁸ In 1928, 2 July, the day commemorating the 1917 Battle of Zborov, the first victory of the Czechoslovak Legions over the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was also made a national day, known officially as Czechoslovak Army Day. See: *Hájková*, Dagmar/*Wingfield*, Nancy M.: *Czech(-oslovak) National Commemorations During the Interwar Period: Tomáš G. Masaryk and the Battle of White Mountain Avenged*. In: *Acta Historiae* 18 (2010) No. 3, 425-452. – *Galandauer*, Jan: *2.7.1917 Bitva u Zborova: Česká Legenda [The Battle of Zborov: Czech Legend]*. Praha 2002.

⁹ *Zákon ze dne 14. října 1919, jímž se prohlašuje 28. říjen za svátek státní [Law of 14 October 1919, Proclaiming 28 October as a State Holiday]*, číslo [number, č.] 555/1919, *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu Československo [Body of Law of the Czechoslovak Republic, Sb.]*, 781.

¹⁰ *Národní shromáždění československé 83. schůze, 14 October 1919 [83. Meeting of the Czechoslovak National Assembly on 14 October 1919]*. URL: <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1918ns/ps/stenprot/083schuz/s083002.htm> (last accessed 03.04.2014).

Church and state. Through the establishment of its own national days, therefore, the new Czechoslovak state would present itself as a democratic and progressive country, in stark contrast to the more retrogressive and unjust Habsburg context – even if religious allegiances still played a decisive role in the creation of Czechoslovakia’s national day calendar.

The state day on 28 October to commemorate the foundation of Czechoslovakia was thus seen as playing a crucial role in the construction of the new state’s identity – specifically in presenting its supposed political identity as being that of a modern European state.¹¹ This new identity was articulated in a speech given by President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk to the National Assembly on the first anniversary of Czechoslovakia’s independence.¹² Masaryk claimed that the Czechs and Slovaks had “achieved an independent republic because we fervently believe in our national ideals”, and that the task was now to maintain and build upon the democratic model chosen for the state.

Yet, other than the state holiday of 28 October, for the first seven years of its existence, Czechoslovakia lacked a comprehensive national day and public holiday law. The Habsburg festival calendar had a heavy concentration on Catholic and imperial holidays, and the Czechoslovak government sought to reduce their number. There was also an economic motivation for having fewer holidays.¹³ But the government found it difficult to decide just which religious holidays to remove, given the diversity of traditions throughout the country. This meant that the huge pressure to instigate a Jan Hus Day on 6 July – from liberal nationalists, guilds, voluntary associations, local governments – was in vain, as there was little space left within the calendar for yet another holiday.¹⁴

In response to the frustration resulting from this indecision over declaring Jan Hus Day a national day, various (Czech) liberal nationalist organisations (many of which were closely linked to the state) organised their own commemorative events for the occasion. These groups included the Sokol athletics movement, women’s clubs, Freethought (*Volná myšlenka*), a variety of workers’ organisations and similar associations – although, since many of these had close links with the (governing) political elite, it may be fairly safely assumed that their efforts were to some extent at least state supported, if not state sponsored. For the 1919 Hus commemorations, for example, homeowners in Vinohrady, then a Prague suburb, were asked “to decorate [their] houses with banners” in celebration.¹⁵ On 6 July 1919 Sokol organised

¹¹ Dagmar Hájková points out that Masaryk was especially keen on 28 October to become a full state holiday, although the press often referred to it as a national day. See: *Hájková, Dagmar: 28. říjen a jeho podoby* [28 October and Its Forms]. In: *Kostrbová, Lucie/ Malínská, Jana* (eds.): 1918. Model komplexního transformačního procesu? [1918. A Model for a Complex Transformation Process?]. Praha 2010, 219-232. See especially 221-222.

¹² Národní shromáždění československé, 85. schůze, 28 října 1919 [85th Meeting of the National Assembly of Czechoslovakia on 28 October 1919]. URL: <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1918ns/ps/stenprot/085schuz/s085001.htm> (last accessed 04.04.2014).

¹³ *Paces*, Cynthia: Prague Panoramas. National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century. Pittsburgh 2009, 116.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 117-118.

¹⁵ Husovy Oslavy [Hus celebrations]. In: *Národní politika*, 1 July 1919, 3. – See also articles

sporting contests and street celebrations in Vyšehrad and the working-class strongholds of Žižkov and Smíchov.¹⁶

Lectures on Jan Hus were given at Charles University and attempts were made to link his tradition with the legacy of the Battle of White Mountain.¹⁷ In Charles University's Great Hall the Hus commemoration was tied in with the commemoration of Jan Jesenský, the rector of the University, who had been executed in 1621 on Old Town Square along with 26 other nobleman in retaliation for the Protestant uprising.¹⁸ The central commemoration took place at the Jan Hus monument in Old Town Square, with Czechoslovak Army garrisons present among the nationalist organisations attending the event. The monument was covered in flowers in a strictly orderly fashion.¹⁹ Hus was presented as "the first conscious apostle of Czech democracy", who taught that the Czechs "must stand inalienably for a set of moral and civic virtues."²⁰ Less than a year after rioting protestors had demolished the Marian Column, which had been seen as a Catholic/Habsburg symbol, the public space of Old Town Square was again being used to underline the final victory of the Czech/Protestant identity over its Habsburg/Catholic opposite number – a struggle that – so the imagery implied – had been waged over several centuries.²¹

The other historical symbol of Bohemia, St Wenceslas, was also remembered on 28 September, the anniversary of his assassination by his pagan brother Boleslav in 929. The newspaper *Národní politika* published opinion pieces on Wenceslas and described the events held by non-state actors in honour of the saint on 28 September of the same year.²² Wenceslas was typified in the paper as a figure who "encouraged the Czech people in their hopes, soldiers in their bravery, the Czech political struggle in its persistence and confidence" and who was "the symbol for Czechs

on the importance of Hus in Czech(oslovak) history and symbolic politics: V Husův den [On Hus Day]. In: *Národní listy*, 6 July 1922, 1.

¹⁶ See, for example, the Jan Hus commemoration in 1919: Husovy oslavy. In: *Národní politika*, 2 July 1919, 3. – For celebrations in later years see, for example: Husovy oslavy. In: *Národní listy*, 7 July 1923, 1-2.

¹⁷ Husovy Oslavy. In: *Národní politika*, 1 July 1919, 3. – For the programme see also: Husův den [Hus's Day]. In: *Národní listy*, 1 July 1919, 1-2. This article also reported on Hus celebrations in Bratislava and Vienna. See p. 2. – For Hus commemorations in Slovakia in this period see, for example: Oslava M. J. Husa v Bratislave a v Prahe [Hus Celebrations in Bratislava and Prague]. In: *Slovenská politika*, 7 July 1922, 2.

¹⁸ Husovy Oslavy. In: *Národní politika*, 2 July 1919, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 4.

²⁰ Hus (6. července 1415-6. července 1919.) [Hus (6 July 1415-6 July 1919)]. In: *Národní politika*, 6 June 1919, 1-2, 1.

²¹ The Marian column had stood on Old Town Square since 1650, when it was erected to commemorate the victory of the Habsburgs over the Protestant Swedes in 1648 during the Thirty Years' War. In the 19th century, however, the column came to symbolise the hated Habsburg rule, and was associated with Habsburg victory over the Bohemian estates at the Battle of White Mountain in November 1620. In November 1918 a mob returning from White Mountain, just outside of Prague, demolished the statue. See: *Hojda*, Zdeněk/*Pokorný*, Jiří: *Pomníky a Zapomínky* [Memorials and Forgetting]. Litomyšl 1996, 28-31.

²² See examples in: *Stoklas*, Jiří V.: *Český národní kult svěťce Václava* [The Czech National Cult of St Wenceslas]. In: *Národní politika*, 28 September 1919, 1-2.

of their faith in the future”.²³ The Catholic daily *Čech* reported a large public commemoration organised by the Catholic Church in commemoration of Wenceslas, which attracted around 60,000 participants.²⁴

Miracles – although not something that would necessarily impress non-Catholics – were also attributed to Wenceslas in terms of saving the Czech nation in times of need. Examples include the Battle of Kressenbrunn in 1260, when Ottokar II Přemysl defeated King Béla IV of Hungary, or when Wenceslas apparently helped the Czechs during the First World War by sending the Czech Legions to fight in the war against the Austro-Hungarians “at the worst moment”, thus achieving the independence of the Bohemian Lands.²⁵ In other words, Wenceslas was remembered as an “important” historical figure who could be used as “evidence” for the continuous existence of a Czech state over the centuries and thus as someone who could provide sustenance to the Czechs in times of need.

Indeed, the Czech politicians and thinkers who overwhelmingly dominated the drive for the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia adhered to the motifs of the Czech national movement based upon the historical narrative developed by František Palacký, which foregrounded the Hussite movement and its founder, the 15th-century religious reformer Jan Hus.²⁶ In Palacký’s trenchantly anti-German and anti-Catholic schema, Hus is seen as a proto-democrat who campaigned against corruption in the Catholic Church, which was in collusion with the autocratic Austrian-German Habsburgs.

Whose Day Is It Anyway? The 1925 National Day Law Debate

While 28 October may – at first at least – have been an easy national day to establish, as it presented a future vision for the new state, the task of commemorating the past of the lands that encompassed Czechoslovakia proved to be a much stickier affair. By 1925, a draft bill on national days had been drawn up by the *Pětka*,²⁷ the group of five coalition party leaders who, as Peter Bugge notes, effectively “decided what issues to put on the political agenda [...] as well as what to do with them.”²⁸

²³ *Ibid.* 1.

²⁴ Veliký den katolické Praha [Great Day for the Catholics of Prague]. In: *Čech*, 29 September 1919, 1.

²⁵ *Stoklas*: Český národní kult svěťce Václava 1 (cf. fn. 22).

²⁶ *Palacký*, František: History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia. In: *Trencsényi*, Balázs/*Kopeček*, Michal (eds.): Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770-1945): Texts and Commentaries, Volume II, National Romanticism, The Formation of National Movements. Budapest, New York 2007, 51-56. – For the role of Hus in the 19th-century national historical narrative, see also: *Cabanel*, Patrick: Protestantism in the Czech Historical Narrative and Czech Nationalism of the Nineteenth Century. In: *National Identities* 11 (2009) No. 1, 31-43.

²⁷ *Paces*: Prague Panoramas 119 (cf. fn. 13).

²⁸ *Bugge*, Peter: Czech Democracy 1918-1938 – Paragon or Parody? In: *Bohemia* 47 (2006) No. 1, 3-28, 14. The *Pětka* consisted of the leading politicians from the five major parties: the Agrarians, National Democrats, Czechoslovak People’s Party, Social Democrats and National Socialists. The decision-making process was extremely secretive and members of the group did not even take notes.

Nonetheless, early drafts of the law – which would have abolished all religious holidays except Christmas – were eventually worked into a compromise bill that contained three civic holidays (28 October, 1 May and 6 July), two semi-religious holidays commemorating significant historical figures (Saints Cyril and Methodius on 5 July and St Wenceslas on 28 September), and a number of Catholic religious feast days bequeathed from the Habsburg era, including Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Ascension, All Saints Day and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.²⁹

The debate in the National Assembly on the law, held in late March and early April 1925, was often ferocious, reflecting the deep splits that existed between Protestants and Catholics in Czechoslovak society, which were further magnified in the cleavage between Czech Protestant liberal nationalists and conservative Catholic Slovaks. Although the parliamentary debates had ultimately little effect on the national day law – the decisions of the *Pětka* being more influential – they are nevertheless of great historical interest as the National Assembly at least provided a forum in which the opposing views confronted each other.

Even the parties that were represented in the *Pětka* did not always agree on who or what should be commemorated, giving rise to divisions running along ethnic, religious and localist lines. The Hungarian-language paper *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* reported on 14 March 1925 that, whilst it seemed that the coalition parties had reached an agreement on the national day law, in the morning the Catholic-oriented Czechoslovak People's Party, led by Monsignor Jan Šrámek announced that it could not stand behind a law that was not acceptable to Catholics.³⁰ The paper informed its readers that the *Pětka* was now trying to convince some of the opposition and minority parties to vote in favour of the draft, although this goal would be difficult to achieve, as the German and Hungarian people's parties were exercising passive resistance to the law. However, *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* advised the coalition parties that, instead of trying to pass the bill, they should establish only one or two state holidays and leave it to the various churches and associations to decide upon their own holidays.

Unsurprisingly, *Prágai Magyar Hírlap's* advice fell on deaf ears. The debate in the Chamber of Deputies on 21 March 1925 opened with general remarks by Josef Černý, a backbench member of the Agrarian Party. His contribution is of particular interest as he also happened to be the son-in-law of the prime minister and *Pětka* member, Antonín Švehla.³¹ It can be assumed, then, that Černý had been selected to advance the *Pětka* position that had already been decided upon behind closed doors, aimed at compromise and at satisfying everyone by including everything. Černý proposed a national day calendar that included (in addition to 28 October as Foundation of State Day) Cyril and Methodius Day, as well as St Wenceslas Day and

²⁹ *Paces*: Prague Panoramas 119 (cf. fn. 13).

³⁰ A cseh néppárt nem szavazza meg az ünnepekről szóló javaslatot [The Czech People's Party Will Not Vote for the Proposal on the Celebrations]. In: *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 14 March 1925, 3.

³¹ *Miller*, Daniel: Forging Political Compromise: Antonín Švehla and the Czechoslovak Republican Party, 1918-1933. Pittsburgh 1999, 164.

Jan Hus Day. All these figures, he argued, were important for the Czechoslovak nation and were thus worthy of commemoration.³² He gave a brief historical justification of the inclusion of the 9th-century Byzantine Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius, claiming that they had “established the Slavic alphabet”.³³

St Wenceslas and Jan Hus both received lengthy treatments from Černý. St Wenceslas had been seen by “the Czech nation for nearly a millennium” as its national patron, whose name is the healing symbol of Czechoslovak independence [...] and whose cult has become so widespread in the Bohemian Lands that his day was not regarded purely as a religious holiday, but principally as a national celebration.³⁴

This is an important distinction as it “de-Catholicised” Wenceslas in order to make him acceptable to the strong liberal nationalist tendency that favoured the Protestant Hussite tradition. Even so, reverence for St Wenceslas, Černý continued, is also evident in the St Wenceslas Chorale “that had been sung at all the famous and unfortunate times of our nation.” Furthermore, the Bohemian army had fought under the saint’s banner since the 13th century. To offer a more contemporary example of Wenceslas’ significance and stature, Černý pointed to the first gold coin that was minted for the new Republic, the Czechoslovak ducat, which bore an image of the saint.³⁵

Černý attempted to weave a coherent historical narrative capable of harmoniously accommodating both St Wenceslas and Jan Hus. This narrative still prioritised Hus as symbolising the values and identity of the Czechoslovak nation, whilst characterising Wenceslas as the patron saint and general symbol of the new Republic, whose usefulness lay in the fact that he gave historical weight to the new and relatively fragile state. Černý proclaimed Hus to be the country’s “greatest son and the greatest Czech, whose name is linked to [...] the most celebrated age in our national history.”³⁶ Hus was “the first awakener”, an “advocate of [the nation’s] right and freedom, a fearless fighter for the moral and spiritual liberation of mankind.” Černý argued that “[t]herein lies the huge importance of Hus, not only for the Czechoslovak nation, but for the entire cultured world.”³⁷ In this sense, he was attempting to place Czechoslovakia within the western European democratic tradition by arguing that Hus was an important contributor to it, asserting that the Czechoslovaks were not simply followers but had also provided leadership in this respect.

Černý claimed that there was nothing new to commemorating Hus, as he had been honoured since the 15th century, and it was only the defeat of the Bohemian nobles at White Mountain in 1620 by the Habsburgs that had put an end to his ven-

³² Zpráva výboru ústavně-právního k vládnímu návrhu (5061) zákona o nedělích, svátcích a památných dnech republiky Československé (tisk 5119) [Report of the Committee for Constitutional Law on Government Proposal 5061 Regarding Sundays, Holidays and Memorable Days of the Czechoslovak Republic (printed paper 5119)] on 21.03.1925, Session 336. URL: <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1920ns/ps/stenprot/336schuz/s336001.htm> (last accessed 13.12.2013).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

eration. The foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic had, however, restored normality and “most of the nation worships Hus’ monument *de facto*”. The proposed law was thus no more than a legal formality, making 6 July a national day of commemoration.³⁸ Commemoration of Hus on this day had indeed been a “grassroots” phenomenon that had attracted widespread support in recent years, but Černý still felt the need to qualify the level of support as being from most of the nation, and not all of it, indicating that Hus, while he was the most important figure defining the national identity of many, remained a divisive figure for others.

Černý’s cheery and hopeful opening tone was not to last, however, and the remainder of the debate in the National Assembly on the law was often vitriolic. The main point of controversy was indeed whether to establish an official national day in honour of Jan Hus. The Slovaks in particular protested that he was of little relevance to them, a fact that galvanised them into questioning even the necessity of 28 October as a state holiday that they too should be obliged to commemorate. The priority given to a Bohemian Protestant reformer was important enough to push Catholic Slovaks into questioning whether Czechoslovakia belonged to them in the same way as it belonged to the Czechs. This produced differing interpretations of the foundation of Czechoslovakia, with the Slovaks arguing that they would prefer to commemorate 30 October, the date when they signed the Martin Declaration and officially joined Czechoslovakia, as their Foundation of State Day.³⁹

It can indeed be asked why 28 October 1918 in particular was selected as Foundation of State Day. On 18 October, T. G. Masaryk, Edvard Beneš and Milan Rastislav Štefánik had issued the Washington Declaration of Independence, which outlined the fundamentals of a democratic Czechoslovak Republic. The Declaration “claim[ed] the right of Bohemia to be reunited with her Slovak brethren of Slovakia, once part of our national State, later torn from our national body”.⁴⁰ Ten days later, on 28 October the press in Prague published the note of the Foreign Minister of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Gyula Andrassy the Younger, on the conditions under which Austria would sign the peace agreement. This was misinterpreted by many as a surrender – the newspaper *Národní politika* had posters with the word *Příměří* [Armistice] printed – and people started gathering on the streets of Prague to celebrate Austria’s capitulation.⁴¹ Representatives of the National Committee in Prague – Alois Rašín, Antonín Švehla, Jiří Stříbrný, František Soukup and the lone Slovak Vavro Šrobár – the “men of October 28”, proclaimed independent Czecho-

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ In the Martin Declaration, also called the Declaration of the Slovak Nation, the Slovak National Council proclaimed that they were the only ones – and not the Hungarian government – authorised to speak and act in the name of the Slovak nation. The Declaration also emphasised the common linguistic, historic and cultural ties with the Czechs and announced the Slovak nation’s future involvement in a Czecho-Slovak nation. For further details see: *Bartl*, Július (ed.): *Slovak History: Chronology and Lexicon*. Mundelein 2002, 219.

⁴⁰ Declaration of Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation, 18 October 1918. URL: <https://archive.org/details/declarationofind00cze> (last accessed 12.02.2016).

⁴¹ *Klimek*, Antonín: *Říjen 1918: Vznik Československa* [October 1918: The Formation of Czechoslovakia]. Praha 1998, 186.

slovakia by “creating its first law, through which the ‘Czechoslovak state came to life’.”⁴² Šrobár, not actually a member of the National Committee, was only incidentally involved in these events, having arrived in Prague that morning, whereupon the four Czechs had “enthusiastically adopted” him: “We finally have a Slovak!”⁴³

Slovaks back in the Slovak part of the new Czechoslovakia, however, were unaware that the country’s independence had been proclaimed in Prague on 28 October.⁴⁴ They were still unaware of it on 30 October when, two days after the Prague proclamation, representatives of the Slovak political parties formed the Slovak National Committee and issued the Declaration of the Slovak Nation. Also known as the Martin Declaration in honour of the town in which it was signed, Turčiansky Svätý Martin, it declared Slovakia’s independence from the Kingdom of Hungary, along with the wish of the Slovak people to join in a shared state with the Czechs. In this sense, the proclamation of an independent Czechoslovakia in Prague on 28 October 1918 had no Slovak participation aside from the chance appearance of Šrobár. Three members of the “men of October 28” – Švehla, Rašín and Stříbrný – were to become members of the *Pětka*. Given that there were other days that could have been selected as foundation of state day, which would have been more inclusive of the Slovaks, such as 18 October, the day the Washington Declaration of Independence was issued, it is possible that the men of the *Pětka* and proclaimers of Czechoslovak independence on 28 October deliberately selected this date in order to promote their own glory. Thus, the Czech leadership had failed to create a truly inclusive image of the national body by choosing 28 October and it is little wonder that the Slovaks were ambivalent towards it.⁴⁵

On 21 March 1925, during the debate on the bill on national days, Černý reminded the Chamber that 28 October had already been approved as a state holiday and the centuries-long “oppression of the nation by foreign powers and foreign enemy dynasties” had ended on that date.⁴⁶ It was on 28 October that the Czechs had “finally overthrown the bonds of slavery and national subjugation and proclaimed before the world the liberty of the nation.” Černý continued: “28 October is the recognition of Czechoslovak independence [...] it forever incorporated two levels of national unity, the Czech and the Slovak.”⁴⁷ His speech aimed to highlight the broader rhetoric of 28 October, which emphasised the importance of the new relationship between the Czechs and the Slovaks. Černý was here attempting to weave a unifying narrative around 28 October, to incorporate the Slovaks into its

⁴² Burda, Tomáš: Czechoslovakia Ninety Years Ago. In: Klaudyán: Internet Journal of Historical Geography and Environmental History 5 (2008) no. 2, 67-72, 69.

⁴³ Klimek: Říjen 215 (cf. fn. 41).

⁴⁴ Rychlík, Jan: Czech-Slovak Relations in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1939. In: Cornwall, Mark/ Evans, R. J. W. (eds.): Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe, 1918-1948. Oxford 2007, 13-26, 13.

⁴⁵ For a similar discussion on choosing 28 October over other dates, see also: Hájková: 28. říjen a jeho podoby 221 (cf. fn. 11).

⁴⁶ Session 336 (cf. fn. 32).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

achievements, claiming that they had been achieved by Czechs and Slovaks together. Even so, many Slovaks still felt that they were not included in Czechoslovakia on an equal footing with the Czechs, and began to question the priority given to 28 October.

The draft (and indeed the final) version of the law⁴⁸ included the controversial Paragraph 3, with its “special statutory provisions”, which Černý claimed were vital to ensure that “the importance of this great feast [of 28 October] is not disturbed”.⁴⁹ These “special statutory provisions” included equating the day of 28 October with the characteristics of a Sunday, i.e. that it would be a fully-fledged non-working day, on which shops and offices must be closed by law. For those who violated these rules there was a penalty of either a 10,000 Kč fine or a prison sentence of up to one month. This, Černý stressed, would further underline “the great national importance that 28 October will have for the Czechoslovak people.”⁵⁰

It might be asked just how reflective of the identity of the people – and especially of the minorities such as the Germans, Hungarians and some Slovaks towards whom this paragraph was aimed – 28 October was, if they had to be threatened with a month in prison to prevent them from violating the rules set out for its commemoration.⁵¹ The measure also demonstrates the great concern of the Prague-based political elite to make 28 October into the most important holiday of the nation, one intended to unite the new nation – albeit through slight coercion.

Černý’s concern to reiterate the importance of 28 October even though it had already been established as the main national day suggests that it had perhaps not quite yet won the loyalty of all Czechoslovaks. One figure did gain the acceptance of both Czechs and Slovaks in the debate on the law to govern national days: St Wenceslas. For the non-Catholic Czechs, he reinforced the historicity of the Bohemian lands, while for the Slovaks he was a harmless Catholic historical figure. Arguments did however break out over Jan Hus, as well as over proposals to commemorate John of Nepomuk as a counter to Hus. Questions were even raised as to whether Cyril and Methodius, the 9th-century missionary brothers from Thessaloniki, were relevant enough throughout the whole of Czechoslovakia to warrant a national day of their own.

Jan Hus Day: Prising Open the Cleavages of Czechoslovakia

The big battle was to come over the commemoration of Jan Hus. For Czech liberal nationalists, who dominated the rhetoric of Czech national identity, he was the founding father of Czech national ideology, to whom the 19th-century “national

⁴⁸ Zákon ze dne 3. dubna 1925 o svátcích a památných dnech republiky Československé [Law of 3 April 1925 Regarding the Holidays and Memorable Days of the Czechoslovak Republic], č. 65/1925 Sb. 433-434.

⁴⁹ Session 336 (cf. fn. 32).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ For a general discussion of the question of what it meant to be Czechoslovak in the eyes of the political elite in the Castle, see: Orzoff, Andrea: *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948*. New York 2009.

revival” owed its existence. Czech nationalists had already organised commemorative events on 6 July, the day when Hus was burnt at the stake by the Catholic Church for his “heretical” views. For the Catholics, however, whether Czech or Slovak, he represented a threat to their religion. Even worse for the Slovaks, he symbolised their (perceived) subjugation to the Czechs.⁵²

A suggestion was raised that the 14th-century Bohemian Catholic martyr John of Nepomuk also be given a national day, as a counterbalance to Jan Hus. But for Czech liberal nationalists, Nepomuk was as much a red rag as Hus was for the Slovaks and Czech Catholics. The Habsburgs had supported Nepomuk’s cult and canonisation in the 17th and 18th centuries, leading Czech nationalists in the 19th and 20th centuries to claim, as Howard Louthan describes it, that “Nepomuk was a Habsburg invention foisted on the nation to suppress allegiance to the kingdom’s true saint, Jan Hus”.⁵³ Indeed, the supporters of Nepomuk’s canonisation portrayed him as a “counter-Hus” symbol, who came to correct the Protestant errors.

During the parliamentary debate in the Chamber of Deputies on the bill, Františka Zemínová, a Czech National Social Party deputy, contrasted the historical impact of Hus and Nepomuk on the Czech people. She argued that whilst Hus represented “the highest glory” in the national history, Nepomuk represented just the opposite: “the most terrible suffering” of the nation under the Habsburgs, and that these “[t]wo symbols illuminate the [...] millennial struggle of the Slavs with Rome.”⁵⁴ Zemínová claimed that Nepomuk had only been made a saint for political reasons, whereas Hus, on the other hand, was the first to proclaim the nation’s freedom, and it was through his example that “[t]he Czech nation, free and victorious, proved that it has the right to exist” – deliberately disregarding the fact that while Hus may have been the founder of the freedom of the Czech nation, he was not seen in that way in the whole of Czechoslovakia. Moreover, she continued, 6 July fits neatly into the already existing national day calendar: by commemorating 6 July, “28 October and 1 May [are also] newly illuminated and edified”.⁵⁵ Zemínová’s argument is virulently anti-Catholic, and pan-Slavist: the Slavs had been involved in a millennial struggle (again linking back to the medieval period) against the Vatican. In the context of this struggle, Hus was a fighter who had resisted Rome’s supremacy over the Czechs, whereas Nepomuk represented Rome.

Not all Slavs agreed with Zemínová’s anti-papal sentiments, and for them Hus represented as big a threat as Nepomuk posed for the Czech liberal nationalists. The campaign against honouring Hus was led by the right-wing, conservative nationalist Slovak People’s Party. The debate centred not just on matters of ecclesial history, but on the very nature of the new Czechoslovak state and the competing symbols its constituent parts were claiming for it. Andrej Hlinka, leader of the Slovak People’s

⁵² For a general historical overview on Hus in English see: *Fudge*, Thomas A.: *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*. London, New York 2010.

⁵³ *Louthan*, Howard: *Converting Bohemia: Force and Persuasion in the Catholic Reformation*. Cambridge 2009, 293.

⁵⁴ Session 336 (cf. fn. 32).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Party and a Catholic priest, claimed he would agree to commemorate Hus if the inscription on his statue in Old Town Square were actually being adhered to, but after listening to the debate so far he had come to the realisation that it clearly meant nothing.⁵⁶ Hlinka described how he walked past the Hus statue every day and quoted its inscription as reading: “Pravdu milujte a pravdy každému přejte.” [Love the truth and wish the truth for everyone] – a slight error, as the inscription actually reads: “Milujte se, pravdy každému přejte.” [Love one another, wish the truth for everyone].⁵⁷ Hlinka also noted that the majority of the Slovaks were Catholics and thus for them Hus was a figure of no special significance. He accused the governing elite of attempting to “trample over everything” by enforcing the commemoration of Hus over that of Catholic saints, transforming the religious splits also into a split along national and local lines. As he had observed during his stays in Prague, the “national cult” was focused on Catholic saints and the city centre was dotted with their statues: St Wenceslas, Adalbert of Prague and John of Nepomuk. Why, then, commemorate Hus and “trample” on all of this?⁵⁸

Hlinka’s speech is interesting for a further reason, in that it exemplified the nexus that connected historical figures, the urban landscape of statues and physical symbols, religious/national identity, political/state symbols, and historical narratives with national day commemorations. By pointing to the statues of Catholic saints on Charles Bridge, he was claiming that they were every bit as real and present – for Czechs as much as for Slovaks such as himself – in the identity of Czechoslovakia as Jan Hus, whose statue is in Old Town Square.

The Slovak press, especially *Slovák*, the official newspaper of the Slovak People’s Party, keenly followed and echoed the debates in the National Assembly. Hlinka’s lengthy speech in the Chamber of Deputies was reproduced in full in *Slovák*,⁵⁹ underlining how much the debate resonated among the various communities of Czechoslovakia at the time and how it was seen as an opportunity to get their own “side” of the argument across. There were numerous articles protesting against the commemoration of Jan Hus in Slovakia, while others pushed for the commemoration of 30 October, instead of 28 October, as a more apt Foundation of State Day for the Slovaks.⁶⁰ *Slovák* even described the inclusion of Jan Hus in the commemorative calendar as “an insult” to Slovak Catholics and accused the Czech political elite of making “violent uses of state power against bishops and priests”.⁶¹

Jozef Tiso in particular, a Catholic priest and member of the Slovak People’s Party who was later to become the leader of the Nazi client state of the Slovak Republic between 1939-1945, promoted this theme of the commemoration of Hus as an attack

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See: Hlinkova obrana kresťanského Slovenska [Hlinka Defends Christian Slovakia]. In: *Slovák*, 24. March 1925, 1-2. – Nechceme ani 28 október ani Husa [We Want Neither 28 October nor Hus]. In: *Slovák*, 25 March 1925, 1-3.

⁶⁰ Otázka sviatkov [The Question of Holidays]. In: *Slovák*, 18 March 1925, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

on Slovak (Catholic) identity. Tiso belied any concept of Czechoslovak unity. As his biographer James Ward writes, “Since he had always constructed Slovak identity around Catholicism, it is not surprising that he rejected a Czechoslovak identity that celebrated the progressive Masaryk, the anticlerical Sokol, and the heretic Hus.”⁶² Tiso presented the creation of a Jan Hus Day for the whole of Czechoslovakia as an attempt to turn the Slovaks into Czechs and turn them away from Catholicism, thunderously proclaiming that if the Slovaks were going to be forced to commemorate Hus then they should, like the Czechs, do so with fires, where they would burn everything connected to Hus: “And at each of these celebrations, let the Slovak nation swear ... ‘We will never be Czechs, and we will never give up the Catholic Church!’”⁶³

Many of Tiso’s Slovak People’s Party colleagues refused even to consider commemorating Hus. Senator Jozef Barinka, for example, argued that the holiday of “Master Jan Hus has deeply offended 30% of the Catholic citizens of Slovakia. Why the insult?”⁶⁴ Barinka negatively contrasted Hus with Nepomuk, adamantly stating that “for the Slovaks” Jan Hus “is not a historical figure, John of Nepomuk is.” Since Hus’ reformation was unsuccessful in Slovakia, the majority of the Slovaks did not even know who he was. Barinka was almost threatening in his tone to Czech senators with his thunderous proclamation that “[t]he Slovaks will never remember Hus” and the “wounded Catholics will not harbour love and trust for the Czech nation, but [their wound] will lead to hatred towards the Czechs, which neither I nor my colleagues want.”⁶⁵

Jan Herben, a Czech senator from the right-wing National Democratic Party, felt provoked by Barinka’s comparison between Hus and Nepomuk: “I think that in the interest of maintaining the dignity of the Senate such a comparison should be left unanswered. [...] Jan Hus and John of Nepomuk cannot be compared.”⁶⁶ If, as Barinka claimed, Hus was unknown in the Slovakian part of the Republic while Nepomuk was held in high esteem, then, Herben quipped, “this is a disaster for Slovakia.” Herben proceeded to educate his Slovak colleagues and elaborated on the historic significance of Hus, again emphasising that Hus is important not only for the Czechoslovak nation, but he also possesses worldwide significance. In contrast,

⁶² Ward, James Mace: *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia*. Ithaca 2013, 85.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 92.

⁶⁴ April 1925. Zprávu ústavně-právního výboru o usnesení poslanecké sněmovny (tisk 2113) k vládnímu návrhu zákona o nedělích, svátcích a památných dnech republiky Československé. Tisk 2126. [Report of the Constitutional-Legal Committee of the Chamber of Deputies’ Resolution on the Government Bill Regarding Sundays, Holidays and Memorable Days of the Czechoslovak Republic] 3 April 1925, Session 260 at <http://www.senat.cz/zajimavosti/tisky/1vo/stena/260schuz/S260002.htm> (last accessed 02.02.2012).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Session 260 (cf. fn. 64). Herben had long been opposed to the commemoration of Nepomuk. – See: *Vlnas, Vít: Jan Nepomucký, česká legenda* [John of Nepomuk, Czech Legend]. Prague 1993, 71.

[t]he importance of John of Nepomuk is only local, and unfortunately only relates to world history insofar as historians dealt with the process of him being declared a saint. [...] It is therefore desirable that Slovakia endeavours to make the respect for John of Nepomuk disappear and to replace it with respect for Jan Hus.

As Herben concluded, this course of action “will benefit Slovakia.”⁶⁷

Czech Catholics, on the other hand, were concerned about the way in which the commemoration of Hus had been selected, as they perceived that the advocates of a Hus national day were using this opportunity to attack Catholics and their revered figure of John of Nepomuk. Even so, they were at pains to stress that – unlike the Slovaks – they were not opposed to Hus per se. Václav Myslivec, a member of the Catholic Czechoslovak People’s Party, argued that they were not “hurt” by the introduction of a Hus national day, since they agreed with about 90 % of Hus’ teachings (and since even František Palacký believed that the remaining 10 % was undesirable).⁶⁸ What they were hurt by was the fact that choosing Hus as a national day also entailed fighting the Catholics, in this case especially John of Nepomuk.

Other members of the Slovak People’s Party used the opportunity of the debate to fulminate against perceived slights against Catholics. Senator Ján Kovalik, for example, even complained about the fact that only the dates were cited in the draft law, not the actual personages or events they commemorate:

These Slavic heroes [...] have been called St Wenceslas and St Cyril and Methodius for one thousand years. [...] Those names belong to them, they are historical names [...] Yet the bill does not name ‘Saint’ Cyril, does not name ‘Saint’ Wenceslas, but says 5 July and 28 September. It seems to me that you do not want to name these Slavic heroes by their proper names, instead you give them only numbers as one does for convicts in jail!⁶⁹

The Catholic Slovak opponents of the national day law thus used the ploy of Slavism to paint the law as unpatriotic and to attack Czech nationalists. Indeed, the law, Kovalik continued, was “anti-Christian”, and would “destroy [and] annihilate Slavic culture, Christian culture, upon which the whole world’s culture is founded.”⁷⁰ Of interest, however, is his appeal to the concept of “Slavic heroes” of a thousand years ago: Cyril and Methodius (for the Slovaks) and Wenceslas (mainly for the Czechs) could function to construct a national history and national day calendar for a united Czechoslovakia as all these figures were both Slavic and Christian. Neither Hus nor Nepomuk needed to be elevated to this extent by the state while this narrative still discreetly observed the separate identities of the Slovaks and Czechs. It is as though Kovalik was saying that the people in Prague who devised this law did not have respect for such a potential common narrative, as they wanted to impose their own anti-Catholic Czech agenda.⁷¹

The Slovak People’s Party view was not universally held by Slovaks, at least not by all Slovak political parties. The Slovak Agrarian Party believed that Jan Hus Day

⁶⁷ Session 260 (cf. fn. 64).

⁶⁸ Session 336 (cf. fn. 32).

⁶⁹ Session 260 (cf. fn. 64).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

should be commemorated, since without Hus “the nation would have perished long ago”.⁷² It backed the national day law and, once it had been passed, sought to play down the controversies it raised by saying that it was now time to move on and discuss issues of greater importance, such as Church-State relations and land reform.⁷³ The more moderate position of the Agrarian Party may have been due to some extent to the fact that they were allied with the Czech Agrarian Party of Švehla and Černý.

The new national day law was eventually passed on 3 April 1925, with Jan Hus Day and 28 October firmly embedded in the national day calendar. The law stipulated the following, rather numerous, religious feasts as public holidays, giving no explanation for what they were (other than for moveable feasts): “1 January, 6 January, Ascension Day, Corpus Christi, 29 June, 15 August, 1 November, 8 December and 25 December.” As regards “memorable days” (*památné dny* i.e. national days), the law again gave the dates with no explanation: “The memorable days of the Czechoslovak Republic are: 5 July, 28 September, 6 July, 1 May and 28 October is a state holiday under the Act of 14 October 1919, No. 555.”⁷⁴ It appears that even when the national day law had been passed, discomfort with the contradictions that it contained made it difficult even to describe the events and individuals being commemorated.

Two new holidays with religious as opposed to strictly civic connotations were introduced, which could perhaps be perceived as a small concession to the Catholics and the Slovaks. These were the Day of St Cyril and Methodius and St Wenceslas Day. Thus, whilst some efforts were made to find a middle ground and include commemorations that would be satisfactory to both the Czechs and the Slovaks, the legislation that was passed presented an almost exclusively “Czech” national narrative.

Horthy's Truncated Hungary: National Days in the Service of Irredentism

In Hungary, the decisions about what should be a national day were more settled than in Czechoslovakia, with both the main interwar national days selected having a precedent, in some form, in the 19th and 20th centuries. The two official national days were: 15 March, commemorating the start of the 1848-49 revolution against the Habsburgs (which had previously been commemorated on 11 April, the day the April Laws were signed in 1848),⁷⁵ and 20 August, commemorating both the found-

⁷² Dva sviatky [Two Feasts]. In: Slovenská politika, 05 July 1925, 1. The article jointly commemorated Cyril and Methodius Day (celebrated on 5 July) and Jan Hus Day (celebrated on 6 July).

⁷³ Po sviatkoch [After the Holidays]. In: Slovenská politika, 16 April 1925, 1.

⁷⁴ Zákon č. 65/1925 Sb. 433-434 (cf. fn. 48).

⁷⁵ The so-called April (or March) Laws [*Áprilisi törvények*] were signed by Ferdinand V. The law was passed by the Hungarian Diet, which at the time had its seat in Pozsony (today Bratislava, in Slovakia). The Laws were more or less based on the Twelve Points manifesto that was circulated in Pest-Buda on 15 March 1848 when the revolution erupted. They granted Hungarian control over the National Guard, national budget and foreign policy

ation of the Hungarian state in the year 1000 and its founder St Stephen. St Stephen was a far less controversial figure in Hungary than the medieval saints and martyrs were in Czechoslovakia, and any disputes were not over the actual figure of Stephen himself, but over how his figure was used by the governing elite of Admiral Miklós Horthy.

Of greater concern for the political elites, however, was the opportunity for anti-regime protest that 15 March offered. Whilst the celebration of 20 August served as a unifying day for the nation, 15 March, with its emphasis on opposition to autocratic rule, had the potential to become a headache for the government. This indicates another marked difference between Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the inter-war period: whilst Czechoslovakia presented itself as a modern democratic state, Hungary at this time was a “kingdom without a king”, governed by the conservative regent Admiral Miklós Horthy, who ruled from March 1920 to October 1944.⁷⁶

In the first two years of Hungary’s existence as an independent state the country was a politically unstable place, experiencing two revolutions and the “White Terror”. The “Aster revolution” led by Count Mihály Károlyi in October 1918 resulted in King Charles IV standing down from the Hungarian throne. The Károlyi government was itself soon overthrown by the Communist Republic of Councils, which was in turn crushed after six months by Admiral Miklós Horthy and the National Army. The Kingdom of Hungary was then re-established on 1 March 1920. Since the Entente Powers would not agree to the return of Charles IV, Horthy was installed as head of state and Regent.⁷⁷

In consequence, “an anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, revisionist, nationalist, conservative culture dominated Hungarian politics throughout the entire inter-war period.” The chaos of the Hungarian Soviet Republic allowed this regime to present itself as “defending society from the alleged menace of Bolshevik revolution.”⁷⁸ Although its duration was brief, the Hungarian Soviet Republic was at least in power on 1 May, which it celebrated with great pomp.⁷⁹ With the fall of the Republic and the consequent persecution of Communists during the White Terror of the Horthy regime, 1 May commemorations in the name of international solidarity were banned.⁸⁰

and also removed serfdom. After the crushing of the Hungarian revolution the Laws were largely void, but Hungary did gain autonomy within the Habsburg Empire after the 1867 Compromise. See: *Gyarmati: Március hatalma, a hatalom márciusa: Fejezetek március 15. ünnepelésének történetéből* [The Power of March, the March of the Power: Chapters From the History of 15 March Commemorations]. Budapest 1998, 31.

⁷⁶ *Romsics: Magyarország Története* 153 (cf. fn. 3).

⁷⁷ *Apor, Péter: Fabricating Authenticity in Soviet Hungary. The Afterlife of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Age of State Socialism.* London 2014, 4-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 6-7.

⁷⁹ See the evocative description given by the Hungarian-born author and journalist Arthur Koestler. *Koestler, Arthur: Arrow in the Blue. The First Volume of an Autobiography: 1905-31.* London 1969, 83-84.

⁸⁰ *Voigt, Vilmos: Éljen és virágozzék ... (A budapesti május elsejéről)* [Long Live and Prosper ... (On 1 May in Budapest)]. In: *Budapest Negyed* 2 (1994) no. 3. URL: <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00003/00003/voigt.htm> (last accessed 12.05.2015).

Promoting the Nation: St Stephen's Day

During the interwar period, most Hungarians living outside of the capital of Budapest still worked in farming, and for them the main days of commemoration/celebration were the traditional 1 May festivities, carnivals and, most importantly, the harvest celebration during the fair on St Stephen's Day on 20 August. The Day of St Stephen on 20 August had a long tradition of being commemorated in some form, but it was not until the interwar years, specifically in 1920, that St Stephen's Day became a secular national day.⁸¹ As Gábor Gyáni remarks, the transition to a more secular and politicised commemoration is not surprising, as "the Horthy regime emphatically articulated its own political ideology through the language of historical mythology".⁸²

Added to this, and strengthening the new secular, more political overtones of the day, was the element of territorial revisionism, as a direct result of the Treaty of Trianon. Reversing the Treaty was high on Horthy's agenda and the issue came to permeate the 20 August commemorations during this period. The foundation of the state by King Stephen in AD 1000, his canonisation on 20 August 1083, the crown, the annual procession with the Holy Right,⁸³ and what is often referred to as the ideology/ideal of St Stephen (*Szent Istváni eszme*) made the commemoration of 20 August the perfect vehicle to transmit the messages of the Horthy regime about Trianon and Turanism (a movement popular at the time that emphasised the eastern/Asian origins of the Hungarian people). Yet, from early on, the Hungarians also saw other potentials in the St Stephen's Day commemorations, not simply "national" issues, but intertwined issues, such as economic and tourism opportunities.⁸⁴

The active promotion of St Stephen's Day as a tourism attraction began in 1926 when "Queen of the Danube" brochures published by the Tourism Office "in French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Esperanto (and which were sent in several million copies abroad) presented St. Stephen's week as the high point of the touristic season in Hungary."⁸⁵ The promotion of St Stephen's Day as an international tourist destination attempted to show off the pageantry of the day, and, of course, it was also hoped that this would provide lucrative business for the country.

The aim was that foreign tourism would also draw the attention of foreigners to Hungary's fate after the Treaty of Trianon. In 1928, Gyula Gábor published the

⁸¹ Gyáni, Gábor: *Kommemoratív Emlékezet és Történelmi Igazolás* [Commemorative Memory and Historical Justification]. In: *Veszprémy, László* (ed.): *Szent István és az államalapítás* [St Stephen and the Foundation of the State]. Budapest 2002, 569-581, here 571.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ The Holy Right (*Szent Jobb*) refers to the (allegedly) mummified right hand of St Stephen.

⁸⁴ Budapest had been promoting itself as a popular tourist destination with an elaborate marketing strategy from around 1885, under the branding of the "Paris of the East", lending the city a cosmopolitan air. The Horthy regime shifted this cosmopolitan branding to a more nationalist-conservative and inward-looking one under the new branding strategy of "Queen of the Danube". See: *Vari, Alexander*: From "Paris of the East" to "Queen of the Danube": International Models in the Promotion of Budapest Tourism, 1885-1940. In: *Zuelow, Eric G. E.* (ed.): *Touring Beyond the Nation: A Transnational Approach to European Tourism History*. Farnham 2011, 103-125, 104-105, 111-112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 113-114.

book *The history of the St Stephen's Day celebration (A Szent István napi ünnep története)*, in which he quotes a proposal published in *Az Ujság* by Archduke Joseph Francis of Austria, son of the last Palatine of Hungary. In his piece, Joseph Francis had suggested that the commemorations and celebrations on 20 August had the potential to make Budapest a major tourist attraction.⁸⁶ Gyula gleefully noted that the mayor of Budapest, Ferenc Ripka, also seemed to have read the Archduke's words, as Ripka had been encouraging the transformation of the holiday to attract greater international attention. Gábor supported these new developments, arguing that in times like these, "in our hearts we need to keep alive and care for the unbreakable hope and faith in the resurrection of Greater Hungary". The logic behind Gábor's argument appears to be that St Stephen's Day, as an entertaining and fascinating event for tourists and people living outside Hungary, had the potential to raise the country's profile and provide a showcase for its "cultural heritage", thus strengthening Hungarian claims for the restoration of the lost territories. He asks: "What would be more suitable than the Crown of St Stephen, the holy symbol of former Greater Hungary?"⁸⁷ The foreword concludes: "Let every 20 August from now on be year by year renewed, always a living demonstration against Trianon, until St Stephen's Crown shines upon us again whole, in its old light."⁸⁸

Unlike in the case of Czechoslovakia, both St Stephen's Day and the more "political" anniversary of 15 March were easy commemorations to settle on as national days for the Hungarians. Yet, as we will see, while the content and rituals of the St Stephen's Day commemorations were uncontroversial, those of 15 March were the subject of some nervousness. Even so, and perhaps precisely because of the general unanimity that St Stephen represented certain Hungarian political ideals and values, the figure of St Stephen was often mobilised in an expression of dissent, in order to argue that the political and clerical elite itself was undermining these values. *Népszava*, the paper of the Hungarian Social Democrats, attacked the government for not adhering to the ideals of St Stephen. In its coverage of the 1926 commemorations, *Népszava* featured an article by an "active Catholic priest", who "wants progress in a way that largely fits our [Social Democratic] perception, in opposition to" those Christians "who referring to "traditions" want the medieval period back".⁸⁹ The anonymous priest argues that although the regime continuously refers to the figure of St Stephen, they act completely against his ideals.

The core of the article's argument is that whilst St Stephen realised that the Hungarians needed to turn towards the West to be able to survive (by adopting Christianity and establishing relations with the medieval European powers), the cur-

⁸⁶ Gábor, Gyula: *A Szent István napi ünnep története* [The History of the St Stephen Day Celebrations]. Budapest 1928 (Franklin Társulat).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 9. For a report on the success of attracting foreign visitors to the capital see: Páratlan érdeklődés mutatkozik Szent István napja iránt [There is an Unmatched Interest in St Stephen's Day]. In: *Az Ujság*, 15 August 1925, 3.

⁸⁹ Szent István és a művelt Nyugat: Szent István-napi gondolatok [St Stephen and the Cultivated West: Thoughts on St Stephen's Day]. In: *Népszava*, 20 August 1926, 1-2, here 1.

rent generation of the 1920s, who often think that they are more Turanian than the ancient pagan Hungarians, reject Western influences such as the rule of law that Stephen fought so hard to protect. This well illustrates the way in which Stephen was a universally accepted but multi-vocal symbol, who was used by opposing groups with conflicting positions (from nationalists to social progressives) to argue that the other side was not truly “Hungarian” as they diverged from Stephen’s message.

In Hungary, in sharp contrast to Czechoslovakia, where the commemoration of medieval figures divided society along both religious and ethnic lines, St Stephen appealed to everyone, from the left to the right and from religious to non-religious people alike. The main draw of St Stephen lay in the message of the unity of the nation, including the “lost territories”. Whilst the figure of Stephen was not divisive, how certain groups used his image was often debated. The Social Democrats did not agree with the regime’s conservative-nationalist image of Stephen and instead highlighted Stephen’s European credentials. The Catholic Church, supportive of the overall message of the regime, also sought to claim ownership of the St Stephen commemoration through its religious monopoly. The greatest opportunity for this came with the 34th International Eucharistic Congress of 1938, which was held in Budapest and which coincided with the 900th anniversary of St Stephen’s death.

The Congress took place between 25 and 29 May, followed soon afterwards by the official St Stephen Commemorative Year celebrations. The Congress made the St Stephen commemorations into an international event, attracting thousands of visitors to the capital.⁹⁰ The Eucharistic delegation arrived in Hungary on 23 May 1938. The Congress opened on 25 May on Heroes’ Square, although the main attraction was the Eucharistic procession of a flotilla on the Danube that took place on 26 May, during which the papal legate gave his blessing to the event.⁹¹ On 29 May the Congress ended and the St Stephen Commemorative Year began.

In preparation for the commemoration of the 900th anniversary of Stephen’s death in 1936, the National Committee for the St Stephen Commemorative Year (*Szent István Emlékév Országos Bizottsága*) was established to oversee all the preparations for the jubilee celebrations.⁹² One proposal was to rename District V in Budapest from Leopoldstadt (*Lipótváros*) – so named in 1790 in honour of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II – to St Stephen town (*Szent István város*).⁹³ At a meeting of the General Assembly of the Municipality of Budapest on 2 June 1937 this proposal was discussed and a motion was forwarded to the Minister of the Interior.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ See: Csehszlovákiából tízezrek érkeznek az eucharisztikus világtalálkozásra [Tens of Thousands are Arriving from Czechoslovakia for the Eucharistic World Congress]. In: *Népszava*, 25.05.1938, 12. – Népáradat [Deluge of People]. In: *Népszava*, 28.05.1938, 1.

⁹¹ *Moravék*, Endre (ed.): *A Szent István Emlékév* [St Stephen Commemorative Year]. Budapest 1940 (A Szent István Emlékév Országos Bizottsága) 185-186.

⁹² Budapest Főváros Levéltára [Budapest City Archives, hereafter BFL], IV. 1402. b 1274/1937, 1-4, here 3. Letter from Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi to Jenő Karafiáth. 20 October 1937.

⁹³ Today District V is called *Lipótváros* once more, as it was in the Communist era as well. It seems likely the name was restored at the beginning of the Communist period in 1948.

⁹⁴ Budapest Székesfőváros Törvényhatósági Bizottsága Által az 1937. évben Tartott Köz-

In 1938 the renaming of the District was also praised by the mayor of Budapest Károly Szendy, who in a letter to the Lord Mayor, Jenő Karafiáth highlighted why District V was the best choice, since this part of the city is “one of the most beautiful”, and this is where many of the symbols of the nation connected to St Stephen could also be found, such as St Stephen’s Basilica, the Parliament (*Országház*), the courts and Freedom Square (*Szabadság tér*):

where four memorials of Trianon are arranged at the four points of the compass that propagate the ungratefulness that was shown to the lands of the holy crown by those European nations that can thank St Stephen’s Hungary for their survival, which for centuries shed its blood to protect western civilisation and Christianity.⁹⁵

The theme for the Jubilee was thus to be Stephen as the embodiment of the Hungarian state, both in historical and territorial terms. In this sense, the Hungarian state exceeded its present borders and encompassed the areas detached by the Treaty of Trianon. One of the more interesting elements of the above passage is the notion of St Stephen’s Hungary as having protected western Christianity for centuries from invasions from the East – most notably by the Turks – only to have ultimately been betrayed by the very nations it had protected. In this image we see the development of Hungary’s argument to explain why it aligned itself with the fascist powers of Europe, which would soon lead to it siding with Germany in the Second World War against the western European powers deemed responsible for Trianon, in the hope that Germany would be able to restore the “lost territories”, including parts of Slovakia. In 1938, while Hungary was using St Stephen as the symbol of a historically whole Hungary, the beginning of the breakup of Czechoslovakia was already underway, with Sudeten German demands for greater autonomy providing the pretext for the Munich Agreement, which was concluded in September of that year.

A Problem Day: 15 March and the Social Democrats

On 15 March 1848, in the midst of the revolutionary fervour that had gripped much of Europe, a group of young Hungarian intellectuals, writers and students gathered at the Café Pilvax in Budapest and agreed on a set of demands known as the “Twelve Points”, which included union with Transylvania, abolition of censorship, an independent national guard and an annual national assembly in Pest-Buda. The group then marched to various points around the city, most notably the National Museum, where the poet Sándor Petőfi recited his poem, the “National Song”, and the Twelve Points, to enthusiastic crowds.⁹⁶

gyűlések Jegyzőkönyvei [Minutes of the Meetings of the Municipal Committee of Budapest in the Year 1937]. 1937. június 2-iki közgyűlés [Meeting of 2 June 1937]. 1937, No. 241, 148 (Budapest Székesfőváros Házinyomdája).

⁹⁵ BFL IV. 1402. b 286/1938, 1-33. 15. Letter to Jenő Karafiáth from Károly Szendy, Subject: The commemorative assembly on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of St Stephen’s death. 2 May 1938.

⁹⁶ For a detailed description of the day’s events see: *Freifeld*, Alice: *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848-1914*. Baltimore, London 2000, 46-51.

This event initiated the Hungarian revolution against Habsburg rule, which continued until the Hungarians surrendered at Világos on 13 August 1849. The repercussions were severe: on 6 October 1849 thirteen Hungarian generals were hanged in Arad, and the moderate Prime Minister Lajos Batthyány was executed in Pest.⁹⁷

The anniversary of 15 March 1848 was already being commemorated underground the following year but it was not until 1860 that such commemorations could be conducted in the open, albeit still unofficially.⁹⁸ The first open and official commemoration came in 1898, when Law No. V was passed, which sanctioned the commemoration of the revolution for the approaching fiftieth anniversary.⁹⁹ But, what was commemorated was not 15 March, the date favoured by most Hungarians, amongst them Ferenc Kossuth, son of Lajos Kossuth, who put the bill forward. The implications of this particular date were too controversial. Instead, the Hungarian Parliament selected 11 April, the date in 1848 when Emperor Ferdinand I (King Ferdinand V in Hungary and Bohemia) approved the April Laws, a move that was also more palatable to Vienna.¹⁰⁰

With national independence after 1918, however, the unpopular compromise represented by the choice of 11 April was no longer necessary and the possibility naturally arose of moving the official commemoration day to 15 March. The Horthy regime was at first cautious about adopting 15 March as its own, presumably because of its revolutionary and liberal connotations, and also because the date was associated with other groups as well, including the country's Social Democrats, who saw themselves and the working class as "[t]he only one real guardian of the [18]48 revolution."¹⁰¹ The Horthy regime, sidestepping symbols that had previously been connected to the commemorations, such as the poet of the revolution Sándor Petőfi, shifted the focus to the Surrender of Világos in 1849, which ended the revolution, and Arad, scene of the execution of the Arad Martyrs. Thus the Horthy regime still felt there was value in identifying with the memory of 1848 and the revolution, and connected Arad with Trianon so as to reconfigure the narrative of 15 March to fit with their irredentist ambitions. Petőfi was still a hugely potent symbol for Hungarians, however, and, although he did not represent the regime's conservative politics he still had a nationalist value and hence it was essential that they attempted to make Petőfi their own, in particular through commemorative events. One such occasion was the centenary of the poet's birth held from 31 July 1922 to 31 July 1923, with the main event being held on 1 January, the poet's birthday.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 94.

⁹⁸ *Freifeld*, Alice: The Cult of March 15: Sustaining the Hungarian Myth of Revolution, 1849-1999. In: *Bucur*, Maria / *Wingfield*, Nancy M. (eds.): *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present*. Lafayette/Ind. 2001, 255-285, here 261.

⁹⁹ 1898. évi V. törvénycikk az 1848. évi törvények megalkotása emlékének ünnepléséről [Law no. V of 1898 Regarding the Commemoration of the Passing of the 1848 Laws] at <http://1000ev.hu/index.php?a=3¶m=6701> (last accessed 13.11.2016).

¹⁰⁰ *Gyarmati*: Március hatalma 31 (cf. fn. 75).

¹⁰¹ Március bilincsben [March in Handcuffs]. In: *Népszava*, 14 March 1926, 2.

¹⁰² *Klimó*, Árpád von: *Nation, Konfession, Geschichte: Zur nationalen Geschichtskultur Ungarns im europäischen Kontext (1860-1948)*. München 2003, 292.

It was not until the run-up to the 80th anniversary of the revolution in 1928, a year in which a number of special events were planned, that the Horthy regime fully staked its claim to the day by making it an official national day. All parties represented in parliament agreed upon the importance of enacting the memory of 15 March into law. This did not mean, however, that there was no opposition to the Horthy regime's claim to the memory of the revolution. Opposition parties, and especially the Social Democrats, who from the beginning of the 1920s on claimed to be the true heirs of the revolution, criticised the government's attitude to the day of remembrance on a number of issues.¹⁰³

The bill to introduce 15 March into the national day calendar was announced by Prime Minister István Bethlen on 18 October 1927 in the House of Representatives, amidst "[e]nthusiastic cheering and clapping from the right and the left and the [political] centre."¹⁰⁴ Despite the universal enthusiasm shown after Bethlen's announcement, the debate quickly turned to a discussion about freedom of the press and civil liberties, both issues that were at the core of the ideals of the 1848 revolution. The Social Democrats, whilst welcoming the initiative to pass a law commemorating the revolution, argued that before the passing of the law the government should have made sure that the freedom of the press was intact.¹⁰⁵ The president of the parliamentary faction of the Social Democrats, István Farkas, questioned how the draft law could claim the triumph of the ideals of 1848 when "of the great ideals of 15 March there is nothing [left or achieved]".¹⁰⁶ By using 15 March to protest the erosion of the freedom of the press and civil liberties, the Social Democrats were demonstrating the commemoration's potential to be a threat to authority.

During the final reading of the bill in the Upper House of Parliament, deputy Elemér Simontsits succinctly summarised the Horthy regime's position on why a commemorative day for remembrance of the 1848-49 revolution was necessary.¹⁰⁷ According to Simontsits "the importance of the moral conditions" were highlighted in "the fight for the survival of the nation" after Trianon, and the right moral attitude of the population was more important than any financial aid in the effort to undo the Treaty. Thus, under this new interpretation, 15 March had taken its place

¹⁰³ See also: *Ibid.* 290-301.

¹⁰⁴ Az országgyűlés képviselőházának 78. ülése, 1927 október hó 18-án, kedden, Puky Endre elnöklete alatt [The 78th Session of the House of Representatives on 18 October 1927, Tuesday, Presided over by Endre Puky]. In: Országgyűlés Képviselőházának Naplója. Hatodik kötet [The Minutes of the Parliament's Chamber of Deputies. Vol. 6.] Budapest 1927, 97-110, here 99.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 102.

¹⁰⁶ Az országgyűlés képviselőházának 79. ülése, 1927 október hó 25-én, kedden, Puky Endre és Huszár Károly elnöklete alatt [The 79th Session of the House of Representatives on 25 October 1927, Tuesday, Presided over by Endre Puky and Károly Huszár]. In: Országgyűlés Képviselőházának Naplója 111-142, here 133 (cf. fn. 104).

¹⁰⁷ Az országgyűlés felsőházának 19. ülése, 1927. évi november hó 25-én, pénteken, Báró Wlassics Gyula és Beöthy László elnöklete alatt [The 19th Session of the Upper House of Parliament on 25 November 1927, Friday, Presided over by Baron Gyula Wlassics and László Beöthy]. In: Az országgyűlés felsőházának naplója, II. kötet [The Minutes of the Parliament's Upper House, Vol. II.] Budapest 1928, 3-24, here 6.

together with 20 August, foundation of state day, as an integral part of the irredentist rhetoric of the Horthy regime. Whilst St Stephen and his commemorative day served to provide a historical justification for Hungary's claims to its "lost territories", 15 March was meant to give hope to the population: the Hungarian nation had faced adversity before and managed to overcome it.¹⁰⁸

This law was passed "so that the nation can draw faith, power and hope from the glorious traditions of this day for the emergence of a better future." The measure was soon accompanied by other new uses of national symbols, as part of the commemorations for the eightieth anniversary of the events of 15 March 1848. In 1928 Kunó Klebelsberg, Minister of Culture, issued a directive ordering the national flag be displayed in schools during the 15 March commemorations, as the flag symbolised the power and unity of the nation and was also a symbol of the state's dignity.¹⁰⁹

Whilst most newspaper coverage indicated a general lack of enthusiasm for the 15 March commemoration in 1928,¹¹⁰ the Social Democrats, who claimed to be the true heirs of the revolution, commemorated the day by lamenting its new status. The front page of *Népszava*, the Social Democrat newspaper, ironically stated: "[i]t is now written in the law and is now, so to say, compulsory to commemorate [15 March]. The *counterrevolution* made the day of the *revolution* into a lawfully celebrated day."¹¹¹ Indeed, this "tamed March" did not correspond with many of the demands set out in 1848, such as the freedom of the press or civil rights, on which the Social Democrats called out the government during the debate in the House of Representatives. The Horthy regime was playing a clever political game in turning 15 March into an official national day: one of the effects of the law was that it also made it more difficult for the Social Democrats to gather on the day and hold their own commemorations at sites where the official commemorations were already being held.

The Horthy regime also went a step further. They not only tried to prevent the opposition from appropriating the symbolic spaces connected to the revolution, but they also banned their events. On the front page of *Népszava* on 17 March 1928 the headline announced that, "The celebratory procession was banned, but the working people of Budapest and its environs will still meet at the Petőfi statue!" Noting that the police had banned the celebrations, the article ended with a call: "!!Everyone must agitate for the success of the people's assembly!!"¹¹² On page 3, the paper

¹⁰⁸ 1927. évi XXXI. törvénycikk március tizenötödikének nemzeti ünneppé nyilvánításáról [Law no. XXXI of 1927 Regarding the Proclamation of Fifteenth of March as a National Day] at <http://www.1000ev.hu/index.php?a=3¶m=7715> (last accessed 01.06.2015).

¹⁰⁹ *Gyarmati*: Március hatalma 58 (cf. fn. 75).

¹¹⁰ The newspapers close to the regime were busy reporting on Pál Teleki's speech in the Upper House of Parliament regarding the *numerus clausus* (which aimed to limit the number of Jewish students enrolled at the universities), the serialised memoirs of Countess Larisch (Empress Elisabeth's onetime lady-in-waiting), and Kunó Klebelsberg's promises of a new National Theatre building. See: *Ibid.* 57.

¹¹¹ Az amnesztiált Március [The Amnestied March]. In: *Népszava*, 15 March 1928, 1.

¹¹² Az ünnepi felvonulást betiltották, de Petőfi szobra előtt mégis találkozik Budapest és környéke dolgozó népe! In: *Népszava*, 17 March 1928, 1.

argued that their meeting was not a “demonstration”, but a “celebratory procession” and quoted from the police justification of the ban, which stated that “it is evident that the planned procession was intended to be party political”, i.e. the permission for the procession “was submitted by the Social Democrat Party, therefore it must have a political purpose”.¹¹³ The Horthy regime was keen on controlling the message of the day by banning any kind of counter-commemoration that might challenge the official narrative.

The Horthy regime’s initial ambiguity towards 15 March in the first half of the 1920s had thus acted as an impediment to the full incorporation of the day into an official commemorative narrative. The revolutionary tradition was therefore utilised by the Social Democratic party (and later, in the 1930s, by the Communists), who claimed to be the heirs of 1848. This association took on ever greater significance as the regime grew more authoritarian and skirted with fascism. Thus, leaving its official appropriation of 15 March until so late meant that the Horthy regime began to face a counter-narrative that was already firmly established by 1927, when the commemoration was eventually made an official national day. The revolutionary narrative of 15 March – unlike the narratives associated with St Stephen’s Day – better suited the parties on the left of the political spectrum, and proved to be a difficult fit with Horthy’s Catholic-nationalist rhetoric.

Caught in the Middle: Hungarians in Southern Slovakia

The Hungarian and Czechoslovak cases show how these two post-Habsburg states used the same tools – national days – in their nation-building processes, with similar external forms, yet with a sharply contrasting rhetorical content. Czechoslovakia sought to present a democratic, multi-ethnic rhetoric, which ultimately ended up simply exposing the shortcomings of its democracy and exacerbated social cleavages. Although an effort was made to break away from Habsburg forms of commemoration and to create a completely new national day calendar,¹¹⁴ one of the oldest commemorative subjects – Jan Hus – was also the most radical, as he represented an anti-Habsburg, anti-Catholic liberal nationalist programme for the new state.

Hungary, by contrast, clung to the notion of being a kingdom (albeit one without a king), and was run by an authoritarian nationalist regime. The Treaty of Trianon had made a relatively ethnically homogenous country out of Hungary, meaning that it was in a position to avoid the controversies of Czechoslovak national day laws, while the two pre-existing national commemorations – which Hungarians had already been in a position to celebrate prior to 1918 due to their privileged status within Austria-Hungary – namely of St Stephen’s Day and the 1848-1849 revolution, were selected as the national days of the newly independent state.

¹¹³ Betiltották! [They Banned it!]. In: *Népszava*, 17 March 1928, 3.

¹¹⁴ Interestingly, although not expressed in the form of a national day, Habsburg forms of commemoration still had a potency during the interwar Republic. A good example of this is the continuing veneration of the leader figure: both the Emperor Franz Joseph and Masaryk were presented as the unifying father, even grandfather, figure for the nation. Just as with Franz Joseph’s birthday, Masaryk’s birthday was celebrated with much pomp each year. See: *Hájková/Wingfield: Czech(-oslovak) National Commemorations 442-443, 445-446* (cf. fn. 8).

One place where the two Czechoslovak and Hungarian national day efforts came together, however, was in southern Slovakia, where, post-Trianon, there was now a large Hungarian population. This was a new situation for these Hungarians as they had never lived under foreign rule as, for example, the Slovaks of the Kingdom of Hungary had until 1918. They were now not only obliged to commemorate the national days of Czechoslovakia, in particular 28 October, but were not permitted to commemorate Hungarian national days.

Although the Hungarian political parties had abstained during the debate on the 1925 national day law, the general population in southern Slovakia, at least during the 1920s, challenged the obligation to commemorate the Czechoslovak state holiday. They showed their disregard for the celebration of the foundation of the Czechoslovak state by not attending the official events and by ignoring the day's status as a holiday by, for example, opening their shops, thus violating Paragraph 3 of the 1925 law.¹¹⁵

Reports by the Police Commissioners of each county were required from 1925, and they shed an interesting light on the political and cultural activities of the various political parties and minorities in Slovakia. Although many of the reports pointed out that large parts of the Hungarian minority acted "aloof" or "behaved passively and did not participate", they also show a gradual increase in acceptance of celebrations marking the foundation the new Czechoslovak state.¹¹⁶ Reports, especially from the late 1920s and early 1930s, also noted that "the Hungarian ultra-chauvinists have fallen silent" and that there was "already a noticeable participation of Hungarians in state celebrations."¹¹⁷

To enable 28 October to be celebrated in what was considered an appropriate and dignified manner, the Slovak authorities issued identical posters and fliers in Slovak and Hungarian reminding the citizens of the significance of the day and the necessity to celebrate it with dignity, while public buildings were adorned with the Czechoslovak flag. It was also "forbidden" to display the state flag "in an inappropriate or insulting manner".¹¹⁸ In his 1927 report, the Police Commissioner of

¹¹⁵ See, for example, reports from the Police Commissioner in Komárno: Štátny archív v Nitre, Ivanka pri Nitre [State Archives of Nitra, hereafter SANR], f. Policajný komisariát v Komárne [Police Commissariat of Komárno, hereafter PLK], k 18. Report on the celebration of the state holiday on 28. X. 1926 in Komárno, 29. 10. 1926. – Or SANR, PkK, k 18. Report on the celebration of the state holiday in Komárno on the day 28. 10. 1927, 4. 11. 1927.

¹¹⁶ SANR, PkK, k 18. Police Commissioner in Komárno – situational report for the first half of 1930, 30. 06. 1930 and SANR, PkK, k 18. Report on the celebration of the state holiday in Komárno on the day 28. 10. 1927, 04. 11. 1927.

¹¹⁷ SANR, PkK, k 18. Police Commissioner in Komárno – situational report for the second half of 1929, 27. 12. 1929. Situational reports pointed to growing Hungarian participation in the celebrations of 28 October from as early as 1926: "the Hungarian side appears to have a growing tendency to participate" in Czechoslovak commemorations. "The proof of this was the celebration of the state day on 28. 10. 1926." SANR, PkK, k 18. Police Commissioner in Komárno – situational report for the last quarter of 1926.

¹¹⁸ SANR, PkK, k 18. Poster issued by the Police Commissioner of Komárno, 19. 10. 1929. A 1926 flyer issued by the Police Commissioner not only threatened those who failed to comply with the regulations of the state holiday with a fine or a prison sentence, but also

Komárno (in Hungarian *Komárom*, a city split in two by the Treaty of Trianon, with one side of the town in Hungary and the other in Czechoslovakia) made it clear that non-compliance would result in either a 10,000 Kč fine or one month in prison (as stated in Paragraph 3). He added that he:

believe[d] that all the interested institutions and their leaders, guided by the importance of 28 October and by the spirit of the achievements of this historic day, will not give cause for these punitive measures, but, on the contrary, will do their utmost on this occasion, as in previous years, to elevate the dignity [...] of the celebration.¹¹⁹

He also hoped that not only the institutions but also the general public would commemorate the day by displaying Czechoslovak flags on their houses.

This increasing trend towards greater Hungarian participation in the celebrations for the foundation of the new Czechoslovak state also coincides with a gradual reduction in open confrontations with the state – during 20 August commemorations, for example. This (apparent) acceptance of the new order by some members of the Hungarian population could be explained by a number of factors, including fear of the repercussions if caught not commemorating the Czechoslovak state day or simply a gradual acceptance among ethnic Hungarians of the new situation.¹²⁰ By the late 1930s, with Hungary's growing alliance with Nazi Germany and German threats to Czechoslovakia, nationalist feelings began to be outwardly expressed through the wearing of national costume, cockades and other Hungarian symbols.¹²¹ Such practices were prevalent mainly in larger towns such as Kassa/Košice, Nyitra/Nitra or in Pozsony/Bratislava but, apart from a number of minor incidents, they did not lead to any larger-scale conflicts between the different ethnic populations of the country.¹²²

Keeping St Stephen out of Slovakia

In the scramble for the “symbolic ownership” of public space,¹²³ the place of Hungarian national days became an important issue for the Hungarian population

with police proceedings for minor offences. The flyer also expressed the Commissioner's hope “that the inhabitants of the city of Komárno [...] will use the occasion to solemnly show their affection for the Republic and will contribute to the dignified celebrations in many ways.” SANR, PkK, k 18. Flyer issued by the Police Commissioner of Komárno, 20.10.1926.

¹¹⁹ SANR, PkK, k 18. Poster issued by the Police Commissioner of Komárno, 19.10.1929.

¹²⁰ The 1929 report of the Police Commissioner of Komárno noted that whilst events in Budapest did influence the mood in southern Slovakia, the Hungarian minorities were becoming less receptive: “the constant efforts of the Hungarians not to comply with the peace treaties [...] are resonating less and less” in the area. Even so, the same report also mentioned a demonstration in Komárno against the Treaty of Trianon on 9 June, although it does note that this was a peaceful protest. SANR, PkK, k 18. Police Commissioner in Komárno – situational report for the first half of 1929, 01.07.1929.

¹²¹ *Simon*, Attila: Egy rövid esztendő krónikája: A szlovákiai magyarok 1938-ban [The Chronicle of a Short Year: The Slovak Hungarians in 1938]. Somorja 2010, 162.

¹²² *Ibid.* 163.

¹²³ *Michela*, Miroslav: Collective Memory and Political Change – The Hungarians and the Slovaks in the Former Half of the 20th Century. In: International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs (2006) no. 3-4, 15-26, here 19.

of Slovakia, who continued to express a desire to commemorate Hungarian national symbols, including a wish to honour the founder of the Hungarian state, St Stephen. As discussed above, Hungarian minorities in southern Slovakia were relatively hostile to 28 October during the mid-1920s, although towards the end of the decade and from the early 1930s on their attendance at the 28 October commemorations increased. Perhaps in correlation with the reduced hostility towards 28 October, open commemorations of 20 August also declined.

In Hungary itself, though, St Stephen had become a symbol of Greater Hungary – of a reaching out to Hungarian brethren not yet reunited with the national whole – and provided the justification for much irredentist rhetoric. Yet not every Hungarian in Slovakia agreed with this interpretation of St Stephen. Some Hungarian activists even accused the motherland of misinterpreting “the real meaning of St Stephen’s message”.¹²⁴ For this minority of Hungarian activists, the tradition of St Stephen “represented an idea of tolerance among nations”, what the newspaper *Kassai Napló* summarised as: “A home should be a home to all its sons.”¹²⁵ Yet, despite the efforts of some members of the local Hungarian population, St Stephen was indeed still seen by many local Hungarians as a symbol of Greater Hungary, and it was thus easy to reproduce the discourse of Hungarian irredentism in southern Slovakia too.¹²⁶

Slovak Church and state authorities were also aware of the importance of St Stephen for the Hungarian population and the nationalist connotations attached to his image. In 1919 a Circular of the Apostolic Administration of Trnava clarified that 20 August was a working day in Slovakia and forbade any commemorative sermons or masses. Instead of 20 August, the Church argued that the feast day of St Stephen should be commemorated on 2 September, in accordance with the calendar of the Catholic Church.¹²⁷ Despite these constrictions, the Hungarian population continued to commemorate St Stephen on 20 August, mostly by abstention from work and wearing black on the day.¹²⁸

A further ban on 20 August was introduced in 1931, which was to evolve into a general ban on commemorating St Stephen in any form on the offending date. The “patronal churches” in Slovakia “declar[ed] that Slovakia had already become a part of [a] new state and therefore there was no reason to celebrate a feast which the Catholic Church [already] celebrates on 2 September”.¹²⁹ Although the general ban on commemorating 20 August did indeed oblige many Hungarians to stop publicly commemorating Stephen on that date, it did not mean that the cult of the saint and his day of commemoration simply died out in Slovakia. As Slovak historian Miroslav

¹²⁴ Kassai Napló, 20.08.1920, 1, quoted in *Michela*, Miroslav: “A Home Should Be a Home to All Its Sons”: Cultural Representations of Saint Stephen in Slovakia During the Interwar Period. In: *Hudek*, Adam (ed.): *Overcoming the Old Borders. Beyond the Paradigm of Slovak National History*. Bratislava 2013, 97-110, here 102.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 102.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 103.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 105-106.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 106.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 107.

Michela observes, by the 1930s many Hungarians had stopped attending the 20 August commemorations and provocations against the state authorities also gradually declined, as Hungarians wanted to avoid accusations of irredentism and the subsequent discrimination against them. Instead, commemorations took place in the private sphere.¹³⁰

Whilst 20 August, the anniversary of the foundation of the state and its founder St Stephen, had already become an established day of commemoration in Hungary even before the First World War, 15 March, as discussed above, only became a day of commemoration after 1918 and was not an official national day until 1927. Despite its unofficial status, 15 March was still commemorated in Hungary and, significantly, by Hungarian communities in Slovakia. The Czechoslovak authorities, fearing the growth of separatist tendencies, banned celebration of the anniversary of the 1848-49 revolution along with the already banned 20 August anniversary.¹³¹

Since 15 March had not officially been established as a national day prior to 1918, as historian Attila Simon observes, it lacked a comprehensive tradition in southern Slovakia.¹³² Moreover the ban on commemorating Hungarian national days meant that “the Hungarian minority was completely deprived legally of the possibility of using their national symbols, and thus of the chance to legitimately celebrate their national days.”¹³³ Nonetheless, the Hungarians in southern Slovakia came up with alternative ways of commemorating the revolution, by marking anniversaries in private clubs and with religious services.¹³⁴ The public commemoration of 15 March was banned in churches but Hungarian churchgoers would sing their national anthem as a mark of respect on the day, at least during the first half of the 1920s. As with commemorations of St Stephen, however, these commemorative acts became increasingly sporadic towards the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s.¹³⁵

Conclusion

The interwar political elites of both Czechoslovakia and Hungary saw national days as pillars upon which the historical narratives of their respective newly founded nation-states could rest, and around which the identity of those states could be solidified. Yet, despite the adoption of similar commemorative forms, there were also significant differences between the approach taken by the two countries. The gov-

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Simon, Attila: *Maďarská komunita, štátna moc a 15. marec v období prvej Československej republiky* [The Hungarian Community, State Power and 15 March During the First Czechoslovak Republic]. In: Macho, Peter (ed.): *Revolúcia 1848/49 a historická pamäť* [The 1848-49 Revolution and Historical Memory]. Bratislava 2012, 95-107, here 96-97.

¹³² *Ibid.* 96.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 97.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 102.

¹³⁵ Simon demonstrates this with an example from 1929. The Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior received information that the 15 March commemoration in Budapest would take place on an especially grand scale, which in turn would also affect the Hungarian inhabitants of southern Slovakia. Whilst the Czechoslovak authorities were ready to tackle a possible demonstration, nothing out of the ordinary happened on the day. *Ibid.* 103.

erning elite in Czechoslovakia, comprised primarily of Czech Protestants and liberal nationalists, pushed through a national day calendar that, while it attempted to offer a little something to Catholics and Slovaks, was really centred around Jan Hus Day and Foundation of State Day on 28 October. There was, however, opposition to the choice of both these days, with the result that the construction of an overarching narrative for Czechoslovakia that would have appealed to everyone proved difficult.

St Wenceslas – commemorated on 28 September – could have been developed into a historical figure sufficiently anodyne to become a “multi-vocal” symbol acceptable to all parties. For the governing elite, however, his figure was perhaps too closely associated with Catholicism and Habsburg rule. Perhaps more importantly for Czech liberal nationalists, the figure of Jan Hus had been championed over that of St Wenceslas during the “national revival”. Instead, Foundation of State Day on 28 October was selected as the primary state commemorative day. Theoretically, it should have played a unifying role for the country but the fact that it was seen as linked to the Prague-based elite undermined any effort in this direction. As a result, such “unity” had to be imposed on the multi-ethnic state, through Paragraph 3 of the national day law, which prosecuted anyone who violated the day’s status as a holiday.

Hungary, by contrast, was truly an ethnically unified country, thanks in part to the Treaty of Trianon. This meant that the commemoration of St Stephen on 20 August, which already had a precedent from the 19th century and even earlier, was an easy choice for a national day. Moreover, St Stephen was a “multi-vocal” symbol who could comfortably mean different things to different people: a religious figure; the political figure credited with the foundation of Hungary and with aligning it with the West; the symbol of Greater Hungary; and even a tourist attraction. This meant he could successfully represent all Hungarians – including those outside of Hungary. Hungary’s other national day, the anniversary of the start of the 1848-49 revolution on 15 March, also had an unofficial underground history that dated back to before 1918. Its revolutionary focus initially made the Horthy regime uncomfortable with the date as that regime found it was difficult to incorporate the anniversary into its nationalist-Christian historical narrative. Yet it was such a “natural” date of commemoration that the Horthy regime came to understand that it had to be included in the official national day calendar.

As the contrasting cases of interwar Czechoslovakia and Hungary demonstrate, a central function of national days, in particular for new states, is to establish the legitimacy and unity of the state, and a common identity for its people. Yet, this would appear to work only where there is already a strong pre-existing common historical identity. This is a central contention of sociologist Gabriella Elgenius in her study of national days in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, in which she concludes “that historical prerequisites and national day design are crucial in the making of successful ceremonies.”¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Elgenius, Gabriella: *The Politics of Recognition: Symbols, Nation Building and Rival Nationalism*. In: *Nations and Nationalism* 17 (2011) no. 2, 396-418, here 412.

Hungary's interwar national day calendar worked because the new state was ethnically homogenous. Moreover, its two main national days were not entirely "new" and already enjoyed a rich tradition of commemoration going back to the 19th century and even earlier. By way of contrast, Czechoslovakia's interwar national day calendar involved mostly newly-created commemorations for a fragmented society; hence, given that the Czechoslovak national days became the subject of aggressive debate (reflecting different visions of how Czechoslovak society could be) and the country's establishment had to struggle to get the whole population to participate in the commemorations for individual national days, it could be argued that interwar Czechoslovak national days failed.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ This assessment may be seen as benefiting somewhat from hindsight, however, as the national day calendar of interwar Czechoslovakia barely lasted for a generation, just twenty years, before the country was dismantled by the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the Second World War. After 1948, a Soviet-influenced Communist national day calendar was imposed, with a different commemorative content from that of the interwar period. Hence, it is possible that, if events had not developed as they did, 28 October may have established its own traditions and emerged as a successful national day after a few more decades.