REZENSIONEN

Szabó, Miloslav: Klérofašisti [Clerofascists].

Slovart, Bratislava 2019, 207 pp., ISBN 978-80-556-3902-4.

In 2000, the Slovak historian Róbert Letz published a fulsome encyclopedia entry on the 19th-century cleric Andrej Rojko, praising him especially as a Slovak nationalist and social activist. While Letz noted that Rojko had "warned of the dangers [of Masonry] for Catholicism," he did not address the priest's attitudes towards Jews.[1] Miloslav Szabó, in contrast, opens his *Clerofascists* by showing how Rojko's obsession with Masons had, by the fin de siècle, metastasized into racist anti-Semitism. Jews, wrote Rojko in 1897, are "a race afflicted by God's curse, […] a plague and insatiable parasite that has been annihilating […] Christian Aryan nations for centuries, […] a rotting, toxic boil, a […] terminal cancer on the body of human society" (p. 14). This contrast alone explains why this book is a welcome contribution, above all in Slovakia, to the contentious debate on the relationship between clergy and fascism.

How boldly Szabó wages this historiographical fight is evidenced first by his title. "Clerico-fascist" originally was used to name (alternatively, to shame) Italian priests who had allied with Mussolini. In Slovakia, as "clerofascism," it was by 1989 and the fall of Communism a compromised category, evoking Stalinist efforts to discredit the church by linking it to the 1939-1945 pro-German Slovak Republic, the leaders of which were often priests, such as President Jozef Tiso. Ľubomír Lipták, a luminary among Slovak historians, even denounced the term as akin to the Judeo-Bolshevik smear. By rehabilitating *klérofašisti* as a category of analysis, Szabó challenges his colleagues to jettison the topic's cultural baggage.

Szabó's work is informed theoretically foremost by Roger Griffin's view of fascism as "an exclusive, revolutionary myth of national rebirth" (p.18), and especially by his key interventions over "clerical fascism."[2] Following Griffin, Szabó applies the category not to regimes but to clerics who, despite the contradictions inherent in such projects, sought to reconcile or even synthesize their religious missions with fascism. (One might ask, however, why clergy are the only profession to merit such a category.) Szabó is also inspired by Aristotle Kallis's work on the entangled nature of fascism's diffusion across borders (the "fascist effect"), and the studies of Kevin Spicer and Thomas Forstner on "brown priests."[3]

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1 *Letz,* Róbert: Andrej Rojko. In: *Pašteka,* Július et al.: Lexikón katolíckych kňazských osobností Slovenska [Encyclopedia of Slovak Catholic Priests]. Bratislava 2000, 1162.

2 *Griffin,* Roger: The 'Holy Storm': 'Clerical Fascism' through the Lens of Modernism. In: Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 8 (2007) 2, 213-227; *Szabó,* Miloslav: 'For God and Nation': Catholicism and the Far-Right in the Central European Context (1918-1945). In: Historický časopis 66 (2018) 885-899.

3 *Kallis,* Aristotle: The 'Fascist Effect': On the Dynamics of Political Hybridization in Inter-

Empirically, Szabó focuses not on emblematic Slovak "clerofascists" such as Tiso, but rather on lower-ranking, often obscure clergymen. The book's core consists of biographies of three Catholic priests, characterized respectively as an "activist," an "extremist," and a "martyr." Karol Körper was a Slovak MP and head of the "spiritual administration" of the regime's paramilitary, the Hlinka Guard. Viliam Ries made his reputation in the 1930s as a young "Catholic modern" poet, unmaking it during the war as editor in chief for *Náš boj* (Our Struggle), a radically pro-Nazi journal. Anton Šalát was a fiction writer and MP who fantasized about laying down his life in opposition to Judeo-Bolshevism, and who was indeed murdered in the 1944 anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising, but by partisans driven by common criminality rather than ideology. Szabó contrasts each of these lives with short biographical "excursions" on other clerics. Körper's shadow "activist" is Ladislav Hanus, best known for his postcommunist memoir that established his anti-totalitarian credentials, but who during the war nonetheless toyed with fascism. Ries's double is Vladimír Rolko, a Lutheran pastor and poet who easily matched Ries's extremism, and whose inclusion reminds readers that clerical attraction to fascism is not merely a Catholic phenomenon. Finally, Szabó juxtaposes Šalát's "martyrdom" with the sad tale of Ľudovít Veselý, a Catholic priest who did not fit the Tiso regime, consequently suffering demotions and humiliations, then execution by the Gestapo. While Szabó posits the Rojko of his prologue as a protofascist, his epilogue connects his wartime clerics to the present through Fr. Marián Kuffa, an anti-LGBT crusader and ally of Slovak neofascists. This handful of ministers hardly constitutes a viable sample for a sociological study, but Szabó's mission is instead to map their intellectual journeys towards fascism by a thoughtful reading of their often extensive journalistic and artistic output, combined with church and state documents. Adding depth to this persuasive analysis is Szabó's astute contextualization.

The paths that Szabó marks out invariably crossed common ground. The Judeo-Bolshevik specter, for instance, built on Catholic fixations with Masonic world conspiracies, and let clerics imagine Hitler's racial warfare as an apocalyptic crusade for civilization. Less pivotal common enemies were liberals, whom fascists hated for their commitment to equality, while Catholics deplored their secular aims. Nationalism as a link held out to clergy a parallel hope of redemption and regeneration. In other words, "national rebirth" was both national and religious. Other points of contact included papal desires to bring about a spiritual rebirth through Catholic Action[4], the church's traditional preference for hierarchy and submission to leaders, Catholic social theory (especially in relation to corporatism), and the church's cult of martyrs.

War Europe. In: *Kallis/Pinto,* António Costa: Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe. Basingstoke 2014, 13-41; *Spicer,* Kevin: Hitler's Priests. Catholic Clergy and National Socialism. DeKalb/Illinois 2008; *Forstner,* Thomas: Priester in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Identität und Lebenswelt des katholischen Pfarrklerus in Oberbayern 1918 bis 1945. Göttingen 2014.

[4] Catholic Action was a lay movement mobilized by Pius XI to infuse society with Christian values.

A second important theme for Szabó is diversity. For example, Körper was attracted to fascist paramilitaries already in the 1920s, yet Ries apparently awoke to the movement only with the gaining of Slovak autonomy in 1938; although Ries adapted Nazi models of racism, Körper was inspired instead by the American variant. Fascism also offered many meanings to these men. Körper saw Nazi Germany as "a guarantor of Slovak nationalism," while Ries "sought shelter in Nazism […] as a guarantor of the liberation of the economically oppressed" (p. 119). The Lutheran Rolko saw race as a guarantor against the Catholicizing aspirations of the Tiso regime. For Šalát, Nazi Germany was a guarantor to secure Slovak society from Judeo-Bolshevism. The desire to synthesize ranged from Körper adding a clerical collar to his Guardist uniform to Rolko constructing a totalitarian model in which state and church ruled despotically over the life of the nation and its morality, respectively. Less diversely, these men often viewed the world as having gone to hell in a hand basket, thanks to their enemies. Šalát, for instance, denounced Czechoslovak "lying democracy," Lenin and Stalin's "Judeo-Bolshevism," British "plutocracy," and an American "rackets system." The priest valorized his own movement, in contrast, as "healthy, Christian, Slovak realism" (p. 187). The distance from here to purging was short at best; Šalát even took his state's 1942 deportation of Jews as a mark of national maturity.

Engaging fascism often came with costs for these clergymen. Körper ended up attacked by secular radicals and their anticlerical Nazi advisors as corrupt, and pushed out of the Guard. Ries drew the Tiso regime's ire by backing strikes, and the hierarchy's disfavor (ironically) by defending artistic freedom. He was sacked from his editorship and suspended as a priest. Going to work for *Náš Boj* and German intelligence in addition to getting married was his idiosyncratic response. Rolko came under fire for denouncing the Slovak diet, a Tiso power base. Condemned by a postwar tribunal, he blamed his fate on Jewish machinations. And Šalát, of course, lost his life, but not as a martyr for the faith – no doubt a great disappointment, if he had been able to recognize it at the time. Engaging fascism wrought transformations as well. Pan-Slavic convictions, for instance, typically fell to the side as these clerics reoriented to Hitler's Europe.

The subtitle on the cover (but not title page) of this book translates as *Slovak Priests and the Temptation of Radical Politics* (*1939-1945*) (Slovenskí kňazi a pokušenie radikálnej politiky [1939-1945]). "Temptation," of course, elegantly fits Szabó's religious subject and serves well his dialogue with the Slovak public. Yet the concept assumes a default position for priests as closer to the good than embracing fascism allows. It is a comforting conceit, and far preferable to Stalinist interpretations of clergy as fascist by definition. But it reminds us nonetheless of how difficult it is to dismantle moral frameworks in relation to this topic. No one, for instance, would write of the theologian Jacques Maritain being "tempted" by human rights. Except for perhaps Hanus, I did not see these men as being seduced by fascism, but rather simply attracted to it for what it could gain them, and how it aligned with their world views.

This is an excellent study, packed with compelling stories. I suspect that its impact on Slovak public opinion already has been salutary. Even though it is somewhat

sparsely documented, many are the scholars who should find it highly useful. Let us hope that it will be translated, as it deserves a wide readership outside Slovakia.

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