

Mary Heimann
mary.heimann@strath.ac.uk

Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia, by James Mace Ward (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013; pp. xii + 362. Hardback £26.50).

Of all the European ‘little dictators’ who came to power between the wars, Slovakia’s Jozef Tiso was the only one who was also a Catholic priest. Now remembered chiefly for his alliance with Nazi Germany and role in the Holocaust, Tiso was hanged as a collaborator and war criminal by the restored Czechoslovak authorities in 1947. Subsequently dismissed as a ‘clerical fascist’ or Nazi ‘puppet’, he was simultaneously held up by right-wing Slovak émigré groups as a ‘patriot’ or ‘martyr’. Only relatively recently, in 1998, did a first revisionist biography (*Tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka* by Ivan Kamenec) suggest that he might be neither devil nor saint, and seek to untangle Tiso’s moral, political and legal responsibility for wartime Slovakia’s dark past. Tiso’s legacy remains problematic for Slovak patriots because, war criminal or not, he was the first politician to deliver Slovak autonomy (1938-9) followed by independence (1939-45).

James Ward’s excellent *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* offers the first political biography in English to follow Kamenec in seeking to understand, rather than simply to praise or condemn, the controversial Slovak dictator. Only by taking account of the successive dramatic shifts that occurred in the political landscape of Central Europe over the course of the twentieth century, Ward argues, can one begin to make sense of the apparent contradictions in Tiso’s life.

Jozef Tiso, who until 1918 operated in Hungarian and was known as Tiszó József, was formed by his training as a Catholic seminarian. After the First World War and the creation of Czechoslovakia, he transferred his sense of national allegiance from Hungary to Slovakia. As a local politician, he exploited political anti-Semitism to push for what he saw as social justice and an increase in the influence of Catholicism in public life. Between 1927 and 1929, when the Slovak People’s Party (Ľudáks) tried ‘actively’ to engage in Czechoslovak politics, Tiso served, ‘behind the ramparts of the enemy’, as a minister in the Prague government. The Slovak electorate punished the Slovak People’s Party so badly for joining in coalition politics that it remained in hopeless opposition until the Munich Crisis unexpectedly gave Tiso the opportunity to seize autonomy. Six months later, under pressure from Hitler, he declared Slovakia independent.

Tiso’s regime was not pretty. After expelling the Czechs, imprisoning the Communists and rounding up the Jews, the Catholic priest and Ľudák leader elevated himself from President to *Vodca (Führer)*. He presided over the most draconian anti-Semitic laws in force anywhere in Europe, including Nazi Germany. While continuing to present himself as a good Catholic priest, he joined enthusiastically in the attack on ‘Catholic’ Poland in 1939, argued that the Church should serve the ‘higher’ aim of the nation, ignored Vatican directives and knowingly sent even baptised Christians of Jewish origin to the gas chambers.

At first glance, Tiso appears to fit the model of a Vicar of Bray, a man whose stated 'convictions' shifted smoothly in order to further his personal ambition. As one of Tiso's contemporaries, Pavol Čarnogurský, memorably put it: 'Tiso would sail down the swiftest stream just to keep his hand on the tiller'. This is one way to understand him. Ward, however, sees in Tiso some deeper, underlying consistencies: a man who, despite his opportunism and ambition, together with his habit of shifting responsibility onto others and pleading ignorance of misdeeds, nevertheless stood up 'for what he saw as the truth'. According to Ward, Tiso 'developed lifelong dual missions. The first was to defend his Church and to regenerate her influence over public life. The second was a mission of social justice which, between the world wars, changed into a mission of national justice'.

The portrait Ward paints is of a priest who gradually switched his notion of the highest good from being God and the Church to being 'the Slovak nation'. Certainly, Tiso frequently used quasi-religious language to describe the nation. In a characteristic speech in 1923 he exhorted Slovak Christians 'With proudly raised heads, let us bear our sacrifices on the altar of the freedom of the Slovak nation, and cherish the sacred fire of love of nation in our souls, as it gives us strength to bear these sacrifices with pleasure.' Rather unexpectedly, given his rabid anti-Semitism, he even compared the contentious Pittsburgh Agreement (which promised Slovak autonomy) to the Torah, suggesting that a copy be distributed to every Slovak home where it might 'hang in a beautiful frame in every Slovak's dwelling so that he can have it before his eyes in good times and bad.'

Tiso died a Catholic. He remained to the end a staunch German ally, convinced anti-Semite and unrepentant Slovak bigot. Yet he often bent the facts to suit his immediate political purposes. In 1919, the year that Hungary became a Soviet republic and Jews were identified with Bolshevik menace, the man who had just changed his name from Tiszó József taunted Jews with the accusation that they had 'Magyarized' their names in the past, but would now be forcibly prevented from trying to 'Slovakize' them: "'Let everyone keep the names that they have now, until we see who is who!'" His Catholicism could be equally hypocritical. He claimed, for example, that the mistreatment of Jews was compatible with the commandment to love one's neighbour since Christian 'self-love' justified anti-Semitism.

Crucial to Ward's assessment is the notion that profound changes in moral outlook that occurred rapidly over the course of the twentieth century altered both the ways in which Tiso saw his own mission and how he was judged by contemporaries. Ward is surely right that it is anachronistic to take Tiso's participation in what was later termed 'the Holocaust' as 'the central issue for interpreting him'. But while this may help us to avoid seeing him as a cartoon monster, it reinforces his resemblance to the Vicar of Bray. Which, at least in this reviewer's opinion, rather underlines Hannah Arendt's point about the banality of evil, Nazi or otherwise.

MARY HEIMANN
University of Strathclyde

(998 words)