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Mary Heimann
Heimannm@cardiff.ac.uk

After Hitler, Before Stalin: Catholics, Communists and Democrats in Slovakia, 1945-1948, by James Ramon Felak (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009; pp. xv + 261. Hardback \$50, paperback \$26.95).

In February 1948, there occurred in Czechoslovakia the kind of ‘fateful moment’, in Milan Kundera’s words, ‘that occurs only once or twice a millennium’. This was the moment, afterwards immortalized in photographs, paintings, posters and even postage stamps, that Klement Gottwald, the leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), ‘stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to harangue hundreds of citizens massed in the Old Town Square’. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, having outmanoeuvred its coalition partners in the post-war National Front government, had just seized power over the Cabinet and, consequently, the country. Czechoslovakia, as the immediate result of an internal political crisis rather than Soviet interference or Great Power intervention, fell behind the Iron Curtain.

The *Coup de Prague* or ‘Victorious February’ which took place in the Czechoslovak capital in late February 1948 is well known; not so the equally successful, and considerably more ruthless, Slovak Communist seizure of power which immediately preceded it. This was the *putsch* staged in Bratislava by the regional Slovak Communist Party (KSS) to remove representatives of the Democratic Party from the devolved Slovak regional government or ‘Board of Commissioners’ (a body with roughly the same powers and standing in contemporary Czechoslovakia as the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly hold in today’s United Kingdom). Now, at last, James Felak has brought out the book that many of us have been waiting for: a micro-study of the Bratislava coup which helps to explain how and why traditionally Conservative and Christian Slovakia, where less than 40% of the population had voted for the Slovak Communist Party in the 1946 general elections, fell to the

Communists as seemingly effortlessly as politically progressive, anticlerical Bohemia, where roughly 60% supported the Communists. The answer, Felak's study suggests, is to be found in the Slovak Communist Party's post-war approach to the Catholic Question and especially its skill in dividing Catholic opinion, discrediting the Democratic Party and exploiting mutual Czech-Slovak suspicions. Dirty tricks, sophisticated propaganda and the encouragement of legal double-standards for the Czech and Slovak-speaking parts of the state, together with intimidation and some muscle, helped to create the conditions which enabled the Slovak Communist Party to seize power.

The political struggle over Slovakia took place in three distinct phases. In the first year after liberation, the Communist Party showed the friendliest possible face to Slovak Catholics, distancing Catholics and Catholicism from the Tiso regime (the extreme right-wing clerical dictatorship, closely allied to Nazi Germany, which had ruled Slovakia from 1939-1945) and emphasising the common moral ground between Christianity and Marxism. The KSS not only advertised how many of its members considered themselves to be at once Communist and Catholic; it also sought to create a new Catholic Party consisting of the more 'progressive' Catholic elements. In the end, however, it was the other main Slovak political party, the Democratic Party, which was able to promise Catholic schools, newspapers and political representation in the so-called April Agreement, a document that 'read like a Catholic wish list'. (p. 45) The immediate result was a landslide victory for the Democratic Party and a resounding defeat for the Slovak Communist Party in the 1946 elections.

According to Felak's well-crafted argument, the April Agreement represented both the reason for the Democratic Party's election success in Slovakia and its Achilles heel, since it opened itself up to the charges of harbouring pro-Tiso

collaborators and elements disloyal to the people's democratic Czechoslovak Republic' (p. 68). Stuck between a rock and a hard place, the Democratic Party 'became an easy target for Communists seeking to subvert and overturn the results of the election in Slovakia' (p. 69). The penultimate showdown came in 1947 with the trial of the Slovak Catholic wartime dictator, Fr Jozef Tiso. The Tiso trial was successfully exploited by the Communist Party to divide opinion throughout Slovakia and arouse fears of resurgent Slovak nationalism in Prague. The Democratic Party was simultaneously discredited among many Slovaks for failing to prevent the public humiliation of Tiso's public execution despite a widespread underground movement in his favour and pleas for clemency from, among others, the Vatican. As a result, Slovak autonomy was curbed, Slovak national feelings wounded and mutual Czech-Slovak suspicions and resentments increased.

The tale of the Communist subversion of Czechoslovak democracy after the Second World War has been told many times, most notably by Karel Kaplan, author of the classic *Der kurze Marsch: Kommunistische-Machtübernahme in der Tschechoslowakei, 1945-1948*, *Pět kapitol o únoru*, *Pravda o Československu, 1945-1948* and other works which detail the KSČ campaign to woo Czech voters and its misuse of the ministries of Agriculture and the Interior to bribe peasants with confiscated land, infiltrate the army and police, and discredit, monitor, threaten, bribe or intimidate political rivals. James Felak's well-researched account of Communist, Democratic and Catholic party politics in post-war Slovakia gives us the other half of the story: a description and close political analysis of the tactics which enabled the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) not only to neutralize Christian and democratic opinion, but also to seize power despite its failure at the polls. This is a story that is vital to making full sense of 'Victorious February' in Czechoslovakia. It also serves

as an instructive case study of post-war Communist tactics in Central and Eastern Europe that deserves to be better known by historians and political scientists alike.

After Hitler, Before Stalin: Catholics, Communists and Democrats in Slovakia, 1945-1948 is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand how the Communists managed to seize power -- not only in socialist-minded post-war Prague but also in traditionally conservative and Catholic Bratislava – without having to fire a shot.

(977 words)

MARY HEIMANN
Cardiff University