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*The Wright Flyer Papers*

Air Command and Staff College (ACSC/DEI)

225 Chennault Circle, Bldg. 1402

Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6426

Tel: (334) 953-6810

Fax: (334) 953-2269

E-mail: [ACSC@maxwell.af.mil](mailto:ACSC@maxwell.af.mil)

AIR UNIVERSITY  
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# **Slovakia 1944**

## **The Forgotten Uprising**

SEAN M. JUDGE  
Major, USAF

Air Command and Staff College  
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## **Foreword**

It is my great pleasure to present another of the *Wright Flyer Papers* series. In this series, the Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) recognizes and publishes our best student research projects from the prior academic year. The ACSC research program encourages our students to move beyond the school's core curriculum in their own professional development and in "advancing air and space power." The series title reflects our desire to perpetuate the pioneering spirit embodied in earlier generations of Airmen. Projects selected for publication combine solid research, innovative thought, and lucid presentation in exploring war at the operational level. With this broad perspective, the *Wright Flyer Papers* engage an eclectic range of doctrinal, technological, organizational, and operational questions. Some of these studies provide new solutions to familiar problems. Others encourage us to leave the familiar behind in pursuing new possibilities. By making these research studies available in the *Wright Flyer Papers*, ACSC hopes to encourage critical examination of the findings and to stimulate further research in these areas.



JIMMIE C. JACKSON, JR.  
Brigadier General, USAF  
Commandant



## **Abstract**

The Slovak National Uprising of 1944 is ignored and/or treated as a nonevent in the Western historiography of World War II. The political climate during World War II and the Cold War that followed obscured and distorted the history and understanding of this revolt. The raising of the Iron Curtain in the 1990s removed the veil of secrecy from much of Eastern Europe's wartime history, and Western historians are exploring the new resources available, but coverage of Slovakia's story and uprising remains very limited. This work aims to fill some of the void.

Fully understanding the uprising requires an analysis of a number of different viewpoints in order to avoid capture by the political views of the parties involved: the Slovaks, the Germans, or the Soviets. Each group had different plans and goals: the Slovaks found themselves precariously between the Allies and Germany, the Germans fought to maintain their strategic position in central Europe while the Soviets hoped to expand their influence through eastern and central Europe. Each group naturally interpreted events differently and acted accordingly. Ultimately the Germans crushed the Slovak rebellion.

Events surrounding the uprising remain cloudy to this day. The Slovaks won only short-term political gains, but their Jewish and ethnic German populations paid a heavy price. The Germans won their last significant victory in the war and maintained their presence in Slovak territory until the very end. The Soviet Union suffered significant casualties, but saw Communist influence increase in the region. Recriminations swirl around the lack of Allied support and the duplicity of Stalin. Western historians have excluded coverage of the uprising in part to avoid embarrassment. Significantly, the Slovaks remain at odds among themselves about the importance and the meaning of the uprising.



## Introduction

*“By this uprising Slovakia showed its adherence to the ideals of democracy, freedom and plurality,” Caplovic told CTK [the Czech News Agency], adding “it was necessary to more emphasize the international aspect of the uprising. It will only be young historians who will approach the topic in an unbiased way,” he said. “The current perception has been distorted by communist historians who did not deal with broad international connections of the uprising by which Slovakia joined the allies and returned to the ideals of the first Czechoslovak Republic,” he said.*

—Dusan Caplovic  
Slovak Deputy Prime Minister  
paraphrased on the Anniversary of  
the Slovak National Uprising, 2006

The story of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 is a complicated and tragic one that has been obscured and distorted by the politics that it surrounds. Slovakia’s relationship to Nazi Germany during World War II stemmed from the unique history of the Slovak people and their precarious position in Europe during 1939, but it created political tension both internally and externally for the small nation. The war situation in the summer of 1944 exacerbated these tensions and presented an opportunity for the Slovak opposition to stage an uprising against their puppet government, under Monsignor Jozef Tiso and thereby, the power of Nazi Germany. The three primary actors in the uprising included the Slovaks, Germans, and Soviets. Each group had its own viewpoint derived from diverging political aims and goals that guided their actions throughout the rebellion. The successful suppression of the uprising by Germany required nearly two months of heavy fighting with dire consequences for the Slovaks, including their Jewish and ethnic German compatriots. The Slovaks won only short-term political gains for their efforts. The failure of the uprising has resulted in postwar recriminations and accusations, often colored and skewed by Cold War ideology and Czechoslovak politics. The resulting confusion and

polarization has obscured the Slovak rebellion particularly in Western historiography. Recent publications indicate an increasing Western interest in the World War II history of Eastern Europe. The raising of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s granted greater access to historical resources throughout those nations once dominated by Communist governments and historians are taking advantage of the opportunity. Norman Davies revisited the Warsaw Uprising with his well-received work *Rising 1944: The Battle for Warsaw*, published in 2003, just in time for the 60th anniversary of that revolt. Author David Glantz has published study after study focusing on the operational campaigns of the Red Army, with his latest piece being *Red Storm over the Balkans: The Failed Soviet Invasion of Romania*. Richard DiNardo followed this trend when he published *Germany and the Axis Powers: From Coalition to Collapse* in 2005. Unfortunately, Slovakia and its rebellion are not even mentioned in DiNardo's work, and they receive only passing acknowledgement in most others.<sup>1</sup> A careful review and analysis of the varying points of view on the Slovak National Uprising will fill some of this void and reveal a more complete picture of what really occurred that fateful fall in 1944.

## **Setting the Stage: Slovak History and the Alliance with Germany**

Prior to the creation of the Czechoslovak state following the First World War, the Slovaks as a people resided in the backwaters of the international stage. Long dominated by Hungarian influence, a Slovak nationalist movement began in the late nineteenth century when the pressure for assimilation into Hungary's culture, a process known as Magyarization, became acute.<sup>2</sup> Slovaks began to seek unification with the Czech people to throw off the Hungarian yoke and forge a critical chapter in Slovak history.<sup>3</sup>

Support for Czech and Slovak unity first came from abroad, significantly from outside of Europe. Czech and Slovak American organizations recognized an opportunity to exert influence during the First World War and signed the Cleveland Agreement of 1915 and the Pittsburgh Pact of 1918, both seeking the creation of a unified Czech-Slovak state with varying degrees of autonomy for the smaller Slo-

vak population.<sup>4</sup> The dreams were fulfilled on 28 October 1918 when the Czech National Committee in Prague declared a new “Czecho-Slovak” state and the Slovak National Council, formed on 30 October, proposed a union with the Czechs, breaking affiliation with Hungary.<sup>5</sup> Slovaks would soon see that the newly created state did not meet their fullest expectations.

Slovak hopes for autonomy in the new Czechoslovak state proved illusory. The West was instrumental in the creation of Czechoslovakia, but was ignorant about the Slovak people, allowing the Czechs to assert their own influence and exploit the new state for their own agenda.<sup>6</sup> The Slovaks’ own limitations also played a role in their subordination. Decades of Hungarian dominance left them with weak political organizations, inexperienced administrators, and a psychological profile that deferred to authority, accepting lower status in the social order of their new country.<sup>7</sup> These failings, combined with the numerical superiority of the Czech population, predictably resulted in benevolent domination of the Slovaks in the Czechoslovak construct. Even as late as 1938 Slovak representation in the government only totaled 131 out of 7,470 civil servants, one out of 139 military generals, and 33 out of 1,246 foreign affairs officials.<sup>8</sup> Making matters worse, while Slovaks were 75 percent Catholic, the representation in their allotted 54 National Assembly seats consisted of 31 Protestant Slovaks, 13 Czechs, and only 10 Catholic Slovaks.<sup>9</sup> The stage was set for the political turmoil that would accompany the 1938 Munich Agreement and the resulting breakup of the young Czechoslovakian state.

Nazi Germany, under Adolf Hitler, had an unquenchable desire for expansion in the late 1930s. Following his successes in remilitarizing the Rhineland and absorbing Austria into Germany without war, Hitler turned next to Czechoslovakia by using its ethnic German population as a pretense to manufacture a crisis. His ultimate aims towards Czechoslovakia were simple: he planned to control the Czechs by German domination and to control the Slovaks by ensuring their allegiance as an ally with a small measure of independence.<sup>10</sup> The international crisis came to a head in September 1938 with the Munich Conference where Germany, with the aid of Italy as a suppos-

edly neutral arbitrator, treated with Britain and France to decide Czechoslovakia's fate. The results were disastrous for the Czechs, whose new Czechoslovak republic consisted of truncated Czech lands (some border territory ceded to Germany) and autonomous regions in Slovakia and Ruthenia.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Eduard Beneš, the president of Czechoslovakia and a Czech, resigned on 5 October 1939 in the immediate aftermath of the Munich Agreement.<sup>12</sup> The increased Slovak autonomy, decreased Czech influence, and German–Hungarian relations would soon force the Slovak people to secede from Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovak government arising from the ashes of the Beneš administration was attempting to retain as much legitimacy as possible and, fearing a Slovak move for independence, made plans for a military occupation of Slovak territory and declared martial law on 9 March 1939.<sup>13</sup> After a meeting between Hitler and Monsignor Jozef Tiso, an influential priest in Slovak politics, it was clear that Slovakia had to choose between independence and alliance with Germany, or continued rule from Prague likely followed by Hungarian reoccupation of Slovak lands with German permission.<sup>14</sup> The Slovak parliament unanimously approved independence and installed a government with Tiso at its head.<sup>15</sup> The new and vulnerable government immediately signed a Treaty of Protection with Germany on 23 March 1939, aligning its foreign and defense policies with the Nazi regime and avoiding occupation in return for protection against Czech or Hungarian dominance.<sup>16</sup> The move was an affront to the Czechs, while the Catholic roots of the new government alienated Slovakia's own protestant population, sowing the seeds for future political turmoil that would play a role in the 1944 uprising.

Czech bitterness and disappointment with the Slovak maneuverings were immediately evident. Historically, while the Slovaks had been at odds with the Hungarians, the Czechs' enemy was Germany, making the Slovak defection to the Nazi camp even more galling.<sup>17</sup> Beneš, the deposed Czech president, began a vigorous and organized campaign in 1939 to reverse the Munich Agreement and revive the Czechoslovak Republic through the creation of a government in exile.<sup>18</sup> Beneš made no effort to hide his animosity toward the Slovak Republic, declaring the entire affair

treasonous and its leaders traitors.<sup>19</sup> The Western powers were slow to recognize Beneš' exile government, stubbornly adhering to the Munich accord, but by 1942–43, nearly all the major powers, including the Soviet Union, supported this organization as the legal representative of all of Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup> Beneš tried to rally Slovak support for his government against their new republic by pointing out that Germany was sure to lose the war, by declaring his exiled government would spare the Slovaks the stigma of defeat because he represented them too, and by accusing the Tiso regime of complicity in Hungarian intrigue against Slovakia.<sup>21</sup> These two competing governments would vie for Slovak legitimacy and support the entire war, even during the Slovak uprising itself.

The war situation in August 1944 played a key role in the launch of the Slovak National Uprising. The scent of impending Allied victory over Germany lingered on every front. In the West, the successful invasion of Normandy enabled Operation Cobra, 25 July, and the subsequent breakout that was liberating France.<sup>22</sup> Rome had fallen on 4 June of that same year; the first Axis capital to be captured.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of southern France in mid August, seemed to reaffirm the Western Allies' mastery of the situation. The view on the Eastern Front, close to Slovakia, was very similar.

The Soviet Union was making remarkable gains against Germany in the East. A massive Soviet offensive was launched against the center of the German Eastern Front on 22 June 1944 (the third anniversary of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union), using 166 Red Army divisions, 2,700 tanks, and over 1,300 assault guns.<sup>24</sup> The attack was an astonishing success; tearing a 200-mile opening in the German lines and costing the Nazis nearly 200,000 men, 2,000 tanks, 10,000 heavy guns, and 57,000 trucks in the first week alone; and bringing the front ever closer to Slovak borders.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, other German allies, such as Finland, were tottering on the verge of collapse or defection to the Allied camp.<sup>26</sup> Slovaks were not the only people watching current events in 1944; the French and Poles were well aware of the tide of war.

Spurred by the combined successes of the Allies and various other motivations, uprisings seemed to overtake

Nazi-occupied lands. On 1 August 1944, the Polish Home Army seized the center of Warsaw from the Germans and hoped to hold their gains until the arrival of the Red Army, which was already tantalizingly close.<sup>27</sup> The Poles waged a valiant two-month campaign to hold out against Germany, hoping for Soviet assistance that never materialized, before they succumbed on 27 September.<sup>28</sup> The Germans killed 200,000 of the city's inhabitants with their violent suppression of the insurrection.<sup>29</sup> The Parisians staged their own uprising at nearly the same time when, as Allied forces approached the city, they raised the "Standard of Revolt" on 18 August 1944.<sup>30</sup> The Allied armies rushed to assist the rebels, and Free French forces liberated Paris by 25 August.<sup>31</sup> The advance of the Allies and the examples of Warsaw and Paris set the stage for the Slovak revolt. Unfortunately, for the Slovaks, who could not foresee the tragic end of the Polish uprising, their revolt would mimic the Polish course.

### **The Slovak National Uprising: The Slovak, German, and Soviet Views**

The military situation only partially explains the Slovak rising. Given Clausewitz's dictum that war is an act of policy and a continuation of politics by other means, the Slovak National Uprising must be viewed politically.<sup>32</sup> The Slovaks, Germans, and Soviets each had their own view of the uprising and their own associated political agenda, which helped determine the course of action they followed and colored their perspective of the events. It is the Slovak view that is the most complex and difficult to dissect.

Resistance in Slovakia was the result of a confluence of events and policies that culminated in the formation of an outwardly unified, though internally divided, opposition movement. The Tiso regime and its Catholic heavy handedness, as already noted, alienated the Slovak protestant populace, who had enjoyed a somewhat privileged place in the Czechoslovak construct. The progress of the war and allegiance to Nazi Germany began costing Tiso support, with the disaffection resulting in two primary resistance groups: the Democratic Party under Jozef Lettrich and the Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS).<sup>33</sup> The opposition groups began cooperating in 1943 and consolidated their efforts into one

movement under the Christmas Agreement of 1943, which created the Slovak National Council (SNC) with 50 percent membership from both groups.<sup>34</sup> The stated political charter included the reestablishment of Czechoslovakia with greater Slovak autonomy, a democratic political structure, and freedom of religion within a secular state.<sup>35</sup> The now unified opposition movement began to plan for an uprising with these specific goals in mind.

Yet Slovakia, by the time of the uprising, was politically isolated from the Allies. The three years following Slovakian independence saw the tiny state recognized by 28 other nations, including Britain, the Soviet Union, and prewar France, but these three later withdrew their recognition, and the United States was never to grant it.<sup>36</sup> The exiled Czech government managed to isolate Slovakia and had even made an agreement with the Soviets in May 1944. The agreement granted the Red Army military operational authority in Czechoslovakia in exchange for Czech administrative authority behind the lines of liberated territory.<sup>37</sup> Beneš went on to declare that there would be a “settling of accounts with all collaborators” after the war.<sup>38</sup> Slovak politicians were on the outside looking in and needed to take action to put themselves in a more agreeable position following the end of the war.

Motivations for the uprising created the strange bedfellows of Beneš and the SNC. The exile government needed some form of overt resistance under the Czech banner to increase its legitimacy and negotiating power at the end of the war, while the SNC needed to justify its own claim to lead the Slovak people, so the two agreed to work together.<sup>39</sup> Specific SNC goals for the uprising included reestablishing a Czechoslovakia with two equal nationalities, switching to the side of the victors by aiding in the defeat of Hitler, avoiding physical destruction of Slovakia by German scorched-earth policies, establishing a democracy, and allowing a quick strategic advance through the Carpathian mountains towards Vienna by the Red Army.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, a group of midlevel dissident Slovak officers, including Lt Cols Ján Golian, Mikuláš Ferjencík, Mirko Vesel, and Dezider Kišš-Kalina, also recognized Slovakia’s political predicament and contacted the Beneš government in February 1944 in the hopes of instigating a resistance movement

in the tiny nation.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the exiled Czechoslovak government, the SNC, and these sympathizers in the Slovak military set out to make plans for a revolt.

The planning for an uprising was extensive, but very difficult, given the multitude of actors, the surrounding political intrigue, and the geographic separation of the parties. In April 1944 the SNC named Golian as the leader of its military preparations for revolt, and on 14 May the Beneš government confirmed his position.<sup>42</sup> The first task was dividing the Slovak Army officer corps into three groups: active participants in the uprising; anti-fascists who would be notified just prior to the start of the uprising; and unreliable officers, loyal to the Tiso regime, who would be removed as soon as possible after the revolt began.<sup>43</sup> Local industry produced uniforms, boots, blankets, rations, mines, concrete fortifications, explosives, and even some improvised armored cars in advance of the uprising.<sup>44</sup> By June 1944 secret stockpiles in central Slovakia amounted to three months of food, 1.3 million liters of gasoline, and 3.5 billion Slovak crowns.<sup>45</sup> Golian's military plan called for the use of two Slovak Army field divisions in joint operations with the Red Army to hold open the Carpathian passes and allow the Soviets to rush into Slovakia from the east, while the rear army would hold on to central Slovakia until relieved.<sup>46</sup> The movement would kick off on either a coordinated signal with the Red Army advance (the preferred method), or as a response to German military occupation of Slovakia, which to that date had been left largely unmolested by the Nazis.<sup>47</sup> Despite the planning, the rapid pace of events in August 1944 would soon force the SNC's hand.

Events beyond the control of the SNC, rather than coordination with the Red Army, triggered the start of the uprising. The Soviet Union, in advance of its main force attack of the summer, had begun fomenting a partisan movement under its control in Slovakia, which forced the Tiso government to appeal to Germany for assistance, resulting in German occupation of Slovakia beginning on 29 August 1944.<sup>48</sup> This was the first indication of the command and control problems that would plague the uprising throughout, as the SNC and Golian tried desperately but unsuccessfully to slow the partisan operations by communicating to Moscow via the exile government in London.<sup>49</sup> Presented with a

fait accompli, Golian declared the uprising at 2000 hours on 29 August, calling for the mobilization of the reservist classes of 1938–39.<sup>50</sup> Questions remain about how much of this poor coordination and communication was the fog and friction of war, and how much was deliberate obfuscation by the Soviets.

The initial breakdown of strength inside Slovakia showed 18,000 army troops with the uprising, 9,000 remaining loyal to the Tiso government, and 29,000 reservists joining the revolt, while the higher estimates claim the partisan movement boasted between 18,000–26,000 members of varying nationalities including Czech, Slovaks, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Yugoslavs, Jews, and even Frenchmen.<sup>51</sup> The uncoordinated start of the uprising, due to the partisan activities, resulted in confusion that allowed the Germans to capture and disarm the two eastern field divisions of the Slovak Army slated to hold the Carpathian passes for the Red Army.<sup>52</sup> It also resulted in the loss of crucial supplies in Kvetnica, including 40 million rounds of ammunition, 62,000 artillery rounds, 112,000 grenades, 181 heavy machine guns, and 632 light machine guns.<sup>53</sup> On balance, the rebellious Slovaks initially edged the Germans and Tiso loyalists in numbers, but they faced an enemy who benefited from superior training and weaponry.

Despite this inauspicious start, Golian's forces managed to seize a portion of Slovakia and fought gallantly to hold it while waiting for Allied, especially Soviet, support. The loss of the two divisions in eastern Slovakia combined with the steadfast loyalty of Slovak garrisons to Tiso in western Slovakia confined the insurgency to the middle of the country.<sup>54</sup> The insurgents consolidated their forces in and around the Hron Valley, hoping to keep the Germans out of the strategic triangle of Brezno–Banská Bystrica–Zvolen, with Banská Bystrica as the nominal rebel capital.<sup>55</sup> After the initial and confusing opening of hostilities, the mountainous terrain of central Slovakia dictated the character of combat, forcing brigade-sized conventional engagements for control of key passages in strategic river valleys, such as the Váh.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, as the fighting raged, conditions in the insurgent territory resumed a surreal sort of normalcy, as the trains ran on time, five newspapers continued print-

ing, and the rebel government collected taxes.<sup>57</sup> Hope for success now rested on Allied reaction.

Questions concerning Allied support for the uprising, both from the West and the Soviet Union, remain the most contentious issues surrounding the Slovak National Uprising to this day. The original SNC plan relied heavily on Soviet support. Many Slovaks feel that help never arrived because the Soviets intentionally withheld it. Alexander Dubček, future leader of communist Czechoslovakia and an active partisan during the revolt, put the blame for poor coordination and a lack of support squarely on the Soviets who, in his view “were simply not interested in such coordination” for political reasons.<sup>58</sup> Dubček goes on to fault the Soviets for belatedly launching an offensive into Slovakia, one week too late to save the two Slovak divisions disarmed by the Germans only 30 miles from the Russian front.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the Red Army delivered lavish supplies to Slovakia to sustain the Soviet-run partisan movement, not the native SNC and its troops who operated independently of Moscow.<sup>60</sup> Even the substantial Soviet contribution of the Red Army-trained Czechoslovak Parachute Brigade, flown into Tri Duby airfield in late September and early October, is derided as too little too late.<sup>61</sup>

The lack of large-scale aid from the West is generally forgiven or overlooked. Many blame Western failures, once again, on the duplicity of Stalin who severely limited the West’s freedom of action in or near its zones of operation.<sup>62</sup> As early as the beginning of October, the insurgents saw the undeniable parallels to Warsaw and made frequent analogies to the Polish situation when pleading for Allied support.<sup>63</sup> Many in the SNC and those sympathetic to the uprising believed the United States to be a champion of democracy and a source of hope. They more readily yielded the benefit of the doubt to the West and the United States than they did to the Soviets.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of who was to blame, the lack of weapons and supplies was only one problem faced by the insurrectionists.

The plethora of actors involved in the Slovak uprising also resulted in political divisions that hampered command and control and unity of purpose throughout the course of the uprising and thereby left plenty of room for postconflict recriminations. The internal forces involved in Slovakia in-

cluded the SNC, with its communist and noncommunist elements, the Moscow-directed partisans, and the supporters of Tiso and Slovak nationalism. Externally, Beneš competed with Stalin and Tiso for influence and legitimacy. The uprising's Slovak commanders were never able to control, and could only marginally influence, the operations of the Soviet partisans who took their orders from partisan headquarters in Kiev, Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> Dubček confirms this, stating, "This divided chain of command later posed very serious problems."<sup>66</sup> Some also claim that there was extreme internal dissent within Slovakia, as the majority of the Slovak population never supported the rebellion and were loyal to Tiso and his Slovak government until the end of the war.<sup>67</sup> Dubček expounds upon the external factors at play between Beneš and Stalin, saying that in the Czechoslovak-Soviet Alliance Treaty signed around the same time as the Christmas Agreement of 1943 Beneš effectively delivered Czechoslovakia to the Soviet sphere of influence by subordinating its external policies to Moscow.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, these divisions and the political intrigue they entailed ceded the initiative to the Germans and proved disastrous for the Slovak National Uprising.

The German view of the event is generally more straightforward than that of the Slovaks or Soviets. The war had stretched the Nazis thin and left them with limited resources in the area, but they were certainly not caught unaware in Slovakia. Many of the ethnic German population of Slovakia, including those who were soldiers in its army, had previously been mobilized or transferred for employment in Hitler's *Schutzstaffel* (SS, meaning Protective Echelon). The resulting absence of a German fifth column in the Slovak army aided the elaborate Slovak planning and stockpiling prior to the revolt.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the Germans maintained good enough intelligence in Bratislava and in each Slovak Army division to realize that something was in the works.<sup>70</sup> Following the defection of another key ally, Romania, on 24 August 1944, German Army Group North Ukraine prepared a plan for Operation Potato Harvest (*Fall Kartoffelernte*) to disarm and intern the East Slovak Army Corps.<sup>71</sup> The Germans had good reason to be concerned.

The German goals in relation to the uprising stemmed from Slovakia's strategic geographic position in Central Europe. The switching of sides by Romania, followed by the Slovak revolt, threatened to encourage a similar movement in neighboring Hungary, something the Germans desperately wanted to avoid.<sup>72</sup> They also recognized the Slovak situation was, according to Gerald Reitlinger, a "much more dangerous situation than Warsaw, because the rebellion cut off the retreat of the routed German Eighth Army in Galicia."<sup>73</sup> The immediate goals of intervention included stabilizing the situation in the industrial regions of Slovakia and propping up the Tiso government with 10,000–15,000 men for about one week.<sup>74</sup> This indicates they did not think the fight to secure Slovakia would be very difficult. They were wrong.

The initial German reaction was swift and effective. Following Tiso's appeal for help in combating the growing partisan threat, the Germans ordered several ad hoc SS units including *Kampfgruppe* (KG or battle group) Schill and KG Wittensmeier, as well as two better-organized units: the SS Horst Wessel Division, and the SS 18th Freewillig Panzer Grenadier Regiment into Slovakia.<sup>75</sup> *Reichsführer* (Equivalent to field marshal and leader of the SS) Heinrich Himmler took control of the operation and appointed SS *Obergruppenführer* (lieutenant general equivalent) Gottlob Berger as commander.<sup>76</sup> Berger viewed this as a simple police action, which would take no more than four days.<sup>77</sup> Because of the confusion the premature partisan triggering of the uprising caused, the Germans rapidly disarmed the Eastern Slovak Army Corps, removing the two best Slovak divisions, consisting of 24,000 of its finest troops, from the fight.<sup>78</sup> Despite their ad hoc composition, the German units retained a strong advantage in training and experience over their Slovak opponents, consistently defeating the larger but poorly armed foe.<sup>79</sup> The large scale of the rising, however, frustrated the German attempts to quell it quickly. Himmler reacted by appointing a new and more operationally focused SS commander, Herman Höfle, in late September and by increasing the troop commitment to seven divisions, with a total of nearly 45,000 troops with armor, artillery, and air support.<sup>80</sup> By early October, the Germans had assembled the resources needed to crack the uprising's defensive pe-

rimeter in the center of the country, and they put them to good use.

German conduct during the suppression of the revolt stemmed from Nazi ideology and its explanation of the nature of partisan warfare. Slovakia, as late as the summer of 1944, had been a quiet backwater where German children vacationed without raising any special concern.<sup>81</sup> Hitler viewed the uprising through his typically anti-Semitic lens:

But the matter went deeper. Why had a country, not as yet menaced with Russian occupation, welcomed British-trained parachutists? And why had part of the army been willing to go over to the enemy? For Hitler there could only be one answer. In Slovakia the Jews had been allowed to survive. In March 1942 Slovakia had set a good example to other satellite countries by deporting her own Jews to Poland. But later in that year, when fifty-six thousand had been sent, it was discovered that resettlement in Poland meant the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belsec, and Sobibor. Henceforward, under cover of a complicated codex of laws, thirty-five thousand Jews had remained in the country.<sup>82</sup>

This ideological sentiment ensured the remaining Jews would suffer heavily during the suppression. Brutal partisan fighting also enraged and motivated the Germans. Most of the partisan activity occurred under the supervision of the Soviets, who had let loose a reign of terror specifically targeting the ethnic German population.<sup>83</sup> Although the SNC and Golian waged an essentially conventional campaign during the uprising, Slovaks would pay for the Soviet-directed partisan excesses and suffer the reprisals of the SS who began a series of mass executions in the region.<sup>84</sup> The now stereotypical acts of Nazi brutality became commonplace.

The Soviet accounts and perspectives of the Slovak National Uprising follow a party-line construct. The Soviets recognized the strategic position of Slovakia in Europe and the lack of German forces in the country and began to plan accordingly.<sup>85</sup> They, like the Nazis, were aware that something was in the works in Slovakia through their own communist contacts in the resistance movement.<sup>86</sup> Independent of the internal Slovak resistance, Moscow pressed ahead with its own vision for operations in Czechoslovakia, which included the use of large-scale partisan warfare directed from Kiev, and the employment of Red Army trained Czechoslovak units during the nation's liberation from the

fascist grip.<sup>87</sup> When the Slovaks did send a mission to try to coordinate with the Red Army, the Soviets found the proposed plan for a linkup through the Carpathians wishful thinking rather than actual capability, and rejected the conventional plan in favor of the popular uprising they believed their partisan struggle would ignite.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the Soviets viewed the Beneš government's request for a Soviet timetable of operations with great suspicion, refusing to disclose their operational plans to the "bourgeois" body.<sup>89</sup> Naturally, Soviet planning and secrecy were in line with its own goals in the region.

Those goals contradicted the German aims, obviously, but also conflicted with the aims of Beneš and even the majority of the Slovaks themselves. Repeatedly the Soviets fault the planners of the rebellion for not considering an "uprising of the masses," but instead focusing on their own interests in the political realm: "all the representatives of the Beneš government had invariably striven (covertly) to prevent the Czechoslovak antifascist movement from breaking out on a large scale. Beneš and the members of his cabinet were far-seeing, experienced people who realized very well that the activation of the people's forces meant a great class danger for a bourgeois republic."<sup>90</sup> Stalin wanted a "social revolution" aided by the great socialist power, the Soviet Union, not a victory for the exiled regime: "To allow the proponents of the 'London Concept' to triumph without any challenge would have been foolish and pointless political benevolence. Once a Soviet-controlled partisan movement was entrenched on Slovak territory there was an instrument in being to 'activate' the struggle, to place the leadership of this fight firmly in the hands of the 'progressives' and to preempt the bourgeois nationalists by precipitating revolt."<sup>91</sup> "Political benevolence" not being Stalin's strongest suit, the Soviets behaved accordingly during the uprising.

The Soviets' initial primary focus in Slovakia was on the operations of its partisans, which forced the premature launching of the general uprising by provoking German intervention. The Russians had been building up their partisan strength in the region since the first group of 11 men, commanded by P. A. Velichko, was parachuted into the area near Ružomberok on 20 July 1944.<sup>92</sup> The official Soviet version of events states that by August of 1944 Red

Army successes left no doubt about the outcome of the war, stirring up “an underground struggle by the Slovak people against fascism.”<sup>93</sup> Once fighting broke out, the Soviet regime determined, as an ally, it had an obligation to support the Slovaks as a “manifestation of proletarian internationalism.”<sup>94</sup> The predominant amount of support was delivered to the partisans, not the organized Slovak resistance, via nightly flights into the area delivering millions of bullets, thousands of rifles and machine guns, and hundreds of antitank weapons.<sup>95</sup> While this partisan struggle raged, the Soviets did attempt to establish contact with those Slovak forces engaged against the Germans via a hastily organized offensive through the Carpathian mountain passes.

Conventional Red Army forces were relatively close to the Slovak border in late August 1944. After the completion of the massive Operation Bagration (Операция Багратион) offensive in the summer, the front stabilized on the far side of the Carpathians, 50 kilometers from the northeastern Slovakian frontier.<sup>96</sup> According to the Soviet claims (which are not without some justification), their forces were worn down and under strength from the summer combat and had recently stood down to a defensive posture.<sup>97</sup> Despite their condition, the units under the command of Marshal Ivan Koniev in the 1st and the 4th Ukrainian Fronts (army group equivalents), supported by the Soviet-trained 1st Czechoslovak Corps, were ordered to launch an offensive at the outbreak of the uprising through the mountains to try and reach the rebels.<sup>98</sup> Lack of communication with the resistance organizers reared its ugly head here once again. The Soviets still expected support from the Eastern Slovak Army Corps, not knowing it had already been disarmed.<sup>99</sup> S. M. Shtemenko’s account calls the failure of these Slovak divisions an act of treason, incorrectly accusing the unit’s commander, Gen August Malar, of going over to the Germans.<sup>100</sup> The Soviet offensive faced difficult terrain and strengthened German defenses, but still made some substantial initial progress, including a 40-kilometer advance by 14 September, before its advanced units were cut off and stalled by German reaction.<sup>101</sup> The pace then slowed dramatically, and it was not until 6 October that the 1st Czechoslovak Corps seized the Dukla Pass from the Germans and entered its own country from the east.<sup>102</sup> These

efforts yielded little immediate results, as the previous failure of the Eastern Slovak Army Corps to hold its position meant the forces under Koniev, despite their advances, were still far from the uprising confined in central Slovakia.

October 1944 saw the Germans fully regain the initiative and suppress the revolt. They had been grinding away at the Slovaks throughout September, making slow but steady gains, with KG Schill demonstrating excellent tactical prowess.<sup>103</sup> The forces facing each other in mid October consisted of nearly 36,000 Slovaks in the organized force, of which about 9,000 had no personal equipment, and approximately 48,000 German troops of varying quality, age, and health.<sup>104</sup> Each side received a small measure of air support. The Germans enjoyed excellent results from Stuka dive-bombing attacks.<sup>105</sup> The Slovaks benefited with a brief spate of support from the 1st Czechoslovak Fighter Regiment that arrived at Tri Duby airfield from the Soviet Union, an episode that deserves further investigation.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, throughout the month of October, the insurgents were forced on the defensive until the Germans launched their final effort. The offensive began on 17 October, when 35,000 troops pushed up from the south out of Hungary facilitated by that country's regime change.<sup>107</sup> The unreliability of the Soviet-controlled partisan groups, who frequently failed at their assigned missions or simply vanished from the field of battle leaving other units exposed to the enemy, handicapped efforts to resist the German advance.<sup>108</sup> Banská Bystrica, the nominal capital of the resistance forces, fell to the Germans 10 days later.<sup>109</sup> While the fighting raged in the center of Slovakia, the Soviet efforts in the east were falling short as well.

The Soviet offensive was unable to generate any momentum following the capture of the Dukla Pass. Further gains eluded the Soviets, despite continued fighting in the mountainous area, until late November.<sup>110</sup> The offensive into Slovakia cost the Soviet Union 80,000 casualties, 20,000 of which were killed, while the 1st Czechoslovak Corps itself had 6,500 dead and was ground down to half strength.<sup>111</sup> These numbers are proof positive that the Soviets made a serious effort to force the mountains. On 28 October, facing a German counteroffensive and realizing the failure of the Red Army to progress any further, Gen Rudolf Viest, who

had succeeded Golian as military commander of the uprising, accepted defeat. Viest did not formally surrender, but ordered the remaining insurgents to head for the mountains to revert to partisan warfare, which would continue until the end of the war.<sup>112</sup> Organized Slovak resistance had collapsed after two long, hard months of fighting.

The Slovak National Uprising had failed to liberate the country for a number of reasons. The uprising was triggered prematurely, and the Slovak forces were not yet totally prepared for the fight. This resulted in the immediate loss of its two best fighting units, and the state of training and armament of the remaining insurgents was low.<sup>113</sup> Divided and competing chains of command further diluted the efforts of the organized insurgents and the partisans, allowing the superior operational prowess of the Germans to decide the issue.<sup>114</sup> The final major contributor to Slovak failure was the stark lack of outside support.<sup>115</sup> The preceding failures made this need for support all the more important. Even though the uprising failed in its most ambitious goal of liberating the country, it produced some significant political and military effects.

The uprising ended up benefiting each of the key players to some degree. Beneš and the Czechoslovak government in exile received some pro-Allied activity to boost their influence at the end of the war.<sup>116</sup> The Germans secured their last clear-cut success of the war and managed to stabilize the Eastern Front and blunt a Soviet push into central Europe.<sup>117</sup> They remained in place until April 1945. Militarily, the uprising only marginally affected German war efforts, and those Slovak manufacturing plants under German control continued war production in support of the Reich throughout the entire period of the rebellion.<sup>118</sup> The Soviets saw the influence of the Communist movement in Slovakia strengthened vis-à-vis their “bourgeois” opponents.<sup>119</sup> The Slovaks garnered their own pro-Allied credentials, which averted potential postwar treatment as a defeated nation, and they could take pride in the fact that it was almost entirely a Slovak affair, despite Beneš’ efforts to paint it otherwise.<sup>120</sup>

None of these benefits came without a cost. The numbers of casualties for the uprising are difficult to establish with any degree of accuracy. Conservative estimates

of Slovak losses for the uprising amount to 1,700 killed, 580 missing, and 3,600 wounded, but there are plausible estimates that claim 2,500–3,000 dead, and 5,000–6,000 wounded for the two months of active combat.<sup>121</sup> On 30 October, the Germans collected 10,000 prisoners of war in the Bystrica–Zvolen–Donovaly area and shipped them to Germany for use as forced labor.<sup>122</sup> German losses in fighting the Slovaks are in the neighborhood of 3,000 men killed, wounded, or missing.<sup>123</sup> Soviet losses on the Eastern Front in and around the Carpathian passes have already been described.

The uprising proved disastrous for the ethnic German population in Slovakia. Partisan bands played particular havoc with these Slovaks of German descent. Large-scale killings were commonplace: 30 civilians killed in Deutsch-Proben, 70 murdered in Hochwies-Paulisch, 130 killed in Krickerhau, another 187 slaughtered in Glaserhau, 143 killed in Rosenberg, and so on.<sup>124</sup> The partisans were even bold enough to massacre 150 “German” civilians who were assisting the Slovak insurgents with construction of defensive positions, which then brought retribution by the Slovak military, who executed the murderers.<sup>125</sup> Himmler, ever protective of German blood, ordered the evacuation of the ethnic German population from central and eastern Slovakia in November 1944, while many of the rest fled from the Russian advance. This left only 5,000 ethnic Germans of a once-thriving population in Slovakia by 1950.<sup>126</sup> The brutal partisan activity against the Slovak Germans brought fear of reprisals from the Nazi security forces.<sup>127</sup> These fears proved to be well founded.

The Germans had terror on their mind from the beginning of their intervention, and they continued their persecutions well after organized resistance had ceased. There is no clearer indication of Nazi intent than the public declaration in early September 1944. They promised to exact a “two-thousand-fold revenge” against anyone who harmed a German in Slovakia, and the Slovak insurgents were labeled “murderers and bandits.”<sup>128</sup> The brutality began almost immediately as the German troops, aided by the Tiso government’s loyal Hlinka Guard, plundered livestock and equipment for their own needs and torched scores of Slovak communities.<sup>129</sup> The fear of the local populations

was palpable. This fear limited assistance to the Slovak army as ordinary citizens learned the Germans were murdering entire families and burning down the homes of anyone caught sympathizing with the rebels.<sup>130</sup> Following their brutal suppression of the Warsaw uprising, the infamous SS *Sturmbrigade* Dirlewanger arrived to assist with the suppression, using its notorious “medieval methods” against the Slovaks.<sup>131</sup> Once the conventional fighting culminated and then subsided into partisan warfare, the German efforts at repression became more furious. They followed the standard Nazi program by employing *Einsatzgruppen* (special action units) infamous for their early role in extermination of Soviet Jews and Commissars. The Germans established five units under *Einsatzgruppe* H in Slovakia which, in the six weeks before 9 December, reported 18,947 people captured including 9,653 Jews, 3,409 “bandits,” 2,186 deserters, and 714 others “who offered resistance.”<sup>132</sup> “Special treatment,” better known as immediate execution was administered to 2,257 victims, while 10,000 others, mostly Jews, were sent into concentration camps.<sup>133</sup> The numbers above indicate an undeniable truth: the Jews were once again a favorite target of the Nazis.

The outcome of the Slovak National Uprising would write the tragic final chapter in the forlorn story of Slovakia’s Jews. As previously stated, Slovakia’s Jews had undergone significant persecution under the Tiso regime, including the mass deportation of 56,000 people. Yet the deportations had stopped, once the Slovaks learned the Jews were being executed, leaving between 20,000–35,000 Jews in-country at the time of the uprising.<sup>134</sup> The Germans forced the resumption of deportations on 30 September 1944, with the last train departing as late as 31 March 1945.<sup>135</sup> During the uprising itself, the Germans summarily executed any Jew caught in the area of the fighting.<sup>136</sup> The purge was so thorough that by the end of the war only six out of an original 180 rabbis survived, and there was no significant Jewish population remaining.<sup>137</sup> The Nazis had concluded their postscript to the history of the Slovak National Uprising with a bloody exclamation point.

## **Political Obscurity and the Tides of History**

The failure of the uprising, in concert with the political climate of the Cold War, colored the historical coverage of this remarkable rebellion. Stanislav Kirschbaum notes the steady subordination of the Slovaks to the Czechs in the late 1940s resulted in the willful distortion, by the Communists in the 1950s, of the objectives and the historical record of the uprising.<sup>138</sup> Divisions existed even among the Communists themselves; the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the CPS vied for postwar power, while the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sought to expand its own international influence. The Czech communists went so far as to accuse many of those Slovak communists involved in the uprising of being “bourgeois elements” and “deviationists,” more interested in nationalism than socialism.<sup>139</sup> This competition between these three Communist parties is yet another aspect of the Slovak story that deserves more study. The political thaw that followed the federation of Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s saw the beginning of more accurate coverage of the uprising, only to see it lost again in the subsequent repression after 1968.<sup>140</sup> Alexander Dubček, the partisan veteran and communist leader, claimed something of an epiphany when he realized “that of the many officially sanctioned books and studies published in the past about the uprising, only a few were more than propaganda.”<sup>141</sup> Discerning the full truth about the Slovak National Uprising is extremely difficult, at best, and requires proper consideration of the differing viewpoints and the motivations of each of their protagonists.

Western accounts of World War II have virtually ignored the Slovak National Uprising for a number of reasons. Embarrassment at the treatment of Czechoslovakia with appeasement and the Munich Agreement in 1938, and then failure to hold Germany to that same agreement in March 1939, which led to the creation of bastard Slovakia, has played a role.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, both Britain and the United States played only a minor role in the uprising. They were largely bystanders looking in from the outside, powerless to do anything. The British had deliberately limited aid, with their Special Operations Executive restricted to sabotage and guerrilla activities, not major uprisings.<sup>143</sup> The Ameri-

cans and the British tried to support the uprising with very small, secret military missions that resulted in the capture and execution of 17 of their agents.<sup>144</sup> These covert missions focused their efforts on the Tri Duby airfield near Banská Bystrica and managed to fly out dozens of downed Allied airmen, while flying in military and medical supplies for the insurgents.<sup>145</sup> In a way, the Western countries tried to exonerate themselves by blaming the Soviet Union for prohibiting them from assisting the Slovaks and denying them operational freedom in the area.<sup>146</sup> In truth, US and British priorities were elsewhere. Operation Market Garden's launch and subsequent failure in mid September 1944, the 20 October 1944 surrender of Aachen, the first large German city to be captured, and the Warsaw uprising all garnered more attention. Since then these efforts have enjoyed extensive coverage in Western media, overshadowing the events in Slovakia.<sup>147</sup> This lack of exposure in the West contrasts sharply with the accounts from the Soviets and Communists.

The Soviets, ever mindful of the value of propaganda, worked diligently to present their view of the uprising as the true history and in so doing to further their own political aims in Europe. The orthodox view portrayed the Soviet Union as a strong and willing ally of the Czechoslovak people, which was ready to help when the government in exile requested assistance.<sup>148</sup> Their version of history makes no mention that partisan activity prematurely triggered the uprising, but implies that Hitler just decided to occupy Slovakia according to his own timetable.<sup>149</sup> Communist accounts try to claim leadership in the struggle by inaccurately portraying the SNC as a Communist construct, calling it a "people's front" fighting the Nazis, ignoring the true, even representation of communists and noncommunists in the body.<sup>150</sup> Red accounts aim to paint a vivid picture of Communist resolve and glory: "At the most trying moments the insurgents—especially the Communists—courageously looked danger in the eye and went on fighting hard. They knew that the Red Army was hurrying to relieve them, so they held out to the last."<sup>151</sup> Given such resolve, failure of the uprising had to be attributed to Beneš, his officers, and the Slovak bourgeoisie who conspired against the "people's" revolt.<sup>152</sup> Soviet writers also made sure to fault the West,

in general, for its paltry amount of aid given, while claiming to have granted the insurgents extensive help.<sup>153</sup> Lastly, to ensure their version of events was accepted, the Soviets rounded up and arrested those Slovaks, even many of the communists, involved in the uprising and placed individuals that were more “reliable” in their stead following the end of the war.<sup>154</sup> While the Soviets were able to provide a unified, if distorted, account of the uprising, the Czechs’ views on the affair are slightly more complex.

Two basic Czech views of the situation prevail: the version of the Beneš government and noncommunists and the post-war version of events proffered by the communist regime. The Beneš government in exile desperately needed to portray this revolution as their own, and attempted to lay claim to inspiring and organizing it for the Slovaks, who needed to atone for their sin of independence.<sup>155</sup> One simple statistic refutes this claim: only about 1,000 Czechs participated in the rising.<sup>156</sup> The Beneš government was also keenly aware of the accusations made against the Soviet Union in the Warsaw uprising and saw the same duplicity and hence reasons for failure in Slovakia.<sup>157</sup> Ultimately, Beneš laid the failure of the Allies to provide support on the results of the Teheran Conference in late 1943, which yielded up Czechoslovakia to the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>158</sup>

The Czech communists who came to power in the post-war period held a slightly different position. Those communists involved in the revolt were small in number and did not receive prominent appointments in the government because they drew Soviet suspicions.<sup>159</sup> Those who were in power endeavored to paint the uprising as a Communist venture, while at the same time portraying the democratic groups as having collaborated with the Nazis.<sup>160</sup> They focused their efforts on the prominent democratic patriots who opposed them politically and tried to extort others into making signed statements defaming the enemies of Communism.<sup>161</sup> In their efforts to bolster the Communist image, they attempted to switch the blame for the murder of many of the ethnic German population to the German SS.<sup>162</sup> These efforts seem to have convinced many ordinary Czechoslovaks who believed the uprising failed simply because of the vagaries of war and saw the Communists as the primary victors over Germany.<sup>163</sup> The complexity of the

Czech viewpoint is replicated to an even greater degree in the Slovak position.

The Slovak National Uprising represents many different things to many different Slovaks. It should come as no surprise that internal disputes often yield the most vociferous reactions and create deep wounds. The uprising “became the object of many conflicting interpretations, not only by those who condemn it and those who justify it, but also by those who led it.”<sup>164</sup> Those who opposed the uprising did not see the event as liberation from fascism, but instead viewed it as a betrayal of Slovak independence and a return to subordination under the Czechs.<sup>165</sup> Those that supported the uprising claim that an overwhelming number of Slovaks opposed the creation of Tiso’s independent state, viewing the separatist movement as treasonous to the Czechoslovak state.<sup>166</sup> They also view the uprising as part of a central European, noncommunist democratic revolution, comparing it to the movements of Dragoljub Mihailović in Yugoslavia and Bor-Komorowski (Gen Count Tadeusz Komorowski) in Poland.<sup>167</sup> The prosecution of Slovak “collaborators” after the war, only served to deepen the divide between these groups. “People’s courts” tried Tiso and over 20,000 others, finding over 8,000 guilty of collaboration.<sup>168</sup> Further division between the Catholics, who were more likely to have supported Tiso, and the Protestants, who favored Czechoslovakia, occurred as the result of the internment of 10,000–20,000 of the former in the Soviet Union following the war.<sup>169</sup> Many Slovaks, and the Beneš government, saw duplicity and treachery in the Soviet handling of the affair and drew parallels to Warsaw.<sup>170</sup> The debate continued even after the war, as many remembered the short-lived period of independence and relative prosperity as a positive legacy.<sup>171</sup> Reverberations of these divisions are felt even today. The 62nd anniversary celebration of the 1944 Slovak National Uprising was disrupted by a group of protestors from the *Slovenska Pospolitost* (Slovak Community), which supports Tiso’s legacy and derides the uprising anniversary celebration as a “festival of traitors.”<sup>172</sup> Clearly, there remains in Slovakia a deep-seated divide over the interpretation of this historical event.

Despite the complexity and variance of views towards the uprising, proper analysis can cut through the political

haze to clarify some of the contentious aspects of the revolt. Comparisons with the Warsaw uprising on both the politics involved and the atrocities committed are useful, but only to a limited degree. Stalin was nothing if not a shrewd politician, and there can be no doubt he was carefully maneuvering to ensure Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia, but unlike in Poland, the Red Army did attempt a hasty offensive to reach the insurgents. In fact, the Red Army lost four times as many men attempting to force the Carpathians as they did on the approaches to Warsaw during the Polish revolt.<sup>173</sup> Reasons for this difference are unclear, but it may be that the Russians believed they had a fleeting opportunity to seize passes through difficult geographic terrain with the help of the insurgents, rather than having to fight for it later under more challenging circumstances. It may also be attributable to the well-known animosity that existed between the Poles and Russians in general, and Stalin and the exiled Polish regime at that time. Additionally, although German reprisals against the Slovaks mimicked the brutality against the Poles, they seem to be on a much smaller scale. The figures for Warsaw are generally accepted as 200,000 civilians killed due to the uprising there, while the previously cited, though undoubtedly incomplete, Slovak figures fail to approach this level.<sup>174</sup> Nor can all the atrocities be attributed to the Nazis, much to Communist chagrin, as partisan vengeance against Slovak Germans has already been demonstrated. In laymen's terms, the Warsaw and Slovak uprisings may be siblings, but they are certainly not twins.

The overarching reason for failure was the lack of a clear, unified command, or at least unity of effort. The divergent political aims of the SNC, the Beneš exile government, and the Soviet Union prevented them from ever being able to establish a single coordinated plan and thereby employ their forces and resources in concert to greater effect. In Slovakia, the insurgents had their own chain of command which was working with the SNC and the exile government, while the partisans answered to Moscow and, for all intents and purposes, ran their own independent operations. Moscow would not subordinate its partisans to Beneš, and his government refused to subordinate the Slovak army to the Soviets. The mutual lack of trust was valid in that they

all had different aims, but it proved fatal to each of their efforts. Blame must be shared equally, as none of the key participants were able to compromise effectively enough to fight the mutual Nazi enemy.

Despite claims otherwise, the Slovak National Uprising was predominantly Slovak and democratic, not Czech, Soviet, or Communist. The Beneš government was able to portray the uprising as its own because the Allies had recognized it as the legitimate representative of the Czechs and Slovaks. It was precisely this recognition, however, that forced the Slovaks to work through Beneš because they had no other means of communicating with the Allies. By slight of hand, it appeared that the Czech government was indeed running the show. The numbers speak for themselves, and Czechs, as previously mentioned, did not make up a large contingent of combatants during the revolt. Similarly, Communist attempts to take credit for leading the uprising and conducting the larger share of fighting are patently false. The Slovak army bore the main burden of combat throughout the rising.<sup>175</sup> It is the unfortunate fate of the Slovaks that history and politics cloud these facts.

The ongoing internal recriminations among the Slovaks themselves are as unfortunate as they are inevitable. Taken from an outsider's perspective and leaving the debate about the morality of the Tiso regime aside, one can see Slovak patriots on both sides of this issue. The idealists among the Slovak separatists naturally find the attempt to overthrow Slovakia's first independent government abhorrent. When looking at it from their perspective, one must remember that the German army did not occupy Slovakia until the partisans triggered the intervention. These people found being a relatively unmolested, but subservient, ally to Germany preferable to complete political subordination in a unified Czechoslovak state. The realists inside Slovakia could see the writing on the wall and recognized Slovakia's best interests lay with switching to the Allied side before the war was over. They viewed reincorporation into Czechoslovakia as inevitable and decided it would be better for their tiny nation to avoid treatment as a defeated member of the Axis alliance. Thus motivated, they decided to act. Regardless of these two views, the uprising had serious political consequences for the Slovaks.

The bottom line for the Slovak people, despite the short-term gain of averting treatment as a conquered nation, was long-term political weakness, which would cost them during the Cold War. The uprising effectively ended Slovak statehood by destroying the link between Tiso and the people and turning Slovakia into an occupied German puppet state without even the pretense of independence.<sup>176</sup> The failure of the uprising also weakened the Slovaks' claim to more autonomy and equality in the recreated Czechoslovak state, as the Soviets, the Beneš government, and internal Communist leaders all preferred a more centralized political system emanating from Prague.<sup>177</sup> The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was able to leverage Czech fears of renewed Slovak separatism to its own benefit, and seized power in 1948. The Slovaks, who to the last voted against communism at a rate of two to one, now found themselves subordinate to the Czechs once again, and this time it would be under a communist regime.<sup>178</sup> It would remain so until the now famous Velvet Divorce in 1993.

## **Conclusion**

The true story of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 can only now be revealed. The passage of time and end of the Cold War allow closer inspection of the different viewpoints of this revolt and help wipe away some of the murkiness of the political milieu that surrounds it. The unique history of Slovakia, wedded to the tumultuous European political scene of the late 1930s, resulted in the creation of an independent Slovakia closely allied to Nazi Germany. This move toward independence and the close ties to Germany created great internal and external turmoil for the tiny new state. Dramatic changes in the 1944 war situation provided a fleeting opportunity for those internal and external actors who opposed the Slovak government to rise up and redress their grievances. The uprising forced three key participants including the Slovaks, Germans, and Soviets into action. Each of these players had their own plans and goals for the uprising, which guided their actions therein and produced independent and sometimes conflicting accounts of what really happened during the fateful event. Two months of

hard fighting ended in the collapse of organized resistance in Slovakia with dire consequences for the Slovak Jewish and ethnic German populations, while yielding only limited short-term political gains for the Slovaks. Following the failure of the uprising and the end of the war, political maneuvering, influenced heavily by Cold War politics, yielded accusations and countercharges between East and West, as well as internally in Czechoslovakia and among the Slovak people. These debates and disagreements further obfuscated the issues and actual history surrounding the revolt, sending it into obscurity, particularly in Western accounts of World War II. A disciplined analysis of each of these post-war accounts reveals some undeniable truths about the uprising and paints a much clearer picture of many of the more hotly contested aspects of the tragic event. It is time to set the historical record straight.

#### Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

1. DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*. DiNardo covers the collapse or defection of numerous Axis nations including Italy, Finland, Romania, and Hungary in his chapter 9. He moves directly from Romania's defection in August 1944 to address that of Hungary, declaring Hungary "the last German ally to be dealt with" on page 188. Omission of Slovakia from a book specifically about Germany's allies indicates just how much this tiny nation has been, and still is, overlooked by Western histories of World War II.

2. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 142.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 150–51.

5. Ibid., 151–52.

6. Ibid., 158.

7. Ibid., 155–57.

8. Ibid., 175.

9. Ibid., 161.

10. Downs, *World War II*, 23.

11. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 181.

12. Beneš, *Memoirs*, 50–51.

13. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 182–83.

14. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People*, 249.

15. Ibid.

16. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 190.

17. Brown, "The S.O.E.," 41.

18. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 42.

19. Beneš, *Memoirs*, 58.

20. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People*, 265.
21. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 209–10.
22. Gilbert, *Second World War*, 561.
23. *Ibid.*, 531.
24. Keegan, *Second World War*, 480.
25. Gilbert, *Second World War*, 544.
26. Keegan, *Second World War*, 481.
27. *Ibid.*, 482.
28. Gilbert, *Second World War*, 597.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Keegan, *Second World War*, 414.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.
33. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 206.
34. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 44. This SNC was a different organization than the Slovak National Council that proposed union with the Czechs in October 1918, referenced in note 6.
35. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 199.
36. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 191.
37. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 292.
38. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 209.
39. *Ibid.*, 215.
40. Downs, *World War II*, 24.
41. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 254.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 92.
44. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 285.
45. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 90.
46. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 294.
47. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 45.
48. Weinberg, *World at Arms*, 712.
49. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 296.
50. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 93.
51. *Ibid.*, 94. These numbers do not include the 24,000 soldiers of the two eastern divisions who were immediately captured and disarmed by the Germans, as related further in the paragraph.
52. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 205.
53. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 97.
54. Downs, *World War II*, 30.
55. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 272.
56. *Ibid.*, 277–78.
57. Downs, *World War II*, 103.
58. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 46–47.
59. *Ibid.*, 47.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 210.
62. *Ibid.*, 213.
63. Downs, *World War II*, 67.
64. *Ibid.*, 91.
65. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People*, 298.

66. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 45.
67. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People*, 299.
68. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 44.
69. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 257.
70. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 92.
71. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 259.
72. "Slovak Revolt," *New York Times*.
73. Reitlinger, *SS*, 377–78.
74. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 93.
75. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 47.
76. *Ibid.*, 43.
77. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 272.
78. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 45.
79. Downs, *World War II*, 51.
80. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 305.
81. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 37.
82. Reitlinger, *SS*, 378.
83. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 38.
84. Reitlinger, *SS*, 378.
85. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 295.
86. Downs, *World War II*, 24.
87. *Ibid.*, 25.
88. Shtemenko, *The Last Six Months*, 290.
89. *Ibid.*, 295.
90. *Ibid.*, 287.
91. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 295.
92. *Ibid.*, 292.
93. Shtemenko, *The Last Six Months*, 293.
94. *Ibid.*, 302.
95. *Ibid.*, 318.
96. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 256.
97. Shtemenko, *Last Six Months*, 298–99.
98. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 299–300.
99. *Ibid.*
100. Shtemenko, *Last Six Months*, 306.
101. *Ibid.*, 308.
102. *Ibid.*, 312.
103. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 51.
104. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 295–96.
105. *Ibid.*, 280.
106. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 49.
107. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 218.
108. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 40.
109. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 218.
110. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 54.
111. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 307.
112. Kliment and Nakladal, *Germany's First Ally*, 108.
113. *Ibid.*, 110.
114. *Ibid.*, 111.
115. Hinze, *To the Bitter End*, 49.

116. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 219.
117. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 307.
118. *Ibid.*, 265.
119. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 48.
120. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 308.
121. *Ibid.*
122. Downs, *World War II*, 162.
123. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 307–8.
124. Downs, *World War II*, 31.
125. *Ibid.*, 32.
126. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 313–16.
127. Downs, *World War II*, 117.
128. “Railways Held Objective,” *New York Times*.
129. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 215.
130. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 56.
131. Downs, *World War II*, 131.
132. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 216.
133. *Ibid.*
134. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 312. Estimates vary. Axworthy claims 20,000, while, as in note 83 above, Reitlinger estimates 35,000.
135. *Ibid.*
136. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 190.
137. *Ibid.*, 191.
138. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 222.
139. Erickson, *Road to Berlin*, 306.
140. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 222.
141. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 41.
142. Beneš, *Memoirs*, 59. For Beneš, the failure of the West to hold Hitler to the guarantees of the Munich Agreement was a second blatant betrayal of Czechoslovakia.
143. Downs, *World War II*, 108.
144. *Ibid.*, 288–89.
145. *Ibid.*, 287.
146. Korbelt, *Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 71.
147. Gilbert, *Second World War*, 593, 604.
148. Shtemenko, *Last Six Months*, 287.
149. *Ibid.*, 298.
150. *Ibid.*, 293–94.
151. *Ibid.*, 318.
152. Toma, “Soviet Strategy,” 290.
153. Korbelt, *Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 72.
154. Davidson, *Nuremberg Fallacy*, 231.
155. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 222.
156. Werth, *Russia at War*, 911.
157. Downs, *World War II*, 104.
158. Beneš, *Memoirs*, 252–53.
159. Korbelt, *Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 167.
160. *Ibid.*, 170.
161. *Ibid.*, 171.
162. Downs, *World War II*, 32.

163. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 48–49.
164. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 207.
165. *Ibid.*, 218.
166. Lettrich, *History of Modern Slovakia*, 6.
167. *Ibid.*, 219.
168. *Ibid.*, 229–30.
169. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People*, 305.
170. Werth, *Russia at War*, 911.
171. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 49.
172. “Slovak Extremists Detained,” *Czech News Agency*.
173. Davies, *Rising ‘44*, 350.
174. Keegan, *The Second World War*, 483.
175. Axworthy, *Axis Slovakia*, 304.
176. Kirschbaum, *History of Slovakia*, 221.
177. Dubček and Hochman, *Hope Dies Last*, 48.
178. Korbelt, *Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 220–21.



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