

Reasons that the Hlinka Guard Became Involved with the Deportation of the Slovak Jews By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

Slovak history from 1939 to 1945 has been considered as the most contentious period of its existence. The nation was greatly influenced by the Nazi Germany and all the conditions and issues that Germany brought with it. Slovakia's hope of achieving statehood is another current that intermingled in the disorderly World War II period. The Hlinka Guard was a militia of the Slovak People's Party named after Andrej Hlinka, a Slovak Catholic priest and politician, and the leader of the Slovak People's Party. While there were many factors and influences affecting the members of the Hlinka Guard, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that many members acted to enrich themselves while acting on the anti-Semitic prejudice of Slovak society.¹

Many Slovaks looked to the Hlinka Guard as a means to achieve national independence. When the Slovak National Uprising broke out in August 1944, Guard members were able to re-surface the old slogans, long-standing prejudices and their national role in Slovakia's proclamation of independence.² During the Uprising, the Hlinka Guard were the only ones who were able to restore order with the help of the Germans.³

Some people joined the Hlinka Guard because their club had been abolished and they still wanted to belong to an organization. Others genuinely believed in the national ideas the movement seemed to initially represent. Others were lured by benefits that were offered to those who joined, and many Slovaks were able to improve their everyday livelihood through membership in the Guard.⁴

The Hlinka Guard is a phenomenon that significantly affected life in Slovakia from 1938 to 1945.⁵ The story of the Hlinka Guard should be seen in the broader context of the foreign and domestic political situation in the hectic period of pre-World War II, which had its roots in the period shortly after World War I. The development of the Hlinka Guard must be followed against the background of the society and political events of the first twenty and thirty years of the 20th century. It was during this period that conditions were created that aimed, among other things, to realize the ideas of Slovak autonomy. The struggle for the autonomy of Slovakia played the most important role in Andrej Hlinka's Slovak People's Party during the whole period of the Czechoslovak Republic.⁶ The political objectives of the Slovak People's Party were sympathetic to many young Slovaks dissatisfied with the so-called 'politics of Czechoslovak parties.'⁷

In the 1920s and 1930s, one of the largest political enemies of the Hlinka Guard in cities was the radicalized Communist Party. This was mainly related to the influx of rural inhabitants into towns and to the expansion of members of the socially weakest sections of society, mainly among the poor and unemployed agricultural or industrial workers.⁸ Politically angry radical

¹ Ivan Kamenec. *On the Trail of Tragedy: The Holocaust in Slovakia*. Translated by Styan, Martin. Bratislava: Hajko & Hajková, 1991, 22.

² Gila Fatran. "The deportation of the Jews from Slovakia 1944–45." EuroDocs, European Studies. Provo: Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 1996, 61.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Kamenec, 57.

⁵ Jelinek Yeshayahu. "Storm-troopers in Slovakia: the Rodobrana and the Hlinka Guard." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6(3), 1971, 98.

⁶ Raul Hilberg. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hana Kubátová and Jan Láníček. *The Jew in Czech and Slovak Imagination, 1938–89: Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*. Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2018, 161.

Communists, as well as Agrarians and Socialists, who were supported by zealous and equally radical people, did not hesitate to resort to physical assaults or murder. The Social Democrats announcing programs like the Communists became one of the most important obstacles to the people's efforts to improve themselves in Slovak cities. As a result, in 1923 young Slovak People's Party policymakers began to organize the seeds of the predecessor of the Hlinka Guard, the *Rodobrana* (Home Defense/Nation's Defense).⁹ The presence of Fascist ideas in *Rodobrana* played an important role in designing its program, and even imitated similar Fascist organizations abroad in some ways.¹⁰

In the early 1930s, different attitudes developed in the Slovak People's Party to the tactics of political struggle. Two groups emerged inside the party; the so-called moderates, grouped mainly around Jozef Tiso, and radicals, whose leaders were younger officials such as Alexander Mach and Karol Sidor. The radicalization of young separatists in this period was not only a response to the government's centralism, but also one of the first efforts to create a new and stronger organization to replace the *Rodobrane*. Although Karol Sidor was the first man to be appointed as commander in chief of this new formation, it was Alexander Mach who persuaded the party leadership that a paramilitary force in Slovakia was needed.¹¹

Alexander Mach proved to be a good strategist and on June 11, 1938, published an article in *Slovak Truth* entitled "Hlinka Guards," which proposed moving the separatist struggle to a higher, more active level. Among other things, he called for the creation of Hlinka Guards, namely, an organization responsible for gatherings, cultural events and press publications. After October 6, 1938, the power of the Hlinka Guard grew from day to day. More so because the movement began to spread rapidly all over the territory of Slovakia.¹²

Being a member of the Hlinka Guard brought advantages. It is precisely the many benefits made available from the Guards' legitimacy that attracted more to its rank. In addition to the radical supporters of humanist politics, they were the most radical supporters of persecuting the Jewish population. Although the Guard's activities could not be perceived solely as anti-Jewish actions, it was these events that were visible from the outside and most reflected Slovak society at the time. Many of the Guards were active in the most brutal crackdowns on Jews, and gradually the role of the Guards in the process of resolving the 'Jewish question' within the state apparatus became official.¹³

March 1939 was a time of great social and political change for the Slovaks. Since gaining autonomy on October 6, 1938, the territory of Slovakia has undergone a profound socio-political and territorial change. However, the declaration of autonomy of the Slovak land was only a step on the road to full self-determination for the Slovak People's Party and Hlinka Guard radicals. On March 14, 1939, the Guardian efforts were supported by the establishment of an independent Slovak state.

Following the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria to Nazi Germany in March 1938, the conquest and breakup of Czechoslovakia became Hitler's next ambition. According to Yehuda Bauer, "The incorporation of the Sudetenland into Germany that began on October 1, 1938 left the rest of Czechoslovakia weak, and it became powerless to resist subsequent occupation.

⁹ Kamenec, 201.

¹⁰ Yeshayahu, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 81.

¹² Yeshayahu, 111.

¹³ *Ibid*.

Orders were given to subordinate headquarters that fleeing Jews and Czechs were to be searched, and money and treasures from each person were to be taken away.”¹⁴

The money and valuables of Jews were to be handed over to the county authorities for confirmation, but in many cases, they were kept by Guard members. In addition to the seizure of property, however, Guardsmen were also involved in the deporting of persons, especially those of Czech nationality from the Slovak territory. The Guardsmen were very brutal, especially when it was a question of seizure of Jewish property, unlawful detention of Jewish people at Hlinka Guard headquarters, or their frequent arrests and beatings. A very widespread way of enriching the Guards was to force the property of Jewish citizens to be transferred to Christian Guard members by force, torture or threats.¹⁵

In April 1940, the Slovak government passed the First Aryanization Law. Through a process known as voluntary Aryanization, Jewish business owners could suggest a qualified Christian candidate who would assume at least a fifty-one percent stake in the company. Party radicals and the Slovak State’s German backers believed that voluntary Aryanization was too soft on the Jews. As a result, in November, a second Aryanization law was passed, authorizing the seizure of Jewish property and the removal of Jewish workers from businesses. Liquidation of Jewish assets benefited small Slovak businesses competing with Jewish enterprises, and Aryanization was applied to larger Jewish-owned companies which were acquired by Aryan-owned competitors.¹⁶

After overcoming initial problems in the consolidation period after autonomy, the Hlinka Guard ceased to be just an organization whose main feature was arbitrary interference in security issues. It began to cooperate with the representatives of the state. In addition to the security tasks traditionally assumed by the Guard, it became interested in solving what it perceived as various ailments of Slovak society.

In mid-July 1940, Adolf Hitler invited Jozef Tiso, Vojtech Tuka and Alexander Mach to a summit held in Salzburg, Austria. German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop told the Slovak delegation that Germany justified interference in Slovakia’s internal affairs because they considered Slovakia within its *Lebensraum* (living space). After the Salzburg Conference, the Hlinka Guard began a new phase in the development of the organization. Hlinka Guard openly declared the ideas of a Slovak version of National Socialism.¹⁷

New anti-Jewish legislation of the Slovak Republic gave credibility to the Hlinka Guard members efforts of persecuting Jews. On this basis, Jews became second-class citizens and gradually their rights were increasingly restricted. The Guardsmen also dealt with the issue of Czechs remaining in Slovakia even after the removal of a large part of Czech employees. However, the anti-Jewish agenda became the most important part of the organization’s active work. Guard activities in the Aryanization process varied from case to case. While some Guards were satisfied earning money from the Jewish property that the Jews worked on, others were dissatisfied with it and robbed the property of the owners. Some Guards did not even hesitate to occupy the flats of Jewish owners, who were deported to the Nazi concentration camps.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “The Fate of the Slovak Jews.” Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team. Accessed September 29, 2020. <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/slovakjews.html>.

¹⁶ “Governmental regulation of legal status of Jewish people.” EuroDocs, European Studies. Provo: Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 1941, 17.

¹⁷ Yehuda Bauer. *Jews for Sale: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, 287.

¹⁸ Bauer, 197.

The Hlinka Guard was aware that many regulations of anti-Jewish legislation might seem to the Slovak citizens to be contrary to Christian morality. It therefore proposed to organize a series of lectures for Guard members on topics such as “Judaism as a plague on the body of the nation in the past” or “The importance of removing Jews from Slovakia” at which the local headquarters cultural officers stressed that all other issues were not as important as a definitive solution to the Jewish question. They stress that the Hlinka Guard had the greatest responsibility for solving this issue. Between 4,000 and 7,600 Jews were deported, in pogrom-like operations, in which Hlinka Guard participated, from November 4 to 7, 1938. The victims were rounded up, loaded onto buses, and dropped off past the new border with Hungary. Anna Cichopek explains, “The Slovak deportations were the first deportations in central Europe.” The passage of the Jewish Code of September 9, 1941, required that all Jews over six years old wear a yellow star. The Hlinka Guard and the Nazi *Freiwillige Schutzstaffel* (Voluntary Protection Corps) increased assaults on Jews and engaged in antisemitic demonstrations on a daily basis.¹⁹

The Nazis committed that the deported Jews would not be returned to Slovakia. They further committed that any property left behind by the Jews was up to the Slovak government to dispose of. Initially, the Germans wanted 20,000 young, strong Jews, but before their deportation had even started, Heinrich Himmler proposed that Slovakia be Jew-free.²⁰

The Hlinka Guards welcomed the departure of the first Jews from Slovakia on March 27, 1942. Already a month before, even with the participation of number of Guards, the district authorities were to make an inventory of Jews aged 16–60 years. According to Nazi observers, the ‘mass baptism of Jews’ began with the start of deportations.²¹

Jews were more systematically concentrated for deportation from the beginning of March 1942. Under the regulations, deportation notices were sent to the Jews only four hours before they were to depart to prevent them from escaping or hiding. The aim of the Hlinka Guard was to export all Jews from Slovak territory without the possibility of their return, so Guardsmen should not have to look at individual cases in terms of their pain, but in terms of national interests. On March 25, the first transport of thousand young people left for Auschwitz, in occupied Poland.²² The deportees lost all property and citizenship. Approximately 58,000 people were transported from Slovakia through October 1942. Altogether over 70,000 Jewish citizens of Slovakia died in concentration camps, the largest percentage in Auschwitz–Birkenau. Approximately 80 percent of the Jewish population of Slovakia perished during the Holocaust. The Hlinka Guard played an important role in the deportations of the Slovak Jews to Auschwitz and other labor and death camps.²³

In *The Destruction of the European Jews* Raul Hilberg writes, “National Socialist policies of racial superiority brought into the Slovak society a new dimension of antisemitism, which was evident in Slovakia since the 19th century, but only gained monstrous proportions during the period of 1939 to 1945.”

In conclusion we see that an anti-Jewish campaign was launched after the declaration of the Slovak autonomy in 1938 and the presentation of a solution to the Jewish question became one

¹⁹ Yehoshua Büchler. “The deportation of Slovakian Jews to the Lublin District of Poland in 1942.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 6, Issue 2, 1991, 161.

²⁰ Hilberg, 100.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Yehoshua Büchler. “First in the Vale of Affliction: Slovakian Jewish Women in Auschwitz, 1942.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Volume 10, Issue 3, Winter 1996.

²³ “Auschwitz Birkenau: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945).” World Heritage List, UNESCO. Accessed September 29, 2020. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31/>.

of the main attributes of the governmental policy of the emerging authoritarian and totalitarian regime. The authoritarian regime in the so-called solution of the Jewish question showed its anti-democratic, anti-human and ultimately anti-Christian side.²⁴ This campaign was in large part carried out by the Hlinka Guard. There is certainly evidence that members of the Guard were influenced by ideology. Some people perceive the Guard as an instrument of the Nazi influence on Slovakia that was unavoidable. While these factors are true, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the Guard acted to enrich themselves while acting on the anti-Semitic prejudice of society.

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²⁴ Anna Cichopek. *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–48*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 291.

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