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The Election to the National Assembly in 1935

During twenty years of the interwar period, the German minority constituted a significant share of the population in Czechoslovakia. According to a population census, which was carried out in 1930, Germans were second only to the Czechs as the biggest national group in the state (Tomaszewski 1970: 647). As far as the political life is concerned, the Sudeten German Homeland Front played a dominant role in the 1930s. The organization was led by Konrad Henlein who was influenced by the Third Reich. Facing the coming parliamentary election, the organization's name was changed to the Party of Sudeten Germans (SdP, Sudetendeutsche Partei). In the period of 1935–1938, the SdP initiated a course of action which aimed at gaining support from Germans who lived in the Slovakian territories. The party had to compete with traditional Hungarian influences there.

Those who favoured supporting the SdP expected that a lot could be achieved with the help of a strong and perfectly organized movement. Such expectations had an impact on the orientation of the Party of Carpathian Germans (KdP, Karpatendeutsche Partei) and its leader, Franz Karmasin. On the 28th of March in 1935, a decision was taken to form an electoral alliance (Král 1964: 75). According to a secret protocol, the Henleiners were able to finance the coming electoral campaign of the KdP. At the same time, following a clear directive from Berlin, they made an arrangement which excluded priests as potential candidates from the electoral lists recommended by the Slovakian Germans. This condition was related to the political course of the Nazi Germany towards the Church. Many priests opposed

Adolf Hitler's dictatorship and were persecuted as a result. On the other hand, as Andrzej Szefer notes, part of the clergy was fascinated by the Nazi ideology and saw in it an opportunity to unite all of the Germans who inhabited Czechoslovakia (Szefer 1967: 120–123).

The Henleiners' position in the Czech country became ever stronger. Their success was *inter alia* built on the economic crisis, unemployment and demagogy. The position was not even threatened by the creation of an anti-Henleiner Sudeten German Electoral Bloc which was joined in Slovakia by Hungarian minority parties as well as the Party of Spiš Germans (ZdP, Zipserdeutsche Partei), led by Andor Nitsch (Kováč 1991: 98).

The SdP succeeded in the parliamentary election, gathering 1,25 million of votes and becoming the strongest political party in Czechoslovakia (Kožeński 1989: 30–31). As early as on the 2nd of June in 1935, Henlein organized a meeting of the deputies and senators who belonged to his party. He reminded them that they were obliged to follow the political line that had been formulated by the leadership. He recommended a role for a „constructive opposition” (Káňa, Valenta 1961: 35; Szefer 1967: 125). The electoral success was also celebrated by the KdP although their results in the election were not as impressive – they were supported by 27 561 voters. A considerable share of the Germans voted for Communists and the allied German-Hungarian minority parties. It was only owing to the alliance with the SdP that Karmasin won a seat in the lower chamber of the parliament and Sigmund Keil – a seat in the Senate (Kováč 1991: 100). The KdP could thus experience the victory as part of the SdP, which had a great impact on the future orientation of the party.

The impact of the SdP on the Slovakian Germans in the years of 1935–1938

After the election, Henlein's position grew stronger. In June of 1935, he had a meeting with Rudolf Hess, from whom he received political instructions (Cesar, Černý 1962: 313). Simultaneously, the German consul in Bratislava informed his Hungarian counterpart that collaboration between the two minorities on the Slovakian territory was only possible if the Hungarians ceased to support Andor Nitsch. The Hungarian minority parties faced a dilemma. To pursue their goals they needed to co-operate with the SdP, while at the same time they were

not willing to give up the support of the Slovakian Germans who played a significant role in their political calculations. In the autumn of 1935, the activities of German agitators coming from the Czech country intensified. Bratislava and its neighbourhood were considered in Germany – because of the vicinity of Austria – as an area particularly suitable to the promulgation of the national-socialist ideology (Kováč 1991: 101–102). Towards the end of October 1935, a group of SdP activists arrived in Bratislava to continue then their voyage across eastern Slovakia as far as the Trans-Carpathian Rus. Their reports, reflecting on the possibility of political infiltration of Slovakia and Rus, sounded very optimistic.

In November of 1935, some members of the KdP leadership asked Henlein officially to take over the leadership of their party. An internal party opposition resisted then, composed of those party members who believed that their party should remain autonomous. However, the opposition did not gain any support either abroad or in the milieu of the other German parties in Czechoslovakia. Their programme differed from the programmes of the Hungarian minority parties as well as from the programme of the ZdP. They became politically isolated. The KdP became an integral part of the much stronger SdP. Every six months Karmasin filed reports on his activities to a Henlein's plenipotentiary. The main goal that he had set for himself in the first of those reports included integration of the German movement. His attention was focused on Spiš. According to the report, the KdP counted slightly fewer than four thousands members in Slovakia as of 1935. Most of them – 1973 – lived in the middle part of Slovakia, while in Bratislava and its neighbourhood there lived 1250 of them, in Spiš – 557, while in Trans-Carpathian Rus there were no more than 300 of them (SNA, NS – Karmasin, sygn. 120, k. 227. Sprawozdanie F. Karmasina...). Nevertheless, the implementation of Henlein's programme in Slovakia was far from being unproblematic. The KdP coupled their fate with the political line pursued by the Henleiners and adopted their programme which gradually evolved until it became openly anti-statist.

The financial support coming from Germany was received *inter alia* through German cultural associations. „Deutsche Stimmen“, Karmasin's publication initiative, which experienced financial difficulties from the very beginning of its being established, was able to survive only owing to grants by the German Foreign Institute. In April of 1936, Henlein visited Bratislava. In November he came to the Slovakian territory again, this time visiting Spiš. Despite their declared

civic activism, the Sudeten envoys carried out anti-statist propaganda among the Slovakian Germans. The nationalist tenor was complemented with anti-Communist and anti-Semitic slogans (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 137, k. 61. Notatka...).

Henlein had a clear impact on the Evangelical clergy as well. The reverend Samuel Frühwirth was one of the most known activists and a member of the leadership of the KdP. The Henleiners tried to expand their sphere of influence in the Slovakian territories by co-opting Catholic priests as well. Indeed, part of the Catholic clergy turned into ardent promulgators of the KdP. The parish priest from Sklena, Josef Steinhubl, may serve as a vivid example. He arrived to Sklena shortly before the election to the National Assembly in 1935. He took an active part in the electoral campaign, which produced sizeable results to the benefit of the KdP-SdP since it received 600 of votes in Sklena (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 257, k. 37. Urząd Powiatowy...).

The successful political propaganda in Slovakia enabled the KdP to implement Henlein's political directives consistently even when his demands and tactical maneuvers were not justified at all. A memorandum addressed by Henlein to the League of Nations on the 24th of April in 1936, may serve as a good illustration of the fact. Both of the parties filed a complaint that the minority agreement of 1919 was not implemented and as a result the German minority was discriminated in Czechoslovakia in the political, economic and cultural dimension. The KdP members signed the complaint although in their case it was absolutely unjustified (Kováč 1991: 102). However, memoranda did not have to rely on true facts, they served to provoke political confusion.

When the „Berlin–Rome Axis” had been established, the SdP received a clear instruction to make contacts with the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia. As early as the 27th of April, 1936, during a meeting of the KdP leadership in Bratislava, this issue was discussed. The future collaboration was premised on the condition that the Hungarians should stop supporting Nitsch and undertake co-operation with the German minority. In the summer of 1936, a temporary agreement was signed to regulate the mutual relations (Hoensch 2001: 37).

The SdP launched a political offensive. The deputies of the party took advantage of a debate over the 1937 budget in the Prague parliament to attack Czechoslovakia's foreign policy. They criticized expenses to be spent on military equipment. Their hidden objective was to weaken the capacity of the Czechoslovak state in the area of military

defense. Karmasin embarked on criticizing the state educational policy. The attacks were to create an impression of internal political instability in the country.

On the 14th of February in 1937, a meeting of the KdP in Handlova took place. A deputy Pavel Nickerl, speaking on behalf of the SdP, stressed the necessity to integrate all of the Germans to improve the difficult situation of the German national minority. On the same day, in German Pravno another event occurred, during which a fight broke out between Communists and members of the KdP. A deputy of the SdP from Czesky Krumlov, Adolf Jobst, criticized the model of political activism that had been so far implemented by social democrats who, according to the deputy, had accomplished nothing over the past 11 years. He demanded that German schools be built, more Germans employed in administrative offices, more jobs created for the 600 thousand German unemployed. In April of 1937, a meeting of the KdP was organized in Gelnica, during which Hermann Gärtner criticized the USSR severely, stating that extreme poverty existed in the country. The only group that enjoyed a good standard of living there were – according to him – people's commissars, while all of the other citizens were given food coupons and queued to buy bread since three in the morning. Simultaneously, he was very critical of the political course of the ZdP (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 137, k. 24. Urząd Powiatowy...).

The Germans aimed first and foremost at gaining as much political freedom as possible. The tactics of the SdP involved articulating economic and social slogans and promulgating national sentiments which had an imperialist flavour. The party tried to exercise an impact on the attitudes of the local German population by claiming that it was the Czechoslovak government that was solely responsible for their poverty. The government was, in turn, supported by the parties of the German civic activists. The SdP used then the pretence of the situation which had been caused by a world-wide economic crisis.

In the summer of 1937, opponents of the Henleiner movement engaged in one of the last attempts to compete with Henlein and Karmasin. On the 11th of June in 1937, the German National Christian-Social Party was founded in Bratislava. The political grouping was formed by an exit of the German Section of the Hungarian Christian-Social Party at the moment the latter was united with the Hungarian National Party. At the same time, a significant number of the Section members decided to choose the membership in the KdP (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 259, k. 221. Dyrekcja Policji...).

Activities undertaken by Erwin Zajiček, who – after he had become a minister in July of 1936 – tried to expand the sphere of influence of the German Christian Democrat Party by engaging in political propaganda in the territory of Slovakia as well, did not produce many results. The secretariat of the German National Christian-Social Party was established in German Pravno. It was managed by Antonín Wäserle. Although the party's activities were then restricted to the area of German Pravno–Kremnica, Zajiček did not hide his interest in their expansion to Trans-Carpathian Rus. At this point, a cleavage also emerged within the milieu of the Catholic priests in Slovakia. Part of them openly identified with the Henleiner movement while others supported minister Zajiček's grouping. A conflict also broke out between the parties themselves: the German National Christian-Social Party and the German Christian-Social National Party. The ZdP, grouped, in turn, mostly Protestants, whereas the SdP tried to gain an influence over the two Catholic groups which acted within the framework of the ZdP, using the slogan of the unity of all Germans in Czechoslovakia (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 259, k. 271. Urząd Powiatowy...).

In August of 1937, the German Foreign Institute in Stuttgart celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its being established. On the occasion, a big feast was organized in which Rudolf Hess and Joseph Gebbels took part. There were invited Germans coming from all over the world. Slovakia was represented by Gärtner from Kremnica. Henlein was also present at the celebration which had a clear nationalist tenor. He received a golden medal for his merits (Král 1964: 140–145).

To strengthen the position of the KdP, at the beginning of October in 1937, the tenth anniversary of the party's foundation was celebrated. On the 6th of October Henlein, accompanied by his deputy Karl Herman Frank, came to Bratislava to take part in the celebrations. During his speech at the premises of the local Redoubt, he emphasized the position that the Germans had in Czechoslovakia (AAN, MSZ, sygn. 5476, k. 56. Łaciński...). Karmasin pointed, in turn, to numerous advantages that the Germans gained in Czechoslovakia owing to their integration and the creation of a unanimous front. He believed that they „should not rest on their laurels”. Further work in the same direction was necessary and unavoidable because the struggle against the ever intensifying pressure of de-nationalization required a total unity and energetic action not only in the sphere of culture but also in the political field and in the domain of economy. The accomplished results

let, however, the Germans hope the best for the future” (SNA, NS-Karmasin, sygn. 119, k. 281. Relacja z obchodów...).

In Bratislava Henlein faced an anti-demonstration staged by the Communists during which *inter alia* Vladimír Clementis delivered a speech. The Polish consul in Bratislava, Waclaw Łaciński, who described the event, drew attention to the stances taken by other political groupings. Parties of the centre stressed that the tenor of Henlein's speeches was moderate. The national camp emphasized, in turn, an exquisite organization of the meeting, its solemn atmosphere and proceedings (AAN, MSZ, sygn. 5477, k. 27. Łaciński...). Henlein did not leave Bratislava lulled. He intensified his political agitation among young people and members of sports organizations. Ever new political envoys came to Slovakia not only from the Sudeten area but also from Germany. In addition, young people were being sent to the Reich to be politically trained.

Henlein was just about to face a very turbulent period as he was preparing to start political agitation in the Czech borderland. This was why he had to select a trustful person who could represent his interests in Slovakia. Henlein appointed Karmasin his political plenipotentiary for the territory of Slovakia. He did it after he had come back from Bratislava on the 15th of October in 1937 to learn that the latter had been his loyal supporter. Karmasin was released by Henlein from his duties at the parliamentary club in order to concentrate his efforts on stirring up political agitation in Slovakia (Král 1964: 130–131).

Minister Zajiček came to Bratislava again, this time unofficially. He held several meetings during which he stressed that the Germans profited enormously from the political line pursued by the civic activists although he himself was still not satisfied with the pace of the changes. He remarked that a law concerning applicants for the state administrative jobs was just being intensely worked on. The law was to be based on a national criterion. He also mentioned an amendment to the law on state investments – local enterprises were to be prioritized as far as the building of smaller construction objects was concerned. These promises seemed very attractive. During the meetings, Zajiček attacked the national- socialist movement and stressed the need to fight the KdP. Zajiček left, however, earlier than planned, albeit he claimed to have been satisfied with the visit. In the lobby it was rumoured that he had undertaken the attempt to influence the opinions of the local Germans too late since the position of Henlein had already been well anchored there (AAN, MSZ, sygn. 5477, k. 27. Łaciński...). The KdP

grew in strength and organized subsequent meetings in the areas inhabited by the German minority. The meetings were to attract as many supporters as possible.

In December of 1937, during a visit which the Hungarian prime minister Kalman Darányi paid in Berlin, principles of common tactics directed against Czechoslovakia were worked out (SNA, KÚ, sygn. 197, k. 57. Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych...). The tendency to reinforce the collaboration between the Hungarian United Party and Henlein was reconfirmed, which led to political isolation of Nitsch and his ZdP. The process intensified in February of 1938. Henlein needed the support from the Slovakian Germans, although their political weight in Slovakia was unimpressive. They were not numerous and they were not integrated. Collaboration with the Slovak Peasant Party (HSLŠ) was actually much more important for Henlein. He tried to win their support for the German-Hungarian anti-Czechoslovak action. On the 8th of February in 1938, a German delegation headed by Frank, in which Karmasin was also included, paid a visit in Ružomberek to the HSLŠ leader, the reverend Andrej Hlinka. Hlinka was not friendly disposed towards the German delegation because of the Third Reich's attitude towards the Church. Nevertheless, he wanted to start acting, aiming at winning autonomy for Slovakia. This is why he agreed to host the SdP deputies. Both parties discussed their future co-operation in very general terms and were as yet unable to agree on any concrete political steps (Orlof 1977: 16). The German minority played a decisive role in the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Its first stage entailed the May and September crises in the state, which culminated in the Munich conference (the 29th –30th of September, 1938). The event ended the history of the I Republic. In the analyzed period, the Slovak Germans did not play as significant a role as the Sudeten Germans.

Concluding remarks

The years between 1935 and 1938 were very important for the German minority in Czechoslovakia. In 1935, a parliamentary election was held which promoted the SdP to the status of the dominant political party in the I Republic. The Sudeten Germans supported co-operation with the Third Reich and were an instrument used against the Prague government. The Germans who lived in Slovakia differed from the Sudeten Germans not only in terms of their number and density of

residence but also in terms of their political activities. Three German language „islands” in Slovakia were isolated from one another and they fairly quickly underwent magyarization. Although Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten Germans managed to win the support of the KdP led by Karmasin for his ideas, when trying to expand the sphere of influence onto the Slovakian territories, his SdP had to compete there with the ZdP and the Hungarian minority parties. By 1938, the Henleiner movement did, however, succeed in integrating the majority of the Germans inhabiting Czechoslovakia, including the ones residing in Slovakia.

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