

## GERMAN NATIONALISM AND THE SLOVENES IN AUSTRIA BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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In this paper I do not intend to enter upon the well-known events of the German-Slovene nationality conflict in any detail. Rather, I would like to attempt a synthesis of previous scholarly work with the purpose of offering some generalizations about its results, and of being able to see them in relationship to research in the field of nationality questions in general. Above all, my goal is to characterize the specific variety of German nationalism that may be encountered in the Austrian federal province of Carinthia. My remarks will therefore be limited to aspects of this subject as they affect Carinthian Slovenes.

Slovenes have lived in Southern Carinthia for 1400 years. In the middle of the nineteenth century there were 100,000 of them, practically one-third of the province as a whole. According to the last census of the Habsburg monarchy, which was carried out in 1910, the number of persons who listed Slovene as their language of regular usage (*Umgangssprache*) was 66,463, that is 18.3% of Carinthia's population. The most recent count, in 1981, gave only 16,421: in other words, a mere 3.1% of the population is now said to use Slovene on a daily basis. However, neither the figure for 1910 nor that for 1981 (an even greater misrepresentation) correspond to the actual circumstances. There are in reality many more individuals in Carinthia whose mother tongue is Slovene.

German nationalism of the Carinthian variety, which is traditionally focussed on anti-Slovene activity, remains an acute problem today. In 1972 it reached a new zenith. That was the year in which the federal government in Vienna, having been forced by diverse actions on the part of the Carinthian Slovenes to do something about implementing Article VII of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty (that is, the minority protection measures), decided to erect bilingual town- and village-signs. What happened thereafter and what was reported in the international press amounted to a great shock for Austrian democratic society. A mob, guided from behind the scenes by anti-Slovene organizations, perpetrated what was called the "pogrom" or "massacre" of the place-name signs: all bilingual designations were torn down.

At the present moment we are being confronted with yet another escalation of the anti-Slovene movement. The *Kärntner Heimatdienst*, the central or overarching anti-Slovene organization, and the strongly German-national "Freedom Party" (*Freiheitliche Partei*) of Carinthia have started a movement in favor of a popular referendum that would mandate the abolition of the bilingual schools in which Germanophone and Slovene-speaking children are now educated together. The aim of this maneuver reflects an old tactic: namely, to do the utmost to prevent the population of the bilingual district from learning the literary (standard) variety of Slovene. In this manner, the number of Slovenes decreases from census to census.

We are still very far from achieving a goal that would do honor to a democratically mature society: ideally, in an ethnically-mixed area as many people as possible would command both languages. Only very recently can we discern new tendencies outside the radius of the old political parties: Germanophone parents have been registering their children for instruction in Slovene; youth organizations are expressing themselves against national prejudice; an Austrian nation that no longer considers itself primarily



German is emerging. There is also room for the Carinthian Slovenes in this context. To be sure, as a result of these developments, that arise from a modern democratic society, the Carinthian Slovenes too will have to reconsider nationality viewpoints which, up to now, they have taken for granted.

The aforementioned events and developments represent a special challenge for the historian. By analyzing the roots, the content and the forms of the German nationality conflict, he can strengthen social consciousness, act against prejudice, and thereby contribute to overcoming the tensions.

Before I discuss the inter-war period, I must make some comments about the starting-point.

Socio-economically speaking, in the first two decades of this century the Carinthian Slovenes were to be found almost entirely within the strata of small peasants and cottagers. In order to survive they had to seek supplementary income. Their leadership élite consisted almost exclusively of Catholic clerics. In contrast to the Slovenes, the secular intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie of the German Carinthians determined political affairs. This was especially true for the southern, Slovene-inhabited part of the province, where the urban centers were traditionally German; the contrast between the Slovene countryside and the German city had become especially marked from the last third of the nineteenth century on. That was the time when Carinthia began to experience a very serious economic crisis as a consequence of the decline of the older form of the mining industry, which was scattered about the whole province in small enterprises. The Catholic clergy organized a kind of peasant self-help movement by means of agricultural cooperatives, and took over the political leadership of the Slovenes. The Germans, on the other hand, began to see their own influence disappearing. Opposing positions became clearly defined. "Slovene" became increasingly synonymous with the adjectives "clerical", "conservative", "small-farmer" or "hay-seed", "backward" and "culturally inferior"; "German", on the other hand, was equated with "liberal", "progressive", "middle-class" and "culturally superior."

Anti-Habsburg Slovene historiography likes to overlook the fact that it was mainly the conservative governments in Vienna that showed as much indulgence as they could to the Slovenes. At the same time, the actual causes that led to the escalation of conflict in Carinthia before the end of the First World War are ignored. After the turn of the century, Slovene economic, cultural and political organizations in Carinthia began to link up with overall, central Slovene associations. For the most part, these bodies had their headquarters in Ljubljana; and that meant, in effect, the incipient integration of the Carinthian Slovenes beyond the old provincial borders into the Slovene nation as a whole. The German Carinthians, especially those in the South of the province, saw their property and economic existence threatened and set about to attack everything Slovene—a culture that they regarded simply as something imported in Carinthia from abroad. So was born the "primeval anxiety" (*Urangst*) which is so frequently cited nowadays. In order to justify their anti-Slovene position, they became wedded to an extreme form of German nationalism.

The process of integrating the Carinthian Slovenes into the overall Slovene nation had made great progress by the time of Austria-Hungary's collapse. Arbitrary, unfair treatment of the Carinthian Slovenes during the First World War contributed much to this. Thus, approximately 19,000 Slovenes signed the May Declaration of 1917: a demand for a separate South Slavic Kingdom within Austria-Hungary. (Clearly, this presupposed the continuity of the Empire under the Habsburg scepter.)

There is no need for me to discuss in any detail either the little border war or the



plebiscite.<sup>1</sup> After the plebiscite, the Carinthian Slovenes, now incorporated into the First Austrian Republic, found themselves in a completely changed situation. Whereas they had previously been a largely-integrated part of the Slovene nation, they were now a national minority in a German country. Indeed, the new Austria had just christened itself "German Austria." In fact, even this state was not considered desirable, since many people regarded themselves as Germans and believed that their country should belong to the German Reich.

Only a few days before the plebiscite, the provisional Provincial Assembly "solemnly" promised: "Conscious of its responsibility in this hour, it declares . . . that it desires to guarantee to [its] Slovene fellow-countrymen their linguistic and national individuality, now and for all time . . ." The commitment had to be made "solemnly" because such promises could not be kept in any case within a state based upon nationalism. Less than two months later, the Carinthian Provincial Administrator Arthur Lemisch (this time at a "solemn" session of the provincial diet) sketched future policy toward the Slovenes in an unequivocal manner:

"In the reconstruction of [our] homeland those 15,278 [persons] who voted in the plebiscite for union with the SHS should not be forgotten. We believe that a good many thousands of them are misled. We have the task of turning them into Carinthians again . . . We have only one generation of time to bring these mistaken persons back to Carinthianism; . . . With German civilization and with Carinthian congeniality, we shall in one generation have overcome the work before us, if school and church do their part."

At this point several basic observations are in order. The nationality concept of the politically immature Central Europeans was not that of Western Europe or North America, where it had a genuine democratic concept. Rather, it was a categorical outlook, an essential aspect of which can only be characterized by the German term *völkisch*. A people identical in language, history and culture had been raised to the position of progenitor of the state. People, nation and state were conceptually melded by ideological manipulation. Indeed, they were regarded as a biological unity, as an organism. Development in the direction of fascism was pre-programmed.

If people, nation and state were conceived of as an organism, it followed naturally that national minorities were regarded as alien bodies within the national organism, and so were they also treated. Alien bodies in an organism, if they are not to cause any damage, must be isolated and controlled. It is even better if one succeeds in destroying them. Both approaches were followed, in part very successfully, with respect to the Carinthian Slovenes during the next 25 years.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, the aim was to isolate the incorrigibles, that is to say, those persons who continued to insist that they were Slovenes and placed great value on learning the written Standard Slovene language. They were labelled "national Slovenes," and were accused of having voted for the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the plebiscite. Various circumstances led to the initiation, in 1925, of negotiations in the Carinthian diet over cultural autonomy for the Carinthian Slovenes.<sup>3</sup> Discussions broke down entirely in 1929, and it was claimed that responsibility for the breakdown lay with the Slovenes. The reason why the Carinthian Slovenes hesitated to accept cultural autonomy in the form intended was explained very clearly, at a plenary session of the Carinthian Slovene Political and Economic Association, by the Slovene deputy Franc Petek, who was one of the negotiating partners. He said:



“The government thinks that there are two kinds of Slovenes—the nationally-minded and those friendly to the Germans—because only the former are politically organized while the latter go along with the Germans. Hardly anybody would dare, under current circumstances, to register as a nationally-minded Slovene because he would then be vilified as an irredentist and become subject to acts of violence. The German nationalist public would be pleased to see the cataster [= People’s Book], because it would then know by name all the persons whom it suspects of sympathy for Yugoslavia.”

The correctness of Petek’s remarks was confirmed by the then leading Carinthian German national provincial historian, Martin Wutte. He declared to his Greater German comrades:

“By establishing the nationality registry a line of demarcation will be created. I believe that no more than 15,000 Slovenes will list themselves, and hence we shall no longer have to operate with the number of 50,000.”

Unquestionably, the establishment of a so-called Slovene ethnic cataster would have meant the official reduction and isolation of the Carinthian Slovenes to a minority within the national minority. The growing, omnipresent pressure, that extended from fear for one’s job to discrimination of children in school and even to physical terror in virtually all realms of life, caused an even greater number of Carinthian Slovenes to take refuge in national indifference in order to escape the suspicion of irredentism.

This was the start of a new political tactic which was meant to lead, via the decomposition of the national minority, to the quickest possible assimilation and hence to the complete disappearance of the Carinthian Slovenes; a tactic that was the specific characteristic of German nationalism in Carinthia during the inter-war period. It was typical of that period that people could not conceive of existence outside of ethnic categories; and therefore place had to be created in the *völkisch* world for those individuals who did not want to, or could not, admit to being Slovenes but, at the same time, were not Germans. For them a special new construct was invented; they came to form an *ethnos* of their own: the so-called “Windisch” people. Those historians, philologists, ethnographers and other scholars of a German-nationalist bent who were contributors to the consolidation of nationalism began to search for criteria to create a national ideology for these “Windisch”. First of all, the motives of those more than 10,000 Slovenes who had voted for Austria in 1920 were deliberately misinterpreted in a nationalist sense. No longer was it economic common sense but pro-German sentiment that, supposedly, had decided the outcome of the vote on the part of many Slovenes. The plebiscite was proclaimed a great German victory. The patriotic fidelity (*Heimattreue*) of the pro-German “Windisch” was allegedly rooted deeply in peaceful historic symbiosis with Germans. Thereby the autonomous history of the Carantanian Slavs was, simply, erased.

Linguistic scholars provided the main arguments for the existence of a separate “Windisch” people. They maintained that the Carinthian Slovene dialects, from the perspectives both of linguistic structure and of the numerous borrowed German words, could not be considered as belonging to the Slovene literary language. It was thus not a question of dialects of Slovene, but rather of an autonomous mixed German-Slavic language: “Windisch”. But this “Windisch” had no literary form. It was a spoken



tongue only, and therefore could not be taught in schools. The literary language of the “Windisch” people thus had to be German.

I know of no other case in which the strategy of facilitating the decomposition of a national minority had an ideological foundation of this kind, and was so successful in its effects as this strategy was in Carinthia.

The data of the censuses demonstrate the success of the anti-Slovene maneuvers in a way that hardly requires comment. As mentioned above, in the last census of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy the Slovene proportion of Carinthia’s population was 18.3%, or 66,463 persons. This figure, which was based on the language of everyday use, must certainly be regarded as too low. Private Slovene counts resulted in the number of 100,000. Already in 1923—only 13 years later, and only three years after the plebiscite—we encounter the completely unbelievable figure of 34,560 Carinthian Slovenes. At this time people were no longer asked about their language of everyday use, but rather about the language “which one speaks most readily and in which one normally thinks.” This thoroughly vague and subjective criterion of “thought language” made it much easier, obviously, for linguistic and ethnic circumstances to be concealed. Nonetheless, the 1923 reduction by half of the 1910 figure can only be explained by the Slovenes’ fear of German-nationalistic repression.

A punctilious Slovene counter-census was completed the same year, with respect to 57 townships in Southern Carinthia (thus not the total area inhabited by Slovenes). It showed that there were 71,452 Slovenes. Indeed, members of the German camp were then still speaking of 80,000 or more Slovenes in Carinthia.

The final census of the Austrian Republic was taken in 1934. By this time, the “Windisch” national ideology was already fully effective as propaganda, and German nationalism had reached its hysterical phase. Since the “Windisch” were supposedly in the process of entering the more highly-valued cultural milieu, the question now did not relate to the language itself, but rather to “the cultural environment to which one felt that one’s language belonged.” Now, only 24,857 Slovenes “felt” that they belonged to the Slovene cultural milieu. Based on very careful estimates, this number was about one-third of those Carinthians whose mother-tongue was Slovene. Two-thirds of the Carinthian Slovenes has already fallen victim to the German-nationalist political conversion tactic.

We are not yet in a position today to draw a complete picture of the German-Slovene nationality conflict in the inter-war period. Historians are not permitted access to important documents preserved in the Carinthian provincial archives. German-nationalist organizations which reappeared on the scene after the signing of the 1955 State Treaty have, naturally, no interest in opening their private archives to researchers. Our only hope is a research project which is currently being conducted, whose goal is to gain new knowledge with the help of oral history techniques.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES

1. See Claudia Fräss-Ehrfeld, "The role of the United States and the Carinthian Question 1918-1920," in this volume.
2. For the individual measures that were undertaken, see Thomas M. Barker, *The Slovene Minority of Carinthia* (New York, 1984) 172-202.
3. See Barker: 183-186.
4. This undertaking is being sponsored by the European Science Foundation in Strasbourg.

## POVZETEK

*V zadnjem popisu prebivalstva habsburške monarhije leta 1910. je na Koroškem 66.463 ljudi označilo slovenščino kot svoj občevalni jezik. Komaj 24 let kasneje, leta 1934., ko so celo nemške statistike cenile število slovensko govorečih na več kot 80.000, je v poslednjem popisu prve avstrijske republike bilo komaj 24.857 Slovencev. To je bila posledica močnega nemškega nacionalnega pritiska. Po obmejnih spopadih in po plebiscitu 1920. leta so nekatere protislovenske organizacije, ki so imele najmočnejši vpliv na pokrajinsko politiko, storile vse, kar je bilo mogoče, da bi ponemčile južno Koroško in tako preprečile možne jugoslovanske teritorialne zahteve. Slovenska inteligenca je bila odstranjena s položajev oblasti, slovenski pouk je služil samo za učenje nemščine, zemljo Slovencev so načrtno kupovali in dajali na razpolago nemškim naseljencem. Posebnega pomena za Koroško pa je bilo dejstvo, da so Slovencem, ki se pod političnim in socialnim pritiskom že niso več upali priznati za Slovence, ustvarili nekakšno nadomestno narodnost 'vinidišarjev', kar naj bi pripomoglo k njihovi nagli utopitvi v germanstvu.*