

Political Propaganda of the Hlinka Slovak People's Party (HSLS) in the Regional Weekly the Trenčan

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Abstract

Political propaganda of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party in the regional weekly Trenčan. The political press has been a key part of the political communication of mass political parties since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. No major political party did without them in this period, when there were no audio-visual media (radio from the 1930s and television from the 1950s) or social networks (the end of the 2000s). However, research of political communication in Slovakia naturally focused on periodicals covering with their circulation the entire country. The presented article focuses on the research of the Ľudák's newspaper The Trenčan, which has been digitized in the meantime, but for its more thorough analysis we visited the District Archive in Trenčín. Thanks to direct research in the archive, it was possible to think more deeply and evaluate the intentions of the regional elites of the HSLS in the Trenčín region and its journalistic quality.

Keywords: The Trenčan, weekly newspaper, HSLS, propaganda, Slovakia.

Introduction

Party journalism research represents an intersection between political science, journalism and linguistics. Its content also focuses on the context, but also on specific linguistic means of expression. They are aimed at the emotions of the political audience. Jesper Strömbäck and Adam Shehata reacted to this conceptually: “Political journalism has a strong tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than as issues, particularly during election campaigns; that interpretive journalism has become more common; that political journalism has a penchant for conflict framing and media negativity; and that there is only limited evidence that political journalism is influenced by political or partisan bias“ (Strömbäck, Shehata 2018).

Part of the research mentioned above also focuses on totalitarian media. As Paul Kecskemeti saw „ ... it is a truism to say that no public opinion can

exist in totalitarian states, in the sense in which the term has come to be understood in Western societies“ (Kecskemeti 1950).

Party newspapers represent a specific part of political journalism. Essentially, they are an involuntary consequence of the expansion of the right to vote in the 19th century among the previously politically disenfranchised sections of the population. His trust was sought to be won by new mass political parties emerging based on a precise ideological definition - at that time class-based (socialist parties) or confessional (people's or Christian-democratic parties) and later their various ideological or value hybrids (Christian-socialist parties). In the case of political parties with longer organizational continuity, it is possible to follow the development and content of tens of years of published party newspapers with the same name.

An even more important means of communication was the press for totalitarian political parties (Friedrich, Brzezinski 1999). They served not only as a tool for transmitting current political messages to members of totalitarian parties, but also participated in the indoctrination of the entire society. “The goal of the power apparatus of totalitarian regimes was to achieve a state where people would think and act independently, exactly in accordance with the will of the totalitarian rulers, in other words, their goal was to indoctrinate the basic contents of propaganda into human thinking” (Arendt 1951). At this level, propaganda plays an educational role” (Štefančík 2019).

Since 1919, the main press organ (and since 1925 of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party) has been the daily *Slovák*. During the first 20 years of its existence, it had a circulation of up to 8,000 copies, and during the Slovak State, its print volume almost tripled.¹

The local press also included the weekly as a regional press periodical of the HSLŠ for the city of Trenčín and its surroundings. The price of one copy was 70 Hellers, and the newspaper maintained it during most of the period of publication from the end of 1923 until the beginning of 1945 (from 1939 the price was even reduced to 50 Hellers). The annual subscription was around 35 crowns, and it was also possible to buy a half-yearly subscription for around 18 crowns. The period of publication of the *Trenčan* covered more than two decades, which included the period of the 1st Czechoslovak republic, the adoption of the regional constitution with effect from 1928, the economic crisis from 1929, the rise of the autonomist movement in the first half of the 1930s, the threat of Czechoslovak statehood by Nazi Germany, the adoption of autonomy in October 1938, the establishment of the Slovak

¹ Available on: Comenius University in Bratislava, Digital Library (undated).

Republic in the spring of 1939 and its existence with the rise and gradual erosion of the People's Regime.

Content focus of the weekly *Trenčan* before the Munich Agreement

The *Trenčan* focused on supporting political reporting and journalism of the main media line of the HSLŠ and naturally also reflected the events in the municipal and regional politics of the city of Trenčín and the county between 1923 and 1938. The content of his political articles - news and commentary - had a national and social focus. He focused on issues of the national status of Slovaks (he was naturally autonomist but at the same time loyal to the 1st Czechoslovak republic). Equally present and important was the accent on social issues - and that of various demographic groups of Slovaks. In the field of foreign policy, he was anti-Hungarian, anti-Soviet and anti-German - but the orientation in the last two was turbulently changed in the period 1938-1941.

During the Munich crisis in the fall of 1938, the *Trenčan* still wrote:

– *“At a serious moment, when the ancient enemy of Slavism is preparing all means to weaken our state independence, we must all be on our guard and undo what divides and embitters us in domestic relations. Here is the ratio of Slovaks and Czechs who are called based on the Czechoslovak Republic. The state as well as preserve, improve and bring it to flourishing (...) Slavism must not have Prussians among them, none of its tribes must imitate Prussian characteristics: live and let others live and apply themselves”* (The *Trenčan* 1938).

In the same issue, however, another unsigned author wrote a more critical opinion on Czech political attitudes and alluding to the arrangement of the common state:

– *“In the most difficult period of the Republic, the Germans are offered places and concessions, and the Slovaks must defend themselves even more than at any other time, so that Czechs do not occupy the places in Slovakia”* (The *Trenčan* 1938).

With the advancing international crisis, which seemed less and less likely to be resolved in Czechoslovakia's favor, the weekly changed its political rhetoric. Already in the next issue, he tried to convince his readers that alt-

though the republic is really experiencing fateful months and the international order is really changing, he claimed that, according to him, Slovaks have no enemies abroad.

The peak of the Munich crisis was interpreted by the weekly awkwardly, emotionally, but still with a concrete political conclusion:

– *“We looked ahead and then into the distance - and we saw emptiness ... Freemasonry and Bolshevik circles and powers, according to their well-known morality, have always arrived late, when it was necessary to help and they let our public down at a time when it was boasting about them. (...) We need a consistent and powerful orientation to the right, which if we don't do now, we will never get out of the abyss. We certainly have enough reasons for this direction, and the latest behavior of Soviet circles against us has sobered everyone from the illusion of the value of the word given by the Bolsheviks”* (September 24, 1938, XV. year, no. 39.).

In other words, the Ľudák's weekly did not feel conformed to the political crisis in question, in the moods of the individual articles it was possible to perceive also fears, elsewhere exaggerated strong self-confidence. In the end, the popular press found a way out and at the same time comfort in ideological fundamentalism.

The international political crisis culminated with the adoption of the Munich Agreement on September 30, 1938. A week later the Trenčan welcomed it on its pages:

– *“After twenty years, we have once again worked towards a great historical day, which records twenty years of struggle, suffering, sacrifices of life and bread, which the supporters of the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, headed by their eternal hero leader, brought a new and satisfying life to the Slovak nation of its continuous duration”* (The Trenčan 1938).

It was a completely different attitude than the one from the Trenčan presented on September 17 with the title in a serious moment, which spoke about the unacceptability of Germans among Slavs. The line of rationalization explaining the reasons for the adoption of the Munich Agreement included emphasis on the indictment of political Czechoslovakianism. According to the Trenčan, Czechoslovakism represented an illegal arrangement of the republic, it did not allow the full-fledged national existence of the Slovaks.

Although the Munich Agreement was supposed to guarantee peace in Europe, as the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain symbolically declared after its signing on his return home, the first weeks after it brought a feeling that was understood and publicly expressed by Trenčín's ľudáks:

– *“Parliamentary speeches and diplomatic meetings in London and Paris , in Rome and Berlin give us the impression that there is not the trust between the great powers that we assumed after the Munich agreement. We see that preventing war between does not mean permanent peace, but that it is only the price for a shorter or longer truce. Because otherwise we wouldn't even understand the gesture of all the leading states after the current political crisis, that they started arming even more feverishly”* (The Trenčan 1938).

The Trenčan publicly considered the need to change the political system in the same month. Ideologically defined political parties were supposed to belong irrevocably to the past, because they were to blame for the chaotic mental state of society. It was supposed to be a system that led to angering the nation, to the systematic influence of the citizenry by the castle government group, which oriented political life to the left. The ideological belief proclaiming the salvation of all people according to socialist and communist slogans, had a Jewish background, according to the newspaper, while it did not convert the world to its faith, but brought the state and the nation to the brink of destruction. These political parties should not have had more space to exist. Their ideological slogans could not feed the people, because only bread and work were supposed to do it. That is why the new state was to be built through political parties that bring together citizens of the same profession - that is, it was to have a status system. Humanism, socialism and communism were ideological delusions. Their removal was supposed to limit disputes and naturally create the prerequisites for social unity.

Changing arguments in favor of offensive war

During the attack on Poland, which started the Second World War, the Slovak state took the side of the aggressor - Nazi Germany. We decided to examine these historical events as the second in the series, because it was an attack on a Slavic country with which the Slovaks historically had no political or significant territorial conflicts. At the same time, it was a confessionally Catholic country with an authoritarian regime. It was naturally expected that Poland could be a partner country for Slovakia. However, this was not

made possible by the plans of Nazi Germany, whose satellite state Slovakia became under known historical circumstances on March 14, 1939.

In the article “Providence” published at the end of August 1939 the Trenčan explained the conclusion of the Riebbentrop-Molotov Pact:

– *“We did not entrust our future to the last card that brought the former republic to ruin, but to the German card, which is not gambling, and will even win us the return of those who were torn from us by force brothers to live more happily and nationally in their original Slovak homeland. Such surprises as the non-aggression pact between Germany and National-Soviet Russia, and which we will still experience in our favor, if we evaluate the brotherhood with the new Germany wisely and with deeds, can prove that these hopes are not exaggerated”* (The Trenčan 1939).

What is interesting about the article is that contrary to previous claims about the Vienna Arbitration, it admits that part of the territory was unfairly taken from Slovakia and hopes that it will return to Slovakia in the future. An interesting term is national-Soviet Russia, which was invented by the people's journalism. In a figurative sense, she convinced the public that Russia is not a Bolshevik country as they wrote before and as they returned to it after the attack on the USSR in the summer of 1941, but that it was indeed a Soviet, but at the same time national Russia.

As we have already stated, the content focus of the Trenčan as a regional press organ of the People's Party was also oriented towards social issues. In order for the newspaper to build a positive relationship with Germany and suppress the public's anxiety about the war bringing, in addition to casualties, material hardship, the weekly in the article „To the new guard!“ claimed:

– *“Germany closed its borders, made a currency for domestic use, and began to work with capital borrowed from the state without any other cover, which it did not demand from the result of work. (...) There are enough resources both for armaments and for the proper and humane remuneration of the socially weakest working class, and everyone gets their wages fairly and appropriately, and at the same time, everything that is a prerequisite for the cultural life of the population is being built”* (The Trenčan 1939).

At the beginning of the war, the People's Press convinced the public that economic prosperity and war were not mutually exclusive.

The outbreak of the Second World War, which was preceded by the German-Soviet Pact with secret additions on the division of Poland, also brought about a change in rhetoric towards the USSR. While until its conclusion, the popular press presented Soviet Russia as a godless country suffering under the yoke of the Bolsheviks, after the conclusion of the Pact, the Slovak State established official diplomatic relations with the USSR, and the newspapers had to explain this to their audience.

In the article "Russia and the Slovaks", the newspaper saw:

– *“The desire of the young Slovak state is to be recognized by all the great world powers, to expand and exercise its independence in this way. It was therefore important to us that all of us and Russia already on March 16, 1939, because every state seeks friendly relations even with conflicting states, thereby not recognizing the correctness of their conflict, it just wants to have peace from them and economic benefits, which it is the duty of every state administration to take care of. (...) The relationship of the Slovak state to Russia, declared friendly from the beginning, has not changed, but the relationship of Russia to the Slovak state is changing, to our advantage in diplomatic – primarily economic interests”* (The Trenčan 1939).

In a metaphorical sense, the readers of the Trenčan should have "understood" that 1. the criticism of the conclusion of diplomatic relations with the until then arch-ideological enemy was a manifestation of the "political faithlessness" of the opponents of the people; 2. as it not the Slovak state but the USSR changed its position and 3. it was not about ideological rapprochement, but about mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

Ľudák's reflection of the war with Russia and the USA since 1941

Even though the content of the weekly articles in 1939 was reserved towards the war as such and appreciated the preservation of peace after the Munich crisis, it published pro-war journalism from September 1939. The attack on the USSR, which was also a temporary political and economic partner after the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, was welcomed by the newspaper with an article entitled "Welcome the War of Liberation", which it characterized to its readers as follows:

– *“When 10-15 years ago we read about the inhuman abominations of the Bolsheviks murderers, how they destroyed human lives and*

national property day after day out of pure Jewish revenge and bloodlust, and we pitied the enslaved Russian nation, we often asked ourselves who would free Eastern Europe from the Bolshevik deadly terror and Jewish madness, and indeed we had little hope, that some strong European state would sacrifice itself for this crusade and war of liberation and prove this extremely great service to humanity” (The Trenčan 1941).

According to the Trenčan, if there ever was a popular war, it was the war against the Bolsheviks is the most popular. Adolf Hitler and the "knightly German nation" were the liberators of mankind, and the civilized world will be indebted to them for the war against Russia from generation to generation.

The originally confessional, national and social orientation of the Trenčan changed to pro-Nazi and especially anti-Semitic with the outbreak of the war against the USSR. Until 1938, anti-Semitism on the pages of the Trenčan was almost non-existent. It began to appear only with the opening of the conflict against the Soviet Union:

– *“The united European chic against the Jewish-Bolshevik murderers of Christianity and civilization, which was formed by the generous intervention of Germany, is the most significant and joyful event in recent world history. What has become incredible in the new age is that European states have grouped themselves into a phalanx in defense of religious and social freedom”* (The Trenčan 1941).

Paradoxically, the war "diversified" the journalistic genre of the Trenčan. From September 1939, newspaper tried to bring the testimonies of Slovak soldiers, and from the summer of 1941 he even brought reports from the territories conquered by the German army and its allies. The first war report in The Trenčan was published under the title "Bloody exploits of the Bolsheviks in Lviv", where the newspaper reported on the Soviet prison:

– *“War correspondent Dr. Achim Holitz announce from Lviv: We are in liberated Lviv and we are going with the commission to Brigitta prison. Our guide is the Reich German Georg Neumann from Katowice, who himself survived 14 days in this hell and was supposed to be shot for espionage. He showed us the cellar with the bloody stairs where the poor victims were tortured. What we saw there surpassed everything we had heard about Bolshevism. Blood, pieces of human flesh, clothes, and caps were everywhere on the floor. The pitiable*

victims of the Bolshevik bloody terror bled out there under the wounds embedded with knives. Then, they were thrown into a common pit. In another prison, about 30 corpses were lying one over the other in the yard. Women and men, women half-dressed, all horribly mutilated. The Bolsheviks tortured 20,000 people there” (The Trenčan 1941).

In addition to conveying the image of the prison, the Trenčan began to publish specific data in his articles that had been absent until then. There are no contemporaneous opinion polls that would confirm this, but the attitude of people towards war (especially after the experiences of the First World War) was not positive in Slovakia. But this didn't suit the Ľudák's regime, which was an ally of the war aggressor, so the Ľudák's newspaper tried to rid people of their fears of war and indoctrinate Ľudák's member of party and their supporters by presenting war successes:

– “The Slovak army at the front receives domestic and foreign recognition. The Slovak army overcame a certain phase of development in which it encountered the misunderstanding of its own sons against the mission of the army of a small state in a modern war, although the invasion of the Hungarians and its atonement, as well as the campaign in Poland and its results, were tangible evidence that we must be equipped with modern comforts army if we want to remain an independent state” (The Trenčan 1941).

Since war aggression could hardly be argued along rational lines, the weekly appealed to emotion – it tried to evoke a sense of responsibility and encouraged bravery.

The extension of the war to the USA, which invaded Japan in December 1941, was interpreted by the Trenčan because of the foreign policy imperialism of England, the USA and the USSR. As we mentioned above, the weekly included an optimistic tone in its war reporting. In the war in the Pacific, he was sure of Japan's superiority in war.

– “Japan declared war on the US against the threat to its existence and thus came into conflict with all its enemies of the Triple Pact. The very first days of the war in the Pacific are great evidence of Japanese heroism and unheard-of enemy losses in naval combat units. America and England will not be able to replace the ship space destroyed in the first two days of the new war, and their eastern Gibraltar is already blockaded by Japan” (The Trenčan 1941).

The Trenčan defended Japan's wartime aggression with claims about Japan's vassal status both vis-à-vis the Anglo-American world and the Soviet Union - but without concrete arguments.

Conclusion

The Trenčan was founded and published until 1945 as a regional press organ of the Hlinka Slovak People's Party for Trenčín and its surroundings. It was one of several regional periodicals, and its original content focus was national, confessional and social in nature. It primarily reported on local and regional events – dominantly from the environment of politics, social life, culture, church and sports. Not only did he regularly publish news articles aimed at the youth, with which he wanted to convey mainly Christian values to the young generation, but he also dealt with their social status.

In the autumn of 1938, adopting the Munich Agreement and creating autonomy for Slovakia brought about a change. Newspapers originally loyal to Czechoslovakia, which indicated fears of Czechoslovakia's demise with anti-German attitudes, began to profile themselves more nationally, more critical of Czech political elites and Western powers after a period of melancholy period. Subsequently, March 1939 was spent on the pages of The Trenčan in a spirit of enthusiasm for the creation of its state.

From the fall of 1939, they offered their readers increasingly less believable, but even less spectacular, political propaganda expressed. The positions and comments of the weekly first had to explain a politically sensitive event, namely the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR, which until then was presented on its pages as the greatest ideological and at the same time foreign policy threat. The Trenčan tried to explain this as a non-ideological (i.e. pragmatic) and especially beneficial decision for the economy. He emphasized that it was not a betrayal of the original ideological foundations and finally helped himself by claiming that the whole thing was not a Slovak but a Russian initiative.

From the first September issue of the Trenčan in 1939, the newspaper tried to provide optimistic information about the war events that were expected despite the adoption of the Munich Agreement, which was supposed to ensure the peaceful arrangement of Central Europe. Paradoxically, the war contributed to the weekly's variety of genres. War reports were published on its pages, letters of Slovak soldiers from the front were published, and propaganda war photographs were also added.

If the weekly tried until 1938 to create authentic party journalism, which was a natural part of the democratic competition of political parties, then

until 1945 the newspaper only confirmed the propaganda line of the Slovak government to local readers. The *Trenčan* wrote disingenuously about the changes in the foreign policy orientation of the Slovak government, building the impression of the useful role of the Slovak army in the fight against the USSR.

With the beginning of the war against the USSR, the weekly became an openly anti-Semitic periodical, which it had not been until then. In particular, he interpreted foreign political events against the background of the struggle against international Jewish-Bolshevism. He helped himself with the original economic and social arguments of the people - i.e. that even the war and the fight against the Jews were waged in favor of the material prosperity of the Slovaks.

Corpus Resources

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