

# Politics without a Past

THE ABSENCE OF HISTORY IN  
POSTCOMMUNIST NATIONALISM

SHARI J. COHEN

## **Politics without a Past**



# **POLITICS WITHOUT A PAST**

---

The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism

Shari J. Cohen

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS   Durham and London 1999

© 1999 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Typeset in Melior by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear  
on the last printed page of this book.

## Contents

---

Preface and Acknowledgments	vii
Chronology	xi
1: The Legacy of Two Totalitarianisms	1
2: Historical Consciousness, Family Stories, and Nationalism	25
3: Weak Nationalism in Slovakia: The Precommunist Period	47
4: Islands of History: The Democrats and Nationalists	57
5: Organized Forgetting: Elites with No History	85
6: Nationalism without Nationalists? Democracy without Democrats?	119
7: Politics in a Hall of Mirrors	157
8: Conclusion	177
Appendix: List of Interviews	183
Notes	187
Bibliography	247
Index	263



## Preface and Acknowledgments

---

In 1991, as I looked at the swath of territory that had been the communist world, hoping to contribute something original while engaging my own interests for the arduous work of a doctoral dissertation, I noticed a bizarre and troubling phenomenon. From Slovakia, where the founding of the Nazi puppet state of 1939–45 was being celebrated, to Lithuania, where some of those sent to the Gulag for Nazi collaboration were being exonerated, to Croatia, where the symbols of the fascist Ustashe were being openly invoked, there seemed to be a pattern of resurgence of symbols and issues connected to World War II. And the resurgence was of symbols from the wrong side, the side that collaborated with the Nazis, the side that had been hidden beneath the myth of Soviet liberation. Referred to by one scholar as the “big bang event” for the world as we knew it until 1989, World War II remains a significant presence even as we leave behind the century so shaped by that war. Not only was I alarmed by what appeared at the time to be a possible rehabilitation of groups that collaborated with the Nazis, but this was happening in a period that looked strikingly like the 1920s and 1930s. I wanted to know how, and whether, in an odd replaying of history, we would see a return of something like fascism. I worried, through my Jewish eyes, that we would begin to see a revision of our understanding of the Holocaust as constituting a particular type of crime.

As a scholar, however, trying to make sense of the politics of postcommunism, I found myself facing a void. And this void characterized not just my subject of study but also the analytical toolkit I had at my disposal to make sense of this subject. These were polities that lacked defining myths, let alone parties, parliaments, and other common political phenomena,



which were barely in the process of formation; if they did exist, they seemed to be facades, empty of content. As part of the first generation of scholars to try to analyze postcommunism, without much guidance from the past, I lacked even the words and categories to map and understand this odd reality. Political scientists studying postcommunism were pressed to draw theoretical conclusions about an extremely fluid environment and about a process that had only begun to unfold.

On several research trips from 1992 to 1995, in what at the beginning of that time period was Czechoslovakia, I came to realize that the very formlessness of the postcommunist political scene was overwhelmingly more significant than a return of fascism from the past. I began to recognize that communist regimes had impaired these societies in a particular and profound way, which in turn shaped the meaning of the return of contentious issues from World War II. These regimes had destroyed, or never built, common interpretive frameworks for understanding the past. It is the implications of trying to rebuild societies where even the leadership lacks the social and moral glue that history could provide, that I attempt to explore in this book. This “absence of history” has not been sufficiently recognized or incorporated into our theorizing about the impact and aftermath of communist regimes.

Slovakia was originally one of several case studies in which I chose to examine the meaning of the reemergence of the World War II past. It became apparent, however, that even that small country had a great deal to teach, and I opted to stay there and not go on to the other cases that were part of my original research design. This understudied case turned out to be a perfect microcosm and laboratory for a set of issues that are highly relevant for the whole region and beyond.

There are numerous individuals without whom I would have never completed this project. I mention only some of these people here. I could not have done without the day-to-day insight from my intellectual partners and co-pilots in navigating through the postcommunist void, Carrie Timko and Tomek Grabowski. Their willingness to read endless drafts and discuss the nuances of every idea made this book much better than it ever would have been. My graduate advisers at University of California, Berkeley—Ken Jowitt, Ernie Haas, George Breslauer, Michael Rogin, and Reggie Zelnik—allowed me a great deal of intellectual freedom and provided guidance at key stages of the project. The reader will quickly discover how much influence Ken Jowitt, the chair of my dissertation committee, had on

my thinking. Ernie Haas's high standards and lifelong intellectual agenda also shaped my first contribution as a social scientist in important ways.

Other colleagues and friends read parts of the manuscript and helped guide me out of intellectual blind alleyways at critical moments. Here I would like to mention in particular Felicia Wong, Steve Weber, Kelly Smith, Abby Innes, and Jon Shenk. Saul Perlmutter, with his intellectual playfulness, egged me on from the beginning of this enterprise. Denis Gromb deserves special mention for combing through nearly the entire manuscript and offering invaluable advice for making the text more accessible. Jane Dawson and Kathy Moon gave generously of their time in guiding me through the publishing process.

The Slovaks and Czechs who aided in my research are too numerous to mention. I would like to thank in particular Sona Szomolanyiova, without whose help and insights I would never have been able to accomplish so much in Slovakia. Eva and Peter Salner offered their ideas, connections, and friendship over the years.

The Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, the MacArthur Group on International Security Studies, and the Institute for the Study of World Politics provided vital funding for this project. I would also like to thank Wellesley College and the Wellesley political science department. Through financial support and a congenial environment I was able to complete the final stages of the book.

Finally, I thank my parents, Joan and Roy Cohen. My mother in particular has been a constant cheerleader, a sounding board for ideas, and an editor. My father has served as a model of persistence in setting and achieving difficult goals.



## Chronology

---

Ninth century. Great Moravian empire. The 1992 Slovak constitution cites this as the foundation and predecessor to modern statehood for Slovaks.

1792. First signs of Slovak national “revival” as Bernolák attempts codification of Slovak language.

1846. Codification of Slovak language by Ludovít Štúr.

June 1861. Memorandum of the Slovak nation submitted to Budapest Diet.

1863. Matica Slovenská (Slovak Cultural Foundation) founded.

1875–1918. Repression of the incipient Slovak nation-building efforts under the “Magyarization” policies of the Hapsburg empire.

October 1918. Founding of Czechoslovakia as independent, democratic state uniting the Czech lands, previously under Austrian rule, and Slovakia, previously under Hungarian rule.

August 1938. Jozef Tiso succeeds Andrej Hlinka as leader of the Slovak People’s Party, the major force pushing for Slovak autonomy during the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic. The party is renamed the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party (HSLs). Andrej Hlinka had founded and led the party from 1918 until his death in August 1938.

September 29, 1938. Munich agreement between Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy acquiescing to the ceding of the Sudetenland to Germany.

October 6, 1938. Žilina agreement whereby, under leadership of Jozef Tiso and the HSLs, Slovaks took full control of Slovak governmental and executive power. This new administration took the first measures against political opponents and Jews.

- November 2, 1938. Vienna “arbitration” in which parties to the Munich agreement granted Hungarian demands that portions of southern Slovakia be ceded to Hungary.
- March 14, 1939. Declaration of “independent” Slovak state under leadership of Jozef Tiso in exchange for collaboration with Hitler; on March 15 Czech lands were occupied and became a Nazi protectorate.
- September 9, 1941. Passage of Jewish “codex” codifying anti-Jewish legislation put forward in first years of the regime; paralleled the German “Nuremberg laws.” This included a racial definition of Jew and the “Aryanization” policies that turned over Jewish property to Slovaks.
- March 1942–October 1942. Two-thirds of Jewish population of Slovakia (57,628) deported to Poland ostensibly for resettlement. Only several hundred of these survived. After deportations about 24,000 remained in Slovakia. They lived and worked on the basis of various economic, presidential, or religious exceptions or were placed in Jewish work camps and centers.
- August 29, 1944. Slovak communists, army officers, and democrats start the Slovak National Uprising against the Tiso state and the Nazis.
- October 1944. Slovak National Uprising defeated and Nazis occupy Slovakia; approximately 13,500 more Jews were deported, of whom 10,000 died.
- May 1945. Germans are defeated and Czechoslovakia reconstituted; Slovak communists and democrats who led the Uprising push for federal state but eventually compromise on these demands.
- December 1946–April 1947. Trial of Jozef Tiso culminating in his execution.
- February 1948. Communists take power and begin to repress all noncommunist political, cultural, and religious groups.
1950. Arrest and imprisonment of Slovak “bourgeois nationalists,” including the important Slovak communists and partisans Gustáv Husák and Ladislav Novomeský.
1963. Amnesty and rehabilitation of “bourgeois nationalists” and beginning of the reform movement that culminates in Bratislava and Prague Spring.
- January 1968. Alexander Dubček becomes Communist Party chief and presides over the Bratislava/Prague Spring.
- August 20, 1968. Warsaw Pact troops invade.
- January 1, 1969. Czechoslovakia becomes a federal state, though many aspects of Slovak autonomy are not implemented.
- April 1969. Gustáv Husák becomes Communist Party chief and begins

- the process of repressing the reform movement and restoring neo-Stalinist control. This process came to be called “normalization.”
1985. Mikhail Gorbachev comes to power in the Soviet Union; signals begin in 1987 that Eastern European countries can go their own way.
- November 17, 1989. Beginning of “velvet revolution” which leads to collapse of communist regime ten days later.
- December 29, 1989. Václav Havel becomes president of a newly democratic Czechoslovakia.
- June 1990. First free parliamentary elections; Vladimír Mečiar becomes prime minister of Slovakia.
- March 1991. Split of Public Against Violence movement and formation of Movement for a Democratic Slovakia under leadership of Vladimír Mečiar.
- April 1991: Vladimír Mečiar removed from post of prime minister; Ján Čarnogurský appointed in his stead.
- June 1992. Second parliamentary elections; Mečiar’s party is the victor and Mečiar again becomes prime minister; Václav Klaus becomes prime minister in the Czech Republic. Their election leads to the August 1992 decision to split Czechoslovakia.
- January 1, 1993. The end of Czechoslovakia and formation of the Slovak Republic.



## 1 The Legacy of Two Totalitarianisms

---

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall, the plot line of the transition from communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union remains obscure and puzzling. The characters in the drama are themselves part of the puzzle. Former communists have become nationalists, or at least taken up nationalist slogans. But they have just as often become free marketeers. Heroic dissidents, who captured the imagination of the Western world in 1989, have all but disappeared from the political scene. Others of them have disappointed as they took up the banner of fascist periods from the past. Party labels and identifications are fleeting and have little to do with policy positions. Populations, which seemed to be empowered in 1989, remain cynical and apathetic and have increasingly turned to the 1980s with nostalgia. References to the past resurface like debris, with little apparent meaning, as these societies remain confused about the most important moments in their history. But this picture does not fit well with either of the primary paradigms put forward by analysts trying to interpret the first few acts of the postcommunist play. History has not returned from the past, either as aggressive nationalism or as a seamless continuation of the precommunist period.<sup>1</sup> But neither has history ended: democratic institutions and liberal ideologies introduced from outside have not pushed these societies on the pathway toward liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> Observers have been deceived by the democratic and nationalist costumes and masks which hide a more important reality.

Indeed, it is the very amorphous nature of these societies emerging from communist domination that is so central to their character. While there is certainly variation across the former communist countries, what has often



## 2 The Legacy of Two Totalitarianisms

been missed is the very profound lack of unifying ideologies, a devastating legacy left by the fifty- or seventy-year experience of Leninist domination. These are societies trying to create new polities without common standards of moral or historical judgment. It is this absence, I argue, that should stand at the center of our analysis. The absence itself needs to be explained and its significance explored. Can democracies be built without common ideologies? Might we be misunderstanding the significance of the appearance of nationalist mobilization and even ethnic conflict by assuming a continuity with the past that is not there? What exactly has returned from the past and what did Leninist regimes succeed in wiping out? This book shifts the lens in an attempt to make the drama more comprehensible. It does this through the case of Slovakia, which is used here as an emblematic case to develop ideas that I hope can be used fruitfully elsewhere.

### Past, Present, and Future

#### Looking Backward

Hannah Arendt, in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and George Orwell, in his *1984*, alerted Western readers to the novel nature of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Although neither projected what political life would look like after totalitarian regimes collapsed, these authors' insights remain useful for understanding communism and postcommunism and have been discarded by most Western analysts too easily.<sup>3</sup> In Orwell's *1984* the regime's control of history is the central and insidious mode of exerting its power. It is no accident that East European dissidents in the 1980s saw Orwell as accurately describing life under communism, focused as it was on wiping out all competing interpretations of history. In one scene the hero Winston Smith enters a pub in a part of town inhabited by "proles," the working classes, a place where at least some link to the period before the revolution remains in folk songs and expressions. In the hope of finding out information about the past, Smith approaches a prole and asks what life was like before the revolution. But Smith is disappointed to discover that while the old man could tell him a bit about his personal experiences, he could not locate those experiences in any larger interpretive context.<sup>4</sup>

This larger interpretive context—which I refer to throughout the book as historical consciousness—into which individuals can place their family

stories is at the very heart of what we understand as modern national ideologies. National ideologies, with their standardized society-wide histories, create an “imagined community” in which individuals feel connected to people they do not know through a common history.<sup>5</sup> These narratives of history which come to be shared keep individuals connected to state institutions. They allow elites to cooperate to achieve common goals that stretch beyond personal enrichment; they cause members of society to participate; they allow for a society to move forward. Without this glue, societies would be comprised only of the individual families within them. National ideologies function this way whether they are civic—meaning membership is based on the individual—or ethnic, where membership is based on birth.<sup>6</sup> Family stories and even ethnic stereotypes—which often float free of these larger narratives of history—cannot integrate societies. While communist regimes did not eliminate family stories, and even fostered and preserved ethnic stereotypes, these other types of connection to the past have very different political implications than do commonly shared national ideologies.

Of course, standardized meanings of history have to come from somewhere. A process needs to take place whereby either states or groups of intellectuals articulate new ideologies to substitute for the breakdown of the face-to-face and religiously based ties of the village.<sup>7</sup> Articulation is what happens in a nation-building process through education and socialization, political speeches, novels, and films. If this process never takes place, collective meaning of similar individual experiences—even something as traumatic as a war—would never develop.

I argue here that like Orwell’s proles, postcommunist elites and the societies they govern lack that larger interpretive context into which their individual family stories could be placed. This is particularly surprising in the case of the elites and intelligentsias, since we expect intellectuals and key political figures to share historical narratives and to define the meaning of key moments of history for ordinary people.<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand this striking and important legacy left by Leninist regimes we need to look backward and reevaluate what exactly the nature of these regimes was. We need to look at the imposition of communist institutions as a peculiar process of nation-building. Like Orwell’s infamous “ministry of truth,” communist regimes successfully rewrote history, claiming for themselves exclusive insight into past, present, and future. However, Leninist regimes were notoriously poor at winning loyalty to the newly propagated histories they tried so hard to instill. Unable to

#### 4 The Legacy of Two Totalitarianisms

build “new Soviet men,” but highly successful at keeping alternatives from developing, these regimes left much of the elite as well as the larger society without common meanings of history. It was, after all, mostly agricultural societies, with weak national identities, which became the focus of Leninist nation-building. Only small islands of continuity with precommunist ideologies remained amidst this sea of homogenization. Nowhere can we see this better than in Slovakia. However, the Slovak case is only an extreme of what happened, to varying degrees, elsewhere in the communist world.

##### Making the Question Concrete

The absence or weakness of ideology left by Leninist regimes is very difficult to observe. It is the actors in the play who give the best clue, once we look beneath their masks. The elites who became important after communism’s collapse will be the focus of this book.<sup>9</sup> Elites offer a way to trace continuity through the tremendous political, economic, and cultural changes that the fall of communism represented. After all, individual people constitute one of the few constants amid the baffling institutional flux of postcommunism.<sup>10</sup>

In Slovakia, and across the communist world, elites with a particular profile came to dominate politics and, in many cases, to mobilize nationalism. Vladimír Mečiar, who was the major figure to mobilize the postcommunist movement for Slovak autonomy, and who presided over the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, shares a common set of traits with Leonid Kravchuk in Ukraine, Alexander Lebed in Russia, and even Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, just to name a few. They, and those who surround them, are all products of a communist socialization process. Beneath their ideological masks, they all embody the absence of ideology that is proving so difficult to overcome. Thus the victory of this type of historyless elite, which embodies ideological weakness or absence, is the phenomenon that needs to be explained and whose significance needs to be analyzed.

##### Leninism and Postcommunist Elites

If we look across postcommunist countries we find similar casts of characters, though Leninist regimes varied in their ability to destroy national ideologies from the past.<sup>11</sup> While noncommunist institutions were largely destroyed, small groups remained as the sole bearers of the alternatives to communism—both democratic and nationalist, both civic and ethnic.

These groups were heirs to a precommunist nation-building process through which, during the communist period, they developed or preserved historical consciousness. I refer to these elites as “ideological elites.” It was these anticommunist elites who presided over the revolutions in Slovakia and throughout the communist world.<sup>12</sup>

But more important and more pervasive was the Mečiar type to which I just referred. I call this second type the “mass-elite,” in reference to the literature on mass society associated with Hannah Arendt.<sup>13</sup> The masses that, for Arendt, were the fodder for Nazism and Stalinism, had been unhinged from traditional institutions and ties but had not been integrated by any modern ideological framework or interest groups. Without intermediary organizations, she argued, masses were available for mobilization by totalitarian movements. Later historians of the origins of Nazism and Stalinism have shown that in both these cases, in different ways, more group associations remained than Arendt thought. These group associations might, in fact, have been critical for the ability of totalitarian movements to mobilize, thereby calling into question her causal argument.<sup>14</sup> However, the products of the very regime type she tried to explain fit her concept better than ever. If masses were not present at the beginning of the twentieth century, Leninist nation-building brought about precisely this result. Even without the causal link made by Arendt about the availability of masses, her concept is useful for calling attention to the fact that it is unusual for elites and societies to be so impaired in their ability to join with others based on common judgments of the central elements of their national history.<sup>15</sup>

The term “mass-elite” sounds oxymoronic at first. But I use this unusual designation to emphasize the fact that the elites, whom we expect to have ideologies, are more like masses, in their lack of shared understanding of the past. I also use it to accentuate that this condition is the result of a historical process.<sup>16</sup> The mass-elite is not by definition limited to members of the Communist Party, though many were party members since that was the road to career advancement. This type is defined as elites who had no connection to any alternative ideology and who were solely formed by the official Leninist socialization process.

These elite types, mass-elites on the one hand and ideological elites on the other, have both a historical and a behavioral element.<sup>17</sup> As we will see illustrated in the Slovak case, the different types of elites developed through fundamentally different historical pathways, through two types of nation-building processes. Their behavior in the postcommunist period—ideologically committed, on the one hand, and ideologically un-

committed and transformable on the other—should be understood in terms of the historical pathways that formed them.

While the connection between formative history and behavior is quite easy to understand in the case of the ideological elites, the link between history and behavior for the mass-elite needs further explanation. Without any integrating ideology, the mass-elite could only be motivated by short-term personal interest. It is important to distinguish between instrumental networks for material gain and ties to others who have the same understanding of their nation's history.<sup>18</sup> It is also important to make the distinction between this short-term personal interest or *egoism*, and *individualism*. As Ken Jowitt points out, individualism, the cultural underpinning of Western liberal democracies, is an ideology. It is a set of beliefs which looks like, but is distinct from, the more basic egoism. Egoism is amoral. It is what is left when nothing ties individuals to one another. It is ego unrestrained by group ties or overarching societal norms.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that the mass-elites are not associated with any ideological tradition makes them extremely flexible in the postcommunist period. They are free to jump from idea to idea and from party to party, and to transform themselves at will. Only in the postcommunist context, for fully opportunistic reasons, do they pick up an available idiom, whether nationalist or democratic.<sup>20</sup> Their apparent postcommunist ideological orientations should not be taken as defining. Instead, knowing their past, we can understand the ephemerality of their ideological guises in the present. They are opportunists but they are historically created opportunists.

That the mass-elites are historically created opportunists is critical to the argument here. While simple opportunism is a characteristic of politics everywhere, the pervasive and all-encompassing opportunism behind what looked like a return of ideology in postcommunist politics is what needs to be better understood. The opportunism of the mass-elite differs from that of a figure like Bill Clinton. Whereas some would call Clinton the consummate opportunist, in contrast to the mass-elite, Clinton is linked to an identifiable ideological tradition. In contrast to the postcommunist setting of extreme fluidity, Clinton operates within the context of well-established institutions. In addition, the mass-elite dominate politics at a founding moment when ideology is essential for building and consolidating new institutions. In the U.S. Democratic Party, for example, it is possible to find both ideologues and opportunists. In postcommunist politics, in Slovakia and elsewhere, the mass-elite tends to come together to dominate entire parties. The ideological elites tend to be marginalized not merely as individual politicians but as a group or type. The perpetuation of this

opportunism is what makes democratization so daunting in the postcommunist world, as we will see illustrated in Mečiar's rise in Slovakia.

### **Slovakia, an Emblematic Case**

In each former communist country it is possible to find ideological democrats, ideological nationalists, and mass-elites. In each country the coalitions they form, the power relationships within those, and the particular ideological labels that are adopted differ. This depends on how prevalent the mass-elite is relative to the ideological elites. But the Slovak case is an appropriate one to develop this framework because the mass-elite appear here in a purer form than elsewhere. It is only if we isolate this elite type and develop this framework in a clear case that we can then use the same approach to try to understand less clear cases. Thus I use Slovakia as a *single theory-developing case*.<sup>21</sup>

As we will see in the next section, the argument rests on the fact that Leninist regimes came to power in societies with weak nationalisms and in societies that were largely agricultural. But Slovakia, even in comparison to other countries of east central Europe where communism took hold, had a very weakly articulated nationalism at the time communism appeared.

Slovaks brag about the fact that they experienced three different regime types in the course of the twentieth century—democratic (1918–38) as part of the First Czechoslovak Republic, fascist (1939–45) as a quasi-independent Nazi puppet state, and communist (1948–89) as part of a reconstituted Czechoslovakia.<sup>22</sup> Two aspects of Slovak history stand out, making it a particularly good case with which to develop my argument. First, Slovakia had its only period of statehood as a Nazi puppet state during World War II. The nationalist party, headed by Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, opted to trade collaboration with the Nazis for Slovak independence. The Czech lands were occupied and made a German protectorate. Since the leaders of that state willingly deported much of the Jewish population and since this state was aligned with the Nazis, statehood itself is inherently tainted.<sup>23</sup> World War II is both a moment of glory and a moment of great shame. It is the central moment in Slovak national history but is forever associated with the Nazis. There is one aspect of Slovakia's World War II experience that could be rescued—the antifascist uprising in 1944. However, as we will see, that experience is controversial as well since it was embraced by the communist regime. There is no agreement on other formative moments in Slovak history, as evidenced by a 1992 survey of

eight historians. When asked which historical experience was a moment of glory for Slovakia, they gave eight different answers.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to this problematic legacy of fascism, a second aspect of Slovak history that makes it an appropriate case study is that Slovakia modernized and went through a nation-building process within the communist context. Like many countries in Eastern Europe, its social structure was largely agricultural before 1948. It also had a weak national identity: a small national intelligentsia and little experience of self-administration during the period of Hungarian domination. The fascist period made it easier for communism to wipe out alternative ideologies since the strongest one was tainted. Thus communism prevented the preservation and articulation of alternative meanings more effectively here than in many other places. However, while Slovakia is an extreme case, it is not so extreme as to be unique. The mass-elite is particularly pervasive in places where there was little to withstand the communist assault upon competing ideological traditions.

Cases across the communist world vary according to how strongly rooted alternative modern ideologies were. Some countries in Eastern Europe had a more significant precommunist period of independent statehood, or a larger or more influential nationalist intelligentsia, or more institutions in which the past was preserved to withstand communist domination.

Clearly we see a less dominant mass-elite in a place like Poland, where even the Communist Party was shaped by the struggle with the Solidarity movement in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> However, much of the former communist world, like Slovakia, modernized and built nations within the communist context. In most of these countries opposition to communism was extremely weak. Any society with a weak national experience before communism and which went through the Leninist modernization process would have a significant mass-elite. This would include, to varying degrees, several of the East European cases, including Romania, Bulgaria, and parts of the former Yugoslavia. Ukraine and Belarus and the central Asian republics in the former Soviet Union also share this background. Even the Czech Republic has its own version of a mass-elite, though the Czech version did not become nationalist and tends more toward the technocratic.<sup>26</sup>

Though in many ways a more complicated case, Russia is a perfect place to look for the mass-elite.<sup>27</sup> As Steve Fish points out, Russia's seventy, rather than forty, years of communism made the attempt to reconstitute ideologies in the postcommunist period even more daunting than in East-

ern Europe.<sup>28</sup> Russian elites all were products of a Leninist regime that went even further than did the one in Slovakia in wiping out alternatives to communism and preventing these from developing. One of the most difficult tasks in analyzing Russia is trying to tell who is who among the elite. Almost every key figure in postcommunist Russia regularly switches parties and idioms. (Even the identifications of those who do not switch as frequently should be examined in terms of whether they were formed exclusively by the Leninist nation-building process.)<sup>29</sup> While clearly Russia has a more developed and richer history than does Slovakia, that country's tainted Stalinist legacy, the ambiguity surrounding its imperial past, and even the victory in World War II offer little clear basis for reconstituting a new society-wide ideology.

Armed with the categories I set up in the Slovak case, and with the questions they raise, we can look at other cases and try to determine exactly what the relative impacts are of the communist versus the precommunist nation-building experiences.<sup>30</sup> Rather than assuming a return of history, we can sort out exactly what is returning and how significant that return is.

Using the ideas developed in the Slovak case, we can look behind party and ideological self-identifications and see how shallow these identifications are. We can ask what they really mean. We can make more sense of the switching of idiom and fluidity of personnel that continues to characterize politics in these countries. We can begin to understand odd alliances between seeming ideological opposites. We can also begin to ask the larger and longer-term question about the significance of the absence of an overarching ideology in societies that often resemble the mass-elite more than they do the ideological elites and continue to elect the mass-elite through democratic politics.<sup>31</sup>

## Historical Consciousness of World War II

Within the Slovak case I have chosen to trace historical consciousness regarding the World War II legacy in order to assess the extent to which national ideology was preserved, developed, or erased during the communist period. But each of these choices—historical consciousness as a stand-in for ideology and World War II as the central facet of Slovak history—must be justified by way of introduction.

The theoretical justification of the link between historical consciousness and national ideology is discussed at length in chapter 2, but here in brief is why it is so central to national ideology. First, history (or memory)



is the central part of identity that allows a person or a group to understand themselves as maintaining particular characteristics over time. It is at the core of national ideologies for just this reason. The critical role that history plays in ideology was recognized by the dissent movements that formed in response to Leninist regimes. They preserved national ideology through their focus on history and memory. They believed that state control of history—which became known as “organized forgetting”—meant state control of identity.<sup>32</sup> Second, history, or historical consciousness, functioning as it does to provide group identity, allows for common judgments and learning from the past. Third, the *consciousness* part of historical consciousness calls attention to the fact that national ideologies are products of a process of articulation, of making individual family stories into a collective history.<sup>33</sup>

Slovakia’s World War II legacy can be broken down into several controversial issues. How responsible were the leaders of the Slovak state for the deportation of Slovakia’s Jewish population? Was the Slovak state and its ideology legitimate or imposed from outside? What was the character of the resistance to Nazism?

While the main focus of this book from a comparative perspective is communism’s legacy, the World War II legacy is a particularly interesting one to use to demonstrate the argument, because so many countries shared it.<sup>34</sup> While Slovakia and Croatia had traded statehood for collaboration, Baltic nationalists, the Ukrainian nationalist movement, Romania, and Hungary had also collaborated with the Nazis. Occupied countries such as Poland continued to struggle with this legacy. Of course East Germany had to contend with the legacy of two totalitarian regimes in the most direct way. World War II divided democrats, nationalists, and communists in each of these countries.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout this region, World War II was important on a number of levels. It was a battle between ideologies—fascist, communist, and democratic. It was an overlay on top of particularistic ethnic conflicts in each country—Czechs against Slovaks, Croats against Serbs. It was also a story of national sovereignty squashed by either Nazi or Soviet imperialism. But at the center of the difficult process of coming to terms with this past, from a moral perspective, is the Holocaust, and in particular the fate of the Jews.

The Jewish deportations at the hands of the Slovak state receive particular focus in this book. The contribution to Hitler’s effort to exterminate Europe’s Jews, more than the severing of the Czechoslovak state, is the central moral issue that taints the Slovak wartime state. The Jewish issue is clearly at the heart of the Western understanding of what made World

War II different from other wars. The moral catastrophe of the Holocaust was such an important part of the postwar intellectual discourse in the West that it is particularly dramatic to see how cut off the East actually was from this discussion. That these events happened on the territories of these countries makes their isolation from the postwar debate even more remarkable.<sup>36</sup>

The word *holocaust* did not enter the Slovak debate until 1989 (though small groups of nationalists and democrats discussed it). On the territory of that small country whose leaders traded nominal independence for collaboration in one of the century's greatest crimes, this history was never made meaningful. Even members of the elite were never exposed to the interpretation of the Holocaust that intellectuals in the West take for granted—that this was a European or human tragedy.

The Jewish deportations might, at first glance, make the 1939–45 period an odd one to use to demonstrate my argument. This is a history which elites might well try to forget anyway, even without the pressure and coercion of a Leninist regime. After distinguishing between the reasons for forgetting this difficult past in communist countries as opposed to countries of Western Europe, I offer several reasons that make the 1939–45 period a good choice in spite of this problem.

The literature on coming to terms with fascist pasts in Western European countries like Germany and France tends to use the metaphor of repressed memory rather than state-organized forgetting.<sup>37</sup> While repressed memory suggests denial, but also the possibility of accessing this memory, organized forgetting results in something more like amnesia and thus ignorance of events from the past. Contrast, for instance, a case like Austria, where debate about the fascist past only took off in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the postcommunist cases. In the Austrian case, collaboration with the Nazis is not remembered by the elites because its content is difficult. In the communist cases, it is not remembered because of the state's effort to create a new elite that remembers no other history. Thus, while the fascist past is likely to be “forgotten” even in societies without Leninist regimes, there is a clear distinction between these different reasons for forgetting the past and the implications of these different types of forgetting. The divide between the ideological elites in Slovakia paralleled the divide we see in Western European countries. Anticommunist nationalists made arguments resembling those made by apologists for Nazi collaboration for the purposes of preserving national image. Democrats, like their counterparts in Western Europe, were set on condemning that collaboration in the interest of promoting tolerance and democracy.<sup>38</sup> The

mass-elite, on the other hand, lacked any shared interpretation at all beyond their personal family experiences.

Several factors make World War II a useful case to illustrate the results of the Leninist nation-building process in Slovakia in spite of the ambiguity about reasons for forgetting the fascist past. As we already know there was little to compete with World War II as a key nation-forming experience in Slovakia, given its lack of independent political history and weak national development. The anticommunist nationalists, composed of two streams—émigrés from abroad and the small Catholic dissident community who formed the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)—in many ways continued the legacy of the Slovak state even though it left a problematic basis for a national myth. Particularly the émigrés, who, in many cases, had been associated with the fascist Slovak state, continued to see that state as a glorious moment of Slovak autonomy.<sup>39</sup> They avoided admitting responsibility for its leaders' willingness to collaborate in the deportation of Slovak Jews or to impose a fascist dictatorship. The democrats—the dissident and Western oriented intellectuals of Public Against Violence (VPN)—saw Nazi crimes and the Slovak fascist state as part of a larger human tragedy that served as a benchmark against which to judge other regimes, such as the communist one.<sup>40</sup> They used it to warn of the dangers of dictatorship and the unprecedented immoral actions that these regimes could carry out. They saw the 1944 Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis as human resistance to dictatorship and thus as the true legacy on which a modern democratic Slovak national identity ought to be based.

World War II was also at the center of the Communist Party's claim to legitimacy and to the national myth the Party tried to build among communist elites. This was true not only in Slovakia but also throughout Eastern Europe.<sup>41</sup> As Pavel Campeanu puts it, "the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War became the improvised substitute of the worldwide revolution. The historical mission of the international proletariat was assumed by the national army of the great victor."<sup>42</sup> Thus, World War II, given its centrality, illustrates the striking effects of communism in destroying (or failing to build) historical consciousness quite well. The entire population was affected by the war and everyone had personal family stories about the Slovak fascist state, about participation in the Slovak army, or about the Uprising against the Nazis. In addition, society-wide meaning was given to these events only in the communist context since communist domination followed the war so quickly. National history writing in Slovakia really began during the communist period.

## Competing Theories

The book falls into two parts—communist and postcommunist. The first part should be understood in contrast with two prevalent arguments regarding the effects of Leninist regimes. These are *return of history*—conflicts from the past reemerged once communist repression was lifted—and *historical institutionalism*—communist regimes inadvertently created and strengthened nationalism through a particular approach to dealing with multiethnic societies.<sup>43</sup> The first part of the book also has a bearing on debates about collective memory. Finally, it is a detailed examination of the World War II legacy in Slovakia and thus begins to bring the countries of Eastern Europe into the growing literature on the legacy of that war. The second part, in chapters 6 and 7, looks at postcommunist Slovak politics through the lens of the weakness of ideology embodied by the mass-elite. Those chapters are in dialogue with the literature on transitions to democracy and the literature on nationalist mobilization.

## Reinterpreting the Communist Period

Both historical institutionalists and advocates of the return-of-history approach tend to look backward to find a nationalism which seems inevitably to exist. Yet neither raise the question of how strong or significant this nationalism is. Return-of-history arguments tend to see an undifferentiated return of issues and conflicts from the precommunist past which were frozen by communism. Debates regarding Slovakia's World War II past would be understood as having been pushed underground. When it became possible to engage in the free exchange of ideas, these debates simply resurfaced.

But, as I argue at greater length in chapter 2, it is essential to actually trace the mechanisms through which ideas about the past were preserved during the communist period. Analysts who contend that history has returned tend to assume that resistance to communism was more significant than it in fact was and that nation-building was more developed than can be shown to be the case.<sup>44</sup> The small groups that resisted communism, often in emigration, shaped the understandings of communist societies that developed in the West and gave an exaggerated sense of the importance of resistance. A second shortcoming of return-of-history arguments is that they fail to distinguish between shared national ideologies and separate family stories. By failing to make this distinction, these argu-

ments therefore fail to assess the significance of exactly what is returning from the past.

I argue that two factors must be taken into account that allow us to see that only the small groups of democrats and anticommunist nationalists represent a return of history in the sense of a return of national ideologies from the past. The first factor that must be understood is the nature of Slovak society; it was largely agricultural in 1948 and its national identity was not strongly rooted. Second, we must pay attention to the particular approach the communist regime took to nation-building.

The weakness of Slovak national consciousness in 1948 and its socioeconomic composition is the subject of chapter 3. The Slovak intelligentsia was very small in 1948 and much of that group was repressed as a threat to the communist regime. Much of the modernization process in Slovakia happened during the communist period, not before. Thus most of those who became the elites after 1948 had to have come from the parts of the population less subject to the partial processes of modernization and nation-building which took place during the years of the first republic and the wartime Slovak state. Members of the generation that became the elite after 1948, and especially of the one that entered the elite after 1968, often did not have ties to families that would have been conscious of preserving history. They were not from families that might have had prewar history books in their libraries or might have been tied in to Western networks or sources of information or even to prewar associations with the Communist Party. They went from peasant households directly into the communist socialization process.<sup>45</sup> While all families had some personal experience from the war, it was up to the communist regime alone to integrate the wartime experience into a new Leninist ideology.

What about communist nation-building? Historical institutionalists argue that Soviet-style nationality policy, which was aimed at muting differences between nationalities, inadvertently created nationalism where it did not exist and strengthened it where it did. This was particularly true in multiethnic federal states—the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Institutions, from academies of sciences to ethnic dance troupes, were set up with national facades and socialist substance to buy the loyalty of local elites; the intention was for their socialist content to be absorbed. But historical institutionalists point out that elites who were products of these institutions emerged from the experience of Leninist regimes with nationhood as their primary frame of reference.<sup>46</sup>

The historical institutionalists focus on only one side of the institutional legacy of communist regimes. They fail to take into account the

atomization caused by elite purges and the regime's approach to history teaching. Thus, even if nationalist idiom is available to these elites because of their having operated in Soviet-style national institutions, these elites might still be motivated by egoism, and the nationalist idiom they adopt might well be shallow. The focus in this book is on the other side of the institutional legacy of communist regimes. While the failure of communist regimes to brainwash is commonly accepted, the effects of this failure in combination with the regime's stunning success at preventing alternatives from developing, even in the face of profound alienation from the regime, is what is less often appreciated. The Leninist nation-building process combined periodic purges with a particular approach to the presentation of history.

In the case of World War II in particular the communist regime devoted a great deal of effort and resources to creating a communist myth that would win supporters. This included official history texts, elaborate commemorations, holidays, museums, research institutes, novels, and films. According to the communist version of the war, which can be recognized with some variation across Eastern Europe, fascism was bad, but its dictatorial nature was underplayed and was said to derive from its being a product of the highest stage of capitalism. The resistance against the fascists was good, but this applied only to those aspects linked to communist parties and the Soviet Union. Deportation of the Jews and Hitler's focus on Jews in his all-European extermination project was not emphasized.<sup>47</sup>

But the methods the regime used for presenting history—what came to be known by East European dissidents as “organized forgetting”—made history meaningless for the people who were products of the communist education and socialization processes. Official histories not only left out and distorted key events and personalities but also shifted in what they left out and distorted. This left people unable to judge the meaning of important historical events. These methods are demonstrated in detail in chapter 5 through an analysis of the history texts, novels, and films that each generation since World War II encountered.

That chapter will also show that even though the changing and diluted Party version of the war became either suspect or meaningless for its members, alternatives did not develop. This was mostly due to the fact that the regime periodically engaged in purges—in 1948 with the coming of communist domination, in the 1950s with Stalinist purges, in the 1960s with de-Stalinization, and after 1968 and the invasion of Soviet troops suppressing the Prague Spring. The alternatives that did develop, in 1968,