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Falsification of History in Slovakia

By Frank Koszorus, Jr.

Stalin, who in 1948 extended his empire to include Czechoslovakia, was a master of historical falsification, as best evidenced by his orders to blame the Germans, who were nowhere near the site, for the Katyn Forest massacre of Polish officers and other prisoners in 1940. The peoples of Central and Eastern Europe shook off their communist masters more than twenty years ago, which led to the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Old practices like the falsification of the past and intolerance toward minorities, however, die hard, as events in Slovakia, a NATO and European Union member, recently demonstrated.

Ivan Gasparovic, President of Slovakia and a former prosecutor under the communist regime, resorted to this shameful practice when he labeled Janos Esterhazy a follower of Hitler and fascism and opposed the unveiling of a sculpture in Esterhazy's memory in Kosice, a city close to Slovakia's border with Hungary. Gasparovic's statement is historically indefensible and serves to fan the flames of ethnic hatred and intolerant nationalism in Slovakia.

In 1938, Hungary regained part of Czechoslovakia inhabited predominantly by ethnic Hungarians. Fewer than 100,000 Hungarians remained in Slovakia, an ally and client state of Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945.

Although Esterhazy could have left Slovakia and taken a seat in Hungary's parliament, he chose instead to stay to serve the small Hungarian community remaining in Slovakia as the head of the Hungarian Party. In that capacity, Esterhazy opposed the Slovak Nazi puppet regime of Jozef Tiso. At great peril to himself, he was the only member of the Slovak Parliament to vote against the law authorizing the deportation of Jews in 1942. Later, Esterhazy personally saved Jews from the Holocaust.

Not surprisingly Esterhazy's and his party's anti-fascist stand did not sit well with the Nazis. He was pursued by the Gestapo and went into hiding, choosing once again to stay with his community in Slovakia instead of going into exile.

Immediately after the war in 1945, Esterhazy was arrested on the orders of Gustav Husak, a post-war communist leader of Czechoslovakia, for speaking out against the discriminatory anti-Hungarian measures introduced by the government. These measures, rooted in the anti-democratic concept of collective guilt, stripped ethnic Hungarians of their citizenship, virtually all of their rights, property (without compensation), dignity, and, in some cases, their lives. After being handed over to the KGB, Esterhazy was convicted as a "war criminal" by a Soviet court.

In 1947, while Esterhazy was imprisoned in the Soviet Union, the National Court in Slovakia in a perfunctory proceeding, and without any evidence, sentenced him to death *in absentia* on the trumped up charges of being a fascist and having contributed to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. It is a cruel irony that Esterhazy was wrongly accused of doing exactly what Slovakia would do on its own forty-six years later in the "Velvet Divorce" of 1993 -- dissolving Czechoslovakia. Upon his return from Russia, Esterhazy's sentence was commuted to life in prison. He died in a Czechoslovak prison in 1957 and was buried in an undisclosed mass grave.

It was more than reasonable to expect Slovakia to exonerate Esterhazy, an unsung hero of anti-Nazi resistance, after the demise of communism. Even Russia exonerated him on January 21, 1993, acknowledging that he had been "arrested without cause." Astonishingly, however, Slovakia still refuses to exonerate him. This despite the irrefutable historical record of Esterhazy's principled anti-fascist views and actions, the pleas of the Hungarian minority and his family, and support from internationally recognized individuals such as Simon Wiesenthal who wrote on behalf of Esterhazy to Dr. Peter Samko, Chief Judge of the Bratislava Court. Slovakia is even failing to take into account that the Catholic Church has begun the process to beatify Esterhazy.

Not only is President Gasparovic's statement a falsification of history, it dishonors a man of integrity and courage, is a slap in the face to Slovakia's Hungarian minority and, hence, has become a source of tension between Hungary and Slovakia. Esterhazy's posthumous exoneration, on the other hand, would constitute a long overdue act of reconciliation, which would lead to improved relations between two NATO allies as well as serve the cause of truth and justice.

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