

MARIANNA ORAVCOVÁ
(2020)

AKCIA B

[Action B]

*Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa [The National Memory Institute],
303 p.*

In Slovak historiography, several researchers in the social sciences are focusing on important topics related to the historical development of society after the Second World War. The awareness of the “obligation” to fill the “gaps” in the social and political history of Slovakia has prompted researchers to return to events that took place more than seven decades ago. These gaps emerged as a result of several factors, such as the fact that until the end of the 1990s many events were “banned” topics in social science writing at academic centres and universities. In addition, these topics have long been absent from the public media, popular scholarly literature, and film production. This situation persisted as a result of political control exercised systematically with the intention of forbidding the publication of certain information that would compromise the government and the political regime. Such topics included the post-war political situation in the 1950s, when after the parliamentary elections in 1948 the Communist Party seized political power in Czechoslovakia.

It took more than four decades for Czechoslovak society to be presented with an image of the cruel reality of political persecution, which has been preserved in extensive document collections and archives. Most of them were marked as “secret and top secret”, which meant they were not publicly available for consultation or later for research purposes. Unfortunately, the testimonies of direct witnesses, who were often accused of seditious activities, have only rarely been preserved. Ethnologists have confirmed that in the course of their research, there were several topics that were traumatising for their respon-

dents. Understandably, memories of this type were generally not retold even within the family circle.

It was not until the late 1990s that these events came to light in Marianna Oravcová's pilot study *Správa o očiste* [A report on the purge] published in 1992. She continued in her research, focusing on events related to the involuntary resettlement of people from Slovak cities such as Bratislava, Nitra, and Košice to the countryside. Her endeavours resulted in an extensive publication entitled *Akcia B* [Action B], which was published in 2020 by the National Memory Institute in Bratislava. The title is derived from the initial letter of the word "byt" (meaning "apartment" in English). The word "action" refers to the systematic organized involuntary abandonment of people's flats, or even houses, and the eviction of city inhabitants to the countryside. In addition to being involuntarily (by law provision of so called "unreliable person" designed for this purpose) resettled from their own homes, citizens were ordered to settle in a remote rural location and carry out manual labour in a particular enterprise (especially in the fields of manufacturing and construction or in stone quarries). When assigning new jobs to the evicted, the authorities did not take into account their original vocational training and education, even though the majority of the persecuted had completed university studies in various specialisations. On the contrary, they were exclusively assigned manual jobs despite their high level of education. The written order to carry out forced manual labour was an example of how the authorities disregarded applicable international conventions such as the Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour adopted in 1930 by the General Assembly of the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

The notion of the "purge of society", which was also used by the author in her earlier work (Oravcová, 1992), is incorporated as a leitmotif throughout the chapters of the publication, which is documented by specific archival materials from eight state institutions and materials from the family archives of those that were affected by the evictions.

The first chapter, *Cez ľudovú demokraciu k diktatúre proletariátu* [From popular democracy to the dictatorship of the proletariat], presents the readers with depicting the post-war atmosphere and the efforts of the political authorities to "purify" the cities of people who the incoming political regime saw as the "class enemy". They declared that their parallel goal was to find a solution to the inadequate housing capacities in the cities. However, as the documented resolutions of the supreme party authorities made clear, the reason behind the advertised increased efforts to address the housing problems was not primarily the improvement of urban housing conditions. On the contrary, the primary motive was the acquisition of suitable and often prestigious housing for the new rising generation, which, according to the parties' committees, was to create a "new society" in the aftermath of the February 1948 coup d'état. In the

propaganda rhetoric, families that were involuntarily resettled from the cities were referred to as “flawed”, “unreliable”, “unwanted”, or “former people” (“byv-shiye ljudi” in Russian) and were replaced by politically reliable individuals from a rural and working-class backgrounds. These often Communist Party members individuals usually lacked the education necessary to carry out the roles which they were appointed to by the party authorities. The legal validity of these decisions was meant to be supported externally by the rapid development of new legal standards and political competencies in all positions of state leadership.

This approach, based on the principles of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, was intended to be an instrument of the class struggle aimed at achieving popular democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The second chapter, *Zákonné neprávno* [Legal injustice], uses specific examples to demonstrate how the legal system in Czechoslovakia was transformed. It was done in line with the party’s goals, decisions, and repressive policies against its political opponents, who the implementers of these changes referred to as “entrepreneurs and exploiters”. These umbrella terms referred to people who opposed the political regime. However, it was not possible to appeal against the party’s decisions. The newly-established legal system enabled the division of flats according to the established “hierarchy” of the state institutions (Oravcová, 2020: 185).

The third chapter, *Mimosúdne perzekúcie* [Extrajudicial persecutions], describes the process of the “purge of society”. This process took place from the spring to the autumn of 1948 through a series of comprehensive investigations of state and public employees. Shortly afterwards, another provision was introduced stipulating that pensioners and the clergy of all churches could also be prosecuted for so-called seditious activity. Prosecution also took place in the universities, targeting both lecturers and students who were expelled and then enrolled in manufacturing and retraining courses. The accused individuals were hit by sanctions usually relating to their profession or career, such as the loss of employment or early retirement. There were also some cases where individuals voluntarily applied for work in manufacturing for fear of persecution. However, the compiled list of “enemies” was subject to further sanctions even after the phase of massive purges.

The fourth chapter, called *Akcia B – ako byty* [Action B – as in flats], is the most extensive in terms of content and the number of published documents on the process of removing people from the cities. It described the stages of preparation and the implementation of evictions, which began to take place on 15 July 1952. The subchapter *Zvláštna komisia* [Special commission] merits some attention as it described how this commission was responsible for the distribution of replacement dwellings for those evicted to rural settlements. The commission was composed of members of the competent branches of the

government, starting with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia and finishing with the State Security, whose role was to “exert pressure on isolated victims and disregard any consideration of the legal framework or the provision of living conditions for those evicted” (Oravcová, 2020). This is also evidenced by the allocated dwellings, which were in an unsatisfactory condition and often without electricity, water and sanitary facilities. The size of the living area (comprising one room with a kitchen) was much more modest than in these people’s original homes, as evidenced by numerous archival documents. Allocated dwellings were often quite remote and had poor access to the designated place of work. This meant a tedious journey to work in the early morning and from work in the late evening. The motions and justification of the reasons for the eviction did not even find their way into the hands of the people concerned, and it was after 1992 that they got the opportunity to read these materials (Oravcová, 2020).

The decision adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 4 September 1953 (six months after Stalin’s and Gottwald’s deaths) put an end to the long, bitter, and unjust persecution of families and individuals. This chapter also contains a valuable analysis called *Sociologická sonda* [A sociological probe] dealing with Slovak society in the 1940s and 1950s that was carried out on the basis of lists of people and families evicted from Bratislava. Statistical data show that the political persecutions that took place in the 1950s affected two generations. Less than ten percent were protected from these sanctions. The severance of social, professional, neighbourhood, and family ties was particularly difficult for those evicted but also affected those who remained in the city.

Despite several inconsistencies in official documents, which were later rectified following the appeals of those affected, Oravcová concludes that these evictions caused a significant change and rupture in the social and economic structure of the Slovak middle class, which over the course of two decades between the two world wars was formed mainly from people from the agrarian and working-class environments of Bratislava and other cities and replaced by a new party “elite”.

The fifth part of the publication, entitled *Ponovembrový postoj k perzekúciám z 50. rokov* [The post-November stance on the 1950s persecutions], provides a glimpse of the somewhat successful and the unsuccessful methods and results of compensation for persecutions, forced evictions, and forced labour from 1956 to 1968. It was only after the events of November 1989 that more favourable opportunities were created for initiatives to be set up by individuals and the Slovak Helsinki Committee, which was established in 1990. Oravcová also joined this committee. Within the committee, a working group was established in 1992 with the intent to thoroughly analyse materials documenting persecutions. Despite the presented material, those affected were not granted

any significant moral and civic satisfaction desired and even after 1989 did not receive any financial compensation for their forced labour.

In the 1990s, the issues presented by Oravcová as a part of the historiography of the social sciences in Slovakia caught the attention of several Slovak ethnologists who carried out their own research (Salner, 1998; Ratica, 1991; Darulová, 2013; Janto, 2017).

The content, scope, and exemplary and precise scholarly interpretation of the issue, based upon the study of the archive documentation, testify to an effort to make this matter accessible and to capture the experiences of the third generation of families of those affected, which is something historical memory tends to overlook.

This is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's observation in *Sloboda a politika* [Freedom and politics] (Arendt, 1958, p. 694): "We know from our experience with totalitarian governments that the gift of freedom may be destroyed, or rather that we must be apprehensive about it being destroyed."

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