

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES ON REGIONAL
LEVEL DURING THE PERIOD OF SLOVAK AUTONOMY
(6 OCTOBER 1938 – 13 MARCH 1939):
THE EXAMPLE OF NITRA TOWN*

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Abstract. *The year 1938 brought gradual disintegration of the Czechoslovak Republic. The tense situation from the country's centre spilled over into the regions. Emergency measures restricting constitutional freedoms ultimately became the starting point for significant political changes and the truncation and destruction of the hitherto pluralistic system. The emerging ruling power in Slovakia, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, using a marginal interpretation of the legal norms of the interwar republic, sought to take advantage of this opportunity to put curbs on the diverse political scene. On its way to power, under the slogan of uniting national forces, this party shut down operations of its rivals by force, significantly reduced the number of prints and various associations, and monopolised social life in Slovakia in general.*

Keywords: *Slovak autonomy 1938, authoritative regime, regional history, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, Nitra town, regional history.*

Introduction

The history of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Conference in September 1938 has received significant attention in historiography. The Munich decisions had major impact on the internal situation in the country and was followed very quickly by political radicalisation and substantial changes in the political system. In general, current research still mainly focuses on the international situation and nationwide consequences in terms of analysing individual steps of the state apparatus. This article captures the regulations and changes at the lower level of the state administration. The aim is to follow the process of liquidation of political plurality and democratic elements in the administration based on the example of a single region: the town of Nitra and its surroundings. At the time of the Munich Conference in September 1938,

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Nitra was one of the largest cities in Slovakia and had well-developed infrastructure. Its main economic focus was the processing of agricultural products. It was a multi-ethnic city with Slovak, Jewish, Hungarian, German and small Roma communities. The city's population exceeded 20,000 inhabitants.

Czechoslovakia in the period from 1918 to 1938 is generally considered to have been successful model of democratic system. When surrounding states were struggling with democratic rule and even adopting authoritarian regimes, Czechoslovakia remained a plural democratic system. Several parties were active on the Czechoslovak political scene between the two World Wars and, once elected to national or local representative bodies, they were given the opportunity to carry out their election programmes. People were able to cast their votes for the political party that best suited their values and attitudes.

However, due to the international situation and threats to territorial integrity, voices requesting changes democratic rules were growing stronger. In the 1930s, representatives from a range of political parties increasingly appeared to criticise political pluralism and democratic governance. A gradual destruction of these principles in Czechoslovakia was significantly aided by the international situation and the related internal political crisis in 1938. The political environment in Czechoslovakia in the first months of this year was mainly shaped by Germany's annexation of Austria. The union of Austria and Germany created a major realignment of forces in Central Europe. It increased the political and possible military threat to the integrity and sovereignty of the Czechoslovak Republic, which remained the last democratic state in the region. A number of long-standing poorly tackled problems, mainly ethnic, were exacerbated in the country. Events abroad activated representatives of ethnic minorities to demand a revision of the post-war order. Meanwhile, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSLP) began seeking to carry out its programme of Slovak autonomy, for which it had strived for 20 years. On the other hand, existing threats to the republic also multiplied appeals for prudence and national unity. Nevertheless, unity was not possible without finding a compromise concerning the Czech-Slovak relationship. There seemed to be no solution appearing on the horizon. On the contrary, with municipal elections in Slovakia approaching, political parties escalated their rhetoric, making compromise ever more difficult to reach. Due to differing views on tackling individual political problems in the run-up to the municipal elections, HSLP was unable to reach agreement with other Slovak (Czechoslovak) parties, so it established contacts with Hungarian and German political groupings instead.¹ HSLP pursued a similar policy in

¹ Bystrický 2008a, p. 125; Arpáš 2019, p. 157–171.

creating election coalitions at the regional level. This in turn increased the distrust of Czech and Czechoslovak parties towards the strongest Slovak party.

Tense political and social situation in Nitra in 1938 before Declaration of Slovakia's Autonomy

At the local level, the political struggle in 1938 became fully evident in the planning of May Day celebrations. In previous years, May Day celebrations were organised by political parties in their own right. Fearing an escalation of tensions, the government considered cancelling the celebrations altogether in 1938. This radical step was not taken in the end, however.² The celebrations were intended to transcend their partisan character and become a demonstration of support for the republic. This was also the spirit of early proposals at a meeting of the Nitra City Council. The programme should have included the reading of a government statement concerning the celebrations, but the mayor of Nitra, František Mojto, refused to read it out – for purely partisan reasons, as HSLS refused to attend the same celebrations as the Communists. Another problem was the declaration, indicated earlier and drawn up in Prague, mentioning Czech–Slovak unity, which HSLS did not recognise. If HSLS were to participate in the joint parade and the reading of the declaration, it could be seen as a betrayal of the autonomist agenda.³ A group of city deputies on the preparatory committee therefore stated that they were not able to predict how their party members and sympathisers would behave in these circumstances. As a result, the district authorities banned the celebrations in the city. The intention to organise a compelling pro-Czechoslovak rally failed.

The controversy surrounding the May Day celebrations in the city highlighted the tense political situation at the local level. Tension in Nitra escalated in the run-up to the municipal elections in Czechoslovakia, originally set for 1937. Nevertheless, the government eventually postponed the vote to a later date. However, the elections did not take place on the same date in all municipalities in 1938 – they were held in some places in May and in other locations in June.⁴ The situation was tense due to the partial mobilisation announced on 21 May 1938 in response to escalations on international scene, mainly in Czechoslovak–German relations. The election turnout in Nitra was convincing: 10,482 out of 11,592 eligible voters came

² Horák 2016, p. 90–91.

³ Olejník 2014, p. 45.

⁴ For more details, see: Arpáš 2011, p. 80; Bystrický 2008a, p. 120–137; *Obecné volby* 1938, p. 1.

to the polls.⁵ A grouping of ethnic parties (the United Provincial Christian Socialist Party and the Hungarian National Party) garnered the highest number of votes, with Hlinka's Slovak People's Party coming second, closely followed by the Social Democrats. The Jewish parties and the Communists suffered significant losses compared to the previous elections. Four coalitions were created in Nitra. HSLs, with the United Hungarian Party,⁶ won a total of 20 seats. The Social Democrats and the alliance of Jewish parties, with a total of 11 seats, were the second-strongest grouping. The third coalition involved as many as five parties, including the Agrarians and the Czechoslovak People's Party, but it had a mere four mandates in total. Somewhat stronger was an association of the National Socialists and the Communists, with a combined seven deputies. The Slovak National Party and the Civic Party of Christian Peasants ran separately but did not win any seats.⁷ Broad-spectrum alliances also emerged in other Slovak cities and towns, their common denominator being positive attitudes towards the republic and its defence, despite minimum intersections elsewhere in their agendas.⁸ Hlinka's Slovak People's Party allied with Hungarian conservatives in Nitra. Although the grouping presented itself in the regional press as Christian, the actual common denominator of these parties was their desire to resolve the ethnic question in the country. The election results in Nitra were presented by HSLs as a landslide victory, even though this was far from being true. The party was up by 805 votes compared to the 1935 general election,⁹ but this did not make it the strongest party in the city. Given the distribution of power among parties, it was unlikely that it would find a different political partner than the United Hungarian Party. Conversely, other parties were ready to bridge partisan and ideological gaps and unite against HSLs.

Two camps emerged in the city parliament, both having roughly the same number of deputies. HSLs with the Hungarian parties had a total of 20 deputies, while the remaining parties allied in a single camp had a combined 22 deputies. The mayoral election on 1 August 1938 became the first serious test of how the city parliament would operate. HSLs and the Hungarian parties presented the bid of František Mojto (HSLs), who was opposed by the joint candidate of all the remaining parties in the city parliament:

⁵ *Výsledok* 1938, p. 1.

⁶ Lipták 1992, p. 213–220; Hetényi 2011, p. 47–96.

⁷ NSA, fund Nitra City Authority, inventory no. 34. Minutes on the election of the municipal parliament of Nitra on 22 May and the elections of mayor, vice-mayors, municipal council and commissions on 1 August 1938.

⁸ Bystrický 2008a, p. 121–122; *Koho bude Nitra voliť* 1938, p. 1–2.

⁹ Rychlík 1997, p. 139; Bystrický 2008a, p. 128.

František Kopeček, a Social Democrat. As the parties supporting František Kopeček had a majority, it seemed that Nitra would have a new mayor. But after the votes were counted, it emerged that both candidates received 21 votes each. This was due to member of the city parliament, Alexander Arnold from the Czechoslovak People's Party, who sided with HSLs despite previous agreements. A repeated vote brought the same result, so lots were drawn to decide. The lot determined František Mojto was the winner. Bernát Rolfes (United Hungarian Party) became the vice-mayor and Alexander Arnold (Czechoslovak People's Party) the second deputy mayor.¹⁰ As with the mayoral election, Mojto's deputies were also decided by lot. HSLs thus took the post of mayor, with one deputy mayor being a member of the allied Hungarian party and the other being a person who had voted for František Mojto. The rival camps began to accuse each other of foul play and election fraud. These disputes eventually led to the filing of a complaint, although this was eventually dropped. The fact that HSLs's members, coalition partners and sympathisers took key posts allowed for a relatively smooth transition to political dominance after October 1938.

Response to Declaration of Slovakia's Autonomy in Nitra

The situation was changing constantly during intense negotiations on Czechoslovakia at the Munich Conference in September 1938. People in the regions had to deal with problems concerning the provision of daily needs amid fears of supply shortage and mobilisation. The government, on 17 September 1938, adopted emergency measures to restrict constitutional freedoms for the next three months. The decree allowed for intrusions into citizens' privacy. The authorities were permitted to carry out house searches without a warrant and restrict secrecy of correspondence. Censorship was also introduced, among other measures.¹¹ Many of these measures remained in force in the following months, and after the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy they made it easier for HSLs to seize power and dismantle the mechanisms of pluralist democracy.

Various internal structures began to emerge in Slovakia and the Czech lands.¹² After the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy on 6 October 1938, HSLs considered it necessary to gain control over the state administration on Slovak territory. For this purpose, national committees were established in Slovak towns to ensure a smooth transfer of power and put pressure on the

¹⁰ NSA, fund Nitra City Authority, inventory no. 34. Minutes on the election of the municipal parliament of Nitra on 22 May and the elections of mayor, vice-mayors, municipal council and commissions on 1 August 1938; *Voľba* 1938, p. 1; Hetényi 2021a, p. 19–51.

¹¹ *Sbirka* 1939, p. 849.

¹² Rychlík 1997, p. 148.

state administration. They would temporarily represent the equivalent of parallel centres of power in the regions. In terms of personnel, they were linked to HSLS and its organisations.¹³ Their existence was based on a marginal interpretation of existing legislation. According to a circular letter issued by the Slovak autonomous government they were to be auxiliary and advisory bodies of the official authorities, but in practice they became key components of transition of the state and regional administration to HSLS and, in the short term, an essential component of the regime's reconstruction.

A 25-member national committee was established in Nitra on 10 October 1938. Formally it was supposed to be a non-partisan body, but in practice it was mostly composed of HSLS members and its sympathisers. The committee had the ambition to oversee and steer the situation in terms of public order and security in the city, even though there was a regular police force. The committee's task was "personal and property defence of fellow citizens."¹⁴ In addition, the committee, in cooperation with the emerging Hlinka Guard (HG), was to take part in preparing various events, including the general election planned for December 1938. According to the autonomous government's ideas, the national committees were primarily to "teach and lead the nation to discipline ... and complete unity."¹⁵ After accomplishing their mission, the committees were dissolved by a circular letter on 19 December 1938.

Another tool to facilitate the smooth transition of power was a circular letter issued on 19 October 1938 on the dissolution of local councils that could not guarantee, by their composition, a rapid consolidation of the situation or if the local authorities were headed by inconvenient mayors.¹⁶ The city parliament in Nitra remained in place for some time, as HSLS held key posts in the city hall. Mayor František Mojto had been in office since 1932 so it was not necessary to apply this decree in order to take power. In addition to HSLS figures, the city parliament also featured members of the United Hungarian Party. The spectrum of political parties shrank in the wake of state regulations on dissolving certain political parties. This also truncated the Nitra city parliament, with 14 deputies being dismissed and replaced by

¹³ Pekár 2008, p. 161–169; Baka 2010, p. 16; Podolec 2003, p. 647–668.

¹⁴ *Národný výbor* 1938, p. 4; *Izák-Hviezdin* 1940, p. 23.

¹⁵ *Vyhlásenie* 1938, p. 1.

¹⁶ Podolec 2003, p. 647–668. Such a course of action was allowed in exceptional situations by legislation of the First Czechoslovak Republic (Act No. 243/1922 of the Collection of Laws and Decrees). The law stipulated that such emergency regulations could be in force no longer than six months. The temporary nature of the measure was abolished by a decree of the Interior Ministry in April 1941.

other figures, based on an HSLŠ's proposal.¹⁷ In the following period, appointment instead of election became the way to get a post, based on the appointee's attitudes to the changing circumstances and the ruling party.

The situation in the city was escalated in already tense moments mainly by members of the emerging Hlinka Guard.¹⁸ The HSLŠ's paramilitary organisation began to form in Nitra as early as the mobilisation in September 1938, with the stated goal of preventing riots and possible threats to people's property and lives. It constituted a power and armed force, which was strongly linked to HSLŠ and facilitated the transition of local structures into the party's hands. The Hlinka Guard demonstrated its power for the first time at celebrations marking the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy. The event was not without riots. During the October 1938 talks between the autonomous Slovak government and Hungary on arrangements concerning the common border, the Hlinka Guard organised several events to demonstrate political power in response to rumours that Nitra would get part of Hungary. The mood in the city was tense, with repeated provocations from both sides. In order to maintain public order, the Nitra district authority banned the display of ethnic minority flags and the wearing of tricolours. Several incidents were reported, including the hoisting of the Hungarian flag on the peak of Zobor Mountain overseeing the city.¹⁹

The talks with Hungary and the First Vienna Award eventually resulted in further territorial losses for Czechoslovakia. In order to cover up this setback, the Slovak government organised massive celebrations of Slovakia's autonomy in the second half of November. On 20 November, which was a Sunday, bells were to ring across Slovakia, including in Nitra. The event had a proclamatory nature again. It was attended by around 2,000 guardsmen and, according to estimates of reporters from the local press, around 15,000–20,000 people in total. Minor events also took place in nearby villages.²⁰

Another show of force in Nitra was organised by the HG on 11 December 1938, a week prior to the general election. According to an estimate by a local newspaper reporter, approximately 800 guardsmen appeared in Nitra.²¹ On the election's eve on 17 December 1938, the HG's Nitra branch held an emergency event in the city. Guardsmen marched down

¹⁷ Hetényi 2010, p. 437. The change occurred on 4 November 1940, when both the city parliament and the city council were dissolved, and a government commissioner and advisory board were appointed (Pekár, Tokárová 2019, p. 144–157; Hetényi 2021b, p. 191–214).

¹⁸ For details about activities of Hlinka Guard in the year 1938, see e.g. Sokolovič 2009, p. 55–117.

¹⁹ *Okresný úrad* 1938, p. 4; *Maďarská zástava* 1938, p. 2.

²⁰ *Slovenská nedela* 1938, p. 2; *Prehliadka* 1938, p. 1; *Národná manifestácia* 1938, p. 2.

²¹ *Garda* 1938, p. 2.

the main street under the lights of lanterns and torches to gather in the main square, where they were addressed by representatives of the central government. HG members then were to join the election campaign and canvass in the city. On the election day, they were to secure a peaceful course of the vote and be present at polling stations. Their physical presence in and around polling stations was a show of force and indicates that the election was hardly democratic.²²

Following the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy, lukewarm attitudes towards the common state became evident in several contexts. Recent events in the country and abroad also affected the mood in the run-up to celebrations of Czechoslovakia's twentieth anniversary. Preparations for the event in Slovakia were coordinated by a jubilee committee in Bratislava. However, the event, partly in the light of international events, turned out differently than expected. Despite increased efforts, there was low public demand for jubilee badges. A mere 1,374 badges were sold in Nitra, which was only about one third of 4,000 available. The head of the district authority attributed this failure to political shifts and mobilisation.²³ Since the badges were up for sale months before the aforementioned events, his explanation can be seen as too simplifying. Amid tension caused by the local elections – and, later, the country's truncation – there was hardly any mood to celebrate in Nitra. The population of the region included many ethnic Hungarians, who did not feel any appeal to celebrate Czechoslovakia's founding in anticipation of the forthcoming border revision. Prime Minister Jan Syrový's government eventually called off the official programme by a decree of 14 October, citing recent developments in the state as the reason. 28 October, which was the day of Czechoslovakia's anniversary and hitherto a state holiday, became an ordinary working day and Sunday provisions no longer applied to it.²⁴ State leaders, including Prime Minister Syrový, commemorated the republic's anniversary by attending some minor events. In Slovakia, the commemoration of 28 October was ignored, with the *Slovák* daily newspaper taking a few potshots at the common state on that day.²⁵ Meanwhile, commemorations of 30 October, the day of the 1918 Martin Declaration, were prepared in Slovakia. The government decided that pupils in schools should be reminded the anniversary as part of their final lesson on 29

²² *Všetkým* 1938, p. 1; Nižňanský 1998, p. 163–203; Zavacká 2019, p. 40–56; *Do pozornosti* 1939, p. 3.

²³ NSA, fund Nitra City Authority, box 35, no. 1620/1938. Slovak Jubilee Committee to the District Chief of Nitra, 22 July 1938; *Ibid.*, District Office in Nitra for the Slovak Jubilee Committee, 29 November 1938.

²⁴ *Sbírka* 1939, p. 1068.

²⁵ Olejník 2008, p. 105–106.

October. Schoolchildren were obliged to listen to a radio broadcast, which included a speech by Education Minister Matúš Černák.²⁶

Removal of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party's political rivals

The situation in September 1938, with growing tensions in foreign policy and the subsequent adoption of the Munich Agreement, made it easier for HSLs to quickly eliminate other political parties and gain control of newspapers, magazines and other prints. As relevant emergency measures had already been introduced, such interventions were technically legal. As in other cases, laws and the Constitution of the First Czechoslovak Republic concerning periodical press and censorship were interpreted at the very edge of their intended scope and subsequently abused. Political parties were progressively liquidated (this was officially discussed as “cessation of operations”) or merged with HSLs. Along with the destruction of political rivals, periodicals that had originally subscribed to other political parties also ceased to exist or came under HSLs's influence. This removed the platform for oppositional and critical views and allowed the party to take control over the dissemination of information. The scope for citizens to exercise their own political ambitions, promote their ideas, read periodicals and associate on the basis of shared values was significantly curtailed within a few weeks in the name of the nation's supposed unity.

The Communist Party was the first to be suspended, on 9 October 1938, on the grounds of performing subversive activities.²⁷ All newspapers and magazines published under the remit of this political party were banned. The party's official newspaper, *Slovenské zvesti*, also ceased to exist. At the end of October, Martin Mičura's Czechoslovak People's Party was incorporated into HSLs, while its official newspaper, *Ludová politika*, was shut down along with *Ludový chýrnik* weekly and *Slovenský gazda* monthly.²⁸ The National Fascist Community;²⁹ the Slovak National Socialist Party,³⁰ with its evening newspaper *A-Zet*;³¹ and the Czechoslovak Traders' Party had all a similar fate. The Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants (simply called the Agrarian Party), which experienced turmoil following the Žilina Agreement on Slovakia's autonomy, eventually also succumbed to the “cleansing”. Young Agrarians attempted to oust the old leadership and take over the steering of the organisation. Although the Agrarians were initially in favour of

²⁶ *Zo zasadnutia* 1938, p. 2; *Ludové manifestácie* 1938, p. 3.

²⁷ *Činnosť* 1938, p. 2; *Komunistické spolky* 1938, p. 4.

²⁸ Bystrický 2008b, p. 236; *Mičurova strana* 1938, p. 1; Duhajová, Šefčák 1993, p. 51.

²⁹ On history of the National Fascist Community, see e.g. Hruboň 2015.

³⁰ Bystrický 2008b, p. 237.

³¹ Duhajová, Šefčák 1993, p. 52; *Heslo dňa* 1938, p. 4.

“simplifying” the political scene by banning certain parties, in the end they could not withstand the pressure. The Agrarian Party merged with Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party and its official newspaper. *Slovenský denník*, was taken over by people close to HSLs.³² The newspaper was eventually shut down at the end of 1938. Other periodicals linked to the Agrarians also disappeared – *Slovenský hlas* newspaper, the weeklies *Slovenská vlasť* and *Slovenská domovina*, and the bi-weeklies *Roľnícke rozhlady*, *Zem* and *Mladý roľník*.³³

The Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party³⁴ ceased its activities in Slovakia on 16 November 1938, along with its daily newspaper, *Robotnícke noviny*. On 24–25 November, the Slovak government cracked down on the Jewish parties – the Jewish Party in Slovakia and the United Socialist–Zionist Workers’ Party.³⁵ Nor did the Slovak National Party, until then HSLs’s partner in the promotion of autonomy, escape suspension of its activities in this period. Nevertheless, the two parties shared views on a number of issues, including anti-Bolshevik and anti-Jewish sentiment and the desire to eliminate of centralist parties.³⁶ In total, 11 of the 18 daily newspapers ceased to exist during the period of Slovak autonomy due to HSLs’s actions.³⁷

Two HSLs-affiliated dailies with nationwide reach were available for the public in 1938 – *Slovák* and *Slovenská pravda*. In addition, HSLs also controlled the regional press. A weekly called *Svornosť* began to be published in 1937 in Nitra, with a local priest, Michal Boleček, its editor. Although the newspaper focused mainly on Christian topics, in the exposed times of the municipal elections and their aftermath, including the elections of mayor and the setting up of the new city parliament, it released extra supplements devoted exclusively to politics and pre-election rivalries. This newspaper played an important role in the election year as a mouthpiece of ideas and attitudes held by local HSLs figures, and effectively became an opposition outlet to the local pro-government (Agrarian) weekly *Národná stráž*. In addition, two weekly newspapers written in Hungarian – *Nyitra megyei Szemle* and *Nyitra vármegye* – were also published in Nitra.³⁸ All these periodicals dealt with regional issues in addition to social and political topics. The declaration of Slovakia’s autonomy was followed by changes in the regional

³² Bystrický 2008b, p. 235.

³³ Duhajová, Šefčák 1993, p. 44–46. For more on history of the Slovak National Party, see Rogulová 2013.

³⁴ Šutaj 1998, p. 27; Ruman et al. 1997, p. 217–248.

³⁵ Hlavinka 2007, p. 39–40.

³⁶ Bystrický 2008b, p. 240–243.

³⁷ Baka 2010, p. 18.

³⁸ On *Nyitra megyei Szemle* weekly, see e.g. Vörös 2008, p. 41–74; Duhajová, Šefčák 1993, p. 63–64.

desks of individual newspapers. Starting from 20 November 1938, *Národná stráž* was renamed *Nitrianska stráž*.³⁹ The weekly also promptly changed its rhetoric. It became an uncritical defender of the new conditions, adopting brutal language, especially when it came to topics related to Jews and Hungarians. The changes on the desk were also fully reflected in the newspaper's visuals. The logo now consisted of a three-peaked mountain with a two-barred cross on fire. The newspaper gained a subtitle: "A non-political weekly newspaper and organ of the Hlinka Guard in Nitra". In fact, the newspaper was based on HSL's official rhetoric. In April 1939, the regional commander of the Hlinka Guard, Vojtech Višňovský, took over the editorship, replacing the long-time editor-in-chief Klúčovský. Nitra's Hungarian-language newspaper *Nyitramegyei Szemle* ceased to exist, and two years later another Hungarian newspaper *Nyitra vármegye* followed it into oblivion.⁴⁰

Along with political parties, several civic associations were also shut down.⁴¹ A number of them were directly linked to the activities of political parties and so they were liquidated in parallel. Nevertheless, associations with activities not directly related to political parties were affected as well. These associations had reached out to people sharing certain religious or political beliefs, organising various events to bring their members together and provide them with meaningful leisure activities. Debates on various political and social issues in the city and the republic were an essential part of life in such associations. Communist associations were among the first to be liquidated. Their property was taken over by local HG organisations. Jewish associations were the most affected – they all were abolished. There were 15 Jewish associations in Nitra.⁴² The government subsequently took over their property worth more than 565,000 crowns in total.⁴³ Other associations and trade union organisations were not spared either. All local branches of Czechoslovak trade union organisations and associations opposing Hlinka's Slovak People's Party were banned. The statutes of associations that were allowed to carry on were thoroughly revised. A total of 41 associations and organisations (not including the aforementioned Jewish ones) were dissolved

³⁹ Klúčovský 1938, p. 1. *Svornosť* weekly ceased to exist in 1940 and Michal Boleček joined *Nitrianska stráž*.

⁴⁰ Duhajová, Šefčák 1993, p. 99.

⁴¹ Operations of associations were stopped by a decree of the Government of the Slovak Land, dated 16 December 1938.

⁴² NSA, fund State Police Office in Nitra, box 6. Letter of the State Police Office in Nitra addressed to the Central Economic Office in Bratislava on 28 November 1940.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Minutes written at the State Police Office in Nitra on the taking over of the property of Jewish associations in Nitra, 24 January 1941.

or disbanded in Nitra in 1938 and 1939⁴⁴ and their property taken over by HSLS organisations. A total of 36 fellowships and trade union associations remained in place in Nitra. These associations, which included Masaryk's Anti-Tuberculosis League, the District Youth Welfare and the local branch of the Red Cross, saw government commissioners appointed to oversee their activities.⁴⁵

The Government of the Slovak Land also decided to dissolve all paramilitary organisations except for the HG. The activities of the Czechoslovak physical education movement Sokol in Slovakia were also suspended. However, Slovak and Czech members of the Sokol branch in Nitra met in late January 1939 to draw up a memorandum raising their voice against the suspension of its activities. This was one of the few actions in the region to protest against the authorities' moves. Over 190 Sokol members signed the appeal. Local guardsmen learned of the secret meeting and seized some of the signature sheets. In response to the Sokol memorandum, the HG organised a demonstration parade.⁴⁶ The guardsmen blamed the aforementioned Sokol memorandum on the Czechs, although many Slovak Sokol members had signed it as well.⁴⁷ The crowd turned against the Czechs, with participants shouting slogans like: "Out with the Czechs!" and "We want an independent Slovak state!" At the end of the protest rally, the traditional hymn *Hej, Slováci* was sung and the guardsmen then marched again in the streets of Nitra, shouting HG slogans such as: "Resign! Step aside all you who are obstructing the flow of the new Slovak life!"⁴⁸ The event was one of many anti-Czech actions in the city in those months.

For a few weeks after the declaration of autonomy, the youth still had the opportunity to organise themselves in the Scout Movement, which was quite popular among young people. However, Scout groups in the country were eventually disbanded in December 1938. The government politicised the ideals of Scouting – i.e. apolitical and democratic principles – to serve its own advantage. The nascent Hlinka Youth included many people who had originally been active in the Scout Movement.⁴⁹ Some former Scouts resisted the regime's efforts to politicise the organisation. Among them was the Catholic priest Jozef Lukačovič, who was instrumental in the founding of Catholic Scouting and served as its leading figure. He refused to participate

⁴⁴ Ibid. List of existing and defunct associations in Nitra.

⁴⁵ *Čo nikto nerozumie* 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Izák-Hviezdin 1940, p. 28; Hetényi 2010, p. 441, states as many as 210 signatures. Several signatories withdrew their signatures in the following days as a result of pressure.

⁴⁷ *Provokácia* 1939, p. 2–3; Hetényi 2010, p. 441.

⁴⁸ Izák-Hviezdin 1940, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Kozolková 2017, p. 19.

in the transition of the Catholic Scouts with a changed name under the tutelage of the government authorities in 1938. He was subsequently transferred from Bratislava to Zlaté Moravce. However, he did not stay there for long; he was dismissed from the state service and ended up in Ilava prison.⁵⁰

Military intervention of the central government in Slovakia and its course in region

Prague had incomplete information regarding events in Slovakia since the declaration of its autonomy. Reports of rising separatist tendencies in Slovakia began appearing ever more frequently in early weeks of 1939. The Czech political leadership had no concept of solving the Slovak issue.⁵¹ In the tense atmosphere caused by rising pressure from abroad, especially from Nazi Germany, the central government decided to restore its power by force. Jozef Tiso was to be dismissed as head of the autonomous government in Slovakia and other personnel changes in the cabinet were also planned. Radical HSLs figures, some HG commanders and part of the bureaucratic apparatus were to be removed, but autonomy itself was to be preserved. A military intervention took place on the night of 9–10 March 1939 which only served to boost anti-Czech sentiment in Slovakia. The action ended in failure; central government troops were unable to paralyse the Hlinka Guard, partly because they were forbidden to use firearms.⁵² The action ended in minor skirmishes and was swiftly called off on 11 March 1939.

The situation in Nitra became radicalised from 10 March 1939 under the impression of reports of the military's involvement. Guardsmen were concentrated in the town, including those called up from nearby villages. They were reacting to reports that the army was blocking all entries to the city and occupying key government buildings. The city's leaders were summoned to the District Office at 10 a.m. to be told by the commander of the Nitra unit, Colonel Josef Stratil, that martial law had been declared on the orders of General Homola. The two top HG leaders left the city to mobilise guardsmen. Several skirmishes took place on Saturday between soldiers and guardsmen, who were arriving from several parts of the district and gathering in Nitra. There were no serious clashes, however. As many as 3,500 guardsmen reportedly gathered outside the city on Saturday 11 March.⁵³ Approximately 1,000 guardsmen remained in Nitra the following

⁵⁰ Milla 2008, p. 33–34.

⁵¹ Bystrický 2012, p. 511; Zudová-Lešková 2010, p. 384–391.

⁵² Bystrický 2015, p. 30.

⁵³ Hetényi 2010, p. 439.

night. A demonstration march by the Guard was held on Sunday 12 March which culminated in a solemn oath-taking ceremony. The crowd was radicalised by a sermon of the priest Michal Boleček, who gave an open-air mass, as no church in Nitra was big enough to accommodate so many people. The HG was still unarmed – it only had a few rifles, which were stored at the District Office. On the night of 12–13 March 1939, the Guard raided a military warehouse near the local sugar factory and looted about 200 rifles with ammunition. Since information was scarce and no newspapers were released on Monday 13 March, people tried to catch some news at least from radio broadcasts. Mainly members of the Guard listened to the broadcasts of Vienna Radio, which featured Karol Murgáš and Ferdinand Ďurčanský at that time.⁵⁴ Various rumours and distorted information were spread. A tense atmosphere persisted, with the constant presence of guardsmen in the streets adding to it. The news on the proclamation of the Slovak state on 14 March 1939 provoked, especially among HG members, a wave of aggression against everything related to the Czechs and the previous regime. Czechoslovak signs and symbols were torn down from buildings and inscriptions related to the Czechoslovak Republic were painted over. The local HG occupied all important points in the city on 14 March, including the barracks and the airport, and disarmed the troops. On the same day, the Slovak state was declared by the Slovak Diet in Bratislava.

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⁵⁴ Izák-Hviezdin 1940, p. 29–41.

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