

# THE FLYING SQUADS OF HLINKA GUARD: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE SLOVAK WARTIME PAST

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THE ERA of the First Slovak Republic, from 1939 to 1945, is one of the most controversial periods in Slovak history. Nazi Germany's rise to power, followed by the outbreak of WW2 and all the consequences that came with it, have strongly influenced the assessment of the era. Slovakia's hope of achieving statehood is another current that intermingled in the disjointed WW2 period, which again has made an assessment of the era more ambiguous. Roughly the same could be said about the personalities and organizations of the regime, particularly the Hlinka Guard (*Hlinkova garda*), 1938–1945 (for more information see Sokolovič 2009), or HG, a party militia of the Slovak People's Party (*Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana*, HSĽS) named after Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), a Slovak Catholic priest and politician, and the leader of the Slovak People's Party.

When the HG was established, many Slovaks perceived it as a symbol of the struggle for national emancipation, but it gradually experienced stagnation and a loss of membership because active members of the HG vehemently participated in the persecution of Jews and the expropriation of their assets. When the Slovak National Uprising

broke out in August 1944, the HG had its "moment of glory", especially when the Flying Squads of the HG, or the POHG (*Pohotovostné oddiely Hlinkových gárd*), entered the stage. The POHG were established because the Germans did not trust the already disintegrating Slovak Army, which they blamed for their participation in the uprising. The HG seemed to be the best organization for fulfilling auxiliary and security tasks (later on, HG's Field Units were established to be engaged in direct combat).

There are not many organizations that stir up such negative emotions as the POHG, whose members were perceived as murderers who actively helped Germans slaughter innocent Slovaks. Their members were the targets of immediate post-war retribution and of the 1950s communist justice system as well. Their deeds have now become more well-known than the less-publicized killings committed by antifascist partisans during the Slovak National Uprising. It could be that the newly restored Czechoslovakia of 1945 needed to settle its accounts with the past regime, and therefore welcomed targeting the POHG more than commemorating the raging partisans the regime wanted to celebrate.

A black-and-white approach to pre- and, unfortunately, post-89 history prevails, in which the members of the HG and POHG are automatically considered “murderers” and “fascists”, while the inner motives of each member could have been quite different.

#### HLINKA GUARD AND THE UPRISING

When the Slovak National Uprising broke out in August 1944, it brought new life blood into the veins of the HG. The members were able to resuscitate the old slogans about their own significance and their national role in Slovakia’s proclamation of independence in March 1939. When the army “failed”, the POHG were the only ones who were able to restore order with the help of their “German friends”. They were essentially established to help resurrect the crumbling regime.

Entering the squads was voluntary in the beginning. Although there were thousands of HG members, the willingness of Slovaks to enter its armed units was not as great as the commanders expected. Therefore the High Command of the Hlinka Guards began to issue draft cards, also sending them to non-members of the HG,<sup>1</sup> who were simply afraid of risking their lives in military action and for whom the idea of being a Guardsman was distant. However, during states of military emergency, the refusal to accept a draft card could lead to capital punishment.<sup>2</sup> So it comes as no surprise that many of the HG draftees, who were persecuted for their membership in the Flying Squads in the postwar period, really had no sympathy for the HG’s ideas.

The deeply rooted stereotypes of HG members and military squads as radical killers of Jews is no longer acceptable. When the HG movement was established in 1938, some people joined just because their favorite club or association, for which they could seek conditional renewals only after joining,<sup>3</sup> had been abolished, while others genuinely believed in the national ideas

the movement seemed to initially represent or wanted to help the failing regime survive. It is clear that these types of “Guardsmen” were less willing to risk their lives for distant ideas. However, others were lured by benefits that were offered to those who joined the Flying Squads, and many Slovaks were able to solve their everyday livelihood difficulties (Sokolovič 2009, 396–398.) Some actively participated in persecutions, but the majority of them served as watchmen, and many of them immediately ran away from home at the first possible opportunity. It is estimated that 5% of the Guardsmen participated in executions, and it is known that they were physically present at one mass execution where 282 people died (Hruboň 2010).

#### FACING THE POSTWAR JUSTICE

After the end of WW2, the newly established regime sought to settle its accounts with the past regime and its exponents almost immediately. Based on the Slovak National Council (*Slovenská národná rada*), or SNR, decree No. 33, issued on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1945, the members of the HG were branded as “domestic traitors”. HG leaders and members who supported the interests of Nazi Germany, contributed to the “destruction of the republic”, and openly promoted “the activities or ideas of fascists occupiers and local traitors”, were to receive capital punishment.

Postwar settlements with the Guardsmen were complicated because many of the HG’s high functionaries managed to escape Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> Had they returned home, they would have risked being stripped of their civil rights, incarcerated, having their fortunes confiscated, or executed. The HG’s military commander during the Uprising, Otomar Kubala, did not escape this fate and was shot in August 1946.<sup>5</sup>

While the new regime was keen on punishing almost all forms of activism during the Slovak state (1939–1945), it was almost impossible to do so while the HG, at the

peak of its power, had more than 100,000 members, of which the radicals and chauvinists were a minority. As with the HG generally, each case had to be individually considered. Some of the former Guardsmen were completely passive when inside the HG, and therefore could not be proven guilty, or the evidence was missing.

Based on the decree, many of the Guardsmen were often punished after being denounced by universal, false “witnesses”, who participated in numerous charges only for the purpose of convicting the chosen Guardsmen. False denunciations, politically driven sentences or score settlements are present in every radical regime change. Some people were thus sentenced unjustly, while others escaped merited punishment and could watch satisfactorily from the sidelines as their former, less lucky “colleagues”, whose guilt might have been lesser, were punished. Many of the former Guardsmen were acquitted and could incorporate themselves into the new society. Many of them joined the Slovak Communist Party after, and sometimes even before, the 1948 communist coup d’état, and some of them took important state office or positions. They were later targeted by the Secret Police in the 1950s, in its aim to disclose Slovakia’s “nationalist underground”.

#### HG IS BACK IN THE 1950S

When the postwar retribution trials ended, one might have thought that the days of settling the score with Slovakia’s HG past were over. However, the reverse was true. In the late 1950s, the Czechoslovak socialist regime, influenced by the events in Poland and the 1956 uprising in Hungary, was plagued by internal turmoil. Czechoslovakia attempted to prove to the Soviet Union that it would not tolerate events like those in Hungary, and in so doing, it played the old “struggling with nationalism card”, which was perceived as a possible instrument that could undermine the republic. The representatives of the former regime,

particularly those from the First Slovak Republic, became apt targets and convenient victims of propaganda and staged trials (Sokolovič 2010, 58–78).

In order to mold public opinion, it was necessary to choose exponents of the former regime to which the atrocities could be attributed, influencing public sympathies in favor of a “just punishment”. The incidents of mass murder committed by the Nazis in the villages of Nemecká, Kremnička, Krupina and others during the retaliation that followed the defeat of the Slovak Uprising were chosen as a reminder of the time, and of the perversity of Nazi racial ideology.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that members of HG’s Flying Squads objectively assisted with these mass killings played into the hands of the state power. They were able to create the illusion that the perpetrators’ punishments were just by mixing together objective “proof” of the murders they committed, unsubstantiated “evidence”, and artificial constructions, supported by forced confessions; they then used this for the purposes of propaganda. It was impossible to confirm or disprove their accusations with certainty then, and even now. However, it is probable that many of them did at least assist with killings, and some may have been the shooters themselves.

One characteristic feature of political processes in the 1950s was a frequent bending of the law in order to discredit defendants and pass these “just” judgments, which were really prepared in advance, in line with the instructions of the Communist Party and state power. Individual defendants tried in 1958 had already previously faced the retribution courts for their wartime activities. In every democratic legal system, a rule is enforced that a man cannot be judged for the same crime twice (*ne bis in idem*), but the 1958 indictments were reformulated to get around this so a new legal process would be legitimated in the public eye. New documents were allegedly “discovered” that gave the state the

ability to try defendants once again, based on new, important information initially unknown to the postwar retribution courts.

The process was exploited by the regime propaganda machine. A special political committee was established to watch over all “major issues” in the trial preparations, ensuring that they manifested the willingness of the Czechoslovak people to fight fascism, nationalism and the residue of Hlinka’s ideology (*ľudáctvo*).<sup>7</sup> The terms of sentences were set before the trial, and the processes were directed from behind the scenes by politicians who demanded that the judges pronounce 10 capital punishments on pre-selected defendants (only five were sentenced to death, much to the dismay of the Slovak communist leadership).<sup>8</sup>

The defendants were subjected to psychological and physical terror during the investigations; many confessions were coerced and administrative interrogation protocols signed while they were being threatened with violence. Even the priests, who were the co-defendants in the process, were tortured. Leonard Sliachan had to memorize his confession word for word, and the interrogating secret policeman beat him and tore hairs, along with skin, from his head.<sup>9</sup> Including priests in this process was the regime’s attempt to “settle its scores”, not only with the HG’s legacy but also with the “rebellious” Catholic Church.

The organizers even managed to include support for their efforts to centralize Slovak self-governing institutions in the propagation process. The media was instructed to focus primarily on exposing in depth the “genuine anti-people and anti-national nature of the clero-fascist ideology, the fascist character and politics of the whole so-called Slovak state regime, and the brutality and criminal perversity of its representatives”.<sup>10</sup> The campaign climaxed when two propaganda brochures were issued, depicting the crimes of the Guardsmen and their close connection to both the Catholic Church hierarchy and representatives of the Slovak

state regime (Gryzlov 1958; Sedláková 1958).

In light of everything mentioned above, we must consider the 1958 political process used to convict the Guardsmen as brutally manipulated; its only aim was to attack various (following the vocabulary of the party apparatus) “anti-state groups”. It was one of the last, big, staged trials of the 1950s, offering us insight into the nature of not only the Slovak justice system – an obedient servant of the regime – but also the era in which it took place.

#### HLINKA GUARD AFTER 1989

In the era of the restored Slovak Republic, state power attempted to sentence the exponents of the wartime Slovak state. Within the most publicized case, the commander of the military group *Edelweiss*, Ladislav Nižnanský, was indicted for committing numerous crimes during the repression that followed the Slovak National Uprising. However, after the 1993 dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the restoration of the Slovak Republic, the attempts to come to terms with the legacy of the HG shifted from a criminal to a moral level, and there was a move to assess the HG more objectively, examining all the aspects of their activities.

The various conceptions of Slovak history during the unsettled period of WW2 have become part of the historiography, and it is complicated by the fact that the perceptions of the HG have been influenced by ideological biases, from both sides, since the predominance of so-called Marxist historiography. Nowadays the era of the Slovak state and its organizations, the HG included, is a space where two conceptions of Slovak historiography clash. Some historians see this era as only positive, neglecting any of the negative, while another group, influenced by pre-89 ideology (with the exception of the short period of “thaw” in the 1960s), forbid any objective historical discussion about the HG, which they perceive

as a tool used by the “clero-fascist Slovak state” to suppress democratic processes.

After 1945, many Slovaks perceived the Slovak state and the HG as the opposition to the hated Communist regime, and so they were often spared criticism and even glorified. Many former Guardsmen, and others who were either justly or unjustly sentenced in the postwar trials, painted an image of the Slovak state between 1938 and 1945 which bolstered and uplifted the Slovak nation, and thus stood in opposition to the later period of socialism. This was amplified by the fact that Slovak distinctiveness was gradually suppressed after WW2, as the new regime applied centralistic Czechoslovakian measures, known from the period before 1938 or 1939, respectively.

This may be the reason why the ideas promoted by many Guardsmen were appealing after the restoration of Czechoslovakia and even today, as the HG still finds its sympathizers. They tend to nostalgically remember the positive part of HG’s legacy, like its support for Slovak pride and statehood, while viewing its participation in persecutions as less important. After 1945, former Guardsmen who emigrated after the war tried to resuscitate the “lost glory” of the organization, and established both large and small groups in the hope they could expose the wicked, newly established regime; however, if these former Guardsmen returned home they would be jailed, so their propensity for any real change was limited. Therefore the majority of them never returned home, and those who decided to only did so after 1989. They encountered completely different situations, in which the HG-like organization had lost its *raison d’être*. The HG has become a historical fact, and is worthy of a historical examination; it should not be a

subject of political blackmail or a topic used to stir emotions.

## POZNÁMKY

<sup>1</sup> Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, 604–54–3.

<sup>2</sup> Military History Archive, Bratislava, zb. Slovensko, box 29, 1252.

<sup>3</sup> Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, 604–51–3.

<sup>4</sup> Nation’s Memory Institute Archive, Bratislava, A 17, box 1, archive number 3.

<sup>5</sup> Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, National Court, Otomar Kubala.

<sup>6</sup> Nation’s Memory Institute Archive Bratislava, KS ŠtB Banská Bystrica, 567, box 82, 83, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, ÚV KSS – preds., box 976.

<sup>8</sup> National Archive of the Czech Republic, Prague, KSČ – ÚV 1945–1989, Prague – politické byro 1954–1962, 172, 233/7.

<sup>9</sup> Katolícke noviny /Catholic Paper/, 30. 5. 2004, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, ÚV KSS preds., box 976.

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