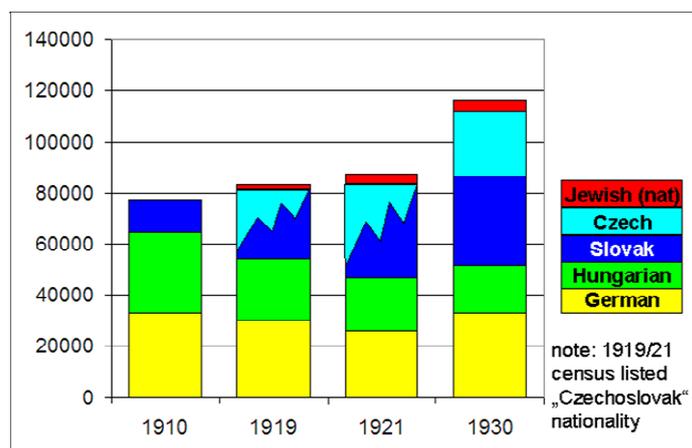


## **The Slovakization of Bratislava 1918-1948** **- processes of national appropriation in the interwar-period -**

In today's presentation I will discuss the Slovakization of Bratislava. While in my project I focus on two decades - after World War I 1918-28 and after the breakup of Czechoslovakia 1938-48, today I will concentrate on the interwar period:

Until 1919 Pozsony - also known as German Pressburg and, though less common, Slovak Prešporok - was a provincial center at the northwestern frontier of the Hungarian kingdom. I believe some will know the book by Eleonora Babejová on *Fin-de-Siècle Pressburg*, that gives a compelling picture of German-Hungarian conflict and cooperation in the city. In 1919, the city is incorporated into the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic and, having been renamed Bratislava by governmental decree in march 1919, soon grows to be the political, economic + cultural center, the unofficial capital of the Slovak part.



Tab.1:  
Bratislava 1910-1930.  
population by nationality

Political change is followed by migration movements and individual change of national affiliation that profoundly change the national composition of the city's population: Keeping in mind the usual problems of statistical data, we can state that the majority of the German, and about 50% of the Hungarian inhabitants remain in town, but they surrender their once dominant position to the Slovaks + Czechs, who move into the new capital. The interethnic climate in the city, the relations between veteran residents and newcomers has been covered by several in-depth studies by Peter Salner, Daniel Luther - who have done ethnological research, based on oral history.

However, the population changes apparently do not suffice to make Bratislava a "Slovak city" - or as the Slovak local papers put it: mesto slovenského razu, a city of Slovak character, spirit or physiognomy. "Slovakization" - that is the desire to transform the perceived non-Slovak city into an explicit Slovak one, is not an ex-post construct of historiography but a hot issue of contemporary debate. Slovak positions are countered by German and Hungarian voices, who in turn emphasize their claims on the city.

In my thesis, I consider the Slovakization of Bratislava as a process of national appropriation, at the legal-administrative level of decision-making and property rights, as well as on the cultural-representative level of symbols, discourses and content.

Most commonly, urban studies focus on the symbolic markers in public space - street names, monuments, architecture, or look at celebrations as a means of appropriating urban space. In the current project, I approach this nationalization process by looking at institutions: Choosing examples at a national, municipal and civic level, from the secular and the religious sphere, I will focus on the university, the city theatre and three local parishes. I look at them not with the aim of writing classical institutional history, but use them as an access point to tap into the city's public life. My sources are documents from within the institutions, official documents from various bodies of state administration and local press.

These institutions are sites of sustained or repeated interaction - and also contestation among the nationalities for aspects of practical usage, representation as well as economic interests.

This can be nicely illustrated at the example of the university: After lengthy discussions about the location of the third Hungarian university, in 1912 Hungarian Royal Elisabeth University (Magyar Királyi Erzsébet Tudományegyetem) is established in Pozsony. With the organization slowed down by the war, in 1919 only the faculties of medicine and law were fully functioning, while the philosophical faculty still remained a stub.

Already in October 1918 - a newspaper article reports a Czech party gathering, where voices demanded to found a Czecho-Slovak university in Pozsony - before the proclamation of the Czechoslovak Republic and still 3 months before the city was occupied by Czech troops, so this option still sounded very much unreal to the city's inhabitants.

After the Czechoslovak takeover, the Hungarian university initially continues operation. However, it is closed in feb1919, after the professors refuse to participate in the welcoming of the Slovak government in Bratislava, emphasizing that the border issue is yet unsolved and as representatives of the Hungarian state they cannot be expected to welcome what they must consider temporary occupation powers. After pleads of city authorities and students the university is reopened under a Czechoslovak supervision, but only till the end of the summer semester. It is then officially dissolved and simultaneously, a new Czechoslovak state university is built up, first the medical faculty, later also law and philosophy, the latter with special emphasis on training secondary school teachers. Most of the professors come from the Prague Charles University. Only the Hungarian law faculty remains in Bratislava for another two years, then it joins the rest of the Hungarian Elisabeth University that is first moved to Budapest and then to Pécs in 1923. So lets look at these developments under the three aspects mentioned above:

The practical usage of the Czechoslovak university for the new state was obviously the education of the future elite, especially at the philosophical and law faculty with an appropriate ideological mindset and naturally - in the state language. The language issue is first challenged by German parties, who demand the establishment of separate German chairs at the new Czechoslovak university. These demands go unheard - however, in the first semester, Czech medical lectures were regularly summarized in German, as a concession to the students' language problems.

Another concession to the students would be the decision, to let the Hungarian law faculty temporarily continue its work + thus enabling them to finish their studies according to the previous curriculum. However, until the unification of Czechoslovak legislation Hungarian civil law remains in effect, so the education of Hungarian jurists is also in the interests of the Czechoslovak state, at least until an own, Czechoslovak law faculty can be established.

This practical consideration obviously outweighs the symbolic aspect: Locating an Czechoslovak university in Bratislava enforces the new government's claim to the city, adds to Bratislava's status as unofficial Slovak capital, and also makes it a new center of the national elite, drawing Czechoslovak scientists and students and thus improving the national balance against the initial German-Hungarian majority. Analogically, allowing a Hungarian faculty to remain in Bratislava makes the Hungarian minority in the town very visible, might strengthen the Hungarian sense of togetherness and thus sends an ambiguous message. It comes as no surprise that this symbolic significance of the faculty is also pointed out by the Hungarian professors and the government officials in Budapest, when deciding about their continued work in Bratislava.

Dissolving the Hungarian university is also a matter of economic concern - assuming ownership of former Hungarian state property, the Prague government acquires important resources for its new Czechoslovak university - buildings, office equipment, medical laboratories and to a lesser extent also the existing library.

Looking at the university, the three aspects mentioned seem of equal importance. This seems similar in the case of the parishes, here possibly with a slightly heavier weight of economic considerations. In contrast, the city theatre offers an example, where issues of representation - theatre performances as part of national high culture - clearly outweigh the other two. However, I consider it important to keep in sight all 3 aspects + not misreading the institutions as a mere playground of nationalist ambition.

Having talked about possible motifs, naturally leads to the question of actors - who voices, who asserts these interests - is it state administration, city council, political parties, local or national associations, single citizens? Are we always faced with a clear Czechoslovak vs. Minorities front, or are there other alliances? And do the actors construct interrelations between the institutions?

These questions shall be illustrated at the example of the Protestant-Lutheran parish. In Bratislava, the religious groups are organized in autonomous communities, whose elected councils independently administer the community's assets and maintain elementary as well as secondary schools. The Lutheran Protestants comprise 12% of Bratislava's population, the majority is German-speaking, with both Hungarian and Slovak minorities. So in 1919 the protocol language is changed from Hungarian to German. According to Lutheran philosophy, services are traditionally conducted in all three languages.

The Bratislava community leads the German-Hungarian protest movement against the Slovak attempts to reorganize the parishes on now-Slovak territory in a separate Slovak Lutheran Church. However, this protest is not in accordance with the appeals of the Hungarian church authorities, who advocate the preservation of the pre-war organizational structures of the Hungary Church. Instead, Bratislava protest culminates in an attempt to disassociate the Bratislava parish from the emerging Slovak organization and unite with the German Protestant Church in the Czech lands.

Slovak community members increasingly speak up against the council's activities and also voice demands for more participation and language rights in the administration as well as more Slovak classes in the community schools. In a final compromise, the Bratislava community stays within the new Slovak church organization, but is amicably divided into a German-Hungarian and a quickly growing Slovak parish. Except for some minor disagreements, both parishes keep up cordial contact throughout the interwar period. So let's look at the actors involved:

It is notable that the state administration interferes little with internal community matters - besides preventing the affiliation of the Bratislava parish with the Bohemian-German church organization, the Slovak Ministry takes an interest mainly in school affairs and formal issues - like for example insisting that the parish replace its German-Hungarian stamp with a trilingual, later only Slovak-German version.

The main drive for the assertion of Slovak language rights and the final separation in a Slovak parish comes from leading figures of the Slovak church organization as well as the local Slovak parson and Slovak parish members. Among these, we find prominent figures of the Slovak national movement as well as men occupying high posts in Czechoslovak state administration, e.g. two former Župans of Bratislava. Some of the Lutheran parish's leading figures - Slovaks and Germans alike - are also members of the city council, thus taking an interest into theatre and university affairs. Some members are also further engaged into theatre matters, as members of the Slovak resp. German theatre association.

On first sight, we can observe of a clear-cut front of Slovaks vs. Germans and Hungarians. However, a closer look, especially in the question of community schools, reveals also German-Hungarian tensions.

Unlike the Lutheran parish, the other examples show a much higher degree of state intervention. This is little surprising in the case of the university, a state institution - however, sources indicate that the first initiative for founding of a Czechoslovak institution came from Czech medical professors in Prague, and was only then taken up by the parliament and the Ministry of Education. Similarly, the initiative for founding a Slovak theatre company is a private one and the company remains a private enterprise throughout the inter-war period. But state administration supports the cause of the Slovak National Theatre and thus interferes with major decisions like the division of the theatre season and the choice of directors. In all three examples, we can observe a limited influence of other outside actors - in the case of the parishes bodies of church hierarchy, in the case of university and theatre voluntary associations of students or theatre clubs.

In a town of 90' inhabitants, the personal links between institutions, municipality and state administration are not surprising and can be found with the other examples as well. Especially striking is the engagement of high-ranking government officials in the SNT Association. The interlinkage is probably weakest at the university, as most of the professors arrive as outsiders from Prague. However, the university students soon come to play an important role in the struggles for the city theatre.

The Lutheran parish is the only institution, where the process of Slovakization can be framed in the straightforward Slovak vs. German-Hungarian pattern. Already the example of the new university - a Czechoslovak state university - will have triggered the question, if Bratislava is really undergoing a process of Slovakization - or rather Czechoslovakization?

This prominent question shall be deepened at the case of my third example institution - the city theatre: Unlike the Czechs who have already built their National Theatre under Austrian rule, the Slovaks have several amateur ensembles but no professional theatre company. Thus it is a matter of national pride and cultural self-determination to create such an ensemble and secure him the representative stage of the new capital. Having organized several Czech guest performances throughout the first months of 1919, the Ministry Plenipotentiary for Slovakia finally organizes a Czech company to play in Bratislava as the Slovak National Theatre. The Bratislava theatre is municipal property, but the city council's claims to respective contracting rights are overruled by the ministry: German and Hungarian theatre is not banned from the stage altogether, but despite energetic protests of the minorities the division of the season is shifted more and more in favor of the Slovak company. Already in 1921/22 the SNT occupies the 8 months main season, while the German and Hungarian ensembles are left with 6 weeks each in the unfavorable summer period.

Theatre is considered an important instrument of national education - to reverse the effects of cultural Magyarization among the Slovaks, and also to promote knowledge of and sympathy for the Czechoslovak culture among the minorities. Thus the initial absence of the minorities from Slovak performances is perceived as a political boycott. Only in the mid-twenties the SNT gains popularity among the minorities as well - by improving the quality of the performances and also making repertoire concessions - playing more operas and also German + Hungarian authors. On the other hand, the minority theatres increasingly stage the works of Czech, and to a lesser degree also Slovak authors - it is left to speculation, whether motivated by anticipatory obedience or a sincere interest in Czechoslovak culture.

The struggle with the minorities over the theatre season quiets down in the mid-1920s, however, the Slovak National Theatre is facing increasing criticism from Slovak nationalists, who point out the mismatch of name and content: Due to the lack of a Slovak ensemble or even a sufficient number of Slovak actors and art directors, the SNT is run by a Czech ensemble, playing almost entirely in Czech language, besides the international standards focusing on Czech drama, honoring public holidays with Czech opera gala performances.

Karol Sidor, the editor-in-chief of the Slovak People's Party's newspaper "Slovák", launches an increasingly aggressive press campaign, claiming that the slow progress of Slovakization is an intentional act of Czechoslovak - or simply Czech - cultural imperialism. Slovak nationalists demand that the SNT be a truly Slovak one - with Slovak director and staff, cultivating the works of Slovak dramatists and playing the international repertoire in Slovak translation. After all - if Russian, French, Polish and of course also Czech National Theatres play each in the language of the nation represented - why should the SNT be different? Furthermore, they claim higher state subsidies and with the upcoming administrative reform of 1928 they demand, that the SNT be turned into a public institution under Slovak county administration. In 1924, the staging of "Žižka's death" - a piece by the Czech playwright Jirásek supposedly offending Slovak national feelings and staged on a day, that was intended to celebrate the birthday of a Slovak dramatist - gives rise to the biggest scandal of inter-war theatre life: Activists of the Slovak People's Party together with university students disturb the performance with a violent demonstration, whistling, throwing stink bombs and starting a quarrel with the "Czechoslovak" audience.

Under such pressure, state officials and theatre directors increasingly emphasize their desire for change and stress the respective achievements, but simultaneously stress the lack of capable Slovak actors and appropriate dramatic works - things would simply need more time. Sources do not show public and explicit endorsements for a Czechoslovak character of the theatre, however, there are a few references to the theatre's mission of furthering Czech-Slovak understanding (Masaryk 1928) and occasionally official correspondence betrays the fear, that under Slovak-nationalist control, Czech drama would be eliminated from the stage - clearly an undesired development. The government-friendly press does not present a compelling vision of a Czechoslovak theatre either, but limits itself to criticize Slovak nationalist claims for being counter-productive and scaring off the audience.

Just like the theatre, also the university is a target of Slovak nationalist critique - again in the newspaper "Slovák", but also and increasingly from the part of the university students. They demand that the language of administration and instruction be Slovak and not Czech and call for Slovak teaching staff. The fact that some of the Czech professors openly voice their support for the Czechoslovakist state ideology - namely the historians Vaclav Chaloupecký and Albert Pražák - further aggravates the conflict, which remains unsolved throughout the inter-war period.

So for the inter-war period it would be more fitting to speak of a Czechoslovakization process. A comparison of the pace and extent of institutional change, enables us to draw first conclusions as to whether this Czechoslovakization of Bratislava can be considered an effect of the internally-driven change of its institutions or of a coherent 'nationalization policy' of the state administration.

In the early months of 1919, Czechoslovak state administration starts out in a town with an unwelcoming, if not openly hostile German and Hungarian majority. While there is no ready agenda for "Slovakization", the case-by-case decisions of the administrative bodies show - and at times explicitly state - a coherent interest to assert Slovak resp. Czechoslovak presence in the city.

Bound by democratic standards and international treaties on minority protection, Czechoslovak legislation lays out the basic principles for an institution's existence and operation. Further administrative engagement and thus also the speed and thoroughness of institutional change depend both on the legal status of the institution as well as its importance under practical and representative aspects: The slowest and most tedious progress of Slovakization is within the parishes, autonomous bodies that attract little state interest - it is fastest and most thorough with the university, a state institution of high practical and representative importance.

It is interesting to observe that the initial drive for Slovakization comes usually not from the state but other actors - insiders of the existing institution or stakeholders of the new institution to be created. This is possibly due to revolutionary situation when state administration is still under construction. In the following, government support is most notably restricted by budget considerations - the Czechoslovak university is set up, but receives little funds in comparison to the second new university in Brno, the SNT is kept a private enterprise with chronically low subsidies.

It is important to note, that the Czechoslovak claim to Bratislava is not an exclusive one but rather the attempt to enforce the "appropriate balance" of state-nation and minorities in Bratislava, in practical aspects of daily life, representation and economic power. And looking at inter-war Bratislava, this attempt is successful:

The Golden Book of Bratislava, issued in 1928 on occasion of the 10th anniversary of the CSR, offers a fitting metaphor: "let the three colours of our national flag, that is flying from the town hall during our public holidays, be a symbol of the peaceful cohabitation of the three main nationalities living in this city...[J.J.Skalský]"

Germans and Hungarians settle into their minority position under the Czechoslovak flag... and the conflict potential remains with the third nationality, the "Czechoslovaks" themselves. Election campaign of jun1938 shows this nicely: While governing parties proudly proclaim "Yes, Bratislava is Czechoslovak, we're the boss here", the Slovak nationalists still are unsatisfied & demand: "We want a Slovak Bratislava"!