

History of Slovakia



The area of Slovakia was inhabited since older stone age. This is documented by numerous findings like the skull of a Neanderthal man in Gánovce in the East of Slovakia and another one close to Šaľa nad Váhom in the Southwest, or the Venus from Moravany – a sample of Palaeolithic art. For a long period of time the region had been an area where different cultures met and interacted and it managed to resist raids from Huns, Avars, old Hungarians and Germanic tribes.

For millennia had the land in the Carpathian arc, wide open to Danube plains in the South, been an area where cultures from the South, the North, the East and the West met. At the turn of the centuries namely, in the first centuries after Christ, Limes Romanus, the border of Roman Empire reached the southern borders of Slovakia. Great invasions and raids from the East (Huns, Avars, old Hungarians) used to come to an end in the plains of the Danube. Line that now forms Western borders of the current Slovakia had been under pressure of Germanic tribes. Vienna, capital of Austria, that had been a capital of Habsburg Empire for centuries, is within the sight from the Bratislava castle.

Various political and cultural influences, struggles for gaining the control over the Carpathian Basin had a lasting influence on the fate of Slovakia. Slovak history, as well as the country itself, was little known abroad for a long time, being "hidden" in the histories of other, larger state units. The state tradition of Slavic inhabitants, the ancestors of today's Slovaks is recorded already in the 7th century, when in the fight against nomadic Avars, Sam's Empire existed for a short period of time. In the 9th century, the Great Moravian Empire covered the territory of Slovakia and its neighbouring areas.

During this period, Christianity begins to spread and the literature in the Slavic language is written for the first time. Great Moravian Empire was constantly struggling against Frank's Empire, penetrating into the area around Danube from the West. It perished under the raids of current Hungarians' ancestors, who came to this area at the beginning of 10th century. Until 1918, Slovakia was a part of Hungarian kingdom and together with this kingdom a part of the Habsburg monarchy since the 16th century.

Medieval Slovakia was a developed country. This is documented by numerous Gothic cathedrals, fortifications, town halls and bourgeois houses in the rich merchandise towns. These towns had a legal system that was also valid in the countries of West Europe. They profited from wine-growing, international trade and mining. The goldmines in Kremnica long belonged to the richest in Europe. Gold ducats of Kremnica have been cast in its mints ever since the year 1335. Also silver was mined in Kremnica in large amounts. In the 16th and 17th century, Slovak copper dominated the European market.

The economic boom, reflected also in the culture and scholarship was slowed down by the expansion of Ottoman Turks for hundred-and-fifty years. The borders of Ottoman Empire reached to the southern part of Slovakia from the defeat of Hungarian armies by Mohac in 1526 until the defeat of Turks near Vienna in 1683. State of a kind of "cold war", interrupted by direct conflicts, raids and devastation was complicated by religious struggles between Catholics

and Protestants and repeated rebellions of Hungarian nobility against the Habsburg family. One of the consequences of these "lost centuries" was that Slovakia started to fall behind the Western Europe.

After driving the Turks from Hungary, country started to restore under the rule of Maria Theresia /1740 - 1780/ and her son Josef II. Number of economic and social reforms made the status of farmers and townsmen easier and removed the worst forms of Protestant discrimination. School reforms improved the educational system. Since the end of 18th century, first manufactures are established and iron industry develops greatly. The first railway was built in 1846, the first steamship reached the shore of Bratislava already in 1818. In the 19th century first banks, insurance and stock companies came into existence. In the end of the 19th century all elements of the modern civil society already existed - political parties, labour unions, different associations, daily press and magazines, a dense network of secondary and higher schools. This modernisation was fast enough to keep the country in contact with the most developed European countries but could not overcome the historically arisen handicap.

Modernisation of Hungary and Slovakia in it was slowed down and deformed by nationality problems. Hungary was a multinational country, however its ruling elites, that were of Hungarian ethnicity tried to assimilate large Slovak, Romanian, German, Serbian and Ruthenian minorities in their struggle with the Habsburgs. This tendency inevitably led to conflicts. In the 1848-49 revolution, after Hungarians refused to recognise Slovak equality of rights, Slovak national movement representatives led by Ľudovít Štúr, defended themselves with arms in their hands.

The policy of Hungarianisation, liquidation of Slovak schools and associations were all obstacles of further modernization and social development of citizens with other than Hungarian ethnicity. Result of this continuing conflict came in declaration of independence from Hungary and affiliation to originating Czechoslovakia, made by Slovak National Council on October 30, 1918, the time when First World War was about to end and the defeated monarchy was falling apart.

Military legions of Czechs and Slovaks who were fighting on the side of the Treaty in Russia, France and Italy against Germany and Austria-Hungary played an important role in formation of the new state. Slovak general Rastislav Štefánik was considered to be one of the founders of the state and still belongs to the most respected personalities of Slovak history. During the period 1918 - 1938 Czechoslovak Republic was the only Central European state, in which the parliamentary democracy was preserved. In 1938 Czechoslovakia became a victim of the Munich's Treaty signed by the world powers, which enabled Hitler to occupy the frontier areas and eventually subdue whole of the country. Southern parts of Slovakia were occupied by Hungary in November 1938, a part of the northern Slovakia by Poland and the suburbs of Bratislava by Germany. In March 1939 Hitler entered Prague and in the territory of Slovakia the Slovak Republic was founded.

Slovak Republic was controlled by the Nazi Germany, took part in the war on its side. Many Slovaks rejected the German hegemony, the anti-democratic, anti-Semitic policy of the government. They entered the foreign Czechoslovak legions that took part in the war on the side of the Allies in France, North Africa, in the battle for England and also in the territory of Soviet Union. On August 29, 1944 anti-German uprising broke out. The army of over 60.000 men defended central Slovakia for two months.

After the Second World War Slovakia, together with the re-created Czechoslovakian Republic became a part of block under Soviet influence. Even though the Communists won only 30% of votes in the 1946 elections in Slovakia, the dominion of the left wing in western parts of the state enabled them to break down the resistance of Democrats. After the coup in February 1948, the communist dictatorship was introduced and lasted for 41 years. A sigh of relief that restored the hope for a change was the reform movement in 1968, embodied by a significant Slovak politician Alexander Dubček. His "socialism with a human face" was smashed the Soviet tanks in August 1968. It was apparent that the liberation of the country would be possible only together with the other subdued states and after the changes in the Soviet Union itself.

In November 1989 a massive folk movement that was in Slovak part of the country organised by public initiative „Public against Violence" smashed the communist dictatorship. The country's task was to return to its historical traditions: to the parliamentary democracy, liberal trade economy. Another task was to solve the position of Slovakia in the state.

Since the foundation of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia exerted to create such a system, that would take into account its individual features and demands. These efforts seemed to succeed several times before and also after the war, but it always came to recovery of the old centralised regime. Long confrontations and discussions which started in 1989 finally ended in 1992 with an agreement on a peaceful separation of the state, which was also voted for in common Czech-Slovak parliament in Prague. On the 1st January 1993 a new independent Czech and Slovak Republic came to existence. A new chapter in the history of Slovakia started. In this chapter the country that was for thousands of years an inseparable part of the European civilisation and history, finally exists under its own name and with its own, unshared responsibility.