
Marxism and the National Question in Slovenia before 1914

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The Slovenes, a South Slav people, before 1914 were contained within the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. They were one of the smaller nations, numbering about 1,200,000. Their lands were of strategic significance, lying directly across the communications routes from both Vienna and Budapest to Trieste. The combined factors of numerical weakness, strategic location, and Hapsburg determination to maintain the integrity of the Empire made it almost inconceivable that the Slovenes might ever become independent. They were a highly nationalistic people, however, and by the middle of the nineteenth century sought relief from Austro-German domination. Their aspirations were couched in the form of demands for cultural and political autonomy within the Empire.

Among the advocates of autonomy were the social democrats. Theoretically Marxists should have had no interest in nationalism; reality dictated that they, like any other powerseekers, develop a national program. Their program represents a particularly clear-cut example of the influence of local political environment on the evolution of policy of a Marxist party. The purpose of this paper is to examine (1) the characteristic approach of Slovenes to the national question; (2) the emphasis of social democrats on parliamentary reform; (3) the synthesis of those elements which comprised the Slovenian SD national program; and (4) the fate of that program when introduced into the cockpit of politics.

The approach of Slovenes to the national question was conditioned by the fact that they were an "unhistorical" people; that is, unlike the Czechs and Croats, they had no history as a separate political entity which might afford a legal precedent for claims to political autonomy. They could therefore justify their demands only by their cultural distinctiveness. Cultural nationalism appeared in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, was strengthened in reaction to attempts at enforced Germanization in mid-century, and was reinforced by the intermingling of the Slovenes with Germans and Italians. Slovenes were in a majority only in the crownland of Carniola; elsewhere they were threatened with absorption by other, larger nations. This led Slovene intellectuals to redouble their efforts to cultivate national pride and distinctiveness.

Slovenian political associations were forbidden by the Hapsburg government throughout most of the nineteenth century, but the government could not oppose attempts at self-improvement. The principal vehicles for national self-expression therefore were cultural associations. These first took the form of publishing associations, and later of reading-rooms (*čitaonice*), over sixty of which were founded in the decade after 1861. These activities made the Slovenes the most literate of South Slav peoples.¹ In 1868 the laws of the Empire were relaxed to permit the formation of nonpolitical associations, which in Slovenia took the form of "enlightenment" (*izobraževalno*) associations. These promoted native drama, music, and dance, all of nationalistic content. They also afforded a cover for political activity, provisions of the law notwithstanding. Social de-

mocracy in Slovenia dates from the founding of the Labor Cultural Association in Ljubljana on 28 November 1869.² Thus no people in Europe were more self-consciously "cultured" than the Slovenes, and they customarily expressed their political aspirations in cultural terms.

This cultural nationalism affected Slovene thought with respect to reform of the Austrian constitution. Reform was needed in two respects. First, the boundaries of the old crownlands of the Hapsburg monarchy had little relation to ethnic distributions. The minorities therefore sought a reform which would allow a better representation of their national interests. Second, only a part of the citizenry was enfranchised, and that by property qualification on an unequal basis. The electors were divided into classes of voters, or curiae, so arranged as to weight representation in favor of propertied and urban interests. Those interests were then predominantly German, so that here too the national question arose.

Slovene proposals for constitutional reform at first urged that the crownland boundaries be redrawn to conform to linguistic frontiers, each nation having its own state. Those states should then comprise a federal union. A Slovene, M. Kaučič, introduced a program of ethnic federalism into the Kremsier Parliament in 1848. The distinguished Czech historian Francis Palacky took up the idea and further elaborated it.³ A defect of the plan was that it was impossible to draw boundaries that would not leave minorities within each crownland. In 1865 a group of Slovene political leaders embodied similar ideas in the Maribor Program, a complex plan for obtaining local autonomy; a balance of representation by nations in mixed regions; and representation by nations in the central diet.⁴ Slovenes proposed similar plans repeatedly thereafter.

Austrian social democrats at first tried to avoid the national question, but from the earliest appearance of SD activity in Austria in the 1860's the Marxists were among the most active agitators for universal and equal suffrage and other civil rights. A partial reform was achieved in 1896 which provided for universal though still unequal suffrage. SD agitation contributed toward achievement of that reform, and it was largely due to their efforts that universal and equal suffrage was introduced in 1907. The reforms applied only to the central diet; the curia system persisted in the crownland diets until the collapse of the Empire in 1918.

The partial parliamentary reform of 1896 permitted the membership of the Austrian SDP to devote more of its attention to national tensions within its own ranks. In that year the party had to be reorganized as a federation of national SD parties, one of which was the "Yugoslav" (Slovenian) SDP. That name was taken in the hope (unfulfilled) that it might in time embrace all South Slav SD's. At the same time there was change in the nature of its leadership. Until about 1890 the Slovene SD's had been led by skilled craftsmen; thereafter leadership passed into the hands of young university-trained intellectuals. The writer and literary critic, Ethin Kristan, was secretary of the party until 1913, and his colleagues were of the same orientation. Although it was the smallest of the South Slav SD parties, the Slovenian SDP had by far the largest number of publications devoted to discussions of Marxist theory. Thus the leaders of the Slovenian SD's after 1896 were drawn from the social group who traditionally were the high priests of Slovenian cultural nationalism; they had learned political theory in the universities; they acquired political experience by participating in SD agitation. They were well qualified to play a significant role in the Brünn congress of the Austrian SDP (1899), at which the party adopted a new and more realistic national program.

The national program adopted by the Austrian SDP at its founding congress in 1898-99 had been a mild one, merely containing a condemnation of the exploitation of one nation by another.⁵ The Austrian SDP delegates in the diet after 1896 found themselves handicapped by this and

urged adoption of a stronger program.⁸ At the Brünn Congress the central party executive proposed a resolution demanding that Austria be reorganized into a federation of national states having autonomy in the conduct of local affairs. The minorities should be protected by a federal law.⁹ This was essentially the ethnic federalism program of 1848, and suffered from the same defects.

The Slovenian SD's proposed a resolution of their own with Etbin Kristan acting as spokesman for it. They proposed that territorial boundaries have only a purely administrative significance. In all other respects the political unit should be the nation. Each person should declare his nationality, and thereafter participate in cultural and political affairs as a member of his autonomous and self-administered nation without regard to place of residence.⁸ This program of cultural extraterritoriality would result in having a diet comprised of national curiae rather than curiae defined by economic criteria.

The Slovenian SD's referred to that as a program of "cultural autonomy," and their writings suggested that it was original with them. Contemporary Yugoslav historians convey the same impression. The claim to originality is as well justified as most such claims. The program of cultural autonomy was a social invention, and like all inventions was the product of a creative synthesis of existing elements. Kristan's contribution was to synthesize Slovene cultural nationalism, social democratic ideas regarding parliamentary reform, and the peculiar Austrian institution of curiae. The elements were there for anyone to combine. As so often happens in such cases, the invention had recently been put forward by another. One "Synopticus" (Karl Renner) in a pamphlet published in 1899 proposed essentially the same program, which he called "personal autonomy."⁹ That pamphlet was known to the delegates at the Brünn Congress, and Kristan was forced to defend the Slovene claims to originality.¹⁰

Kristan's defense of his own program was not very well received. Its cool reception may have been partly due to the defeatist tone of his address. The most effective defense of the idea of cultural autonomy was made by Dr. Wilhelm Ellenbogen, who based his address on Renner's pamphlet.¹¹ Support for that concept was strong enough to impel the formation of a committee to work out a compromise; Kristan was a member of the committee. The compromise resolution, known thereafter as the "Brünn Program," was essentially that of the central executive. It was still based on territorial-national rather than cultural-national autonomy. Only minor concessions were made to the Kristan-Renner viewpoint.¹²

Neither Renner nor the Slovenian SD's ever really accepted the resolution. Renner went on fully to elaborate the idea of personal autonomy for which he is well known. The Slovenes also continued to develop the idea of cultural autonomy, which they soon applied to all of the South Slavs. They even included the Bulgarians, who were usually left out of account by other South Slav SD's. The Slovenian SD's dreamed of a common South Slav SD movement of which they should be the leaders. They believed it possible to develop a common South Slav language, script, literature, and culture; and they fervently believed that nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of the full national development of every people. Dr. Henrik Tuma in his *Jugoslovenska ideja i Slovenci* (The Yugoslav Idea and the Slovenes) (1907) proposed the formation of a common South Slav organization based on cooperative economics and democratic politics. He further proposed that the South Slavs all adopt the Latin orthography as a step toward developing a common culture.¹³ Kristan in the 1907 congress of the Slovenian SDP repeated the same ideas, saying:

The Yugoslav question is really not political, not the question of the establishment of a Yugoslav state, not a question of the Karadjordjevic or the Coburg dynasty, but above all it is a question of the common language, the common literature of all South Slavs, the present disunity of which is an obstacle to their own growth and the development of their entire culture, and which if linguistically united would easily become the most important factor of culture."

It must be mentioned here that the program of cultural autonomy or an extraterritorial basis expressed the central tendency of thought of the Slovenian SD's, from which there were individual deviations. Dr. Anton Dermota, for example, considered the South Slav question to be more political, economic, and social than cultural." Even a cultural solution might create as many problems as it solved; as early as 1899 Albin Prepeluh (Abditus) had observed that while it would be better for all South Slav peoples to be united in one state, "It seems to me that if the Yugoslavs today were to be united in one group, that the national chauvinism of that 'whole' would progressively bite off more and more, even as Austria."²⁴ With our advantage of being able to exercise 20:20 hindsight we can say that Prepeluh's caution was justified; but at the time he might well have been thought unduly pessimistic.

Slovenian nationalism became more chauvinistic after 1907. A sign of the times was that a youth movement inspired by revolutionary nationalism made its appearance. The movement was centered among the Slovenian students of the Ljubljana gymnasium. On 14 September 1908, rioting broke out which resulted in two dead and others wounded. From 1910 those youth agitated for the formation of a South Slav state outside of the Empire; by 1911 they were in communication with the Serbian *Narodna odbrana* (National Defense), a nationalistic secret society which already had a sinister reputation." In 1912 the Christian Socialist Political party, the Slovenian People's Party, agreed with the Croatian Party of Pure Right on a policy of close collaboration."²⁵ The temper of the times called for a program of territorial unification, if necessary by the use of violence.

The Slovenian SD's did not at first abandon their central emphasis on cultural nationalism, but they began to attach more importance to territorial matters. That became evident in the aftermath of the annexation of Bosnia. The Slovenian SD's received the news rather passively; then they saw possibilities of assuming a leading role in the South Slav SD movement. They called a Yugoslav Social Democratic Conference in Ljubljana for 21-22 November 1909, which they intended to be a sort of "little International." They invited attendance of all south Slav SD parties."²⁶ The hopes of the Slovenian SD's were not realized. The Bulgarians did not attend, and the Serbian SDP sent its secretary, Dmitrije Tucovic, only as an "observer." The abstention of the Serbian SDP robbed the conference of much of a chance of effectiveness, since the national question could then be considered only as an internal affair of the Austro-Hungarian empire."²⁷

The formal product of the conference was the "Tivoli Resolution," named for the hotel in which the conference was held. The resolution embodied essentially the cultural-nationalist position of the Slovenian SD's. It stated that the South Slavs of Austria-Hungary sought as a *final* goal the unification of all South Slavs (not specifying those of the empire alone), without regard to difference of name, faith, script, or language or dialect, into a single cultural-autonomous state within a democratic federation of nations. As an interim measure the SD's resolved to work within the framework of existing political institutions of the Empire "for its complete democratization in all of its national-political and state bodies."²⁸ The resolution also provided for a Yugoslav Socialist Bureau to coordinate the activities of all South Slav SDP's."²⁹ The wording of the resolution was deliberately vague in order to avoid charges of high treason. Even so the resolution hardly afforded an outline of a workable political program.

It was the Serbian SDP rather than the Slovenian that profited by the rising national tension. The Serbian party became interested in the national question only at the time of the Annexation crisis. As war clouds gathered thereafter its firebrand leader, Dmitrije Tucović, came to devote most of his attention to the national question. The Serbian SDP called its own Balkan Social Democratic Conference in Belgrade for January, 1910.²² All South Slav SDP's attended it; and with that the Slovenian SD's lost whatever chance they might have had to play a leading role outside their own lands with respect to the national question. This episode constitutes an early example of the party imperialism among Marxists which is now familiar, but was then scarcely to be expected.

Within the Slovenian SD movement itself, however, the evolution toward substitution of territorial for cultural autonomy continued, and was completed by 1913. Etbin Kristan by then had emigrated to the United States. The fullest expression of the new line on the national question was made by Ivan Cankar, the most distinguished Slovenian poet and playwright of his day, who had been a leading social democrat since 1907. On 12 April 1913 he made a speech before the society *Vzajemnost* (Solidarity) in Ljubljana. The influence of the old tradition of cultural nationalism was still evident in that he saw the four South Slav peoples as being closely related culturally, and entitled to live together in a league of South Slav states if they so desired. He strongly condemned the Austrian government for preventing this by absolutism in Croatia, trials for high treason in Dalmatia, and forced Germanization in Slovenia. But, said Cankar, "A Yugoslav question in a cultural or even language sense for me simply does not exist." For him, the problem was a purely political one.²³ Because of the inflammatory nature of the speech the governor of Carniola had Cankar indicted for high treason and ordered the dissolution of the society *Vzajemnost*. So ended the advocacy by the Slovenian SD's of a cultural-national solution to the national question.

It is evident that the social and political environment in Slovenia in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth afforded certain elements that lent themselves well to the formation of a distinctive national program. The emphasis on cultural manifestations of nationalism was characteristic of Slovenians in general. The curia system had accustomed the Slovenes to think in terms of classifying the inhabitants of the Empire for political purposes; classification by nation can easily be substituted (at least in thought) for classification by economic criteria. Applied Marxism in the form of social democracy characteristically emphasized both parliamentary reform and internationalism. The Slovenian SD's made a creative synthesis of these elements, resulting in the invention of a characteristically Slovenian social democratic program of cultural-national autonomy on an extraterritorial basis within a multinational state. Frustrated in their independent efforts toward this solution, after 1900 they broadened their program to include all South Slavs in their scheme; at that point something of a territorial aspect was reintroduced into their program. The Slovenian SD's took the opportunity afforded by the Bosnian annexation crisis to seek a commanding position among the South Slav SD's. The effort was abortive, the tougher-minded Serbian SD's taking the lead away from them. That marked the end of the creative efforts of the Slovenian SD's in the national field. By 1913 the increasingly chauvinistic tone of Slovenian nationalism had compelled the SD's to join those who favored the formation of a South Slav state, that is, to seek a territorial rather than a cultural-autonomous solution to the national question.

The efforts of the Slovenian SD's were not significant in terms of power politics, but were interesting as an example of the exercise of the faculties of creative synthesis, of invention, in the application of social doctrine to an important political problem in their particular socio-political environment.

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