

# The many faces of Tiso

Michael Ivory reviews a defining book about the infamous priest and politician who still stirs up controversy

**Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia**  
James Mace Ward, Cornell University Press 2013

Few historical figures divide opinion so sharply as Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), the priest and politician who assisted in the final break-up of pre-war Czechoslovakia, and who led the short-lived Slovak State that rose from its ruins.

Even in 2013 an attempt by presidential candidate Jan Carnogurský to absolve Tiso from the label “clericofascist” provoked bitter controversy on the part of those who continue to regard the former parish priest as a Nazi puppet and anti-Semite, whose personal responsibility for Slovakia’s part in the Holocaust is undeniable. Their ideological opponents play down such issues, preferring to stress Tiso’s achievement in creating a nominally independent state for his fellow-Slovaks, regarding it as a precedent for the republic that this year celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Hitherto, a lack of sources in

English has made it difficult for non-Slovak speakers to evaluate such claims and form a balanced judgement. It is probably safe to say that most of those in the West who have even heard of Tiso would place him among the villains of 20th century history, guilty as charged by the postwar Czechoslovak court of treason, if not necessarily deserving of his botched execution.

This new study by an American specialist in central European history is most welcome in that it permits a more nuanced view to be formed. Tiso emerges as a somewhat complex, even contradictory figure. He was firstly an ardent servant of his church in the Kingdom of Hungary, possibly with Magyarone tendencies and almost certainly destined for a bishopric.

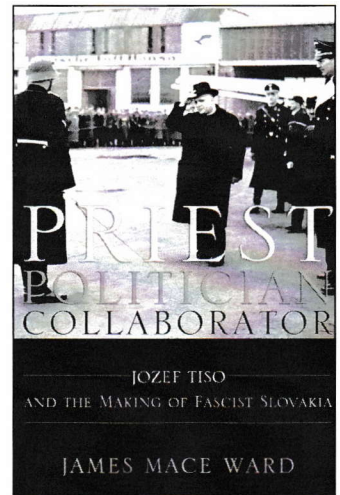
Then after 1919 he played the part of an artful Slovak nationalist politician prepared to work within the framework of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Lastly he was the founder of the Slovak State, cleverly – perhaps too cleverly – navigating a course between the demands of the Third Reich, occasional reproaches from his own church, the efforts of home-grown

totalitarians such as Vojtěch Tuka to establish a local version of Nazism, and the interests of his fellow-Slovaks as he saw them.

Mace Ward absolves Tiso from the charge of opportunism, judging him to be a man of principle albeit with “an almost epic ability to deny the consequences of his own actions”. In the end the challenges Tiso faced were insuperable; even though he was able to walk the streets of Bratislava without a security guard, never was the entirety of the Slovak population behind him, as support for the 1944 National Uprising was to prove.

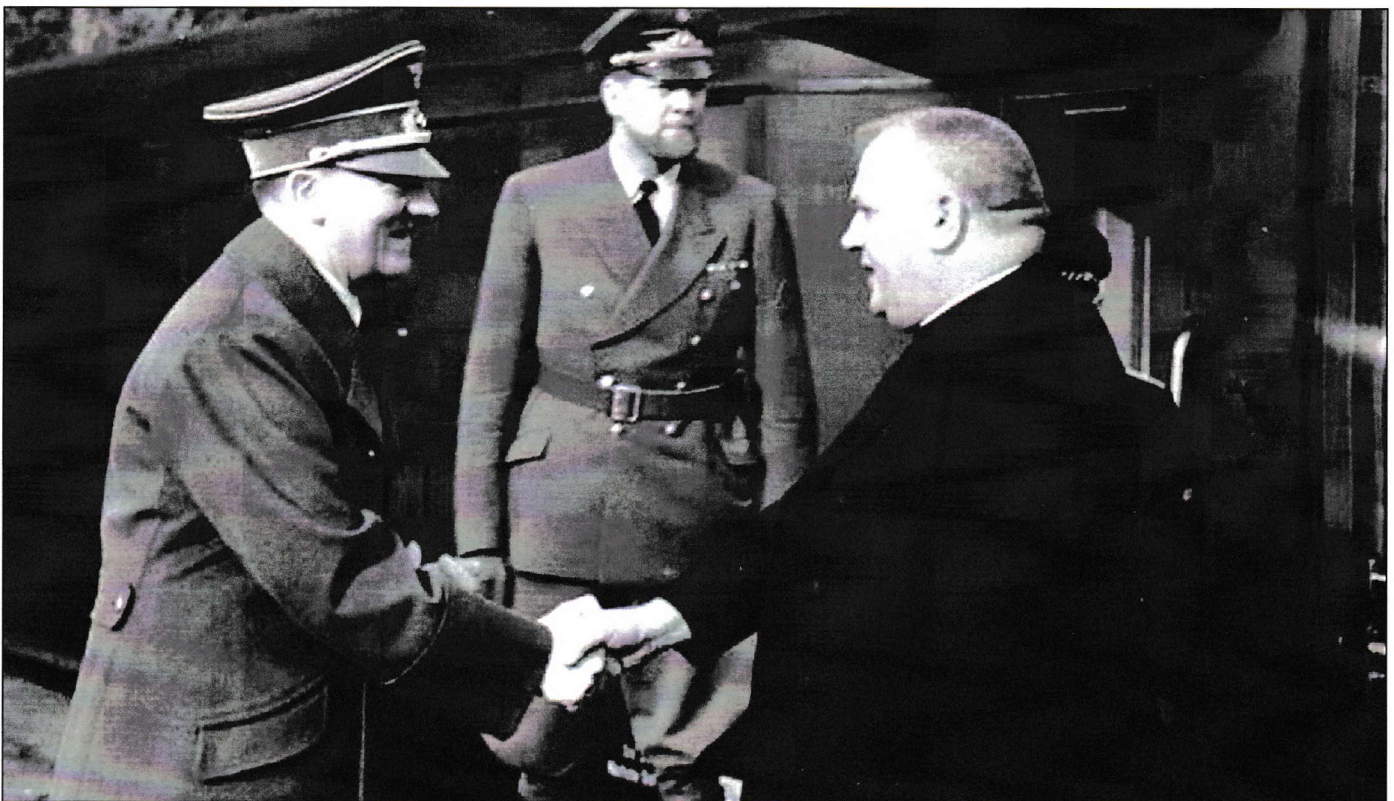
After the defeat of the SNP, Tiso became an almost pathetic figure, as revealed in a pair of famous and eloquent photographs reproduced in this book. One shows him in late 1944, bestowing a decoration on a particularly villainous-looking German soldier in the town square of Banská Bystrica, the other depicts him in 1945, stony-faced and manacled on his way to face trial.

Perhaps the most fascinating section of the book is its penultimate chapter “Losing Battles 1944-2011”. In it Mace Ward reviews how his subject



has remained the focus of controversy, starting with his trial, a textbook example of political theatre, via the nationalistic polemics of his former colleagues in exile, to the wrangles of more recent times alluded to above, notably between the liberal historians of Bratislava’s Historical Institute and the ‘ultras’ of the Slovak National Party and the Matica Slovenska.

Mace’s even-handed account of the man who for good or ill took on the title of ‘Vudca’ (führer) is indispensable to everyone interested in the story of modern Slovakia; impeccably researched and densely written, it is unlikely to be surpassed.



Adolf Hitler and Jozef Tiso in Berlin, pictured on March 13, 1939