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Ustaša's Brother Frenemies: Slovak Minority in the Independent State of Croatia

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Abstract

This article examines the position of the Slovak minority in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during the Second World War, focusing on the tension between official discourses of interstate friendship and local experiences of insecurity. Drawing on extensive archival sources, including diplomatic correspondence and administrative and security reports, it shows how ethnic Slovaks were formally portrayed as members of a friendly nation while remaining exposed to administrative exclusion, stigmatization, and violence in peripheral regions. Inspired by selected insights from Brubaker, Wimmer, and Kalyvas — used as heuristic points of reference rather than deductive frameworks — the article conceptualizes this ambivalent position as that of a “frenemy” minority: symbolically included yet structurally marginalized. It argues that the deterioration of the Slovak community's security from 1942 onward resulted from an uncoordinated syncretism of centrally implemented policies of ethnic exclusion and processes of state degradation, manifested in fragmented authority and the brutalization of local actors. By highlighting the gap between declared friendship and practical neglect, the article contributes to debates on minority governance under fascist rule and on the effects of weak state capacity and localized violence in wartime authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: Independent State of Croatia; Ustasha; Slovak minority; fascism

Introduction

The government of the Slovak State — a satellite of Hitler's Germany, established on 14 March 1939 as a by-product of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia¹ — publicly welcomed the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia on 10 April 1941. It regarded the state, known in historiography by the acronym NDH (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*), as a potential ally capable of strengthening its fragile international standing and, together with Romania, forming the basis of a regional alliance directed against Hungarian revisionism.² Yet the first months of the NDH's existence, however, revealed that the only consistently functioning element of the new regime was revolutionary violence, rapidly escalating into unprecedented terror.

Although the NDH displayed certain attributes of statehood — its own political and administrative institutions, army, and currency — the political reality quickly dispelled any illusions contained in its official designation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bratislava learned of the difficulties the new, according to Ustaša propaganda, “restored kingdom” faced from reports sent by members of the Slovak diplomatic mission, most notably Jozef Cieker, the envoy who served in Zagreb from November 1941 to February 1944. While the regimes of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party

(*Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana* — HSĽS) and the Croatian Ustaša shared common ideological foundations,³ cooperation between them was limited, occurring mainly in the cultural and military spheres, and — declining over time — in the economic sphere as well.⁴

One of the most significant factors contributing to the stagnation and gradual deterioration of intergovernmental relations was the NDH's minority policy toward ethnic Slovak communities settled in the eastern Croatian regions of Slavonia and Syrmia. The specific forms this policy assumed, together with its turbulent wartime dynamics, raise broader questions about the nature and escalation of Ustaša ethnic violence and its progressive brutalization. In this context, the article introduces a new analytical category of “*frenemies*,” which it seeks to substantiate empirically and incorporate into scholarly usage. In doing so, it intervenes in a growing body of scholarship that has drawn attention to the complex interplay of violence and minority governance in the NDH (Korb 2010; Kralj 2019; Roksandić 2019; Byford 2020; Jareb and Pavlaković 2020; Iordachi and Miljan 2023; Yeomans 2025).

Background, Aims, and Methodology

When General Slavko Kvaternik announced Croatia's independence over the radio, the Slovak government internally reacted with neutrality, hesitation, and a degree of embarrassment. The NDH came into being solely because of the military destruction of Yugoslavia and on the basis of an agreement between Adolf Hitler and Ante Pavelić, whose revolutionary Ustaša movement seized political power in the country after the Wehrmacht's occupation of Zagreb.⁵ From the perspective of state-building mythology, this was far from an ideal scenario: independence without even a semblance of formal legitimacy (proclaimed not by a parliament but guaranteed only by the boots of German soldiers), led by an organization that had never sought popular support in regular parliamentary elections and had gained notoriety solely through terrorist activities⁶ — all of this prompted skepticism in Bratislava toward the *Führer's* new Balkan project. Nevertheless, the Slovak State recognized the NDH almost immediately, and on 16 April 1941, President Jozef Tiso sent Pavelić a congratulatory telegram. In it, he expressed “our joy at the final victory of the Croatian liberation struggle” and likened it to the joy “we ourselves experienced two years ago.”⁷

Immediately after Slovakia's diplomatic recognition of Croatia on April 16, 1941, political circles began vying to underscore the “age-old fraternity” between Slovaks and Croats, united by similar destinies within former state entities and by the identical outcome of their national emancipation struggles — in the words of propaganda — “the resurrection of the national state.” (Rychlík and Perencević 2020, 279).

The Slovak press engaged in an intensive campaign highlighting the intersections of Slovak and Croatian history and figures who had supported their respective national causes: for example, Juraj Haulík, the first archbishop of Zagreb and a native of the Slovak city of Trnava; Štefan Moyzes, bishop of Banská Bystrica, professor at the Royal Academy in Zagreb, and member of the Hungarian Diet for the Croatian National Party; Josip Jelačić, Ban of Croatia, imperial Habsburg general, and key political-military actor of the 1848 revolutions who opposed the Hungarian revolutionary government; and Josip Juraj Strossmayer, bishop of Bosnia and Syrmia and advocate of Slavic nations within the Habsburg monarchy. Through these carefully curated historical references, the press constructed a narrative of cultural proximity and shared Slavic heritage, embodied in what was explicitly described as the “long-standing Slovak-Croatian friendship” (Záhorský 1941, 5–6), a formulation that blended notions of historical brotherhood with the language of contemporary political alignment and which, after the creation of the NDH, was expected to rise to a new level. The Slovak government naturally anticipated that, unlike Yugoslavia — which had received Slovakia's declaration of independence with marked reserve — Pavelić's cabinet would approach a fellow Slavic state identifying with Catholicism with sympathy, deploying a rhetoric of interstate friendship that was expected to translate into tolerant minority policies, and that this attitude would extend to the Slovak minority residing in the NDH (Rychlík 2016, 157).⁸

In this context, references to “brotherhood” functioned primarily as a cultural-historical metaphor rooted in narratives of Slavic mutuality, whereas “friendship” operated as a performative diplomatic language at the international level, without necessarily implying consistent protective practices toward minority communities.

In the early 1940s, the discourse of Slavic mutuality underwent a marked transformation in both the Slovak State and the Independent State of Croatia. Originally articulated in liberal and anti-imperial contexts of the nineteenth century and the interwar period — where it had been associated with cultural cooperation, self-determination, and resistance to imperial domination — it was stripped of its normative content and refunctionalized within an authoritarian political framework. In the bilateral relations between Bratislava and Zagreb, Slavic mutuality no longer served as a language of political equality or democratic solidarity, but rather as a symbolic resource legitimizing alliance politics within the fascist Axis and the exclusionary, anti-liberal agendas of both regimes. Detached from its earlier emancipatory meanings, the rhetoric of Slavic brotherhood thus became compatible with, and even supportive of, policies that contradicted its original ideological foundations.

This discursive emphasis on friendship and fraternity was not limited to isolated journalistic statements but became a recurring trope in Slovak public discourse following the establishment of the NDH. Newspaper commentaries and official statements repeatedly framed Croatian independence as the natural culmination of shared historical struggles and spiritual affinity, thereby embedding contemporary political alignment within a longer narrative of Slavic and Catholic solidarity. Such representations endowed the newly formed alliance with a sense of historical inevitability and moral legitimacy, while simultaneously depoliticizing the question of how this proclaimed friendship would materialize in concrete policies toward minority communities. The expectation that symbolic friendship would translate into tangible protection for the Slovak minority thus rested on a conflation of rhetorical convergence with political practice. The language of fraternity and interstate friendship suggested continuity between diplomatic recognition and minority governance, even though no explicit institutional mechanisms guaranteed such an outcome. This slippage between discourse and practice proved crucial: it shaped the initial optimism of Slovak political elites and minority representatives alike, while obscuring the fundamentally exclusionary logic that structured Ustaša ethnopolitics.

Against the backdrop of the NDH authorities’ policies toward the Slovak minority, this article examines the extent to which such expectations had any realistic foundation. It argues that the Slovak side’s romanticized immersion in the past of Slovak-Croatian mutuality — wrapped in the idea of Slavic brotherhood and a narrative of shared suffering (Záhorský 1941, 5–6) — had little chance of serving as a foundation for planning friendly bilateral relations that would, in turn, be reflected in the treatment of the Slovak minority in the NDH. Particular attention is paid to how the official rhetoric of friendship, politely reciprocated by the Ustaša authorities, clashed from the outset with a completely different prioritization. Amid a verbally declared — but never practically implemented — protection of the Slovak minority in the NDH, the study argues that, despite nominal friendship with the Slovak State, the Ustaše’s priorities were far narrower and far more chilling, focusing solely on consolidating domestic control. As early as April 1941, immediately before the fall of Belgrade, the *Poglavnik* signaled the defining features of the incoming Ustaša regime: violence, blood, and a revolutionary state that would not be for everyone.⁹

Closely connected to the vision of ethnic violence organized and safeguarded by the Ustaša regime was another of its defining features, which this study examines through the experience of the Slovak minority: the hypocritical binary of declaratory promises and a practical combination of incapacity and disinterest on the part of the power center toward the periphery and its population. From the current state of knowledge, the NDH was neither independent (in the sense of state sovereignty) nor exclusively ethnically Croatian, and, as the years following 1941 revealed, its very status as a state was questionable, too. The fragility of the statehood manifested most strikingly in the eastern parts of the NDH, where Pavelić’s regime failed to cope with security challenges and, in

effect, never gained full control over its own territory. The situation was particularly evident in regions inhabited by the Slovak minority, which, despite its loyalty to the Ustaše, faced multiple threats.

In this article, references to the NDH's state failure are grounded not in abstract typologies, but in contemporaneous administrative and diplomatic documentation. Reports by Slovak diplomatic representatives in Zagreb and in the eastern regions repeatedly describe the inability of central authorities to enforce decisions, discipline local security actors, or guarantee even minimal civilian protection. These sources document a systematic discrepancy between formal assurances issued by ministries in Zagreb and their non-implementation at the local level. Further evidence of degraded state capacity emerges from security reports describing the fragmentation of the chain of command, the coexistence of multiple armed actors, and the autonomous actions of local Ustaša units. Administrative paralysis — manifested in the prolonged non-approval of minority statutes and the non-enforceability of official decisions outside the capital — reinforced this pattern. State failure in the NDH thus appears as spatially uneven and situational, but nonetheless structurally consequential for minority governance. By 1942, what had been a largely localized partisan movement within the NDH had expanded into a mass phenomenon. The catastrophic security situation, which led to the loss of communication between Zagreb and the outlying regions, gave rise to a specific phenomenon that contemporary observers and later historiography have described as “wild Ustaše” (*divlji ustaše*), referring to locally operating units that acted with limited central control (Kralj 2019, 244). The removal of the top level of command shifted decision-making authority to local leaders, who operated with considerable autonomy and, in some cases, entirely outside the strategic control of the Ustaša leadership. This chronic chaos inevitably fed into the brutalization of purges aimed not only at Serbs, Jews, and Roma, but, as this article seeks to demonstrate, ultimately drew the Slovak minority into its spiral — despite the fact that the NDH's original program of indiscriminate violence did not target them. The devolution of authority, repeatedly noted in diplomatic correspondence, exemplifies the erosion of central state capacity rather than a centrally coordinated policy of repression.

While the Ustaša's ambivalence toward minorities has been noted by several scholars (see, e.g., Jelinek 1980b, Bartulin 2006), its “Janus-faced” policy toward the Slovak community represents, in many respects, a specific case. Ethnic Slovaks constituted a minority that posed no threat to the Ustaša state. Unlike ethnic Serbs, Jews, or Roma, they were not listed among the regime's declared enemies; unlike ethnic Germans or Italians, they did not enjoy privileged minority status arising from the NDH's subordination to the Fascist powers; unlike Bosnian Muslims, they were not considered part of the Croatian nation; and unlike ethnic Hungarians — who, like the Slovaks, lived in NDH territory — they were not under the “protective hand” of a revisionist state with territorial claims against the NDH.

On paper, therefore, the Slovaks posed a “trouble-free” minority, without the cause or capacity to form an oppositional force to the regime and, moreover, backed by the diplomacy of the formally independent Slovak State. They seemingly possessed every prerequisite for enjoying a comfortable position. Yet, as I argue in this article and substantiate through source-based evidence, the opposite was the case: although Pavelić's state did not apply genocidal strategies to the Slovak minority, its treatment sharply contradicted the ceremonial verbal assurances routinely expressed during interstate visits and at the diplomatic level. Ustaša leaders nominally stressed the warmest relations of friendship and understanding, promising the Slovak minority every support for unhindered national development and guarantees for the preservation of Slovak identity — particularly its culture and language. Yet at the decisive juncture, these promises were unfulfilled, and their actions — described and analyzed herein — bore the hallmarks of deliberate neglect, and at times open hostility, comparable to the regime's drastic approach toward other aforementioned groups perceived by it as hostile.

Building on this empirically grounded analytical framework, the article employs the category of *frenemies* to illuminate a paradoxical configuration of state–minority relations characteristic of

Ustaša ethnopolitics. In the case of the Slovak minority in the NDH, official rhetoric of friendship, Slavic solidarity, and symbolic alliance coexisted with coercive practices implemented on the ground by state institutions and security apparatuses. This dissonance reveals how minority communities could be formally included within the regime's representational order while simultaneously being treated as politically unreliable and subjected to repression. By examining the Slovak minority through this lens, the article demonstrates that performative gestures of goodwill were structurally constrained by the regime's broader exclusionary and violent logic. The analytical value of this approach lies in its capacity to capture forms of hostile inclusion that remain insufficiently addressed in existing scholarship on wartime ethnopolitics and minority governance.

The analytical framework of this study draws inspiration from the theoretical approaches of several scholars that help to better explain the dynamics of Ustaša practice toward the Slovak minority. Foremost among these is Rogers Brubaker's concept of "ambivalent inclusion," as elaborated in *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2004). Brubaker emphasizes that ethnic categories are not immutable entities but are dynamically produced and reinterpreted meanings, which actors strategically adjust to current needs. Minorities may thus be regarded at times as an integral part of the "nation" (or society) and at other times as a suspect element. In the NDH case, the Slovak minority was continually redefined — symbolically welcomed as "brotherly," yet simultaneously marginalized and even persecuted, placing it in the position of what I term a "friend-enemy" (frenemy).

Building on Brubaker's notion of *ambivalent inclusion* (2004), this study also integrates Andreas Wimmer's analyses of *nationalist exclusion* (2002) and *ethnic boundary making* (2013) to conceptualize the Slovak minority's paradoxical position in the NDH. Wimmer's framework (Wimmer 2002) highlights how nationalist regimes define the nation in ways that inherently exclude those outside the dominant ethno-national template, even when they are rhetorically embraced as allies. Such exclusion often takes the form of *subordinated incorporation*, whereby minorities are symbolically included yet structurally prevented from attaining equal status. In the NDH, rhetorical "brotherhood" with the Slovak State masked a process of boundary contraction: the withholding of legal recognition, cultural rights, and security guarantees served political aims unrelated to the Slovaks themselves, aligning instead with the regime's strategic relations with other powers. Wimmer's model of *ethnic boundary making* (Wimmer 2013) further explains in general how these shifting and strategically manipulated boundaries combined boundary blurring at the level of official discourse with boundary strengthening in everyday practice — especially in peripheral regions where weak central authority allowed local actors to enforce exclusionary boundaries more harshly than the center's rhetoric suggested. This synthesis reveals the Slovaks as a textbook case of a "frenemy" minority: nominally embraced within the imagined national community but persistently relegated to a structurally vulnerable and politically expendable position.

To explain the specific mechanisms of violence, I also draw on political theorist Stathis Kalyvas's implicit use of the "gray zone of control" from *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Kalyvas (2006) distinguishes between areas under full control, areas under the enemy's control, and so-called "contested zones." It is in these contested zones — namely, present-day eastern Croatia and the Syrmian areas of present-day Serbia within the eastern NDH — that the highest levels of selective violence occur against groups that resist clear classification. The Slovak minority in the regions of Syrmia and Slavonia found itself in a space where the central NDH authorities could not guarantee order, and where local, often shifting antagonistic power structures acted autonomously, at times impulsively and without a coherent strategy. In this context, even a community with a long record of loyalty could easily become a target of violence — not because of active resistance, but because of state failure and the opportunism of local actors, as was the fate of the Slovaks in the Ustaša state.

While the term *frenemy* originates in colloquial usage, its analytical potential emerges when anchored in established theoretical frameworks. In the context of authoritarian and fascist regimes, it captures the contradictory coexistence of symbolic inclusion and practical exclusion — conditions that mainly Brubaker's (2004) notion of *ambivalent inclusion* identifies but does not explicitly

name. The *frenemy* category helps to advance this insight by emphasizing the deliberate political strategy behind oscillating minority status: rhetorical friendship becomes a tool to legitimize selective repression and maintain control. Throughout this article, the term “frenemies” is used as a context-bound analytical category derived from the NDH case, rather than as a transferable or fully formalized theoretical framework.

Accordingly, the article does not seek to test or operationalize social-scientific theories through systematic hypothesis verification. Instead, concepts developed by Brubaker, Wimmer, and Kalyvas are employed heuristically, as interpretive points of reference that inform the reading of the empirical material instead of serving as deductive frameworks imposed upon it. The analysis remains source-driven, and theoretical references serve to clarify patterns observed in the archival record rather than to evaluate the explanatory power of the theories themselves. In this sense, these concepts function primarily as heuristic guides illuminating patterns in the archival material, not as formal explanatory models imposed on the evidence.

Ethnic Slovaks in the NDH

Ethnic Slovaks in the NDH constituted a visible minority of approximately 25 thousand individuals. They compactly inhabited twenty villages and minor towns, primarily in Syrmia and Slavonia (Vereš 1944, 99–100). While the regionally dispersed Slovak minority had coexisted within the same state long before April 1941, contact between its various enclaves and diasporas in the former Yugoslavia had been hindered by confessional differences and varying degrees of economic and cultural development. The largest group within the Ustaša-ruled Croatia, as defined by its established borders, consisted of Slovaks from Stara Pazova, located in the easternmost tip of the NDH (today in Serbia), whose ancestors had settled there as early as 1770 (A.V. 1942, 83–84). Together with their compatriots from Ilok (today the easternmost municipality of Croatia), the Slovaks of Stara Pazova led national activities during the war, representing in the NDH not only Slovak Lutherans of the Augsburg Confession (17 thousand persons) but also Roman Catholics (8 thousand persons) (Vereš 1944, 99).¹⁰

The cultural advancement of the Lutherans — with their own church and national schools — stood in stark contrast to the conditions of the Catholic Slovaks, settled predominantly in Slavonia, who were engaged mainly in agriculture. The latter showed less interest in organized national and associational life, and over decades of presence in the so-called Lower Land¹¹ (*Dolná zem* — with the main migration wave arriving only from the 1860s onward), some had naturally assimilated. Organizers of Slovak national-cultural life in interwar Yugoslavia regularly visited these Slavonian villages from 1934 onward. The writer Ján Čajak summarized their impressions as follows: “We noted great neglect by our nation, illiteracy is spreading among them, their speech is already half-Croatianized, and we found no trace of contact with Slovakia” (Čajak 1940, 127). To illustrate: in the villages of Jelisavac, Josipovac, Jurjevac, Ledenik, and Lipovljani, a total of 700 school-age Slovak children had no opportunity for education in their native language (Vereš 1944, 100). The absence of Slovak-language instruction inevitably weakened their national consciousness compared to Slovak Lutherans in Syrmia.

Ustaša Croatia brought no positive change. The lofty phrases of Ustaša officials contradicted the reality of the eastern periphery. Although Ustaša *čuvar*¹² Mirko Puk declared at a ceremonial gathering in December 1942 that “Croatian-Slovak mutuality, filled with substance, will be unbreakable, lasting, and eternal,”¹³ fissures had already appeared by that time. Most notably, the NDH Ministry of the Interior unreasonably delayed approval of the statutes of the Slovak National Unity (*Slovačka narodna zajednica* / *Slovenská národná jednota* – SNJ), the minority organization intended to comprehensively organize the cultural life of Slovaks in the NDH. Approval was granted only on 26 June 1943, after the Slovak government threatened the Croatian side with repercussions¹⁴ — a matter discussed later in this article. A further problem was the deteriorating security situation, which led even the Slovak envoy in Zagreb, Jozef Cieker, to

undiplomatic yet accurate reflections raising the question of what peculiar state the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Slovak minority in the NDH were, in fact, dealing with.¹⁵

The loss of Bački Petrovac, which was annexed and governed by Hungary along with the rest of the Bačka region after the partition of Yugoslavia, proved irreplaceable for the Slovak minority. Despite regional rivalries among Slovaks from Bačka, Syrmia, and Banat, Petrovac had retained, until the fateful events of April 1941, its position as the leading center among the scattered Slovak communities of the multiethnic Balkan kingdom. It was home to key national institutions — the Slovak Matica in Yugoslavia (*Matica slovenská v Južoslávii*), a Slovak grammar school, a publishing house, and a printing press. Petrovac-based cultural institutions supplied Slovak-language literature and press to the entire 70 thousand-strong Slovak population in Yugoslavia (Čajak 1940, 126). The already weak links between Petrovac's cultural bastion and the Slavonian Slovaks were definitively severed with the breakup of Yugoslavia, with especially detrimental effects on education and enlightenment among the latter.

Under these circumstances, Stara Pazova became the center of Slovak national life in the NDH, emerging from the shadow of its rival Petrovac after the NDH's borders were drawn. This Syrmian town of roughly eight thousand inhabitants (about six thousand were ethnic Slovaks of Lutheran confession)¹⁶ entered the new state with a well-developed national-cultural infrastructure. A few statistics illustrate this: shortly before the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in the 1939/40 school year, twelve Slovak teachers were employed in Stara Pazova — fully half the number of Slovak educators in all Syrmia. Here, where Slovak-language instruction dated back to the last third of the eighteenth century, as many as 834 pupils were enrolled in sixteen sections and five classes (the largest number in all Syrmia), a figure reflecting the town's size. Among other NDH localities, the largest numbers of pupils in Slovak instruction in the final months of Yugoslavia's existence were in Boljevci (170), Ilok (161), Erdevik (108), Bingula (79), Dobanovci (54), and, with equal numbers, Šid and Slankamenački Vinogradi (48). The school in Ljuba had no Slovak teacher, while pupils in Soljani and Ašanja had no access at all to Slovak-language instruction (A.V. 1942, 85). Although the demographer and migration expert Ján Svetoň believed that the situation would eventually improve and that Slavonian Slovaks would, with the support of the Slovak State, catch up culturally with more developed communities (Svetoň 1942, 69–70), under NDH conditions, they had neither the space nor the time to do so.

An insightful and highly accurate one on the Slovaks' situation was provided in the summer of 1940 by Břanimír Altgayer, leader of the German national group in Croatia. In his observations, prepared at the request of the Slovak *Volksgruppenführer* of the ethnic Germans, Franz Karmasin, Altgayer summarized the basic facts about Slovaks living in areas that would, in April 1941, become part of the NDH in the following points:

1. Slovaks in Croatia cannot be regarded as an organized national group.
2. Appropriate relations between individual Slovak-settled localities in Croatia are lacking.
3. There are significant differences, in terms of national consciousness and political orientation, between Catholic and Lutheran Slovaks (Catholics leaning toward the Croatian Peasant Party, Lutherans — so-called Czechoslovakists¹⁷ — unsympathetic to the Catholic HSES regime in Slovakia).
4. Catholic Slovaks have no connection with their mother nation (Slovaks in Slovakia) nor with Lutheran Slovaks in Croatia or Yugoslavia more broadly; as an agrarian population, they devote little attention to reading or education, and they maintain no cultural contact with the linguistically related Croatian Czechs living in Daruvar and its surroundings.
5. Apart from teachers and clergy, they have no intelligentsia or leading personalities.
6. National cultural and economic organizations operate only in Lutheran communities.

Altgayer concluded his report with a clear statement: “The overall national awakening and organizational consolidation of the Slovaks in Croatia is possible only through the intervention and

assistance of the mother country and its designated organizations. In doing so, however, given the advanced Croatization — especially among Catholics — no time should be wasted.”¹⁸

For the Slovak government, which anchored its soft power abroad in the image of “paternal care” for Slovak minorities, as well as for the Slovak elite within the NDH, this represented a formidable challenge.

Creating “Frenemies”: The Slovak minority in the grip of Ustaša ethnopolitics

The already unfavorable situation of the Slovak minority living in territories assigned to the NDH deteriorated significantly from a legal standpoint after 10 April 1941. Under the new Croatian laws, the ethnic Slovaks were not granted Croatian citizenship. State authorities, therefore, regarded its members as foreigners, even though they had previously been citizens of Yugoslavia. This second-class status, coupled with the Ustaša regime’s inability to meet even the basic needs of its population, including social welfare, led the Slovaks — almost from the first months after Yugoslavia’s collapse — to seek relocation to Slovakia. Only the intervention of the newly established Slovak embassy in Zagreb halted the tendency toward property sales and repatriation, with embassy staff arguing that “now is not the time for experiments and mass repatriation.”¹⁹

The reluctance of the Slovak government to support the relocation or repatriation of ethnic Slovaks from the NDH cannot be explained solely by logistical constraints or wartime insecurity. Rather, it reflected a deliberate political calculation aimed at preserving formally cordial relations with the Ustaša regime. From Bratislava’s perspective, a large-scale withdrawal of Slovaks from the NDH would have signaled a lack of confidence in the stability and legitimacy of a fellow Axis-aligned state, thereby constituting a reputational risk for bilateral relations. Mass relocation would have implicitly acknowledged the failure of proclaimed friendship, Slavic solidarity, and minority protection, undermining the symbolic foundations of Slovak–Croatian cooperation. Consequently, the Slovak government prioritized diplomatic decorum and alliance maintenance over the tangible security needs of its co-nationals, effectively subordinating minority protection to the performative logic of interstate friendship.

Despite the officially friendly relations between the NDH and the Slovak State, the Slovak minority’s political and cultural rights fell far short of those enjoyed by the larger German and Hungarian minorities, both of which could rely on the stronger diplomatic leverage of their historical homelands. The central issue facing the minority in its dealings with Croatian state authorities — and one that escalated to the diplomatic level of Croatian–Slovak interstate relations — was the protracted question of institutionalizing a nationwide organization for ethnic Slovaks that, on a non-political basis, would provide a platform for their cultural life in the NDH.

The establishment of the Slovak National Unity was deliberately delayed by the Croatian authorities,²⁰ who feared that granting such recognition might create a precedent and prompt similar demands from other national and ethnic communities. This evasive stance also blocked the signing of a proposed cultural agreement between the NDH and the Slovak State, leaving an entire spectrum of issues unresolved. Ironically, the draft agreement prepared by Anton Bonifačić, a representative of the cultural department of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, included a provision for clarifying the legal status of the small Croatian minority in Slovakia,²¹ which had historically established and inhabited small settlements in the west of the country since the mid-sixteenth century.

The question of the SNJ, and of the legal definition of the Slovak minority in the NDH more broadly, was not advanced even by the personal visit of a thirteen-member Slovak delegation from various Croatian regions, led by the Lutheran pastor from Ilok, Ivan Vereš, to Minister of the Interior Andrija Artuković, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mladen Lorković, Minister of Education Stjepan Ratković, and Ustaša deputy leader Ljudevit Šolc. The Zagreb meetings were conducted in an atmosphere of artificial formalism. Artuković stated that “Slovaks in Croatia must feel at home,” while Šolc promised the delegation that he “would always help the Slovaks in a brotherly way.”²²

Diplomatic platitudes, however, could not mask the NDH leadership's genuine lack of interest in the Slovak minority. Over time, manifestations that both the minority and the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs classified as anything but friendly became increasingly frequent.

Tensions mounted over seemingly minor issues. In addition to the unresolved question of the Slovaks' legal status and representation in the NDH, the Ustaša authorities, for example, postponed under the pretext of a "deteriorating security situation" the Slovak Day in Stara Pazova, scheduled for 30 August 1942 (Michela 2003a, 118), which was to showcase the culture and traditions of the Slovak minority to the wider public.²³ The celebration was intended to become a grand national manifestation, and the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs also attached great importance to it.²⁴ Attendance was projected at ten thousand people, including prominent guests such as Slovak envoy Cieker and Croatian ministers Lorković and Artuković. As Cieker noted, the manifestation was expected to be "the first in the Independent State of Croatia and a demonstration of the positive relationship of Slovaks living in Croatia not only toward their motherland, Slovakia, but also toward their present homeland, Croatia."²⁵ The preparations and the event itself, however, were thwarted by a state of emergency declared in connection with an ongoing joint German-Croatian-Hungarian military operation, codenamed "Fruška Gora," aimed at eliminating partisan groups in the Syrmian mountains.

Individual initiatives from within the community to constitute the Slovak national group in the NDH with its own statute also failed. An effort was launched by the Slovaks of Stara Pazova, who organized a petition drive in Slovak villages. Yet in the conditions of the Ustaša state, such an initiative stood no chance of success. The regime feared that granting the Slovaks' request would lead the Hungarians living in the NDH to make similar demands, and that their political emancipation might eventually result in territorial claims and border revisions detrimental to Croatia (Michela 2003b, 115–16). Croatian ministers euphemistically—but tellingly—indicated their negative stance toward formalizing the status of the Slovak community during the visit of the Slovak delegation, stating that this was "in fact unnecessary, because the Slovaks have long lived in love and unity with the Croats and are loyal and devoted citizens of Croatia."²⁶

The Croatian side's awkward responses, which undermined the mythology of Slovak-Croatian friendship, were echoed in political backstage dealings. In an effort not to alienate its ally, the Slovak side was careful with its wording. For example, on the occasion of the planned Slovak Day in Stara Pazova, the main daily of the HSEs in Slovakia, *Slovák*, was to publish a special supplement dedicated to the Slovaks in the NDH. Yet at the request of Slovak envoy Jozef Cieker in Zagreb, dated August 18, 1942, the plan was tactically abandoned. Aware of the Croatian government's reserved stance toward the legal recognition of the Slovak minority, Cieker advised the coordinator of pro-governmental Slovak press, Imrich Kružliak, that the newspapers should avoid any mention of the Slovak national group in Croatia or its statute, and refer only—at most—to the approval of the SNJ statutes in the NDH, whose ceremonial proclamation was expected to coincide with the Slovak Day.²⁷ The reason was evident: there was a fundamental difference between recognizing the legal subjectivity of a minority in the NDH and formally approving a cultural, apolitical association.

The saga of the unapproved SNJ statutes, however, was far from over and still had nearly a year to run. The commission of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contrary to previous promises of swift processing, demanded that the submitted statutes explicitly include the following clauses:

1. The SNJ may not be a political organization or claim to represent the Slovaks in the NDH.
2. Slovaks may not publicly use their flag in the NDH.
3. The SNJ may not claim the property of former Slovak and Czechoslovak associations in Yugoslavia.
4. The SNJ may not, in legal acts, present itself as the organization of Slovaks living in the NDH, but only as an association, and may not delegate its representatives to Croatian self-governing and legislative bodies (i.e., municipal councils and the *Sabor*).²⁸

The persistently and rationally unjustified, prolonged delay in authorizing the activities of the SNJ began to cause frustration not only among Slovaks in Croatia but also in Bratislava.²⁹ On June 21, 1943, envoy Cieker attended a meeting at the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (now headed by the new minister, Mile Budak) concerning the legal status of the Slovak minority. In response to the stated demands, the Slovak envoy once again received an evasive answer to the effect that, while the Croatian government sympathized with the Slovaks, it had to “take into account domestic political circumstances.” Cieker was told that although the submitted SNJ statute was not formally a national minority statute, by its nature it amounted to one and therefore needed to be amended to make it “politically acceptable” for the Croatian side.³⁰

Croatian officials demanded the removal of sections referring to the political character of the SNJ,³¹ arguing that even the granting of legal status to the German minority in the NDH had met with protests from the Italian diplomatic service, which did not look favorably on conferring political privileges upon individual national groups. The Italians were particularly concerned that if rights were granted to the Slovaks in Croatia, the Croatian government might analogously demand equal treatment for Croats in Dalmatia, in territories annexed by Italy under the Rome Agreements of 18 May 1941. Particularly forceful in this matter was Italian envoy Raffaele Casertano, who, after one of the Slovak delegations’ visits to Zagreb, reportedly “opened fire” on Lorković, fiercely opposing such gestures of goodwill.³²

As Cieker understood from his conversations with Lorković and from the reality of the NDH two years after the proclamation of independence, the delays in meeting Slovak minority demands were due not only to political considerations but also to their near-zero relevance in the eyes of the Ustaša government — an issue “not on the second but on the fourth track,” as he called it.³³ Despite the verbally declared intention to maintain good relations with Slovakia, Croatian ministries prioritized entirely different matters. In his report of 7 April 1943, Cieker summarized the situation as follows:

Today in Croatia, one practically cannot travel, one cannot convene meetings, postal deliveries are unreliable, and therefore, implementing what should have been done in August and September of last year, when conditions were more favorable, is practically impossible. The essence of the problem, however, is that there is no order in the country and that such an atmosphere prevails in which the question of approving the statutes of the Slovak National Unity is a very minor matter. One cannot expect concreteness when the substantive essence of state life is in disarray.³⁴

The reluctance to accommodate the Slovak minority’s representatives was further underscored by denunciations from local Ustaše against the leading figures of the SNJ Preparatory Committee. According to a report from the Ustaša Surveillance Service (*Ustaška nadzorna služba*), presented to Cieker by Minister Artuković, all the leaders were politically suspect as so-called “Benešites”³⁵ or communists — a charge that even the Slovak envoy himself (an open supporter of the HSLS regime) categorically rejected. As the Lutheran pastor from Ilok, Ivan Vereš, recounted, the list of the allegedly unreliable included not only himself but also the chairman of the Preparatory Committee, Jozef Stupavský, and Secretary Ján Vitéz, who, on the basis of unfounded suspicions, nearly ended up in front of an Ustaša militia drumhead court.³⁶

Frustration with the Croatian ministers’ intransigence and the authorities’ deep-seated distrust of Slovak minority leaders in the NDH was vented by members of the SNJ Preparatory Committee in a letter to the envoy dated 27 March 1943:

We never had illusions [...] When it is necessary to prove this friendship through action, it fails. This friendship at banquets and celebrations overflows with words, and at home we have nothing from it — in fact, we experience the opposite [...].³⁷

Only under the pressure of Cieker's diplomatic efforts and the emphatic warnings of Slovak Minister of the Interior Alexander Mach to the Croatian envoy in Bratislava, Blaž Lorković³⁸ — that such a reserved attitude could seriously damage Slovak-Croatian relations — was the SNJ finally granted official approval on 26 June 1943.³⁹ This Croatian decision, however, was preceded by a near faux pas when Mach issued an ultimatum threatening to withhold a planned Slovak State decoration for Croatian writer Ivo Andrić and temporarily banned the establishment of branches of the Slovak-Croatian Society, which promoted cultural relations between the two countries.

Although the Croats ultimately relented, approved the SNJ statutes, and even promised in a separate law to guarantee the development of a network of Slovak schools in the NDH,⁴⁰ the overall position of the SNJ remained weak (Michela 2003a, 120). In practice, the new organization continued the tradition of the Slovak Reading Club based in Ilok, which in official documents had long styled itself as the "Preparatory Committee for Organizing the Slovak National Unity in the NDH," fostering "national spirit" among Croatian Slovaks in the spirit of the Tiso regime — through annual commemorations of 14 March and the distribution of HSLS calendars and printed materials.⁴¹

After authorization, the SNJ's activities fell within the scope of the former Slovak Matica in Yugoslavia, and its political influence was negligible. It dealt primarily with the still unresolved issue of opening Slovak sections in schools, organized the training of future teachers in Slovak pedagogical preparatory courses, and distributed Slovak literature to Slovak villages in Slavonia and Syrmia. Given the absence of a Slovak press in the NDH, the SNJ leadership also substituted for a missing periodical by sending informational circulars to members⁴² — who, with the worsening security situation in the east of the country, were increasingly preoccupied not with cultural matters, but with literal matters of survival.

"Frenemies" on the periphery: The Slovak minority in the security vacuum of Slavonia and Syrmia

During a tour of the territory of the Slovak State's new ally, Viliam Kovár, a journalist for the government daily *Slovák*, stopped in Lipovljani, a nationally mixed village about one hundred kilometers southeast of Zagreb. In conversation with local Slovaks, he mentioned that the Slovak government was considering the possibility of a reciprocal population exchange between Slovakia and NDH and asked whether the Slovaks of Lipovljani might be interested in repatriating to the homeland of their ancestors. It was mid-June 1941.⁴³

News of Kovár's casual inquiry spread among the inhabitants of Lipovljani extremely fast. By late summer 1942, the Slovak embassy in Zagreb was reporting a strong interest in resettlement, which it attributed primarily to the arrogant, even hostile, behavior of Croatian authorities. More than a year after the proclamation of independence, these authorities still refused to grant NDH citizenship to Slovaks, insisting instead that they apply for citizenship through the Slovak authorities. "The political atmosphere and changes in conditions in Croatian territory have created a psychosis among the Slovaks, and they are coming with requests to be repatriated," envoy Cieker reported to Bratislava.⁴⁴

The Week of Slovak Culture, organized in Zagreb at the turn of November and December 1942 as a kind of substitute for the canceled Slovak Day in Stara Pazova, took place in a rather bitter atmosphere. On the one hand, speeches stressed how Croats and Slovaks were united by "the greatest friendship";⁴⁵ on the other, the Slovak embassy began to receive the first whispers of serious Ustaša abuses in the east. In this climate, Envoy Cieker became an important source of moral support for compatriots in difficult times. Whenever it was technically possible, he traveled from the capital across Croatia to the distant Stara Pazova so that, at least symbolically, the Slovaks would feel that the Slovak State stood with them and that they were under its protection.⁴⁶

However, from the beginning of 1943, the scope of Cieker's activity began to narrow dramatically. Frequent detonations on railway lines disrupted transportation,⁴⁷ leaving Slovak communities

without personal contact with Slovakia's highest diplomatic representative in the NDH. In Syrmia, several villages fell under direct partisan control. For the Slovaks, this meant a figurative entrapment between two "millstones." Initially, before the situation escalated, they were compelled to hand over food to the partisans, for which they were then accused by German and Ustaša troops of supporting the communist resistance once these forces regained control. In the volatile chessboard of shifting dominance, inventive responses to extreme situations often became a matter of life and death. "To survive and endure in health" became a dominant survival strategy. The uncertainty of tomorrow was even sensed by local Germans, who stopped greeting each other with the Nazi *Heil Hitler!* and reverted to the neutral *Guten Tag*.⁴⁸

Envoy Cieker observed that the turbulent conditions in the eastern NDH were prompting the Slovak intelligentsia to submit more requests to the embassy in Zagreb for passports — solely to travel to Slovakia and leave the dangerous Balkans to the warring parties. For leading minority figures from Stara Pazova and Ilok who sought to leave, however, Cieker had no sympathy. He forbade their departure, insisting that it was their sacred duty not to abandon their people in difficult times. Even descriptions of horrific scenes unfolding before their eyes failed to sway him. Slovaks routinely witnessed cycles of retaliatory violence between Croats and Serbs, and armed attacks on civilian targets, including regular train services, were increasing. Serbian partisans openly stated that, should they lose control of the region, they would install Slovaks at the head of villages as a shield against Croatian vengeance.⁴⁹ It is not difficult to imagine how such tactics were perceived by the paranoid Ustaše.

Cieker preemptively warned Croatian ministries that any potential wartime refugees from the east would be very bad publicity for the NDH. The authorities promised him that the critical security situation would be addressed, but — as always — the results were the same. For example, to one Slovak-inhabited village, they promised to send a company of home guards reinforced by a tank, yet once again, nothing came of it. This not only undermined the Slovak minority's basic respect for the Ustaša state, but such failures also eroded German confidence in the political leadership of the NDH. According to Cieker's insights from diplomatic circles, by mid-1943 the Germans had already concluded that appointing Pavelić to head the NDH had been a mistake, and that even if Germany were to win the war, the Ustaša regime in its current form would be unsustainable.⁵⁰

The pattern of escalating violence continued to expand. It can be stated that from the autumn of 1943, the central political leadership of the NDH had lost not only control over the easternmost regions of the state, but also even the most basic trust of the population. The Slovak minority in Syrmia was subjected to continuous terror by officially allied units charged with stabilizing security. A few examples illustrate the situation: in just the first half of October 1943, around twenty Slovaks in the Ilok district fell victim to raids. Soldiers cold-heartedly shot a 20-year-old deaf girl, Mária Salčáková, on the road to Ljuba when, due to her disability, she failed to obey an order to stop. During an operation in Fruška Gora near Erdevik, Cossack auxiliary units serving in German forces shot six Slovaks working on farms and in the fields, merely because they were outdoors and were suspected of partisan activity. Near the village of Bingula, they similarly shot dead 25 men without cause, 15 of whom were Slovaks.⁵¹

A wave of barbaric reprisals for acts of sabotage against railway lines — during which the Ustaše executed randomly selected civilians as a public warning — provoked particularly negative reactions among the local population. For example, when on 8 October 1943 a train exploded on the line between Djeletovci and Šidski Banovci, Ustaša captain Tomjenović ordered the hanging and shooting of twenty residents of Šid. On the night between October 9 and 10, another train exploded between the neighboring villages of Ilača and Tovarnik, for which a further twenty people were to be executed "as a warning."⁵²

Fleeing was barely possible. Local Ustaša authorities prevented any internal displacement by refusing to issue travel permits. Interventions by SNJ representatives on behalf of imprisoned

Slovaks became a daily routine. “The conditions in which we live are almost unbearable. The secretary and I are driven to despair,” wrote Chairman Jozef Stupavský to Envoy Cieker.⁵³

When the anarchy of forces ostensibly tasked with restoring peace in Syrmia and Slavonia was compounded by the rape of women and the theft of livestock, the Slovak minority understood that the NDH authorities simply did not care about their safety — either passively tolerating the abuses committed by auxiliary units of the German armed forces recruited from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, such as Circassians or Kyrgyz, or actively assisting them. Under the impact of reports from the east, Cieker critically observed:

The new Croatian government could also be called the municipal committee of the city of Zagreb, because its practical competence is reduced to this territory [...] Such disorder breaks even the remnants of the foundations of the state’s integrity.⁵⁴

The Slovak envoy also complained to the chief of the general staff of the Croatian Home Guard (*Hrvatsko Domobranstvo*), General Ivan Prpić, that the minority simply did not feel the presence of the state — the Croatian gendarmerie and army often did not even dare to enter problem areas, as they would have faced overwhelming force.⁵⁵

Moreover, from the end of 1943, partisan conscription came into play. After the formation of the First Czechoslovak Partisan Brigade “Jan Žižka,” subordinate to the National Liberation Army under Josip Broz Tito and deployed in the area between the Drava and Sava rivers, ethnic Slovaks lost the ability to argue their way out of forced enlistment into the armed units of the anti-fascist resistance. In the turbulent conditions of Syrmia and Slavonia, it was impossible to remain neutral. Refusal to join partisan groups automatically branded one as an enemy in their eyes. Ruthless conscription, which targeted males between the ages of fourteen and fifty-five, generated fear.⁵⁶

There were only three survival strategies: buying one’s way out with a bribe, hiding, or fleeing to Zagreb. In the NDH capital, Slovaks sought either to obtain passports and visas to legally emigrate to Slovakia or at least to find employment — an almost impossible task in the advanced stages of the war. Above all, the attempt to flee to Slovakia was understandable: until the summer of 1944, the country remained outside the zone of direct military operations, its territory was not exposed to aerial bombardment, and it was widely perceived as a comparatively stable and secure area within the broader wartime landscape.

Shockingly, in this life-threatening situation, Cieker unexpectedly sided with the Ustaše — who, in his view, were attempting to address the crisis but were failing in the effort. He feared that if the embassy helped even a single Slovak in need to obtain the necessary documents and permits, it would set a precedent, the news would spread, and Slovakia would be overwhelmed by a migration wave of ethnic Slovaks from the NDH.⁵⁷ It was the first time that the diplomatic mission in Zagreb openly turned its back on them. The Slovak minority was thus abandoned by its last steadfast and determined ally.

The Ustaša Raid on Lipovljani and the Genocidal Finale

Considering the documented cases of killings of Slovaks on the periphery of the Independent State of Croatia, a critic might object that these acts did not display an explicit ethnic undertone and that violence in these areas affected the population regardless of ethnic origin or religion. To describe ethnic Slovaks as “collateral victims” risks obscuring the prolonged, group-specific exclusion that preceded and conditioned their later exposure to violence.

Historian Alexander Korb has drawn attention to the complexity of collective violence in multiethnic societies, where the motivations of perpetrators naturally varied, and where traditional frameworks for thinking about strictly “premeditated genocides” — based on principles of ethnic, racial, or religious difference — are no longer fully applicable (Korb 2010, 10–11). Lucidly, the motivations of specific perpetrators in specific incidents cannot always be identified unambiguously

from the archival sources. It is likely that many “in situ” executions were carried out for varied, even de-ethnicized reasons — for example, material gain, personal grievances, or even on a momentary whim.

Yet reprisals against ethnic Slovaks did not occur solely as impulsive acts in the mountains, pastures, and fields of the Syrmia–Slavonia borderlands; they also extended into the sphere of systematized state violence — behind the gates of the dreaded Jasenovac concentration camp. Jasenovac — dubbed the “Balkan Auschwitz” — became the embodiment of suffering, sadistic torture, and brutal killing. It is a little-known fact that this camp, administered entirely by Croatian Ustaše, imprisoned a number of ethnic Slovaks, of whom at least 106 never returned home. What preceded the violent deaths of these individuals, members of a “friendly” minority by official designation?

Among the declared victims (which places Slovaks in eighth place according to ethnicity), more than two-thirds were residents of the already-mentioned village of Lipovljani, located barely 20 kilometers from Jasenovac. The broader context of their violent deportation supports the thesis advanced in the introduction: that Ustaša ethnopolitics contained a genocidal logic shaping the regime’s treatment of several minority groups and that its relative moderation toward ethnic Slovaks during the first years of the NDH’s existence had been restrained exclusively by diplomatic considerations. After Slovak diplomacy lost its former resolve and the Ustaša command hierarchy suffered a lethal breakdown, the Slovak community came to be treated much like other enemy groups — without regard for the implications this might have for Slovak-Croatian intergovernmental relations.

As noted earlier, from as early as the summer of 1941, many Slovaks from the ethnically mixed Lipovljani had applied, through the Slovak embassy in Zagreb, to relocate to Slovakia. The growing number of such applications aroused suspicion and envy among the Croatian population, particularly when the embassy granted some applicants Slovak identity documents and at least seasonal employment, primarily in the agricultural sector, in Slovakia. This allowed members of the Slovak minority not only to evade conscription into the NDH’s armed forces but also to secure lucrative earning opportunities and, most importantly, the comfort of safety — something unimaginable in Slavonia.⁵⁸

Among local Croats, this deepened the perception that the Slovak minority was unwilling to share their fate “for better or worse,” and thus it came to be regarded as a disloyal element. The growing ethnic polarization at the micro-level of the periphery was fueled by the accelerating collapse of the state. In Lipovljani, Ustaše operating in the region intimidated Slovaks, warning them that if they found any indication of their aiding partisans, the entire village would be mercilessly burned down.⁵⁹ The hardships of the inhabitants were compounded by threats from both warring sides: pro-Yugoslav partisans announced that they would continually destroy the railway line to provoke the Germans, who would retaliate by bombing the village and rendering it uninhabitable — thus leaving residents with no choice but to seek refuge in partisan units.⁶⁰ Conversely, the Germans — accusing the people of Lipovljani, based on Ustaša denunciations, of supporting partisans — posted a notice on the municipal building stating that for each railway sabotage, ten civilians would be shot. These were not empty threats: even at the end of 1943, two villagers were seized as an example and deported to the Jasenovac camp, from which most inmates never returned. As noted earlier, others were hanged or shot without trial or even a formal charge.⁶¹

An undisputable milestone in the brutalization of Ustaša practice against the Slovaks was the relocation of envoy Jozef Cieker to Madrid in February 1944. With Cieker’s departure from Zagreb, the Slovak minority lost a longstanding supporter who — despite some lapses in reliability toward the end of the previous year — had stood firmly on its side and provided real assistance. Considering subsequent events, Ante Pavelić’s words during Cieker’s farewell audience rang as nothing less than a cruel mockery. The *Poglavnik* assured the departing Slovak envoy that “he and his government will see to it that Slovaks in Croatia feel at home in the state, and that they will always enjoy the rights that the Croatian nation itself has.”⁶² This customary blend of empty

platitudes, however, contained a kernel of truth. The Ustaša regime did indeed guarantee the Slovak minority the same “rights” that, in the disintegrating state, the Croatian population itself “enjoyed” — ironically speaking, the right to be disciplined and to obey. Shortly thereafter, Cieker’s successor, Viktor Bečka, former Slovak consul general in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, held his inaugural audience with Pavelić on 21 February 1944 (Petruf 2011, 241) — likely without anticipating the human tragedies he would be called upon to address only months later.

On the night of 19–20 September that same year, Ustaše forces raided the village of Lipovljani under cover of darkness, abducting 182 inhabitants — 109 of them Czechs and Slovaks (Krajči 2023, 72; Hudec and Kuric 2006, 128),⁶³ the majority belonging to the Slovak minority. Czech resident of Lipovljani, Marija Odošić (*1932, née Marija Uhitil/Marie Uchytlová), recalled that tragic night:

That year, on 20 September, the Ustaše came to Lipovljani very early. It was still dark; people were still sleeping. They banged on the doors and took away people from 14 to 60 years of age. They said they were going to work, to some kind of work [...] They took them to the Jasenovac camp [...] Great suffering and certain death awaited them. Our good neighbors left [...] Our Lipovljani people left. People in the prime of life. Their families, women with small children, were left in grief and tears. After the war, the women asked and begged if anyone knew anything about the people from Lipovljani who had been sent to Jasenovac [...] They learned nothing. (Krajči 2023, 64).

The multinational community of Lipovljani was shocked by the scale of the raid. Helpless Slovaks contacted the embassy in Zagreb shortly after the incident, making urgent pleas for help. Over the following weeks, they sent six letters to the embassy (dated 29 October, 5 November, 12 November, two on 19 November, and 16 December 1944), but all went unanswered. This correspondence bears witness above all to the mixture of hopelessness and misery with which ethnic Slovaks had to contend daily. The lack of response points to a combination of incapacity, weak resolve, limited means for the embassy to help, and an unspoken abandonment of allied obligations by the Ustaša regime in the context of total war. The letters were sent by the leadership of the SNJ; the final attempt was dispatched — apparently to underscore the urgency — collectively “in the name of all Slovaks.”⁶⁴

The Slovaks of Lipovljani can hardly be accused of making excessive demands or of showing disrespect. Since communication channels through the local Ustaša administration were nonfunctional, they sought to convey their plight directly to the central government via the Slovak diplomatic mission under Bečka’s leadership. “We beg them to release our sons, husbands, and brothers from the prison in which they are held in Jasenovac, so that they do not die of hunger there, because they do not deserve this for refusing to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Croatian nation,” one of the letters stated.⁶⁵ To support their plea, SNJ representatives explained that the Slovaks had no desire to fight in Yugoslav partisan units, many of them had been forcibly conscripted, and they stressed their genuine loyalty toward both Croatian and Slovak authorities (the letter still — despite everything — spoke of “our Croatian brothers” and even ended with the official salute of fascist-axis Slovakia, *Na stráž!*).⁶⁶

Less than a week later, another urgent appeal was sent to Zagreb, emphasizing that not a single Slovak had yet returned from Jasenovac, even after almost two months since the Ustaša raid. The first politely worded criticisms — that no one was communicating with the minority — began to appear. Such reproaches multiplied in the letters of November 19, 1944, which expressed a pre-apocalyptic desperation on the part of an ignored ethnic community. As the authors of the second letter remarked about the situation in the village, “what has begun to happen to us in this short time is unspeakable horror.” In correspondence addressed to Bečka’s deputy, Ing. Mamatey, they pleaded for “rescue from certain death,” stating that they were ready to leave “with nothing but our bare lives.”⁶⁷

The persecution of the Slovaks from Lipovljani became the subject of Bečka's meeting with Pavelić on November 10, 1944. In addition to the *Poglavnik*, the envoy intervened with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mehmed Alajbegović and Minister of the Interior Mato Frković. Pavelić promised that he would inform himself about the problem and present his position at the next meeting. The meeting on November 20 followed the usual pattern — friendly formalities, expressions of goodwill to set matters right, and assurances. Pavelić reassured Bečka that the matter would soon be resolved, that “probably many of the detained Slovaks will be released,” and that “regarding the Slovaks, the matter will be handled as leniently as possible.”⁶⁸

The likely course of the “necessary investigation” can be read between the lines of the last letter, dated December 16, 1944. The collective letter from the inhabitants of Lipovljani serves as a final résumé of their deteriorating situation. The colder temperatures of the pre-Christmas season raised fears that their relatives in Jasenovac might fall ill, as during the late summer when they had been arrested by the Ustaše, they were wearing only light clothing and shoes.⁶⁹ At that point, the unfortunate villagers of Lipovljani did not yet know that most of their relatives were already dead. According to the sparse records of the Jasenovac Memorial Site (*Spomen područje Jasenovac*), of the 72 Jasenovac inmates of Slovak nationality born in Lipovljani, only nine survived 1944. In the final months of the war, however, they were no longer exempt from Ustaša repression.⁷⁰ According to the known data, only one abductee ever returned to Lipovljani: a Czech, Vladimír Kastner (Ušák 1978, 160; Hudec and Kuric 2006, 128).

Conclusion

“The land is soaked with blood [...] People have gone wild and are burning for revenge [...] Villages are burned, railways destroyed, bridges blown up, state buildings torched; the populace alternates between the rule of partisans and that of the Ustaše, Germans, or Italians.”⁷¹

With these words, a disillusioned Slovak envoy, Jozef Cieker, described the situation prevailing in the nominally “friendly” Independent State of Croatia in one of his February 1943 reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bratislava. Less than two years after the founding of a state built on the ruins of Yugoslavia, this was a devastating assessment for the Ustaša political leadership.

As the months passed, the situation deteriorated to the point that the NDH exhibited certain characteristics of a failed state — not through an early loss of formal territorial control, but through the progressive erosion of civilian security, administrative enforcement, and effective authority in peripheral regions. The center-periphery dynamic in the NDH was not one of simple breakdown, but of displaced responsibility. While authorities in Zagreb articulated an ambivalent and selectively inclusive stance toward the Slovak minority, they failed to provide clear legal status, enforceable protections, or effective oversight. This institutional ambiguity enabled local actors to operationalize exclusionary measures — through stigmatization, obstruction of minority institutions, and, in some cases, direct repression. Interwar political loyalties of the Slovak minority — especially the attachment of the Lutherans to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia — may have provided an additional layer of suspicion. In the wartime context, these historical affiliations were not causal in themselves, but could be retrospectively mobilized to legitimize such practices.

The fascist nature of the NDH regime, combined with its inability to consolidate internal order, spun the revolutionary centrifuge of violence ever faster. The security vacuum, marked by power anarchy, spelled human catastrophe for the inhabitants of peripheral and mountainous regions. The collapse, intertwined with the ongoing civil war, condemned civilians of all ethnic backgrounds to years of uncertainty, constantly oscillating between life and death. This trajectory also engulfed Slovak communities, concentrated mainly in Syrmia and Slavonia. The experience of the Slovak minority thus illustrates how minority governance in the NDH operated through a paradoxical combination of symbolic inclusion and practical neglect. While Slovaks were rhetorically portrayed as members of a friendly Slavic nation, their security depended largely on the fluctuating balance of local power structures and the declining capacity of the state. In this sense, the Slovak case highlights

how politically marginal minorities could become expendable within authoritarian wartime regimes. While the violence accompanying the collapse was often indiscriminate and affected civilians of various backgrounds, this does not preclude the role of ethnicity as a structuring factor of vulnerability rather than as an explicit motive of individual perpetrators.

Ustaša perceptions of the Slovak minority evolved from a formal affinity — defined by political loyalty, an artificially constructed “history of common struggles” in the past, and linguistic proximity — to acts of open hostility that stripped away the mask of false friendship. Croatian authorities approached the “Slovak question” with caution from the beginning: while the Slovak State’s embassy lobbied intensively for the minority’s national rights, Ustaša governments maintained only a formal pretense of constructive partnership. As both states declined, the Slovak minority in the NDH found itself abandoned in its struggle for survival and, in the terms of the theoretical framework outlined in the methodological part of the article, remained essentially subordinate within what Andreas Wimmer conceptualizes as a relational triangle between the state, the minority, and competing political or national actors. Fascist regimes, of course, were not normatively designed to protect minorities, nor did they operate within a rights-based framework of minority governance. Yet in relations with minorities originating from formally allied states, they sometimes upheld a symbolic posture of privileged status as part of diplomatic performance, not genuine protection. It is precisely this performative and conditional logic that the category of “frenemy” helps to capture, and whose failure in the case of the Slovak minority in the NDH underscores the gap between declared friendship and lived insecurity.

From the autumn of 1944 onward, the Slovak diplomatic mission in Zagreb not only failed to offer effective assistance but eased its own task by accepting Ustaša arguments and implicitly blaming members of the minority for their own plight. When the Slovaks of Lipovljani — the most severely affected community — appealed to the embassy for help in securing the release of their loved ones from the Jasenovac concentration camp, they received only a cruelly mediated message: the Slovak Republic’s legation was powerless, as those arrested in the Ustaša raid were “partisans and communists.”⁷² This dismissal, reproducing a Ustaša narrative that justified violence, deeply offended the Slovaks of Lipovljani — not only because it was untrue, but also because the predominantly agrarian population had, in the interwar period, sympathized with the Christian-national Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), which had openly despised communism.

Through their own experience, the Slovaks in the NDH increasingly came to realize that the Ustaša state was not the fulfillment of a “Croatian dream,” but a violent and destabilizing political reality — for many Croats themselves and virtually all minorities without distinction, including those not, so to speak, “first in line” for extermination. In this sense, the NDH became a laboratory of ethno-political ambivalence, in which nominally friendly minorities were no more protected from violence than official enemies, and in which the state had lost the capacity to function as a state — except when making symbolic gestures.

This study has demonstrated, through the example of the Slovak minority in the NDH, that even minorities not formally regarded by the regime as an ideological or security threat could be subjected to structural neglect, repression, and eventually physical violence. Although Ustaša ethno-politics nominally invoked ideals of brotherhood, solidarity, and shared interests, in practice, it failed at the most basic functions of protecting and guaranteeing minority rights. Two key factors emerged here: the political redefinition of the minority status, as highlighted with reference to Brubaker’s theory, and the geographical factor emphasized by Kalyvas. Rather than tracing semantic shifts in the concept of “minority,” the article examines how changing political classifications and security perceptions gave rise to altered practices of governance and protection.

The *frenemy* category, empirically grounded in this study, serves as an analytical tool for identifying and naming the structurally ambiguous position of a minority oscillating between regimes of proclaimed benevolence and ethnically inflected suspicion, occasionally materializing in discriminatory or coercive practices. As demonstrated in multiple empirical sections, Slovaks were at times subjected to adverse treatment explicitly justified by their ethnic designation, particularly at

the level of local administration and security forces, even in the absence of a centralized policy of ethnic repression. In the context of a progressively degraded fascist regime such as in the NDH, it becomes clear that formalized friendship with the center of power offered no protective shield — especially in conditions where the state never fully controlled its own territory, decision-making processes, or security apparatus, and where external actors frequently intervened, often spontaneously and without orders. The Slovak minority, as a notional “friend-enemy,” thus became a victim not only of escalating wartime tensions and ethnic ferment in the NDH, but also of the cynicism of state power. The demonstrated gap between the diplomatic platitudes of Ustaša leaders in Zagreb and the reality on the NDH periphery underscores the duality of words and deeds under the conditions of state disintegration framed by the “purifying revolution” of a fascist ruling movement. The NDH thus failed not only as a moral or political project, but as a state in the functional sense: it neither monopolized violence nor fulfilled its most elementary obligation of protecting those under its nominal authority.

Beyond the case of the Slovak minority in the Independent State of Croatia, the analytical perspective developed here invites reflection on other historical contexts in which symbolic affinity coexisted with institutional constraint. In interwar and wartime Europe, comparable constellations emerged in situations where state authorities formally framed certain groups as cultural or ideological allies while simultaneously subjecting them to administrative control, surveillance, or situational coercion. What these cases share is not a uniform pattern of majority-minority interaction, but a mode of governance in which declaratory inclusion operated alongside restrictive state practices. These comparative observations are offered strictly as heuristic points of orientation rather than as claims to generalizability or to the transferability of the analytical category beyond its historically specific context.

Methodologically, the “frenemy” category may serve as a limited comparative heuristic for analyzing state-minority relations in situations of both formal alliance and latent hostility. Its applicability is derived from, and limited by, the empirical conditions under which it was developed, without being presumed to extend uniformly across political systems or historical periods. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the analytical limits of the category. The boundary between a *frenemy* minority and a merely tolerated one is sometimes blurred, requiring careful contextualization and multi-source verification. This reflexive awareness strengthens the category’s utility and guards against its overextension as a catch-all label.

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Notes

- 1 Since the adoption of the Constitution on 21 July 1939, the official name of the state has been the *Slovak Republic*. In practice, however, this designation did not take root. Politicians, as well as the general population, continued to use the original name, the *Slovak State*. For the purposes of this article, I will employ this historically established term, which has also been adopted in historiography.
- 2 For the problematic relations between the Slovak State and Yugoslavia, see: Jarinkovič 2012, 8–63; Sovilj 2016, 121–190, 201–212; Němeček 2000, 385–98.

- 3 Historian Pavol Petruf points to the interconnectedness of the two states through their association with the Fascist Axis, the emerging “new European order,” proclaimed Catholicism, anti-Bolshevism, and a shared narrative of “national liberation.” Petruf 2011, 241.
- 4 For further details, see: Michela 2003a, 112–122; Pejs 2024; Mičko 2019, 111–113.
- 5 Since the Ustaša was the only political party permitted in the NDH, for the context of the years 1941–1945, I will use the adjectives *Ustaša* and *Croatian* on an institutional level interchangeably.
- 6 On the topic of Ustaša terrorism during its period in exile, see: Iordachi and Miljan 2023.
- 7 “Pozdrav prezidenta Dr. Jozefa Tisu šéfovi chorvátskej národnej vlády Dr. Paveličovi.” *Slovák* 23 (88): 2.
- 8 See also the review study: Rychlík 2004, 939–57. From other works analysing specific aspects of Slovak–Croatian political relations and contexts, see, for example, the studies: Jelinek 1980a, Miljan 2019, Tomas 2023.
- 9 “Dr. Anton Pavelič: Prišiel deň oslobodenia a odplaty!” *Gardista* 3 (84): 5.
- 10 The figures for individual municipalities are provided in the material held in the Slovak National Archive Bratislava (*Slovenský národný archív* – SNA), fond (f.) Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1939–1945 (*Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí* – MZV), box 143. According to the *List of Slovak Settlements in the NDH*—which, however, represents only a rough estimate—the largest concentrations of ethnic Slovaks lived in Stara Pazova (7000), Bingula (1500), and in Ilok, Jelisavac, and Našice Markovac (1000 each). Tkáč 2017, 77–79.
- 11 *Dolná zem* is a term used in historiography to denote the Slovak ethnic settlement, mainly in the southern regions of the historic Kingdom of Hungary. Slovaks living in this area (the territory of present-day Serbia, Romania, Croatia, and Hungary) continue to identify themselves as *dolnozemskí Slováci* (“Slovaks of the Lowland”) to this day.
- 12 Čuvar was the head of the office of the so-called State Notary, which was responsible for verifying the legality of documents. It was a largely ceremonial position.
- 13 “Hrvatsko-slovačka prijateljska uzajamnost, izpunjena sadržajem, bit će neslomiva, trajna i vječna.” *Nova Hrvatska* 2 (282): 5.
- 14 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1558/1943 – 2101/43. Cieker to MFA, June 29, 1943.
- 15 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1558/1943 – 2101/43. Cieker to MFA, June 29, 1943.
- 16 According to the last Yugoslav census of 1931, Stara Pazova was home to 6,105 Slovaks. By comparison, Ilok had 1,319 Slovak inhabitants (Stupavský 1944, 48). According to the data of regional historian Andrej Kuric, in 1940, Ilok was home to 1,505 Slovaks. Cf.: Kuric 2002, 15.
- 17 “Czechoslovakists” was a pejoratively perceived designation for adherents of the ideology of Czechoslovak national unity, which held that Czechs and Slovaks constituted two branches of a single nation. In the Slovak context, this ideology became a target of criticism, as it essentially denied the individuality of the Slovaks and, in effect, the very existence of the Slovak nation.
- 18 SNA, f. MZV, box 268, “Slovak settlements in the Banovina of Croatia/Slovenia.”
- 19 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2352/1942. “Slovaks in Croatia, citizenship, arrangement,” September 23, 1942.
- 20 For further details, see the reports in: SNA, f. MZV, box 143.
- 21 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1558/1943 – 1234/43. Cieker to MFA, April 7, 1943.
- 22 “Slováci v Chorvátsku musia sa cítiť ako doma.” *Slovák* 24 (193): 3.
- 23 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2788/42. “Slovak Day in Stara Pazova.”
- 24 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2788/42. “Slovak Day in Stara Pazova – Croatia,” August 27, 1942.
- 25 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, č. 2610/42. “Slovaks in Croatia – approval of an organization – Slovak Day in Stara Pazova,” August 1, 1942.
- 26 “Slováci v Chorvátsku stáli aj politicky vždy pri chorvátskom národe.” *Slovák* 24 (214): 4.
- 27 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2610/42, August 18, 1942.
- 28 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, “Official Record” – report from the Scientific Society for Foreign Slovaks.

- 29 State Archive (*Štátny archív* – ŠA) Bratislava, f. District People's Court (*Okresný ľudový súd* – OLS) Bratislava, 27/48 Jozef Cieker, box 31. Cieker to MFA, January 29, 1943.
- 30 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2101/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – the settlement of their affairs," June 29, 1943.
- 31 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2101/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – the settlement of their affairs," June 29, 1943.
- 32 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1234/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – approval of statutes and the overall situation of Slovaks in the NDH," April 7, 1943.
- 33 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1234/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – approval of statutes and the overall position of Slovaks in the NDH," April 7, 1943.
- 34 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1234/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – approval of statutes and the overall position of Slovaks in the NDH," April 7, 1943.
- 35 Supporters of Edvard Beneš, President of Czechoslovakia from 1935 to 1938. Following the Munich Agreement, Beneš resigned from office and fled to the West. During the Second World War, he headed his government-in-exile in London, which was gradually recognised by all the powers of the anti-fascist coalition.
- 36 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3260/43. "Slovaks in Croatia – approval of statutes," September 22, 1942.
- 37 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 247/43. Preparatory Committee for the Organisation of the SNJ in the NDH to Cieker, March 27, 1943.
- 38 Blaž Lorković, serving as the highest-ranking Croatian diplomat in Bratislava, was the brother of Croatian minister Mladen Lorković. Before him, the interests of the NDH in the Slovak capital had been represented by Dragutin Toth and Josip Berković. Petruš 2011, 234–235.
- 39 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, 265.
- 40 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2047/43. "Slovak–Croatian Cultural Convention – signing," July 2, 1943.
- 41 Central Archives of the Slovak Evangelical A.C. Church in Serbia (*Ústredný archív Slovenskej evanjelickej a. v. cirkvi v Srbsku*) Stara Pazova, f. Slovak Matica (*Matica slovenská*), Circular no. 10, January 12, 1943; Circular no. 11, March 8, 1943.
- 42 "Viac pomoci Slovákom v zahraničí." *Slovák* 25 (174): 3.
- 43 SNA, f. MZV, box 143. "Minutes of the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb," June 16, 1941.
- 44 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 2352/1942. Cieker to MFA, September 23, 1942.
- 45 "Tjedan slovačke kulture u Zagrebu." *Nova Hrvatska* 2 (281): 5.
- 46 "Poslanik Slovačke Republike u Staroj Pazovi." *Nova Hrvatska* 3 (151): 5.
- 47 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 1236/1943. Cieker to MFA, April 12, 1943.
- 48 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, February 18, 1943.
- 49 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, February 18, 1943.
- 50 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, June 21, 1943.
- 51 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Presidium of the Slovak National Unity in Ilok to Cieker, October 16, 1943.
- 52 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Stupavský to Cieker, October 3 and 10, 1943.
- 53 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Stupavský to Cieker, October 3 and 10, 1943.
- 54 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, October 17, 1943.
- 55 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, May 27, 1943.
- 56 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3310/43. Cieker to MFA, October 19, 1943.
- 57 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3310/43. Cieker to MFA, October 19, 1943.
- 58 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3490/43. Cieker to MFA, 14 December 1943; ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, January 23, 1943.

- 59 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, 18 February 1943; also, ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Presidium of the Slovak National Unity in Ilok to Cieker, October 16, 1943.
- 60 SNA, f. MZV, box. 143, no. 3490/43. Cieker to MFA, 14 December 1943; ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, January 23, 1943.
- 61 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3490/43. Cieker to MFA, December 14, 1943.
- 62 "Poglavnik o právach Slovákov v Chorvátsku." *Slovák* 26 (32): 3.
- 63 Slightly different figures for the number of deported Czechs and Slovaks (107) are given by Ušák 1978, 160.
- 64 SNA, f. MZV, box 1157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, November 5, 1944.
- 65 SNA, f. MZV, box 1157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, November 5, 1944.
- 66 SNA, f. MZV, box 1157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, November 16, 1944.
- 67 SNA, f. MZV, box 1157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, November 19, 1944.
- 68 SNA, f. MZV, box 143, no. 3310/43. "Slovaks from Lipovljani – intervention," December 5, 1944, see also Bečko's letter to MFA, November 21, 1944.
- 69 SNA, f. MZV, box 1157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, December 16, 1944.
- 70 Two Slovaks from Lipovljani perished in Jasenovac in 1942, 1 in 1943, 60 in 1944, and the remaining 9 in 1945. See: Pregled i pretraga poimeničnog popisa žrtava KL Jasenovac 1941–1945. Accessible online: <https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=7618>.
- 71 ŠA Bratislava, f. OLS Bratislava, Tlud 27/48, box 31. Cieker to MFA, February 12, 1943.
- 72 SNA, f. MZV, box 1 157, no. 503. Letter to the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Zagreb, December 16, 1944.

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