

Pro-Natal/Anti-Women Policies in Slovak Republic During World War II

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Immediately after creation of Slovak state, a client/puppet state of Nazi Germany, the period of proclaimed moral decay of Czechoslovakia was replaced by the era, which had been marked by numerous efforts to re-claim, and strengthen control over women's reproduction and sexuality. The ruling HSPP fuelled by the nationalist and Catholic pronatalist discourses, the state did not only encourage population growth, but also wished to restore "traditional" family values. While the government aimed to encourage the population increase by social benefits, it predominantly relied on legal punishment, and public shaming of women who had abortion. In this paper I would like to guide you through the introduction of new family politics of Slovak state; propaganda of the motherhood; and rejecting reactions. I will argue that such restrictive policies of family planning have no success, and are rather against-Women.

Slovak Republic and Family Planning

During the 20th century, family planning was never meant to be a private choice of individuals but was rather a subject of national, political, religious, and ideological goals. The Slovak state led by the HSPP was not any different.

Family politic of the Slovak state was influenced by several factors. One was family policy in Nazi Germany, but also Fascist Italy, and the teaching of the Catholic Church. An encyclical of *Casti Connubia* from 1930 by Pius XI. described the abortion as the intentional murder of an innocent person and at the same time rejected any indication for abortion. He also opposed contraceptives. As did Slovakia.

By the Laws on Protection of Foetus approved on March 29, 1941 abortion policies was tightened. The exception was a serious threat to a woman's life. The procedure could be performed only in institutions designated by the Ministry of the Interior after confirmation of the threat to a woman's life by two official doctors. Previous penalties have been increased. Although in many cases the authorities promoted the new law as an act of Christian morality, the main reason for passing this law was the effort to increase the population, and preserve the gender hierarchy.

The ideal of a Slovak woman was a mother with numerous children. However the state did not introduced any significant systematic socio-economic reforms which might help families and

mothers. Government policy and its propaganda tools have strongly opposed abortion, almost without considering the health status of the woman, the social status of the family or the pregnant woman, or regardless of the conditions in which the pregnancy took place.

Yet, the moralistic arguments of the ruling HSPP and the introduction of the new Law on Protection of Foetus in 1941 encountered several pitfalls. The network so-called “angel makers” (or ‘backstreet’ abortionists; in Slovak *anjeličkár*, in German *Engelmacher*), midwives, doctors and physicians who performed abortions, existed throughout the Slovak Republic, and although their activities were endangered by law, they did not disappear.

Women’s Opposition

No political mobilization or major protest actions against ban on abortion and contraception could have been made in the Fascist Slovak Republic. This however does not mean that there was no opposition. I would like to show you two main examples how women did protest against the state family policy.

a) Letter

One of the critics of the newly adopted law was an anonymous letter dated May 7, 1941 addressed to the Presidency of the Slovak Parliament. The senders were Women from Trnava, who criticized the Slovak Parliament’s decision to pass a law without considering the situation of the Slovak people, and the result was that Slovaks “*grumble, blaspheme God and even becomes non-Christian just because you pass the law on maternity protection.*” These were in a very critical position, especially when it came to the reasons for the creation of this law: *„It is easy to shout for the gentlemen in the high seats, so that poverty can be hatched, and then it could protect their backs when something goes wrong.”* It was clear to these women that the republic had no Christian values in the interest of foetal protection, but sought to multiply the population for its own use and protection.

b) Court cases

In my research of state family policy and actual practices I looked into police investigation and court files against women who underwent clandestine and thus illegal and criminal abortion. Such research brought me to understanding of clandestine abortion as an only option for Slovak women to protest against regulation of their sexuality and control of their bodies. I suggest that the response of Slovak women to ban on contraception and abortion was not complying with the law, but rather developing own strategies to control fertility. This meant bypassing the law by pursuing clandestine abortions by searching for providers of abortions. Similarly, to Joanna

Mishtal's findings, I too consider the 'privatisation' of abortion care the widespread, yet in this case loosely-organized clandestine form of protest.

Success of the anti-abortion policies?

Although the Law on Protection of Foetus remained in force until the end of the existence of the wartime Slovak Republic, it did not stop abortions. It is not possible to accurately state the number of abortions in the Slovak Republic from the enforcement of the law until 1945, in practice the "success" of this law did not occur.

While in 1941 there was a reduced number of treated "criminal" abortions at the Bratislava Women's Clinic. Yet this data cannot be a proof of the effectiveness of the Law on Protection of Foetus. A significant number of women from areas which were annexed by Hungary after the Vienna Award in 1938 were excluded from "abortion" statistics of the Bratislava Women's Clinic. Therefore the number of women treated at this clinic in general dropped. Additionally, the increase in the number of births was mainly related to the strong generation. This generation that was numerous reached the reproductive age, and thus more people in reproductive age equals to a larger number of new-borns.

In addition, not all women who underwent abortion discreetly and without complications were never disclosed. More complicated cases of other women could be hidden from hospitals or clinics. And last but not least, women who died of complications associated with improperly performed abortion - inflammation, while the origin of the inflammation was not further determined, were also not included in any "abortion" statistics. Thus, there is no reason to believe that pro-natal policy, and thus the tightening of the criminalization of abortion, had reduced the number of abortions.

To conclude, instead of increasing birth rate, the wartime's Slovak family policies rather harmed the society, and women in particular. I argue that stricter regulation of abortion did not lead, and will never lead to increase of birth rate. I also believe that this fact has been always acknowledged, yet the political elite nevertheless decided to restrict women's reproductive rights in order to preserve the patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, punishing women for abortion regardless their circumstances for having rejected their "natural" obligations as mothers was not only a chastisement for the illegal act of terminating pregnancy, but as Miranda Pollard suggest it was a price to pay for disturbing the social order. Similar family policies have then carried its legacy until present days not only in Slovakia. The populist and undemocratic forces against gender equality and women's reproductive rights see such family policies as a 'ethical' model to be achieved. While women, activists and democratic society see acts leading towards similar restrictions in family policies as attacks on women's right over their

bodies, and thus attacks on human rights, and democratic values. Any limitation of reproductive rights is then seen as a warning, and an impulse to act.