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"Such women—such a nation." Antifeminism and Female Mobilization in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State

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Abstract

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Nazism, Fascism, and regimes under their influence, such as the Slovak State, promoted a traditionalist and patriarchal view of the role of women in society, offering a definition primarily as mothers. The present article explores how, by way of mass mobilization efforts, the Slovak State positioned women both as instruments in reinforcing the regime's stance and as active agents in promoting its political agenda, examining the state's efforts to provide alternatives to suppressed feminist movements, and shedding light on the complex and often contradicting roles of women. By examining the writings of supporters of women amongst the regime, this study investigates their contributions to redefining motherhood as a political act and creating state-sanctioned avenues for women's participation in public life.

"Such women—such a nation,"[1] claimed the Slovak weekly *Nový svet* (New World). The rise of Fascism and Nazism and the movements' ideological position on a woman's role in society had great influence across Europe. Slovak wartime politics, represented solely by Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana (HSĽS, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party), was no different. The proclaimed traditionalist and patriarchal understanding of the sole role of women as mothers within Nazism and Fascism aligned well with Slovak rural conservativism deeply rooted in religion, and was promoted in political Catholicism.[2] While profoundly misogynist, the Fascist movements across Europe aimed for mass support—women included[3]—and as such,

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1 Aké ženy – taký národ. In *Nový svet*, 31 October 1942, p. 21.

2 See: BAKA, Igor. *Politický systém a režim Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1939–1940*. Bratislava : Vojenský Historický Ústav, 2010; KAMENEC, Ivan. The Slovak state, 1939–1945. In TEICH, Mikuláš – KOVÁČ, Dušan – BROWN, Martin D. (eds.) *Slovakia in History*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 175–192; NEDELSKY, Nadya. The wartime Slovak state: a case study in the relationship between ethnic nationalism and authoritarian patterns of governance. In *Nations and Nationalism*, 2003, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 215–234.

3 See about Nazi Germany: KOONZ, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*. London; New York : Routledge, 1986; KRIMMER, Elisabeth. *German Women's Life Writing and the Holocaust: Complicity and Gender in the Second World War*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018. For comparison with Fascist Italy see: GRAZIA, Victoria de. *How Fascism Ruled Women*.

the mobilisation of women was essential for the success of these movements. The present article aims to explore female antifeminist mobilisation within the Fascist-Axis Slovak State,[4] with an emphasis on the relevant female actors.

While the existing research on Slovak women's roles in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State exploring the complex interplay between gender, politics, and ideology has excelled in recent years, such studies traditionally focus on women as objects of state policies. Similarly to Wendy Lower's suggestion, the agency of women in history has been underappreciated in general, and in the research of women in far-right[5] movements and regimes, even more problematically. Given the moral and legal implications, the agency of women in the crimes of such regimes has not been fully elaborated or explained.[6] Scholars have examined how such regimes sought to suppress feminist movements while simultaneously co-opting women into roles that aligned with state goals.[7] Researchers have highlighted how far-right regimes promoted traditional gender roles, glorifying motherhood and domestic life as central to their vision of a moral, hierarchical society while delegitimizing feminist achievements, casting them as threats to societal harmony, family values, and national identity.[8] In contexts like the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, scholars

Berkeley : University of California Press, 1992; GARVIN, Diana. *Feeding Fascism: The Politics of Women's Food Work*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2022; GOTTLIEB, Julie V. *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement, 1923–1945*. London : I. B. Tauris, 2000. For the more general approach and collective essays see: PASSMORE, Kevin (ed.) *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2003; BLEE, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Berkley : University of California Press, 1991; HEINEMANN, Isabel – STERN, Alexandra (eds.) Special Issue: Gender and Far-Right Nationalism. In *Journal of Modern European History*, 2022, vol. 20, no. 3.

4 Throughout this article, the term "Fascist-Axis Slovak State" is used to describe the ideology, regime and politics of the Slovak State during 1939–1945, see: HRUBOŇ, Anton. Fascist-Axis Slovakia's Spiritual Polis Politicus: Transformation of Ružomberok to the 'Capital of the Movement' under the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party Rule (1938–1945). In *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 2024, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 171–191.

5 The umbrella term "far-right" is used in order to cover various movements which have been linked to right-wing extremism, radical conservative, ultra-nationalism, chauvinism, authoritarianism, and racism, such as various forms of Fascism, Nazism, Falangism, neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, the alt-right, white supremacism and other Far-right ideologies, movements, and regimes, such as the regime of the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, see: GOLDER, Matt. Far Right Parties in Europe. In *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2016, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 477–497; MUDDE, Cas. *The Far Right Today.* New York : John Wiley & Sons, 2019; HAINSWORTH, Paul. *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*. London : Pinter, 2000; GRIFFIN, Roger – FELDMAN, Matthew (eds.) *A Fascist Century*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; GRIFFIN, Roger. *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion*. London : Routledge, 2013; LAZARIDIS, Gabriella – CAMPANI, Giovanna – BENVENISTE, Annie (eds.) *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe: Populist Shifts and 'Othering'*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; RYDGREN, Jens (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right.* New York : Oxford University Press, 2018; TWIST, Kimberly A. *Partnering with Extremists: Coalitions between Mainstream and Far-Right Parties in Western Europe.* Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2019; HRUBOŇ, Anton. *Fašizmus náš slovenský*. Bratislava : Premedia, 2021.

6 LOWER, Wendy. *Hitler's Furries*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, p. 11.

7 See: ZAVACKÁ, Marína. "Nová žena" so starou prachovkou. Prejavy občianskeho vzdoru na stránkach časopisu Katolíckej jednoty žien 1939 a 1940. In DUDEKOVÁ, Gabriela et al. *Na ceste k modernej žene. Kapitoly z dejín rodových vzťahov na Slovensku*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2011, pp. 375–402; ZAVACKÁ, Marína. Crossing sisters: Patterns of Protest in the Journal of the Catholic Union of Slovak Women during the Second World War. In *Social History,* 2012, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 425–451; ZAVACKÁ, Marína. Nová žena v útoku a obrane. Druhá svetová vojna v časopise Katolíckej jednoty žien. In *Forum Historiae*, 2009, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 66–78.

8 On the ideal roles of women in far-right movements throughout history see: SNEERINGER, Julia. *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany*. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2002; LILLY, Carol S. – IRVINE, Jill A. Negotiating Interests: Women and

emphasize the fusion of Catholicism, nationalism, and antifeminism where women were portrayed as guardians of morality and tradition, aligning their roles with religious and nationalist imperatives.[9] Research shows how women were exploited to serve the regime's broader political agenda and attempts directed towards reconciling traditional gender norms with pragmatic needs during wartime, yet not without resistance.[10]

As scholars have often focused on analysing how the regime portrayed the ideal woman, restricting previously achieved rights and freedoms, this article turns the attention on the women themselves, examining how individuals actively contributed to the effectiveness of antifeminist narratives, which remains underexplored. In the focus on women's lived experiences, significant potential exists for further research into the tensions between ideological goals and practical realities, and most importantly into women's active participation in successes of the regime. The gap this article aims to fill is to reveal how the regime of the Fascist-Axis Slovak State offered alternatives to the suppressed feminist movements, by re-interpreting motherhood as a political act and creating state-sanctioned opportunities for women to participate in public life, often through tightly controlled organizations. The paradoxical nature of women's experiences under such regimes is explored here, especially of those women who achieved leadership roles, professional advancement, and public influence, often while actively promoting narratives that opposed feminist ideals. This article therefore seeks to fill a gap in the present research by considering the study of antifeminism, especially when conducted by women, and thus examining women's roles in these movements beyond the promoted maternal role, which is crucial in understanding far-right politics in the past and today. Thus, the goal is to explore the antifeminist discourses during the Slovak wartime period, identify what alternatives women were offered as replacements for feminist achievements, and to examine how women were both instrumentalized and actively engaged in antifeminist mobilization by the far-right regime.

Nationalism in Serbia and Croatia, 1990–1997. In *East European Politics and Societies*, 2002, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 109–144; DARBY, Seyward. *Sisters in Hate. American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*. New York : Little, Brown and Company, 2020; LEIDIG, Eviane. *The Women of the Far Right Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2023; BLEE, Kathleen – MCGEE-DEUTSCH, Sandra (eds.) *Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay Across Borders*. Philadelphia : The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

9 ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. New Slovak Woman: The Feminine Ideal in the Authoritarian Regime of the Slovak State, 1939–1945. In NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa (eds.) *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust.* Boston : Academic Studies Press, 2021, pp. 62–80; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Propagácia materstva v období prvej Slovenskej republiky (1939–1945). In TIŠLIAR, Pavol (ed.) *Populačné štúdie Slovenska 3*. Bratislava : Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, o.z., 2014, pp. 31–110; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. *Strážkyne rodinných kozubov? Ženy v ideológii a politike slovenského štátu*. Bratislava : Veda, 2020; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva – HRNČIAROVÁ, Daniela. Ženy v období autonómneho Slovenska. In BLÜMM, Alexander – RYBÁR, Lukáš (eds.) *Historické štúdie. Acta historica Posoniensia 21*. Bratislava : Stimul, 2013, pp. 261–298.

10 See: ZAVACKÁ, Marína. *Ľudácka prevýchova. Mária Janšáková* v *Ilave roku 1939 a jej Cela č. 20*. Bratislava : Artforum, 2018; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Späť do kuchýň, kostolov a k deťom. Ženy počas autonómie 1938–1939. In *Forum Historiae*, 2019, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 19–39; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. Žena proti štátu. "Kriminálne" potraty v čase Slovenskej republiky 1939–1945. In HYRJA, Jozef (ed.) *Tisovi poza chrbát. Príbehy odporu voči ľudáckemu režimu.* Bratislava : Hadart, 2020, pp. 31–51; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. In the Name of Helping Women. Women against the Family Policy of Slovak Republic during the Second World War. In *Central Europe*, 2023, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 78–96.

The present article does not seek to provide an exhaustive large-scale analysis of archival materials. Instead, it focuses on conceptualizing the representative narratives that underpin the understanding of women's contradictory roles within the fascist framework, exploring how women were positioned simultaneously as tools to anchor the regime of the Slovak State, and also as active agents in promoting and supporting the antifeminist agenda. By examining these dual roles, the article sheds light on the complex interplay between women's prescribed roles as symbols of traditional values and their active participation in the regime's successes. In doing so, women were explored not merely as passive recipients of the antifeminist narrative, but also key contributors to the dissemination and implementation. Therefore, in this article, the attention is shifted to this duality which reflects broader tensions in the ways women's involvement was framed, manipulated, and leveraged to align with fascist and other far-right ideological objectives. In addition, by situating the Slovak case within the broader European context—particularly in light of recent research on the active roles of women in countries beyond Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Great Britain, such as Hungary, Croatia, Latvia or Romania[11]—it is sought to deepen our understanding of the Slovak experience while contributing to the broader scholarship on fascist movements in Europe.

Antifeminist Discourses in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State

The Fascist-Axis Slovak State (1939–1945) operated as a client state of Nazi Germany, marked by authoritarian rule under HSĽS. The political climate was shaped by a mix of Nazi collaboration, inspiration from Italian fascist ideology, Catholic conservatism represented politically by the country's president—a Catholic priest—Jozef Tiso,[12] and extreme nationalism, together forming a repressive regime, including persecution of political opponents, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic laws, eventually resulting in mass deportations and murder.[13] Yet it would be a mistake to interpret the Slovak State as a sim-

11 See: PETŐ, Andrea. *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; YEOMANS, Rory. Militant Women, Warrior Men and Revolutionary Personae. The New Ustasha Man and Woman in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–1945. In *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 2005, vol. 83, no. 4, pp. 685–732; IOANID, Radu. The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard. In *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 2004, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 419–453; AXINIA, Anca Diana. *Women and politics in the Romanian Legionary Movement*. Florence : European University Institute, 2022; AXINIA, Anca Diana. "In This Country, Women Are Also Soldiers": Interrelations between Age and Gender in the Women's Section of the Romanian Legionary Movement. In *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire*, 2023, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 468–491; OPPERMANN, Paula Antonella. *Changing contexts, one agenda. Latvia's fascist Pērkonkrusts from inter- to post-war.* Glasgow : University of Glasgow, 2022.

12 KAMENEC, Ivan. *Dr. Jozef Tiso 1887–1947: tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka*. Bratislava : Archa, 1998; WARD, James Mace. *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia*. Ithaca; NY : Cornell University Press, 2013; HRUBOŇ, Anton. *Mýtus a kult Jozefa Tisa.* Bratislava : Paradigma Publishing, 2022.

13 See: RAJCAN, Vanda – VADKERTY, Madeline – HLAVINKA, Ján. Slovakia. In MEGARGEE, Geoffrey P. – WHITE, Joseph R. – HECKER, Mel (eds.) *Camps and Ghettos under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany. Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, Vol. 3*. Bloomington : United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2018, pp. 842–852. See also: NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. Public Health as Resistance in the Sereď Camp in Slovakia. In VASTENHOUT Laurien – LÁNIČEK, Jan (eds.) *Jewish Councils in Nazi Europe, 1938–1945: A Pan European Perspective. European Holocaust Studies 6.* Göttingen : Wallstein, 2025, pp. 121–140.

plified and belated mirror image of Nazi Germany. HSĽS's program neither duplicated the Nazi nor the Fascist program, but developed its own version of politics adapted to local developments and legacies.[14] This distinct adaptation was also evident in the regime's approach to gender roles and a woman's place in society.[15] While inspired by broader fascist ideologies, HSĽS tailored its antifeminist policies to align with Slovakia's cultural and religious traditions, as well as historical context.[16] In the Slovak State, this included reinforcing patriarchal values through restrictive measures on women's education, employment, and public engagement, ensuring their roles were confined to the home and family as key pillars of the Christian (Catholic) and nation's moral and social fabric.

In a recent book, and also in a number of her articles, Slovak historian Eva Škorvanková analyses the aspect of the antifeminist narrative in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State in detail. She points out that the regime sought to consolidate traditional values, emphasizing the primacy of the family and promoting patriarchal norms.[17] The roles prescribed for women were largely confined to motherhood and domestic duties, reflecting broader efforts to reinforce gender hierarchies. Within this narrative, the state's propaganda and policies intended to attract women as key agents in the creation of a morally and ethnically "pure" Slovak nation, while simultaneously suppressing feminist movements and dissenting voices.[18] The state portrayed feminism as a threat to national and moral values; decadent and unhealthy, rejecting the natural calling of every woman. A good woman was then a mother, "A nation that does not have healthy women and responsible mothers will perish."[19] A woman transgressing from her "normal" role, attracted either by immoral feminist, communist, capitalist or combination of all above was no longer desired by any part of the nation, "Is she still a woman? Is she still a wife? Is she still a mother? Is she still a citizen? Is she still a suitable member of the national community?"[20] In addition to casting feminism as a destabilizing force, antifeminism was instrumental in delegitimizing liberal and leftist ideologies, which were often associated with feminist movements. In the case of the Slovak State, the first Czechoslovak State was aligned

14 See: HRUBOŇ, Anton. Creating the Paradigm of 'New Nation': Eugenic Thinking and the Culture of Racial-Hygiene in the Slovak State. In *Fascism*, 2021, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 275–297; HRUBOŇ, Anton. Slovenský fašizmus. In HRUBOŇ, Anton. *Fašizmus náš slovenský*. Bratislava : Premedia, 2021, pp. 17–174.

15 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2021, pp. 62–80; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Family Planning in Slovakia 1939–1945 and its Ideological Influences. In HEIN-KIRCHER, Heidi – HIEMER, Elisa Maria – NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa (eds.) *Challenging Norms: Family Planning as a Reflection of Social Change in 20th Century.* New York : Berghahn Books, 2025 (forthcoming).

16 See: DUDEKOVÁ, Gabriela. Diskurz o poslaní vzdelaných žien pred a po roku 1918. In DUDEKOVÁ 2011, pp. 94–116; KLIEMS, Alfrun. "Objatie" a "prienik". Ľudovít Štúr, poézia a ženstvo. In ZAJAC, Peter (ed.) *Štúr, Štúrovci, Romantici, Obrodenci*. Bratislava : Veda, 2016, pp. 299–312; HOLLÝ, Karol. *Ženská emancipácia. Diskurz slovenského národného hnutia na prelome 19. a 20. storočia*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2011; MAGNONE, Lena. Dennica. Prípadová štúdia marginalizácie žien v stredoeurópskych modernistických hnutiach. In *Slovenská literatúra*, 2024, vol. 71, no. 6, pp. 555–568; GREGOROVÁ, Hana. *Slovenka pri knihe.* Bratislava : Aspekt, 2007; KODAJOVÁ, Daniela (ed.) *Živena 150 rokov spolku slovenských* žien. Bratislava : Slovart 2019.

17 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2020, pp. 69–75.

18 See: NEŠŤÁKOVÁ 2023, In the Name, pp. 78–96; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. *Be Fruitful and Multiply. Slovakia's Family Planning Under Three Regimes 1918–1965*. Marburg : Verlag Herder-Institut, 2023, pp. 102–108.

19 Ženská spustlosť. In *Gardista*, 18 April 1943, p. 3.

20 Ženská spustlosť. In *Gardista*, 18 April 1943, p. 3.

with feminism as well as communism and the European Jewry.[21] By portraying feminism as an alien, subversive ideology imported from liberal or socialist movements, threatening the cohesion of the traditional, patriarchal nation, the regime strengthened its nationalist and authoritarian narrative, presenting its vision as the only viable path to national renewal and cultural integrity.[22] This strategy ensured that antifeminism became not only a social stance, but a key political tool in advancing far-right objectives.[23]

For a deeper and more systematic examination of antifeminist discourse in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, a closer look into its origin within HSĽS prior to 1938 will be essential in the future. As for now, an analysis of antifeminism in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, suggests that it was closely aligned with the regime's goals and broader far-right ideologies, serving as a mechanism to reinforce traditional gender roles and bolster the state's vision of a hierarchically ordered society.[24] By rejecting feminist achievements and framing them as threats to societal harmony and national identity, the regime sought to consolidate power and maintain a patriarchal social structure. In regimes like the Slovak State, which fused Catholicism with nationalist ideology, feminism was framed as a rejection of divine or natural law.[25] Religious teachings were used to reinforce the notion that women's subordination to men was divinely ordained and vital for societal order. Feminism was linked to moral decline and social disorder, with claims that it encouraged selfishness, promiscuity, and a rejection of traditional values. Feminist calls for independence were depicted as eroding the moral fabric of society. By advocating for women's rights, feminists were accused of undermining the family unit, seen as the cornerstone of the nation.[26] Women's primary contributions to society were framed as rooted in their biological and moral roles as mothers and caregivers, and this role in the far-right movements and regimes became essential to the proliferation of a "racially pure" national community.[27] The regime thus emphasized that women's "natural" and "divine" duties were to nurture the family and bear children,

21 See: SZABÓ, Miloslav. *Potraty. Dejiny slovenských kultúrnych vojen od Hlinku po Kuffu*. Bratislava : NPress, 2020; SZABÓ, Miloslav. *Kráska a zvrhlík. Rasa a rod v literatúre 19. a 20. storočia*. Bratislava : NPress, 2022.

22 Dr. P. A. Feminizmus v Anglicku. In *Slovák*, 3 November 1942, p. 1.

23 ZAHAY, Megan L. What "Real" Women Want: Alt-Right Femininity Vlogs as an Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic. In *Media and Communication,* 2022, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 170–179; BIRSL, Ursula (ed.) *Rechtsextremismus und Gender. Gefälligkeitsübersetzung: Right-wing extremism and gender. Quelle*. Opladen : B. Budrich, 2011; PETŐ, Andrea. Gender as a Symbolic Glue Makes European Freedom of Education at Stake. In *The Progressive Post*, 22 September 2018, https://ssrn.com/abstract=3898855 [last viewed on 28 April 2025]; BECK, Dorothee – HABED, Adriano José – HENNINGER, Annettee (eds.) *Blurring Boundaries – 'Anti-Gender' Ideology Meets Feminist and LGBTQ+ Discourses*. Opladen : Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2024; GRAFF, Agnieszka – KOROLCZUK, Elżbieta. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. London; New York : Taylor & Francis, 2022; KOVÁTS, Eszter. Anti-gender politics in East-Central Europe: Right-wing defiance to West-Eurocentrism. In *GENDER – Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 2021, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 76–90.

24 NEŠŤÁKOVÁ 2023, Be fruitful, pp. 102–107.

25 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2020, pp. 11, 37.

26 GROSSMANN, Atina. Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism. In *Gender and History*, 1991, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 350–358; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. Family Conceptions at the Intersection of Feminism, Public Health, and Nationalism in Czechoslovakia (1918–1939). In *Journal of Family History,* 2023, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 309–322.

27 HRUBOŇ 2021, Creating, pp. 275–297.

portraying feminist aspirations for equality as unnatural and selfish, as betrayals of their duty to the nation which distracted them from raising the next generation of citizens. In the Slovak State, feminist ideas on women, but also any prospect of women entering the workforce or participating in public life, would be countered with the argument that this would disrupt economic and social stability.[28] The employment of women was often seen as taking jobs from men or reducing their focus on family responsibilities.

These narratives collectively sought to delegitimize feminist movements, redefine women's roles in service of the state, and align gender relations with the broader authoritarian and nationalist goals of the regime. The regime's policies discouraged female participation in public and political life, redirecting their contributions toward the domestic sphere to support demographic growth and foster a compliant citizenry.[29]

Nationalist Female Mobilisation as an Alternative to Feminism

Given the significant advancements achieved by feminism by 1930s, any regime seeking to curtail women's rights had to propose alternative measures to placate the nation's women and mitigate potential unrest. For younger generations of girls and women who had grown up embracing the gains of feminism and women's emancipation—such as access to education, greater financial independence, and the ability to choose a partner without parental approval—the outright rejection of these achievements was untenable. These advances had become deeply embedded in their sense of identity and in future aspirations. However, the regime found ways to reinterpret and repurpose these emancipatory ideals which aligned with its ideological goals.

In March 1941, the more radical daily newspaper *Gardista* (the Guardist) published an article and a survey asking readers if emancipation, meaning feminism, has made women happier. The author of this call, Mária Klimanová, who was primarily an editor for Slovak radio, explains the intention of the survey this way:

> Emancipation has not been properly understood in recent years […] Well, the idea of emancipation itself is not bad, it is just that it is poorly implemented in practical life. I guess even women themselves misunderstand it, when it takes away from their femininity so much that men prefer to look for women who are less emancipated.[30]

Klimanová and other authors strategically avoided the term "feminism," with its associations of activism and societal change, when talking about rights and equality for Slovak women, deeming it too provocative and subversive.[31]

28 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2019, pp. 19–39.
29 ZAVACKÁ 2009, pp. 66–78; ZAVACKÁ 2011, pp. 375–402.
30 KLIMANOVÁ, Mária. Urobila emancipácia ženy šťastnejšími? In *Gardista*, 23 March 1941, p. 12.
31 The term "feminism" was rarely used with a positive connotation in the Slovak context. Even leftist and communist women politicians and activists distanced themselves from the label, dismissing feminism as a bourgeois construct. They rejected the notion of being identified as feminists, viewing the term as incompatible with their class-based ideology and political priorities. NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. Forgotten Women. Slovak Communist Women Struggle for Reproductive Rights on Pages of Proletárka in the 1920s. In MASHEVA, Ivelina – ZIMMERMANN, Susan Carin (eds.) *Through the Prism of Gender and Work. Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond, 19th to 20th Centuries*. Leiden : Brill, 2023, pp. 167–201;

Instead, they used the less contentious term "emancipation," which could be reframed to align with the regime's ideological goals, emphasizing women's roles within the confines of tradition and national duty rather than as a challenge to existing power structures. Klimanová smoothly suggested re-interpreting women's emancipation to fit the regime's ideology and intentions by choosing everything that is beneficial from the understanding of the term emancipation, but nothing which could destroy femininity. She considers one of the signs of femininity to be lower intelligence, "it would also be against nature if we [women] wanted to be smarter than men […] and if someone is smarter, God forbid she shows it to men."[32] While assuming the "natural" roles and intellectual predispositions of women, Klimanová quite elegantly emphasized that Slovak women must escape the type of emancipation which make them appear too masculine, but at the same time, she admits that women could not return to the times "when women were deprived of education, when no one cared whether a woman felt something, what she was thinking about, […] So we still stick to the motto 'No way back, we must go forward!'"[33] With such an ending, Klimanová encourages the readers of *Gardista* to write to the editors and advise them on what kind of emancipation would be beneficial for both Slovak women and men.

By reshaping the narrative, the regime presented a version of emancipation that appeared compatible with its antifeminist agenda. Women were encouraged to view their education and skills not as tools for personal advancement or societal equality, but as resources to serve the state, strengthen traditional family structures, and fulfil nationalistic duties. In this reimagined framework, women's independence and capabilities were acknowledged, but only insofar as they could be leveraged to reinforce the regime's values, such as motherhood, social service, and moral leadership within the confines of the domestic and "women's spheres."

Indeed, the Slovak fascist-like HSĽS intended to highlight the perceived failures of feminism and other political parties in addressing women's emancipation, recognizing the necessity of appealing to women by offering alternative solutions. However, HSĽS, like many other similar parties across Europe, faced the same problem as Andrea Pető pointed out: "how to integrate women who have increasing economic and psychological independence into the movement and into the ideal state as envisioned by the movement, when in principal, the objective of the state is to confine women in their homes."[34] To replace feminist achievements and goals, the Fascist-Axis Slovak State had to craft a substitute that aligned with its ideological framework and addressed women's needs in ways that reinforced the regime's goals. To examine such methods of integrating Slovak women into the movement, and the antifeminist strategies

ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Otázka regulácie pôrodnosti na stránkach ženskej komunistickej tlače na Slovensku. In TIŠLIAR, Pavol (ed.) *Populačné štúdie Slovenska 10*. Bratislava : Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, o.z., 2017, pp. 17–44.

32 KLIMANOVÁ 1941, p. 12.

33 KLIMANOVÁ 1941, p. 12. A reference to a famous motto by Ľudovít Štúr, a Slovak revolutionary, politician, writer, and a leader of the Slovak national revival in the 19th century.

34 PETŐ 2020, pp. 21–22.

developed and propagated by women, writings by women who supported and represented the regime, and thus participated in its success, will be analysed, though an examination of the two main aspects: motherhood and female youth mobilisation.

Empowering Motherhood: Nationalist Appeals to a Women's Duty

In the Slovak State, motherhood was not merely framed as an abstract ideal, but as a profound, active role central to the nation's future. Women were tasked with the essential responsibility of creating and raising new generations, ensuring the upbringing of ideal citizens who would embody the values and goals of the state. This vision positioned motherhood as a full-time engagement, one that required undivided focus and dedication. Under this framework, women were expected to withdraw from public life and paid labour, as these pursuits were seen as distractions from their "natural" and most important calling.[35] Yet, instead of offering some rewards for women to make staying out of the workforce more appealing, such as significant financial incentives, tax breaks or stipends for homemakers, the state forced women out of paid jobs and campaigned against the employment of married women.[36] The press linked this campaign to a general criticism of women's employment, which was allegedly associated with a lack of interest in starting a family and a rejection of motherhood. Part of the reasoning for dismissing married women from their jobs was to ensure men's opportunities in job markets, "a woman must not take work from others," as the chairman of the autonomous government, later president of the Slovak State, Jozef Tiso explained in 1938.[37] He clarified the motivation of his Party:

> We want to return women to the family. Where a man earns and has a salary that would support three families […] We want to return men to women who will have salaries that will allow them to take care of their families in a manner appropriate to their status.[38]

The government of the Slovak Autonomy, and later of the state, was referring predominantly to women working in civil service, offices, as clerks, or teachers. Working class women in paid labour in factories or agriculture were not of much interest to the regime.[39] Dismissing women from their jobs in civil service was supposed to be a solution for unemployment (of men), and women were required to make the sacrifice for the economy and the nation.[40] If the sacrifice were not voluntarily, women would be forced.[41]

Even women around the Catholic Union of Slovak Women and its journal, *Nová žena* (the New Woman)—whose unconditional support was expected—raised their concerns.[42] Therefore, support from women, especially the model Slovak woman, was crucial to proceed with further restrictions for women without much resistance. When journalist Jana Pivarčeková Vlková

35 SZABÓ 2020; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ 2023, In the Name, pp. 78–96.
36 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2014, pp. 31–110.
37 Slovenský snem skutkom. In *Slovák*, 20 November 1938, p. 1.
38 Slovenský snem skutkom. In *Slovák*, 20 November 1938, p. 1.
39 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2019, p. 28; NEŠŤÁKOVÁ 2023, Forgotten Women, pp. 167–201.
40 Skoro 20.000 vydatých žien v štátnej službe. In *Slovák*, 23 December 1938, p. 2.
41 POCKODY, Štefan. Od koreňov treba nápravy. In *Slovenský denník*, 4 November 1938, p. 3.
42 ZAVACKÁ 2012, pp. 425–451.

asked about women's employment and the plan to dismiss women from workplaces, Angela Sidorová, wife of a key politician Karol Sidor,[43] offered a deeply contradicting answer. First, she replied: "Well, you know, Slovak women do not have to worry. We need every workforce."[44] Sidorová clearly supported the Fascist-inspired, deeply conservative, chauvinist and Catholic regime, but she also expressed fear that women might become second-class citizens under the regime they supported.[45] In one breath, Sidorová added:

> a bigger salary for men, so that they can support their families in a humane and dignified way, and the woman will not have to bring money. She will be then able to apply her abilities and desires within family life.[46]

Inspired by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and other Fascism-inspired regimes, women in Slovakia had also begun to be marginalized from public life, restricted from certain occupations, and unable to enter university.[47] Yet Slovak women, especially those of the youngest generation, were clearly impacted by the women's movement and feminism. Experiencing a democratic republic, a certain level of societal and economic independence, an increase of gender equality or even sexual liberation, even those women who supported HSĽS found the policies of the Slovak regime disappointing, if not offensive. Sidorová must have been aware of the upsetting results for women who were to be dismissed from universities and their jobs, as she added: "It would not be fair to banish an excellent female worker only to the kitchen, because a woman gives a lot to human culture."[48] Her contradicting answers only prove how torn she was on the question of female employment. In her own life, Sidorová enjoyed some new opportunities for women as she worked as an editor and was active in public and political life in the interwar Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, as the wife of the leading representative of the Slovak State, she was expected to promote the same position as the regime demanded. Moreover, the fact that she was taking care of her four children at that time played well to her ideal portrayal.

43 Karol Sidor (1901–1953) was a Slovak journalist, diplomat and politician. He was a member of Slovenská ľudová strana (the Slovak People's Party, later renamed as HSĽS) from 1920. He had important roles within the structure of the Party, such editor-in-chief of the daily *Slovák* and commander of Hlinkova garda (the Hlinka Guard). He served as member of the Czechoslovak National Assembly from 1935–1939; Minister without portfolio in the Czecho-Slovak government from 1938–1939. He acted as Chairman of the Slovak autonomous government for a short time, and Minister of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. As he rejected German pressure to declare an independent Slovak State in March 1939, he was removed from Slovak political life on the orders of Germany and spent the wartime years as a Slovak ambassador to the Vatican. After the war, he escaped reunited Czechoslovakia where he was sentenced in absentia to 20 years in prison.

44 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ, Jana. Rozhovor s Angelou Sidorovou. In *Nový svet*, 11 February 1939, p. 17.

45 BACCHETTA, Paola – POWER, Margaret (eds.) *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*. London & New York : Routledge, 2002.

46 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

47 ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Snahy o obmedzenie vysokoškolského štúdia žien v období slovenského štátu. In *Historický časopis,* 2018, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 649–670; ŠEMŠEJ, Matej. Univerzitné študentky počas prvej Slovenskej republiky. In DUDEKOVÁ 2011, pp. 367–368. See also: STEPHENSON, Jill. *Women in Nazi Germany*. New York : Longman, 2001, pp. 17–20; BLEE – MCGEE-DEUTSCH 2012.

48 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

In contrast to her encouragement of women to focus on families and withdraw from paid labour and public life, Sidorová shared that her oldest daughter Oľga, who had begun to study at a *gymnasium* (grammar school) wishes to become a journalist "like her father was."[49] Clearly Sidorová, like other far-right women advocating for antifeminism and promoting traditional gender roles, emphasizing a woman's place within the family, sometimes faced contradictions, particularly when envisioning the futures of their own daughters, for whom they pictured a broader range of possibilities, including democratic values, equality, and even feminist achievements.[50] Motivated by a desire to prevent her daughters from growing up in a world with fewer rights than she herself had enjoyed, Sidorová perhaps believed herself able to navigate the regime's restrictive framework and as a woman of political elite, to offer a life of opportunities for her daughters beyond the regime's vision for girls and women.

At the same time, the regime's nationalist rhetoric redefined women's roles, urging them to embrace motherhood as a patriotic sacrifice, an act that entwined their familial responsibilities with their duty to the nation, framing subordination as a contribution to national strength and survival. This sacrifice often entailed withdrawing from public life, relinquishing careers, and leaving civic engagement and personal ambitions to dedicate themselves fully to their families. The reporter interviewing Sidorová commented on her role as a female activist and author (under the pseudonym Ada Stromská) of Slovak history. Yet the more important position seems to be Sidorová's backing of her husband, standing side-by-side him when persecuted during the first Czechoslovak republic, "What an exemplary Slovak mother who truly understands her mission and does not think about difficulties."[51] This self-sacrifice was framed as evidence of loyalty, duty, and alignment with the regime's priorities, reinforcing the expectation that a woman's primary responsibility was to support the broader ideological and nationalistic goals.

Yet, this sacrifice was framed as only temporary, with the promise that the new regime would ultimately compensate for past struggles and provide women with everything they needed, especially when shown as devoted partners who patiently awaited their husbands' return from urgent work for the nation, link Alžbeta Machová, wife of the Head of the Propaganda Office, Leader of Hlinkova garda (the Hlinka Guard), and later, Minister of the Interior.[52] She said:

> together with him, I believe and look to the future with peace of mind, and I wait patiently with the children for the time when he will be able to devote more time to us and allow himself a little more rest and free time.[53]

Such a narrative of temporary sacrifice suggested that women's current self-denial was an investment in a future where their loyalty and contributions

49 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.
50 LEIDIG, Eviane. *The Women of the Far Right Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2023.
51 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.
52 HRUBOŇ, Anton. *Alexander Mach. Radikál z povolania*. Bratislava : Premedia, 2018.
53 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

would be rewarded, reinforcing the idea that their sacrifices were both necessary and meaningful within the regime's vision of societal progress. Indeed, some of the women married to political leaders of HSĽS experienced difficulties, such as legal persecution of their husbands. In March 1929, Machová was in the last trimester of pregnancy expecting their first child, when her husband Alexander was arrested in the trial against Vojtech Tuka.[54] The future Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, Tuka was charged with espionage and high treason. Mach was still in prison when his firstborn daughter Marta was born in May 1929. But unlike Mach, who was released in the autumn of the same year, Tuka was found guilty and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.[55] The experiences of husbands' imprisonment were later utilized to construct narratives portraying these men as martyrs who endured great sacrifices for the nation and the state. Simultaneously, the wives were showcased as resilient partners and devoted mothers who shouldered the immense burden of caring for their families alone. These women were celebrated for their strength and dedication, upholding the household and ensuring familial stability while their husbands pursued the greater good. In addition, when husbands, brothers or fathers were persecuted or jailed for their nationalist political and ideological views and works, women kept the ideas alive.[56] Such portrayals reinforced traditional gender roles while elevating both the men and their wives as symbols of patriotic virtue and moral fortitude, serving to legitimize the regime's ideological narratives.

Wifehood, and especially motherhood, was framed as a noble and selfless act, with women's contributions to the nation measured by their ability to raise future citizens imbued with the values and ideals of the state. By prioritizing the family above all else, women were expected to view their private, domestic role as an extension of their public duty, aligning their individual sacrifices with the broader goals of national renewal and strength. The "softer" gender, especially when perceived through motherhood, was also a great tool and agent to lighten the brutal face of the regime. Here, especially married women amongst the new political elites, participated in public photo opportunities with their husbands. They were meant to introduce the human, private side of their partners, and thus portray these men, the agents of violence, hate, and persecution, with their "softer" side as fathers and husbands.[57] By 1939, Machová had mothered three children with her husband Alexander. She described their children as Mach's weakness, "Everything for them. Sometimes even the impossible."[58] According to Machová, for her husband, seeing their joyful faces made him "forget all the unpleasant troubles of the world."[59] Apart from emphasising the strong alpha male yet sensitive and sacrificing father in their husband, wives of politicians

54 HRUBOŇ 2018, pp. 81–83.
55 WARD 2013, pp. 104–105.
56 HRUBOŇ 2018; KATREBOVÁ-BLEHOVÁ, Beáta. *Slovenská emigrácia v Taliansku v rokoch 1945–1950*. Bratislava; Rím : Slovenský historický ústav v Ríme, 2019, p. 53.
57 Mach had the reputation of a drunkard and womanizer. NEŠŤÁKOVÁ 2023, Be fruitful, pp. 95–101; HRUBOŇ, Anton. Historicko-právne otázky sexuality a sexuálnych trestných činov v Slovenskej republike 1939–1945 (niektoré aspekty problematiky). In SCHELLE, Karol – TAUCHEN, Jaromír (eds.) *Sexuální trestné činy včera a dnes*. Ostrava : KEY Publishing, 2014, pp. 185–193.
58 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.
59 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

hinted at a rare occasion of vulnerability. In an interview, Machová described the two rare moments when she "saw tears in his [her husband's] eyes," first when their first son died, and according to her:

> it was even worse the second time. I will never forget it. It was after 2 November, when we lost hundreds of thousands of Slovaks, when we lost Slovenský Meder, where he is from, and Košice, where my parents stayed.[60] But he recovered from that quickly and I think that since then he has been living mostly with the idea of how to get the separated Slovaks to unite again.[61]

While their husbands engaged in public struggles to advance the nation's cause, these women, like Machová, portrayed themselves as steadfast guardians of the domestic sphere, ensuring a harmonious and supportive home environment.[62] Machová continued:

> because when I see him happy and cheerful in the circle of our children, I feel that I am probably not doing my duties badly as a wife and mother. Because it is not an easy thing to be the wife of a politician.[63]

This narrative not only reinforced traditional gender roles, but also highlighted their contributions as indispensable to the success of their husbands' endeavours, framing their domestic labour as a form of patriotic service.

The state's emphasis on motherhood elevated it to a form of empowerment—albeit one strictly confined to the domestic sphere—portraying women as pivotal to national regeneration while simultaneously excluding them from broader civic and professional participation. For instance, in November 1942, when one of the most popular daily newspapers, *Slovák* (the Slovak), published an article entitled *Žena a jej pravé miesto* (Woman and Her Rightful Place) on its front page, author Nora Preusová complimented and at the same time blamed women for the rise and decline of nations. The twenty-year old author who was a cultural referent of the Women's Units of HSĽS, and perhaps for that reason was able to complete a journalism course at the Faculty of Arts of the Slovak University, considered women to be active members of society:

> [When] human society was in decline, or *vice versa*, we must always attribute the main role, a large share in the success and or failure to women, because women and as mothers are responsible for the morality in their family, for order, upbringing and harmonious coexistence of family members.[64]

60 Machová was referring to the First Vienna Award, a treaty signed on 2 November 1938. The arbitration and award were direct consequences of the Munich Agreement, which resulted in the partitioning of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovak territories in southern Slovakia and southern Carpathian Rus were regained by Hungary. Czechoslovakia also ceded small patches of land in Spiš and Orava regions to Poland. DEÁK, Ladislav. Medzinárodno-politické súvislosti Viedenskej arbitráže a dôsledky pre južné Slovensko. In ŠMIHULA, Daniel (ed.) *Viedenská arbitráž v roku 1938 a jej európske súvislosti: Zborník príspevkov z vedeckej konferencie konanej v Bratislave 10. novembra 2008*. Bratislava : Vojenský historický ústav, 2008, pp. 9–23.

61 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

62 ALBERT, Craig Douglas. Gender Issues in Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Migration. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 22 December 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.189

63 PIVARČEKOVÁ-VLKOVÁ 1939, p. 17.

64 PREUSOVÁ, Nora. Žena a jej pravé miesto. In *Slovák*, 28 November 1942, p. 1.

Referring to some sociological findings, Preusová considers: "the level of morality of the family is the same as the level of morality of the nation."[65] Thus, if mothers have a key influence on the family, which is the foundation of the nation, the Women's Units of HSĽS put women in the core of their program:

> Slovak women should take as much part in wartime as our women did in the first national struggles. […] all conscious and filled with Slovak-ness heroines. These [women] stars in the Slovak sky, female workers, fighters and sufferers […] must be sufficient light for us today, when it is about maintaining and preserving the freedom won through hard work [...] Slovak women still have a lot to work on. If they want to not only give new generations, but also ensure them a free homeland.[66]

Still single and childfree, Preusová described roles of women beyond mere reproduction, though considered it the most important. She understood the education and upbringing of children, and perhaps their own partners, within the desired ideology the key role of women—the actual builder of the nation, ensuring the folk, the statehood, the race. Therefore, within the framework of the regime's antifeminist agenda, women who actively participated in state propaganda moved beyond the abstract glorification of motherhood. They framed motherhood as a political act—a crucial and patriotic contribution to the survival and strength of the nation. This narrative positioned women's domestic and reproductive roles as essential to the state's ideological and political goals, transforming private family life into a public, national duty.

Shaping Ideals: Mobilizing Female Youth and Cultivating Women Leaders

The far-right mobilization was also youth mobilization par excellence and therefore also attractive for girls and young women.[67] Often women's involvement in far-right movements has been as predominantly representative. The latest research shows that women were essential to the far-right as enablers and agents of ideology and practices of discrimination, violence, and genocide.[68] Young Slovak women, too, went beyond providing silent support of nationalist, racist, and chauvinist rhetoric and policies, managing to legitimize the movement's agenda, and also personally profit from the regime for their own benefit. So, while the Slovak State explicitly punished some women by removing

65 PREUSOVÁ 1942, p. 1.

66 PREUSOVÁ 1942, p. 1.

67 For examples of youth mobilisation within different far-right movements in history, see: DOGLIANI, Patrizia. Propaganda and Youth. In BOSWORTH, R. J. B. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 185–202; MORANT-ARIÑO, Toni. Politische Beziehungen zwischen der weiblichen Organisation der Falange und den Frauen- und Mädelorganisationen der NSDAP, 1936–1945. In WILDE, Gabriele – FRIEDRICH, Stephanie (eds.) *Im Blick der Disziplinen. Geschlecht und Geschlechterverhältnisse in der wissenschaftlichen Analyse*. Münster : Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2012, pp. 238–256; PETRENKO, Olena. Geschlecht, Gewalt, Nation: Die "Organisation Ukrainischer Nationalisten" und die Frau. In *Osteuropa*, 2026, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 83–93; SCHEMBS, Katharina. Fascist youth organizations and propaganda in a transnational perspective: Balilla and Gioventù italiana del Littorio all'estero in Argentina (1922–1955). In *Amnis*, 2013, vol. 12, no. 1, http://journals.openedition.org/amnis/2021 [last viewed on 28 April 2025].

68 PETŐ 2020; AXINIA 2023, pp. 468–491; JELINIĆ, Ana. Ustaškinja–The Propaganda Organ of the Women's Ustasha Movement: Antifeminism in Ustasha Propaganda. In *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 2018, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 85–86.

them from their jobs and confining their roles to the private sphere of home and family, other women were compelled to assume more public identities. These new roles extended beyond symbolic positions, such as being the wives of political leaders, as the regime actively established alternative forms of female leadership to align with its ideological framework. For some women, the nationalistic awakening was also a personal challenge, and a possibility to act on ambitious notions, at times daunting but at the same time energizing, enabling them to expect more from life.[69] As such, a number of women found new opportunities in women's organizations under state control.

In September 1940, when Milo Urban provocatively posed the question "Where are our women?" on the front page of *Slovák*, he accompanied the question with an almost aggressive critique of women's perceived lack of presence in public life.[70] This rhetorical attack, however, was not merely a spontaneous commentary—it served a larger agenda. Just a month later, HSĽS announced the creation of a women's branch within the party.[71] This new organization was tasked with coordinating all women's activities, signalling a clear intent to centralize control. The ultimate goal appeared to be the establishment of a single, state-run organization for women, effectively replacing the diversity of independent women's initiatives with a unified structure aligned with the regime's ideology.[72] Seemingly overnight, the role of Slovak women was supposed to extend beyond womanhood and motherhood:

> Only now […] after a long abuse of women, we are trying to return her to her original mission. Above all, she will be what she really is—a woman and a mother […] but in public life we want and must count on her [...] Even there, she has her own defined, important section, [...] and we here—on the male side—we just wish she would take this part and really master it.[73]

The new structures and organization for women within the Party were inspired significantly by Nazi Germany and its organization Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft (the National Socialist Women's League), especially after the Salzburg Conference in July 1940.[74] As a consequence of this meeting between Nazi Germany and the Slovak State, the Slovak members of the pro-Nazi radical faction of HSĽS, such as Vojtech Tuka and Alexander Mach, replaced more moderate members in executive positions. Ultimately, the Slovak State became more strongly oriented towards Nazi Germany. Nazi advisers to Slovakia were appointed for various work divisions, such as propaganda, Hlinkova garda, social issues, police or Jewish affairs, and the Slovak State submitted to

69 LOWER 2013, p. 26.
70 URBAN, Milo. A kde sú naše ženy. In *Slovák*, 8 September 1940, p. 1.
71 ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Ženský odbor HSĽS ako koordinátor sociálnej práce? In TIŠLIAR, Pavol (ed.) *Populačné štúdie Slovenska 13*. Bratislava : Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, o.z., 2020, pp. 59–82.
72 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2020, pp. 118–124.
73 URBAN 1940, p. 1.
74 KAMENEC, Ivan. Vnútropolitický vývoj Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1939–1945. In HRADSKÁ, Katarína – KAMENEC, Ivan (eds.) *Slovenská republika 1939–1945. Slovensko v 20. storočí, Vol. 4*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2015, pp. 153–182; RYCHLÍK, Jan. Slovakia. In STAHEL, David (ed.) *Joining Hitler's Crusade*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 121–122; RAJCAN – VADKERTY – HLAVINKA 2018, pp. 842–852.

Nazi Germany especially in the area of foreign policy and anti-Jewish measures.[75] So when the more radical faction of HSĽS took control, the regime's political Catholicism somewhat retreated, creating space for more revolutionary elements to emerge. This shift was evident in movements across Europe, such as those in Hungary, Romania, and the United Kingdom.[76] As a result, the regime's stance on women began to evolve, moving away from the religiously and nationally conservative framing of women's societal roles towards a more revolutionary approach, which allowed women's political involvement to become more prominent. However, this transformation was far from complete. Firstly, political Catholicism and deeply ingrained societal views on gender roles remained firmly conservative. Secondly, the radical shift did not have enough time to fully realize its goals. Nevertheless, while the step of a broader involvement of women seems to be quite contradictory in respect to the late 1930s calls for women's moral and national duty to withdraw from public and create their strongholds in homes with husbands and children, the fascist or far-right women's programs were quite conflicting. As Andrea Pető claims, programs for women within far-right movements were generally well-thought-out systems of ideas, which were necessarily self-contradictory as they simultaneously advocated for women's mobilization and return of women to their "traditional" gender roles.[77] So paradoxically, women attained leadership positions and advanced in their careers, embodying aspects of feminist ideals, even as they actively participated in promoting antifeminist narratives.

Hence, following the ban of number of youth organisations in interwar Czechoslovakia where girls were active, such as Catholic Scouting, some girls and young women previously a part of these organisations and unions found their place in a compelling alternative of Hlinkova mládež (HM, the Hlinka Youth), a new youth organisation established in 1938 by the ruling HSĽS.[78] Initially, many of these former Scouts protested the dissolution of their organization, but over time, some redirected their energy toward participating in and organizing within HM. HM offered activities reminiscent of those they had enjoyed in Catholic Scouting, including outdoor pursuits, structured group events, and a strong emphasis on the Catholic Church's presence and teachings. It also provided a framework for "gender-appropriate" participation, where girls could engage in sanctioned roles and responsibilities while still enjoying highly restricted, yet still available opportunities to mix with boys and young men—a feature that made the organization socially appealing. Additionally, HM presented young women with opportunities to advance within its hier-

75 PEKÁR, Martin. Slovensko medzi 14. marcom 1939 a salzburskými rokovaniami. In PEKÁR, Martin – PAVLOVIČ, Richard (eds.) *Slovensko medzi 14. marcom 1939 a salzburskými rokovaniami*. Prešov : Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, Filozofická fakulta/Universum, 2007, pp. 11–20; TÖNSMEYER, Tatjana. *Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakei*. Paderborn : Ferdinand Schöning, 2003, pp. 63–65.

76 KALLIS, Aristotle. Transnational Fascism. The Fascist New Order, Violence, and Creative Destruction. In BAUERKÄMPER, Arno – ROSSOLIŃSKI-LIEBE, Grzegorz (eds.) *Fascism Without Borders. Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*. New York; Oxford : Berghahn, 2019, pp. 39–64.

77 PETŐ 2020, p. 3.

78 MILLA, Michal. *Hlinkova mládež 1938–1945*. Bratislava : Ústav pamäti národa, 2008, p. 69.

archy, giving them a sense of purpose and a chance to demonstrate leadership within the movement. Some participants benefited from travel opportunities, allowing them to visit different parts of Europe and meet peers from similar fascist-oriented youth organizations, fostering a sense of international camaraderie. For others, HM offered more personal rewards, such as the chance to form friendships, build a community, or even meet like-minded partners. This range of incentives helped to draw many former Catholic Scouts into the fold of HM, aligning their youthful enthusiasm and organizational skills with the regime's broader goals of ideological and social mobilization.

Girls and young women arranged within the Slovak youth organisation found themselves at the centre of the far-right universe. In June 1942, Baldur von Schirach, former leader of the Hitler Youth, sent a telegram to Adolf Hitler offering greetings from the Cultural Rallies of European Youth, Weimar-Florence,[79]

> On behalf of the youth male and female leaders from Italy, Bulgaria, Belgium (Flemish and Walloon delegations), Denmark, Finland, Croatia, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Hungary, who have gathered in Weimar for the cultural manifestation of European youth under the sign of the Axis.[80]

This telegraph was published in *Slovák*, among many other places. The Slovak delegation was part of the meeting which was, according to von Schirach: "dominated by the spirit of which You [Adolf Hitler] and Benito Mussolini are the embodiment as role models for the youth of Europe, on the path to the New Order in our part of the world."[81] Having just paraded through the streets of Weimar, as the pictures and the propaganda video from the opening ceremony suggest, Slovak girls and young women lined up side by side with the European Nazi-Fascist youth representatives.[82] They, too, became a symbol of cultural or rather ideological unification of the "new" European youth.[83]

Three months later, in September the same year, Europäische Jugendverband (the European Youth Organization) was founded. The organization was comprised of 13 states associated with Nazi Germany. Clearly, the Hitler Youth headquarters endeavoured to give shape to its European projects and create a "supra-regional association of youth associations of the countries under German influence," with the vision to represent "a body with a multinational leadership."[84] With the aim to indoctrinate fascists' ideals at an early age, the organization also prided itself on gathering and building up the new European leadership, among which was meant to be the Slovak female leaders within HM. Slovakia, was among eight other countries who took part in outlining Europäische Jugendverband, represented by Alojz Macek, head of HM, and

79 See the full-text of the program: *German and Italian Kulturkundgebungen der europäischen Jugend Weimar-Florenz 18. bis 30. Juni 1942*, https://archive.org/details/EuropaischeJugend1942Wettbewerbe/page/n25/mode/2up [last viewed on 28 April 2025].
80 Baldur von Schirach Führerovi. In *Slovák*, 26 June 1942, p. 4.
81 Baldur von Schirach Führerovi. In *Slovák*, 26 June 1942, p. 4.
82 The promo video from the event: *Ponte culturale Weimar-Firenze. Cronaca cinematografica realizzata dall'Istituto nazionale LUCE.* Available online, https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000092888/1/cronaca-cinematografica-realizzata-dall-istituto-nazionale-luce.html?startPage=3280 [last viewed on 28 April 2025].
83 MILLA 2008, pp. 122–126.
84 BUDDRUS, Michael. *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg: Hitlerjugend und nationalsozialistische Jugendpolitik*. Berlin; Boston : De Gruyter Saur, 2003, pp. 787–790.

husband of Emília Macková (neé Mihálová), who was leading the educational branch of the Department of Víly (Fairies) within Hlinkova mládež-Dievčatá (the Hlinka Youth-Girls), dedicated to the youngest members, from six to ten years.[85] Within Europäische Jugendverband, a number of Working Groups were created, among them Female Youth led by Jutta Rüdiger, head of Bund Deutscher Mädel (the Nazi League of German Girls), Penelope Testa led Inspectress of the Fascio Femminile, the women's section of the Italian Fascist Party, and the Spanish Pilar Primo de Rivera, Sección Femenina branch, the women's section of the Spanish fascist Falange and for Slovakia, it was Margita Valková who led the female branch of HM.[86] Valková, a former active member of the scouting movement, took on the role of the country's leader of the female branch of the Hlinka's Youth-Girls in December 1941.[87] She was a former teacher, who had to leave her job due to regime's restrictions for female employees.

Indeed, in addition to dissolving a significant number of pre-war youth and women's organizations, the regime actively targeted employed women through a variety of restrictive measures. These efforts ranged from forcibly removing women from civic service roles to imposing limitations on the enrolment of female students in universities. The regime's broader objective included a push to prohibit paid work for married women altogether, with exceptions primarily for working-class women employed in factories or agriculture. Among the professional groups subjected to these policies, female teachers faced particularly severe persecution, reflecting the regime's intent to curtail the presence of women in public and intellectual spheres.[88] When female teachers were initially encouraged and subsequently compelled to leave their positions, some women sought alternative roles within the newly established structures of the regime. Many of these former educators transitioned into leadership roles, leveraging their skills and experience. A significant number became prominent figures in the women's branches of the Party as well as in HM organization, assuming key positions and shaping the direction of these groups.

A perfect example of such a woman is indeed Margita Valková. Born in 1916 in a small village in Šarluchy (today Tekovské Lužany) near Nitra, a former teacher in Bratislava and active member of active Catholic Scouting, Valková was only 25 when she took over one of the most prominent roles for a woman in the state. According to the magazine *Nová mládež* (New Youth), right after the establishment of HM, she immediately joined for the extracurricular activities of girls within HM.[89] Her transition from an educator and scout leader to a prominent role within the structures of the regime highlights the complex interplay between her professional background and her adaptability to the

85 The youngest group was followed by Tatranky (age 10 to 15) and Devy (age 15 to 20). MILLA 2008, p. 69.

86 On the female leader, see: WILLSON, Perry. A "Shining Example of Fascist Womanhood": Angiola Moretti 1925–1943. In *European History Quarterly*, 2022, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 744–767; CITRIGNO, Flavia. The Duce's Cheerleaders and the Führer's Vanguard. In *Fascism*, 2024, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 58–74.

87 Sestra Margita Valková menovaná krajskou vodkyňou HM. In *Nová mládež*, 1 December 1941, p. 7.

88 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2019, pp. 19–39.

89 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2019, pp. 19–39.

shifting socio-political landscape. While her ideological alignment and personal beliefs undoubtedly played a part, her decision was also influenced by the career opportunities these roles provided. Positions within the regime allowed women like her to maintain continuity in exercising their skills and capacities, offering a sense of professional fulfilment even as their previous roles were dismantled. Her story exemplifies how individuals navigated the constraints and opportunities presented by the regime, often reshaping their roles to align with or operate within the new ideological framework. Moreover, these positions, such as Valková's, came with tangible benefits, such as prestige, financial security through well-paid jobs, and the opportunity to travel across Europe, which was a rare privilege during this period.[90] This intricate interplay of personal, ideological, and material incentives not only influenced the decisions of individual women, but also reflected broader societal shifts under the new regime.

As the Slovak State consolidated its power, the public representation of women, including those in prominent positions such as the wives of leading politicians, underwent significant changes. Notably, interviews with these women—once a platform to promote their roles—disappeared from public discourse, signalling a recalibration of how the regime chose to project gender ideals in the public sphere. This shift coincided with the stabilization of the regime, marked by the cessation of further elections and consequently, a diminished need to appeal to the female electorate. As the political climate became more secure, the emphasis on showcasing the "ideal Slovak woman"—a mother—as a symbol of national identity did not wane, but received a new feature—young capable woman, but active within a desired sphere. The narrative shifted also away from promoting the image of an exemplary yet relatable woman—the mother, reflecting the regime's shift under the German influence from rather Christian conservative gendered ideals to more radical, Nazi inspired visions of gender and youth. Surprisingly, selective examples of women excelling within traditionally male-dominated fields, such as aviation, were highlighted to showcase national progress and achievement under the regime, as seen in the portrayal of figures like Vilma Švachová: "In our pictures, we see the first female pilot in independent Slovakia, Vilma Švachová […] Flying transforms timid, unstable and hesitant characters into bold, courageous, decisive [humans] full of strong calmness."[91] This caption together with pictures of a young, attractive female pilot were printed in the Slovak weekly *Nový svet* in September 1941. Published three months after Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union with the Slovak Army side by side, Švachová's achievements were presented not only to showcase the modernity of the Slovak State, but rather to promote the Slovak participation in the Nazi war against the Soviet Union, to challenge Slovak men to join the war effort more enthusiastically, suggesting that otherwise they would have to face humiliation at the hands of their womenfolk.[92]

90 SEIBERT, Katharina – BARNABAS, Balint. Rallying Europe: Young Women and Men Searching for a Life and a Future. In *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire*, 2024, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 331–348.

91 Vzdušná cesta – symbol nových čias. In *Nový svet*, 20 September 1941, p. 4.

92 BAKER, Catherine. Music as a Weapon of Ethnopolitical Violence and Conflict: Processes of Ethnic Separation during and after the Break-up of Yugoslavia. In *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2013,

In addition, the focus shifted from the idealized image of a married woman with children to girls and young women, reflecting a strategic change in the regime's priorities. Mobilization of youth was a cornerstone of fascist movements, as securing the loyalty of younger generations was essential for ensuring the movement's continuity and ideological perpetuation. Similarly, the active recruitment and mobilization of female citizens, particularly young women, became a key aspect of this strategy. By targeting a younger demographic, the regime sought to mould them into loyal supporters and participants, aligning their identities and aspirations with the state's goals and reinforcing its vision of societal order. In addition, women played a central role in recruitment and in ensuring overall support of the regime by promising men not only the glorious future, but also the safety and love in a family created with like-minded partner.[93]

Conclusion: Women as Tools and Agents in Antifeminist Mobilization

If nation depended on women, as the quote in the introduction suggests, were women indeed crucial for the regime of the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, and for the historical far-right in general? Was their support, obedience, and complicity a fundamental part of the success of these movements? Did women actually find their empowerment through the antifeminist and antimodernist mobilisation? Or were women just fooled, were they just wives who passively complied, were there just girls and young women who rebelled or were attracted by the fashionable movement, were all these women victims of the antifeminist movements?

A close study of selected women's accounts shows that in the Fascist-Axis Slovak State, women occupied a dual role as both tools and active agents in advancing the regime's antifeminist agenda. Initially, the regime set the stage with a series of antifeminist policies designed to redefine the place for women in society. These included demands for female students to leave universities, forcing married women out of the workforce, and encouraging a withdrawal from public life into the private sphere of homes and families. Prominent women, particularly the wives of influential politicians, became vocal advocates of these narratives, presenting the so-called "sacrifices" of women as essential for the nation's well-being. Through their own lives and public roles, they sought to model the ideal woman: selfless, devoted, and anchored in traditional values. Once the more radical politicians took over, the sacralised portrayal of women and Catholic conservative definition of women's prescribed roles had shifted.[94] A new revolutionary element was introduced—encouragement of a greater participation of women in public life. Yet, women's activities were meant

vol. 47, no. 4/5, pp. 409–429; LILLY, Carol S. – IRVINE, Jill A. Negotiating Interests: Women and Nationalism in Serbia and Croatia, 1990–1997. In *East European Politics and Societies*, 2002, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 109. For fates of German female pilots Hanna Reitsch and Melitta von Stauffenberg, see: MULLEY, Clare. *The Women Who Flew for Hitler: A dual biography of Nazi Germany's most highly decorated women pilots*. New York : St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2017; RIEGER, Bernhard. Hanna Reitsch (1912–1979): The Global Career of a Nazi Celebrity. In *German History*, 2008, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 383–405.

93 LEIDIG 2023, p. 56.

94 For more on sacralisation of fascist ideology, see: GENTILE, Emilio. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1996.

to support the antifeminist mobilization. Women took on prominent roles in propaganda, education, and social services, directed to girls and young women, actively promoting and reinforcing traditional values. They drew upon their own skills, methods, and strategies to push these narratives, demonstrating that they were not merely passive instruments of the state but rather active participants and creators of antifeminist campaigns.

While women's activities were confined to the so-called "women's sphere," within this domain, they found an alternative to feminist achievements by carving out spaces of influence and agency, albeit under the auspices of state ideology. Their involvement often underscored the contradictions inherent in the regime's policies; women were expected to renounce public ambitions, yet their labour and leadership within organizational structures were crucial to the regime's agenda. These contradictions were consistently rationalized by the state, which framed women's contributions as essential acts of national service, while simultaneously curtailing their broader aspirations. It is argued here that women actively endorsing the regime of the Slovak State, as many other women in far-right regimes and movements, acted in different ways than far-right men. Women's strategies then complemented those of far-right men, making the influence of the far-right ideology more effective.[95]

After the war, unlike many of their partners, most of these women were not criminally charged. Due to the deeply gendered nature of legal systems and the structure of criminal law collections at the time, there was no established legal vocabulary or framework for holding women accountable for actions that were essential to the rise and success of far-right movements. These legal systems were built on traditional gender roles that often depicted women as passive, apolitical, or incapable of significant agency in political or criminal activities.[96] As a result, women's contributions to far-right ideologies—whether as propagandists, enablers, or active participants—were often overlooked or dismissed as peripheral, even when their roles were pivotal. This lack of recognition in the legal and social discourse not only shielded many women from prosecution but also perpetuated a narrative that minimized their responsibility and obscured the full scope of their involvement in far-right agendas.[97] Therefore, a better understanding of women's participation in far-right movements helps reveal the complexity of their roles, motivations, and agency, challenging simplified narratives of victimhood or passive bystanders, and contributes to the overall picture by shedding light on how gender dynamics influence political ideologies, the mechanisms of mobilization, and the sustained success of such regimes, offering valuable insights into the intersections of gender and authoritarianism.

While this article serves as an introduction to rethinking the roles of women in historic far-right movements, it also highlights the significant potential

95 BLEE 1991, p. 3.

96 TIMM, Annette – SANBORN, Joshua A. *Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe: A History from the French Revolution to the Present Day*. London : Bloomsbury Academic, 2022; WIESNER-HANKS, Merry E. *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. Chichester : Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

97 WALLACH-SCOTT, Joan. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1988; KOONZ 1987.

for further research in this area. This topic necessitates an in-depth examination of sources that have been poorly analysed or overlooked entirely until now. In particular, the absence of detailed biographies of women agents involved in antifeminist mobilization calls for closer scrutiny. Exploring the lives of women who acted on behalf of the regime or were complicit could shed light on their contributions to the regime's success through antifeminist and antimodernist mobilization. Furthermore, exploring related topics through comparisons with other countries, examining the long-term impacts of antifeminist mobilization in post-war contexts, and analysing its echoes in contemporary society would provide valuable insights.