

Michal Ďurčo, *Cesty a diaľnice na Slovensku v medzivojnovom období. Nástup automobilovej doby v znamení Československej Republiky* [Roads and Highways in Slovakia during the Interwar Period. The Beginning of the Era of the Automobile under the Sign of the Czechoslovak Republic] (Bratislava: VEDA vydavateľstvo SAV - Historický ústav SAV, 2020), 230 pages

Radu MĂRZA 

Associate professor, Faculty of History and Philosophy,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: radu.marza@ubbcluj.ro

A few years ago, a book was published in Bratislava that, at least for Romanian historiography, deals with an unusual theme. While the field of railway history has produced a substantial body of scholarly literature (in Romania), the history of road transport is only beginning to emerge as a field of study.

The book written by historian Michal Ďurčo, a researcher at the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, is a history of road transport in Slovakia during the Interwar period. The subject is by no means easy, and yet the author did not make it any easier for himself. He made a great documentation effort, which involved going through an impressive bibliography of hundreds of journal articles, volumes, monographs, etc., but he also visited 12 archives on the territory of Slovakia, where he consulted numerous fonds (government institutions, local administration).

We have provided these details, which are normally written at the end of a review, from the very beginning in order to emphasize the effort made by the author. The result is a complex and comprehensive book. It has a logical structure, starting with general considerations and aspects of the history of the subject it focuses on, before moving on to the subject itself and its details.

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From the *Introduction*, the author discusses theoretical aspects, which he then develops in the first chapter, *Theoretical-methodological considerations* (pp. 21-42). One aspect is the relationship between road (highway) building and prosperity, but most interesting was the discussion of the capital-periphery relationship and the ideological valences of road (highway) building, relevant to the subject of the book (pp. 16-33). Let us not forget that until 1918, the territory of Slovakia was part of Hungary (the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and it was linked, in terms of infrastructure (roads and especially railways), to the Hungarian communications system. Thus, after the establishment of Czechoslovakia, one of the great challenges for the new state was that of... the “de-Hungarianization” of the Slovak road system (but, in a broader sense, of the entire economy and other aspects of society) and linking it to that of Bohemia and Moravia, which were much more advanced in this regard. In relation to these, Slovakia’s road network was peripheral, Prague was far away, and Bratislava had – in relation to the Slovak territory – an equally peripheral position (p. 24). As the author will point out several times in the book, the unification of the country (Czechoslovakia) was one of the great economic problems of the Czechoslovak state in the two Interwar decades. He also discusses the specificities of the relief and geography of Slovakia and their impact on the road system (pp. 24-28).

In the same chapter, two other sections should be noted: one devoted to the historiography of the issue, outlining the current state of the Slovak scholarship and using with numerous references to the European and American bibliography of the topic, including the presentation of the relevant archival fonds (pp. 36-42), and another consisting of a brief dictionary of specialized terms used (pp. 33-36).

Chapter II is quintessentially historical: *Formation of the modern road network system (18th century-1918)* (pp. 43-59). The author provides an excellent history of road building in the modern era at a European level, then moving on to the Austrian Empire, Hungary and Austria-Hungary, and provides a case study of road connections in the Moravian-Slovak (Hungarian) border area up to 1918 (pp. 51-59). The matter is particularly interesting, precisely because, before 1918, the area was (and, after 1993, became again) a border area, that at that time separated very different regions in terms of their historical evolution.

The next chapter deals with the period of the consolidation of the system of communication ways (1918-1928) (pp. 61-112). This is one of the central chapters of the book. Transport history is seen not only as a chapter of wider economic history, but in a more comprehensive sense: political, ideological and even cultural, which sets Michal Ďurčo's research apart from many of the typical transport history works, which are highly technical. The author carefully followed the situation in Slovakia during the period when its territory was part of Hungary, as well as during the subsequent transition period. It was a transition that took place during wartime (until the first half of 1919, there were battles on the Slovak territory between the Czechoslovak army and volunteer forces associated with the Hungarian army of the Béla Kun Communist regime), during which the new Czechoslovak authorities tried to establish a functional relationship between the Czech-Moravian and Slovak territories. The transition had an interesting human dimension. As in the railway sector, the specialized personnel in the road sector were partly of Hungarian origin, and they refused to collaborate with the new state authorities. Meanwhile, the specialists coming from Bohemia were unfamiliar with the specifics of the place or the Hungarian language, which made it difficult for them to restore and operate the road system in Slovakia, which was in need of major repairs after the war. In addition, the Slovak road system had to abandon the North-South orientation (Slovakia to Hungary and the capital Budapest) in favour of the East-West orientation (Slovakia to Bohemia and the capital Prague) (pp. 61-67).

The author does not overlook the geographical specificities of the Slovak territory. Its central and northern parts are mountainous (in the north, on the border with Poland, the High Tatra Mountains, and in central Slovakia, the Low Tatra Mountains), which has caused numerous problems for the road network. He then reviews the existing road categories and closely follows the projects intended to improve and develop the network. This approach highlights the importance of using archival sources and certain specialized publications, which allowed the author to reconstruct the entire "landscape" of the Interwar Slovak road transport history in great detail: institutions, power factors, the connection between the central institutions from Prague and the state authorities in Bratislava and in the territory, the legal framework (Hungarian legislation was in force in Slovakia, which was different from the laws in Bohemia and Moravia), financial aspects, currents of opinion and,

above all, numerous and endless projects. At the end of the book, the author summarizes: in 20 years, 320 km of new roads were built in Slovakia, 600 km of road were modernized (a term is used in the Slovak language – *bezprašný* – which would translate as “without dust,” i.e., covered with an asphalt or concrete layer), 77 iron-concrete bridges, all of this while the number of motor vehicles increased from 143 (1920) to over 20,000 (1938) (p. 205).

Returning to the third chapter of the book, dedicated to the 1918-1928 decade, the author notes the personnel problems (insufficiency of qualified personnel – engineers, foremen, as well as workers), the lack of construction materials and fuels, especially during the first years after the war, the consequences of the war of 1919 (the retreating Hungarian army destroyed road and railway bridges, railways, including railway signalling systems and dykes) (pp. 72-74). It was even found that one of the causes of the difficult advance of the Czechoslovak army in Slovakia during the battles with the Hungarian army was the poor conditions of the roads (p. 80).

Interestingly, in the early years of the Czechoslovak regime, the population or local administration often associated automobiles with the power in Prague and the Czechoslovak army (p. 77-79). For the same period, the author points out a great paradox: the few automobiles in Slovakia travelled on very poorly maintained roads, which led to breakdowns that could not be repaired because there were no... automobile repair facilities.

As noted above, the author proposes several case studies. One is dedicated to the so-called “Masaryk road,” built in the 1920s in the area of the Low Tatra Mountains, in a difficult terrain. There was an older road there, attested from previous centuries, but Czechoslovak planners decided to build a new one (pp. 85-102). The author is a very good historian, attentive not only to the geographical setting and the challenges of the 1920s, but also to the historical background of the region. He observes, as in other cases, the competitive relationship that developed between the old roads of the 19th century and the railway that was built in the area for economic reasons (it served local industries, especially metallurgical plants) (pp. 92-93).

Chapter IV is titled *The “democratization of motoring” period (1928-1935)* (pp. 113-172). It is a period marked by the Great Depression and its consequences, which hit the economy of Slovakia (Czechoslovakia), especially the metallurgical plants in the area of the Low Tatra Mountains. Again, the author presents the general historical framework and the consequences on

a local level very well, especially for the road sector (pp. 114-118). During this period, the effects of legislative and administrative unification within Czechoslovakia begin to emerge, new projects are made, in some cases construction commences, but funding remains chronically insufficient. However, as the author notes, it is the period in which, for the first time, roads begin to really compete with railways, but without surpassing them. He also notes that road transport does not become dominant over animal-drawn transport all across Slovakia (p. 118).

In the many projects and debates that the author discovered in the archival sources from the 1930s, we must note the emergence of new and interesting arguments. One idea promoted by the authorities and road designers was to highlight, through the chosen routes, locations with touristic potential: spa resorts, which abound in Slovakia (e.g., Trenčianske Teplice, Turčianske Teplice), mountain resorts (in the High Tatra Mountains), and caves. Additionally, the idea of building roads that highlight the landscape (pp. 142-145) also appears. This is how the tourism argument emerges in the discourse of the Slovak (Czechoslovak) authorities. However, as the years pass (especially after 1933), the Czechoslovak army begins to put more and more pressure on the civil authorities to speed up the construction of strategic roads (p. 128). Slovak decision-makers are beginning to assert the need to build roads that connect Slovakia not only to the Czech Republic, but also to the surrounding countries, in order to capitalize on the country's geographic position in Central Europe and to take advantage of international trade opportunities.

At the time, the issue of "economic nationalism" also arose, and Czech tourists were encouraged to visit Slovakia, not only to become better acquainted with their country, but also to support its less developed regions (of Czechoslovakia) in the difficult aftermath of the Great Depression. However, in the 1930s, for Czech and Moravian visitors and tourists, Slovakia was still a great unknown. Traveling through Slovakia and especially through Subcarpathian Ukraine (Zacarpattia) was an outright adventure (p. 143). To attract tourists from the western parts of Czechoslovakia and especially from abroad (p. 145), quality roads were needed, yet these were almost entirely lacking. The real situation on the ground has been described in considerable detail by several Czech travellers who journeyed by car and even by motorcycle throughout Slovakia (pp. 146-151).

During the 1930s, Slovak decision-makers, politicians and the press began to lament the underdevelopment of Slovakia's road transport infrastructure (as well as the country's overall situation), fueling the Slovaks' political dissatisfaction with the joint state with the Czechs (pp. 120-130, 138-142).

Moreover, in this chapter, the author offers us some case studies of roads built in the years 1928-1935. During the Great Depression, road construction also played a social role, providing jobs for hundreds of unemployed workers from metallurgical enterprises in the region, which were severely affected by the crisis (pp. 163-172).

The fifth and last chapter of the book is titled *The Czechoslovak Highway (1935-1939)* (pp. 173-204). The author focuses on the discussions and projects that concerned the construction of motor-only roads (motorways) in Czechoslovakia, with a specific focus on Slovakia. The author shows that, while before the Great War the automobile was regarded as a luxury or sporting item, after 1918 it became a practical means of transport for the middle class. The number of cars increased greatly and, at least in and around big cities, car traffic became more congested, so the necessity of building roads became quite obvious.

In this chapter, the author provides a very compelling historical introduction to the topic under scrutiny: the beginnings of highway construction worldwide (the United States of America in 1908 – motor parkways, Italy in the early 1920s, Germany after 1933), noting the size of this construction effort in the last two mentioned countries (pp. 173-178). He also mentions the problems caused by the poor road infrastructure during the First World War (p. 175), which gave an impetus after the war to the military commanders of European countries to press their governments for the construction of strategic roads or highways.

The same happened in Czechoslovakia, where the first highway projects were drawn up in 1934-1935, with Germany playing the role of both model and political and military threat (pp. 178-183). The so-called “country project” formulated in 1937 by the well-known businessman Jan Antonín Baťa, the owner of a very well-known and popular shoe factory, was very interesting. In his book, symbolically titled *Let's build a country for 40 million people (Budujme stát pro 40 000 000 lidí)*, he stated that “transport builds unity” and proposed an extensive network of highways and roads for the entire Czechoslovak territory (pp. 192-194). In addition to Baťa's project, there were many others, which

aimed at the administrative, economic and cultural unification of the country, but not a single kilometre of highway was built. After the *Anschluss* and the territorial losses suffered by Czechoslovakia in 1938, highway projects became more and more necessary. However, with the country's proximity to Germany, the projects started to support German interests (linking Germany to Romania via Vienna, Budapest with the access to the Black Sea, the Breslau/Wrocław - Brno - Vienna highway, etc.) (pp. 197-204).

The author concludes his analysis with the year 1938, which is historically justified (given the title of the book). However, perhaps it would have been worthwhile to extend the inquiry into the subsequent years, in order to trace the epilogue of the discussed subject. In the territory of Bohemia and Moravia, the first (few) kilometres of highway were built during the Protectorate (German occupation, 1939-1945), and work was resumed immediately after the war for several years. During the Slovak State (1939-1945), not a single kilometre of highway was built in Slovakia, only ordinary roads. In Czechoslovakia, including Slovakia, the systematic highway building effort would resume in the late 1960s, when construction of several highway segments began. By 1989, approximately 650 kilometres had been put into use (figures taken from the Czech and Slovak Wikipedia pages by the author of the review).

Returning to the book *Cesty a diaľnice na Slovensku v medzivojnovom období. Nástup automobilovej doby v znamení Československej Republiky*, published by the Slovak historian Michal Ďurčo, it is a highly remarkable volume. The author went through extensive documentary material, leading to serious, systematic research. It encompasses both the big picture and the international context, as well as detailed research (case studies). It is a book that focuses on the administrative and political aspects of the history of the road network in Interwar Slovakia, but does not neglect the cultural aspects either. The documentation is exemplary, as evidenced by the impressive bibliography at the end. With his book, Michal Ďurčo makes an important contribution to this relatively unexplored field of historical research and will hopefully motivate other historians to engage with it.