

The shift in Slovakian road planning from Austria-Hungary to Czechoslovakia

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ABSTRACT

Before 1918, modern-day Slovakia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The state paid little attention to transport infrastructure as a tool of integration until the second half of the eighteenth century, a dynamic that changed as economic experts began espousing mercantilist ideas. Progress in Hungary was modest initially, but the pace of change increased significantly after the Compromise of 1867. Since the modern road network was centered on Budapest, the main lines in Slovakia led southward. In 1918, Slovakia became part of the new state of Czechoslovakia, which led to rapid transformation as trunk roads were redirected from Budapest westward to Prague. Czechoslovakism provided the ideological background for these proposed changes. From the 1930s onwards, some technocrats and politicians presented Czechoslovakia as a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe, a vision that was given concrete form through the new and promising technology of the motorway.

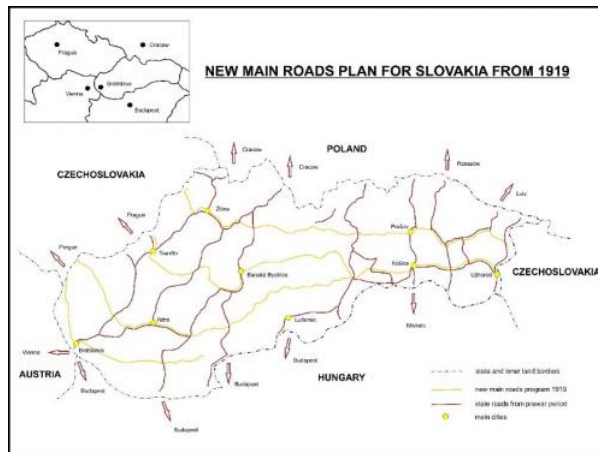


Fig. 1. New main road plan for Slovakia from 1919. © Michal ĀurĀo

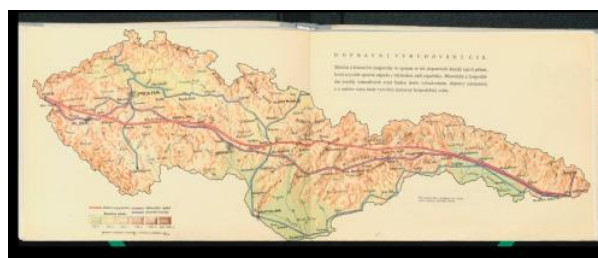


Fig. 2. Jan Antonin Bata's motorway (red line). Source: BAĀA, Jan AntonĀn. Budujme stĀit pro 40 000 000 lidĀ. ZIĀn: Tisk, 1937. (Translation of the text: ĀBuilding transportation in the CSR (Czechoslovak Republic). Road and rail arteries, together with waterways,

will secure direct, cheap and fast travel between the west and the east of our republic. Historical and economic differences among different regions will thus be eliminated, transforming our country into a single economic unit.â

Transport infrastructure is often understood as an instrument of integration, yet it can also serve as a tool for segregation. Its primary function is to overcome spatial barriers, both physical or social, and to thereby facilitate interaction between different locations. The twin factors of system builders and inherent technological possibilities determine whether or not transport infrastructure will break through these barriers. When it succeeds in doing so, locations are connected and users become more or less integrated. In modern Europe, the main actor governing this kind of integration and segregation through the development of transport policy has commonly been the state.â

Part of modern-day Slovakia belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary from the eleventh century onwards. Hungary itself became part of the new Habsburg Empire in 1526. At the time, responsibility for maintaining the road network rested with the aristocracy who controlled estates, cities, and counties. Due to the lack of centralized oversight, the stateâs influence over integration through transport remained very limited up to the second half of the eighteenth century, when local experts took inspiration from mercantilism, which placed a heavy emphasis on transport. New roads were planned to connect every part of the Habsburg Empire with the imperial capital of Vienna. These roads were to be paved after the example of the French *chaussÃ©e*, making them passable year-round.â

In this configuration, the Hungarian part of the Empire and its capital of Budapest were part of a loose network, and remained dependent on Vienna in terms of transport. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 changed the situation, as Hungary was finally able to determine its own transport policy. A ministry of Public Works and Transport was established, and there was feverish investment in rail in addition to planning for waterways. With respect to road building, this led to a new administrative framework, laws, and categorization of roads modeled on the French system. The most significant reformers and visionaries in this process were the ministers IstvÃ¡n SzÃ©chenyi and GÃ¡bor Baross.

The collapse of Austria-Hungary and the subsequent establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 radically changed the functioning and planning of transport infrastructure in these areas. Roads had to be reoriented away from Budapest to the south toward the new political and economic capital of Prague to the west. Much of the personnel remained loyal to Hungary, and had to be replaced by new staff. The crucial importance of transport infrastructure to protecting the fledgling state of Czechoslovakia was proven in 1919, when Hungarian Bolshevik forces attacked Slovakia. With the benefit of pre-war transport infrastructure, they successfully occupied eastern and much of central Slovakia, while the lack of reliable transport links between Slovakia and Czech territory impeded the movement of Czechoslovak troops coming to the nationâs defense.â

In the aftermath of this experience, Czechoslovak army officials drew up a new road network plan for Slovakia (Fig. 1). The crux of the project was the construction of four new roads running east-west, as a counterweight to pre-war Hungarian transport policy. These infrastructure projects took shape against the ideological backdrop of Czechoslovakism, and were intended to reinforce the tenuous political fiction of a Czechoslovak state.

Slovak industrialists also called for such development. Before the war, Slovakia was an integral part of the Hungarian economy, exporting primarily to Southeast Europe. However, after 1918 there were no connections toward the west, making exports to Czech territory and Germany costly and sometimes impossible. Many Slovak factories were unable to compete with Czech industry, and were subsequently shuttered.

In spite of early efforts to bridge this gap, road conditions deteriorated quickly in the late 1920s due to a sharp rise in vehicle numbers. Czechoslovak engineers and politicians turned to the United Kingdom as a model. In 1927, the Czechoslovak parliament duly passed a law financing roads, and the Ministry of Public Works set out to improve road quality.

There were increasing discussions regarding the future of road transport and its role in the countryâs integration

throughout the 1930s. One reason for this was awareness of the autobahns being constructed in Nazi Germany. Despite being a member of the Permanent International Association of Road Congresses (PIARC), the Czechoslovak Ministry of Public Works did not send an official delegation to the World Road Congress held in Munich in 1934. This gesture, which was a first for the interwar period, was an expression of the troubled diplomatic relations between Germany and Czechoslovakia. It also expressed some concerns from the ministry regarding motorways, which were seen as a luxury in Czechoslovakia where there were still relatively few automobiles.Â Â

Opinions began to shift in 1935, when a group of politicians and experts from various fields organized an economic conference in Prague. They styled themselves as regionalists, meaning that they disagreed with the policy of centralism. They offered various solutions to deal with the after-effects of the Great Depression, one of which was a proposal for a national road system, or Czechoslovak motorway. Interestingly, they refrained from using foreign names, such as *autostrada* or *autobahn*, to describe this infrastructure, opting instead for the term ânational roadâ in order to highlight its potential for national and socio-economic integration. The conference attendees further suggested that if Czechoslovakia failed to build a motorway like the Germans were doing, international road transport would be unable to develop, thereby implying that the nation had an international duty.

The government continued to oppose the motorway. The Czechoslovak Road Research Institute, which was established in response to the national road proposal, produced an updated road plan in 1936 covering the national territory in full, based on the most recent data for road traffic intensity. In addition, the Institute finally recommended the construction of a few sections of multi-lane concrete roadsâa motorway by any other name.

In the following year, the famous entrepreneur Jan AntonÃn BaÅa introduced his own Czechoslovak motorway project, which stood out through its explicitly European character and international scope. It would connect to the French port of Le Havre, pass through Paris, Rheims and Frankfurt, and continue on to the Czechoslovak city of Cheb; from there it would wind through the rest of the country to the Romanian border, terminating on the Black Sea coast. BaÅa thereby positioned Czechoslovakia as a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe (Fig. 2). This proposal was largely overlooked internationally. Germany was planning a motorway in the same general direction, running parallel through Salzburg, Vienna (a part of the Third Reich after 1938), and Hungary. Construction on the Czechoslovak motorway did not begin until the collapse of the first Czechoslovak Republic in September 1938, although by the end of the interwar period Slovakia was already well integrated within Czechoslovakia thanks to the new transport policy.

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