Slovakia achieved its independence on January 1, 1993 as Czechoslovakia split apart in a ‘velvet divorce’ brokered by the prime ministers of the two republics, Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar, the summer before. In the years that followed, the Czech Republic affirmed its reputation as one of the most stable and democratic states in the former Soviet bloc. Slovakia achieved the opposite. As Mečiar led his people into a twilight zone between democracy and dictatorship the country was increasingly shunned as a pariah. What went wrong?

The first obstacle Slovakia confronted was a clear tendency among foreign journalists and politicians to see the entire move to independence as the work of troublemakers. US Vice-President Dan Quayle visited eastern Slovakia in June 1991 bringing an uncompromising message that it was in the interests of both Slovakia and the region that the federation remain intact. Some of the more influential journalists were far less diplomatic: ‘The break-up of the Czechoslovak federation is a sad unnecessary event that in the long run may benefit some sectional interests of the Czech economy and the irrational fantasies of some Slovak nationalists but is of little value to Central Europe’ (my italics).1

Aspects of this initial opposition to the very idea of an independent Slovak state have endured in one form or another in both journalistic and academic writing ever since. The reasons are complex but take us to the heart of the main problems Slovakia has faced since 1993.

In this chapter we look at the key issues surrounding the break-up of the federation, starting with a crucial background discussion of
the wartime fascist state of Father Jozef Tiso, whose tempting but ultimately false association with the cause of Slovak independence in the 1990s has proved a complicating factor in explaining the very good reasons for the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. In the next chapter we move to the present with an examination of developments in Slovakia since independence that centres on the 1998 elections.

Disengaging from the fascist past

When nationalists in Slovakia looked for evidence that they were capable of managing their own affairs without guidance from the Czechs they found it in one worryingly obvious place.

On March 14, 1939, fresh from a meeting with Hitler in Berlin, Father Jozef Tiso addressed the Slovak Provincial Assembly. A motion was proposed and accepted. Slovakia became an ‘independent’ state for the first time and Czechoslovakia disappeared from the map of Europe. The importance of the wartime Slovak state to nationalists in the 1990s seemed obvious enough.

The regime may not have been palatable to everybody, but it protected the country and provided the conditions for the expression of national aspirations. Moreover, under most difficult circumstances, the Slovaks proved that they were able to govern themselves.²

A governmental administration had been established, the economy had developed, universities had expanded, cultural life had benefited generally.³ There was of course the troublesome matter of Slovakia’s role as a vassal state of the Third Reich, systematic anti-Semitism and participation in the German war effort. The history books would have to be re-written.

The most appalling example of precisely that came to prominence in 1996 with a book by Milan S. Ďurica, a professor of central and eastern European history at the University of Padua in Italy. The book was circulated to all Slovak primary schools on instruction from the ministry of education at the end of 1996 after 80,000 Ecu of PHARE programme money had been unwittingly granted to help finance the project.