

THE QUESTION OF SLOVAKIA IN HUNGARIAN POLITICS 1920–1927

The fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the subsequent emergence of new states in its territory in 1918 brought grave geopolitical changes in the region of Central Europe. It was at this time that the territory of modern day Slovakia was demarcated from the Hungarian Kingdom.¹ The Slovak political elite united under the Slovak National Council, appealing to a Wilsonian right of national self-determination, and demanded in the “Declaration of the Slovak nation” from 30th of October 1918, that Slovakia become a part of the future Czechoslovak state. This act approved the efforts of the Czech and Slovak exile politicians who during the war had lobbied the “Entente” governments for the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and for the founding of an independent state of Czechs and Slovaks.

After the First World War Hungary was in a situation where the country had lost a majority of its historical crown lands and the successor states now occupied about 72 % of that territory. This situation was the consequence of a few political factors and not least the non-sensibility of Hungarian national policy in the times of dualism, when they didn’t listen to the representatives of national minorities. After the First World War, these national minorities profited from “Entente” help for their national-emancipation efforts. This far-reaching change could not pass without consequence – new conflicts were born. The Decision of Trianon and its results still traumatise Hungarian society today. This point of a common past is a cause of one of the biggest principal conflicts of Czech-Slovak-Hungarian relationships, and sustains stereotypes on both sides. In spite of this fact, Czechoslovak historiography in the past didn’t pay necessary attention to these kinds of questions. In contrast, in Hungarian historiography of the 20th Century, these questions (pertinent with Trianon) are one of the key problems. Fundamental conflict between Czech-Slovak and Hungarian interpretations of the break-up of the monarchy and especially the Hungarian Kingdom and its results, are interpreted from a nationalist point of view:

¹ The first attempt for choosing and identifying the territory of Slovakia/ place where Slovaks live, was the Memorandum of the Slovak nation in 1861.

1. For Slovaks, the disintegration of historical Hungary brought freedom and better conditions for national emancipation. This was the first time in the history of Slovaks.

2. For Magyars it meant an end to the continuity of a long and rich national history and the division of the Magyar nation to foreign lands which meant a national catastrophe.

After the creation of the Czechoslovak State, the new Hungarian Prime Minister, Count Károly Mihály, started looking for a solution to this difficult situation. He wanted to save the integrity of Hungary by providing autonomy for dissatisfied non-Magyar nations, but the activities of his minister for national minorities, Oszkár Jászi, were unsuccessful. There were also the activities of the short-lived Hungarian Bolshevik Republic, which operated with the ideology of bolshevism, and many of its followers believed in the restoration of Hungarian integrity. A consequence of this was the creation of the Slovak Bolshevik Republic, which was also unsuccessful.

The contrarevolution in the summer of 1919 brought another change. Representatives of this political line didn't agree with the revolutionary governments of M. Károly and Béla Kún, who had a critical point of view to old Hungarian politics. They personified a continuity of old Hungarian policy, declaring a Christian-national political direction. On 28th October 1919, a well-known memorandum of Admiral Nicolas Horthy was written about the international situation and the role of the Hungarian national army in a struggle for revision. This document talks about the "Slovak question" as one of the key ways to destroy the Czechoslovakian state², which was generally considered in Hungary as a provisorium and Slovakia/Felvidék was regarded as an "occupied land" or "the territory seceded by Czechs".

From the autumn of 1919, feverish activities to bring Slovakia back to Hungary began. In parallel with foreign attempts, activities in the occupied territories also began. These steps were provided by organisations supported by the Hungarian government and also by some irregular irredenta groups, who had started their activities shortly after the fall of the monarchy. These activities were badly co-ordinated and their results were sometimes contradictory. A strong rivalry existed between the groups organised for winning back the integrity of Hungary and trying to find a solution to this situation. There were conceptual differences, personal aversions, but also competitors fighting for financial provisions. In 1919–1920 there was a conflict between two different concepts connected with the "Slovak question," which had a strong influence on Hungarian politics:

² *Trianon. Nemzet és emlékezet*. Ed. Miklós Zeidler, Budapest, Osiris, 2003, 546–555 p.

Firstly, was the opinion that the “occupied territory” must be returned by military action (with the aid of insurrection), supported by representatives of the army and generality, Felvidéki Liga (Upper-Hungary League) and Tót Központi Iroda (Central Slovak Office). The most well-known Slovaks were Károly Bulissa and Gyula Mészáros. These organisations had strong support from the Hungarian government, especially in producing propaganda. Between the autumn of 1919 and September 1920, a number of courageous plans for the military recovery of Slovakia were born. For example „Ébredés” (Wake up!) was elaborated by the Hungarian generality. These plans were calculated with positive support from the population in the territory of Slovakia, help from Poland and with the provision of neutrality from the rest of their neighbouring countries.³ In 1920, these activities began in this way and they also continued after the signing of the Trianon peace treaty. Finally, these plans were superseded and never took over in spite of pressure from some organisations, which were appealing for an early invasion of Slovakia. Especially Felvidéki Liga, an organisation constituted mostly by Hungarian political emigrants from Slovakia, which produced propaganda, drew information and organised secret military forces behind the borders. The same arguments – that Slovaks were loyal to Hungary, were also used by representatives of Tót Központi Iroda. These organisations were strongly compromised among Slovaks as Magyar nationalist organisations, which worked for the return of the old intolerant regime. The Czechoslovakian side discovered much intimate and secret information about their activities, and this was published with large headlines in the press.⁴

The second group was organised by the Ministry for national minorities, where the Tót Főosztály (High Slovak department) worked. The most well-known personalities with Slovak roots were Zoltán Szvieszény, Viktor Dvorčák, Michal Kmoško and František Jehlička. They saw that the only proper way for saving (or restoring) the integrity of the Hungarian Kingdom – lay in a deal with the Slovaks. Their success was an adjustment of the “Plan of Slovak autonomy” approved by the Hungarian government in beginning of January 1920. But that compromise was just a symbolic, tactical step, serving as arguments for the upcoming discussion at the Paris peace conference. At the same time this secret agreement evoked a large wave of disapproval and some organisations with strong nationalist beliefs understood it as an

³ BOROS Ferenc: *Magyar-csehszlovák kapcsolatok 1918–1921-ben*. Budapest, Akadémia Kiadó, 1970, p. 218–238; DOMBRÁDY Lóránd – TÓTH Sándor: *A magyar királyi honvédség 1919–1945*. Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, 1987, 17–25 p.

⁴ Slovenský národný archív v Bratislave, osobný fond Vavro Šrobár, box 10.

attempt to break up the idea of the St. Stephan crown.⁵ For the Hungarian government, the advantage of the group of Slovak exiles around Jehlicska, was their connection with the autonomist movement in Czechoslovakia. After visiting the Peace Conference in Paris, in August 1919, leaders of the autonomist Slovak Peoples Party – Andrej Hlinka and Jehlička, began to fight for the Slovak autonomy promised by the Czechs, Jehlička didn't return to the Czechoslovak Republic. He established Magyarbarát Tót Néppárt (Pro-Hungarian Slovak National Party) in Budapest and continued acting as Hlinka's delegate in the out-lands. This position would guarantee him a stronger position among Slovak emigrants and more interest from the Hungarian government. The memorandum, which was presented in Paris in August 1919, became a part of the Hungarian argument at the Peace Conference. But the Slovak Peoples Party and also Andrej Hlinka had officially disavowed Jehlička's activities to profit from autonomy by the Hungarian state. Also Czechoslovak propaganda strongly discredited the movement, which had appealed with Slovak nationalism.

In spite of the feverish activities of Slovak irredentas and Hungarian representatives, nothing happened. The Hungarian government was aware of their small military power, allies and economic potential and didn't give approval for these adventurous efforts. Also the loyalty of the Slovak population toward Hungary started to weaken⁶ and there were also signs that part of the Magyar minority also sympathised with Czechoslovakia. The signing of the Trianon peace treaty on 4th June 1920 and its ratification meant a new reality for Hungary. Likewise the isolation of the country, the failure of various attempts to win support from foreign countries – especially France, and the end of the Polish-Soviet war – when the activities against the Czechoslovak state were culminating, caused a change in Hungarian political views in foreign policy. These were told by Hungarian historian Ignác Romsics between 1919–1920 when he considered the alternatives.⁷ Now, was the time for consolidation for a country searching for a place in a new Europe. New Prime Minister count Pál Teleki started a political course of understanding with its neighbours, especially Czechoslovakia. His intervention saved Slovakia from

⁵ TILKOVSKÝ Lóránt: *Területi integritás és területi autonómia. A magyar kormány 1920-évi felvidéki szlovák autonómia-terve*. Századok 2000/3, 555–596 p.; TILKOVSKÝ Lóránt: *Viták a TÉVEL nemzetiségi bizottságában 1920 júliusában*. In: *Baranyai Helytörténetírás*, 1987/1988, 435–478 p.

⁶ About the construction of Slovak national identity and relations with Magyars see: NURMI Ismo: *Slovakia – a Playground for Nationalism and National Identity*. Helsinki, Bibliotheca Historica 42, 1999, 202 p.

⁷ ROMSICS Ignác: *Bethlen István külpolitikája 1921–1931*. In: *Századok* 1990/5–6, 577–616 p.

a planned invasion by irredentas over Christmas 1920. Joint sessions predisposed later organised official meetings between Hungary and Czechoslovakia in Bruck (in March 1921), Marienbad (in June 1921) and Brno (September 1921). The contents of these meetings were very disparate, but generally – Czechoslovak representatives focused on economic problems and were unwilling to talk about political questions and especially about the possible modification of borders, and that was the most promoted condition of Hungary in making an effectual agreement.⁸ This attempt for mutual understanding and approach, which was like a feeler (balon d'essai), was broken in March 1921 with the return of the last Hungarian emperor Karl IV, who claimed back his land. Czechoslovak state representatives and especially the Minister of foreign affairs Dr. Beneš understood this fact as an attempt to restore a historical Hungarian Kingdom and with all of his influence worked against it. Hungarian representatives warned that the King's question was the intrastate problem of the Hungarian government.⁹ Full coldness in relations between Hungary and Czechoslovakia brought a second restoration attempt of Karl IV in October 1921. After this event, relations between the two countries were cold for a long time – except for the discussion of financial aid for Hungary in 1923. In the summer of 1921, a new significant political bloc in the Carpathian region was formed against Hungarian revisionist efforts, including Czechoslovakia, Serb-Croatian-Slovene Kingdom and Romania, named Little Entente.

In April 1921 Teleki was replaced as Prime Minister by a man with a good sense for real policy – count István Bethlen, who declared a continuity with the Teleki's foreign-political course. Proclaiming that Hungary was adapting to the situation which had come as a consequence of the Trianon peace treaty. Because land had been confronted with severe economical problems and international isolation, there was just one chance to keep alive their far-reaching aspiration – which was a revision of the status quo. It was well thought out propaganda. And the government, in contrast with previous ill-judged military plans,

⁸ TÓTH Andrej: První bilaterální jednání mezi Československem a Maďarskem (1921) – Bruck an der Leitha. In: *Moderní dějiny* 9, 2001, 97–159 p.; TÓTH Andrej: První bilaterální jednání mezi Československem a Maďarskem (1921) – Mariánské Lázně. In: *Moderní dějiny* 10, 2002, 29–75 p.; ÁDÁM Magda: *Kisantant és Európa 1920–1929*. Budapest, Akadémia Kiadó, 1989, 212–213 p.

⁹ For this problem see: ORMOS Mária: *Soha amíg élek*. Pécs, Pannónia Könyvek, 1990, 161 p. About Czechoslovakian relations see: ÁDÁM Magda: *Kisantant és Európa 1920–1929*. Budapest, Akadémia Kiadó, 1989, 93–160 p.; TÓTH Andrej: Československá diplomacie a první restaurační pokus Karla Habsburského v Maďarsku (26. březen – 5. duben 1921). In: *Slovanský přehled* 2002/3, 343–370 p.

helped it on.¹⁰ According to the directions of the Trianon peace treaty supporting irredenta was prohibited, but the government needed to keep the question of the “injustice of Trianon” alive. The manoeuvrability of various irredentistic organisations was relatively large, and Bethlen wanted to have them under control as some of their activities compromised the government and could potentially thwart its plans. As a consequence, several organisations were liquidated (also Felvidéki Liga) and in August 1921 a new secret central organisation – Társadalmi Egyesületek Szövetsége (TESz) – was formed, whose role was to steer the activities of 4 secret organisations with government policy. Within TESz there were organisations that operated with the intent of working in the “occupied territories” and above all they co-operated with representatives of the Hungarian minority in successor states. The territory of modern Slovakia was under the control of Rákóczi Szövetség, which also assumed some liability from Felvidéki Liga.¹¹

Next came a very responsible part of Hungarian policy on Slovakia, which was closely connected with the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia. This complicated problem was mostly used by Budapest to present the untenable nature of the status quo. Some of the political parties of the Hungarian minority established in Slovakia, had been in close contact with Bethlens government and received financial support and instructions from Budapest. In the beginning it was especially the Christian-socialist party, which also organised a Slovak detachment.¹² These suspicious contacts were openly predicated and became a part of the political discourse in Czechoslovakia. Most of the Hungarian political representatives were marked for their un-loyalty to the Republic like irredentas and the “traitors of Budapest”.¹³

For the early and “natural self-destruction” of the Czechoslovak republic, Hungarian politicians gave their support to groups which were ambivalent with state. They aspired to make differences between the Czechs and Slovaks become acute and demonstrated the absurd existence of this “artificial state”.

¹⁰ For this problem see: ANGYAL Béla: A csehszlovákiai magyarság anyaországi támogatása a két világháború között. In: *REGIÓ* 2000/3, 133–177 p.

¹¹ B. BERNÁT István: *TESzK a revíziós propaganda egységéért*. Manuscript. Teleki László Alapítvány Könyvtára 591/1987/c.; About Hungarian revisionist propaganda see: B. KOVÁCS Anikó: *Der ungarische Revisionismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*. München, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997, 318 p.

¹² HERTEL Maroš: Az országos Keresztényszocialista Párt szlovák szekciója. In: *Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle* 2003/4, 151–155 p.

¹³ ANGYAL Béla.: *Érdekvédelem és önszerveződés*. Galanta-Dunajská Streda, Lilium Aurum-Forum Institute, 2002, p. 348; ZELENÁK Peter: Maďarská menšina v geopolitických reláciách Slovenska. In: *Pohľady na slovenskú politiku*. Ed. M. Pekník, Bratislava, Veda, 2000, 199–227 p.

They supported the idea of autonomy and Slovak separatism against the idea of one united Czechoslovak nation. Against the co-existence with Czechs, refers to a long tradition of living beside each other, the economic difficulties of joining the Czechoslovak state and not least, differences in religious questions (Catholicism versus Husitism). This was an important role for father Jehlicska and the pro-Hungarian Slovak exiles. Though often used, these sometimes such exact arguments, brought a false hope that with a little help from the Hungarian side – for example using of plebiscite, the whole of Slovakia would return to Hungary. But the complicated reality became more visible as the fast changes in the evolution of Slovak national identity, which had become strongly anti-Magyar, guided by antirevisionistic reactions supported also by the state machinery, which accompanied all wider references about the revision of borders.

In contrast with the strong propaganda war, which took place on both sides, actively subventioned by governments, the higher foreign-political level was seen as a contrast between the relative passivity of Hungary and the activity of Czechoslovak representatives, especially Dr. Beneš who was at the top of his political career. Official Hungarian policy concentrated more on the protection of the rights of Hungarian minorities based in successor states, and they never talked openly about their aspirations to restore the integrity of the Hungarian Kingdom. A change in this statement came after the cancellation of the military and economic control of Hungary and the resulting conclusion of the agreement between Hungary and Italy in April 1927. After this so important pact for Hungary – which ended the foreign-political isolation of the country, a time of active foreign policy began. Intense interest in Czechoslovak-Hungarian relationships evoked a sharp propaganda campaign for ethnic revision, connected with the name of British paper magnate Lord Rothermere. This loud propaganda and reaction along with strong anti-propaganda, wasn't really effective in respect to foreign political relations. But it refreshed and kept alive the question of "Trianon injustice" and the fate of national minorities in the Central-European region. Both sides had equal power in their arguments.¹⁴

Generally, propaganda was made for the general public, for manipulating public opinion, but a real solution wasn't possible without the support of the great powers and the political representatives of both sides reflected this fact.

¹⁴ About propaganda in Hungary and antipropaganda in Czechoslovakia see: KOVÁCS Anikó: Adalékok a magyar revíziós mozgalom történetéhez. In: *Régió*, 1994/3, 70–94 p.; MICHELA Miroslav: Reakcie slovenských politických kruhov a tlače na Rothermerovu akciu 1927–1928. In *Historický časopis*, 2004/3, 503–522 p.