

*Milan Rastislav Štefánik in minds and hearts.
Phenomenon of a national hero
in the context of historical memory*

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General Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880 – 1919), an astronomer, soldier, diplomat and the Minister, the co-founder of the Czechoslovak republic, belongs to the most important historical personalities of modern Slovak history. Shortly after his tragic death, he became a person enshrined in the symbolic national Pantheon: even today he belongs to the group of people, who are generally considered among Slovaks as national heroes. He was buried in the Mount Bradlo which is situated near his birthplace: Štefánik's grave with its monument became a sacred symbol, a Slovak place of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) in the sense of conception of a French historian, Pierre Nora.

The publication is focused on the issue of commemoration of Štefánik and his posthumous cult in Slovak society. From that point of view it is logical that the book does not talk about Štefánik's personality itself but about the society, individuals, and groups; about those, who took Štefánik as their own symbol, identified with him or about those, who refused him.

Štefánik's fascinating life was appealing to simple people. That was why educators tried to use him as a social model whenever they educated youth or whenever they wanted to lift up civic and national consciousness in a widespread way among groups of Slovaks. In the texts dedicated to his commemoration, Štefánik was presented as a liberator, an ancient hero (Icarus, Prometheus) or a national martyr, a national saint or a saviour of the nation. Poets and speakers at the celebrations compared him with Moses, or even with Jesus Christ. Those conceptions and metaphorical pictures corresponded with a myth about millennial oppression of Slovaks and contributed to creating the concept of sacredness in the Slovak national movement. In poetic imagination Štefánik often played a social role of a mystical patron and a protector of the homeland. This motive appeared in a modified version also in the contributions among contemporary journalists in the time of threat that the unified territory of Slovakia could be violated: in the minds of people Štefánik functioned as a symbolic guarantee for the protection of state borders.

The object of the research is based in the problem of how Štefánik has been used or misused in the political and ideological struggle between two main political camps (supporters of Prague centralism versus supporters of Slovak autonomy in the Czechoslovak Republic during the interwar period). These phenomena could be illustrated in polemics between an autonomous and a centralistic press from May 1922. The controversy concerned an alleged dishonour of the commemoration of Štefánik during the political manifestation organized by the Slovak People's Party and by its leader Andrej Hlinka. The fight disclosed not only a character of political culture in the Slovak society but also some manipulative mechanisms. In that conflict the national hero Štefánik functioned

not only as an element for mobilisation and integration but also as an instrument of disgracing and ostracising a political rival: the wider public was influenced to believe the idea: anyone who does not honour the most important national hero is a betrayer of the nation.

Similarly interesting is the contemporary discourse about Štefánik's tragic death. The conception of anti Slovak conspiracy (Štefánik's death as a politically motivated murder) became an incendiary theme appearing also in the media and serving the autonomists as a tool of political and ethnical determination ("we" autonomists versus "they" centralists; or "we" Slovaks versus "they" Czechoslovaks) in their struggle against centralism. During WWII it became an official part of propaganda of the Slovak State.

In the second part of this book the author is focused on the history of the Memorial of Štefánik and on annual commemorative celebrations in the western Slovak city of Trnava. He researched the problem in the context of communal politics, collective identities and group loyalties. The Memorial of Štefánik from 1924 was the first secular statue, commemorated to a national hero. It was situated in the public area in Trnava. It is remarkable that the prior position in the city with a Catholic majority of citizens was given to Štefánik, a son of a Lutheran priest. The Memorial of Štefánik and annual commemorative celebrations were elements of nationalisation within the public space. They functioned not only as tools for Slovakisation of the citizens in Trnava but also for modernisation of that city; secondarily, regarding the character and content of the commemorative rituals, the symbol of Štefánik functioned also as a tool for secularisation: to some degree it functioned as a counterbalance to creating Trnava's "self-picture" formed in a metaphor *Trnava – the Slovak Rome*. The achievement to influence citizens in Trnava in a way they finally identify with Štefánik as their social model caused that during the opening celebration dedicated to the new statue in the city, no one stressed the fact that Štefánik was of Protestant origin; on the other side an interesting attempt appeared to integrate him into the context of domestic identities, loyalties and pictures in the history of Trnava. This attempt showed up in the fact that Štefánik was presented as the *Slovak from the western part of Slovakia*. Then they purposely stressed that Štefánik during his life made connections with reviving activities of Bernolák's followers, that means of the Catholics intellectuals, who operated in Trnava and in the wider western Slovak environment.

The third part of the book is focused on the period of destruction of the Czechoslovak Republic and creating the independent Slovak State (1938 – 1939). A new government led by Hlinka's Slovak People's Party liquidated the democratic system of the Czechoslovak Republic, and immediately started to prefer new symbols, mainly the symbol of Andrej Hlinka. A part of Slovak citizens, mainly the Protestants, spontaneously refused Hlinka to be the most important national symbol. The struggle between the totalitarian regime of the Slovak State and new civic opposition was manifested also in the level of the fight for the national symbols. V. P. Čobrda, the General Bishop of the Lutheran Church, publicly spoke against the national symbol of Hlinka. He said that Hlinka was religiously intolerant and because of that he did not accept him as a symbol

of a national father for the Slovak Lutherans. The same argument he presented also in May 1939 at the Mount Bradlo: during the commemorative celebration of Štefánik. This was organised by the Union of the Lutheran Youth. Čobrda's speech was an open refusal of Hlinka. He stressed the position of Štefánik in the symbolic national Pantheon. The message of the celebration was clear: Milan Rastislav Štefánik is the most important national symbol and the greatest son of the Slovak nation. Štefánik became a symbol of Anti- Fascist, civic revolt.