

The Imperium of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain, 1918–1920

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For the bigger part of the First World War, Slovaks emphasized their loyalty to the Hungarian government. From February 1918 on, the Slovak politicians started to activate themselves in the political life. Slovak political parties gathered to hold a confidential meeting on May 26, 1918, where the Slovak National Party was given a mandate for the central representation of the interests of Slovaks. On the other hand, the political climate only became favorable by the end of October 1918 in order to manifest this intention.

Contemplating solutions and brooding no longer tying them up, they had a more pressing task at hand: to decide on the form of independent national life. The Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain tried to orient themselves, but the international political situation was changing permanently, and for this reason they could not get important information and decisions from abroad, which could help them to make their choice. Thus, they wavered between approaching Serbia, becoming an "independent republic" (The imperium of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain), and approaching Romania.

Finally, the peace talks left the area of their settlements under Hungarian control, which resulted in the immediate exile of exposed individuals. The phrase "their own Slovak Imperium" provided an opportunity though for the occupying Romanian troops. According to Lajos Hrdlička, the occupying Romanian authorities were accommodating in every sense. They were offered a chance for an independent district, "okolie", the "Imperium Slovenské" (The Imperium of the Slovaks). The Slovaks of Békés and Csanád counties remained inside the borders of mutilated Hungary. Romanian troops were tasked with the occupation of the areas of Békés and Csanád. They successfully began building their own little "imperium", as the Romanians called it.

Keywords: First World War; Romanian occupation; Serbian occupation; Slovaks from the Great Hungarian Plain; The Imperium of the Slovaks

During the course of the First World War between 1914 and 1918, the leading personalities of national minorities were interned in the interior of the country. Slovaks were no exceptions from this. Thus, emphasizing its loyalty, the Slovak National Party ceased its activity. This lasted until February 1918. At that point, Šrobár returned to Rózsahegy and immediately began planning. He called Máté Dula in his capacity as the president of the national party to as-

* Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged. The presentation took place in 2019, Békéscsaba, conference of MAMUTT

semble a committee. In his letter he wrote that according to his sources in Vienna, the ruler was preparing to modify the constitution, which would surely result in the termination of the dualist system. At that time, there was no evidence of a program to secede. On the other hand, in his letter dated to March 1918 he outlined the perspective of complete independence based on the Wilsonian principles. Slovak political parties gathered to hold a confidential meeting on May 26, 1918, where the Slovak National Party was given a mandate for the central representation of the interests of Slovaks. This time, however, only the Czech-Slovak alternative was discussed, and they decided on seceding from the state of Saint Stephen. On the other hand, the political climate only became favorable by the end of October 1918 in order to manifest this intention.

The reluctant behavior of Slovaks in 1918 adumbrated that secession was not far away. Contemplating solutions and brooding no longer tying them up, they had a more pressing task at hand: to decide on the form of independent national life. That is why Máté Dula rejected the proposal of Oszkár Jászi detailed in his letter dated to September 26, 1918, where he asked Dula – the chairman of the Slovak National Party – to pen a short study in the context of nationality issues to complement the argument published in the newspaper titled *Huszadik Század*: “Now or never! – is uttered by the smaller nations awaiting salvation. This is our current point of view as well, while – trusting the righteousness of our cause – we await the decision of the nations’ soon-to-be-assembled Areopagus.”¹ Ultimately, Sámuel Zoch made a proclamation on behalf of the Slovaks. Mihály Károlyi, in his telegram dated to November 30, 1918, as a last effort, sends the following message to Máté Dula right before the decision at Túrócszentmárton:

“We feel as if we speak from the heart of the entire Hungarian nation, when in these hours of crisis we turn to the Slovak National Council with genuine, warm words of brotherly love. Neither hatred, nor conflict of interest did separate you from the Hungarian People, only the sinful politics of a stubborn class of us, which harmed Slovak and Hungarian people alike.

The Hungarians are not responsible for the grievances suffered by the Slovak people in their national pride, our people do not have solidarity with our sinful class, and we shall do everything in our power to exterminate them root and stem. We are of the opinion that in accordance with the sacred right of self-determination befitting every nation, the Slovak National Council shall decide in a manner they consider best for, and in the interest of the Slovak people; however, we wish to point out that according to our convictions and sacred beliefs, Slovak and Hungarian people are dependent on each other and we must be looking for a brighter future and for the

¹ LAMS, Martin. Jászi to Dula M. 94 J 32- Bp. 1918.IX.26.; Dula M. to Jászi O. –94 K 33- Martin 1918.okt.19.

terms and guarantees of a better life within the framework of a peaceful consensus and brotherly cooperation. We hope for the Slovak National Council to have wise and productive talks and wish many beautiful, happy and free years for the Slovak People. With brotherly regards on behalf of the Hungarian National Council, Count Mihály Károlyi, chairman."

There was little left to the imagination with regards to what sort of answer would arrive but due to the lack of a written proclamation, Mihály Károlyi could remain optimistic; similarly, Máté Dula responded in a cautious manner but at the same time he clearly rejected the notion of remaining in a joint state:

"The greetings expressed by Mr. Chairman were received with joy and is sincerely reciprocated by the executive committee of the Slovak National Council. This has been the very first occasion that representatives of the Hungarian nation addressed representatives of the Slovak Nation as brothers. Our national committee has also accepted the new international legal situation outlined by Wilson and accepted by the Monarchy's representatives of foreign affairs. If the Hungarian people are willing to embrace the understanding of the Hungarian National Council regarding the freedom of nations as their own, then they shall create the moral framework for an internationally founded, mutual understanding between our nations. We sincerely hope that that the Hungarian people shall take such a place among the society of free nations that befits them on the merit of their cultural values and democracy. The free Czech-Slovak nation wishes to be good neighbors and good brothers to the Hungarian nation. Máté Dula, Chairman of the Slovak National Council."²

The Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain

Similarly, the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain, having exchanged telegrams with the Slovak National Council of Túrócszentmárton, were aware of the political situation but were momentarily confused by the fact that there was no way for them to join the new Czech-Slovak Republic. At Novi Sad, according to records dated to November 10, 1918, the newly founded Slovak National Committee of Slovaks from Bačka and Syrmia expressed its regret for not being included in the new national body. However, they made a promise to always remain Slovaks. Based on this national identity, they wished to maintain a constant connection with the Slovak Motherland and its national life. As children of the Motherland who were stranded far away, they asked for her kindness and love towards them, and they assured her of their devoted loyalty. On November 21, 1918 the Slovak National Council of Túrócszentmárton gave

² LAMS, Martin, Mihály Károlyi's letter to Máté Dula –1918.október.30. 94 B 43; Máté Dula's letter to Mihály Károlyi

their answer. They appreciated their joining but asked them to found the Central National Committee of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain in conjunction with other Slovaks of the Plain's language enclave. They also sent a telegram on November 10, 1918 to the Serbian National Committee operating in Novi Sad, in which they emphasized that they wanted to be able to help them in all of their righteous endeavors. Here, in this brotherly "embrace", they wished to find a better, more beautiful future for their national life.³

The Slovak National Council responded to the article published in the *Slovenský Denník* on November 28, 1918, in which they expressed their surprise at the fact that the Slovaks living North of the Maros River were not going to have representatives in the National Assembly in Prague, despite the fact that they consisted of 250,000 people. They also communicated that the leader of the occupying Serbian troops had shown great interest towards them in Arad, and encouraged them to declare their intention to join Serbia since it would be better for them to join a fraternal nation, rather than a foreign one. Furthermore, they would be glad if their representatives, Juraj Suchánsky from Nagylak and Ondrej Beňo from Tótkomlós could participate in this National Assembly.⁴ This ever-changing situation, lacking long-term certainty, is evidenced by the letter of Lajos Hrdlička to his friend Lajos with an unknown last name from January 2, 1919. According to its contents, the National Committee (Nagylak) joined the National Committee of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain and sent two delegates to the central management – a teacher, Mihály Francisci, and András Beňo from Tótkomlós. They declared the National Committee of Tótkomlós as Hungarophile, since they changed their previous decision.

A public assembly on January 2, 1919 was convened by an individual called dr. Szabó (most likely he was Oreszt Szabó), who was otherwise the representative of Jászi – certain members of the National Committee, using the assembly as an opportunity, attempted to have the previous decision changed because it had come to their attention that the National Committee of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain at Novi Sad had spoken in favor of belonging to the Kingdom of Serbia. Hrdlička and Beňo felt that they must firmly reject this lie and they referred to its program. According to Hrdlička, the majority of the public assembly agreed with the program. However, he would consider it very important for people from outside the community and for secular people – like his friend – to travel down, thus appearing more genuine in the eyes of the people. He considered the presentation he gave at the Slovak performance night a success, and he considered the event itself a moral and financial success. From his letter we learn that Dr. Emil Chrenka, who owned land by inheritance in Nagybánhegyes but lived in Budapest, was also in

³ LAMS, Martin, Slovenská Národná Rada Dolnozemsých Slovákov – SNR Turč.sv.Martin –1918. nov.10. 94 H 52, 94 H 53, SNR – Slovenskej Národnej Rady v Novom Sade 1918. nov.21. 94 I 46.

⁴ LAMS, Martin, 94 F52

Tótkomlós on the date of writing the letter and suggested that they put something "steaming" of socialism into the name of their organization, and thus they would immediately break through all hindrances. From Chrenka he also learned that Tótkomlós and its surrounding area were given to the Romanians. This was seemingly supported by the fact that Romanian troops were tasked with occupying the area. He also notes that the Serbians moved out of Nagylak. In another bulky letter he gives a detailed account of the events from November 1918. Armed homecoming soldiers arrived in Tótkomlós by trains and cars on November 1. They caused a great mess. They began shooting around aimlessly and after one of the merchants (who happened to be of Jewish origin – all 16 merchants of Tótkomlós were of Jewish origin by the way) refused to sell cigarettes to an intoxicated soldier, all hell broke loose. It only ended on the next day, at around 9/10 a.m. The only shop remaining intact was the baker's. Of course this could not have happened without leaving a trace, and having learned about it, the headquarters in Békéscsaba ordered an investigation, and by January 7, 1919 they organized a police force tasked with restoring order in Tótkomlós and its surrounding area and to capture the perpetrators following the conclusion of their investigation. (By the way, it is likely that Hrdlička was personally taking part in and witnessing the event because he had such a detailed recollection of the events that only one who had actually been there could know.)

His personal recollection matches with the contents of documents found in archives, which only include a few more details that were less important to him.⁵ On October 9, 1920 Hrdlička summarized the difficult and uncertain times in a hand-written letter of 8 pages to dr. Vavro Šrobár, who was appointed the minister plenipotentiary of Slovakia. This was done from Bratislava, from exile. His two companions in exile, János Kulík and István Rimavsky also signed this letter in their capacity as members of the Czech-Slovak military legion from Russia. In the letter they asked for Šrobár's intervention with the Hungarian government in order to secure ownership of their estates left behind in Hungary and in order to secure freedom for the arrested exposed Slovaks. Having listed the events in chronological order, the letter proves that neither the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain, nor their leaders had proper genuine and up-to-date information with regards to the status of the peace talks and the general state of affairs. Thus, they wavered between approaching Serbia, becoming an "independent republic" (The imperium of the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain) and approaching Romania. Finally, the peace talks left the area of their settlements under Hungarian control, which resulted in the immediate exile of exposed individuals.⁶

⁵ LAMS, Martin, Lajos Hrdlička's letter to his friend Lajos, whose surname is unknown L 35- SZINCSOK 1996 ;BmL- Orosházi járás főszolg. ir..7236/1920, 89/1924.; BmL – Bvm alisp.ir. 26491/1921. alisp.;

⁶ ŠÚA, Bratislava, f. .MPS.kr.16.i.č.339.sign.XIV.prez.

The recollections of a Lutheran pastor in exile, Lajos Hrdlička

In many ways, the recollections of Lajos Hrdlička published in 1945 match the contents of documents found in Hungarian archives. In his work published in 2010, István G. Vass also processed them in the context of the period between 1918 and 1919.⁷ Ecclesiastical and other archival documents produced matching results with our own research, which aimed at working with materials from state and foreign literary archives, as we have mentioned before. However, the notion that they wanted an independent republic was not verified in the verification procedures conducted after 1920 either. The phrase “their own Slovak Imperium” provided an opportunity though for the occupying Romanian troops. Hrdlička writes that on March 13, 1919 their delegation managed to contact Prime Minister Berinkey and President Mihály Károlyi. Accusingly, he writes that while their entry was being organized by the clerks, they were constantly pressured to raise their voices against the invasion of the Czechs.

They (the delegation) refused to do so. For this, they were called Dvortsakist lying Slovaks and Jewish intermediaries. Finally, they managed to get inside with the help of Dr. Emil Chrenka (a landowner from Nagybánhegyes), a regimental doctor from Budapest. The memorandums were personally handed over to the prime minister and the head of state who received their words with great interest. They promised the most favorable arrangement of their issues.

But what was inside the memorandum of the delegation from Tótkomlós? Broadly, in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the first one and a half decades of the 20th century Tótkomlós petitioned to have itself declared as a district center on many occasions. Together with the neighboring, almost exclusively Slovak settlements this would have also meant a voting district of 30,000 people. So, the language of public administration and teaching would also have been Slovak. At the same time, they asked for the foundation of an economic public school funded by the state. Furthermore, they petitioned for a redistribution of land at the expense of larger estates nearby for over 1800 land claimants from Tótkomlós. They also required the construction of a narrow gauge railway between Tótkomlós and Makó. The memorandum was signed by around 500 people. Unfortunately, the promise remained just a promise because, as we know, the government fell a few days later and was succeeded by the dictatorial Republic of Councils led by Béla Kun. It seemed that they did not even speak the same language with this new regime. Fortunately, this “pseudo-communist Jewish Hungarophile reign of terror” as he put it, did not last long. The Slovak settlements in Békés and Csanád counties were occupied by Serbians and Romanians. The Serbians invited the Slovak representatives to Újszeged in order to consult with them. Here, the idea to unite the Slovak communities under Yugoslav rule was brushed up again, mainly by the Slovaks from Bácska. This intention was put into words by Dr. J. Petrikovich, and

⁷ G.VASS 2010

was sent to the peace conference in Paris. As it turns out, it arrived too late. By that time, it had already been decided that the Slovaks of the Great Hungarian Plain would be in three different countries. Nagylak remained under Romanian rule and the Slovaks from Bácska were subsequently assimilated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Slovaks of Békés and Csanád remained inside the borders of mutilated Hungary. Romanian troops were tasked with the occupation of the areas of Békés and Csanád. According to Hrdlička, the occupying Romanian authorities were accommodating in every sense. They were offered a chance for an independent district, "okolie", the "Imperium Slovenské" (The Imperium of the Slovaks). Naturally, only in case the Slovaks would declare and petition for them to be annexed to Transylvania, therefore requesting to be under the rule of "Magna Romania".

This was done with the help of Slovaks from Békéscsaba. Mihály Saak of Békéscsaba, who spoke Romanian, and György Hrabovszky contacted representatives of the Romanian government, while Hrdlička with the help of his former schoolmate, Dr. A. Marcusa managed to contact the occupying army. This was followed by the assembly of the congress of Slovak settlements in Békéscsaba on August 13, 1919. According to the memories of Lajos Hrdlička, there were around 3000 participants from Békéscsaba and its surrounding area. Here and then they declared a Slovak-Romanian alliance and on the basis of this alliance they petitioned for the areas populated by Slovaks to be annexed to Romania. The declaration of this congress was sent to Paris, as well as to the Romanian parliament. The latter offered two lower chamber and two senate seats for the Slovaks. György Hrabovszky from Békéscsaba would have been the first representative, the other being Pál Veselsky, an elderly pastor. The candidates for senators were pastor Lajos Boor from Nagylak and Lajos Hrdlička, a pastor from Tótkomlós. The latter, upon seeing that the senatorial spot was requested by Romanians, relinquished the position. With the help of prefects Elek Babescu from Orosháza and Dr. A. Marcusa they were able to cooperate in a successful manner regarding matters of church, education, and language. They successfully began building their own little "imperium", as the Romanians called it.

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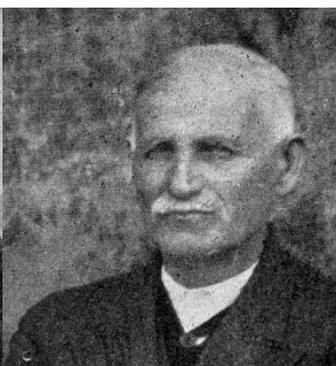
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Mihály Antal



András Benyo



István Franciszty



Mihály Franciszty



György Hrabovszky



Lajos Hrdlicska

THE IMPERIUM OF THE SLOVAKS...



János Kulík and István Rimavszky,
legionnaires



Mihály Lehoczky



Márton Matajdesz



Lajos Zsigmond Szeberényi



Tótkomlós, Fall of 1918 - The flag reads: Long live the free people's republic! (Due to the superscription it cannot be 1919.)