

## RELATIONS BETWEEN SLOVAKIA AND FRANCE 1939-1944

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The author pays attention to the relations between Slovakia and France during 1939-1944. He concentrates on the efforts of the Slovak Government to establish diplomatic relations with France, as well as on obstructions which stood in the way of these efforts. He also outlines some aspects of the relations between Slovakia and Vichy France, and discusses obstacles of the development of the mutual bilateral relations. The activities of some diplomatic representatives and authorities both of the involved parties and of third countries are analysed.

The aim of this contribution is not to describe the position of the topic at issue in the Slovaks' historical memory: such a goal would hardly be accomplishable at present. The gaps in Slovakia's collective memory concerning the topic on which the author's attention is focused are due to many reasons which cannot be analysed here. Since the shaping of structured historical memory must necessarily be anticipated by basic historical research, I shall try to outline what the relations between Slovakia and France were like in the years which were difficult for both nations. I wish to underscore that it is not the aim of the article to be an exhaustive account of all aspects of this issue but it is intended to be an elementary monitoring of the terrain, particularly at the level of diplomatic relations between both countries. I think that such a modest objective might in a way contribute to a better understanding of the period, which has in recent times apparently attracted the attention of historians and the general public with renewed vigour.

On 14 March 1939, a new state emerged on Europe's political map: Slovakia. According to the Constitution adopted in July 1939, the state's official name was the Slovak Republic but that title was rarely used. Slovak politicians and official representatives as well as journalists preferred the name "Slovak State":<sup>1</sup> Slovakia thus became known in Europe as the Slovak State. Before 14 March, Slovakia was an integral part of Czechoslovakia which had come into existence in the autumn of 1918 and created a significant constituent of the French security system

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<sup>1</sup> LIPTÁK, L.: *Slovensko v 20. storočí*. Bratislava 1968, pp. 177-178.

during the inter-war period within Central and Southeastern Europe. France was the first country to recognize Czechoslovakia after its establishment at the very end of World War I. The Slovak State was created before the outbreak of World War II and its formation was not, in contrast to the establishment of Czechoslovakia, associated with the war conflict or with any war victory or defeat or with civil war. The formation of the Slovak State was peaceful. According to K. Bartošek, the "defeat phenomenon" accompanied the establishment of the Slovak State nevertheless: it was present if we regard the Munich agreement and its adoption as the defeat of parliamentary democracy in the Czechoslovak Republic.<sup>2</sup> The events that followed the signature of the Munich agreement culminated in the split up of Czechoslovakia and the formation of the Slovak State under German protection remarkably weakened the power positions of France in the region of Central Europe.

One can say with some simplification, that France's attitude towards Slovakia was based from the very beginning upon its perception of the collapse of Czechoslovakia. The relations between Quai d'Orsay and the Černín Palace were very good during the inter-war period: they pursued the same foreign policy towards Germany and had similar political system. The French government circles accepted in principle Prague's domestic policy of stifling the national-emancipation efforts of some Slovak political parties since they saw there the best guarantee of the integrity and power of their close ally. The 1938 and 1939 events – proclamation of autonomy and independence of Slovakia – were assessed in Paris as a consequence of German machinations in Central Europe.<sup>3</sup> As a whole, it was a correct interpretation, although it is desirable to add, that it was hardly the capital of Slovakia – Bratislava – that might have provided space for Germany to carry out its machinations east of its borders. Either way, the French Government did not show much sympathy for the creation of the Slovak State: its sympathies were directed towards Prague as towards an evident victim of German aggression and not towards Bratislava, which might have appeared at first glance as having a share in German power expansion.

After the Slovak proclamation of independence on 14 March 1939, the new government had immediately taken steps toward gaining its recognition. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Quai d'Orsay that the Slovak State had come into existence as early as 16 March.<sup>4</sup> Paris did not particularly hurry to give

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<sup>2</sup> BARTOŠEK, K.: *L'État slovaque*. In: *Vichy et les Français. Sous la direction de Jean-Pierre Azéma et François Bédarida*. Paris 1992, p. 725.

<sup>3</sup> KIRSCHBAUM, S.: *The Slovak Republic, Britain, France and the principle of self-determination*. In: *Slovak Studies*, XXIII, 1983, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Národný archív Slovenskej republiky (National Archives of the Slovak Republic), Bratislava, fond Slovenský štát. Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí (henceforth Na Sr, SŠ MZV), č. kr. (Box No.) 112.

an answer, which is not surprising if we realize that G. Bonnet empowered the French Ambassador in Berlin, R. Coulondre, to advance a note to the German Government the following day. In the note, the French Government refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new situation arisen in Czechoslovakia after 14 and 15 March 1939<sup>5</sup> and cast doubts, at least indirectly, on the legality of the formation of the Slovak State. *Fait accompli* remained, however, what it had been and the Slovak Government was recognized by Hungary, Poland, Germany, the Holy See, Italy and other states very soon, including Great Britain which recognized Slovakia *de facto* on 4 May 1939. Since Paris was silent, the Slovak Government took several unofficial steps in their efforts to gain French recognition. For instance, on 19 May, the Slovak Minister in Berlin, M. Černák, met the Polish Ambassador in Berlin, J. Lipski, and indicated Slovakia's interest to be recognized by France; Lipski promised to do his best in support of French recognition of Slovakia and thus to encourage "the independent Slovak development".<sup>6</sup> The attitude of France remained unchanged and the situation started to change only slowly under the influence of several factors. One of them were complaints by the British Consul in Bratislava, P. Pares, addressed to the Foreign Office. Pares had complained that he found himself vis-à-vis the representatives of the Axis and he could not approach the French Consul who was an authority on the capital of Slovakia.<sup>7</sup>

Pares's complaints led Sir Alexander Cadogan to refer to the French Government with a request to follow the British Government and recognize the Slovak Government *de facto*. France did not reply immediately; the reason was in part the activities and protests of Czechoslovak emigrants in Paris against such a step. The Slovak Government was aware of the reserved stance of Paris and of the Czechoslovak émigrés activities; the Slovak authorities tried to influence them by reasoning that it certainly was not correct not to have any official French representative in the country which was virtually the only part of former Czechoslovakia that retained its independence. The Czechoslovak émigrés sentenced the Slovak State by their resistance to the establishment of normal relations between France and Slovakia, the Slovak Government reasoned, to become a vassal of the Axis.

In spite of the fact that there were evident weak points in the argument – it was not only the proclaimed "independence" of the Slovak State that was doubtful but the "vassal position" of Slovakia with respect to the Third Reich depended only upon the intentions of Berlin and not at all upon the attitude of the Czechoslovak émigrés in France or the policy of Quai d'Orsay. However, the emigrants

<sup>5</sup> Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris. Guerre 1939–1945 (henceforth MAE, 1939–1945), vol. 803, Vichy – Tchécoslovaquie.

<sup>6</sup> Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 112.

<sup>7</sup> MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie.

were not slow to notice in their unhappiness the ease in which Nazi diplomacy had secured its aims. According to the reminiscences of the French Consul General in Vienna, Chartier, and the French Vice-consul in Bratislava, Boutant, Czechoslovak emigrants accepted the reasoning of the Slovak Government<sup>8</sup> and they evidently mitigated their activities directed against the recognition of Slovakia by France. On these grounds and as a result of interventions on the British part, on 14 July 1939 Paris decided to accredit a consul to Bratislava; this step was *de facto* recognition. France was the fifteenth state to recognize the Slovak Government.<sup>9</sup> The decision made by Paris was probably also influenced by the fact that at the time of recognition it was impossible to envision further development; it was presumed that the new situation would not change straightforwardly but it would take some time: this presumption spoke in favour of the establishment of *de facto* relations with Slovakia.

Although the Slovak Government realized the restrained attitude of Paris towards establishing official bilateral relations, its members presumed to set up a Slovak legation in Paris covering the territories of France, Switzerland, all French colonies and protectorates as well as Belgium.<sup>10</sup> In addition, two Slovak honorary consulates were to be established in France: in Marseille and in Le Havre.<sup>11</sup> During the months to come, those ideas underwent certain changes; it is interesting that the Slovak Government reckoned with the opening of its legation in Paris even in October 1939, that is, after the outbreak of World War II which placed Slovakia and France in different camps.<sup>12</sup> The only change concerned Belgium which should have been exempted from these territorial activities.<sup>13</sup> Such considerations were, of course, unreal; they were based on the assumption of the recognition of the Slovak Republic by France not only *de facto* but also *de jure*. This was not accomplished; moreover, *de facto* recognition was not of the same kind as that of Great Britain which conferred *exequatur* upon the Slovak consul in London: France did not take any similar step and Slovakia had no consular representative in Paris despite the fact that immediately after *de facto* recognition by France, the Slovak Government adopted a resolution to open a Slovak consulate

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The following states that recognized the Slovak State before France: Hungary – 15 March 1939; Poland – 16 March 1939; Germany – 17 March 1939; The Holy See – 25 March 1939; Italy – 11 April 1939; Switzerland – 19 April 1939; Spain – 25 April 1939; Great Britain – 4 May 1939; Liberia – 12 May 1939; Ecuador – 17 May 1939; Costa Rica – 24 May 1939; Japan – 1 June 1939; Manchukuo – 1 June 1939; Yugoslavia – 8 June 1939; France – 14 July 1939. (Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 197). Total number of states that recognized Slovakia was 30 – ĎURICA, M.S.: *Slovakia during World War II*. In: *Slovakia in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Toronto 1973, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

in Paris. In the terms of the Foreign Ministry decision the first consul general in Paris should have been Dr B. Galvánek whose candidature had been approved by the government. The government reckoned with the fact that the establishment of the office and Dr Galvánek's appointment would be implemented "in a rapid way".<sup>14</sup> The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a verbal note to the French Consulate in Bratislava on 18 July 1939, in which it was said: "...wishing to establish and nurture friendly relations between Slovakia and France on the grounds of the existing friendship between the French and Slovak peoples and wishing, in particular, to improve and extend commercial contacts between both countries, it was the Slovak Government's decision to open the consulate general in Paris. It was further determined that Mr B. Galvánek...would be authorized to head the new consulate general with the rank of consul general. As soon as preliminary agreement is obtained from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as far as Mr Galvánek is concerned, he will start his mission in Paris with the consular appointment and will have the honour of submitting it to obtain *exequatur*."<sup>15</sup> The Slovak Foreign Ministry requested the French Consulate to notify the French authorities of this and to inform the Ministry as soon as the agreement was granted. As was already said, no agreement was reached. Rapid changes in the development of the situation in Europe, which at that time was facing the beginning of war, might have been the reason.

In contrast to Slovakia, France had its consular representation in Bratislava at the level of consulate. Milon de Peillon was appointed French Consul. He was born in 1890 and had served in Bratislava from 30 September 1935; after 14 March 1939 his contacts with Prague, which became the capital of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, were suspended since he was subordinate directly to Paris. In the period between the declaration of the Slovak State on 14 March 1939 and the *de facto* recognition by France on 14 July 1939 he understood his status in Bratislava as "factual" and he continued in his work although he felt as he was sitting between two chairs.<sup>16</sup> On 28 March 1939 talks were held between the French Consul and Dr Omilyák by the order of the Slovak Foreign Minister, F. Ďurčanský. De Peillon was chiefly interested in Slovakia's relation with Germany and in this connection mainly in the Slovak-German protection treaty. Omilyák's answers to the Consul's questions were rather evasive and, although according to Mr Omilyák the spirit of the debate was "friendly", it does not seem to have been very cordial.<sup>17</sup>

De Peillon – just as Paris – was probably not an adherent of Slovak independence. When Slovakia became autonomous with its own parliament and govern-

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

ment, the Consul did not conceal his concern over future developments. Similarly as in the cited debate with Omilyák, he was disquieted by Germany's influence over Slovak policy. In his first report sent to Paris after Slovakia's declared autonomy had been accomplished he wrote that thanks to favourable conditions the German Government had gained such a great hold over the Slovak leaders in a very short time that Germany had become their mentor. F. Ďurčanský, who was Minister of Justice in the autonomous government and later its Foreign Minister, was regarded as a German agent.<sup>18</sup> De Peillon's opinion of the leader of Slovak diplomacy was poor indeed.

His opinion of other Slovak politicians was not high either. In his report dispatched to Paris in April 1939 he said that totalitarian methods common in the Third Reich were found quite acceptable among official representatives of the Slovak Government who were inspired by them in building up the political, administrative and economic structure of the state. In his opinion, such a policy would soon ruin the country, he also stated that university students realized those matters clearly and thought of the past with sorrow; he saw grassroots people as powerless, resigned to their fate.<sup>19</sup> The population as a whole was not interested in public affairs; democratic institutions including the press seemed to him impotent and, moreover, he warned (correctly!) – there was still a threat that Slovakia would be divided among its neighbours. De Peillon described the Slovak Constitution declared on 31 July 1939 as follows: in spite of the fact that the Constitution's form is liberal from the outside, it finally makes way for Slovakia to be transformed into an authoritative republic.<sup>20</sup>

Four days after the declaration of the Slovak Constitution, on August 4, 1939, de Peillon as requested, presented his papers *exequatur* in writing to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ďurčanský, and submitted his consular appointment, issued in Paris on 22 July.<sup>21</sup> Of course, soon World War II broke out and the French Government recalled its Consul from his post in Bratislava. On 1 September 1939, De Peillon telephoned the Presidium of Police Directorate in Bratislava; on his request, one police administrator and two detectives were sent to seal the building of the French Consulate: at noon the same day the task was fulfilled. After sealing the Consulate the police constable accompanied the French Consul and his staff in the presence of the member of German Army, Dr Hagel, and the regional police chief, Dr Brichta, to the Hungarian borders where they were met by a Hungarian Army officer. Under his escort the members of the French Consulate were transported by cars to Šamorín,<sup>22</sup> a village situated about 20 km from Bra-

<sup>18</sup> KIRSCHBAUM, S.: op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., č. kr. 112.

tislava which belonged at that time to Hungary. On 18 September, the premises and the inventory of the former French Consulate were handed over to the Spanish chargé d'affaires in Bratislava "in perfect order" by means of the Presidium of Police Directorate. The act was minuted.<sup>23</sup> The recall of the French Consul implied the end of the short official diplomatic representation of France in Bratislava and at practical level, also *de facto* recognition of Slovakia.

Since the French Consulate had been closed, there were no official relations between Slovakia and France.<sup>24</sup> The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed at first the Slovak interests might be represented by the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Paris. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified its chargé d'affaires in Belgrade, J. Cieker, to this effect as early as September 1939. The Ministry requested him to officially ask the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry to represent the Slovak interests in France and to ask for a clear answer, whether positive or negative.<sup>25</sup> Cieker should have spelled out that Slovakia was not at war with France but since Paris had recalled its official representatives from Slovakia, Slovakia had to take similar measures and to recall those who represented Slovak interests there. The Ministry asked Cieker to emphasize the view according to which Slovak subjects in France were under protection of the former Czechoslovak diplomatic offices, but this could not be accepted; France had *de facto* recognized the Slovak State and Slovak interests could only be protected by Slovak diplomatic offices or by those which Slovakia would have addressed. The Slovak Foreign Ministry complained about the treatment of Slovak citizens in France. Cieker's report stated in that connection "how our subjects are treated, for instance in France, is at variance with international law, since, for example, they are forced to enter Czechoslovak legions, they are even sent to concentration camps. The last fact can serve as evidence that they are treated as enemies".<sup>26</sup>

The Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused the Slovak request addressed to Yugoslavia to take over the safeguard of Slovak interests in France, arguing that protection of Slovak citizens by Yugoslav diplomatic offices would be of little use.<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of October 1939, the Slovak Foreign Ministry approached the Rumanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the same matter. In his talks with the Slovak Minister in Bucharest held on 6 October, the Rumanian Foreign Minister, G. Gafencu, posed the question whether the Slovak Minister was informed about the fact that at that time, a new Czechoslovak government had been established in Paris with the former Czechoslovak President, E. Beneš, at its head. The Minister said that he had been informed but it did not change

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., č. kr. 197.

<sup>25</sup> Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 112.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., č. kr. 203.

anything in Slovakia's request which was more of "consular character". Gafencu stated that protection might after all have concerned adherents of the Slovak State and not of the Czechoslovak movement; he said that before he would give a definite reply, he would discuss the matter with the French Government. Then he raised the question whether France had recognized Slovakia; after the reply that Slovakia had been recognized *de facto* but that there had been no time to promote normal consular contacts, he repeated that he would first consult the French Government.<sup>28</sup>

The matter should thus have been decided in Paris since Rumania could hardly have proceeded against France's will. Yet, Rumania did not take over the safeguard of Slovak interests in France; finally it was Italy that agreed to represent Slovak interests in France towards the end of October 1939 with certain stipulations.<sup>29</sup>

During the first months of war there were no direct official contacts between Slovakia and France and personal relations between diplomats of both countries accredited to the third states cooled. The Slovak Minister in Budapest notified the Bratislava Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 4 October 1939 that he had had no contacts with the French Minister since 1 September. He expressed his opinion that on the part of France there probably were efforts not to enter into and cultivate contacts with the Slovak Minister because Slovakia was regarded as a state with which it was at war.<sup>30</sup>

French interests were represented in Slovakia by Spanish Legation in Bratislava. Although Slovakia was beyond the interests central to French politics, some efforts to keep at least indirect contacts also endured on the part of France. Paris was at that time chiefly interested in the situation of French subjects in Slovakia. On 11 October 1939, the Spanish diplomatic office asked the Slovak Foreign Ministry in writing for a list of French citizens living in Slovakia. The Ministry fulfilled the requirement and after the particular data had been put together (by means of the Ministry of the Interior) the list was sent to the Spanish chargé d'affaires in Bratislava, Count de Bailén. The list implied the presence of 96 adult French citizens and 15 children in Slovakia.<sup>31</sup>

After the fall of France in May 1940 Slovakia struggled to normalize relations. Before the collapse of France, at least the interests of those Slovaks who supported the Czechoslovak National Committee were safeguarded by that Committee; after the capitulation of France Czechoslovakia had no official representatives in France any more since members of the Czechoslovak National Committee, the Minister, Dr Š. Osuský, and other people working at the Czechoslovak diplomatic mission had left either for London or for Casablanca. This situation raised

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., č. kr. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

problems in many areas. Slovak interests required normalization for several reasons. For instance, Slovak diplomats serving in Spain needed transit through the unoccupied French territories. At first they had to face confusion. When the Slovak chargé d'affaires in Madrid, J. Mikuš, wished to return to Bratislava in August 1940, he applied to the French Embassy in Madrid for a transit visa through the unoccupied part of France; for as he said, it was the only possible connection between Spain and Central Europe. In spite of the fact that Spain represented French interests in Slovakia, the French Embassy in Madrid refused to grant him a transit visa.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, the diplomats' transit was not the primary reason for Slovakia's efforts to normalize diplomatic relations with France. Economic reasons played a significant role. The naval blockade imposed by Great Britain on the Mediterranean Sea prevented any sea transport between Slovakia and Spain; in this situation Slovak exports to Spain by way of transit through the unoccupied part of France was most desirable.<sup>33</sup> The question of relations between Slovakia and France has already been mentioned: many Slovaks remained in unoccupied France and they were concentrated in camps; all their documents were withdrawn by the authorities. Most Slovaks were located in the camp in Agde – where they eventually numbered 2,500.<sup>34</sup> Other groups of Slovaks were in La Nouvelle, Sigean, La Palme and Roquefort; their number was about one thousand. Slovak authorities expected about five thousand Slovaks to return to Slovakia from France.<sup>35</sup> The Slovaks were, however, also in some prison camps – there were about 300 men in Melun, Pithiviers, Nancy, Meaux, and Montargis.<sup>36</sup> According to the Slovak chargé d'affaires in Madrid, Mikuš, the Slovaks were impatient waiting for repatriation and they asked the Slovak Government to take all possible steps to accomplish it.<sup>37</sup> The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent Dr Mališ to occupied France towards the end of August 1940 to prepare the repatriation of the Slovaks on the basis of the agreement with German military occupation bodies. Mališ's assignment did not, however, refer to the unoccupied part of France. It was therefore necessary to implement a separate repatriation there. In his report submitted to the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mikuš proposed that the Ministry should forward the issue of the transit of Slovak subjects and goods through the unoccupied French territory as well as the issues concerning the Slovaks in unoccupied France by means of the Slovak Embassy in Berlin to the German cease-fire delegation in Wiesbaden; the questions should

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., č. kr. 197.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

then be discussed in a particular German-France commission, if possible, together with the question of the *de jure* recognition of the Slovak Republic by France.<sup>38</sup>

After French capitulation some of its diplomats judged Slovakia similarly as de Peillon had after the formation of the Slovak State. For instance, in the introduction to the report dispatched from the French Legation in Belgrade to Paris on 14 June 1940, it was emphasized that the unity of the Slovak Government "which in fact consists of three politicians: Tuka, Mach, and Ďurčanský (since the others are mere puppets)" had recently been weakened and the Slovak people felt weak, without protection, betrayed and sold out by their leaders.<sup>39</sup> The question of *de jure* recognition of Slovakia by Vichy Government, which Mikuš recommended to be raised together with other questions as early as September 1940, was postponed to the spring of 1941. Vichy asked its at that time Ambassador in Moscow, Gaston Bergery, to establish contacts with the Slovak Ambassador in the capital of the USSR, Fraňo Tiso, who was related to the Slovak President Dr J. Tiso. In May 1941 both diplomats had several friendly talks; on 21 May Tiso sent a letter to Bergery in which he expressed his conviction that "France sincerely wishes a just renewal of Europe and European cooperation at the same time".<sup>40</sup> In his letter Tiso wrote that in his talks with Bergery he was particularly influenced by the idea expressing common interests of both countries, the idea, the essence of which consisted in the words: "new Europe". Tiso thought that Bergery was a convinced supporter of European cooperation in terms of "new Europe" and therefore he asked him openly to act for the Vichy Government in support of the *de jure* recognition of the Slovak Republic, of the "independent" republic, he emphasized.<sup>41</sup> Several days after the arrival of Tiso's letter Bergery informed Admiral F. Darlan about his talks with the Slovak Ambassador in Moscow and about the letter he had received from him. Bergery wrote that he did not know whether Tiso's démarche was spontaneous and his idea or if he had been inspired by the German Embassy in Moscow. He stressed that his meetings with Tiso were held on an "exceptionally friendly basis" and Tiso showed great sympathy for France and that he had the accentuated common interests of France and Slovakia – a Europe within which cooperation would be open and freed of camouflaged oppression. At the end of his report Bergery said that it was improbable that Tiso would have formulated his application for *de jure* recognition without consulting Bratislava or that Bratislava would have permitted him to take a step like that without discussing it with official representatives of German Reich.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Berlin apparently did not show any negative attitude towards creating closer contacts between Vichy and Slovakia at that time. The German commission for armistice economic issues notified France in April 1941 that there were no objections on their part to the launching of economic negotiations between France and Slovakia. The note from the commercial section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vichy France prepared on 1 June 1941 stated that Slovakia might export to France mainly wood and cellulose and that any establishment of closer economic relations between both countries would be in the interests of France.<sup>43</sup> These considerations on the development of bilateral economic relations raised the question of the recognition of Slovakia *de jure* also on the part of France: a problem emerged how to enter into direct negotiations with a state which had not been recognized by Vichy (the issue of the validity of the July 1939 *de facto* recognition was "disputable"<sup>44</sup>) and where France had no representative. Moreover, in April 1941 Germany signified its wish to realize Vichy-Slovak negotiations on a commercial basis directly without German participation, i.e. in a way different from the negotiations between Vichy and Belgium or Luxembourg. Since Vichy had no representative in Slovakia, the Germans recommended that France accredit a standing trade representative to Slovakia. In the view of the commercial section of the Vichy Foreign Ministry accreditation of a trade representative did not necessarily raise the question of Slovak Government recognition but the nomination of such a representative did signify after all a renewal of normal commercial relations. The renewal of such relations should under standard conditions have followed the signature of a trade agreement. What was the best way of proceeding, the commercial section asked the political leadership of the European department of the Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>45</sup>

The response of the political body was prompt: on 6 June, he stated that the *de jure* recognition of Slovakia would be premature and its disadvantage would be that the French Government would be guided to the recognition of other states at the time when it seemed to be more advantageous to take a more reserved attitude towards the issues of territorial changes which had taken place in Central and Eastern Europe. Political leaders did not say anything against the renewal of trade relations with Slovakia: they emphasized that the potential trade agreement and appointment of a trade representative to Slovakia would suggest only recognition *de facto* but not *de jure*; moreover, the renewal of purely commercial relations with Slovakia had no effect from the political point of view but, on the contrary, in time, it might facilitate the creation of normal diplomatic relations. This opinion was expressed by Darlan in his letter to Bergery dated 10 June 1941. The Admiral asked the Ambassador to inform Mr F. Tiso, the Slovak Ambassador in

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See KIRSCHBAUM, S.: op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>45</sup> MAE, 1939-1945, vol. 812, Vichy - Slovaquie.

Moscow, of this attitude; the common interests and friendly ties between Slovakia and France should also be emphasized.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, at the same time, the French Ambassador in Budapest, Robert de Dampierre, posed a question whether France had not made a mistake as it had no French representative in Bratislava. De Dampierre visited Bratislava in July 1941 and spoke to several "private persons" who felt sorry that French culture had disappeared from the city where it once had had a natural right to be present. Those people pointed out that Bratislava used to be a significant observational point where French diplomats might have obtained a lot of interesting information. De Dampierre agreed in principle, and, moreover, he raised the question whether the French could not obtain agricultural products necessary to feed its population as the Germans did. De Dampierre was fully aware of the fact that it was premature to foresee with certainty what would become of Slovakia during further "general reorganization" of Europe. He regarded it suitable to state his findings particularly because German diplomatic circles in Bratislava did not conceal at all that the establishment of the French legation in the Slovak Republic should not be put off any longer.<sup>47</sup>

The leaders of the French Vichy diplomacy, however, have not changed their stance and in December 1941 Vichy still preferred the variant not to recognize Slovakia. On the other hand, the Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not against establishing contacts with the members of the Slovak diplomatic missions at the Holy See, Bern, Budapest, Sofia, etc.<sup>48</sup> In comparison with 1939, a rather significant change had taken place on the grounds of the fact that Vichy and Bratislava belonged to the same camp, willingly or unwillingly.

The simplified reply to the question why the Vichy Government refused to recognize Slovakia *de jure* at that time could be that there was reluctance to recognize the 1940 territorial changes in Central Europe. And why was it reluctant to recognize the changes? The answer can be found in the note of the political leaders of the Vichy Foreign Ministry written on 4 April 1942: our own position dictates us... to avoid any manifestation which might be interpreted as an effort to pursue active policy from this time onwards in the part of Europe, the statute of which is rather vague, can undergo many changes by the end of war. Generally speaking, there are no serious obstacles (except for the above) to creating contacts with Slovakia. One can imagine that Slovakia will survive irrespective of the results of the war.<sup>49</sup>

When judging this stance, one can see at least its prudence. It does not seem to be too much, but it certainly should not be overlooked. At that time, Vichy had in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

mind the creation of "factual relations" with Slovakia, accreditation of trade missions to Slovakia, and even, in spite of the above mentioned facts, the reopening of the former French Consulate in Bratislava; of course, the official recognition would have to be "put aside". The decisive step was not taken for two reasons: not to create a precedent of recognition of other states (particularly Croatia, of which Vichy had a low opinion) and secondly, after detailed investigation into the issue, the Foreign Ministry along with the Ministry of Finance came to the conclusion that the trade exchange with Slovakia could not be of any greater importance and become more extensive.<sup>50</sup> From the aspect of Vichy there were thus both political and economic reasons against the official recognition of the Slovak Republic.

At the time these debates were held in Vichy, Germany appeared again on the scene. The German Embassy at Vichy informed J. Benoist-Méchin in April 1942 about their wish to be acquainted with the attitude of the Vichy Government towards the issue of official recognition of Slovakia as soon as possible. It followed from démarche that Germany would not look at such a step unfavourably. The reply of Admiral Darlan followed in a few days: he indicated that he wanted to discuss the conditions under which Vichy representation in Slovakia could be opened with the Slovak Government without delay.<sup>51</sup> The French and Slovak diplomats met in Bern immediately after this information had been released and on 23 April, the Vichy Government notified the German Embassy at Vichy of their decision to officially recognize the Slovak Republic.<sup>52</sup> This announcement implied the decision to reopen the consulate in Bratislava; if this step did not satisfy the Slovak Government's expectations, Vichy was ready to open its legation in Bratislava.<sup>53</sup> Slovakia as well as Germany (in the case of Germany that interest was at least verbally expressed by a certain section of German diplomacy) showed interest in the steps taken by the Vichy Government in the spring of 1942 as early as the spring of 1940. These compromise steps led, however, to an unexpected turnabout caused by Slovakia's attitude: the Slovak chargé d'affaires in Bern informed the Vichy diplomat, Bard, on 31 July 1942 that the Slovak Government did not consider it suitable any more to open the French legation or consulate in Bratislava;<sup>54</sup> the Slovak Government proposed to appoint in both Vichy and Bratislava only "envoys" ("delegates") who would prepare the future. In his talks with the Slovak diplomat, Bard said that, in his opinion, the intention to establish diplomatic relations between Slovakia and Vichy failed because Germany had not shown understanding. Bard's partner objected to such an interpretation, but the

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

French diplomat kept to his view. Several sources corroborate correctness of his opinion.

S. Kirschbaum says that France recognized Slovakia on 25 April 1942 *de jure* but the exchange of diplomatic representatives never took place since Germany exerted pressure against it.<sup>55</sup> The author of this article has not succeeded in finding out whether Vichy recognized Slovakia *de jure* in April 1942 indeed or whether it was just a clear intention to officially recognize the Slovak Government which in the end was not put into practice. Several French Foreign Ministry documents filled in after 25 April 1942 indicate that the latter was the case.<sup>56</sup> Slovak archive materials do not provide any relevant information on this matter. The Germans did not wish, according to Kirschbaum, any French diplomatic representation in Bratislava since they wanted to complicate the establishment of contacts between the Allies and the Soviet Union,<sup>57</sup> i.e. which might have been implemented through contacts between Vichy and Bratislava. Since the unexpected decision made by the Slovak Government to slow down the promising dialogue with Vichy cannot be understood as autonomous (at least because of "Schutzvertrag" of March 1939 by which the Bratislava regime was taken "under the protection" of Germany) it is certain that it was a consequence of German pressure. It is also equally certain that at least some sections of German diplomacy had not voiced objection to creating closer bilateral relations between Bratislava and Vichy until a certain time. A break had probably come about the summer of 1942.<sup>58</sup> Slovakia's strategy started with the proposal presented in August 1942 to establish a Slovak consulate general at Vichy but without reciprocity. The Vichy diplomacy signified clearly that such a proposal created an unsurmountable obstacle to establishing normal relations – reciprocity was their primary condition.<sup>59</sup> Slovakia really wished to enter into close relations with Vichy; of course, the "rigorous parallelism" forced upon Slovakia by its vassal position with respect to Germany and cited in the protection agreement did not enable it to act autonomously – even the Vichy regime could not have ventured such actions. Either way, Slovak diplomacy did not stop trying: On 30 April 1943 a Slovak emissary visited J. von Ribbentrop in Fuschle. The visit took place on the occasion of the 50th birthday of the German Foreign Minister with the aim to hand over a letter from the Slovak Prime Minister, V. Tuka, to the Minister. According to that letter, the private

<sup>55</sup> KIRSCHBAUM, S.: op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie: it concerns, e.g. a telegram sent by P. Laval from Bern on 25 April 1939, a European section of the Vichy Foreign Ministry report sent to J. Benoist-Mechin dated 28 April 1942, a telegram sent from Vichy to Bern on 19 May 1942 and other documents.

<sup>57</sup> KIRSCHBAUM, S.: op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> Cf MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie. Telegram of the French Ambassador to Finland, Guerin, sent to the Vichy Foreign Ministry from Helsinki on 14 August 1942.

<sup>59</sup> MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie.

hunting-ground Pusté pole was put at his disposal for another 6 years by the highest Slovak executive body. But the speech did not just concern hunting; the Slovak diplomat mentioned that at that time von Ribbentrop might have changed his negative attitude towards the establishment of normal diplomatic relations between Slovakia and France. "We are sure," he said, "that Germany has confidence in us in this case and as such – although we do not want to exaggerate our power and possibilities – we might contribute a bit to the building of better understanding between Germany and France."<sup>60</sup> Ribbentrop made a remark to the effect that he had already discussed the question with the Prime Minister, Tuka; he then promised to think the matter over and that "an acceptable solution must be found in any case".<sup>61</sup>

In the months to follow, as visions of "new Europe" began rapidly to fail, it was more and more difficult to find a solution. Towards the end of January 1944, the Vichy Foreign Ministry's opinion was that the absence of normal diplomatic relations with Slovakia was a result of insufficient interest on the part of Slovakia.<sup>62</sup> No mention was made of German involvement. Since there were no normal relations between Vichy and Bratislava, the Spanish Legation in Bratislava was still authorized to represent French interests. Spain was prepared to carry on with these activities in spite of the fact that the problem of French refugees from German prison camps who were in Slovakia made those activities more and more difficult during the following period of the Vichy regime. The direction of developments on the fronts and the approaching end of the war, which had a fatal impact on both Vichy and the Bratislava regimes, seemed inexorable.

We may conclude that official links between Slovakia and France between 1939 and 1944 were minimal regardless of the fact that after the 1940 French capitulation a theoretically better opportunity for the extension of bilateral relations was created. There were political and economic barriers to such a theoretical opportunity which were difficult to overcome because of the fact that neither Vichy France nor Slovakia could pursue their domestic and foreign policy on an autonomous basis but had to act in accordance with the interests of Nazi Germany: those interests finally split them rather than brought them nearer.

In the end it might be useful to cite that I paid exclusive attention to Vichy France after May 1940 since the Slovak State had no contacts with General Ch. de Gaulle's Free France. Those contacts were the domain of the Czechoslovak exile government in London; research into those contacts is another chapter in the history of World War II.

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<sup>60</sup> Na Sr, SŠ MZV, č. kr. 180.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> MAE, 1939–1945, vol. 812, Vichy – Slovaquie.