

POST-WAR SLOVAKIA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FRENCH DIPLOMACY

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The aim of the article is to indicate to which issues of the development in Slovakia between 1944 and 1948 French diplomacy paid primary attention and how they were interpreted by its representatives.

As for diplomatic channels, the French were informed about the development in Slovakia from two main sources: from June 1945 – from the French Embassy in Prague led by chargé d'affaires Louis Keller till December of 1945 and after that date by the Ambassador Maurice Dejean. From 1946 onwards, the French had another diplomatic source of information on the development of the situation in Slovakia – the French consulate general in Bratislava with Etienne Manac'h at the head, whose territorial activities encompassed Slovakia. Before June 1945 the French – I mean liberated Paris – were informed about Slovakia mainly by the reports obtained from Captain de Lannurien, the leader of French partisans (he himself was not denoted as a partisan in the documents of that time, but as a French 'warrior') in Slovakia. Paris was informed about Slovakia's development before 1945 also through the above-mentioned Dejean who nurtured official and very close contacts with Beneš's exile cabinet in London.

Materials from these sources show that, with regard to the development in Slovakia in the last months of war and the first post-war years, French diplomacy directed its primary attention towards the following issues: 1. the Slovak uprising of August 1944, its course and consequences; 2. development of Czecho-Slovak relations or relations between the Czechs and Slovaks and their impact on the fates of the liberated Republic; 3. various aspects of the former President Jozef Tiso's trial; 4. the course of the 1948 February crisis and its influence on future political life in Slovakia.

All issues were obviously closely interconnected but they also encompassed a number of other aspects and sides which did not go unnoticed by French diplomats. In this paper I shall concentrate only on the four main domains mentioned.

1. Dejean informed Paris about the August 1944 Slovak Uprising in two rather extensive telegrams as early as September 11 and September 19, 1944.¹ In both of them he sometimes named the events in Slovakia “revolt” (‘révolte’, ‘soulèvement’ in the original), and in other places “insurrection”. Other French diplomats working for the government in exile in London also used in autumn 1944 the word ‘revolt’, in relation to the Slovak uprising. For instance, in his voluminous report sent to the Foreign Minister Georges Bidault on October 20, 1944, the representative of the French Committee of national liberation affiliated to the allied governments-in-exile in London Jacques E. Paris used just that word.² But back to Dejean. In the reports mentioned above he stated that the revolt (or uprising) had broken out as a result of coordinated actions of two different groups: on the one hand resistance groups, and on the other, the Slovak army. Their revolt was eased and supported by the Czechoslovak government in London and by the Soviet government. Resistance groups were at first few in number but from the beginning of 1944, when the Soviets started to transport parachutists and weapons to Slovakia on the basis of the agreement with Edvard Beneš to support ‘guerrillas’,³ their number started to increase. Further in his report, Dejean mentioned the force and possibilities of the Slovak Army and analysed the question of the optimum time of the outbreak of the ‘revolt’ as well as Tiso’s strategy in the summer months, when the Germans increasingly requested this approval to occupy Slovakia not only because of the partisan activities but also because they did not trust some groups in the Slovak Army. Tiso’s attempt to organize a punitive expedition against the partisans was evaluated by Dejean as a complete fiasco.⁴

As for the political significance of the ‘revolt’, Dejean saw it at several levels: firstly, it definitely liquidated the apprehension persisting in London Czechoslovak circles that Tiso could turn to the Russians at the last minute and place the Slovak army and territory at their disposal; such a maneuver of the Slovak President failed and he became just an obedient instrument in the hands of Germany.⁵ Secondly, as Beneš told him – the events in Slovakia completely removed what had happened in March 1939 and did away with the obstacle of the necessary union of the Slovaks and Czechs within one republic. Thirdly, as Dejean underlined in the last paragraph of his report, the role the Slovak Army played in the Slovak events

¹ Telegrams dispatched from London to Paris on September 11, and September 19, 1944 Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris (hereafter MAE Paris). Europe 1944–1949. Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 74 (Slovaquie).

² Ibid.

³ Expression used in Dejean’s telegram of Sept 11, 1944.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

would provide the Slovaks with other serious arguments to request for their country “a very wide autonomy within the republic”.⁶

I shall not analyse or comment on the contents of Dejean’s reports. I shall just draw attention to two facts following from it, to my knowledge not mentioned by historiography: 1. that even in the autumn of 1944, Beneš did not stop looking at the Slovak uprising primarily as at compensation for the Slovakia’s alleged responsibility for the split of the Republic in March 1939 and not as an event which ranked Slovakia among the co-equal allied nations. That optics had naturally a far-reaching impact on the development in Czechoslovakia after 1945 since, with respect to the serious matters from which it stemmed, it necessarily and constantly had to affect dramatically both the general line of Beneš’s politics with respect to Slovakia and some individual steps that characterized it. It is not acceptable because it simplified the real status at the end of the 1930s too much. Also Štefan Osuský, co-worker of and loyal to Beneš for many years, pointed to this in September 1944. He wrote in the French weekly *Tablet* (September 23, 1944) that even though there had been a separatistic movement in Slovakia, it is not necessary to seek the first violation of the integrity of the Czechoslovak republic in it. The Czechoslovak constitution, Osuský reported, determined that the borders can only be changed by the passing and adopting of a constitutional law. He stated that in spite of the fact that Czechoslovak parliament never passed such a bill, the Prague protectors of the Constitution agreed with the division of the republic and nobody makes them responsible. Osuský then continued his explanation. If we accept his arguments – and there is evidently no reason not to accept it – a question should also be raised concerning the cession of Ruthenia after World War II; there is naturally, let us say “vis major”, but then the existence of that phenomenon has to be recognized in every moment – not only in 1945 but for instance also in the autumn of 1938 and in spring 1939. 2. We can deduce from Dejean’s reports that the Slovak National Uprising was not important from the point of view of the fact that Slovakia joined the allied states, but primarily from the perspective that from this followed for Slovakia a natural right to make a claim to an equal position in the liberated republic.

As I mentioned in the introduction, an extensive report about the development in Slovakia from the outbreak of the Uprising to February 1945 was also written by de Lannurien.⁷ In contrast to Dejean and Paris, he described the events in Slovakia as an uprising and not a revolt. His report comprised primarily an analysis of military actions, to which the author added political judgement in some places. He chiefly compared the forces of Tiso’s followers and those of the insurgents, whom he denoted as “revolutionary forces”. He maintained that on the one hand, the population had rather indifferently submitted to the policy enforced by the Bratislav-

⁶ Telegram of Sept 19, 1944.

⁷ MAE. Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 1 (Corps diplomatique).

slava government and on the other, the great majority of thinking people, according to Lannurien, was against the regime and its domestic and foreign policy. He introduced general Čatloš and the Slovak diplomatic representative in Hungary, M. Krno, as the examples to show that even the members of the government and highly placed political personalities worked against the regime and its domestic and foreign policy; Čatloš established contacts with the Soviets and Krno helped organize partisan groups in Slovakia during negotiations with French officers in Budapest. I shall not further pursue Lannurien's view on the uprising and the developments in Slovakia towards the end of war. It is probably worth mentioning that at the beginning Lannurien was a serious candidate for the position of consul general in Bratislava⁸ but finally it was decided in Paris to entrust him with other tasks and in November 1945, to accredit E. Manac'h to that function.

2. The second group of questions, to which French diplomacy paid attention in post-war Slovakia, were Czecho-Slovak relations and the form of political arrangement of the liberated republic. It was as early as at the beginning of July 1945 that chargé d'affaires Keller informed the Quai d'Orsay that the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks were of an entirely 'different character' than before the war. He saw this 'different character' particularly in the fact that the Czechs, as he wrote, could not only condescendingly invite the Slovaks to participate in the state administration. As a result, the Slovaks would not have to combat the superiority and authority of Prague. Keller based his opinion on the fact that the Czechs lost their better position in relation to the Slovaks under Nazi oppression, and, on the other hand, the Slovaks made considerable progress in both the material and the spiritual spheres during the existence of the Slovak state; moreover, they experienced and enjoyed independence. Beneš had to take these matters into account as well and, according to Keller, he also did. At the beginning of July 1945, he wrote to Paris that Beneš thought about a kind of personal union of the two states and that its character should be determined by elections, which were pledged to take place towards the end of 1945.⁹

A turn of Prague towards the acceptance of an equal position for both nations in the new republic should have, according to Keller, been strengthened not only by the above mentioned factors and the fact that Beneš was equally popular in Bratislava and in Prague, but even by the absence of parallelism in domestic political life in Bohemia and Moravia, and in Slovakia, which Keller had seen in the different structure of political parties of both countries, in that the Czech communists regarded conservatives and collaborators to be their enemies while Slovak commu-

⁸ A report by the French chargé d'affaires Louis Keller in Prague sent to Paris on July 19, 1945 and other documents. *Ibid.*

⁹ MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 74 (Slovaquie).

nists did not see separatists as their chief adversaries, etc. In short, both positive and negative factors should have worked towards deciding on a sort of federal arrangement: Czechoslovakia must accept a federal arrangement probably recalling Austro-Hungarian dualism after elections, the best solution being the implementation of the unity accepted by both sides within the federal frame,¹⁰ he stated in his report to Paris on July 4, 1945. In another report dated July 19, he repeated that Bohemia and Moravia, and Slovakia would be joined by a kind of personal union more or less close to Austro-Hungarian dualism, Slovakia would have an autonomous administration with its own ministries.¹¹ In short, he reckoned with the fact that the new republic would be of dual form; therefore he requested the establishment of a French consulate general with personnel of a high standard in Bratislava, which he considered to be an extraordinarily important observation point from the political point of view.¹²

Keller's opinion on the arrangement of the liberated republic may be attractive to some, and among others evoke resentment or opposition. Nevertheless, if we compare it with the important step of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London of June 30, 1943, it has to be considered as unfounded. On that day the Czechoslovak government released a festive declaration signed by all its members and on July 10 and 11, it was broadcast by BBC radio. It clearly stated that Slovakia would not be awarded any political autonomy. According to the declaration, the Government made such a decision on the basis of secret reports coming from Slovakia, which allegedly proved that the overwhelming majority of the Slovaks who earlier had wished autonomy, realized in the meantime that it was precisely the autonomy granted after Munich that led to their slavish position.¹³

It is not necessary to mention that the Slovak National Council, which was at the head of the Uprising, hardly agreed: its declaration of September 1, 1944 stating that the Slovak National Council is the only legal representative of the Slovak nation and the only legislative and executive power in the liberated territory, was certainly not random.

Several days after the breakout of the Uprising Benes, as I have already mentioned, said to Dejean that through that act a great obstacle to the 'unavoidable union' of the Slovaks and Czechs within one republic was removed; of course, and that was the essence, he did not say to what "unavoidable union".

His declaration during his meeting with Dr. Jozef Lettrich and other official representatives of Czechoslovak society on February 19, 1947 was much clearer. He said openly that if a new tension analogous to the crisis of 1938 would be cre-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 1 (Corps diplomatique).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ According to the article of Štefan Osuský published in the weekly *Tablet* on Sept 23, 1944.

ated, the republic would not survive but Slovakia would not become independent and would be absorbed by the Soviet Union.¹⁴ I do not want to analyse here what might have been hidden in Beneš's consciousness behind those threatening words. But it did not end with these words. During the meeting with Dejean after Beneš's talks with Lettrich, the President continued in such a tone that the ambassador could not avoid posing a question what had led him to make such categorical declarations. The President's reply will show how far Keller was wrong when speaking about Czecho-Slovak dualism or federation as about an almost settled thing: I had long (!) had this declaration in my pocket, said Beneš, and I had just been waiting for a proper moment. Since the commission entrusted with the preparation of the constitution should now draft a chapter on the relationships between the Czechs and Slovaks, I decided to speak. I was informed that the Slovak democrats wanted to formulate unacceptable demands in this connection, I wanted to make an end to any extortion and eliminate every piece of vagueness. Since the archbishop of Nitra declared during the Tiso trial that every Slovak prefers his country's independence and accepts the Czechoslovak republic merely as the worse alternative, it seemed to me necessary to explode the myth of Slovak independence. We, the Czechs, could not accept it for two reasons: firstly, the Slovak state could be nothing more than a territory where the spies of other countries would develop activities, which would be a seedbed of intrigues directed against neighbouring countries and against us, in particular; secondly, among others and foremost: we do not want a state between our country and the Soviet Union, which would serve as a screen. Beneš also said that the Slovaks were aware of the Czech efforts to keep Slovakia within the Republic and they tried to misuse it. That maneuver started, he said, in Košice, but Slovakia's position could not be privileged any more. Therefore I clearly said to the democrats: if you want separation, let it come true. But I tell you in advance that you will not create an independent state. We do not want it, not at any price. You will be annexed to the Soviet Union. You can choose between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Soviet Union. As for the Slovak communists, they were flirting with the idea of a federal republic in the course of liberation following the pattern of the Soviet Union. Today they know that it would be dangerous and have become the most resolute proponents of a unitary state.¹⁵

These words raise a series of questions that have not been posed by historiography so far and which I shall not ask at this point either; they confirm that if the actors and official representatives on the post-war political Czecho-Slovak scene changed, one thing did not change: either a unitary state or nothing. Was it a wise, self-preserving principle? Hardly. The whole post-war western Europe along with

¹⁴ According to Dejean's report sent from Prague to Paris on Feb 26, 1947. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, *Tchécoslovaquie*, Vol. 75 (Slovaquie).

¹⁵ Ibid.

the United States of America came closer just on the basis of the slogan Unity in diversity!

Dejean's commentary on Beneš's harsh words, non-cooperative attitude and open threatening was very kind. – In spite of his sharp tone, the President has confidence of both the Czechs and the Slovaks and it seems that his words had indeed a beneficial impact since democrats started to speak about "the unified Czechoslovak state" – he notified the Quai d'Orsay immediately after the talks with Beneš.¹⁶ One cannot say that Dejean could have liked the Slovaks very much. This, however, is just a marginal remark; I do not expect from diplomats to show their sympathies for anybody. On the other hand, it is also true that an impartial perspective on the matter is their best certificate, and at the same time, also the best service done in the place of their activities as well as in their homeland. Dejean was looking at Slovakia through the eyes of Beneš, whom he knew well and long; his understanding of the Slovak issue was from the point of view which, with admissible simplification, could be placed into the formulation used by the Ambassador in his wire sent from Prague to Paris on February 15, 1946: The Slovak problem is one of the most important and most delicate, it has to be resolved by free Czechoslovakia. The very existence of the state is at stake. The Slovaks are well aware of it and show a clear tendency to misuse it.¹⁷ As we can see, in some cases one-sided and a priori thinking are found not only among the highest officials of the state but even among diplomats...

3. The third group of questions carefully followed by French diplomacy in post-war Slovakia was the President Tiso's trial. I am sure that Slovak historiography will return to this topic and will describe it objectively but with all seriousness, as the matter deserves, with a sense for thoroughness and responsibility.

We can say without overestimation that the Tiso trial was perceived by French diplomatic representatives as a politically extraordinarily serious event. This was because, as far as the relations within Slovakia were concerned, they correctly saw there a particularly harsh competition between communist and democratic forces. As early as before the beginning of Tiso's trial, Dejean announced to his department that during the election campaign in May 1946, democrats more or less indicated to Tiso's followers that if they won the elections, the President would be found not guilty.¹⁸ Their apprehension that a harsh verdict would divert a number of voters, who voted for them just because of Tiso, had a point. On the other hand, the communists wanted quite the reverse. They wanted Tiso's execution to cause precisely the sort of splintering of the ranks of convinced or tactical Democrat sup-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 74 (Slovaquie).

¹⁸ Telegram sent from Prague to Paris on Nov 26, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 75 (Slovaquie).

porters, which the Democrats were doing everything possible to avoid.¹⁹ It really was a difficult test of the forces of the two decisive political camps in Slovakia. It was very easy to foresee the result because of the existing circumstances.

– If the designated judge is not changed, Dejean notified to Paris several days before the trial, the verdict will be fatal.²⁰ We know today that decision about the sentence on Tiso was made as early as September 1946 during the meeting of Igor Daxner with Edvard Beneš in Topočianky. Dejean informed Paris before the trial that nervousness had been increasing in Slovakia but it had not gone beyond the limit of danger. He cited a communist leader who said that if in Prague the people prayed for the success of the two-year plan, people in Slovakia prayed for Tiso's release.²¹ But we know that the prayers of believers rarely have an impact on the thinking and actions of politicians even if they watch them condescendingly...

Similarly as Dejean, the French consul general in Bratislava Manac'h was also aware of the political significance of the Tiso trial. In his report addressed to the French ambassador in Prague, he denoted its beginning as one of the most important events in the history of Czecho-Slovakia.²² He did not hesitate to denote Tiso to be one of the chief organizers of the breakdown of the Czechoslovak state but, on the other hand, he did not conceal the danger of any verdict: if he is granted a pardon, it will encourage numerous Slovak proponents of autonomy, if he is sentenced to death and executed, there is a threat of serious domestic riots in Slovakia. But considerations of a legal character yield to political considerations and the trial will largely be held in view of the state's interests,²³ he stated. He also said that a prominent Slovak Communist Party secretary told him that Tiso must be sentenced to death and executed and that he is convinced that it will be so. Manac'h's question whether in such a case there would not be fear of domestic troubles, the secretary said that the moment has come when Slovak fascism has to be defeated – in Manac'h's report the word fascism was in inverted commas – that alive Tiso will also be dangerous in the prison and that, as a whole, it is necessary to resist energetically the danger of the Slovak People's Party opposition and reactionaries.²⁴

The secretary's words were justified at least in terms of the fact that, according to Dejean's information, which the French Embassy in Prague announced to the Quai d'Orsay, a great part of Slovak population supported Tiso; about 70–80% of university students were in principal against the trial with Tiso and about 50% was

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Manac'h's report dispatched from Bratislava to the French chargé d'affaires in Prague Henri Lageneste on Dec 3, 1946. Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

prepared to take part in opposition actions. Only the attitude of students from Bohemia and Moravia and students from Protestant, liberal, and communist milieu was indifferent or favourable toward the trial²⁵ – the French ambassador notified to his department.

In the period before the sentence was pronounced, the French diplomats in Czechoslovakia paid attention to the question of the potential granting of a pardon to the accused, the distribution of the forces within the Government on this matter, Beneš's attitude towards a pardon and some other issues. Dejean underscored that in the opinion of the communists and a greater part of the social democrats, the reprieve of Tiso, “collaborator of the enemies of the republic and ally of the Nazis”, might encourage all hostile elements. The National socialists and Catholics (Czech – P.P.) are also uncompromising but because of sympathies, which endured in reactionary circles and among less-educated Slovak peasants, they are afraid that Tiso's execution might again damage relations between the Czechs and Slovaks²⁶ – Dejean wrote in this context to his Foreign Minister.

On the basis of his talks with Beneš, Dejean inclined at that time to the opinion that if the Government would not be able to make clear decision on the issue of reprieving Tiso would probably be granted a pardon by Beneš.²⁷ But in his report of the end of March 1947, he already said that Beneš had decided to join the Government's opinion and the Government seemed to be inclined to the execution. The members of the Government, he wrote, realized that reprieving Tiso as well as his execution would have serious disadvantages from the political point of view and they considered both possibilities. On the one hand, they were afraid that a reprieve might be interpreted as a sign of the weakness of the central power, which would encourage the republic's enemies. On the other hand, they asked whether the execution would not lead to at least temporary riots. But at last they had decided that exclusively from the political point of view the execution would be more advantageous.²⁸ He wrote about the very complicated position of the Slovak democrats whose leader Dr. Jozef Lettrich would probably find it most suitable if Tiso would be granted pardon and then be transferred to the Czech territory since his stay in Slovakia would be accompanied by constant tension within society. But it is hardly probable that the Czechs would agree with such a solution, Dejean alerted: they certainly would not like to become warders of the prisoner, since Dr. Lettrich's friends would certainly try to make him a martyr. He concluded his report from March 1947 saying that even some Catholics realize that the chance of Tiso avoiding capital punishment is minimum.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague to Paris on Jan 29, 1947. Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague to Paris on March 29, 1947. Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

After Tiso's execution Dejean informed his Foreign Minister that there was peace in Prague and the execution did not cause any disturbance in public. His report of April 21 ended as follows: There is an opinion that Tiso's execution means liquidation of the myth of Slovak independence which always had been and might have remained a useful instrument in the hands of the republic's enemies.³⁰

The French journalist Georges Penchenier, who had taken part in the trial did not think that Tiso's killing would explode any myth. He wrote in *Le Monde* of June 14, 1947: The trial did not harm Tiso's prestige in the eyes of the majority of Slovaks. For peasants and for the Catholics who make up 80% of population, he remains on the one hand a priest, a victim of the communists and heretics and on the other, a person who liberated Slovakia from the Czech tutelage and who, in warring Europe, enabled them to live in fruitful peace.³¹ After a lapse of time, in spite of all changes and various shifts, we must admit that the journalist was closer to the truth than the renowned diplomat...

4. The fourth group of questions observed by French diplomats in Czechoslovakia was February 1948 and its consequences for the development of Slovak society. French diplomats in Czechoslovakia directed attention toward a variety of problems. I shall mention some of them: the escape of the Slovak official representatives to exile, trials of various former functionaries from the period of the Slovak state, but also from the post-war years, the role of action committees, the new Constitution and the position of Slovakia within the Republic, new small political parties, relation of the post-February power to the Church, etc. As for the overall assessment of the attitude of the Slovak communists to the crisis of Czechoslovak Government, French diplomats thought that they played just a minor role;³² they underlined the self-confidence with which Široký, Bašťovanský, Husák, and leaders of the Slovak trade unions acted in the period of the crisis of the Government, ascribing this self-confidence primarily to the fact that the activities of the Slovak communists had been settled in advance in coordination with Prague.³³ They emphasized that shortly after February before the approaching elections, the communists struggled to gain the Catholic Church by persuading them that if their future activities concerned exclusively religious affairs, they would be allowed to develop. The demands were naturally absurd since it is hardly possible to strictly separate religious life from political, but the representatives of the Church hierar-

³⁰ Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague to Paris on April 21, 1947. *Ibid.*

³¹ *Le Monde*, June 14, 1947.

³² For instance Dejean in his report sent from Prague to Paris on March 5, 1948. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 77 (Slovaquie).

³³ Manac'h in his report sent to Dejean from Bratislava to Prague on March 4, 1948. *Ibid.*

chy agreed at least for the sake of appearance, knowing that in the new situation, the rescue of the most necessary activities was at issue. In his report addressed to Dejean, Manac'h denoted the attitude of the Church as opportunist³⁴ but he understood in principle that no other attitude was possible in real life.

In conclusion, I alert that in the period examined, French diplomats paid attention to other issues as well – for instance, to agrarian reform, exchange of populations with Hungary, etc. They made an effort to pay careful attention to a complex of questions concerning the development in Slovakia and its connection with the integrity of Czecho-Slovakia, which had always been for Paris a particularly preferred and favourable vision. Attention devoted to the development in Slovakia in the first post-war years by French diplomats shows that although France abdicated from its power position under the pressure of circumstances in Central Europe after 1945, it did not lose interest in individual countries.

³⁴ Manac'h to Dejean on April 6, 1948. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944–1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol. 78 (Slovaquie).