The visit of delegates of the American Slovak League to Slovakia (June – August 1938) and their effort to implement the Pittsburgh Agreement into the Czechoslovak Constitution

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Abstract:
The Czechoslovak Republic (CSR), which was established in the Central European region as one of states after the demise of Austro-Hungarian Empire, was characterized as a state with a complex ethnic structure. Besides Czechs and Slovaks its inhabitants belonged to various ethnic minorities. The influences on the political development of the new state were the German community living predominantly in the western part of the Czech lands and a Hungarian minority settled mainly in Southern Slovakia. In both cases these ethnic groups were included in Czechoslovakia against the approval of the majority of their people. Therefore, they were a potential threat to the security of the Republic. Czech and Slovak political leaders were aware of this situation and were compelled to look for a solution. It was imperative to create a unity between both communities and in this way to eliminate the danger to the CSR. The road to the imposition of the dominant position of Czechs and Slovak in the new Republic was the creation of a political construct of a unified Czechoslovak Nation, consisting of two “branches” – the Czechs and the Slovaks. The adherents to this concept argued that, ethnic, linguistic and psychological closeness between both communities was so deep that only historical developments had prevented a fusion of them into one nation in the past.

Besides the ideological aspect, the concept of a unified Czechoslovak Nation had also deep political consequences. The Czechoslovak Republic, despite its multi-ethnic structure, was built as a national state with superior authority held within central government based in Prague, which, regardless of its concrete composition, was pursuing a policy supportive of “Czechoslovakism”. Therefore, in regard to political and social acceptance of this construct, there was a marked difference between Czechs and Slovaks. Whereas Czechs almost unanimously accepted this concept, Slovaks were sharply divided on it. A significant segment of Slovak society refused to take into consideration that they were Czechoslovaks; arguing that they were members of a fully developed nation with its own history, language and common sense of national self-awareness. Nationally-oriented Slovak politicians and cultural activists saw in the construct of the Czechoslovak Nation an attempt to assimilate Slovaks into a Czech nation. This suspicion was reinforced by Edvard Beneš, one of the most influential Czech politicians, who from 1938 was the President of CSR, and openly declared the necessary fusion of both communities.

Shortly after the establishment of the CSR this conviction was translated into a political program presented by the Slovak People Party (HSPP) led by Andrej Hlinka, and the Slovak National Party, where Martin Rázus held a dominant position, till his death. Both leaders demanded autonomy for Slovakia. The form of autonomy was to be based on the Pittsburgh Agreement signed by representatives of Czechs and Slovaks living in the USA and later the President of the CSR Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. The signatories of the Pittsburg Agreement consented that Slovakia would have an independent assembly and courts, and that the Slovak language would be the official medium of communication in public intercourse. In the view of autonomist adherents, the Masaryk’s signature was undisputable proof that the document had a legal relevance.

In an atmosphere of political tension in Europe, caused by the aggressive policy of Nazi Germany, the HSPP increased its fight for autonomy. As an opportunity to enhance public support for autonomy, a delegation of the
Slovak League visited from the USA during the summer months of 1938, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Pittsburgh Agreement. For the leadership of the HSPP it was of utmost importance to develop close relations with delegates and therefore it sent emissaries to the Polish port of Gdynia where the American delegation was scheduled to arrive. Similarly, the leaders of the Czechoslovak government deemed that friendly relations with delegates of Slovak League were important and sent a welcoming committee there. The pronouncements of the chairman of the Slovak League, Peter Hletko, were somewhat ambiguous; on the one hand he announced that the delegates had brought with them the original Pittsburgh Agreement, which was heartily welcomed by autonomists, on the other hand he declared that the aim of the American delegation was to contribute to the unity of Czechs and Slovaks in the Czechoslovak Republic. Initially the American delegation planned to visit government officials in Prague, but Hletko, allegedly under pressure from one of the leading politicians of HSPP, Karol Sidor, decided to go first to Ružomberok to see Hlinka. The government representatives, including the President Edvard Beneš, the Prime Minister Milan Hodža, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamil Krofta, the mayor of Prague and other dignitaries, could only ignore this change of travel schedule which had put them in an embarrassing situation. On finally arriving in Prague, the delegates were welcomed with lavish hospitality, but despite this welcoming the request of the delegates to implement the Pittsburgh Agreement into the Czechoslovak Constitution was denied. On June 4th delegates attended the Congress of the HSPP in Bratislava. Hletko informed the leaders of the HSPP that they could not expect a positive approach from the government towards the establishment of autonomy in Slovakia. The next day delegates took part in a grandiose celebration of the anniversary of the signing of the Pittsburg Agreement, which culminated when Hletko displayed it in front of a gathered crowd. To maintain an image of impartiality, delegates also attended a demonstration organized under the auspices of the Republican Party on June 6th in Bratislava. The aim of the demonstration was to prove that a majority of Slovaks were against autonomy and were loyal to the CSR. Hletko again defended the Pittsburgh Agreement, but primarily as an instrument of unity between Czechs and Slovaks. More openly he criticized the refusal of the government to accept the autonomy of Slovakia during a public gathering organized on June 19th by the SNS in Turčiansky Sv. Martin. Hletko declared that American Slovaks would never give up on their demands for the autonomy of Slovakia. Hletko was even more critical at a farewell banquet given by HSPP in Ružomberok. Government politicians, in his words, were generous in their hospitality, but not in their readiness to award autonomy to Slovakia. The support of a majority of delegates of the Slovak League for the autonomist program of the HSPP and SNS provoked a wave of negative reactions from the government press. The authority of delegates to speak for Slovaks living in USA was put in doubt, and their journey to Slovakia was characterized as an unimportant episode which had made little impact upon the political development of Slovakia.

Key words:

Since the inception of the Czechoslovak Republic (CSR), its founding fathers had to cope with the problem of how to integrate the ethnic minorities which lived within its territory. This was a challenging task; especially in the case of the numerous German and Hungarian communities. This task was made more complicated by the reluctance of the majority of Germans and Hungarians wishing to be included in the CSR. To solve this challenging problem it was necessary to forge a strong bond between the Czechs and Slovaks. This necessity led to the creation of a political construct, “the Czechoslovak Nation”, consisting of two “branches”: the Czechs and the Slovaks. In this way the Czechs and the Slovaks had a majority in the CSR and assumed the position of the “state forming” nation; that is, a dominant position in the political economic and social life of the new republic. At a political level this construct was defended by political parties which, for most of the existence of the
CSR, formed a ruling coalition; namely the Republican Party, the Social Democratic Party and the National Socialist Party.\(^1\)

The principal advocate of the concept of the Czechoslovak Nation was the Minister of Foreign Affairs (and from 1935 the President of the CSR) Edvard Beneš. Beneš formulated his arguments in great detail in his work *Reč k Slovákom o našej národnej prítomnosti a budúcnosti* (Speech to the Slovaks regarding our present and future state).\(^2\) According to Beneš, only united Czechs and Slovaks could successfully fend-off internal and external threats to the Republic. Beneš argued that the ethnic, linguistic and cultural closeness of Czechs and Slovaks pre-destined both communities to form a united nation. He warned that dissension between Czechs and Slovaks could lead to the weakening of Czechoslovakia and to the danger that Slovaks could fall victim to aggression from abroad. Therefore, it was of vital interest for all Slovaks to form the closest possible ties with Czechs in the CSR. Beneš refused the idea of an independent administration in Slovakia as a hindrance to the free movement of Slovaks throughout the whole of Czechoslovakia in their quest for jobs in government and in the private sphere. He even conceded that Slovaks, less affected by an urban lifestyle, could be instrumental in the process of “reinvigoration” of the Czech community; an opinion for which he was accused of advocating the assimilation of Slovaks into the Czech community.

The concept of the Czechoslovak Nation as a politically and culturally homogenous community gained a number of adherents in Slovakia. These people were known as “Czechoslovakists”. A prominent “Czechoslovakist” was Vavro Šrobár, who during the first years of the CSR held the powerful post of the Minister of Plenipotentiary for Slovakia (MPS). Šrobár belonged to the most radical pursuers of unity between Czechs and Slovaks and used his almost dictatorial power to fight his political opponents; namely Hlinka’s Slovak Peoples Party (HSPPP) and the Slovak National Party (SNP). No less determined in his fight for the unity of Czechs and Slovaks was the leader of the Slovak section of the Social Democratic Party, Ivan Dérer. According to Dérer, any form of resistance against the unity of both nations was a consequence of “magyarization”, which was a policy Hungary pursued to eliminate the bonds between Czechs and Slovaks and assimilate Slovaks. Similarly to Beneš, Dérer perceived attacks on the unity of Czechs and Slovaks as the extremely dangerous expansionist intentions of Hungary and Poland, and only the closest bond between Czechs and Slovaks would be, in his judgment, of vital importance for the survival of Czechoslovakia, and in which Slovaks found their freedom. As an adherent to Czechoslovak ideology, Milan Hodža presented himself to be the most influential Slovak politician. Unlike Dérer, who dogmatically defended the concept of the Czechoslovak nation as a reality, Hodža was flexibly adjusting his political credo to a changing political situation in Czechoslovakia. In the final years of the existence of the Republic, when it was becoming clear that a process of growing national awareness of Slovaks was resulting in increasing demands for a greater political independence, he started pursuing a concept of “regionality” as an optimal administrative organization for Slovakia. Hodža became an advocate of the necessity to award more self-governing authority to Slovakia. Despite efforts to transfer an idea of “the Czechoslovak Nation” into a reality, not all Slovaks subscribed to this concept. From the very beginning it roused a resistance from a large segment of Slovak society. The acceptance of the argument that Slovaks were only a “branch”

\(^1\) Official names: Republikánska strana zemedelského a malorol'nickeho ľudu; Československá sociálnodemokratická strana robotnická; Československá strana národnosocialistická.

of the Czechoslovak nation, would invalidate the struggle to form a self-sustained nation, which had been fought for by Slovak revivalists for centuries. The consequences of the fight between those who supported and those who resisted the existence of the ethnically and culturally unified Czechoslovak nation were momentous and were fought till the end of the Republic.

Shortly after the establishment of the CSR, when it became clear that the Republic would be built as a unitary state, a political movement calling for an autonomous status of Slovakia was formed. The most determined in the fight to achieve autonomy for Slovakia was Andrej Hlinka, a Catholic priest of great charisma, who founded and during his life stayed at the helm of the Slovak People Party. A significant role in the Slovak autonomist movement was also played by the chairman of the Slovak National Party, Martin Rázus. However, both these political parties differed in several ways. Unlike the HSPP, which ideologically was staunchly Catholic, the SNP attracted mostly Protestants. There was also a difference in the attitude towards the ruling political establishment; the leadership of the SNP opted for a more moderate approach in comparison to the more radical, frequently aggressive criticism of the centralizing policies of the government. The political influence of the SNP was considerably smaller, resulting from a limited number of potential voters as Protestants constituted less than 10% of the population of Slovakia. But in regard to the struggle for Slovak autonomy, both parties were unanimous. Národnie noviny, a periodical of the Slovak National Party, already in September 1919 wrote that the idea of autonomy had become firmly rooted in Slovakia.3

The most important argument of autonomists in defending their demands for the autonomy of Slovakia was the fact that the president T. G. Masaryk during his visit in USA in 1918 had signed a document projecting the establishment of a Slovak Assembly, Slovak courts and the use of Slovak language as an official medium of communication in Slovakia. Taking the place-name of where it was signed, it was named the Pittsburgh Agreement. Besides Masaryk, the signatories of the Pittsburgh Agreement were representatives of the Czech and Slovak communities in the USA.

Over the coming years, demands for a more autonomous status of Slovakia intensified. Already on February 29th 1920, members of the House of Representatives of the Czechoslovak National Assembly, representing the HSPP, submitted a proposal to change the Constitution of the CSR, which would legalize the autonomous status of Slovakia. The proposal was deliberated in parliamentary committees, but the House of Representatives ignored it.

With an aim to gain a share in the political power, the HSPP leadership agreed to become a part of a ruling coalition after the elections in 1925. However, two years of participation in government brought only meagre results. Though the HSPP gained two ministerial posts – the Ministry of Health Care and the Ministry of Unification and the post of the President of the Land Office in Bratislava, the centralistic character of government remained intact. Autonomy was out of question and, as communal elections in 1927 showed, the HSPP suffered a loss of popularity among its constituents. In comparison to the election to the House of Representatives in 1925, the HSPP lost approximately 100 000 votes in 1927. In 1929 the HSPP left the ruling coalition and till the end of the existence of the CSR remained in opposition.4

On May 8th 1930 the HSPP together with the SNP submitted to the House of Representatives a proposal which requested to legalize a form of administrative autonomy for Slovakia. According to the proposal, a Slovak National Assembly would be established but this legislative institution would be authorized only to adopt laws in the sphere of language use, education, religion and self-government. Despite the modest form of the proposal – there was no request for any sort of territorial autonomy – the proposal was ignored by the ruling coalition. According to the historian Jan Rychlík, even though the HSPP tried to achieve only limited independence for Slovakia in the CSR, the political establishment which came to power after general elections in October 1929 was not willing to be forthcoming to the HSPP in any way.5

The next proposal of the HSPP to implement an autonomous status for Slovakia was published on June 5th 1938 in a radically different political situation. If this proposal would be accepted by the Czechoslovak government, it would result in far reaching changes which would terminate the CSR as a unitary state. The HSPP demanded the establishment of a Slovak government and a Slovak Assembly with exactly defined competences and the imposition of the Slovak language as the official medium of communication in public.6 These demands were submitted during the rising political tension in Europe caused by the increasing aggressiveness of Nazi Germany.

Since his ascent to power in Germany, Adolf Hitler had openly declared his determination to destroy the Versailles Peace Agreements, and during the following years had kept his word. Hitler, bent on imposing German domination over Europe, remilitarized Germany, turned Germany into a totalitarian state and occupied the demilitarized left side of the Rhine. Hitler openly declared his intention to annex all regions inhabited by Germans, even if this would mean violating the sovereignty of neighboring countries; namely Austria and the Czechoslovak Republic.7

The Anschluss of Austria in March 1938 ushered in a new political situation in Europe. It was clear that Adolf Hitler in his quest for domination would not respect the sovereignty of European states and that he was determined to commit acts of open aggression. The policy of Nazi Germany aiming to destroy the system of peace treaties implemented in Europe after the First World War, was facilitated by the failure of Great Britain and France to decisively confront such German aggression.

An imminent target of Hitler’s aggression after the occupation of Austria became the Czechoslovak Republic (CSR). Hitler accused the Czech government authorities of mistreatment of the German minority living there. He openly declared his “irreversible” determination to annex to Germany the Sudetenland, where a majority of the German minority lived, even if this would mean the use of violence. Considering the complex ethnic composition of the CSR, this constituted a threat to a very existence of the Republic.

The HSPP viewed the precarious situation of the Czechoslovakia as an opportunity to compel the Czechoslovak government to be more forthcoming in granting Slovak autonomy. The leadership of the HSPP was unable or reluctant to realize that awarding autonomy to Slovakia would inevitably result in the necessity to grant autonomous status to Sudeten Germans and it

7 In his speech on February 20th 1938 Hitler declared that they are 10 million Germans living in neighboring states who became stripped of their right to freedom and who became an abject subject of abuse and therefore, “For a world power, which have a certain self-esteem, it is unbearable to witness than members of its nation are victims of humiliation for their connection with the mother nation, with its destiny and with its ideology.” Robotnicke noviny, 22. II. 1938, Vol. 35, Issue 43. Hitlerove chvály a hrozby. (Hitler’s praises and threats).
would jeopardize the existence of the Republic. Conversely, the leaders of HSPP considered the external threat to the CSR as an opportunity to achieve Slovak autonomy, regardless of consequences. At the meeting of the HSPP in Ružomberok on July 15th 1937, Andrej Hlinka expressed the necessity to intensify the fight for autonomy and declared the Pittsburgh Agreement to be the “The Magna Carta” of the Slovak Nation. The celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Pittsburgh Agreement was planned to culminate with a visit of delegation of the Slovak League in the USA (the Slovak League), who were scheduled to come to the CSR during the summer months of 1938. The significance of the visit, in the judgment of the HSPP leadership, was heightened by the presence of signatories of the Pittsburgh Agreement who were to bring the original document. Even before the delegation of the Slovak League arrived, the political orientation of its members and its aims had become a topic of radically different explanations expounded by the political parties of the government coalition and the HSPP. Unlike the Slovak daily, which presented the envoys of the Slovak League as staunch supporters of Slovak autonomy, the periodicals representing the parties of the ruling coalition stressed the determination of the members of the delegation to reinforce the unity of Czechs and Slovaks.

The HSPP considered the establishment of a good relationship with the delegation of the Slovak League to be of the utmost importance. Therefore, it was decided that Milan Sidor, one of the leaders of the HSPP, would meet the delegation in open seas before the passenger ship Bathory arrived at the Polish port of Gdynia. Sidor’s trip to Poland and his contacts with Polish political representatives were viewed with open suspicion, as expressed by A-Zet.

At the same time the Czechoslovak ambassador in Warsaw, Juraj Slávik, tried to get instructions from the Foreign Ministry in Prague for what course of action he should take in regard to the delegation of the Slovak League. However, for unknown reasons the instruction did not come.

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9 Národní archiv České republiky, Praha (National Archive of Czech Republic; hereinafter referred only to as NA ČR Prague, fund (f.) Předsedníctví ministerské rady (Presidium of the Council of Ministers, hereinafter referred only to as PMR), carton (c.) 573. Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana, informácie.
10 A-Zet, a periodical representing views of Czechoslovak National Socialist Party announced, without quoting any relevant source, that „Slovak League in America was still now more-or-less controlled by exponents of autonomist line, which was a heritage of old Hungaristic tendencies. In regard to the Pittsburgh Agreement this organization was getting into conflicts with the position of the Czechoslovak government and anti-autonomist majority of the Czechoslovak Nation and was frequently a helper of Ludáks agitation in Slovakia. However now, under impact of international development, as well as under impact of rant caused by Ludáks together with an autonomist block in the Republic, ensued a change of attitude of the Slovak League in America. The League voted in a resolution, in which Slovaks in America are invited to work together with Czechs in pursuing a common course.” A-Zet, 14. IV. 1938, Vol. 25, Issue 87. Obrat v Slovenskej lige v Amerike. (Turnover in Slovenská Liga in America). Robotnícke noviny, an official daily of the Slovak section of the Social Democratic Party, argued that envoys of the Slovak League refused to be a tool of any political propaganda and especially not at all a tool of political propaganda of HSPP. Robotnícke noviny, 15. V. 1938, Issue 111. Pláná agitácia ľudákova s originálom Pittsburhského dohody. (Vortless agitation of Ludáks with original of Pittsburgh Agreement).
11 According to A-Zet, M. Sidor in Warsaw visited Polish political leaders, including the Foreign Minister Józef Beck and senator Gwiżdżá, who was „known by his attacks against Czechoslovakia”. A-Zet concluded that „It will be really interesting to monitor after return of senator Sidor further development of his party”. A-Zet, 21. V. 1938, Vol. 25, Issue 119. Čo robi posl. Sidor v Pošku? (What is Sidor doing in Poland?)
Taking into consideration the significance of the delegation of the Slovak League, the leader of the ruling coalition, despite their negative attitude toward the Pittsburgh Agreement, decided to dispatch an official welcoming committee to Gdynia.

The delegation arrived at Gdynia on May 26th 1938 and was cordially greeted by representatives of the Czechoslovak political parties and the Czechoslovak ambassador J. Slávík. The welcoming of the American delegation attracted extraordinary attention from the Slovak and Czech periodicals. A-Zet reported that Slávík greeted members of the delegation with cordial words, expressing gratitude of the whole Slovak Nation to Slovaks living in America for their endeavors to build up Slovak national awareness and reassured delegates that their visit would contribute to the unity of Slovaks in the CSR. A majority of periodicals representing the political parties of the government coalition reported in a similarly positive tone. Although the periodical České Slovo highly appreciated a speech by the chairman of the Slovak league Peter Hletko, who appealed to politicians representing Poland, that if they loved Slovaks, they should help to protect Czechoslovakia, the periodicals criticized members of the Polish Parliament, senators Walewski and F. Gwijdża for their anti-Czechoslovak declarations. Also judged suspiciously were the contacts of M. Sidor with Polish politicians.

On the other hand, Slovák, without a trace of criticism, cited the mayor of Warsaw, who declared that Poland “without any hidden intentions wants to help Slovaks to freedom and rights.” The government decision to welcome the delegation of the Slovak League in Poland was ridiculed by the communist periodical Slovenské zvesti, which was characterized as hypocritical on the part of politicians of the government coalition. Sidor became a target of criticism by the government press for his over-warm contact with the Polish political representatives and for his journey to the ship carrying the delegates before it landed in Gdynia. The Bi-weekly Politika wrote that the primary reason for Sidor’s journey was to discredit the government envoys and influence the delegates in favor of the HSPP. Politika also expressed disappointment with the attitude of Polish politicians. Robotnícke noviny described the activities of Sidor as damaging to Czechoslovak – Polish relations, and accused the government authorities of inappropriate benevolence toward him. However, Sidor in his memoirs indicated that the Prime Minister Milan Hodža warned him to be careful and not to provoke government authorities to strike against him.

17 According to Slovenské zvesti, a surprising change of attitude towards the Pittsburgh Agreement on part of Czechoslovak government, which for two decades rejected the relevance of this document in arranging relations between Czechs and Slovaks, belonged to “curiosities” of Czechoslovak political development and was proof of the hypocrisy of the government. Slovenské zvesti, 27. V. 1938, Vol. 3, Issue 104. Dohoda o Pittsburghskéj dohode pri ktorej najhoršie obide duch Dohody. Agreement about Pittsburgh Agreement which will bedetrimental to spirit of Agreement).
18 Politika, 1. VI. 1938, Vol. 8, Issue 10. Za ta priateľstvo ćakujeme. (For such a friendship we thank you.).
20 In his memoirs M. Sidor wrote that on June 2nd he visited Hodža, who allegedly warned him – „...Please watch out. Several months ago you were in trouble. But I was keeping a protective hand over you. And I am
The bi-weekly *Politika*, as future events showed, correctly expressed worries in regard to the political orientation of delegates of the Slovak League. If delegates “would became a toy of one political party”, wrote *Politika*, “then their visit would result not in unification of Slovak political scene, but usher in infighting amongst political parties.”

The first incident, potentially damaging relations between the delegation of the Slovak League and the Czechoslovak government, was the decision by the delegates to change their original travel plan and first visit Hlinku in Ružomberok, and only then travel to Prague to meet representatives of the government. The change came as a result of persuasion by Sidor and the representative of the Matica Slovenská, Jozef Cíger-Hronský. Sidor, allegedly, argued that Hlinka was so frail, that he could die before he would have the chance to greet members of the delegation. According to the historian R. Arpáš, exposed to this unpleasant choice, Hletko reluctantly chose to go to Ružomberok. However, according to one of the leading politicians of HSPP, Jozef A. Mikuš, there was no hesitancy on the part of Hletko. Contrary to this, Mikuš wrote, despite the efforts of Slavík, the leader of the Slovak League was firm in his decision to visit Hlinka before the delegation traveled to Prague.

The delegates arrived in Ružomberok on May 28th. Hlinka, Sidor, Mederly and other members of leadership of the HSPP greeted them. After an exchange of pleasantries, Hletko read out the text of the Pittsburgh Agreement in front of a cheering crowd.

As a gesture of the symbolic hold to the shrine of Slovak cultural identity, the delegates visited the Matica slovenská in Turčiansky Sv. Martin. The administrator of the Matica slovenská, Jozef Škultéty, declared that the visit by Slovak countrymen from the USA was one of the most precious moments in his life. In return Hletko compared the significance of Turčiansky Sv. Martin in Slovak history to Pittsburgh in the history of the USA.

On May 31st delegates of the Slovak League were welcomed by representatives of the Czechoslovak government in Prague. The importance of the delegation was shown by the presence of leading Czechoslovak politicians. Besides the President Beneš and the Prime Minister Hodža, the delegates were welcomed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamil Krofta, the mayor of Prague Petr Zenkl and other dignitaries. However, despite lavish entertainment and the cordiality shown by the hosts, both Beneš and Hodža declined to consider the implementation of the Pittsburgh Agreement into the Czechoslovak Constitution. Whereas Beneš argued that complications in regard to the complicated international political situation prevented such a deep constitutional reform, Hodža assured delegates that he was doing all in his power to satisfy the demands of autonomists. A. Arpáš, quoting notes of the Chancellor of the Presidential Office Přemysl Šámal, wrote that Beneš categorically declared that he was always against the Pittsburgh Agreement. When he was asked why he was against the Pittsburgh Agreement, he allegedly answered that it is the word “assembly”, because everybody could explain its meaning according to his imagination.
Slovák asked Hletko about the results of discussions of delegates with Beneš and Hodža. Hletko answered that neither Beneš, nor Hodža expressed a willingness to accept the Pittsburgh Agreement.  

Czech periodicals avoided the refusal by Czechoslovak top political representatives to accept the Pittsburgh Agreement and focused instead their attention upon the declarations of unity of Czechs and Slovaks.  

On June 3rd delegates of the Slovak League arrived in Bratislava. Government officials, led by the President of the Land Office, Jozef Ország, welcomed the delegation cordially, accentuating the positive role of the Slovak League in Slovak history. However, the cordiality of government representatives could not change the growing closeness of the majority of delegates to the HSPP. The deepening mutual understanding was documented by the presence of the delegation at the Congress of the HSPP in Bratislava, which was initiated the next day. The delegates were enthusiastically greeted by and took their seats next to Hlinka, who welcomed them. The General Secretary of the HSPP, Martin Sokol, in his speech described the significance of the Pittsburgh Agreement and accentuated the importance of Slovak national identity. The following speaker, Hletko, summarized the visit of the delegation in Prague; describing a splendid welcoming ceremony provided by leaders of the Czechoslovak government, but made no secrets, that he was surprised that the same people who welcomed them so amicably, were in the past denigrating the Pittsburgh Agreement as inconsequential in the quest for Slovak autonomy.  

In the closing declaration the participants of the Congress declared the HSPP to be the sole representative of the Slovak Nation. During that evening, radical autonomists gathered in the square in the front of the Slovak National Theater chanting autonomist slogans and expressed their anti-communist sentiments and wrath against the Czechoslovak treaty with the Soviet Union by burning the red flag.  

On June 5th the HSPP organized a mass demonstration in Bratislava. The leadership of the HSPP planned the demonstration to be an expression of the demand for autonomy by the whole of Slovakia. Preparations were made to secure the presence of HSPP members from all Slovak regions. To enhance the visual impact, individual groups of demonstrators wore costumes characteristic of their regions. Because of the potential large numbers of people who could gather in Bratislava, which could result in disturbances, the security authorities devoted detailed attention to maintain order and to prevent any occurrences of violence, which could be exploited by hostile propaganda against the Czechoslovak Republic.
The periodical *Slovák* described the public gathering organized on June 5th 1938 in euphoric language, as an event which had no precedent in the history of Slovakia. Unquestionably, it was a momentous demonstration, indicating that the quest for autonomy had many adherents in Slovakia. The center of the celebration was Hviezdoslav Square, where since early morning a crowd of people had gathered. A procession of marching bands and groups dressed in national dress paraded in front of a grand hotel, the Carlton. The procession included a vehicle with a large reproduction of the Pittsburgh Agreement. On both sides of a large model of the document stood two men pointing to Masaryk’s signature. It took two hours for all the groups dressed in costumes, characteristic of various regions of Slovakia, to parade in front of the Carlton hotel. The demonstrators chanted slogans “Slovakia to Slovaks”, “Long live a free Slovakia”, “Hlinka-Hletko, give us everything”. The culminating point of the demonstration arrived, when Hletko displayed the Pittsburgh Agreement. Hletko characterized the Pittsburgh Agreement as a program on the base of which all Slovaks could unite around and gain a just share of rights and duties in the Republic. It could became a platform on which the cooperation of Czechs and Slovaks could be realized. The implementation of the Pittsburgh Agreement, declared Hletko, would secure the strong unity of Czechs and Slovaks. Representatives of the HSPP termed the demonstration as the breaking point in the struggle of Slovaks for autonomy. The significance of the gathering, in their view, was the mass attendance from all Slovakia, which allegedly reached 120 000 people. Unlike *Slovák*, which in its articles drew a picture of euphoria and enthusiastic support expressed by all Slovaks for Hlinka, Hletko and to autonomy for Slovakia, the periodicals representing the political parties of the governing coalition described the festivities organized by the HSPP in sharply negative tones. According A-Zet, members of the American delegation found themselves in an awkward situation, because they realized that they were being used as a pawn of HSPP propaganda. Delegates of the Slovak League presented themselves primarily as supporters of unity between Czechs and Slovaks. Contrary to an estimation of attendance by *Slovák*, A-Zet wrote that the number of participants was not larger than 18 000 and “many were only on-lookers”. Agreement. According to the Land Office, the HSPP expected that participation will reach 100 000 persons, who would attend the celebration from all regions of Slovakia and that festivities would have a significant impact upon the political situation at home and abroad. According to “confidential” information, HSPP members were spreading rumors that groups of peasants, armed with scythes and ice-axes, will arrive in Bratislava. Slovaks allegedly would receive help from America and people would achieve autonomy. The Land Office requested that county offices reported how many people from their counties will travel to Bratislava; if agitation propagating the celebration was carried in line with the law and what mood was prevalent among members of HSPP in general. Finally, the Land Office instructed security authorities to prevent any occurrences of civilians arming themselves. Štátny archív Košice (State Archive Košice; hereinafter referred to only as ŠA KE), pracovisko (section) Rožňava, f. Košická župa (Košice County; hereinafter referred to as KŽ), c. 42, number of document 1132 prez. 33 *Slovák*, 8. VI. 1938, Vol. 19, Issue 130. Na Hviezdoslavovom námestí. (At the Hviezdoslav Square).

34 P. Hletko greeted excited crowd and expressed solidarity of American Slovaks with Slovakia: „I am bringing to you greetings from Slovak America, where live almost one million Slovaks; in overwhelming majority autonomists. We came to visit you, namely the Hlinka´s Slovak People´s party, which is closest to us...Twenty years ago conclusion of the Pittsburgh Agreement brought unity and brotherhoods among Slovaks. We came to pronounce need for this unity“. *Slovák*, 8. VI. 1938, Vol. 19, Issue 130. Rozvinutie Pittsburgského dohody. (Unfolding of Pittsburgh Agreement).


A detailed report of the HSPP Congress and the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Pittsburg Agreement was dispatched by the Police Directory in Bratislava (PD B) to the Ministry of Interior in Prague. The report was without the euphoric language used by Slovak in depicting the HSPP Congress and its celebration of the Pittsburg Agreement, but basically confirmed the event as described by Slovak. According to the PD B, as well as a speech by Sokol, who declared that the final agreement between Slovaks and Czechs was the Pittsburg Agreement, Hletko and Hušek also spoke. Hletko expressed his mixed feelings in regard to the visit in Prague, because same people who welcomed the American delegation, had previously attacked the Pittsburg Agreement. Hušek declared that 90% of the Slovaks living in America were for the autonomy of Slovakia and appealed to participants of the Congress to persist in their fight for autonomy. The PD B reported that the Hungarian minority political activists and the Sudeten German Party dispatched a telegram in which was expressed their sympathy to the HSPP for its “peaceful work for recognition of rights of ethnic communities”.  

As aforementioned, Masaryk had already in 1920 denied the legal relevancy of the Pittsburgh Agreement. Also in a letter dispatched to Hlinka on October 12th 1929 he classified the document as spurious, because according to Masaryk, “at the time when American Slovaks desired the Agreement, the League did not exist and was recognized by the State only in 1919. Therefore a serious politician, statesman with such a piece of paper cannot and must not operate.” The PD B in its report wrote that when Hletko displayed the Pittsburg Agreement and gave it to Hlinka, Hlinka called Hušek, who was one of the signatories, and asked him if the Pittsburg Agreement was signed by Masaryk. When Hušek confirmed that it was so, Hlinka declared that it was to Masaryk’s shame, who in a letter (written to him) had actually proclaimed the Pittsburgh Agreement to be a forgery.  

In regard to the size of the gathering, the Police Department in Bratislava estimated the number of demonstrators parading to Hviezdoslav Square at 18 000 and the total number of participants at the celebration at 25 000. To show that a majority of Slovaks were against autonomy, the leaders of the Republican Party decided to organize a demonstration named “Agrarian Day” on June 6th in Bratislava. The demonstration was to be an expression of loyalty to the Republic. The Prime Minister Hodža, surrounded by government officials, stood on the balcony of the Slovak National Theatre. The leaders of the Republican Party were joined by representatives of the Slovak League led by Hletko. Dérer, who frequently criticized the policies of the Republican Party, also joined the demonstration.  

As in the case of the demonstration organized by the HSPP, the republican organizers made a great effort to ensure that the Agrarian Day would show the power and popularity of the Republican Party. Slovenská politika, one of the republican dailies, in a positive tone reported that masses of peasants from all over Slovakia were traveling to Bratislava to take part in the celebration of Agrarian Day.
Hodža in his speech warned leaders of the HSPP that if they did not end their confrontational policy they would face consequences; a surprisingly stern warning considering his previous conciliatory approach towards the HSPP. A member of the House of Representatives from the Republican Party, Ján Ursíny, appealed to delegates of the Slovak League to not let themselves be misled, and be acquainted with the true thinking of the majority of Slovaks. Hletko diplomatically re-assured that American Slovaks were only wishing that Czechoslovakia would prosper and that Slovaks would remain loyal to the Republic.\textsuperscript{44} The Republican press presented Agrarian Day as an unprecedented victory for all Slovaks loyal to the Czechoslovak Republic. Allegedly, the total participation exceeded 100,000 people.\textsuperscript{45} Also periodicals representing the views of other political parties of the ruling coalition emphasised the significance of Agrarian Day.\textsuperscript{46}

In spite of the conciliatory words of Hletko, stated during republican celebrations in which he was present, his sympathies belonged unequivocally to the HSPP. He professed his political alignment during the public gatherings organized by the Slovak National Party in Turčiansky Sv. Martin on June 19th 1938. He declared that American Slovaks would remain loyal to the Pittsburgh Agreement no matter what.\textsuperscript{47} At the end of July delegates Hletko, Sloboda and Rolík visited Prague again and discussed the situation in Slovakia with Hodža. Asked by member of the editorial staff of Pražské noviny what his opinion was in regard to reforms proposed by Hodža, Hletko answered diplomatically, that “These reforms are fulfilling our expectations to a certain extent”.\textsuperscript{48} Also Slovak reported that the discussion was carried out in a cordial manner, even though Hodža repeated that the Pittsburgh Agreement was impossible to include into the Czechoslovak Constitution.\textsuperscript{49}

Hletko was less diplomatic in his speech at the farewell gala given by the HSPP in Ružomberok. He scathingly criticized the refusal of government representatives to solve the status of the Slovak nation on the basis of the Pittsburgh Agreement.\textsuperscript{50} Even more bitterly, Hletko criticized the adversaries of the Pittsburgh Agreement in his farewell letter to the periodical Slovák.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{44} ARPAŠ, R. Autonómia…p. 126.

\textsuperscript{45} Disregarding partisan exaggerations, according to historian Alena Bartlová, the participation in both demonstrations was approximately equal. BARTLOVÁ, Alena. Andrej Hlinka. Bratislava : OBZOR, 1991, p. 109.


\textsuperscript{47} Slovák, 21. VI. 1938, Vol. 19, Issue 140. Dr. P. Hletko na zhromaždení Slovenskej národnej strany: „Ak by ste vy aj opustili Pittsburgskú dohodu, my americí Slováci ju ani vtedy neopustíme.“ (Dr. Hletko at the gathering of Slovak National Party: “Even if you let Pittsburgh Agreement go, we American Slovaks will stand by it.”

\textsuperscript{48} Pražské noviny, 28. VII. 1938, Vol. 259, Issue 171. Dr. Hletko o pobyte v ČSR. Čo súdi o riešení slovenskej otázky. (Dr. Hletko about staying in CSR. What he thinks about solving the Slovak question.).


\textsuperscript{50} “With the original of the Pittsburgh Agreement we intended to bring a consolidation. We were stretching out your and our hand to Prague, but as an answer we received lofty speeches, grandiose celebrations, soirées, for which were are grateful, but we did not get a honest, brave word, which could bring much improvement in the Republic and which would to one front unite Slovak nation, Czech nation in defense of yours Republic. This word had to be a deed. It had to be immediate legalization of the Pittsburgh Agreement. They did not do it and they do not want to do it”. Slovák, 9. VIII. 1938, Vol. 19, Issue 179. Zostriete boj. (Sharpen your fight).

\textsuperscript{51} P. Hletko wrote that enemies of the Pittsburgh Agreement were damaging interests of Slovakia for their private gain and accused them of being willing to use every dishonorable method to discredit delegates of the
His autonomist orientation was also echoed by Hušek. When leaving to the USA, he promised to visit Slovakia again when “an autonomous assembly will be established”.

The unambiguous support of the majority of the American delegation to demands for autonomy of Slovakia roused a wave of anger among defenders of Czechoslovakia as a unitary state. Pro-government periodicals without exception attacked members of the Slovak League who, allegedly, were misguided by exponents of the HSPP and had become a tool of their propaganda which was hostile to unity between Slovaks and Czechs. A-Zet expressed disappointment about the one-sided orientation of Hletko and his associates to the autonomist program of the HSPP and SNS, and characterized the journey of the Slovak League as only a trip without any meaningful consequences. Politika accused delegates of intentional disregard for those Slovaks who were against the autonomy of Slovakia and, similarly to A-Zet, denied that trip of the Slovak League to the CSR had any significance upon the political situation in Slovakia. Robotnícke noviny accused delegates of the Slovak League of breaching their promise to contribute to building the unity of Slovaks and of lacking impartiality. Slovenské zvesti, quoting a letter sent by Slovak civic organizations in the USA to Hodža, argued that the Slovak League was not the sole representative of Slovaks in the USA. Protests against the Slovak League voiced by certain Slovak associations in America were also reported in a regional periodical Slovenský Východ.

Even though the main objective of the delegates of the Slovak League – inclusion of the Pittsburgh Agreement into Czechoslovak Constitution – was not achieved, it served to encourage leaders of the HSPP and SNP to fight for autonomy of Slovakia knowing that they had an influential ally in the USA. In the not very distant future, autonomy of Slovakia became a reality. However, the way autonomy was achieved, was deeply flawed. It was a result of the German ultimatum to Czechoslovakia to voluntarily allow the annexation of the

Slovak League: „We knew that we will encounter resistance from individuals of this special caste. However, we expected that their resistance will be somewhat more solid and gentleman-like. But we with consternation observed what ugly attacks were used against us. We witnessed lies, made-up stories and defamations every day. They were not shy to hurt and discredit us in front of all the Slovak and Czech public“. Slovák, 10. VIII. 1938, Vol. 19, Issue 180. Dr. Peter Hletko, predseda Slovenskej ligy v Amerike: “Vaše sťažnosti sú celkom oprávnene“. (Dr. Peter Hletko, chairman of Slovak Leagues in America: “Your grievances are utterly justified.”).

52 Slovák, 2. VII. 1938, Issue 149. Podpisovateľ Pittsburghskej dohody odišiel zo Slovenska.
54 “...meaning of journey of the Slovak League in Slovakia presented itself practically in propagandistic campaign only for Hlínka’s Slovak People Party. They did not came to the Slovak Nation, did not talk to it, they chose a certain segment of it...This way, truly the result of if its mission is very sad, simply because in the life of Slovakia did not live any trace. It was an episode which was only promising to become an eventual happening.” Politika, 1. VII. 1938, Vol. 8, Issue 12. Stroskopaná misia. (Wrecked Mission.).
56 Sokol, Catholic Sokol, International Association of Workers and American-Slovak Club of gen. M. R. Štefánik
57 „We are decidedly protesting against the journey of representatives of »the Slovak League in America«, who are not authorized to speak in the name of Slovak people in America, because they were given a mandate to do it. The Slovak people in America is decidedly for undivided and democratic Czechoslovak Republic“. Slovenské zvesti, 1. VII. 1938, Vol. 3, Issue 127. Americkí Slováci protestujú proti delegácii dra. Hletka. (American Slovaks are protesting against delegation of dr. Hletko.).
58 According to Novosti, „Our country men organized in America, who are united into one democratic and antifascist body, are striving to organize a help to Czechoslovak Republic“. Novosti, 2. VII. 1938, Vol. 20, Issue 150. Sme rozbití doma aj v Amerike. (We are broken at home and also in America.).
The visit of delegates of the American Slovak League to Slovakia (June – August 1938) and their effort to implement the Pittsburgh Agreement into the Czechoslovak Constitution

Sudeten territory by Germany or face attack by the German Army. The Czechoslovak government, left without support by Western Powers who had signed the Munich Agreement, had no choice but to consent.

Slovaks paid a heavy price for autonomy. Shortly after the signing of the Munich Agreement, the Czech parts of the Republic were occupied by Nazi Germany. Slovakia, though formally an independent state, became a German satellite with all the tragic consequences that followed.

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The visit of delegates of the American Slovak League to Slovakia (June – August 1938) and their effort to implement the Pittsburgh Agreement into the Czechoslovak Constitution


