

CZECHOSLOVAK HISTORY AFTER 1918 A FEW REMARKS ON THE NEW DEFINED CONCEPT

Miroslav Lysý
associate professor

Comenius University in Bratislava

The creation of the Czechoslovak state at the very end of the 1st world war has been presented as a result of national liberation. Liberation from repressive regime (or regimes) of Austria-Hungary, “prison of nations”. Czechoslovakia served as an example of a liberated national state in contrast with national oppression within a multinational Empire, where one nation ruled over another. The obvious paradox is that Czechoslovakia represented not an example of such a national state, even if we would consider the Czechoslovak nation as a social and legal reality. New created states within the Versailles system in central Europe were from the national point of view – as already pointed out by Czech historian Jan Rychlík – copies of Austria-Hungary with a vast minority population. Real national states were on the other hand nationally compact Austria and Hungary within their post-world war 1st borders. Both states were, however, unsatisfied with it. While in Austria, there were present claims for unification with Germany in national state (banned in peace treaties), for Hungary the restoration of historical borders (or at least revision of Trianon peace treaty) remained as a goal of international policy.¹

The approach of Hungary to the Versailles system and fear from the German unification (connected with the question of the Sudet Germans in Bohemia and Moravia) remained a permanent threat for the new-born Czechoslovak state and a challenge for its unity, based on the fiction of common Czechoslovak nation, created by the Czechs and the Slovaks. It was the Czechoslovak nation, that as a subject of international law achieved state sovereignty through the institution of self-determination. Therefore, the concept of czechoslovakism had not only its cultural aspects, pretended for example in the fictional unity of Czechoslovak language, but also in international and constitutional law.

Before we analyse the concept of national liberation supported by academic institutions, let's not forget, that the concept of national liberation was claimed during the 20th century several times. In 1938, new autocratic regimes in Prague and Bratislava defined themselves as an opposite of Masaryk's or Beneš's Czechoslovakia and especially the regime of Hlinka's Slovak Peoples Party which used every opportunity to present itself as a tool of the Slovak nation, that liberated it from the “danger” of czechoslovakism. The subsequent regimes, since the Slovak National Uprising (1944) and definitively since the end of the World war II through its political representatives claimed itself as saviours of the nation from the fascist dictatorship. Idea of class or people's liberation was also used in 1948, 1968, or 1989. Thus, the 20th century was not only panoptic of instability of regimes and state units. Every single regime also tried to achieve its legitimacy by opposing its predecessor, as a

¹ Jan RYCHLÍK: *Češi a Slováci ve 20. století. Česko-slovenské vztahy 1914–1945*. Bratislava, 1997, 60.

thesis and antithesis. The 20th century became the period of revolutions, regime changes from democracy to far right and far left dictatorship, all in the name of the freedom.

Antetype of national liberation was founded and revealed during the 1st Czechoslovak republic. Although the idea of national freedom was adapted from the 19th century, the year 1918 became much more dramatic due to the fall of the Monarchy. National liberation on the side of the “Czechoslovaks” contrasted with the humiliation of the Germans and Hungarians. Using historical arguments, for Czechoslovakia it was of large importance to introduce its own version of history. Its part was naturally the prehistory of the Czechoslovak nation.

The development of Czechoslovak history started especially at the newly founded Comenius University in Bratislava (1919).² Since 1921, education at its faculties started and new inaugurated professor of Czechoslovak history (established as a new scientific branch) Václav Chaloupecký (1882–1851), who came from Bohemia with the task to educate first professional generation of historians in Slovakia, immediately started to work on the substance of Czechoslovak history.³ His importance is without any question in consideration of the fact, that there were no professional Slovak historians before 1918, only Hungarian authors and Slovak semi-laic scholars with restricted audience and undeveloped methods.

Therefore, if Chaloupecký’s work had enormous effect on historical science in Slovakia, his legacy was (and still is) shadowed with his czechoslovakism. This had been criticised not only after 1938, but also during 1st republic period, with (relevant) remark, that the concept of Czechoslovak history is artificial construct existing thanks to the institutional support only.⁴ It is true, that the term Czechoslovak history has not been used before 1918, but it is also important to remind, that also the term Slovak history was used rarely, as Slovak historians concentrated more on interpretation corrections after Hungarian colleagues. They were authors of Hungarian history from Slovak point of view.⁵ On the other hand, it is not correct to take the czechoslovakism for a creation of Czechoslovak state, if we consider, that the idea of language and national unity between Slovaks and Czechs was present also before 1918 and many authors in 19th century preferred Czech language, even if they later accepted Ľudovít Štúr’s codified variant.⁶ Slovak criticism on czechoslovakism also does not deliberate one very important fact: the creation of modern Czech nation. It was created not only in the historical borders of Kingdom of Bohemia and there was at least the ambition to unify creating nation in Bohemia and Moravia. Lot of job on this project

² “Czechoslovak state university” was founded by Act no. 375/1919.

³ On beginings of his career, see Milan DUCHÁČEK: *Václav Chaloupecký. Hledání československých dějin*. Praha, 2014, 131–134.

⁴ D. RAPANT: *Československé dejiny. Problémy a metody*. In: *Od pravěku k dnešku, Sborník prací z dějin československých*, K 60. narozeninám Jos. Pekaře. II. Praha, 1930, 531–533.

⁵ See for example the Introduction of Záborský’s History of Hungary. J. ZÁBORSKÝ: *Dejiny kráľovstva uhorského od počiatku do časov Žigmundových*. Bratislava, 2012, 3. From works of F. Sasínek we could at least mention his short work with his reaction on the opinion, that Slovaks were descendants of the Czechs arriving to northern Hungary in 15th century. Fr. V. SASÍNEK: *Slováci v Uhorsku*. Turčiansky Sv. Martin, 1905, 3. With reflection to terminology of various languages, it is important to mention, that Slovak language, in comparison with Hungarian or English, distinguish between terms Magyar (Maďar) and Hungarian (Uhor). While the first one refers to ethnic, or language understanding, the second one includes people at the territory of pre-Trianon Hungarian kingdom.

⁶ More Czech and Slovak authors formulated their statements for example here: *Hlasové o potřebě jednoty spisovného jazyka pro Čechy, Moravany a Slováky (=Spisů musejních číslo XXII)*. W Praze, 1846.

made after all historian and politician František Palacký, who such a concept applied in his most famous work *History of Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia*. Let's also mention that he belonged to a group of important personalities of Czech national movement with roots in Moravia.

It was no surprise, that the Czech nation did not intend to be closed within historical borders of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Similar process was also typical for national movements of Germans, Italians or Poles. Therefore, it is too trivial to consider czechoslovakism as the artificial construct only, as it was one of many possibilities of historical development in central Europe. This development did not lead to the unification of Czechs and Slovaks, but at least led to the creation of Czechoslovak state, existing in various forms more than seven decades. The state thanks to which Slovaks finished the process of their national forming.

Although using of the Czech language in Slovakia was frequent, it did not mean also the creation of common national consciousness, that would lead to a common nation. Therefore, let's go back to Václav Chaloupecký and to his attempt to create the construct of Czechoslovak history. In age of 38 he started to work on this in his seminary in Bratislava and this project remained his most important work for next 20 years.

But how can you create Czechoslovak history before 1918 without Czechoslovak state? This question looks like trivial one, but Chaloupecký and his colleagues had to fight with this problem. Natural clue was of course Great Moravia, where "Czechoslovak nation" was united in one state. But what comes next? Chaloupecký tried to find an answer in the history of Czech-Hungarian relations, where such uniters were to be found, as activities and impacts of Moravian and Czech prince Břetislav I (1035–1055). Inspiring were also military campaigns of Přemysl Otakar II (1253–1278). This Czech king meaningfully influenced the history of Bratislava, what supported the imagination of Chaloupecký, who moved to the city with his family, provided here an apartment and profession and simultaneously he included himself in intellectual and bureaucratic Czechoslovak (mostly Czech) community. These scopes, as well as reality of interwar Bratislava with its German, Hungarian and Jewish population forced Chaloupecký to re-think Slavic pre-history of the town. It is not coincidence, that he considered Břetislav I to be the founder of Bratislava, who was also the founder of Moravian town of Břeclav.⁷ Chaloupecký's conclusions were formulated on the base of very uncertain and even in his period criticised hypothesis. Despite this, he extended his conclusions about Břetislav's Bratislava.

Thus, Chaloupecký could start to build one of pillars of Czechoslovak history. Besides this, he observed, how familiar was territory of Slovakia to Czech medieval historian Cosmas (at the turn of 11th and 12th century). He was not only an expert for Slovak toponymy, but he also recorded the Zoborian tale of prince Svätopluk.⁸ Thus, ancient Slovak story of the end of domestic monarchs was revealed⁹ and in wider relations he presented an image of subjected Slovak people unsatisfied with Hungarian domination, that had to be patrolled by

⁷ V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *K nejstarším dějinám Bratislavy*. In: Sborník Filozofickej fakulty University Komenského v Bratislave, 1922, roč. 1, č. 9, 219–220. V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *Staré Slovensko*. V Bratislavě, 1923, 256. V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *O jménu Bratislavy*. In: Bratislava. Časopis Učené společnosti Šafaříkovy, 1927, roč. 1, 320–325.

⁸ *Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum I XIV. Monumenta germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum Nova series*. Ed. B. Bretholz. Berolini, 1923, 32–33.

⁹ V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *Kosmas a Slovensko*. In: Český časopis historický, 1924, roč. 30, 374–376.

Hungarians, Pechenegs, Siculs and Germans.¹⁰ Foreign exponents were also Saint Svorad and Saint Benedict and in Chaloupecký's eyes it was no coincidence that they were heroes of the first Hungarian legend (and in this way they were not Slovak saints).

Therefore, Chaloupecký was not surprised, that the Slovaks did not defend the country from the Czech invasions, as he concluded for years of 1042 or 1109.¹¹ His remarks were based on hypothesis, that the territory of Nitra region was under the power of Přemyslides until the reign of prince Boleslav II (967/972–999) and after his death the “period of disorder” came and the land became occupied by the Hungarians.

That meant, that “national unity” was a very powerful idea in the 11th century. Therefore, Břetislav with his very active eastern policy could be basis for Chaloupecký's Czechoslovak history, thanks to his putative attempt to recreate Great Moravia and unify the nation.

Chaloupecký's construction of the Nitra region was based on Cosmas's northern Hungary topography and the Chronicle of Anonym. The region was bordered with the territory of western Slovakia and it finished, where inaccessible forests stopped Břetislav from entering the territory east of Esztergom and the Gran river. The Slovak territory and its incorporation into the Hungarian state was the reason why Břetislav made the system of principalities in Moravia, that in result led to struggles (without any conceptual background) between Moravian and Bohemian Přemyslides.¹² It is apparent here, how Chaloupecký appreciated the visions imputed to Břetislav. Successors of the Bohemian prince could not be the personalities attempting to regain the territory of Slovakia. This is the reason, why Chaloupecký described Břetislav as the author of the national unification idea, that could not be fulfilled in his period and that perhaps was continued by Přemysl Otakar II in the 13th century.¹³

It is apparent from Chaloupecký's text how he distinguished a dichotomy between foreign and innate: Czechs and Slovaks (Czechoslovak nation) was a historical entity, whose part remained for centuries in the foreign Hungarian state. For Chaloupecký, the Czechoslovak nation was an objective reality. He did not need to approve its existence. Chaloupecký's Czechoslovak nation existed irrespective of the consciousness of its subjects.

In order to create a more consistent construct, Chaloupecký tried to separate Slovaks from Hungarian history. This is the most important turning point in the historiography of Slovakia. Despite how Slovak historians in 19th century tried to diversify from Hungarian or German historians. They simply wrote about the history of Hungary, where they tried to find a place for Slovaks or the Slovak nation. Finally, many of them considered Hungary as their own fatherland. Czechoslovak historians did not have such ambitions after 1918. The Czechoslovak historians did not have to correct the statements of their Hungarian colleagues in order to create a Slovak concept of the history of Hungary. On the contrary: they tried to separate the Slovak history from the Hungarian one.

This raises the question as to whether this was the beginning of today's animosity towards Hungarian history in Slovakia? It is possible that Chaloupecký and his colleagues significantly supported it. The price for the construction of Czechoslovak state unity was abandoning of Hungary and the creation of the idea that Slovakia as a part of Hungarian

¹⁰ V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *Sv. Svorád*. In: Průdy, 1922, roč. 6, č. 9–10, 552–553.

¹¹ CHALOUPECKÝ 1922, 552–553.

¹² V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *Staré Slovensko*, 39–41, 70.

¹³ V. CHALOUPECKÝ: *Staré Slovensko*, 40.

history was an unnatural anomaly. It is remarkable, that this concept was opposed by pre-Trianon supporters of the Hungarian national state idea in Slovakia, but also supporters of Slovak autonomy in the interwar Slovak opposition parties.

Suspicious that the supporters of autonomy with their anti-Czechoslovak position served Hungarian interests which were frequent and in some cases justified (at least in the person of Vojtech/Béla Tuka). Therefore, it is quite interesting that even when with the end of the 1st Czechoslovak republic, Chaloupecký's concept of Czechoslovak history was refused, the narrative of "Hungarian anomaly" was not abandoned. The Slovak state and its regime historians chose for their national concept the Great Moravia, transformed into a Slovak interpretation and "national liberation" was simply moved from 28th October 1918 to 14th March 1939. The "Hungarian anomaly" remained.

It is really interesting, that the official historiography did not create a new historical concept, it only used and modified Chaloupecký's one. It remains a hypothetical question as to why, but for example, the author of the first synthesis of Slovak history František Hrušovský¹⁴ was an ideologist, not a researcher (he was also member of parliament during the autocratic regime of 1938 – 1945).

The concept of national liberation from 1918 (and in variation 1938/1939) had interesting consequences in Slovakia. It is, for example, almost impossible to take an official stance to the Czechoslovak and Hungarian past. Both of these state units have no place in the Preamble of the Slovak constitution or Declaration of the Independence. Both texts come from 1992 and the authors obviously fulfilled their need to present their timely activities at the pinnacle of Slovak history. Thus, they referred to the Great Moravia and the heritage of Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius and tried their best to describe, the essence of the Slovak history over a thousand years as a continuous struggle for achieving national independence. The authors of these texts failed to mention that when Ľudovít Štúr's generation of the 19th century national movement formulated its political program, its statement was that they would try to wake up the Slovak nation from a "dream lasting centuries".¹⁵ This is obviously in contrary with the "struggle", formulated in the constitution of 1992. Therefore, both texts are not only historically incorrect, but they are not able to link up with political thinking of the 19th century national movement.

As we can see, even though it is centuries since the end of the historical Hungary and a quarter century after the end of Czechoslovakia, Slovaks were not able to claim their part of these historical units. In recent times, at least something was changed a little in relation to Czechoslovakia. Historical Hungary, however, became the Cinderella of Slovak history, what pauperized Slovak cultural potential, in respect to state traditions and historical consciousness as such. It is therefore probably high time to abandon the concept of national liberation and move forward.

¹⁴ F. HRUŠOVSKÝ: *Slovenské dejiny*. Turčiansky sv. Martin, 1940.

¹⁵ Žjadost'i slovenskjego národa. In M. DOHNÁNY: *História povstaňja slovenskjego z roku 1848 I*. V Skalici, 1850, 57.