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Cleveland Agreement, 22 October 1915

The First World War was an important milestone both for the world and Slovak history. A special role was played by Slovaks who had migrated to the USA. From the 1870s the beginning of the First World War, over 500,000 Slovaks migrated to the USA, which was almost one third of the Slovak nation. This was economic migration caused by the economic stagnation of the Hungarian Lands as well as national oppression. Slovaks in the USA experienced a democratic system – they founded associations, schools and newspapers. They became more educated, self-confident and motivated. They protested in public about the national oppression of Slovaks in their old country and clearly supported a domestic Slovak national programme that aimed for Slovak autonomy in the Hungarian Lands. The Slovak League in America – an umbrella organisation of Slovaks in the USA founded in 1907 – helped to achieve the common goal. Shortly after the First World War began, Slovaks abroad started to speak out. They saw the war as an opportunity for the Slovak nation to exercise its rights. The creation of a joint Czech-Slovak state seemed to be a real option if the Entente Powers won. This programme was introduced in the United Kingdom by Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. In the USA, the vision of a joint Czech-Slovak State met with consent and resulted in the Cleveland Agreement being agreed on 22 October 1915. It was signed on the Czech side by the chairman of the Czech National Association Ludvík Fisher and secretary Josef Tvrzický, and on the Slovak side by chairman of the Slovak League in America Albert Mamatey and secretary Ivan Daxner.



The joint activity of these two main organisations of the Czechs and Slovaks was forced by the “liberation activity” in Europe, which required a coalition of forces and the creation of a background for their activities. The Cleveland Agreement cannot be considered simply as an internal matter of two compatriotic organisations in the USA. Representatives of the Czech National Associations at the celebration meeting stated that T. G. Masaryk agreed with the proposed text of the Cleveland Agreement. The agreement contained a clear formulation on joining the Czech and Slovak nations into an equal federal unit of states. So, the future state was to be a federation. This was the first important success of resistance abroad. At the end of October 2015, Masaryk created the central body of that resistance – the Czech Committee Abroad. Slovak Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who returned from the Serbian front to France, contributed to another resistance abroad success. In February 2016, the Czechoslovak National Council – a central resistance body – was established. It was led by Masaryk as chairman, while Štefánik represented Slovaks as vice-chairman, and Beneš was secretary. Štefánik



had good contacts with leading French politicians who he convinced to meet Masaryk and to Czech-Slovak resistance abroad seriously. In this way Masaryk could explain that Austria-Hungary would always be more inclined to Germany, and only by breaking this alliance could new states friendly to France emerge.



It was not easy to convince the Entente Powers about a Czech-Slovak state, for which a completely new organisation of Central Europe would be necessary. This required systematic work and proof of loyalty. Hence legions of troops were gradually formed to fight for Entente armies. The Legions were a well-organised and disciplined volunteer force that numbered 100,000. They were of great importance mainly in revolutionary Russia – after the fall of the tsar, they fought in Ukraine against the German and Austro-Hungarian army. The legions were disarmed after peace between Bolshevik Russia and Germany with Austria-Hungary. They should then have been transported to the front in France, which was only possible via Siberia to Vladivostok and across the Pacific and Atlantic. But on the way, the Legionaries came into conflict with armed Bolsheviks. Under the chaotic conditions of revolutionary Russia, the Legions were the only well-organised and disciplined army. In taking control of the Trans-Siberian railway and their fast successes, they aroused great hopes in Entente allies that the Legions would help defeat the Bolshevik regime and so they remained in Russia until 1920. To reach their homeland they had to buy their way out of Bolshevik Russia which they did by giving Russian gold reserves to the Bolsheviks together with the anti-Bolshevik Admiral Alexander Vailyevich Kolchak, who was travelling with them.

The May 1918 arrival of T. G. Masaryk in USA was a triumphal manifestation of the unity of resistance. When Slovak political actors submitted the Cleveland Agreement to him in Pittsburgh on 30 May 1918 and opened the issue of Slovakia’s position in a future Czechoslovakia, Masaryk drafted the new Pittsburgh Agreement the next day. This agreement, which was concluded between the most important compatriotic associations in the USA and the Chairman of the Czechoslovak National Council, Masaryk, supported the self-government of Slovakia with its own parliament and with Slovak as the official language. However, in contrast to the Cleveland Agreement it did not directly mention the equal position of the two state parts in the federation, but only considered Slovak matters, which was an expression of asymmetry. Masaryk ended his journey across the USA in Washington DC with President Wilson. Following this visit and the successes of the Czech-Slovak Legions in Russia, the USA changed its stance on the need to retain Austria-Hungary with autonomy for individual nations, and instead accepted the idea of a Czech-Slovakia. The decision by American Ruthenians about joining Ruthenia to a future Czech-Slovak state as a self-governing unit was an important result of Masaryk’s visit to the USA. After the origins of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the Pittsburgh Agreement became an important argument for forces that wanted to achieve Slovak autonomy within the Czechoslovak Republic.

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References:

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