



06.10.1938

Declaration of Slovak autonomy, 6 October 1938

The expansion of Nazi Germany into Central Europe significantly impacted on the further development of events. The Czechoslovak Republic came under direct German pressure, which with the assistance of the minority Sudeten-German Party asserted the German minority's autonomy in the Czechoslovak Republic. Requirements were intentionally specified so broadly that they could not be met. Although France and the United Kingdom had stood behind Czechoslovakia, these great powers finally pressed the Czechoslovak Republic to give in to Germany in the interests of preserving peace. At the Munich conference of the four great powers - Germany, Italy, United Kingdom and France - on 29 September 1938, Germany acquired parts of the Czechoslovak Republic that had a German minority population as well as numerous Czechs. This meant that Czechoslovakia, which lost a great deal of industry, roads and strategic defensive lines, was placed at the mercy of Germany. While within three months, the territorial requirements of Hungary and Poland should have been satisfied. Poland did not wait, and after giving written notice occupied the Tešín Region. The democratic system in the Czechoslovak Republic was ended by the Munich Agreement, and the development of an authoritative system began.



In this situation with a political vacuum being created, politicians in Hlinka's People's Party (HSL'S) saw an opportunity to assert previously rejected Slovak demands. HSL'S was to put the requirements of such an agreement to the other political parties. On 5 October 1938, the members of the parliament and HSL'S senators held a session in the Catholic House in Žilina. The main paper informing them of the recent political situation was read by Jozef Tiso. It covered the territorial demands of Hungary, while Slovak autonomy within the framework of Great Hungary was suggested. Tiso and other HSL'S politicians rejected it. The theoretical separation of Slovakia was considered. All those present came out in support of the Slovak nation's right to self-determination but no majority stood for an independent state. If the latter had occurred the government had been prepared to intervene and use the army against any constitutional solution made outside the framework of the Czechoslovak Republic. A declaration of autonomy within the Czechoslovak Republic seemed the most reasonable and likely solution, which was supported by the majority of those present. However, it was questionable quite how to formulate such a position.



Agrarian Party members of parliament and senators also travelled to Žilina to consult with the HSL'S on 5 October 1938, where they met at the Rémi Hotel

..... (today's Polom Hotel). Other political parties' representatives joined them and
..... they agreed to accept the proposal for Slovakia's autonomy as prepared by HSL'S.
..... It was mainly the Agrarians who were interested in attracting HSL'S to
..... governmental power. Otherwise responsibility for territorial losses had to be borne
..... by governmental coalition political parties. The course of discussions and their
..... overall atmosphere were also affected by news of the resignation of the President
..... of the Czechoslovak Republic E. Beneš on 5 October 1938. This increased the self-
..... confidence of the People's Party members, while impacting on the self-confidence
..... of governmental political party representatives. The formation of an autonomous
..... Slovakia's first government remained an open issue. The most decisive
..... representatives of HSL'S supported Jozef Tiso as chairman of the autonomous
..... Slovak government.

On 6 October 1938 discussions in Žilina continued with a meeting of the select chairmanship of HSL'S, which approved the final wording of the Manifesto of the Slovak Nation. Subsequently, the executive committee of the HSL'S session was opened with an address by J. Tiso, in which he stressed that, 'today, we live at a moment when the Slovak nation starts to write its history alone, as an independent, sovereign nation.' Then he read the Manifesto of the Slovak Nation text. Representatives responded by singing the anthem 'Hey, the Slovaks.' From the balcony of Catholic House, J. Tiso read the manifesto to the awaiting gathering. The autonomy of Slovakia was declared in this manner. The substance of the manifesto is based on a declaration of the independence of the Slovak nation and a request for the immediate assumption of power in Slovakia by Slovaks. The manifesto text includes a series of postulates and requirements. It stresses the Munich Agreement as an actual political synonym for the rightful expression of self-determination for the nation. HSL'S leaders were convinced that the Munich Agreement rescued Slovakia from being included in Hungary, and that Hungarian claims must be settled based on the ethnical principle. The manifesto further required international warranties for the indivisibility of the Slovak nation and its territory. This requirement took priority because here alone the acute danger of potential divisions of Slovak territory between neighbouring nations was felt. Further, the manifesto stood for peaceful and friendly coexistence with neighbouring nations in the Christian spirit. But it also declared war against the Marxist-Jewish ideology of disruption and violence. This formulation was oriented against socialistic organisations and the followers of Marxist socialist ideology who were associated with Jews in the jargon of the time used by HSL'S. This association was to underline the danger of Marxist ideology. Further, the manifesto required the participation of Slovakia in discussions about borders, which was related to the territorial demands of neighbouring states for Slovak territory and also requested the international protection of Slovak minorities abroad.

Member of Parliament for the Agrarian Party, Ján Ursíny, together with some political party colleagues visited J. Tiso to submit the definitive proposal for an agreement of political parties. They accepted political parties' agreement with the HSL'S proposal for Slovakia's autonomy provided this autonomy was the final constitutional solution and that J. Tiso was authorised to form an autonomous government. In this way, the Žilina Agreement was prepared on 6 October 1938 and signed by representatives of all key right-wing political parties (HSL'S, SNS, Agrarian Party, Trade Party, Czechoslovak National Socialistic Party and Fascist Party). In contrast, social democrats and communists were not invited to discussions or to sign the agreement because for HSL'S they represented the unacceptable Marxist ideology. Lengthy negotiations started on the passing of constitutional law concerning the autonomy of Slovakia. Parliament passed this law on 22 November 1938. The act on Slovak autonomy substantially changed the Czechoslovak Republic's existing constitutional system. An equal federation of three parts - Bohemia,

Slovakia and Ruthenia was not created. Instead Slovakia and Ruthenia established their own parliaments, governments and institutions, but in Bohemia a nationwide parliament, government and institutions had this function and negotiated Bohemian matters with the exclusion of representatives of Slovakia and Ruthenia. An incomplete and relatively complicated triple federation model had been created, based on the principle of the prohibition of majority and the provision of control and fair representation in all crucial nationwide institutions. The country's name once more became hyphenated.

Shortly after the declaration of Slovak autonomy, Hungary submitted its territorial claims. The dispute was decided by Germany and Italy in the Vienna Arbitration on 2 November 1938. Arbitration proceedings were held at Belvedere Palace in Vienna in the presence of representatives of the great powers, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Galeazzo Ciano, and Hungary and Czechoslovak Republic delegations. Slovakia lost an area of 10,390 km², i.e. twenty-one percent of its total territory. This decision was mainly made based on claims by Hungary without the national structures of residents being respected. More than 855,000 residents lived in the occupied territory, of which approximately 504,000 were of Hungarian nationality and 272,000 Slovak and Czech. The Hungarian army commenced the occupation of the assigned territory on 5 November 1938. Of 779 villages and towns assigned to Hungary, 170 had a Slovak majority. Senec, Galanta, Dunajská Streda, Nové Zámky, Vrábce, Šurany, Levice, Lučenec, Fil'akovo, Rimavská Sobota, Rožňava, Košice and Veľké Kapušany were assigned to Hungary. The loss of Košice was felt most painfully. Slovakia lost one third of its arable land based on this arbitration. It received many refugees who had been evicted from their dwellings. Transport difficulties arose after the borders changed, mainly caused by disruption to the railway line between Slovakia and Ruthenia. Occupied territories in Southern Slovakia remained part of Hungary until 1945.

Translated from Slovak to English by Darren Chastney, proofread by Dr Ian Copestake



Prof. Mária Tonková, Prof. Róbert Letz, Prof. Anna Bocková



References: