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MAREK SYRNÝ

Slovak Reflections on the August 1944 Coup in Romania and Its Impact on the Slovak National Uprising

The Romanian coup did more than merely influence the (non)thinking of Slovak government circles about the further development of the war and the possible change of the previous collaborationist strategy.

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Introduction

AT FIRST glance, it would seem that the history of Romania and that of Slovakia in the years of the Second World War, or between 1938 and 1945, had a similar trajectory in many respects. In the reality of Nazi Germany's domination of Central Europe or the Balkans, both Romania and Slovakia more or less voluntarily found themselves in Berlin's sphere of influence and became its clients. They shared a similar fate, being affected by Hungarian revisionism in the form of the first and second Vienna Award, and in the new geopolitical situation their regional archrival—Hungary—paradoxically became at the same time their ally in the big “family” of pro-German satellites. They also had to participate in the Nazi campaign against the Soviet Union. It must be admitted, however, that Romania was considerably more

motivated by territorial disputes over Bessarabia, which Moscow had acquired in the summer of 1940 as a byproduct of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact. In fact, in the Romanian case of being dragged into the war against the USSR, one can speak of the same nationalist motivation to fight the Soviets as was invoked by Slovak nationalists in the participation of the Slovak state in the invasion of Poland in September 1939, although, of course, on a much larger scale. And after years of fighting on the Eastern Front and suffering great losses—again disproportionately greater in the Romanian case—in 1944 both satellites of Nazi Germany found themselves faced with the dilemma of how to continue a war in which their patrons were clearly beginning to lose. By 1944 this trend seemed to be irreversible, despite the propaganda and the pressure coming from Berlin and the illusions about the deployment of new miracle weapons that would stomp the Allies into the ground...

Especially after the elimination of Italy as the second most important European Axis power, or after a series of major Axis defeats on the Eastern Front culminating in the Battle of Kursk (July–August 1943), opposition groups in both countries began to think about the possibility of the front approaching their borders. While Romanian politics had to start dealing with the dilemmas posed by the presence of the Red Army on its borders about half a year earlier than in the case of Slovakia, here too we often find similar alternative developments. On the one hand, there was the prevailing line of the alliance with Germany, particularly popular in the more radical nationalist groups. On the other hand, opposition groups were declaring themselves against the previous collaboration with Berlin. It was seemingly the same dilemma in the anti-German camp, as to when and how to carry out a coup d'état that would return the country to its pre-collaborationist state of good relations with the Allied powers.

However, the similarities between the Romanian and the Slovak developments in the period under review end at this point. First at all, despite all the external similarities, the totalitarian regime of the Hlinka Slovak People's Party was markedly different from the political regime in Romania. The main differences concerned the structure of the ruling elites or the ruling group. Although in general we can speak in both cases about one more radical and one more moderate government faction, respectively about revolutionary nationalists and conservative elements, the unquestionable difference is mainly the attitude of the more moderate or conservative figures in terms of the government policy towards the coming dilemmas. In the Romanian case, the main personality of the coup was the monarch, alongside a part of the hitherto establishment and opposition groups (including the peripheral communists). In Slovakia, there was no catharsis in the government structures—not even in the more conservative ones headed by President Jozef Tiso. On the contrary, President Tiso, enjoying

the title of Leader (more to appease the radicals of the regime than to imitate the Führer), became—unlike King Michael I—synonymous with the obedient German collaborator until the end of the war. With the dignity of a priest, he effectively “sanctified” all German actions in Slovakia in 1944–1945, when virtually all of Germany’s European allies ended their alliance with Germany.

Finding the reasons for this diametrically opposed attitude of the conservative government structures as the front approached, or the war came to an end, may be more difficult. However, one of the main causes is the manner in which the Slovak state had been established in March 1939. Slovakia and the ruling establishment that led it for six war years were fully dependent on Nazi Germany. While the Slovak state was merely a product of Nazi foreign policy, which needed to use it to break up Czechoslovakia and for its subsequent power designs in Central Europe, Romanian statehood had a firmer foundation. It had already established power structures and the existence of the state was not totally dependent on the fate of Nazi Germany, as in the Slovak case.

Of course, the activities and composition of the opposition groups in the Slovak and Romanian cases were also significantly different. While in Slovakia one can speak of a full-fledged European resistance from 1943 onwards—including armed partisan groups, diversions or extensive anti-regime propaganda and intelligence for the Czechoslovak exile or for the Allies—Romanian expressions of resistance were considerably more modest. The structure of the opposition was also different. In Romania, it was based on the traditional political parties. In the Slovak case, however, it was either the new structures of civil resistance emerging from the ruins of the prewar non-left and predominantly liberal parties, or the communists, who held significantly more prominent positions in the Slovak resistance and in society than in the Romanian case.

The Romanian Coup and Its Military-Geopolitical Consequences

IN GENERAL terms, these are therefore the similarities and differences between the pre-coup developments in Romania and Slovakia. Let us now take a closer look at the situation that directly preceded the decisions to carry out the coups and the change of the stance from pro-German to anti-German. Here, first of all, the evolution of the war and the arrival of the frontline at the borders of the two states played a decisive role. From a military-geopolitical point of view, developments in Romania were much more important for both the Germans and the Allies, either because of the possibilities of deep penetration in the region or because of the country’s economic importance (especially

its oil production). Quite naturally, from March 1944 onwards the Germans concentrated on building up a solid defense on the Prut River or, more generally, the defense of the Romanian frontier. The Red Army's spring offensive clearly split the previously more compact Eastern Front into the northern Polish and southern Romanian lines. One month into the spring offensive, the Soviets had already occupied the northern part of Bessarabia and had even established bridgeheads across the Prut River that could serve for the advance into Romania proper.¹ Parallel to the main fighting in the southeast of Ukraine near the border with Romania, the conquest of Crimea took place with huge German and Romanian casualties, although some of the defenders managed to evacuate by sea.² The Red Army on Romania's borders and the ultimate loss of Crimea, despite extensive preparations by the German and Romanian defenders, left no one in the Romanian leadership optimistic about the further advance of the front towards the interior of the country. It was becoming clear that the upstart Red Army could not be held at bay with the available German or Romanian resources. And when secret Romanian probes with the Western Allies regarding Romania's withdrawal from the war did not work out³ (although for a few months the West tried to give the impression that a landing in the Balkans was also on the cards in the context of the deceptive operations in connection with the Normandy landings), the only alternative was an agreement with the Soviets. In April, the Soviets presented the Romanians with their conditions for an end to the fighting and a Romanian surrender, which, however, were clearly rejected by the Romanian leadership at the time in view of the non-acute nature of the situation.

The Soviets were thus faced with two possible directions for a future major operation after the end of the spring offensive, i.e., the Belarusian–Polish and the Romanian variant, geographically divided mainly by the Carpathian Mountains. The Soviets skillfully opted for the militarily very well prepared and successful Operation Bagration, which took them all the way to the banks of the Vistula in July 1944. And when it seemed that they would continue in a northerly direction directly towards Berlin, with an uprising already breaking out in Warsaw (effectively as militarily anti-German as it was politically anti-Soviet), Moscow decided, for political and military reasons, to favor a southerly direction, for a change. There were great opportunities for a quick penetration to secure advantageous positions not only in Romania or Bulgaria, but also to threaten the German troops in Yugoslavia or Greece and to reach the Hungarian plains. That is to say, to dominate the Balkans and the south of Central Europe. This looked much more tempting than retaking well-prepared German positions on the direct line to Berlin. Not to mention the fact that it could have potentially counted on Romania, Bulgaria, or Hungary trying to end the war alongside

Germany and defect to the Allied side, which would have made the conquest of these vast territories much easier. All of these preparations and calculations were taking place while Germany was having enormous difficulty in stopping the Allied invasion of France and the entire German economic sphere of influence in Europe was suffering from the systematic bombing of its infrastructure, including the oilfields and oil refineries in Romania by the US 15th Air Force.⁴

Then, when the Red Army launched the Jassy–Kishinev operation of the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts on 20 August 1944, it was obvious from the number of deployed soldiers and especially of equipment that the German Army Group South Ukraine, together with the Romanian Army, would not be able to hold back the Soviets on the 580 km-long line from the Dniester to the Black Sea. The German propaganda nevertheless tried to reassure the Romanians, as well as the rest of their allies, and to entice them with well-constructed defenses on natural obstacles and the resulting heavy losses of the attacking armies. But neither the exaggeration of the German-Romanian defensive successes or, conversely, of the enemy's losses, nor the portrayal of the futility of Romania's struggle other than against the sinister Bolshevism (which, if victorious, would have supposedly meant Romania's annihilation),⁵ managed to change the decision of King Michael I and of opposition politicians that it was high time to prepare a post-war future for Romania other than alongside a defeated Nazi Germany. And, as in the case of the Warsaw or Slovak National Uprisings, it can also be added that this decision was made at the last possible decisive moment. At the time when the German troops found themselves surrounded near Kishinev,⁶ a "royal coup d'état" took place in Bucharest that definitively reversed Romania's direction from a pro-Nazi to an anti-Nazi ally.⁷ With minor exceptions, the army remained loyal to the king and stopped fighting the Soviets. The Red Army was thus able to end the Jassy–Kishinev operation as early as 29 August, with a famous result. In all, as many as 22 German divisions were eliminated, most of which had found themselves surrounded.⁸ Such a result would not have been possible without the Romanian coup, which in turn depended heavily on the Soviet offensive. This achieved the desired synergistic effect. The coup at first only disorganized the Romanian troops, which made up about half the strength of Army Group South Ukraine. Thus, the German defense could no longer count on several hundred thousand Romanian soldiers. The front advanced 600–700 km in less than three weeks without the Soviets encountering much resistance—the roads had already been opened by the Romanian troops. Subsequently, after the declaration of war on Germany, up to 450 thousand soldiers took part in the clearing battles for Romania, lasting until 31 August, eliminating about 70 thousand remaining German soldiers. In addition, the Romanian army, subordinated to the 2nd Ukrainian Front and numbering several hundred

thousand men (196 thousand Romanian soldiers were at the front on the day the war ended), participated in the liberation of Northern Transylvania (7 September–25 October 1944), in the Debrecen operation (6 October 1944—15 January 1945), as well as in the liberation of Czechoslovakia. Simultaneously with the loss of Romania, Germany lost the important Romanian oilfields. This drastically reduced the possibilities of supplying its armies with diesel and petrol.⁹ Naturally, considering the later developments under Moscow's rule and the uncompromising postwar communization of the country, the coup of 23 August 1944 may also cause embarrassment.¹⁰ One way or another, it was a very positive development for Romania and for the development of the Second World War as a whole in terms of the Allied victory. In a situation where a defeated Romania would have had to face unchallenged Soviet arbitrariness after the war, it was an attempt to salvage, from a very bad position, at least something of Romania's national interests. Not to mention the necessity, also vis-à-vis the Western Allies, to repair the tarnished image Romania had acquired as a German collaborator.

The significance of the Romanian coup for the development of the Second World War does not need much elaborating. The whole German scenario for a defense in Southeastern Europe fell apart, because suddenly German troops were threatened in Greece or Yugoslavia as well as in Hungary and towards Vienna. Despite the never-ending debate about whether the Romanian coup precipitated the fall of Germany by half a year or otherwise, it was undoubtedly a militarily very significant contribution to the defeat of Germany. This was so regardless of the extent to which it was only due to the coup and the Romanian change of sides, or to the impact of the strong Soviet offensive in the southern direction of the front. Naturally, reading the pro-German propaganda of the time, one has to admit the relevance of many of the assertions denouncing the Romanian coup decision, which neither stopped the heavy Romanian losses on the battlefields of World War II nor prevented the loss of Bessarabia or Moldavia to the Soviet Union. Of course, it also did not prevent the postwar Sovietization of the country, and—perhaps with the exception of the recovery of Northern Transylvania—one can only speak of human or political losses.¹¹ But Romania would not have avoided this even if it had stayed alongside Germany, as envisaged by the pro-German radicals. On the contrary, the human, economic and political consequences for postwar Romania in the absence of a coup would have been more significant than in a situation where Romania was suddenly just a former collaborator.

Pre-Revolutionary Slovakia and Government Reflections on Romanian Events

SLOVAKIA ITSELF did not experience the devastating effects of the war until the beginning of the summer of 1944. Although tens of thousands of Slovak soldiers were rotated on the Eastern Front at various times, after numerous desertions and planned-unplanned captures by the Red Army, the German command decided to withdraw the Slovak troops from the area in the third year of the eastern campaign. They also changed their status from combat to auxiliary technical units, tasked to build defensive positions in Romania and Northern Italy, respectively.¹² As the front approached the Slovak border, the Slovak army, in coordination with the German high command, began to form two new divisions in the spring and summer of 1944 to prepare the defense of eastern Slovakia and its Carpathian passes against the approaching Red Army. From the summer of 1944 onwards, eastern Slovakia became a frontline hinterland with a greater presence of Slovak¹³ and German troops. At the same time, political and social activities were curtailed and voluntary evacuation deeper into the Slovak interior was underway. There were also more obvious contacts with the approaching war and German defeat, especially in the form of the Allied bombing of Bratislava and other targets in Slovakia, the implementation of more extensive fortification works, the movement of tens of thousands of Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish refugees from the approaching front or the Red Army, and so on.¹⁴

The then smaller and, due to the relative moderation of the regime, less active or radical resistance movement began to look for ways to make Slovakia, still collaborating with Hitler, a pro-Ally country. At the end of 1943, the result of these efforts was the unification of the hitherto divergent non-communist and communist resistance under the platform of the umbrella resistance Slovak National Council and its programmatic so-called Christmas Agreement. The latter proclaimed as the primary goal of the Slovak resistance movement the achievement of a general anti-German and anti-government uprising with the aim of the Slovaks switching to the side of the Allies. This was to be an expression of the will for the restoration of a democratic Czechoslovak state, already nationally balanced (i.e., with national-political self-government in Slovakia, or federalization) and socially just (nationalization of large enterprises, land reform...). The first months of 1944 in the Slovak resistance were thus mainly marked by preparations for the uprising. Its basis was to be the armed appearance of the Slovak army's pro-resistance units at the moment of the Red Army's convenient approach to the borders of Slovakia, or at the moment of the German attempt to directly occupy Slovakia. The army was then to be joined by

other non-military parts of the resistance and the anti-German or anti-regime population.

In 1944, however, a certain “sorting out of the ghosts” also took place in the Slovak government camp. However, unlike in Hungary or Romania, the top leadership of the Slovak state, headed by the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, never really contemplated a purposeful “betrayal” of the German ally, the main guarantor of Slovak statehood. Nor did it envisage switching to the side of the Allies, represented by the liberal Western democrats or the anti-religious Soviet Bolsheviks. Tiso and his entourage thus clung to the idea of preserving the People’s regime¹⁵ and Slovak statehood in the optimal variant for them of a separate peace between Hitler and the Anglo-Americans, or a potential alliance between Berlin and the West in an attempt to counter the Bolshevik domination of Europe. The only more rational thinker was the Minister of National Defense, General Ferdinand Čatloš, who realized the necessity of an agreement with the Soviets. He offered them, in effect, a Romanian version of the coup—i.e., “letting” the Red Army through the defended border along the Carpathians and bringing the Slovak army in the fight against the Hungarians and Germans, in return for preserving Slovak independence.¹⁶ However, the preservation of Slovak statehood was already passé with the Allies (including Moscow), not to mention the fact that the situation in Slovakia was developing differently from what Čatloš, the Germans, and the Slovak resistance had planned.

Slovakia was already too active in resistance during the summer of 1944 to remain without a German reaction. Airborne Soviet guerrilla organizers multiplied.¹⁷ Also, with the spontaneous rise of the domestic partisan movement, there were already open attacks against German soldiers, and later also against civilians.¹⁸ Even the government’s declaration of martial law on 12 August failed to stabilize the situation,¹⁹ at a time when the leadership of the resistance Slovak National Council or the resistance Military Headquarters²⁰ actually needed to prepare the uprising in peace. On the one hand, the inactivity and lack of unity of the regime and its forces pointed to an apparent significant disintegration of the pro-government and pro-German structures. On the other hand, however, the inability to contain the guerrilla movement (often led by Soviet commanders) or to prepare the army effectively in terms of personnel for a coup pointed to the limits of authority and a certain disorganization even in the case of the resistance leadership.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came the first information about the Romanian coup. Naturally, it should be pointed out that news of what was happening in Romania reached the government with a certain time lag and, of course, only after the German side, which controlled the news flow on extra-German events, had “cleaned up” the information. It was therefore not until 25 August 1944

that the official regime press, in its own way, reported on the royal coup and the more significant first references to it reached the public domain. It is also worth looking at the way in which the regime propaganda in Slovakia—taking foreign information almost exclusively from German sources—portrayed pre-coup Romania.

On the one hand, “terrorist” air attacks by Anglo-Americans or Soviets were often written about. The bombing of oilfields was not mentioned specifically, but the ‘insidiousness’ of the Allied bombing of cities was emphasized (in an attempt to portray it as merely the deliberate killing of civilians).²¹ On the other hand, the Slovak pro-German propaganda worked to give hope for a solution to the situation in Romania and wrote about a determined and certainly successful defense against the barbaric Bolsheviks. The economic problems caused to Romania by the proximity of the front or by Allied bombing were downplayed. On the contrary, the almost trouble-free flow of supplies despite wartime conditions was emphasized, and a “rich” future was portrayed, with estimates of millions of hectares of grain being harvested.²² The “encouraging” words of a Romanian correspondent visiting areas near the front were quoted: “In every town I came to I found the same readiness to regard war as a necessity and as the only possibility for the realization of our national dream . . . No one here is deterred by death.”²³ The leitmotif of the articles touching on the situation in Romania was the calm and determination with which the Romanian nation was preparing for the “existential struggle against Bolshevism.” Although this was primarily pro-German propaganda, the selection of articles from the portfolio offered by the Germans already clearly points to Slovak selection preferences as well. After all, Romania was a relatively mentally and politically close country, the first in the direction of the approaching Eastern Front, which had to deal with similar dilemmas as the collaborationist Slovak regime. It was thus in the eminent interest of the People’s regime in Slovakia—and not only in the German wartime interest—that Antonescu’s Romania should fulfil its “historic role” in the best possible way. Slovak government politicians, too, under the impression of the impact on the stability of the Slovak regime of the fall of Italy or the recent partisan mobilization, were surely well aware of the negative impact for themselves of the loss of Romania. That is why, in addition to the constant hopes pinned on Hitler’s new “miracle” weapons, Slovak government propaganda clung to any hint of unity, strength, and a resolutely pro-German position of Romania, listing the vast amounts of Soviet military equipment already destroyed by the Romanians, etc.²⁴ Even if the loss of some Romanian territory had to be acknowledged, it was accompanied by information about the enormous losses of the Soviet invaders, about the strategic worthlessness of the lost territory, or about the coordinated and planned retreat to new, more defensible positions.²⁵

The first reports on the Romanian coup, taken from German sources of 24 August 1944, appeared in the Slovak government press a day later. Like the first one, the later official reports on the development of the situation in Romania follow an obvious, even strictly German template. The Slovak regime press did not dare (and technically, in fact, did not really have the possibility) to offer information and interpretations beyond what could be found in the articles and opinions coming from the German news agencies and press. The first articles on the coup of Michael I generally provide only basic information about the coup itself, the new pro-Soviet government, and the cessation of the fight against the Soviets. The king's action is, of course, regarded as a betrayal of the German alliance, a perfidious way removing Antonescu, a betrayal of Romanian national interests, and a sellout to the Bolsheviks.²⁶

The so-called democratic government appointed by the king, ostensibly led by the politicians Maniu and Brătianu, but in reality formed by the communists, offered Moscow the surrender of the country. In response, riots broke out all over Romania. A national group of patriots put themselves at the head of the movement against the king and his traitors and called on the Romanian people and the Romanian army to continue the struggle against the Bolsheviks for freedom and life, against death and destruction.

Also, in later articles on the Romanian coup and the post-coup situation, the high “hope” for a pro-German stabilization of the situation appears in the form of the establishment of a “national” anti-king government, willing to continue the fight alongside Germany against the Soviets. A longer passage is also quoted from the appeal of the “national Romanian government,” criticizing the king’s “betrayal” of Romanian national interests for a supposed vision of peace.

In reality, however, this peace entails only the occupation of Romania by the Red Army and thus the dehumanization of Romania, as well as the extermination of the Romanian nation. In a disgraceful ploy, the English and the Americans guaranteed the independence of Romania. The English and the Americans promised our country to Stalin long ago.

One is reminded of the betrayal of the country by the previous king, and of Michael I's readiness to also flee the country when it became clear that the population did not support him.²⁷

While until 25 August 1944 the front pages of the main Slovak regime daily were mainly filled with pro-German articles about the developments on the front or about the new “breakthrough” weapon V-1, or reflections on the in-

ternal development of Slovakia preparing for the front, the next 5–6 days were dominated by “bombastic” information about the current situation in Romania. In fact, they were displaced only by the even more “shocking” information about the domestic coup. During the first days of reporting on the Romanian coup and the post-coup situation, the following main claims can be identified in the official propaganda: the king and the coup organizers are not in control of the situation; the coup, which only caused chaos and violence, was opposed by a significant part of the army and the population still loyal to the Antonescu line of Romanian nationalism and pro-German cooperation; the coup organizers had been deceived by the Soviets, the Germans are in control of the situation and will severely punish any manifestation of hostility.²⁸

On the evening of 24 August, the head of the Slovak Propaganda Office (the equivalent of the Nazi propaganda ministry), Tido J. Gašpar, prepared a statement on the Romanian events. Exactly along the lines of the then German statements or declarations of the pro-German “Romanian National Government,” he stated that

the example of the Badoglio betrayal in Italy, with all its subversive implications, could not deter the Romanian clique of Allied-friendly political misfits, who betrayed the honorable alliance in arms protecting Europe from the Bolshevik hydra and the Anglo-Saxon auxiliaries. . . . The Slovak public is convinced that the Romanian National Council, given its military determination, will frustrate the treacherous designs and that the brave Romanians will deploy all their forces to save the Romanian nation and state from Bolshevism.

This not very original direct propaganda contribution of the Slovak government to the campaign against the Romanian coup was relatively singular. However, the implications of the coup for the weakening positions of Germany and its erstwhile allies were also evident in the regime’s propaganda writing in Slovakia. The measures taken in neighboring Hungary, which were supposed to stabilize the situation after the Romanian coup (changes in the government, cancellation of the ongoing vacations of civil servants, stopping the activities of any political entities, etc.), certainly increased the tension in the Slovak government circles as well.²⁹ As early as 24 August, the German High Command—while considering the possibility of stifling the Hungarian efforts to emulate the Romanian variant of the coup—was also considering Slovakia. In doing so, similarly to the Hungarian case, the imprisonment of the commander of the army in charge of the defense of the country closest to the front was envisaged.³⁰

The commander of the army in the frontline area was General Augustín Malár, who was actually arrested as a precautionary measure a few days later, even

without the Germans having any further idea of his involvement in Defense Minister Čatloš' preparations for a change of sides. But General Čatloš did not escape German attention either. Because of his firm refusal of the new German demands to create new or reinforce previously existing Slovak troops in support of the German efforts to halt the Allied advance in Romania, Italy, or toward Slovakia, the German intelligence services had long targeted him. However, they were not yet aware of his activities towards an agreement with Moscow. On the night of 24 August, Čatloš even had troops moved around Bratislava and reinforced the city's defenses, probably out of fear that the Germans would occupy Slovakia, thus defeating the possibility of implementing his plan to defect to the Allies. However, no occupation of Bratislava took place. The movements of German troops near Bratislava on the Austrian side were related only to the German preparations to deal with the situation in Romania.³¹ Furthermore, under pressure from Berlin, Čatloš eventually withdrew the troops from the city, or cancelled their alert. It was, however, this last matter that decided his political fate in the eyes of the Germans. At the instigation of the German ambassador in Bratislava and under pressure from Berlin, Čatloš was relieved of his executive command over the Slovak army. The post of commander-in-chief was filled by General Jozef Turanec, who had the full confidence of the Germans, and Čatloš remained only as political minister,³² effectively already under the supervision of the Germans. In doing so, he became a kind of "honorary prisoner" of President Tiso (but without direct restrictions on his personal freedom), who thus practically saved him from arrest by the Germans.³³ In the end, this solution was temporarily advantageous for both sides: the Germans no longer had to worry about Čatloš directing the army against the Germans, because he was no longer in command; on the other hand, Tiso and the Slovak government retained some credit when Čatloš was not dismissed as minister or even interned. This would have aroused unwanted fears in the public that something was amiss at the highest levels of the Slovak state. However, the illusion that all was well in Slovakia faded away very quickly.

The failure to maintain order in some mountainous areas with a guerrilla presence,³⁴ combined with the geopolitical consequences of the Romanian coup, suddenly brought Slovakia very close to a German intervention. The government was also clearly aware of this and tried to avoid this alternative—at least propagandistically, since it was not in control of the situation otherwise. In the evening of the third day after the Romanian coup d'état (26 August), Alexander Mach, Minister of the Interior and Commander-in-Chief of the Hlinka Guard (a kind of Slovak equivalent of the Nazi SA), made a crucial radio speech, seemingly intended to discourage anyone in Slovak society from any "adventures" similar to the Romanian one, although Romania itself was

not directly mentioned.³⁵ Minister Mach only propagandistically portrayed the beautiful recent past of the Slovaks in an independent Slovak state under the protection of mighty Germany, suddenly worried about Bolshevik saboteurs, bombing raids from the West or unreliable Axis allies. By highlighting the negative consequences that the coups had brought to the Italians and Romanians,³⁶ or the “senseless” uprising of the Poles, Mach appealed to the Slovaks to be calm, rational and not to engage in actions that would ultimately trigger a harsh (and justified) German reaction.

*The question is whether we ourselves will keep order here, or whether we should allow someone else to do it for us. Friend and foe alike look to us to see how we behave in these crucial moments. Our answer to the unanswered questions can be only one: to fulfil the will of the Slovak nation, and that will is to continue to live here freely, as we have lived freely until now in our independent state. It is therefore the duty of the Government to exert all its strength, to use all the possibilities of the nation, in order to preserve order.*³⁷

These words practically indicated how the government would behave in the coming days. Maintaining the former pro-German “peace and order” in Slovakia became its motto. However, it no longer had the strength to achieve this by itself, and it certainly did not have the will or the determination to resist Germany in any way. Then, when in response to the Romanian events the logical German reaction came in the form of a preemptive occupation of Slovakia—officially to prevent further partisan “saber-rattling”—the Slovak government and President Tiso merely played their role as pro-German collaborators, patiently and to the very end.

The Romanian coup did more than merely influence the (non)thinking of Slovak government circles about the further development of the war and the possible change of the previous collaborationist strategy. It also inadvertently triggered the upcoming uprising in Slovakia. This came precisely in its worst version, i.e., in the context of an attempt by Germany to militarily occupy the country, rather than in the ideal variant, with the Red Army already on the Miskolc and Kraków line,³⁸ and with the rebels better prepared and coordinated with the Soviets.

Contrary to the reasoning of German officials, who saw a direct link between the Romanian coup and the later uprising in Slovakia,³⁹ the Romanian coup did not have such an impact. The uprising had been long in the making and was not just a sudden reaction to the Romanian initiative. The uprising would have been carried out even without the Romanian coup, just in a different geopolitical situation, not just as a last resort for military resistance before the military paci-

fication of the country. Thus, on the one hand, the Romanian events certainly had a positive effect on the awareness of the irreversible disintegration of the German empire, and thus strengthened the resolve to resist. On the other hand, however, they triggered a German intervention that left the preparations for the uprising and its coordination with Moscow incomplete. This was fatal for the military development of the uprising. The German intelligence services had enough information about the unfavorable situation in Slovakia and were able to estimate the danger of losing this territory, the link between the northern and southern directions of the Soviet advance. After the major coup in Romania on 23 August 1944, the occupation of the Slovak territory became strategically necessary for Berlin...⁴⁰

The Slovak National Uprising and Its Post-Revolutionary (Non)Parallels with the Situation in Romania

THE POSSIBLE danger of Slovakia following the Romanian example⁴¹ was identified by the Nazi military and state leadership following the analysis of the new geopolitical situation in Southeastern and Central Europe. The local Nazi power structures in Prague or Vienna were also concerned about this situation and its possible impact on developments in Slovakia. The Nazi county party headquarters in Vienna warned Berlin clearly and firmly:

*As a consequence of the approach of the Eastern Front, and in particular of the events in Romania, the immediate consequences of the sluggish and bad policy which we have hitherto pursued there are becoming apparent in Slovakia. According to Minister Mach's figures, there are already some 7,000 partisans in Slovakia at this time. The Slovak Government does not see this as a tragic development, because these partisans have so far ambushed and murdered exclusively Germans. . . . The Slovak armed forces, as predicted, are proving incapable of contributing to the fight against the partisans as a result of the Bolshevik infiltration. In view of this dangerous situation, the German envoy is said to have asked for a deployment of German troops, at a time when they are urgently needed on all battlefronts.*⁴²

Even if we take into account the greatly exaggerated numbers of partisans at that time, it remains an unquestionable truth that the pro-German Slovak government had already lost control not only over the partisans but even over its own army. The latter, however, contrary to the Viennese Nazi party report, was not influenced by Bolshevik propaganda, but was fully involved in the prepara-

tions for a priority military coup, discussed mainly with the Czechoslovak exiled leadership in London.⁴³

At the end of August 1944, some villages and towns in central Slovakia were already being taken over by partisans, who were occasionally joined by resistance-oriented soldiers. In the context of this disturbing information for the Germans and fearing a repetition of the Romanian events in Slovakia, the German leadership decided on a preemptive occupation of Slovakia. This was initially aimed mainly at pacifying the Slovak districts in the Carpathian foothill zone of eastern Slovakia⁴⁴ and intended to crush smaller outbreaks of partisan resistance. With regard to the partisan movement, it was therefore perceived as a minor “police action” rather than a preventive pacification of the resistance-minded population groups. Even the Germans themselves, despite their intelligence and information from the structures of the German minority, did not have a clear idea of how unstable the Slovak state had become and how widespread the resistance was, preparing for a massive armed struggle.

The Germans began to implement their plan for the preventive pacification of the resistance movement in Slovakia on 29 August 1944. The natural reaction of the Slovak resistance was to declare the armed resistance of the Slovak army and population, i.e., the uprising, against the incoming German troops and against its own government, which had given its official “blessing” to this German action. The Germans, better prepared for such an eventuality, disarmed in short succession the two best armed and trained Slovak divisions, assembled in eastern Slovakia. Officially, these were to help the Germans stop the Red Army along the Carpathians, but in the plans of the rebels they were, on the contrary, to enable the Red Army to penetrate through the Carpathian passes. In addition, due to the unexpected occupation of Slovakia, from the insurgents’ point of view, the chaotic abandonment of military garrisons in western Slovakia was followed by the transfer of only part of the local units to central Slovakia. Here, the rebel defenses were to be formed and wait for the Red Army’s rapid penetration into Slovakia before merging with it. These losses of the first days of the uprising could not be later counterbalanced either by a reorganization or by a determined defense of the rebel territory centered in Banská Bystrica, or by a hastily realized effort by Moscow to help the uprising in the form of the Carpatho-Dukla operation.

In Slovakia, the Warsaw scenario was repeated in many ways, but with a much milder and partially successful end, despite the fact that the Slovak insurgents failed to timely coordinate their activities with the Red Army’s advance and operations. However, due to the full involvement of Slovak communists in the insurgency and as a result of positive Slovak–Russian relations or of the

relationship between the London Czechoslovak exile and Moscow, the uprising eventually gained Soviet support, even if militarily it was a very risky activity, with a low probability of success. To some extent, but far less tragically than in the case of Warsaw, the Slovak National Uprising also suffered from the division of the military-political spheres, which manifested itself only in the token material support of the uprising by the Western Allies.

The Slovak insurgents, politically led by the Slovak National Council (equally composed of non-communists and communists, respectively socialists)⁴⁵ and militarily commanded by General Ján Golian and General Rudolf Viest, the latter dispatched from London, managed to build a relatively well-functioning rebel state and defend it for two months. Although the Slovak insurgents did not escape the fate of an isolated uprising in the German rear (on 27 October 1944 they left Banská Bystrica and withdrew to the mountains, where some of the insurgents fought on as partisans), they fared considerably better than the Warsaw insurgents, both politically and in terms of the number of casualties. The Slovak National Uprising and the Slovak leadership engendered by it dominated Slovak politics for some time after the war and was respected as an equal partner to the Czechs. For a few years, the predominantly democratic political structure was also preserved, and only in 1948 did it openly turn towards communist totalitarianism. The direct insurgent casualties amounted to several thousands, and the ensuing guerrilla war and post-insurgent repression resulted in the deaths of some 5,000 Slovaks, Jews, and other members of neighboring or Allied nations fighting in the insurgency.⁴⁶ Militarily, the uprising was ultimately unsuccessful, but politically it was a great asset for postwar Slovakia, to which the Slovaks returned strongly even in the reformist 1960s.

It is here that we come to perhaps the biggest differences between the Romanian coup and the Slovak National Uprising. Although in 1944 Slovakia and Romania were in roughly the same unflattering positions as pro-German collaborators and faced the same necessity to change the wartime alliances—and although both nations, with varying degrees of agreement, succeeded in the practical implementation of this change—the postwar “fruits” of these coups were markedly different. Paradoxically, given the military defeat of the uprising in Slovakia, Slovak postwar (formerly resistance) politics gained significantly more in a political sense in the restored Czechoslovak Republic than it would have gained without any uprising at all. Also, the uprising was hailed as one of the most significant historical and social events also by the communist power after 1948.⁴⁷ On the other hand, in military terms the Romanian coup was a resounding success. However, it did not have a significant impact on Moscow’s more benign view of postwar Romania or in terms of the country’s milder com-

munization, not to mention the fate of the coup's former organizers. From a purely Romanian postwar domestic political point of view, it can thus be considered less successful than its Slovakian counterpart...



Notes

1. Chris Bellamy, *Absolutní válka: Sovětský svaz za druhé světové války—moderní dějiny*, translated from English by Pavel Vereš (Prague: Academia, 2011), 581–582.
2. Nigel Thomas, *Německá armáda za druhé světové války*, translated from English by Jan Mosbauer (Brno: Computer Press, 2007), 175.
3. Andrzej Koryn, “Augustový prevrat r. 1944 v Rumunsku—príčiny a dôsledky,” in *Varšavské povstanie a Slovenské národné povstanie—paralely a rozdiely: Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie Banská Bystrica 14.–15. október 2008*, edited by Marek Syrný (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2009), 184–186.
4. Antony Shaw, *Druhá světová válka den po dni*, translated from English by Jan Krist (Prague: Naše vojsko, 2007), 142.
5. “Nová sovietska ofenzíva pri Jasoch,” *Slovák* 26, 188 (22 August 1944): 2; “Na východnom fronte ťažisko bojov zas v priestore Vilkovičky,” *Slovák* 26, 186 (19 August 1944): 2; “Sovieti sa chcú dostať k Dunaju,” *Gardista* 6, 190 (23 August 1944): 1; “Na východnom fronte nové ťažisko bojov pri rieke Seret,” *Slovák* 26, 189 (23 August 1944): 2.
6. Jozef Bystrický, “Letné a jesenné ťaženie Červenej armády v roku 1944,” in *Od Priesmyku Predeal po Kurovské sedlo: Boje vo Východných Karpatoch v roku 1944* (Bratislava: Vojenský historický ústav, 2011), 25–27.
7. Marcela Sălăgean, “Reacția aliaților occidentali și sovietici la evenimentele de la 23 august 1944 din România,” in *Udalosti 23. augusta 1944 v Rumunsku a Slovenské národné povstanie z 29. augusta 1944: Ich vplyv na oslobodenie Rumunska a Slovenska a na ukončenie druhej svetovej vojny: Zborník príspevkov z 9. zasadnutia Komisie historikov Slovenska a Rumunska Alba Iulia, 19.–23. september 2011/Evenimentele de la 23 august 1944 din România și insurecția națională slovacă din 29 august 1944: Consecințele lor asupra eliberării României și Slovaciei și a sfârșitului celui de al doilea război mondial: Lucrările celei de-a IX-a Reuniuni a Comisiei Mixte de Istorie Româno-Slovace (Alba Iulia, 19–23 septembrie 2011)* (Banská Bystrica–Alba Iulia: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2012), 50–51.
8. Bystrický, 25–27; Nikolaj A. Jakuba, “Vplyv povstaní v Rumunsku, Bulharsku, Poľsku a Slovensku na vojenské operácie Červenej armády v r. 1944,” in *Varšavské povstanie a Slovenské národné povstanie*, 192.
9. Koryn, 187–188; Constantin Hlihor, “Consecințele geopolitice și geostrategice ale Acțiunii de la 23 august 1944 asupra evoluțiilor regionale și globale postrăzboi,” in *Udalosti 23. augusta 1944 v Rumunsku a Slovenské národné povstanie z 29. augusta 1944*, 40–41.

10. Șerban Pavelescu, “23. august 1944 a rumunská historiografia: Konceptuálne zmeny vnímania historickej udalosti,” in *Varšavské povstanie a Slovenské národné povstanie*, 180–182.
11. Compare: Vasile Pușcaș, “Impactul evenimentelor de la 23 august 1944 din România în aria central-europeană,” in *Udalosti 23. augusta 1944 v Rumunsku a Slovenské národné povstanie z 29. augusta 1944*, 44–46.
12. Vilém Prečan, ed., *Slovenské národné povstanie: Nemci a Slovensko 1944: Dokumenty* (Bratislava: EPOCHA, 1970), 90. For more on the Slovak technical division in Romania see: Jozef Bystrický, “Slovenská I. technická divízia na území Rumunska v roku 1944,” *Historické štúdie* (Bratislava) 45 (2007): 33–49.
13. These were subordinated to the German Army Group North Ukraine. During this period, the priority of the Slovak government became clearly the defense of its own territory against the approaching “Red Danger.” In this context, it made several intensive but unsuccessful attempts to put Slovak war interests ahead of German ones by withdrawing technical divisions from Romania or Italy. Prečan, 124, 146. Among other things, the transfer of these divisions to Slovakia played a key role in the planned coup of Defense Minister Čatloš. Michal Štefanský, *Generál Ferdinand Čatloš* (Bratislava: Ministerstvo obrany Slovenskej republiky, 1998), 47–48. However, the Slovak troops in the Northern Ukraine army line-up did not enjoy the confidence of the German representatives in the Slovak Ministry of National Defense. They feared that the Slovak troops were mentally incapable of participating in the joint defense of the Slovak Carpathians and would tend to defect to the Soviets in the event of Soviet pressure, as had already happened on the Eastern Front. Stanislav Mičev, ed., *Slovenské národné povstanie 1944* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2009), 80. For more about that Slovak army in eastern Slovakia see Helena Pažurová, *Východoslovenská armáda: Horúce leto 1944 na východnom Slovensku* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2012).
14. Ondrej Podolec, “Ticho pred búrkou (Sonda do nálad slovenskej spoločnosti na jar 1944),” in *Slovenská republika 1939–1945 očami mladých historikov III.: Povstanie roku 1944 : Zborník príspevkov z tretieho sympózia Katedry histórie Filozofickej fakulty UCM Trnava Lúka 21.–22. mája 2004*, edited by Martin Lacko (Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda, 2004), 19–28; Michal Šmigel and Peter Mičko, *Evakuácia v znamení úteku: Utečenci z Ukrajiny a Poľska na Slovensku v roku 1944* (Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2006); Michal Schvarc, “Evakuácia nemeckého obyvateľstva z územia Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1944–1945,” *Historický zborník* 15, 1 (2005): 76–84; Igor Baka, “Nasadenie civilného obyvateľstva na Slovensku na opevňovacie práce v rokoch 1944–1945,” *Vojenská história* 11, 1 (2007): 70–84; Ján Stanislav and Jaroslav Švacho, “Bombardovanie rafinérie Apollo 16. 6. 1944,” *Vojnová kronika* 9, 2 (2012): 24–40.
15. The regime of the totalitarian Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party during the existence of the Slovak state (1939–1945).
16. See more in Štefanský, 60–61.
17. By 10 August 1944, the Ukrainian party and partisan leadership had sent 32 organizing groups to the German rear (12 of them to Czechoslovakia, 8 to Hungary, 7

to Romania, and 5 to Moldavia). Only the landings in Slovakia were truly successful, where Kiev had already registered 1,500 partisans in the mountains of central Slovakia by mid-August 1944. Prečan, 294–295.

18. See for example: Jozef Považský, *Koniec legendy o misii generála Paula von Otta* (Martin: Nový život Turca 1996), 41–45; Michal Schvarc, “Masová exekúcia v Sklenom 21. septembra 1944 v širšom dejinnom kontexte,” *Pamäť národa* 3, 3 (2007): 8–11; Marian Uhrin, “II. slovenská partizánska brigáda gen. M. R. Štefánika a represálie,” in *Perzekúcie na Slovensku v rokoch 1938–1945: Slovenská republika 1939–1945 očami mladých historikov VII: Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie Bratislava 21.–23. apríl 2008*, edited by Peter Sokolovič (Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa, 2008), 305–319.
19. It was approached as a concession to the German side, which demanded total mobilization for the defense of Slovakia against the advancing Red Army and threatened that in the event that the Slovak government failed to eliminate the partisans by itself, the Germans would take care of it themselves. Prečan, 317.
20. The Military Headquarters—name of the leading group of the Slovak resistance movement in the Slovak army.
21. “Teroristický nálet na Bukurešť a Ploešti,” *Slovák* 26, 180 (11 August 1944): 2; “Nepriateľ nad Rumunskom a Bulharskom,” *Slovák* 26, 186 (19 August 1944): 1. There was even a fantastic accusation of Anglo-Americans dropping “explosive” toys or sweets aimed at killing children. “Zákernosť anglo-amerických letcov,” *Slovák* 26, 178 (9 August 1944): 3.
22. “Súčasná hospodárska situácia Rumunska,” *Slovák* 26, 174 (3 August 1944): 7.
23. “Front posilňuje bojovú vôľu Rumunska,” *Slovák* 26, 173 (2 August 1944): 2.
24. “Deň rumunského námorníctva,” *Slovák* 26, 184 (16 August 1944): 2.
25. “Tuhé boje medzi Prutom a Seretom,” *Slovák* 26, 190 (24 August 1944): 2.
26. “Zmätok v Rumunsku,” *Gardista* 6, 192 (25 August 1944): 1.
27. “Puč rumunského kráľa,” *Slovák* 26, 191 (25 August 1944): 1.
28. “Kráľ Michal nie je pánom situácie,” *Slovák* 26, 192 (26 August 1944): 1; “Bezpodmienečná kapitulácia Michala,” *Gardista* 6, 193 (26 August 1944): 1; “Pred útekem kráľa Michala z Rumunska?,” *Slovák* 26, 193 (27 August 1944): 1; “Rumunsko sa stane bojiskom,” *Slovák* 26, 195 (30 August 1944): 2.
29. “Zmena vlády v Maďarsku,” *Gardista* 6, 193 (26 August 1944): 1; “Všetky dovolenky v Budapešti zrušené,” *Slovák* 26, 192 (26 August 1944): 2. The Slovak leadership had no idea of all the preparations of the Germans for the possible domino effect of the Romanian events and the behavior of Hungary. In connection with Slovakia, the behavior of the Hungarian 1st Royal Army, which was in the order of battle of the German Heinrici Army Group and was supposed to protect the southern flank of the Slovak section of the Carpathian Mountains, was to be particularly observed. Already on 24 August the Germans foresaw possible Hungarian efforts to follow the Romanian example of a change of front. Prečan, 158.
30. Prečan, 159–160.
31. Štefanský, 63.
32. Prečan, 180–181.
33. Štefanský, 64.

34. Ten days before the uprising, Franz Karmasin, the main representative of the large German minority in Slovakia, complained to Himmler that partisans were spreading out and organizing ambushes everywhere in Slovakia, while the Slovak army was in disarray. He therefore decided to set up a German militia, the Heimatschutz, for the protection of the German minority. Prečan, 304.
35. A few months earlier, Romania had been touted as a successful example of how to resist the Soviets and how to be motivated to protect the regained territory. Prečan, 33.
36. The Slovak government press, for example, stressed the “disgraceful” terms of the armistice with the Soviets, including the hundreds of thousands of Romanians who were forced to participate in the restoration of the Soviet Union. “Poldruha milióna rumunských robotníkov do ZSSR,” *Slovák* 26, 194 (29 August 1944): 1.
37. “Len od nás závisí, či si udržíme slobodu,” *Slovák—pondelník* 6, 34 (28 August 1944): 1.
38. Stanislav Mičev and Ján Stanislav, “Insurecția Națională Slovacă—una dintre componente rezistenței antifasciste europene,” in *Udalosti 23. augusta 1944 v Rumunsku a Slovenské národné povstanie z 29. augusta 1944*, 17–19.
39. Prečan, 210.
40. Compare: Mičev and Stanislav, 18–20.
41. A high official of the Foreign Office in Berlin, after his visit to Slovakia, described the great change in the mood of the Slovaks towards Germany in the last weeks of the summer of 1944 in very eloquent terms: “Faith in Germany and in our victory has suffered considerably from the events of 20 July and the betrayal of the Romanian king...” Prečan, 195–196.
42. Prečan, 167.
43. Jozef Jablonický, *Z ilegality do povstania: Kapitoly z občianskeho odboja* (Banská Bystrica: Dali-BB, 2009), 178–235.
44. The final decision to disarm the two Slovak divisions (about 30–40 thousand men) was taken by the commanders of Army Group North Ukraine on 27 August 1944 on the basis of preliminary directives from Berlin. Due to the element of surprise, the disarmament took place without much resistance from the Slovak soldiers, who ended up interned in German prison camps. Mičev, 87. Only a small part of them managed to join the partisans in eastern Slovakia, to break through to rebel Central Slovakia, while the airmen flew across the front to the Soviets.
45. For more information on party-political relations in the uprising, see: Marek Syrný, *Slovenskí demokrati '44–48: Kapitoly z dejín demokratickej strany na Slovensku v rokoch 1944–1948* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2010), 10–31; id., *Slovenskí komunisti v rokoch 1939–1944* (Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2014), 145–164.
46. See more in Jozef Jablonický, *Povstanie bez legiend: Dvadsat kapitol o príprave a začiatku Slovenského národného povstania* (Bratislava: Obzor, 1990); Mičev, 59–91; Ľubomír Lipták, *Slovensko v 20. storočí* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1998), 242–260; Martin Lacko, *Slovenské národné povstanie 1944* (Bratislava: Slovart, 2008), 39–80.
47. Although, paradoxically, as in the Romanian case, the insurgent communists escaped much of the later party criticism and purges for subversive collaboration

with the “bourgeoisie.” Miroslav Hysko, “Zradcovská úloha buržoázie a západných imperialistov v Slovenskom národnom povstaní,” in *Slovenské národné povstanie* (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied, 1954), 249–250. For the latest on the trials of the so-called bourgeois nationalists, see Branislav Kinčok, *Husák: Buržoázny nacionalista 1951–1963* (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2023).

Abstract

Slovak Reflections on the August 1944 Coup in Romania and Its Impact on the Slovak National Uprising

In July and August 1944, the former dominion and stability of the Third Reich began to shake at its foundations. First, a new front opened up in Western Europe and Germany began to fall into the Allies' encircling pincers. Shortly thereafter, an unsuccessful attempt to change Hitler's government took place, and a highly successful Soviet offensive was underway, which in a matter of weeks pushed the Red Army hundreds of miles closer to Berlin. The most decisive, however, was still August 1944, when as many as four major uprisings or coups took place in territories controlled or occupied by Germany. After the urban uprisings in Warsaw or Paris, there was a major reversal in Romania and, shortly afterwards, a broader uprising in Slovakia. This paper will address the possible inspiration of the Romanian coup for the decision and the developments in Slovakia at the end of August 1944. It will focus on Romania's and Slovakia's position in the German great power system up to that time. It will analyze the dilemmas of pro-German governments facing the prospect of a Soviet invasion of their country and of an overall German defeat. In particular, however, it attempts to answer the central question of the possible effects of the Romanian coup on the development of the situation in Slovakia in the context of the Slovak National Uprising.

Keywords

World War II, great power politics, sphere of influence, Romania, Slovakia, resistance, coup d'état