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ENTRY OF THE SLOVAK ARMY INTO THE WAR AGAINST THE SOVIET UNION IN 1941

Abstract

While preparing the *Operation Barbarossa* the Nazi Germany did not originally consider participation of other countries apart from Romania and Finland that had territorial demands against Soviet Union. German military planners considered for some time the possibility to appoint two Slovak infantry divisions with security tasks in the rear, and in May 1941 there were voices calling for the utilization of two Slovak divisions to enforce the 17th Army of the Army Group South even despite open distrust of Adolf Hitler towards Slavs. Since the preparations were taking place on the Slovak territory as well, Slovak Minister of Defence Gen. Ferdinand Čatloš, in a conversation with German military attaché, Lt. Col. Heinrich Becker, stated that in case of Hungarian participation Slovakia would like to take part in the campaign as well. Germans, at first, pointed out an overall unreadiness of the Slovak Armed Forces but finally – only shortly before June 22nd, 1941 – Hitler declared his wish that the “Slovak Army attended some prospective action”. With

the goal to show more loyalty than Hungarians, Slovak politicians and especially the Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka acted proactively without waiting for the Germans to specify their requirements. The paper analyses the circumstances of Slovak entry into the war against the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, and summarizes the latest findings of Slovak historiography.

Keywords: World War II, Operation Barbarossa, Slovakia, Slovak Army, 1941

Introduction: International and Internal Factors of the Slovak Position towards Soviet Union

The aggressive foreign policy of the national socialist Germany as well as fears of possible division of the Slovak territory between Germany, Hungary and Poland resulted in the Slovak March 1939 declaration of independence (for more information, see Bystrický 2014). Slovak representatives agreed to conduct foreign and defence policy in accordance with Germany in exchange for German guarantees of political independence and (limited) territorial integrity.

Soon after that, German military bodies launched their work in Slovakia. In May 1939, the German Military Commission (*Deutsche Militärkommission*, DMK) took active role in the formation of the Slovak Army, in negotiations regarding the *Schutzzone* ('security zone', border area with the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia where German military units were stationed permanently), Slovak military industry as well as in Slovak participation in war against Poland (for more information, see Nižňanský, Tulkisová 2007, 36–60). Slovak government accepted German demands and allowed the passage of the Wehrmacht units, and Slovakia was rewarded by returning several smaller border areas in Kysuce, Orava and Spiš (as well as several minor corrections in the eastern Slovakia) that were ceded to Poland in 1920, 1924 and 1938. Polish campaign strengthened the role of Slovakia as a model country within the German sphere of interest. It also meant the beginning of a pro-German policy without any possible alternatives (Baka 2010).

Since 1 November 1939, *Deutsche Heeresmission in der Slowakei* (German Land Forces Mission, DHM) and *Deutsche Luftwaffenmission* (German Air Force Mission) were established instead of DMK. These had no commanding powers over Slovak Ministry of National Defence (MND) and their task was advisory but both had right to be informed

on MND regulations, and the bilateral cooperation resulted in the new organisation of Slovak Army (see: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, hereinafter: BA-MA, Bestandssignatur/collection reference, hereinafter: Bs., RW5/V, Archivsignatur/file reference, hereinafter: As., 450). In November 1940, Slovakia joined the Tripartite Pact. This act did not only mean deepening of the collaboration with the Nazi Germany but, despite not expressing any specific obligations, it was a determinant factor of Slovak entry into the war against the Soviet Union. Slovak propaganda accepted German ambitions to form the “new European order” and this term was interpreted by Hlinka’s Slovak Peoples’ Party politicians as intent to consistently apply ethnic principle in international relations, which allowed them to verbalize the calculations regarding the possibility of revision of Slovak-Hungarian borders. These hopes were of course vain and real intentions of the Nazis could only be inferred from the proposals and reflections of representatives of Schutzstaffel dealing with the racial overhaul of Europe. Due to the racist ideology of Nazism that resulted in “*Generalplan Ost*” and ethnical cleansing committed by the German forces in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, several proposals appeared within the SS to assimilate and Germanize the racially suitable part of the Slovak population. Since the autumn of 1940, the racial examination of the members of Hlinka Guard was initiated (Schvarc 2014, 69–80).

Hungary remained an important factor in the political calculations of Slovak leaders. They made every possible effort to counter Hungarian revisionist claims, and, at the same time, did not give in its own demand to revise the Vienna Award of November 2, 1938, when Hungary gained significant part of southern Slovakia. The fear even deepened after the Second Vienna Award of August 30, 1940, when Romania was forced to cede Northern Transylvania to Hungary. The impact of Hungarian expansiveness on the Slovak leaders shortly before the Soviet campaign may be seen in, e.g. the Sicherheitsdienst report of April 28, 1941. The report states that Slovak Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka demanded the participation of the Slovak Army in the German campaign in the Balkans against Yugoslavia and Greece. Tuka claimed that in April 1941, he proposed that the government should offer a participation of one Slovak division but was turned down by the Defence Minister gen. Ferdinand Čatloš (Report of a Sicherheitsdienst agent, April 28, 1941, Bundesarchiv Berlin, Bs. R 70 *Slowakei*, As. 136). Despite the questionable credibility of the document, it sufficiently illustrates the state of mind of Slovak leaders shortly before the German attack on the Soviet Union. Slovak leaders hoped that Germany will



Gen. Ferdinand Čatloš (1895–1972), Slovak minister of defense (1938–1944), during official visit in General Governorate, Cracow, 7 June 1942. German press photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/3196

of the Slovak republic. On September 16, 1939, Moscow informed Slovak ambassador to Berlin, Matuš Černak, on the positive answer, thus officially renouncing its negative attitude to dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Slovak leaders hoped to lessen the one-sided German influence in Slovakia and strengthen the position of the country. Slovaks showed interest in the development of economic and cultural relations, and aspired for the Soviet support in the matter of borders' revision. Slovak diplomatic initiative was very soon calmed down by a German diplomatic intervention on the political scene and subsequent changes in the Slovak government in 1940. Rising tensions in German-Soviet relations had an immediate effect on the policy of Slovakia. Soviets were aware of Slovak dependence on Germany and monitored projects related to the needs of German Army, such as building of new roads, reconstruction of railroads necessary for the transportation of German troops towards the Balkans or the General Governorate (*Generalgouvernement für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete*, German entity governing parts of occupied Poland). Soviet diplomatic and intelligence bodies in Bratislava in April and May 1941, gathered information regarding German preparations for the attack (Medvecký 2017, 12–39). On June 22, 1941, Slovak representatives

support Slovak demands regarding the revision of borders by satisfying Hungarian territorial aspirations at the expense of the Balkan nations. However, Germany turned down Slovak hopes in order not to encourage Romania to come out with similar demands at exactly the time when military preparations for hostilities against the Soviet Union were reaching their peak. Slovaks were calmed by vague promises to reconsider the issue in the future. The failure did not discourage Slovak representatives who considered active participation in the war against the Soviet Union as another chance for pushing the question of the revision of borders forward (Katreba 2000a, 39).

Due to the German-Soviet pact of 1939, the Soviet Union achieved considerable territorial gains and, at the same time, accepted the status quo in the German sphere of interest. Slovak leaders changed their negative attitude as well and in September 1939, Slovakia asked the Soviet Union for diplomatic recognition

officially ceased diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and informed Soviet representatives in Bratislava of their decision. On the next day, the Slovak ambassador to Moscow, Julian Šimko, officially informed the Soviet government of the decision.

The Preparations

Slovakia could not remain neutral in the upcoming confrontation. Its territory was of strategic importance to Germany as Wehrmacht could use its railroad infrastructure for transportation of the troops, and, at the same time, it connected the German war industry with resources available in the occupied territories. German interests were in the background of the reconstruction and adaptation of logistic facilities and railroads that were leading to the north against German adversaries (Poland, Soviet Union), and Slovak strategic interests (towards south) were not taken into consideration. Similar principles were adopted while building telecommunication networks (Katreba 2000a, 40–42). The legal framework of passing through and the stay of German troops in the Slovak territory was settled in the agreement signed on April 30, 1941. Slovak authorities took up measures to provide security and keep German military transports confidential, and to supply them. In May 1941, a list of people suspected or sentenced for communist activities or espionage was prepared so that these people could be immediately imprisoned if necessary. However, the fact that so many Slovak nationals were involved in the preparations, and the great extent of the transports made it impossible to keep the whole operation confidential. The rumours of the upcoming German attack on Ukraine were frequent especially in eastern Slovakia (Report of defence [i.e. counterintelligence] officer of the Headquarters of the 2nd Division to Ministry of National Defence, defence department, April [20–29], 1941, Vojenský historický archív Bratislava, hereinafter: VHA, f. 55, ref. no. 55-32-4).

At first, German leaders expected a quick resolution of the eastern campaign and planned that only Finland and Romania would take an active role in the attack against the USSR, as only these two countries had territorial demands against the Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler expected further Hungarian territorial demands against Romania in exchange for Hungarian participation in the war (Zellner 2008, 238–239). Due to Slavic ethnicity of Bulgarians and Slovaks, Führer rejected the participation of the armies of both countries in the conflict (*Das Deutsche Reich* 1983, 901). Despite Hitler's expectations, the operational

department of the General Staff of the Land Forces (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH) planned to deploy Slovak division in the rear of the Army Group South as soon as in January 1941. Two Slovak infantry divisions were taken into consideration for deployment in the 17th Army to secure oil fields in the area of Sambir – Drohobych but this plan was not approved due to the possible overloading of logistics. The mobilisation of Slovak units was to be done only after the entry of the German forces into the action. OKH still considered the use of Slovak units and these were to be appointed with security tasks and tasks related to the administration of the occupied territories (*Das Deutsche Reich* 1983, 362). During the conference of the Wehrmacht commanders with Hitler on March 17, 1941, Führer emphasized the Slavic ethnicity of Slovaks, but admitted the possibility of later appointment of the Slovak forces for the tasks pertaining to the occupation (Halder 1963, 319). Subsequently, the commander of the ground forces, Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, at the conference with commanders of the army groups, armies and tank groups that took place on March 27, 1941, again confirmed that the combat deployment of the Slovak units was not being planned (*Das Deutsche Reich* 1983, 362). In May 1941, OKH began to reconsider the idea of appointing two Slovak divisions to support the 17th Army without taking any final decision (according to a note recorded in the diary of Gen. Franz Halder on May 17, 1941, the issue of the two Slovak divisions was being discussed: „...was soll mit der Slowakei geschehen? (2 Div[isione]n.)”, i.e.: “... what should happen with Slovakia? (2 divisions)”); Halder 1963, 419).

Due to the abovementioned fact, Slovak and Hungarian leaders were not informed about the preparations of the war against the Union, though transfers of the German troops could not be hidden. In Slovakia, the best informed man was the Minister of Defence, Gen. F. Čatloš, who as soon as April 1941 received intelligence information dealing with the concentration of German and Soviet troops on the borders of General Governorate (Katreba 2000a, 49). Since April 1941, he was issuing orders to secure defence of Slovak territory, especially focused on anti-aircraft measures. These were intensified after June 18, 1941, when an order to organize defence against paratroopers was issued and, at the same time, exercises of air defence were ordered. All the commanders of flight units were called in emergency. The extent of the adopted measures shows that at that time Čatloš and his close circle were most probably aware of the upcoming war.

A few weeks before the start of hostilities, Slovak leaders even showed their own initiative hoping to gain German support for the

cause of the border revision against Hungary. During a meeting with the German military *attaché*, Lt. Col. Heinrich Becker, at the turn of April and May 1941, Čatloš stated that there was a possibility of a military action against the Soviet Union, and that in case of Hungarian participation, the Slovak Army was willing to participate as well (Report of the German Military *Attaché* in Bratislava addressed to OKH, May 2, 1941, in: Baka, Tulkisová 2010, document no. 1, 539-541). The response of the OKH was very evasive as indicated the answer to the question "...when it will be possible to speak of the Operation Barbarossa with Slovaks who want to cooperate." (*Das Deutsche Reich* 1983, 363) where Colonel-General Franz Halder stated in his diary that the German armed forces should not "establish communication with Slovaks sooner than in the middle of June (as with Hungary)." The date limit was further prolonged at the meeting between Hitler and the commanders of the Wehrmacht that took place on June 14, 1941, where it was decided that Slovaks should not receive any information. The situation was to change after the start of the hostilities, when Slovaks were to be advised to prepare troops for defence of the territory of Slovakia. At the same time, German commanders considered using Slovak troops as a support component for the attacking units of the Army Group South as confirmed by the remark of F. Halder: "Deployment on the Russian border southern of the 17th Army is desirable." (Halder 1963, 447, 455)

The level of Slovak representatives' awareness of the German plans is unknown. DHM considered the Slovak army as unprepared and armed with obsolete equipment, of which Čatloš was also informed (Report on Activities of DHM for June 22 – October 1, 1941, October 10, 1941, BA-MA Freiburg, Bs. RW 5, As. 8).

German leaders finally decided that Slovakia should join the war only very shortly before the campaign was launched. On June 19, 1941, on his way back home from Bucharest and Budapest, Colonel General Franz Halder visited Bratislava and, at the airport, he met with DHM leader Lieutenant General Paul von Otto and military *attaché* Lt. Col. Becker. He informed Gen. von Otto of Hitler's wish that Slovak army should participate in "some action". On June 21, German ambassador to Bratislava, Hans Ludin, informally communicated the wish of the German Führer to the Slovak president Dr. Jozef Tiso and Prime Minister Prof. Vojtech Tuka. He visited both politicians on his own initiative, and only after the visit did he request the instructions from the *Auswärtiges Amt*, and declared that both Slovak leaders, according to his opinion, unequivocally agreed to the Slovak participation in the war (Národní

archiv Praha, National Archives Prague, hereinafter: NAP, f. 172 – *Zahraniční úřad Berlín 1932–1945*, Box No. 17, No. 548 625). Both Slovak leaders considered it as an opportunity to show loyalty and considered it to be a possible advantage in the struggle for the border revision.

On the morning of June 22, 1941, ambassador Ludin informed Tuka about the German military action against the Soviet Union as a result of massive Soviet deployment of the Red Army units that were threatening the Reich. The telegram stated that Reich reckons on the support of the Slovak government. Using the opportunity, Tuka asked Ludin to express Slovak demand to break diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union to Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and, at the same time, Tuka forwarded the official request of the Slovak government stating its willingness to participate in the war with an appropriate military contingent. Ludin informed president Tiso via telephone, as he was at that time in Bánovce nad Bebravou (since it was Sunday, and Tiso was a priest; see Testimony of J. Tiso, III. War against USSR, p. 4, Slovenský národný archív, Slovak National Archives, hereinafter: SNA, f. National Court, II A – 887, Tnľud 6/46). Tiso after negotiations with Tuka or Čatloš, on the phone, approved the order to mobilize the conscript soldiers of the first reserve. He did not officially declare mobilisation though, as this step could only be taken after the declaration of war, which had to be approved by Slovak Diet. Tiso later explained his steps by claiming that he did not really want to make it look as a declaration of war, and defended himself that his intention was to downgrade Slovak participation to lowest level possible (see above-mentioned Testimony of J. Tiso, 4–5). There are no documents showing that he really took on the initiative and, most probably, the unfolding of events was convenient for him as he could, in a suitable moment, pass the whole whole responsibility on Tuka. It is worth mentioning that Tiso acted similarly in September 1939 when he left the initiative to join the hostilities against Poland to the Defence Minister Gen. Ferdinand Čatloš. On June 22, 1941, the Slovak Minister of Internal Affairs, Alexander Mach, ordered to arrest 1,100 people suspected of communist activity. At the same time, Mach loudly supported the German “struggle against Jewish-Bolshevism” and praised the war as a necessary, and, as he added, a “defence of Christian values” to the usual claims of German propaganda. The regime tried to mobilise the masses, and in the evening of June 22, 1941, the leader of the Office of Propaganda, Tido J. Gašpar, as well as *Volksgruppenführer* Franz Karmasin addressed the crowd on Hviezdoslavovo Square in Bratislava, while on another occasion the

crowd broke windows of the Soviet embassy and set the ambassador's car on fire (Baka, Tulkisová 2010, document no. 8, 547–551).

Since Germans had no objections against Tuka's initiative, Slovak ambassador to Berlin, Matuš Černak, informed State Secretary of the German Foreign Office, Ernst von Weizsacker, that Slovakia will be at war with the Soviet Union within a few hours (NAP, f. 172 – *Zahraniční úřad Berlín 1932–1945*, Box No. 17, No. 248 626, No. 248 628.). "Hitler's wish" was thus accepted smoothly and without any pressure. Tuka seized the initiative from the beginning without asking Berlin to elaborate its expectations in detail with a single aim to outrun Hungary in an effort to gain German favour.

Slovak participation in war against the Soviet Union was motivated by propaganda and political reasons. As in the case of other German allies, it was meant to support German claims of joint campaign for the "new Europe" against "Judeo-Bolshevism threatening the whole civilized world", and, at the same time, to cover the racial extermination character of the war (for more information see Gosztony 1976). Ideological reasons were important for some German allies as well. Apart from anticommunism, the regimes of these countries were characterized by aggressive ethno-nationalism and ensuing hatred against the minorities, anti-Semitism and in the case of non-Slavic countries also a general hatred against Slavs. Italian, Hungarian and Romanian armies at that time were experienced in annexing territories and taking violent measures taken against civilians.

In case of Slovakia, declaration of mobilisation was an important step leading to direct participation of the Slovak army in the war against the Soviet Union. To circumvent the constitution, the regime only declared military emergency in the country. The relevant orders were issued by the Minister of National Defence, Gen. F. Čatloš, on June 22, 1941, based on the decision of president Tiso to call up conscripts of the first reserve. At the same time, the Minister ordered to form a "Fast Group" under command of Col. (General Staff) Rudolf Pilfousek, intended as a frontline unit, and also a part of the Slovak air force was to take part in the hostilities (Katreba 2000b, 87–100). The Ministry was to coordinate the military preparations with DHM (Baka, Tulkisová 2010, document no. 11, 554–559). The scope of Slovak participation in the war was discussed then. Reports of German military bodies depicting the course of mobilisation are very important to understand and analyse Čatloš's standpoint at this time. On June 24, 1941, the *attaché* Lt. Col. Becker reported:

“German ambassador officially informed the Prime Minister of the state of war between Germany and Soviet Russia on 22 June 1941. Not only did the Prime Minister, Dr. Tuka, but the Minister of National Defence, Čatloš, and later even the President demanded that Slovak armed forces be allowed to rise their weapons.” (Baka, Tulkisová 2010, doc. no. 11, 547–551).

The relevant documents of the DHM state that it was not Čatloš but the German side that asserted that the Slovak forces should only take cover and security tasks. However, DHM did not recommend appointing Slovaks' tasks directly on the frontline due to the overall unreadiness of the Slovak army. Mobilisation was aimed to get units at wartime strength (in peacetime, the strength of all of infantry consisted of two divisions, army and corps units and formations). Commander of the DHM Gen. von Otto claimed that Čatloš did not keep his promise and mobilized to a greater extent than agreed, despite the fact that basic organisational frame of the army stayed the same. German military *attaché* in his report of July 5, 1941, even claimed that the Slovak side had the intention of forming a third division (SNA, f. *Alexandrijský archív*, II.C-938, No. 5 627 303–5 627 306; BA-MA Freiburg, Bs. RW 5, As. 8, Report on Activities of DHM from June 22 to October 1, 1941, November 7, 1941). The head of the DHM further on stated that the intention of the Minister of National Defence, Čatloš, was to maintain the peacetime strength of the army on the Slovak territory due to the fear of possible Hungarian attack. The German mission achieved nothing more but only a guard unit (staffed by not yet dismissed mobilisation year 1939 and older reservists) and a training unit of recruits (mobilisation year 1941) were kept (BA-MA Freiburg, Bs. RW 5, As. 445; SNA, *Alexandrijský archív*, II.C-938, No. 5 627 920-34, Report on Activities of DHM from October 1 to December 31, 1941). The outcome of the mobilisation led several problems related to the deployment of the Slovak units. It was carried out under old Czechoslovak mobilisations plans and was affected by rigid and sketchy thinking of Slovak officers who did not obey military regulations valid at the time. Though this statement may be true partially, we have to agree that after the arrival of the reserve (insufficiently trained), the battle value of units decreased. The multiplicity and structure of commands and units brought back the previously removed shortcomings. Their structure did not follow the German example and cooperation between the respective staff worsened. The mission at the same time stated that despite all mistakes the mobilisation itself was carried out quickly and smoothly (Katreba 2000b). The first setbacks occurred as soon as the

transportation of the Slovak units from Eastern Slovakia to the river San (in the German-occupied territory of Poland) during which, according to the mission, chaos occurred at the level of the staffs (this issue is not further specified) and a collapse of supplies impended. According to the report, the problems were solved only thanks to the intervention of the DHM (overstepping its advisory role) by appointing German liaison staff (BA-MA Freiburg, Bs. RW 5, As. 445).

Until July 4, 1941, the Slovak army mobilized 56,858 men and the army sent to the Eastern Front counted over 50,000 men. By July 5, 1941, the total number of men in the army was 90,533, and 3,454 officers including. The majority of soldiers did not take part in regular fighting and were not deployed at the frontline, apart from those who served in the Fast Group/Fast Brigade and air forces. After a reorganisation took place at the end of July 1941, the Fast Division was established to be deployed on the front and the Security Division to take up security tasks on the occupied territory of Ukraine and southeastern Belarus. As suggested by the report of the DHM, the mobilisation was carried out successfully but its course was affected by technical difficulties, mostly in the sphere of transportation and due to season-related activities, as many recruits were involved in harvesting or other agriculture-related duties (Schvarc, Pekár 2008, document no. 1, Report of German Consulate in Prešov, June 30, 1941, 260). The first anti-war political declarations appeared as well. The protests of reservists or civilians influenced by Russophilia, Slavic or pro-communist sympathies were mostly spontaneous and usually carried out by individuals or smaller groups. The limited extent of these actions was probably a result of the above-mentioned measures taken by the Ministry of Interior, as arrests of communists and resistance activists continued in following weeks.

The following weeks were marked by the suppression of resistance activities. In July 1941, members of illegal intelligence network *Demec* working for the Beneš's Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London were arrested, and in the summer, officers of the State Security Headquarters arrested the Soviet emissary Viliam Široký and subsequently many officials of the illegal Slovak communist party, two members of the Central Committee included. Several army officers and NCO's active in the resistance were arrested too. Also, some spontaneous actions carried out by individuals or smaller groups to demonstrate opposition against the regime took place. General feelings towards the war against the Soviet Union could be characterized as unease. According to available intelligence reports, the propaganda apparatus did not succeed in explaining the reasons for joining the war against another



Slovak soldiers decorated by the Slovak Minister of Defense Gen. Ferdinand Čatloš, Eastern Front, July 1942. German press photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1556

June 24, 1941: Slovak Entry into the War with Soviet Union

The first Slovak units crossed the borders of the country on June 24, 1941. On this occasion, the government published an “appeal to the Slovak nation” stating:

“In total solidarity with the Great German Reich the Slovak nation will take its place in order to defend the European culture. The units of our army have crossed the borders of the Slovak Republic to join the fighting German army.”

The declaration was signed by president Tiso, Prime Minister Tuka, and the Minister of National Defence Čatloš (Baka, Tulkisová 2010, documents no. 3, no. 7, 546–547). On the same day, Tiso informed Adolf Hitler about his intention to join the war via telegram. He used the opportunity to assure Führer about the loyalty of the Slovak nation

Slavic country, especially since Slovakia did not have a common border with the Soviet Union, and had no territorial claims towards it (Katreba 2000b, 94–95). German diplomats reported the situation in a very similar manner. Only did the German advance in the initial phase of the war improve the popular moods, as did the information brought back by the returning soldiers. The situation in the army was similar. Commanders of individual garrisons reported that soldiers were behaving orderly, but the propaganda depicting the war as the “fight for Christianity” had only limited success. Such a reception of the war was reported also within units that were to see action.



Gen. Jozef Turanec (1892–1957), commander of the Slovak Fast Division, Eastern Front, August 1942. German press photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1557

as well as its trust in victory. Tiso also sent a similar telegram to the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joachim von Ribbentrop, stressing the continuity of German-Slovak military cooperation that started during the campaign against Poland in 1939.

Minister Čatloš left the Slovak territory with an army group he was commanding. His first order on the attack against the Soviet Union, dated June 24, 1941, mirrored the claims of contemporary propaganda stressing the pre-emptive character of the attack against the Soviet Union, and labelling the war itself as a crusade for freedom against the “Judeo-Bolshevik yoke” (Army Order of July 1, 1941, in: *Slovenské vojsko*, vol. II, no. 13). These were merely the repetitions of the German propaganda as there is no proof that Čatloš had any specific information on the Soviet military plans. However, Slovak soldiers very soon had an opportunity to witness the atrocities committed by the repressive Soviet bodies (conf. *Dotyky* 2009, 22, and documents no. 1–16, 33–96), which probably amplified the propaganda for some time. However, soon after that, the same soldiers had to witness the atrocities committed by Germans, and some even took active role in such acts.

Summary

Slovak representatives were willing to take part in the German war against the Soviet Union, especially the Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka took the initiative. His activities were motivated by an effort to outrun Hungary and gain German favour for the revision of the First Vienna Award as well as to obtain a place in the “New Europe” proclaimed by Nazis (for a broader view see i.a. Lacko 2012). The willingness of the Slovak representatives to participate in the “crusade against Bolshevism” may be well illustrated by the mobilisation in June 1941, as it had larger scope than foreseen by German side. However, the Slovak military contingent was soon reduced to two divisions (one was called “Fast”, and served on the frontline, the other, “Security”, was tasked with the protection of the rears and railways), and several smaller units. They fulfilled their tasks until 1943/1944, and especially the “Fast” division suffered heavy losses. The Slovak armed forces took part in the German operations against the Soviet Union in the southern Ukraine, reaching Rostov on the Don River, and participating in the occupation of Crimea. Due to the heavy losses, the Slovak forces were withdrawn from the Eastern Front in 1943.

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