

Centenary (Slovakia)

By [Michal Kšiňan](#)

Slovakia has a double memory of World War I: the one of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers' suffering that was more underlined in 2014 and the victorious/heroic one of the Czechoslovak legionnaires and the establishment of Czechoslovakia that was more emphasised in 2018. In the official memory, the latter is incorporated into the great narrative of the Slovak nation that culminated in 1993 with the establishment of the Slovak Republic. However, after four years of centenary commemoration, the "suffering" memory also obtained an important position in the public space. From a general point of view, the typology of events and commemorations of the centenary of World War I was no different from other countries.

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Introduction

While to some it may feel that at the beginning of the third millennium, the [memory of World War I](#) in Slovakia was quasi non-existent, its centenary completely changed the situation.^[1] Before starting our analysis, a few preliminary remarks on the Slovak memory of World War I are necessary.

At the beginning of the war, ethnic Slovaks lived in the northern part of the Kingdom of Hungary without any political rights. From an ethno-national point of view, they were subject to Magyarization (1867-1918) – the policy of national and cultural assimilation of non-Magyar [nationalities](#) conducted by the Hungarian [government](#). However, a great majority of Slovaks were actually loyal to the Habsburg Monarchy and thus courageously fought on the side of the Central Powers until the end of the war. On the other hand, a group of Czech and Slovak emigrants, led by the trio of [Tomáš G. Masaryk \(1850-1937\)](#), [Milan R. Štefánik \(1880-1919\)](#) and [Edvard Beneš \(1884-1948\)](#), established [Czechoslovak Legions](#) – armies fighting on the side of the Entente in an effort to destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire and create a "New Europe", of which [Czechoslovakia](#) became a reality in 1918.

In the immediate afterwar period, parallel memories of the armed conflict emerged. The majority of Czechs and Slovaks – not referring to the important German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia – shared the memory of a meaningless four years suffering in the trenches. The official memory, however, celebrated the great victory and the establishment of a new state. Due to the enormous number of casualties in the Austro-Hungarian armies, the two memories started to merge quickly. In

today's Slovakia, this double memory of World War I is still topical: the one of suffering and the one of victory and heroism. They may seem contradictory at first glance, but they actually coexist rather effectively without being mutually exclusive.^[2]

Exhibiting the War

There wasn't a central commission for the World War I centenary like in other countries, but the Slovak Ministry of Defence created an official logo to commemorate "one of the most important milestones in human history" and label all events regarding the centenary.^[3] The 1931 sculptural work included on the Ministry's logo „A Soldier with a Helmet” (*Vojak s helmou*) by [Ladislav Majerský \(1900-1965\)](#), depicts a sorrowful soldier after the loss of his co-belligerents.

Figure 1: Prvá Svetová Vojna 1914-1918. Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic New Logo, 2014^[4]

[Museums](#) and exhibitions were one of the most important instruments to commemorate the war and its various aspects. The thematic range of the exhibitions was wide and every museum (or similar) institution organised at least one exhibition on different aspects of the war.

From 21 August 2014 to 1 February 2015, the Slovak National Museum (hereinafter SNM, Slovakia's central museal institution), in cooperation with the Military History Institute and Slovak National Archive, opened an exhibition in the Bratislava Castle entitled "World War I. The Tragedy That Affected Everybody" (*Prvá svetová vojna. Tragédia, ktorá postihla všetkých*). A mixture of traditional political, diplomatic and military history topics was presented, including the process of the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the [Paris Peace Conference](#), social history (the hinterland, [children](#), women), soldiers' everyday life, [propaganda](#), impact on [art](#) and similar issues, with an entire hall devoted to the [education](#) of schoolchildren. From an educational point of view, it reiterated and expanded upon standard curricula.

A virtual museum, Europeana 1914-1918, found much success in Slovakia. The primary coordinator of the project was the Slovak National Library in Martin, which, with partners from towns all around Slovakia, collected and digitalised artefacts from the period of World War I or objects relating to it.^[5] As Slovak historian Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová stated:

An individual's perspective appears to be attractive for the interpretation of phenomena associated with the First World War, especially in the form of examples of personal stories with which the audience can connect. Personal ties which are linked to the history of their own community, or to tracing the fate of their own family members, make the strongest motivation for the latest generation, too. New technologies and media offer suitable means for interpreting these findings.^[6]

From 14 May 2014 to 12 October 2014, the Bratislava City Museum presented an exhibition called "War from the Other Side" (*Vojna z druhej strany*), focusing mainly on life in Bratislava (at the time called Prešporok in Slovak, Pressburg in German and Pozsony in Hungarian) and the changes that war brought to the city. Peaceful life before 1914 switched rapidly to patriotic war fever and later, to daily suffering. The museum showed topics like the beginning of war, life on the battlefields and in trenches, military propaganda and the activities of the [Red Cross](#).^[7]

The majority of today's territory of Slovakia was spared from World War I fighting except for the eastern parts, where Russian armies penetrated in 1914-1915 and fought heavily in the battle of the so-called Carpathian Front, a dimension consistently underlined in exhibitions in this region. An example from 2014 was called "World War I and Eastern Slovakia" (*Prvá svetová vojna a východné Slovensko*), where a string of events from the [Sarajevo attack](#) to the battles of 1914-1915 were recounted. The curators of the exhibition wanted to show the impact of combat on soldiers, and also on the inhabitants of eastern Slovakia. In addition to state institutions, military history clubs played a key role in the preservation of the legacy of these battles. In 2016, a re-enactment of the encounters on the Carpathian Front was held by the Military History Club Beskydy.

The heroic memory still plays an important role. The Slovak ministries of defence and internal affairs took part in a Czecho-Slovak project, *Legie 100*, which sought to remember and further develop the message of the Czechoslovak Legions. During World War I, but also in the immediate post-war period, Czechoslovak Legions fought the Bolsheviks in Siberia. Legionnaires lived in trains, which gave birth to the idea of a legion-train (*legiovlak*) for the *Legie 100* project. The Czechoslovak Legion Association purchased and renovated thirteen historical passenger cars; an additional wagon was purchased and renovated by the private Milan Rastislav Štefánik Foundation. This authentic replica circulated around former Czechoslovakia and attracted the attention of the wider public, especially young people. From 2014 to 2018, 600,000 visitors viewed the museum on rails until

its journey ended in 2020.^[8]

Centenary Scholarship

The centenary of World War I brought new impulses to the field of [historiographical](#) research. Great international debates over who to blame for the start of the war did not escape Slovak historiography. Eminent scholar Dušan Kováč disproved several theses by Christopher Clark on the so-called Balkan origin of the war by “pointing out the diplomatic game of the powers during the July crisis” and also highlighting documents that proved the responsibility of [Austria-Hungary](#) and [Germany](#) for launching the war.^[9]

The political, diplomatic and military context of World War I – and especially of the establishment of Czechoslovakia – are still very popular issues among the general public. However, of late, more local and regional dimensions of the conflict have begun to attract the attention of scholars. As an example, we can mention the conference “World War I and the Spiš Region” (*1. svetová vojna a Spiš*) held in Poprad in 2014. The book “World War I and the Liptov Region” (*Prvá svetová vojna a Liptov*)^[10] by Peter Vítek deals with soldiers from the area fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army and Czechoslovak Legions, and the situation in the hinterland. He managed to provide a list of fallen soldiers from the region, including the locations where they died. In 2014, this monograph won the prize for science dissemination from the Slovak Historical Society at the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Several scientific conferences involving international scholars have also been organised all around Slovakia. Amateur historians from the Military History Club Beskydy arranged three of them (2018, 2019, 2020) called “Slovakia and World War I” (*Slovensko a prvá svetová vojna*). Conference proceedings from the first two conferences were published.^[11]

Typically, the military or political dimensions of the conflict are discussed by Slovak historiography,^[12] but other topics have recently emerged as well. Attention is now given to more specific issues and perspectives such as [monuments](#) to fallen soldiers,^[13] [prisoners of war](#),^[14] or recollections of World War I related in local dialects.^[15] The shift towards everyday life, social history and the cultural history of war has become reality. A publication by historian Dúdeková Kováčová on the social history of World War I in Slovakia could be seen as a symbolic achievement of the progress in this field.^[16] Even science dissemination books on World War I and Slovakia do not cover only the military, political and diplomatic aspects.^[17]

With the approaching centenary of the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the attention of scholars has shifted more towards related topics and the key events that led up to the establishment, such as the Pittsburgh Agreement,^[18] but mainly the Czechoslovak Legions,^[19] including the specific memories of some of their members.^[20] Even if these processes have already been very well analysed, historians have tried to tackle the issues from a different point of view,^[21] focus more on local levels,^[22] publish available documents on the matter^[23] or simply produce books aimed at disseminating research.^[24]

Research Dissemination

A great emphasis was put on the dissemination of research during the centenary:

The 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War caused, without exaggeration, a media craze in Slovakia. The popular press, including the most-read daily and weekly newspapers, television and radio, were full of articles and shows about the First World War, especially during the summer months.^[25]

The Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, in cooperation with Juraj Babják, embarked on a project to raise public awareness about monuments of fallen soldiers, the most common type of monument in Slovakia. The agency provided an online map of monuments with pictures taken by photographer Zdenko Dzurjanin, mainly from the Bratislava region, with the goal of progressively covering all of Slovakia.^[26]

Some important public targets for the promotion were children, young people, pupils, students and even history teachers. At every major exhibition, a section and special program were devoted to children and young people. Historians and guest

lecturers were invited to present the results of their research to students of primary and secondary schools. The Slovak Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, alongside the French Centenary Mission and the French Institute in Slovakia, organised a call for projects entitled “World War I and the Personality of M. R. Štefánik”^[27] that funded eight projects. The aim was to develop cooperation between French and Slovak primary and secondary schools. All projects that applied were labelled by the French Centenary Mission.

Memory of the Fallen Soldiers

The centenary of the start of war in 2014 was officially commemorated rather modestly, mainly by military authorities and often under foreign and European Union initiatives. The occasion of the centenary did provide an opportunity for many fallen soldiers' monuments to be restored and in 2014, two new monuments were unveiled in Oravská Polhora and Rabča.^[28] In these bottom-up initiatives, descendants of war survivors sought to realise the projects of their forebears who weren't able to pay honour to the fallen soldiers, initially because of economic reasons, and later because of political ones. The monument in Rabča lists the fallen soldiers from four villages on the Slovak-Polish border (Rabča, Rabčice, Oravská Polhora and Sihelné). Furthermore, the inhabitants of Oravská Polhora have restored the remains of a former monument to [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) and rededicated it to the village's casualties in the wars of the 20th century. Both monuments were consecrated the day before the centenary of the beginning of World War I. In 2018, on the centenary of the end of war, another monument was unveiled in Jamník with a village mayor as the main initiator. Similarly, as in the two previous cases, the idea of building a fallen soldiers' monument was topical earlier (in 1943), showing the continuity of this bottom-up practice, which was wide-spread in Slovakia mainly in the interwar period.^[29]

Military cemeteries from World War I are most numerous in the Prešov Self-Governing Region, where many battles took place. In cooperation with the Military History Club Beskydy, the Prešov Regional Monuments Board identified more than 200 and began restoration even before the centenary. Others were restored by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, responsible for the maintenance of military cemeteries, or by the [German War Graves Commission](#) (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V.*). A prisoner of war cemetery in Dunajská Streda was renovated by the town in cooperation with a local non-governmental organisation and symbolically completed on 11 November 2014.

The restoration of the military cemetery in Majer, Banská Bystrica, where 1,380 soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army are buried, attracted the attention of the wider public. A complete renewal of the original cemetery was not possible. The architects sought to “mentally renew the remembrance space by adding a new viable layer”. The central monument, that is all at once a “view terrace, chapel, wall, stele, rear, pious place and information sheet”, won a prestigious prize for architecture (CE-ZA-AR) in 2020 in the category of common and industrial buildings.

Great Celebrations in 2018

In 2018, the biggest celebrations, stressing the establishment of Czechoslovakia and not the end of World War I, took place. In 2016, the Ministry of Culture created a national coordination committee for the celebration of important anniversaries in 2018. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was in charge of celebrations with a wider international character. Director of the Slovak Institute in Prague Vladimír Valovič was designated national coordinator of the festivities.

The Czech and Slovak authorities agreed on a common program called “Czech and Slovak Century” to commemorate not only the centenary of the creation of Czechoslovakia (1918), but also the 50th anniversary of the Czechoslovak Spring (1968)^[30] and the 25th anniversary of the creation of the Czech and Slovak republics in 1993. In this way, they incorporated the establishment of Czechoslovakia into a great national narrative culminating in the creation of Slovakia. The range of celebratory events related to the establishment of Czechoslovakia was large: concerts, cultural events, dancing shows, [movie](#) projections, exhibitions, festivals, theatre plays, ballets, operas, slam poetry, book readings and so on.

The establishment of Czechoslovakia as such was particularly celebrated, but many other closely related events were commemorated as well, such as the anniversaries of the creation of Czechoslovak Legions in [Russia](#), [France](#) and [Italy](#), and the signing of the Pittsburgh Agreement.

Czech and Slovak institutions often worked together in the organisation of museum exhibitions. The most spectacular shared

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project was the “Slovak-Czech/Czech-Slovak Exhibition”, organised by the individual Czech and Slovak national museums from April to September 2018 at the Bratislava Castle. The exhibition told the story of Czechoslovakia and focused on the shared great moments of Czechoslovak history, but also on architecture, the everyday life of people, mandatory military service and objects like toys or typical Czechoslovak products such as *Favorit* bikes or *Jawa* motorbikes.^[31] Many side events were organised, including lectures, historical quizzes, trips on historical trams or trolleybuses in Bratislava, etc. In the end, a total of 76,683 persons visited the exposition in Bratislava. While the main state-financed exhibitions were located in the capital city, most regional museums held their own, locally oriented exhibitions. For example, the Orava Museum from Dolný Kubín prepared an exhibition on the end of the war and the creation of Czechoslovakia.

The symbolic peak of the national celebration of the centenary of the creation of Czechoslovakia took place on 28 October 2018 in Prague with a military parade and on 30 October 2018 in Martin.^[32] The most important political representatives of Slovakia were present and gave speeches at celebrations in Prague and vice versa. Celebrations in Martin opened with a wreath-laying ceremony in front of the famous Tatra Banka building. In the speeches of the three highest Slovak state representatives, World War I was a non-event and did not relate to the establishment of Czechoslovakia, which shows a particular national perspective on these events.^[33] Instead of a military parade, a show of military equipment, popular among children, was offered in Martin. In the evening, a gala concert entitled “Slovakia in the Heart of Europe” was organised in Ružomberok, a town near Martin. Even if the day of 30 October 2018 was declared an exceptional national holiday, the celebrations in Martin were less pompous than those in Prague.^[34] This day was celebrated by different events all around Slovakia.

The centenary was an occasion to boost cultural diplomacy with the aim of increasing the positive international image of Slovaks and Slovakia. Thanks to the importance of this anniversary and Slovak economic growth, many projects were able to be funded. The best-known Slovak [poetry](#) on World War I, “The Bloody Sonnets” (*Krvavé sonety*) by major poet Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (1849-1921), was translated into English in 2018 by John Minahane. A special edition of the book was given to Queen Elisabeth II, who appreciated such a human legacy that is relevant even today. The centenary of the creation of Czechoslovakia was an occasion to present – often in cooperation with the Czech Republic – Slovakia and its culture to a foreign public that is usually not familiar with it. There were many such events.

Foreign embassies and cultural institutes in Slovakia were very active and again, the strongest cooperation took place with Czech partners. Building on the legacy of Štefánik, the French Centenary Mission, in cooperation with the French Embassy and French Institute, carried out several projects like public lectures about Štefánik and the Czechoslovak Legions. On the initiative of the Embassy of the United Kingdom, on Sunday 11 November 2018 at 1:30 p.m., the bells of the Cathedral of Saint Martin in Bratislava rang on behalf of all Slovak [churches](#) to commemorate the end of World War I. A short, pious event in front of the cathedral was attended by the British and German ambassadors. There were many local commemorations of this anniversary centred on fallen soldiers’ monuments and their memory organised by local associations and villages, often with the participation of the church. On the same occasion, the Slovak president and minister of defence decorated war veterans during the concert of the Military Music Band in Banská Bystrica.^[35]

Although the entire Slovak population agrees that the creation of Czechoslovakia was a significant, positive step in its national history, the relationship to its Czechoslovak past is still ambiguous, which could be seen in the polemics on the aforementioned “exceptional national holiday”. There is memory concurrence of two constitutive dates of the creation of Czechoslovakia: 28 and 30 October 1918. The official status of those two dates has changed several times in recent decades. Some historians, like Dušan Kováč, argue that the official date of creation of Czechoslovakia (28 October) is the most important date of Slovak history. Others, like Anton Hrnko, place greater value on the Slovak contribution to the process (30 October). The first position underlines the Czechoslovak state tradition while the second emphasizes a more Slovak national one.^[36] The debates continued in 2020. The Slovak parliament declared 28 October the national holiday, but it is a working day; all other national holidays are bank holidays, giving the impression of a secondary, or less important occasion.

Conclusion

Practically since 1918, the memory of the creation of Czechoslovakia has overshadowed the memory of the war itself. This historical event is seen as a positive note and state officials are constantly underlining the Slovak contribution to it, symbolized mainly by the personality of Štefánik. In the official memory, it is incorporated into the great narrative of the Slovak nation that

culminated in 1993 with the creation of the Slovak republic. However, after four years of centenary commemorations – and probably under the wider European interpretation that sees World War I as a common tragedy – and after a historiographical turn towards everyday history, we can state that the “suffering” memory also obtained an important position in the Slovak historical memory and public space. Chronology also played a role in this. That the war is seen as a great common tragedy was more underlined in 2014, while the heroic memory of the establishment of Czechoslovakia confirmed its dominant position in the public space with its approaching centenary in 2018.

The commemorations did not stop in 2018. The following year, the Slovak government declared the Year of Milan Rastislav Štefánik, one of co-founders of Czechoslovakia, marking the centenary of his death. The political reconstruction of Central Europe caused by World War I was sealed in 1920 by the signing of the [Trianon Peace Treaty](#), a sensitive topic for Slovak-Hungarian relations. However, commemorations planned for the year 2020 were strongly limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Realised as well as planned commemorations continue to open topical political questions on the incorporation of World War I and its consequences into the great national narratives.

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Notes

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- ↑ Source: Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava 28.07.2014.
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24. ↑ Mrva, Ivan / Mulík, Peter: Rok 1918 a Slováci [The Year 1918 and Slovaks], Martin 2019.
25. ↑ Dudeková, Expert 2016, p. 192.
26. ↑ Pamätníky I. svetovej vojny, interaktívna mapa [World War I Memorial, interactive map], issued by Pamätníky I. svetovej vojny, online: <http://www.pamatniky-tasr.sk/p/> (retrieved: 4 October 2021).
27. ↑ Štefánik became a French citizen in 1912; in today's Slovakia he is seen as a national hero.
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29. ↑ Odhalenie pamätníka padlým vojakom v 1. svetovej vojne [Unveiling of the Memorial to the Fallen Soldiers in World War I], in: Jamníčan 1 (2019), p. 8, issued by Obec Jamník, online: https://www.jamnik.sk/modules/file_storage/download.php?file=0a44d168%7C57&inline=1 (retrieved: 21 January 2021).
30. ↑ The Czechoslovak or Prague Spring was the process of political liberalisation in the 1960s in Czechoslovakia that culminated in 1968. But a military invasion of five countries of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968 foiled it.
31. ↑ Junek, Marek / Lubušká, Lenka (eds.): Česko-slovenská/slovensko-česká výstava [Czecho-Slovak/Slovaco-Czech Exhibition], Prague et al. 2018.
32. ↑ On 30 October 1918 – in the Tatra Banka building in Martin – Slovak representatives declared their will to create a common state with Czechs by passing the Declaration of the Slovak Nation. On 28 October 1918 in Prague, Czech and Slovak politicians declared the creation of Czechoslovakia but the Slovaks in Martin weren't aware of it.
33. ↑ Prezident v Martine. V úžasnom projekte EÚ sme sa opäť spojili s Českom [The President in Martin. In a wonderful EU project, we have once again teamed up with the Czech Republic], issued by Kancelária prezidenta SR, online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezident-v-martine-v-uzasnom-projekte-eu-sme-sa-opat-spojili-s-ceskom/> (retrieved: 22 March 2022); Andrej Danko: Martinská deklarácia dala Slovákom nádej a vieru, že v budúcej Európe nájdu svoje miesto ako slobodný a suverénny národ [The Martin Declaration gave Slovaks hope and faith that they will find their place as a free and sovereign nation in the future Europe], issued by Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=54801> (retrieved: 22 March 2022); Peter Pellegrini. V Martine vznikli základy súčasnej samostatnej SR [The foundations of the present independent Slovak Republic were laid in Martin], issued by Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky, online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/p-pellegrini-v-martine-vznikli-zaklady-sucasnej-samostatnej-sr/> (retrieved: 22 March 2022).
34. ↑ Krapf, James: Centennials of the 1918 Revolutions in Austria-Hungary's Successor States, in: Austrian Studies Newsmagazine 32/1 (2019-2020), pp. 17-18, 33.
35. ↑ Veteránov ocenili. Od konca prvej svetovej vojny ubehlo 100 rokov [Veterans honored. 100 years have passed since the end of the First World War], issued by ta3, online: <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/137322/veteranov-ocenili-od-konca-prvej-svetovej-vojny-ubehlo-100-rokov> (retrieved: 22 March 2022).
36. ↑ Kšiňan, Michal: La mémoire slovaque de la naissance de la Tchécoslovaquie, in: Marès, Antoine (ed.): Mémoires et usages de 1918 dans l'Europe médiane, Paris 2020, pp. 213-224.

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