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Štefánik, Milan Rastislav

By [Michael Kopanic](#)

Štefánik, *Milan* Rastislav

Slovak general, diplomat and astronomer

Born 21 July 1880 in Kosaras, Hungary (Košariská, Slovakia today)

Died 04 May 1919 in Ivanka pri Dunaji, Czechoslovakia

General Milan Rastislav Štefánik was a Slovak astronomer and a pilot in the French army. His diplomatic skills and connections helped gain Allied support for the Czechoslovak independence movement abroad. He organized the Czechoslovak Legion and became minister of war for Czechoslovakia. He perished in a tragic airplane crash in 1919.

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Pre-War Life

Education

A native of western Slovakia, Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880-1919) was the son of a Lutheran minister and a Slovak patriotic mother. Since Slovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time, he was frustrated in not being able to study in his Slovak mother tongue in Hungarian [schools](#). The schools followed a policy of strict Magyarization, which denied Slovaks the use of their own language in public administration and school education. His Slovak patriotism led him to pursue his higher education in Prague, where he completed a doctorate in astronomy. The move to Prague in 1898 changed his life as he came under the influence of Czech intellectuals, in particular, Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), the future president of Czechoslovakia. Though he studied [science](#), Štefánik became active in the Slovak student association, Detvan, and the Hlasists group, which promoted mutual Czech-Slovak cultural and political efforts and published the journal *Hlas* (The Voice). He wrote articles to inform Czechs of the dire situation Slovaks faced under the pressure of Magyarization in Hungary.

Pre-War Career

After graduating in 1904, Štefánik moved to Paris and joined the team of Pierre Janssen (1824-1907), a cofounder of astrophysics and director of the Meudon Observatory. Štefánik used the observatory on Mount Blanc to further study astronomy. Upon Janssen's death, [France](#) employed him for diplomatic missions and to monitor German military positions during his research trips around the globe. His meteorological expeditions took him to [Spain](#), [Russia](#), Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. This Renaissance man pursued a variety of interests, as an astronomer, explorer, photographer and pilot. By the outbreak of the Great War, he had traveled more widely than any other Slovak before him.

He became a naturalized French citizen in 1912 in order to facilitate funding of his research. As a well-traveled man of action, he became popular in France, frequently participated in salon discussions, and developed close ties with many political and social elites.

World War I

Aviator

When the Great War erupted, he enlisted at the lowest rank in the French army and was quickly promoted, eventually attaining the rank of general. Trained as an aviator, he achieved distinction as a skillful pilot flying MFS-54s for the 10th Army in northeast France. As an inventor, he improved observation and bombing devices. His accurate weather forecasts and supervision laid the foundations for the establishment of a meteorological service in the French Air Force.

In 1915, he flew over thirty missions in [Serbia](#) as a member of the MFS 99 squadron, surviving a

crash. In retreat after a Bulgarian offensive, a badly wounded Štefánik joined Serbian allies in a rugged march through mountainous terrain to the Adriatic Sea. Seriously in danger of losing his life, Captain [Louis Paulhan \(1883-1963\)](#) flew an emergency mission to rescue his comrade, performing the world's first "medivac" operation.

Diplomat

Relieved from active duty after surgery, Štefánik returned to France and turned his attention to diplomatic activities. In December 1915, he became involved in the Czechoslovak independence movement abroad led by Masaryk and [Edvard Beneš \(1884-1948\)](#) to promote his nation's cause to the Allies. Having connections in high French circles, Štefánik played an intermediary role in introducing his Czech colleagues to French Prime Minister [Aristide Briand \(1862-1932\)](#) and other leading political figures. The triumvirate's activism led to the establishment of the Czechoslovak National Council. As vice-president of the council from 1915 to 1918, Štefánik would prove integral in promoting the case for Czechoslovak independence to the Allied nations. The presence of an ethnic Slovak added validity to Czechoslovak unity. After the Czechoslovak Republic was established on 28 October 1918, Štefánik was appointed minister of war.

Czechoslovak Legion

Though plagued by serious gastroenterological disorders, Štefánik renewed his active life and promoted the political cause abroad. Working with Beneš, he organized the [Czechoslovak Legion](#) to fight as an autonomous unit in the French army. Making several trips to Russia, he secured the release of Czech and Slovak [prisoners of war](#), uplifted morale, and created a formidable fighting force of over 50,000 soldiers. He performed similar services in [Romania](#), Serbia, and [Italy](#).

After the [United States of America \(USA\)](#) joined the war, Štefánik journeyed to America in June 1917 to recruit Czech and Slovak compatriots for the legion. Visiting New York, Chicago, and Washington over four months, he delivered rousing patriotic speeches. Cooperating with Czech and Slovak societies in the USA and assisted by French diplomats, he negotiated an agreement with Washington officials to recruit non-naturalized Czechs and Slovaks. Although initially obtaining about 500 volunteers, their numbers would eventually reach 2,000, adding to the over 100,000 legionnaires worldwide.

[Britain](#) wanted the legion to re-establish on the [Eastern Front](#) and assist in overthrowing the Bolshevik regime after the 3 March 1918 [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#). The legion would instead seize control of the Trans-Siberian Railway during the summer in an effort to make their way to the [Western Front](#). Štefánik traveled to Siberia to assist in their evacuation.

Epilogue

Death

Although Czechoslovakia had declared its independence, Štefánik never saw the country that he had tirelessly worked to create. His life met an untimely end when flying to Slovakia with two officers from Italy. As he was approaching Bratislava's airport, his plane crashed near Ivanka pri Dunaji on 4 May 1919, killing everyone on board. An official Czechoslovak investigation of the crash did not take place until over seven years later, leading to conspiratorial theories among some Slovak nationalists. However, Italian investigations suggested several technical reasons for the plane coming down.

Legacy

One can only speculate on how Štefánik's career would have unfolded. After World War I, many Czech writers asserted that he was clearly in the Czechoslovak camp, while nationalist Slovaks claimed that he would have pushed for greater Slovak self-rule in the new republic. The recent research of [Michal Kšíňan](#) has demonstrated that while Štefánik firmly supported Czechoslovak political unity, he remained committed to a Slovak ethnic identity.

The huge attendance at his funeral demonstrates that he had become a venerated hero in the country soon after the war. The renowned World War I cemetery architect, Dušan Jurkovič (1868-1947), designed a massive tomb for him on Bradlo Hill above his native village, testifying to his larger than life image.

During the post-World War II era, communists portrayed Štefánik as an instrument of bourgeois [imperialism](#) and his burial mound fell into ruins and his memorials were removed from public display. After the fall of communism, Štefánik's popular reputation revived by leaps and bounds. In a 2019 poll, Slovaks chose him as the most notable personality in Slovak history. Scholars such as Kevin J. McNamara and Michal Kšíňan have attempted to provide a more realistic evaluation of Štefánik from the archives in their ongoing research.^[1] As the most influential Slovak during the Great War, Štefánik played a prominent role in the creation of Czechoslovakia.

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Notes

1. ↑ Kšíňan, Michal: Politika vs. história? Diskusie v slovenskej historiografii [Politics vs. History? Discussions in Slovak Historiography], in: Historický časopis 62/1 (2014), pp. 91-113.
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