

## ŠTEFÁNIK'S CONTACTS AND THE UNITY OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK LIBERATION MOVEMENT

*"This is a technique Štefánik mastered to perfection: charm them instantly or knock them down."*

Lev Sychrava

### A POLARIZING FIGURE

Milan Rastislav Štefánik was a very strong personality. He knew how to win over people quickly, whether in the salons of Paris or in Turkestan, in exotic Tahiti or in Ecuador. It would, however, be naive to believe that Štefánik enjoyed universal popularity. He was the kind of person who would leave nobody indifferent. He aroused either affection or antipathy. How did he win over friends? What use did he make of them for the benefit of the Czechoslovak liberation? What impression did he make on people?

This is what Louise Weiss said to Štefánik: *"Each time I discover new virtues in you. Last time you appeared to be the greatest soldier; today, the greatest poet. Incidentally, the only thing that endears me to my friends are their shortcomings. Fortunately, you are not lacking in those, authoritative, taciturn, disdainful of your health as you are, displaying little trust in women's loyalty: you are a terrible character. Nevertheless, you must trust you have my deepest and genuine affection."*

On his way back from an expedition to Turkestan, Štefánik made a stop-over in Prague. A Slovak charged by the French government with carrying out a scientific expedition instantly elicited contradictory reactions. Some admired him and recognised his scientific achievements while others drew attention to how poor he had been in his student days and claimed that his expedition achieved little in the way of scientific success.

Some of those who knew Štefánik during the war were also not very taken with him. T.G. Masaryk recalled that many French soldiers were jealous of his achievements in the Great War. Štefánik's friend Otakar Španiel was said to recall: *"To write about M. Š. As a human being? That is simply impossible! He was a grotesque, bizarre man, an adventurer. The astronomy was just a cover and based on many accounts Šp. believed that M. Š. was willing to serve even Hungary for money."* Although we may have serious doubts about the truth of these words, Španiel's recollections show that Štefánik was able to arouse envy, hatred and contempt, just as much as admiration and loyalty.

### ŠTEFÁNIK'S CONNECTIONS AND HIS CONFLICT WITH JOSEF DÜRICH

Those whom Štefánik won over would give him everything within their power, often not just money but also important contacts. These played a strategic role in his conflict with Josef Dürich, with whom he clashed while they were in Russia together in 1916–1917. What was at issue was that Dürich wanted to steer the Czechoslovak liberation movement in a more pro-Russian direction while Štefánik remained faithful to Masaryk's pro-Western orientation. Dürich relied particularly on the support of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which sought to exert influence in the future Czechoslovakia, while Štefánik



Štefánik as lieutenant and pilot, 1915



Štefánik with his friends on a stroll near Paris

had the support of officials in the military, who were keen to deploy the Czechoslovak army as soon as possible. After a number of arguments Štefánik expelled Dürich from the Czechoslovak National Council.

Clearly, a decisive figure in this conflict was Maurice Janin, who lent Štefánik his unconditional support, and not just in his conflict with Dürich. This was a clash of two distinct groups. Beneš and Štefánik had disagreed with Dürich's political course well before he left France for Russia, and they told Masaryk about it. Since Dürich brought along two of his associates, Ivan Štafl and V. Crkal against the express wishes of Beneš, Štefánik brought his contacts into play with the aim of discrediting them. Maurice Janin disclosed to his superiors in France details of Štafl's personal life, which had caused outrage in Russia and informed them of the fact that General Mikhail Alexeyev, Russia's chief of staff, wanted Štafl to leave. Since Štafl was a lieutenant in the French Foreign Legion, General Joffre had him recalled from Russia.

Janin later wrote to the Minister of War in France that after Štafl's departure, it was the turn of Louis Stern, a man who provided Dürich with large sums of money which Štefánik believed came from pro-Austrian Jews. Janin repeatedly informed French military officials of Stern's shady activities. His friend, General Alexeyev, placed him under surveillance by the Russian police. On the other hand, Janin was under instructions from Paris to exercise caution with Stern, who had many influential friends in the French capital.

Next came the turn of Crkal. Since Štefánik was unable to have him recalled from Russia, he tried at least to discredit him. He wrote to Beneš: *"Could Osuský arrange for Crkal to be given a smack on the wrist in American papers. Then it will be Dürich's turn."* Next came Dürich's associate, Václav Král. Štefánik informed the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Král was not a member of the National Council and requested that he be put under surveillance during his visit to Paris.

It wasn't just his contacts that helped Štefánik prevail in the end in the conflict with Dürich. Maurice Janin recalls their dispute as follows: *"I can justifiably claim to have supported him [Štefánik] effectively; had it not been for me (this view is shared by Alexeyev and officers of the Stavka [the Russian army's high command]) he could not have done it, given the hostility he encountered, yet I was the only one supporting him. That things are being taken care of now is also thanks to the fact that I enjoy Alexeyev's trust and the benevolence of Nicholas II, who calls me his friend; I hope that with God's help we will accomplish our goal."*

However, Štefánik resorted not only to such strong-arm tactics to ensure the unity and discipline that Czechoslovakia's liberation movement abroad badly needed. When choosing his associates, he picked people representing certain factions of the expatriate community. For example, Gustáv Košík was a go-between to help him keep in the good graces of American Slovaks and Catholics in particular. This is what he wrote about Košík: *"Thanks to*



Otakar Španiel's M. R. Štefánik plaque, made in 1905

**Josef Dürich** (1847, Borovice – 1927, Klášter Hradiště nad Jizerou) was a deputy in the Imperial Diet in Vienna, initially representing the National (Old Czech) Party and later the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party. In 1915 he went into exile joining the Czechoslovak resistance movement under T.G. Masaryk's leadership. One year later he became deputy chairman of the Czechoslovak National Council but was politically marginalised following his expulsion from the National Council and the February revolution of 1917. His account of the conflicts within the Czechoslovak resistance movement abroad appeared in his book, *V českých službách. Vypsání mého pobytu za hranicemi 1915 – 1918 (In Czech Service. A Description of My Foreign Activities 1915–1918)*, 1921.

*him I am gaining trust, because through him we are winning over the entire Slovak Catholic faction, which has no better representative than him. By giving a series of lectures he also accomplished a great deal among the Slovaks. However, I do not rely on him unconditionally. He is basically solid, though poisoned by the clerical atmosphere. He may well yet cause some trouble but this is nothing to worry about. Should he turn dangerous it will be easy to make him cave."*

The Czech historian Antonín Klimek described how Beneš and Štefánik went about unifying the Czechoslovak liberation movement: *"These two men accomplished something for which Masaryk and Dürich in particular had no talent (or stomach) – things that, had Masaryk done them in public, he could not have become 'tatiček' [daddy (of the nation)]. They carried out the work of unification with an iron hand and using dictatorial methods, imposing discipline on the liberation movement abroad (particularly in Western Europe), going about it in a tough, harsh way without fear or shame: they attacked their adversaries to the point of scandalising them (after all, the latter did the same), expelled them from the movement. . . Although from a general ethical perspective this might deserve condemnation, it is precisely what was necessary to ensure that the movement adhered to a unified line and became ready for action, and that our expatriate community groups, weakened as they were by petty disputes and 'preoccupied' with ephemeral concerns such as Sokol exercises, amateur theatricals and billiards competitions, were transformed into elements of an effective political organisation. No wonder that, as L. Sychrava noted, the N.C. (National Council) as well as Beneš and Štefánik were for a considerable time – often until the very end of the war – objects of the worst gossip and hatred among the (expatriate) colony."*



The room where Štefánik received visitors