

Milan Rastislav Štefánik: The Slovak National Hero and Co-Founder of Czechoslovakia. By Michal Kšíňan. London–New York: Routledge, 2021. pp. 300.

In recent decades, Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880–1919) has become one of, if not the, most important Slovak historical figures in Slovakia. Born in Nitra County, he left Hungary in 1898 after completing grammar school, first to study in Prague and then to live in France as an astronomer. He then spent years traveling the world and became a prominent figure in the French scientific and political elite. In 1912, he acquired French citizenship. He joined the French army when the war broke out and used his contacts with members of the political elite to reach Prime Minister Aristide Briand, through Czech émigrés Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, whom he knew from Prague, and Edvard Beneš. Together with them, he quickly won support among the great powers for the post-war liquidation of the Monarchy and the creation of new state structures. Štefánik's political vision and his diplomatic and military organizational work thus played a major role in the creation of the new state of Czechoslovakia. Tragically, however, Štefánik never actually set foot on the soil of this new state. On his journey home, not far from Bratislava, his plane crashed on landing.

Several impressive papers on Štefánik's life and work have been published in recent years. One of Kšíňan's innovations in this already vibrant discourse is that he has created a deconstructionist biography: he deliberately does not follow a linear chronological sequence from birth to death (and does not bring his narrative to a close with Štefánik's death, but rather ends much later). This method allows Kšíňan to focus on what he considers the most important issues in Štefánik's life. Given the complexity of Štefánik's personality and the remarkable turns his life took, it would be almost impossible to organize these penetrating analyses into a straight narrative. Over the course of some 39 years (and especially during the last decade and a half of his life), Štefánik pursued a multifaceted career that was almost unprecedented not only in Hungary, but probably in Europe. This presents the historian with daunting challenges. Within the framework of a single narrative, one has to delve into the inner workings of the French astronomical society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries while also considering the subtle shifts in domestic politics in Ecuador, France, Bohemia (or the Czech lands), Russia, England, the United States, Italy, and Romania, not to mention the systems of rules and customs in the French salons, the functioning of the Masonic lodges, and countless other contexts,

for without this detailed backdrop, Štefánik's life and achievements are hardly comprehensible.

After an introductory historical overview intended presumably for the non-Slovak reader, Kšišňan has divided his book into four major themes. It is worth noting that he does not cover Štefánik's entire life. Apart from a few digressions into some of the events of Štefánik's youth, he concentrates on the last 15 years of his life, the period between 1904 and 1919, when Štefánik gradually emerged as an increasingly prominent figure in intellectual and political life in France. As Kšišňan himself states in the preface, he is primarily interested in the Štefánik as the "Slovak national hero." More precisely, he seeks to consider the qualities, networks, relationships, and events in Štefánik's adult life, between the ages of 24 and 39, that made him such an important figure, so rapidly elevated by the new state to the status of a national icon.

The first chapter, which begins with a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of social capital, examines how Štefánik created his network of French social contacts before the outbreak of World War I and how he transformed his social and cultural capital into economic capital. Kšišňan also considers how Štefánik used his interests and hobbies (astronomy, photography, a passion for collecting, an interest in the arts) to maintain his social capital. This analysis is important, as it furthers our grasp of how Štefánik was able to convince French decision-makers in the middle of the war to consider the views of two Czech emigrants (Masaryk and Beneš), how he was able to persuade them and Western public opinion to entertain a new vision of the future of Central Europe, and how he was able to balance the interests of Russia and France, powers which initially had different ideas about how to resolve the Czechoslovak question.

In the second chapter, Kšišňan uses Max Weber's concept of the charismatic leader as a point of departure to explore, through various case studies and micro-studies, how Štefánik influenced his those around him, or in other words, how he used the network of relationships presented in the first chapter. Kšišňan devotes particular attention, for example, to Štefánik's relationship with women, which was one of the most important elements of this network. From his Prague years onwards, Štefánik, who apparently was not a terribly fetching man, eagerly sought the company of the daughters of wealthy, powerful, aristocratic families with good connections, and he often accepted large donations from them. This subchapter also offers a good example of how Kšišňan, despite his basic premise, maintains a critical distance from the subject of his study. For

instance, he makes the following contention: “Štefánik’s flirtations and frequent partings were a consequence of his impulsiveness and fear of being trapped by common stereotypes of relationships. Often, however, he enjoyed the process of seducing and conquering women; he was more of a seducer than a Don Juan. The interest of ladies certainly catered to his egocentrism and narcissism since he always needed to be in the spotlight.” The analysis of Štefánik’s mission to Ecuador is also outstanding. It offers a detailed discussion of the geopolitical context of Štefánik’s secret mission and how his negotiations brought the South American country into the French sphere of interest.

In the third chapter, which follows the most classical format of a biographical narrative, Kšišňan presents Štefánik’s military and political activities during World War I. Unlike many earlier authors, however, Kšišňan does not take the founding of Czechoslovakia as a fundamental goal, i.e., as a goal established at the outset. Rather, he suggests that it was a political innovation which took clearer form during the war years.

The final major section analyses Štefánik’s identity and the political debates after his death, showing that although Štefánik was far from satisfied with the setup of the new republic, he was not fundamentally in favor of Slovak aspirations for autonomy. Rather, he would have strengthened the Slovak presence in a centralist state on the basis of parity rather than Czech dominance. The last two subchapters provide superb micro-examinations of two myths about Štefánik. The first concerns the circumstances of his death, about which conspiracy theories are still common (for instance, that his plane was shot down by Hungarians or that it was mistakenly shot down by Slovaks who, because of its Italian markings, mistook it for a Hungarian plane, or that Beneš had the plane shot down, or that Štefánik deliberately committed suicide). With exemplary thoroughness and critical distance, Kšišňan points out that the circumstances of the crash cannot be clarified because of the negligence of the investigating authorities, and he convincingly refutes various unfounded theories. The second myth concerns Štefánik’s alleged Freemasonry, which is also a popular theory, though one finds no support for it in any sources and there are far more arguments against it than there are for it.

Kšišňan’s monograph, which draws on a vast source base of unprecedented size and new methodological approaches, persuasively rewrites the historical narrative concerning Milan Rastislav Štefánik, calling attention to details which previously were only superficially understood, introducing new topics, and refuting stubborn legends. The book is clearly one of the best biographies of

the Štefánik. Kšiňan takes as his point of departure the notion that Štefánik is a national hero, but the book is really about much more than that. It furthers a far more nuanced understanding of who this man, known today as a Slovak national hero, really was.

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