



Salzburg. Joseph Tiso's and Cernak's visit - 29.07.1940 The president of Slovakia Joseph Tiso (first from the right) and Slovak ambassador to Berlin Matus Cernak (behind Tiso first from the right) walk in front of the ceremonial regiment. The minister of foreign affairs of the Third Reich Joachim von Ribbentrop is also in the picture (from the left). (NAC)

ARTYKUŁ

## Slovak participation in the war. Occupation of Polish mountain regions

Author: **Maciej Korcuć** 24.09.2020

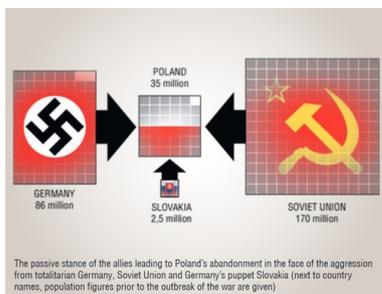
As in conquered Warsaw the symbolic beginning of the occupation was the German victory parade, near the Tatry mountains it was the victory parade organised by the Slovak army in Zakopane.

“We are proud that we could seal the German-Slovak friendship with the effort and blood of Slovaks” - stated the Slovak minister of propaganda Alexander Mach in a speech from October 4<sup>th</sup> 1939.<sup>1</sup>

## Enthusiasm without grounds

Only half a year prior, nothing pointed to such a turn of events. When Slovakia declared its independence on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1939, Poland welcomed it with enthusiasm. It was one of the first countries to acknowledge the newly created state. It did so on the very next day, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1939. Unfortunately, the corrections of Polish-Czechoslovakian border – made in autumn 1938 – already weakened the pro-Polish sympathies of the ruling party of Slovakia.

The Slovak leader, pr. Joseph Tiso hedged his bets on the alliance with Germany. It was no accident, that anti-Polish propaganda strengthened in Slovakia month after month. Alexander Mach – not only the minister of propaganda, but also the leader of the paramilitary Hlinkova Garda – on August 21<sup>st</sup> 1939 gave a speech full of hatred towards Poland, stating territorial demands. In response to the Polish protest, the Slovakian government officially confirmed Mach's demands.<sup>2</sup>



**The actual situation in 1939 (M. Korkuć, *The Fighting Republic of Poland 1939-1945*)**



**Directions of aggression towards  
Poland in september 1939 (M.  
Korkuć, *The Fighting Republic of  
Poland 1939-1945*)**

Many Slovaks did not understand the anti-Polish policy of their government. Some garrisons refused to take part in a war against Poland.<sup>3</sup> However, the Slovak state institutions clearly supported the German aggression. In the northern regions of the country, the infrastructures needed by the Germans to attack Poland were quickly prepared. The Slovaks modernised the roads leading to the Polish border and handed the Germans intelligence on the locations of Polish units, as well as shared their railway lines. They allowed them to place ammunition and gas warehouses near it and allowed the German bombers to use the airfields in Spišská Nová Ves, Vinné and Piešťany. It was here from where the planes which later dropped bombs on Cracow and Warsaw took off. Not long after, in the near border regions, the German armoured and mountain divisions showed up. “We support the allied German army which in these decisive moments comes to defend the independence and territorial integrity of the young Slovak state - against the Polish threat” - said the government’s statement<sup>4</sup>.

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Slovakia also began its own preparations to invade Poland. In August, ten classes worth of reserve soldiers strengthened the army and some of the units from the south were moved up to the north. Border incidents amounted. During one of them, on the night from August 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, a Slovakian unit attacked the railway tunnel of the Łupków-Cisna line in the Bieszczady mountains, protected by the Polish Army and Border Guard. The day after, on August 26<sup>th</sup>, soldiers of the Border Guard were shot at by three German soldiers at the Głodówka pass<sup>5</sup>.

The combat readiness of the Slovakian military and paramilitary organisation was announced on August 28<sup>th</sup>. The Slovakian army reached 150 thousand men – the biggest in its history. The “Bernolak” Army, counting 50 thousand soldiers, was to attack Poland. It consisted of three divisions: “Janosik”, “Škultéty”, “Rázus”, and manoeuvre group “Kalinčak”. The supreme commander became the minister of defence, gen. Ferdynand Čatloš<sup>6</sup>.

At the session of the government from August 30<sup>th</sup>, Tiso stated: “We are ready to march with the Germans”<sup>7</sup>.



**Berlin. Signing of German-Slovak treaty - 21.11.1939** The minister of foreign affairs of the Third Reich Joachim von Ribbentrop (second from the right) and Slovak ambassador to Berlin (second from the left) sign the German-Slovak treaty. Ambassador Paul Schmidt is also in the picture (first from the left).

(NAC)

## **Friends of the Wehrmacht**

The Slovakian army attacked Poland without the official declaration of war 15 minutes after the Germans. "At 5 am the Slovak army crossed the borders" – was written in the journal of the "Janosik" division<sup>8</sup>. On this day, gen. Čatloš gave an order in which he said: "Determined Germany needs determined friends, with our sacrifice we will earn the posterity's gratitude"<sup>9</sup>.

While on the scale of the entire front the participation of these three Slovak divisions did not influence the fate of the war, at Podhale and Sądecki regions it was a clear boost for the German troops of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army of gen. Wilhelm von List being part of the Army Group "South"<sup>10</sup>.

Strong German and Slovak troops marched towards Zakopane, Bukowina, Jurgowa and Nowy Targ. "The entire valley to Orawa is filled with hundreds of tanks, armoured and transport vehicles pushing to Jabłonka Spytkowice and Czarny Dunajec" – reported in the first hours of war the commander of the First Mountain Brigade, col. Janusz Gaładyk<sup>11</sup>.



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**Salzburg. Joseph Tiso's and Cernak's visit - 29.07.1940** The president of Slovakia Joseph Tiso (first from the right) and Slovak ambassador to Berlin Matus Cernak (behind Tiso first from the right) walk in front of the ceremonial regiment. The

**minister of foreign affairs of the  
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Ribbentrop is also in the picture  
(from the left). (NAC)**

“Hostility against Poland is currently a fact. The Slovak army will be fighting alongside the German army. Slovak-German troops are advancing in two directions [...]. Their goal: Nowy Targ – Krościenko” – it was written in the war journal of the army’s command on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939<sup>12</sup>. Already on the first day of war, the Slovaks and Germans took the major part of Podhale, including Zakopane and Nowy Targ<sup>13</sup>. Only individual units of the Border Guard and Border Protection Corps, located on the outskirts of the defence line of the “Karpaty” Army, resisted the enemy heroically. On the next day, the “Janosik” division and the Germans attacked in the direction of Ochotnica and Harklowa. The Slovaks took Czorsztyń on their own<sup>14</sup>. It was defended by the “Żytyn” battalion of the Border Protection Corps, but it had to retreat in the face of the overwhelming forces of the enemy. On the same day, the Slovaks also entered Tylicz. A platoon of Slovak armoured vehicles shot buildings at the main square. Some of them burned to the ground. The soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Podhale Riflemen Regiment, who were forced to fight against both the Slovaks and the Germans since the first days of war, drove them away from the city. Krościenko was taken by the German and Slovak troops.

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The “Škultéty” division prepared for an attack on Nowy Sącz and Gorlice, but after the Polish troops regrouped, it only operated in the western regions of Beskid Niski.

The "Rázus" division took part in the fights and battles near the border at Podkarpacie. Near Huta Polańska, at the Dukielska Pass and near Łupków, it was resisted by the Third Mountain Brigade. Lieut. Rajmund Świątochowski, the commander of the platoon from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Border Protection Corps "Karpaty" was killed in an ambush at Barwnik. Right after that Poles conducted a retaliatory foray. They wanted to get back lieut. Świątochowski's body. They took and burned down the Slovak customs building, but they did not find the body. The Slovaks gave it back only two days later. Harsh fighting took place near Czeremcha. On the night from September 5<sup>th</sup> to September 6<sup>th</sup> Poles conducted a retaliatory foray to the city of Čertyzne. Lieut. Paweł Nazarewicz fell there. All the troops of the "Rázus" division crossed the Polish border on September 8<sup>th</sup>, moving towards Jasło, Krosno and Sanok.

General Čatloš, when delivering a speech to his soldiers on September 13<sup>th</sup>, said: "Soldiers of the young Slovak army turned out to be worthy brothers in arms to their German friends, with whom they brought back peace and order to the territories stolen by the Polish radicals and terrorists"<sup>15</sup>



**Berlin. Joseph Tiso's visit - 10.1940 The president of Reichstag of the Third Reich Hermann Goering (from the right) and president of Slovakia Joseph Tiso in a car. (NAC)**

## Honour and awards

Slovaks participation in Germany's aggression on Poland was condemned by the Slovak ambassador in Poland Ladislav Szathmarý. Already in July he unsuccessfully tried to convince Tiso's government to remain neutral. When war became fact, he denied his own government. The press printed his own protesting statement and he himself, speaking on September 2<sup>nd</sup> to the microphones of Polish Radio, said: "It is the matter of national honour for us to stand on the side of the state which with deepest commitment fights for humanity's greatest values: honour and freedom, and fights as decisively as true Slovaks have always fought in similar circumstances in the history of the Slovak nation. It is impossible to guarantee permanent freedom of the Slovak nation and secure its happy future with means and policies which our greatest sons and martyrs from the past would be ashamed of"<sup>16</sup>. Poles in turn, already on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, scattered leaflets on the border appealing: "We are your brothers! We do not want to shoot you. Do not listen [Nepoczuvajte] to the traitors - yours and ours mortal enemies. Trust us! Wear white armbands. Poles"<sup>17</sup>. It brought little results. What was worse, there were incidents of desertion of Slovaks serving in the Polish Army<sup>18</sup>.

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Moreover, the only foreign formation serving alongside Poles in 1939 was the Legion of Czechs and Slovaks in Poland. The decree on its creation was signed by president Ignacy Mościcki. Its commander became gen. Lev Prchala, but the unit did not take part in any fighting. The creation of the Legion especially offended the Slovak authorities. It was no accident that on September 17<sup>th</sup> the Slovak air force bombed the Hluboczek Wieki town, near Tarnopol, where the Legion was stationed<sup>19</sup>. The Slovak victory parade in Zakopane took place in front of gen. Čatloš and Mach. The ceremony included the awarding of medals to soldiers who had fought with Poles. Victory parade were also organised at Spiska Stara Wieś and Poprada. General von List, on September 27<sup>th</sup>, awarded Čatloš and two other Slovak generals with the German Iron Cross, "to document the heroic efforts of the Slovak army in the war against Poland". In turn, on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1939, soldiers of the

Wehrmacht and Slovak army were solemnly awarded with Slovak medals for their participation in the war on Poland<sup>20</sup>.

Nowy Targ, already as the "German" Neumarkt-Dunajec, became the capital of the region which was made substantially smaller in the south due to the territories handed to Slovakia on the basis of its agreement with the Third Reich. The Slovaks not only took back the territories Poland had joined to its borders less than a year prior, but also took the territories of the so-called Polish Spis and Orava. For the participation in the aggression on Poland the Germans officially handed them to the Slovaks on November 21<sup>st</sup> 1939. 770 km<sup>2</sup> were joined to Slovakia, settled by more than 34.5 thousand people, out of which 586 km<sup>2</sup> (with population of 27 thousand people) belonged to Poland before 1938. They were eleven Oravian villages (Lipnica Wielka and Lipnica Mała, Zubrzyca Góra and Zubrzyca Dolna, Jabłonka, Chyżne, Orawka, Bukowina, Podszkle, Harkabuz, Podsarnie) and fifteen Spis villages (Niedzica, Łapsze Wyżne and Łapsze Niżne, Łapszanka, Kacwin, Brzegi, Rzepiska, Jurgów, Czarna Góra, Trybsz, Krempachy, Nowa Biała, Frydman, Falsztyn, Dursztyn)<sup>21</sup>.

That way the Austrian-Hungarian border from the time of the partitions was brought back, only before 1918 it separated the imperial Galicia from the Kingdom of Hungary. This time, it was to be the border between Slovakia and the German General Governance. As a thank you the Slovak government sent a letter to Adolf Hitler declaring loyalty to the Third Reich.

## **Eradicating Polishness**

Poland was to disappear from these lands once and for all. Hence, any traces of Polish existence at these territories were systematically eradicated and even publically profaned. In example a symbolic funeral of Poland took place in Jurgów<sup>22</sup>.

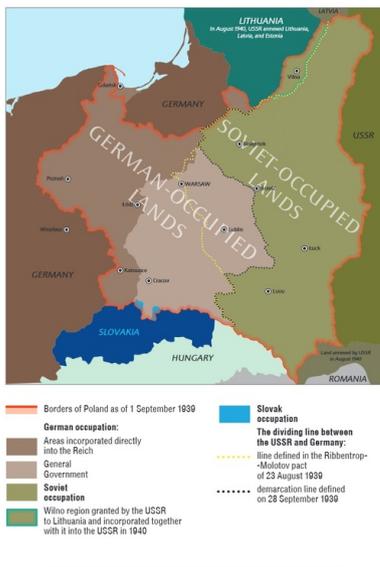
The Slovaks quickly began Slovakising the population. The specifics of the Slovak state, ruled by a Catholic priest, resulted in a strong emphasis being put on the church's policy. The tool for the depolonisation of the taken territories were to be both the representatives of the state and church administration.

It was no accident that it were the Polish priests who suffered from the first repressions. They had to leave their parishes and positions in the church administration. Those, who were from outside of the incorporated regions, were deported to the General Governance. Priests from other Slovak territories were sent in their place. Some of the local priests were isolated from the local communities and locked up in the Slovak monastery in Spis Czwartek (priests from Spis) and Bardejowo (priests from Orava), since they refused to pledge fealty to the Slovak state and to give sermons in Slovak<sup>23</sup>.

As part of destroying all traces of Polish language it was decided to "clear" all captured territories of any Polish books, and first and foremost books for religious services. They were gathered and burned. It was

similar to Polish secular books. For the operation to go smoothly a scheme was used – a charity collection for Polish war prisoners was announced. Priests sent from Slovakia eagerly joined the initiative. Among the local Slovak activists one who was especially active against Poles was pr. Francis Moš, the rector of Nowa Biała at the Polish Spis and the dean of the newly created dean’s office in Niedzica, strongly supported by the Spis bishop Ján Vojtáššák, in 1939 announced as field ordinary<sup>24</sup>.

Polish teachers were deemed as dangerous as priests and were banned from teaching. All the schools were taken over by the Slovak educational authorities. Polish schools were closed and Polish educational books were systematically destroyed. Schools received the status of church schools. The aforementioned pr. Moš, while still serving church functions, at the same time became the state inspector of the people’s schools at Spis<sup>25</sup>. Hostility towards Poland was to be a permanent element of friendship with the Germans.



**The occupation of Poland from 1939 to 1941 (M. Korcuć, *The Fighting Republic of Poland 1939-1945*)**



**The occupation of Poland from 1941 to 1944 (M. Korcuć, *The Fighting Republic of Poland 1939-1945*)**

All border cordons of the General Governance were tightly closed by the Germans on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1940. Their allies did the same on their sides – the Soviets and Slovaks. The border separating General Governance from the territories joined to the Third Reich was also sealed<sup>26</sup>.

Already on spring 1940 pr. Tiso himself visited Spis and Oravian villages. He held Holy Masses in bigger villages and gave sermons about the eternal connection of these lands with Slovakia and the prosperity that was in store for them<sup>27</sup>.

On the scale of the entire Poland, in comparison to the areas occupied by the Germans and Soviets, the Slovak occupation seemed like a less important problem, although it was stressed that these changes in borders would never be accepted by Poland. However, from the standpoint of the Podhale region and the citizens of near-border territories the problem was much graver. The knowledge of the anti-Polish activities of Slovakia resulted in the fact that the near-border communities treated Slovakia as a hostile country, “Since the first days of the country’s occupation the Slovak border guard cooperated with the [German] Grenzschutz and gestapo, stopped Poles trying to pass to Hungary and further to France and handed them to the Germans [...] as well as couriers keeping up communication between the Polish underground and government-in-exile in the West” – wrote Włodzimierz Budarkiewicz, one of the Home Army officers at Podhale and Sądecki regions. Describing the expeditions of the Polish troops to the Slovak border points at the occupied Polish

Spis, he stated that “while disarming the crews of the border stations the partisans did not hold back at all”<sup>28</sup>.

When resistance began expanding in Poland, so already in 1943, some units went to Slovakia to acquire food. Such requisitions were the means to protect Polish farmers from having to feed Polish partisans living in forests. “We got it [food] from Slovakia – said one of the Podhale partisans – after all, the Slovaks cooperated with the Germans, they sent an army east with them. Slovak farmers had five cows each, a lot of pigs too, so we took it from them”<sup>29</sup>. Later, such expeditions were also conducted by Soviet forest troops. The Polish underground did the same in the second half of the 1940s as well.

It is worth stressing, that the territories of the Slovak occupation were included in the activities of the Polish underground. Poles from Orava created a conspiracy structure operating under the codename “Limba”.

### **Care not for all**

Pr. Tiso’s government was a faithful ally to Hitler. In 1941, the Slovaks adopted anti-Semitic bills shaped on the German law. Four temporary camps were established, guarded by the officers of the Hlinkova Garda and supported by the SS instructors. Around 70 thousand Slovak Jews were deported to concentration camps. The anti-Semitic laws and terror also hurt the citizens of the Republic of Poland of Jewish nationality who lived at the territories occupied by the Slovaks. It was the case i.e. in Zubrzyca Górna in the Jabłonka region. The Slovak, on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1942, deported several families from there – in total twenty people of Jewish nationality. They were all shot at a train station. Hlinkova Garda, already in a leaflet in 1940, said: “We will not be fooled by phrases such as Jews are human too. Jews are followers and agents of devils. A Jew is not God’s creation but devil’s creation, that is why a Jew is not human, although they resemble humans”<sup>30</sup>. Especially “eager” Slovaks, including members of the Hlinkova Garda, could count on receiving goods confiscated from Jews, including sawmills, inns, machinery, farming tools etc.<sup>31</sup>

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Hence, along with eradicating Polishness and anti-Semitic actions, the Slovaks worked towards proving to the citizens who pledged loyalty to the new state that they would only profit from being part of Slovakia. The joined territories were taken under special economic care. It was especially in contrast to the situation in Podhale which was joined to the General Governance and occupied by the Germans, who robbed the citizens and repressed farmers with contingents. It was the easier since the war (especially its first years) brought the rise in wealth and generally revived the Slovak economy, even though there were still poor regions stuck in economic stagnation<sup>32</sup>.

Polish zlotys were exchanged to coronas in a very favourable rate for the population. A lot of effort was put into creating new, well-paid jobs. Agricultural economy was revived. Large allocations of food products were provided. "All citizens of Spis perfectly remembered how they received lots of sugar and flour and paid low taxes" wrote one of the researchers of the latest history of Spis. The state made sure that the prices of crops, cattle and wood were favourable too. Additionally, there was a lot of profit made through smuggling through the mountain border to the General Governance – flour, pelts, tires, horses and mushrooms. As a result, during the years of war – in contrast to the terrorised and robbed Podhale – the population of Spis and Orava joined to Slovakia became wealthier<sup>33</sup>. The wealth of those Slovak activists who were gifted with confiscated Jewish property rose especially.



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**Salzburg. Joseph Tiso's and Cernak's visit - 07.1940 The president of Slovakia Joseph Tiso (second from the right) and minister of foreign affairs of the Third Reich Joachim von Ribbentrop (from the right) leave the train station. Behind them in**

**the middle is the head of the  
diplomatic protocol Alexander  
von Doernberg. (NAC)**

## **Post-war borders**

The tides of war also changed the situation in Slovakia. In 1944, an anti-German uprising broke out. The closer it was to the end of the war, the more obvious it became that Slovakia would once again be part of the rebuilt Czechoslovakia. Still in 1945, the Slovaks counted on keeping the Polish territories handed to them by Hitler. The pro-Slovak agitation was helped by the certainty that communism would be introduced in Poland and Czechoslovakia would become a free state. Several years of "cleansing" these lands of Polish population and culture also contributed to that. The Russians, who initially manned the border, had no instructions. In Poland, everyone wanted to bring back the pre-war borders: the administration, Catholic church, political opposition and the underground resistance. Even communists wanted to show their "patriotism" in this case. In the end, the pre-war borders were reinstated in July 1945, but the anti-Polish incidents occurred long after. The Polish underground reacted to this, swiftly punishing any sign of agitation against Poland. Already after the German occupation had ended, due to the conflict there were dead victims on both sides of the border.

It is worth remembering that in the south of Poland war and occupation had a German and Slovak face.

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<sup>1</sup> Cyt. za: J. Kupliński, *Armia słowacka w 1939 r.*, „Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny” 1989, nr 4, s. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> M. Plewczyński, *Powiat Nowy Targ w kampanii wrześniowej 1939 roku [w:] Podhale w czasie okupacji 1939-1945*, red. J. Berghauzen, Warszawa 1977, s. 67-68.

<sup>6</sup> *Proti Poľsku. Odraz ťaženia roku 1939 v denníkach a kronikach slovenskej armády*, red. M. Lacko, Bratislava 2007, s.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kupliński, *op. cit.*, s. 71. 7 J. Kupliński, *op. cit.*, s. 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Proti Poľsku...*, s. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Cyt. za: J. Kupliński, *op. cit.*, s. 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Cyt. za: J. Kasperek, *Podhale w latach wojny i okupacji niemieckiej 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1990, s. 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Proti Poľsku...*, s. 30.

<sup>13</sup> J. Kasperek, *op. cit.*, s. 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Cyt. za: *Proti Poľsku...*, s. 126.

<sup>16</sup> Cyt. za: *Od poznania do zrozumienia. Polacy, Czesi i Słowacy w XX wieku*, red. E. Orlof, Rzeszów 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Cyt. za: *Proti Poľsku...*, s. 121.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 11.

<sup>19</sup> J. Kupliński, *op. cit.*, s. 75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 76-77.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kozanecki, A. Szczygieł, *Z problematyki rozwoju antyhitlerowskiego ruchu oporu na Podhalu i w Sądecczyźnie (1939-1945)*, „Studia Historyczne” 1971, nr 3, s. 570; J. Kasperek, *op. cit.*, s. 45-46.

<sup>22</sup> J. Kowalczyk, *Spisz podczas II wojny światowej i w pierwszych latach powojennych* [w:] *Terra Scepusiensis. Stan badań nad dziejami Spiszu*, red. R. Gładkiewicz, Martin Homza, Levoča – Wrocław 2003, s. 914.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 912; J. Zieliński, *Spisz i Orawa w latach 1918-1945* [w:] *Podhale w czasie okupacji 1939-1945...*, s. 171-173.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*, s. 912-913.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 914.

<sup>26</sup> K. Pluta-Czachowski, *op. cit.*, s. 158.

<sup>27</sup> J. Zieliński, *op. cit.*, s. 173.

<sup>28</sup> W. Budarkiewicz, *Wspomnienia partyzanta podhalańskiego*, Nowy Targ 1986, s. 73, mps w zbiorach PTH – Oddział w Nowym Targu.

<sup>29</sup> Relacja Jana Srala „Potrzaska”, 17 i 23 VIII 1991 r., zbiory własne autora.

<sup>30</sup> Cyt. za: D. Kováč, *Dejiny Slovenska*, Bratislava 2002, s. 227.

<sup>31</sup> J. Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*, s. 914-919.

<sup>32</sup> D. Kováč, *op. cit.*, s. 224.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

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