

Klemensova 2522/19
811 09 Bratislava – Staré Mesto
Slovak Republic
marina.zavacka@savba.sk
ORCID 0000-0002-0731-7698

However, the ongoing war, resulting in a growing number of wounded, captured and missing persons, found the government inevitably and increasingly relying on the SRC for expert health care skills as well as for contacts within international Red Cross networks. Even more, the deployment of SRC nurses in the field hospitals produced a women role-model of a skilled, courageous authority figure worthy of public merit. The analysis of contemporary governmental and SRC press traces the problematic incorporation of such unconventional heroes into the tight frames of contemporary official propaganda.

Keywords: Slovak Red Cross; Nurses; WWII; Eastern Front; Memory;

Po vypuknutí vojny, s rastúcim počtom ranených, zajatých a stratených osôb, však závislosť štátu od SČK vzrastala. Ako organizácia totiž dokázal nielen poskytnúť kvalifikované ošetrovateľské sily, ale mal tiež funkčné kontakty v medzinárodných štruktúrach Červeného kríža. Nasadenie

sestier SČK v poľných nemocniciach na Východnom fronte posilnilo ich obraz ako kvalifikovaných, odvážnych žien s autoritou, hodných verejného uznania. Analýza dobovej tlače ukazuje ťažkosti začleňovania takýchto nekonvenčných hrdiniek do úzkych rámcov dobovej oficiálnej propagandy.

Kľúčové slová: Slovenský červený kríž; zdravotné sestry; druhá svetová vojna; Východný front; pamäť;

Introduction

The study¹ explores the information policy of the Slovak wartime government concerning the Slovak Red Cross, with special focus on deployment of the SRC nurses on the Eastern front. The text is based mostly on contemporary periodicals and memoir literature. In the Slovak National Archives, where the documents of the Slovak branch of the Czechoslovak Red Cross and war-time SRK are stored, the inventory list of relevant collection does not contain a single item related to the operation on the Eastern Front.² „Confidential files“ in the Ministry of National Defence fund in the Military Historical Archive contain an item headed „Cooperation of the Ministry of National Defence of the Slovak Republic with the Slovak Red Cross“, but it only contains the above-cited list of one six-member rotation. The rest consists of organizational correspondence regarding the short-term assignment of one nurse for Slovak soldiers being treated in Vienna.³ Prior to 1989, the contemporary periodicals and other sources stored in public libraries were subject to limited access (list of prohibited publications), regulated by political censorship. In the respective volume of history of the Red Cross in Slovakia, the deployment of nurses on the Eastern front has also been addressed very marginally.

Management of the officially commissioned image of the Slovak Red Cross in that particular period environment was an uneasy and unrewarding task. The organization itself was rooted in strong humanist principles and anchored in a tightly knit international network, all the while the Slovak government the Red Cross had become subordinate to was an obedient satellite of the Third Reich. The very core of Red Cross agenda, i.e. serving one's neighbour regardless of confession or ethnicity, contradicted the governmental politics. At the same time, the government strongly depended on the SRC in specific agendas. Increasing numbers of

¹ The text is a result of APVV-20-0526 Political socialization in the territory of Slovakia during the years 1848 – 1993. Its Slovak draft version was presented in Proceedings of the Conference Phenomenon of borders in the History and Historical Memory. Феномен границ в истории и исторической памяти: материалы международной научной конференции. Stavropol 2021, p. 77-96.

² Slovenský národný archív (Slovak National Archives, hereafter referred to as SNA), fund (f.) Československý Červený kríž na Slovensku.

³ The SRC nurse Berta Malá tended the Slovak soldiers convalescing in Vienna at the beginning of 1943. Vojenský historický archív (Military Historical Archives in Bratislava, hereafter referred to as VHA), f. Ministerstvo národnej obrany Slovenskej republiky 1939 – 1945, f. o. spisy dôverné 1940 – 1945, II. časť – 1943 – 1945; 129: Súčinnosť Ministerstva národnej obrany Slovenskej republiky so Slovenským červeným krížom; Odoslanie sestier SČK do Poľnej nemocnice 1 Zaisťovacej divízie. Kr. č. 369, zn. sp. 60 4/2 - 60 4/4, 21 lis. (p. 136-156).

wounded soldiers and prisoners of war, as well as of Slovak industrial workers proclaimed missing during their stay in bombed German industry, reinforced the SRC position in the internal politics. The Slovak government attempted to neutralise these apparent contradictions in number of ways. Harmonising images were produced through its propagandist machinery while the national Red Cross organisational autonomy was pruned with legislative measures.

The twists and turns of the official approach towards the deployment of the SRC nurses on the Eastern front can serve as a case study of production of ambivalent and often contradictory propagandist messages, reflecting the competing ideological lines within the society, including the ruling party itself.

In the post-war period, war-time experience of individual SRC nurses was pushed into oblivion. This was again caused by few concurrent factors. First, despite their being non-combatant medical staff there was their formal connection to the losing side. Such elements in personal history were safer to blur. Second, in their working environment of strict hospital and military hierarchies, usage of personal surnames was reserved for leading figures only. The hospital staff were usually addressed as Doctor, Nurse or caregiver.⁴ The former patients could not say much about their nurses either. Their individuality was covered by uniforms and in professional distance, and the medication of seriously wounded soldiers also lowered any chance to leave other than anonymous trace in patients' memoirs.

After return from the Eastern front, many nurses faced series of dramatic events such as the anti-Nazi Uprising of autumn 1944 or passing of the front through Slovakia. These moments, where their lives were put into direct risk, overlaid their memories of previous events. And after the war, the luckier ones redirected their energy to peaceful life and to rising their own families, trying to suppress the flashbacks of war. In 1945, some nurses who supported the war-time regime and had some family links to its political elites might have decided to join the wave of its post-war emigration, similarly to wives of higher-rank leaders of the Hlinka's Youth corps or Hlinka's People's Party. But the post-war „silence“ also applied to those who had participated in the anti-Nazi resistance and who remained to live and work in Slovakia during the coming decades.⁵

Since the end of the 1940s, the public silence around many former anti-Nazi resistance members was linked to their family background and political views, perceived as „unacceptable“ by the rising communist regime. This applied not only to nurses formerly posted in higher organisational positions, requiring special

⁴ Routine absence of any eye witness references regarding women nurses is evident e.g. in the memoirs of MUDr. Karol Viršík, a military surgeon of the Slovak army on the Eastern front in March - October 1942. VIRŠÍK, Karol. *Odchádzam s Hippokratom*. Prešov 2005. For an illustrious example of the same phenomenon in the recent academic historiography, see the detailed photo description "Ceremonial funeral of a Slovak soldier, being served by a Lutheran priest, with honour unit in the left side background", dully missing the figure of a white-dressed nurse, standing in its very centre. MIČIANIK, Pavel. *Slovenská armáda v ťažení proti Sovietskemu zväzu (1941-1944)*, III., Rýchla divízia. Banská Bystrica 2009, p. 187.

⁵ MIHÁLIKOVÁ, Anna. „Bratislavská biela pani (Františka Hrubíšková).“ In VOLANSKÁ, Helena a kol. *Hrdinky bez páťosu*. Bratislava 1967.

professional training, who usually came from officials' or tradesmen's families. This also applied to number of rank-and-file Red Cross volunteers, just for being peasant smallholders or stubborn churchgoers. The negative stance towards strong figures from among the war-time nurses was reflected also by the telling time-gap in the list of Slovak holders of Florence Nightingale Medal. This highest international recognition for nurses is awarded by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, to nurses recommended by its national organisations. In 1947, i.e. just prior to the communist accession to power in Czechoslovakia of 1948, three Slovak nurses were decorated to honour their service in military hospitals during the Uprising. But only in 1965 a next Slovak nurse followed, thanks to a temporary Cold War thaw.⁶

Imposed reorganisation

The Red Cross activity on the territory of contemporary Slovakia dates back to the era of Austro-Hungarian empire. However, until the end of the WWI, much of its initial aristocratic tradition of nursing the „wounded heroes of the Fatherland“⁷ was overlaid with new spirit of civic, democratically engaged social movement. Roots of this turn can be traced mainly to the United States of America, where the Red Cross structures evolved into a mass civic organisation during the WWI.⁸ After its end many volunteers decided to carry on and redirect their activities in ways suitable for time of peace, namely into campaigning against epidemics and social diseases, for safety at work awareness, etc. This kind of Red Cross agenda was firmly implemented in Czechoslovakia mainly thanks to wide personal initiative of Alice Masaryk, the daughter of Czechoslovakia's first president T. G. Masaryk. A university graduate in social work, she spent one year guest-working in a centre for immigrants, run by the University of Chicago under the patronage of an industrialist and philanthrope Charles Crane.⁹

In 1919, her acquired organisational skills and personal networks enabled Alice Masaryk to obtain substantial help for Slovakia from the Red Cross. It included medical mission of military doctors and nurses from the Great Britain and mass deliveries of food and medical supplies from the USA.¹⁰ During the critical early post-war period it saved thousands of local children from hunger and epidemics. Alice Masaryk became also *spiritus movens* of a new modern Red Cross school for professional (certified) nurses and social workers, the Institute of M. R. Štefánik in Turčiansky Svätý Martin in Northern Slovakia. The Red

⁶ MINTALOVÁ, Zora – TELGARSKÝ, Bohdan. Červený kríž na Slovensku v rokoch 1939-1947. Martin 2005, p. 85-86.

⁷ CURTISS, John Shelton. Russian Sisters of Mercy in the Crimea, 1854-1855. In *Slavic Review*, 1966, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 84-100.

⁸ IRWIN, Julia F. Teaching “Americanism with a World Perspective”: The Junior Red Cross in the U.S. Schools from 1917 to the 1920s. In *History of Education Quarterly*, 2013, vol. 53, no. 3, p. 259-267.

⁹ UNTERBERGER, Betty, B. The Arrest of Alice Masaryk. In *Slavic Review*, 1974, vol. 33, no. 1, p. 92-95.

¹⁰ SYLVIA z LIMERICKU – MINTALOVÁ, Zora. Z činnosti pomocnej misie Britského Červeného kríža Lady Muriel Paget na Slovensku. In *Historický časopis*, 2008, vol. 56, no. 3, p. 497-506.

Cross linked professional medical staff with the supportive lay public, offering also a range of shorter courses for auxiliary nurses, volunteer sisters and male Samaritans, who staffed mainly ad hoc summoned rescue teams.¹¹

During the interwar period, the Czechoslovak Red Cross established its firm position of an independent association with combined financing. This was based on membership fees and gifts from local and foreign donors, together with grants from the central and local governments. Red Cross ubiquity was guaranteed through introducing its „sapling“ groups in all primary schools, thus involving whole generations of pupils in health and hygienic instruction.¹²

For almost two decades, the Czechoslovak Red Cross posed as an organisation with a whole-state competence, with a central office in Prague. After Slovak autonomy within Czechoslovakia was proclaimed in autumn 1938, its government decreed the dissolution of all associations with headquarters based outside of the Slovak territory.¹³ In an attempt to conform to the new situation, the board of the Slovak division of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, based in Turčiansky Sv. Martin, rebranded itself formally to the Headquarters of the Slovak Red Cross. During the upcoming months, including the period following the proclamation of the „independent“ Slovak state under the German protection, the Slovak Red Cross escaped any political attacks or cleansings. On the contrary, in several moments the state administration itself strongly depended on its capacities. Such case was care for evacuees, who were fleeing inlands from the border changes of November 1938 and from the military conflict with Hungary in March 1939.¹⁴

The period of administrative non-interference expired in summer 1939, due to the approaching German campaign against Poland, including engagement of the Slovak army. At the end of August 1939, the Slovak government formally recognised the Association of the Slovak Red Cross, through which it – as a new state – acceded to the International Committee of the Red Cross „Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field“ of July 27th, 1929. Its Article 10 bound all contracting parties to ensure the position of their national Red Cross Association as a part of its military health service.¹⁵ At that time, SRC still preserved some of its traditional independence from the local politics. Its president and vice-presidents were elected by the general assembly of regional delegates. However, its Central Committee was under the political pressure expanded to incorporate the corps-commander of the Hlinka Youth, the representatives of the ministries of defence, interior, foreign affairs and education, as well as two representatives of the German minority's Deutsche Partei.¹⁶

¹¹ MINTALOVÁ, Zora – TELGÁRSKY, Bohdan. Červený kríž na Slovensku 1919 – 1938. Martin 2005.

¹² Desať rokov práce Československého Červeného kríža. Martin 1929.

¹³ Nariadenie vlády Slovenskej krajiny č. 14/1938 z 28. 10. 1938 „o zaistení majetku spolkov, korporácií a základín, ústredie ktorých je mimo Slovenska“.

¹⁴ FIAMOVÁ, Martina – LONČÍKOVÁ, Michala. Autonómia Slovenska 1938 – 1939: Počiatočná fáza holokaustu a perzekúcií. In Forum Historiae, 2019, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 1-6.

¹⁵ MINTALOVÁ, Zora – TELGÁRSKY, Bohdan. Červený kríž na Slovensku 1939 – 1947. Martin 2005, p. 18. Podľa konvencie vstúpila prístupová listina v platnosť až šesť mesiacov po doručení.

¹⁶ MINTALOVÁ – TELGÁRSKY, Červený kríž na Slovensku, p. 20-21.

Despite personal reshuffling in some leading positions, the acting Director's office apparatus, the members of the former SRC presiding board and especially the highly esteemed teaching staff of the Štefánik's nursing school made all efforts to carry on the humanist and democratic ethos, persisting from interwar Czechoslovakia, and preserved strong mutual collaboration. To break these politically uncomfortable networks and to enhance „adaptation of the work“ of the SRC to “new needs” generated by the developing war, the SRC Director's Office was ordered to move to Bratislava. The SRC Director, MUDr. L. Izák, a civil specialist on tuberculosis, who run the office in Turčiansky Svätý Martin already under the Czechoslovak Red Cross, was replaced by lieutenant of the Slovak army medical service, stomatologist MUDr. Fedor Kornel Skotnický.¹⁷

The SCR, namely its lay component, was further weakened by the forced departure of families of Czech employees from Slovakia, following the proclamation of Slovak autonomy in autumn 1938¹⁸, and by drastic marginalisation of persons of Jewish descent from public life.¹⁹ Prospective certified nurses were discouraged from profession by rising conservative clerical influence in politics, promoting the „return“ of employed women „to the home fireplace“, or their volunteering in regime loyalist organisations.²⁰ The organisational changes imposed on SRC from outside liquidated its internal democratic mechanisms and deprived many nurses of control over projects, which they developed in long term and considered their own. This applied namely to social and healthcare activities, aimed at care for mothers and children and free-time education of schoolchildren, which under political coercion were re-directed to the auspices of Women corps of the Hlinka People's Party and Hlinka's Youth. The voluntary SRC sisters were required to serve at political manifestations of the ruling party, whose values they often did not share.

The interest in SRC membership declined also due to unpopularity of war against Poland and of omnipresent militarisation. According to the Director F. K. Skotnický's report at the general assembly of SRC delegates in July 1940, the SRC coped with losing „a wide field, which had enabled it for the lively, creative and generally useful work“. He complained about RC limited possibility to „propagate the idea of Red Cross among the wide strata of population through its practical, useful work“, and its being deprived of „hearths, around which our activists gathered in their work and which energised them for tasks ahead“.²¹ The new political elites recognised both ideological and practical risks, resulting from such decline. To slow it down, the SRC assembly was called presented

¹⁷ Vojenský historický archív Bratislava (hereafter referred to as VHA) fund (f.) Dokumenty Hlavného vojenského veliteľstva. [Online.] MUDr. Fedor Skotnický, por. zdrav. - dotaz. (195539). Dostupné na internete: <<http://ebadatelnavha.vhu.sk/sk/islandora/object/vha%3A159011#page/3/mode/1up>>

¹⁸ ZELINOVÁ, Hana (ed.). Česi na Slovensku. Zborník z konferencie Česi na Slovensku. Martin 2000.

¹⁹ FIAMOVÁ - LÔNČÍKOVÁ, p. 1-6.

²⁰ ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Ženy v ideológii slovenského štátu. Bratislava 2020.

²¹ Slovenský Červený kríž, 1940, vol. 2, no. 5-6, p. 8, SKOTNICKÝ, F. K. Červený kríž v sociálnej službe mierovej. Prejav z 15. júna 1940.

a resolution to pass, binding its section of voluntary sisters to „rise the number of women members“ and to use „both the personal example and suitable propaganda to win the indifferent women, who still continue turning sideways from the work for the Slovak Red Cross“. ²²

War-time propaganda

In 1941, the Slovak governmental propaganda continued its efforts to integrate contradictory messages of support for the Red Cross humanitarian agenda and support of Third Reich's war campaign. Seeking to conform to this line, the Slovak Red Cross president František Valentín's New Year address also included elements of both. He reminded the public of the tradition of „selfless help to suffering neighbour“, of the war „writing European history with a blood-stained finger again“, and of „the duty of humanity which cannot fade even on the battlefield“. On the other hand, he also stressed that the Slovak Red Cross „has not anything in common with a sentimental, ineffective pacifism“ nor with „wrongly understood internationalism“. ²³ He described the SRC aim as „when nations and states barricade themselves by trenches, barbed wire and panzer shields“ the Red Cross „bridges these abysses and makes the contacts between humans possible“.

The civilian and associating dimension of the Red Cross was suppressed, and the same applied to its „women's“, non-military and neighbourly or familiar character: „if the slogan of total war is valid, then a slogan of total readiness of the Red Cross has to be adopted, too“, namely no more „any ad hoc committees and ladies' boards, but a thoroughly planned preparation“. The „whole nation must stand behind the Red Cross“, which is „a voluntary civic association, but the discipline and readiness performed by its bodies shall be comparable to military“. ²⁴ The official rhetoric shifted from praising the voluntary participation of civilians in helping their neighbours towards presenting such activity as demanded by the army or by the state: „when the soldiers are fighting, it is a duty of citizens to take care of the bleeding wound of the nation and thus participate in its self-preservation“. Such „voluntary“ activity should be executed „as needed“, „on time“ and „administered“ with sufficient force. The claim that the SRC „feels that it must not fail in the difficult hour“ ²⁵ also anticipated new organisational changes.

Prior to the upcoming reform, a group of organisational SRC workers were dispatched for the study journey to the Third Reich. They visited the German Red Cross central offices to get familiar with its „organisation and system of work, which is now, in the war-time, in full swing“. After return, they were expected to implement the newly acquired knowledge at home. Besides the president of the SRC F. Valentín, who was a professor of chemistry, and its director F. K. Skotnický, a stomatologist, the working group included the head nurse

²² Slovák, 18. 6. 1940, p. 3, Z udalostí posledných dní: Dr. Jozef Tiso pri prejave na shromaždení delegátov spol. Slovenského ČK.

²³ Slovák, 14. 1. 1941, p. 5, Dr. F. V. Dokonalá organizácia Červeného kríža. Práca pre budúcnosť národa.

²⁴ Dr. F. V., Dokonalá organizácia, p. 5.

²⁵ Dr. F. V., Dokonalá organizácia, p. 5.

Otília Lorencová, the leading nurse of the medical service Jolana Šramková and „the SRC foreign desk officer“ nurse Vilma M. Mišíková.²⁶ It was probably the only case from among the mixed delegations when the number of women prevailed. The following working group, which travelled to study Italian Red Cross practices in November 1941 under the leadership of director F. K. Skotnický, included four other doctors, a male press secretary and only one nurse, Mišíková, who soon became Mrs. Skotnická.²⁷

Meanwhile, the preparation of a new Law on the Slovak Red Cross proceeded. Copying the Third Reich legislature it deprived the SRC of any remnants of non-governmental character. In media, the SRC was rhetorically equated to the army: „the soldier cannot do without a bayonet and also without the Red Cross“, „while the human mentality requires an arm, it will have to keep the Red Cross apparatus“. Simply put, a soldier fights, while the SRC care enables him to fight, thus „regarding its function, in the war-time it is an equivalent entity to the operational forces“. ²⁸ The idea of the SRC should be „cleaned“ from „false interpretations“, which would be interpreting its agenda as contradictory to war. Such thinking was linked to people who were „lacking the backbone“ and whose feelings could not be compared to those who „think healthily“, who „know the right angle from which to look“ at the matter. According to propagandist texts, the SRC units were serving fearlessly at the frontlines, while its directorate diligently worked to prepare sanitary material. Or in other words „the Red Cross with faithfulness to life and death follows the fighting army to ease the terror of destructive weapons and to prove that there are people who do not fear the highest of sacrifices“. ²⁹ Summed up, the fearless people at the frontline were no more only soldiers, but also the SRC workers.

At the end of November 1941, the reorganisation of the SRC following the Nazi-like Leader principle was presented as a fixed thing. Its president should be no more elected, but appointed and removed by the state president. His nomination should come not from a general assembly of delegates, but from a joint proposal of the minister of interior and minister of the national defence. Minister of interior was entrusted with general supervision over the SRC, while the state president became its honorary Protector.³⁰ Instead of associational structure, which was allegedly „slowing down the successful work of this organisation in the spirit of new era and according to new needs“³¹, the German system of „operational groups“ was introduced. The state took over the financing and

²⁶ Slovák, 4. 4. 1941, p. 4, Exkurzia Slovenského červeného kríža do Berlína. At national RC Headquarters, knowledge of foreign languages was necessary to conduct international correspondence. The staff nurses were trained at internships abroad.

²⁷ Slovák, 11. 11. 1941, p. 6, Delegácia SČK v Taliansku.

²⁸ Gardista, 16. 6. 1941, p. 5, Červený kríž – armáde. Zmiernenie bojových následkov je najväčšou starosťou Červeného kríža.

²⁹ Gardista, 16. 6. 1941, p. 5.

³⁰ Slovák, 10. 12. 1941, p. 4, Vládny návrh zákona o Slovenskom Červenom kríži. SČK je samostatnou právnu osobou.

³¹ Slovák, 20. 11. 1941, p. 3, Zo Snemu: Reorganizácia Slovenského Červeného kríža na princípe vodcovskom.

thus also the direct control, „ensuring the prerequisites for successful development of activities“.³² The new head of the SRC was appointed the Speaker of the Parliament, Martin Sokol, who was a lawyer by education.³³

According to the new law, passed on December the 9th, 1941, the Association of the SRC was dissolved and its voluntary members were re-registered into the reorganised SRC, which was „exclusively authorised to prepare and execute the auxiliary military health service according to orders of the military administration“. It should also cooperate „according to international provisions and within the frame of state administration measures“ in care for prisoners of war. Further it should care for war victims, participate in military education and civil anti-aircraft defence, in the field of medical service, organise nursing and rescue service and supervise their training, provide help in natural disasters, participate in voluntary social work, mediate contacts with international RC offices, etc. The membership in SRC remained voluntary, but its members were subject to the state regulations of official, medical and military secrecy.³⁴

According to the daily newspaper of the Hlinka Guard paramilitary corps, *Gardista*, „today the sign of the red cross is a symbol of relieving the horrors of war. It ceased to be a symbol of peace“. In a pathetic conclusion its author described a scene full of wounded soldiers, streams of blood, sound of guns and dead eyes, where hope is introduced not through the red, but through the „veritable“ cross: „after the moments of thunderstorm, not a red cross, but a Jesus Christ's white cross will shine, bringing again the people peace and tranquillity“.³⁵

In the field hospital

At the beginning of January 1942 the public was presented a new, unexpected image of a Slovak Red Cross nurse. She was positioned directly „at the front“. Until then, the women SRC members pictured on covers of the *Slovenský Červený kríž* (the Slovak Red Cross magazine) were „preparing supplies of hospital linen“ or „fulfilled the order of time“ by tending a re-convalescing soldier, leaning over a hospital bed. The photo on the cover of the first issue shows a nurse, eating her quick lunch from a military mess bowl, standing on a sun-lightened doorstep. While the image was still fitting the habitual aesthetic canon, its description was unexpectedly radical: „a woman front warrior of the Slovak Red Cross“.³⁶ Inside the issue, there was a group picture of five nurses with a doctor, described as „one of the teams of voluntary nurses of the Slovak Red Cross on the Eastern front“.³⁷

During the next weeks, more details were published about the SRC nurses serving on the Eastern front. An article under the heading „New fighters for the honour and glory of the Slovak nation“, published in the *Gardista* newspaper

³² *Gardista*, 20. 11. 1941, p. 3, Pred reorganizáciou Slovenského Červeného kríža.

³³ *Slovenský Červený kríž*, 1942, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 5.

³⁴ *Slovák*, 10. 12. 1941, p. 4, Vládny návrh zákona o Slovenskom Červenom kríži. SČK je samostatnou právnu osobou.

³⁵ *Gardista*, 14. 12. 1941, p. 7, Osudy ranených vojakov.

³⁶ *Slovenský Červený kríž*, 1942, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 1.

³⁷ *Slovenský Červený kríž*, p. 6.

described the graduation ceremony at the High Military School in Bratislava. President Tiso used this event to arrange a decoration ceremony. In front of the lined-up graduates, he decorated the wounded veterans and also few allied German and Romanian officers with a military order For heroism. Then he also awarded a group of representative civilians, who received the Cross of merit for the defence of the state. Their list contained a bishop-military vicar, a head of the Propaganda office, the mayor of Bratislava, president of the Slovak Red Cross, the speaker of the parliamentary defence committee, the president of the Club of foreign journalists FS Oberstumbanführer Kurt Goldbach, the Slovak railways main inspector and his deputy, and five nurses of the Slovak Red Cross. There was no further information given except their names – Oľga Vozáriková, Dr. Jana Hanová, Vilma Ebringerová, Alžbeta Rišánková and Oľga Zvolská.³⁸

Only according to later mentions in the magazine of the Slovak Red Cross and in its celebrative annual it became known that these were a team, which just returned from the Eastern front. Even in the magazine article, the headline vaguely stated that „The Slovak Red Cross was decorated with the Cross of Merit for the defence of the state.“³⁹ During the decorating ceremony, the president addressed the wounded soldiers. The editors selected one of such quotes with a comment: „feeling, that the words addressed to the heroical soldiers belonged also to them, since they were experiencing hardships at the front, the nurses understood in their modest unpretentiousness the magnitude of the sacrifices they brought to the altar of the nation for the glory of humanity“.⁴⁰ The short information about the celebratory dinner organized by the directorate of the SRC for its awarded sisters contained the pathetic phrase that „the award they received only marked with a seal the glorious opus, which they wrote by their special act of mercy, to be inserted into the historical archive of the Slovak history“. The Cross of merit, awarded to František Valentín as the President of the Slovak Red Cross, should be perceived as „merit of Red Cross volunteers who serve the great work of humanity heroically, albeit without shouting“. In congratulatory text of the director Skotnický, the awarded nurses were reminded that „their further work must be worthy the high honours“.⁴¹

Until now, there is relatively little detailed information about the members of this group. One of its members, MUDr. Jana Hanová, was even referred to as a „nurse“ in the SRC reports, while she was a fully qualified doctor. She worked at a children's clinic before going to the field hospital. Her husband Martin Hano, who was a surgeon, was denied the postponement of his field rotation in autumn 1940.⁴² It is therefore likely that she decided to join the staff of the field hospital,

³⁸ Gardista, 15. 2. 1942, p. 3, Noví bojovníci za česť a slávu slovenského národa. Slávnostné vyraďovanie absolventov Vysokej vojenskej školy 14. febr. 1942.

³⁹ ZVONÁR TIEN, Jožo. Veľký rok Slovenského Červeného kríža. Bratislava 1941.

⁴⁰ Slovenský červený kríž, 1942, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 23-24.

⁴¹ Slovenský červený kríž, 1942, p. 23-24.

⁴² VHA Bratislava, f. Dokumenty Hlavného vojenského veliteľstva, [Online], a. j. MUDr. Hano Martin, voj. na trv. dov., voj. nem. 1, 1911/1931 - odklad. (215949). Dostupné na internete: <<http://ebadatelnavha.vhu.sk/sk/islandora/object/vha%3A174283#page/1/mode/1up>>.

too. They both survived the war and worked in Bratislava again in 1946–48, while Martin Hano was a city deputy for the Democratic Party.⁴³

The certified nurse Oľga Vozáriková worked as an organizer of the women's emergency units of the Red Cross after returning from her mission „at the front“. Together with Martin Hano and other co-authors, she participated in the publication of the official SRC textbook „First Aid“, main author of which was MUDr. B. Rippa.⁴⁴ She also dedicated herself to the promotion of the nursing service in the field hospital and reported on her experiences on the radio and in the press.⁴⁵ She repeatedly mentioned that she also kept a more extensive diary during her „frontline“ deployment. In 1944, she worked as a volunteer nurse in territory held by the forces of the anti-Nazi uprising. She died of a gunshot wound on December 17 in the village of Nemecká and was buried in her native Liptovský Peter.

The doctor in the joint photo with the group of nurses in the field hospital was most probably MUDr. Pavel Mráz, who after the war served as the head of the surgical department of the Military Hospital in Bratislava. Following the Communist accession to power he was removed to garrison hospital in Milovice in Central Bohemia. Then, from 1955 until his retirement, which coincided with the political cleansings, following the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia in 1968, he worked at the department of pre-military instruction of the Comenius University.⁴⁶

According to the shorter version of Vozáriková's travelogue, which she published in the Slovak Red Cross magazine and was also included in the SRC Annual, the rotation of the first group of nurses sent to the Eastern Front took over four months. She attributed her motivation to sign up for the service in field to the declaration of the state's military alert, during which the chairman of the SRC appealed to all members to become a „reliable support of our army“.

As a certified nurse, who was trained at the nursing school „to keep the wounded in high esteem“, she felt obliged to „open the tender heart of a woman and take up work with the courage of a man“. She headed to help a soldier who not only „holds a weapon in his hand to protect the interests of the nation“, but „who is a human being“ likely to „suffer and bleed“. Vozáriková received her travel order on July 14, 1941, in 24-hour notice. The next day she joined the group traveling from Bratislava at Kysak station, from where they continued together by train to Medzilaborce in the North-Eastern Slovakia.⁴⁷

⁴³ Oznamy. In *Ľud*, 7. 8. 1948, p. 5; Novoutvorený NV v Bratislave zasadal. In *Národná obroda*, 5. 10. 1946, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Úradná učebnica SČK „Prvá pomoc“ už vyšla. In *Slovák*, 26. 8. 1944, p. 1. Due to its speedy distribution just a few days before the Uprising, this more than 400 pages thick book printed in 25 000 impression could really save lives.

⁴⁵ *Slovák*, 11. 7. 1942, p. 6, Prednáška o samaritánskej službe sestier v nemocniciach a obväžištiach na východnom fronte: Oľga Vozáriková a Pavla Majerová.

⁴⁶ VENCEL, Pavol – MISTRÍK, Juraj. *História vojenskej nemocnice v Bratislave*. Bratislava 2003, p. 107; ONDREJKOVICS de SLAVNICA, S. Rýchla divízia. Pict.: „Veliteľ Poľnej nemocnice 11 mjr. zdrav. Dr. Pavel Mráz. Šéflekár dozoruje urgentnú operáciu raneného vojaka Rýchlej divízie svojim tímom vojenských chirurgov.“ Dostupné na internete: <<http://www.ondrejkovics-sandor.com/?lg=1&s=131>>.

⁴⁷ Slovenský Červený kríž, 1942, vol. 4, no. 5-6, p. 88-90. VOZÁRIKOVÁ, Oľga. Zápisky z frontu.

From there, on the morning of July 16, they set out with the military motorcade, being seated in trucks next to the drivers. On the way through Poland and crossing the bridge on the former Polish-Russian border, they passed „destroyed and burnt houses“, where „barbed wires lie by the side of the road, burnt cars are in ditches, tanks are shot up“. Also some „bunkers“ and „nicely arranged graves of fallen soldiers“ did not escape her attention. After a short break for dinner at the military kitchen, their convoy continued until half past eleven in the evening. Then the nurses were stationed in a former orphanage in an unnamed city and started working in the local military hospital.⁴⁸ They began from rearranging hospital beds, which were „made by men“ in a way their professionally trained eye „somehow didn't like ... After several days or weeks, the convalescents were destined for transport home and the hospital emptied in anticipation of new patients.⁴⁹

Vozáriková particularly noted that between nurses and soldiers, whether co-workers or patients, a „genuine friendly relationship“ arose, and the soldiers „behaved politely towards the nurses and always respected the woman as a sister“. On August 15, the nurses were assigned „to the surgical group of the Rapid Division“ by order of the commander of the medical service with the comment that they „proved themselves well in the work“ and were therefore to go where they were most needed. In the first stage they covered about 400 km and then they were supposed to continue the advance with the army. They became part of a medical convoy that temporarily established a field hospital in adapted buildings during occasional stops and remained until the patients were able to be moved to the hinterland.⁵⁰

According to her own records, Vozáriková's group drove „a distance of 3,000 km into the interior of Russian territory“. She was sure that of all the Slovak nurses working at the front it was them who got the closest to the front line. Then came the autumn rain and mud, and on October 7th they saw the first snow. Despite worsening conditions, the group continued their journey for a few more weeks until they reached „a small town near the Sea of Azov“⁵¹, where they put up a field hospital again. In four months after the start of the journey, they received the order to return. The journey home – probably by ambulance train – took another week.

In the conclusion of her article Vozáriková likely argued against some unspoken objections. She considered necessary „to note“ that since her return she was filled by „unusual sense of awareness that our nurses have the right to wear the medal of heroism.“ She was convinced that „any of their professional nursing

⁴⁸ The route of the nurses copied the advance of the Slovak army units, which is mapped in detail in the military history of the Eastern Front campaign. MIČIANIK, Pavel. *Slovenská armáda v ťažení proti Sovietskému zväzu, I. – IV.*, Banská Bystrica 2007 – 2012. CSÉFALVAY, František a kol. *Vojenské dejiny Slovenska, zv. V. (1939 – 1945)*. Bratislava 2008.

⁴⁹ On July 22th, 1941 the first of larger clashes between the Slovak and Soviet army took place at Lipovec (Lypovets). Its being remembered as „bloody“ by its surviving Slovak participants indicates, that Vozáriková's team tended the wounded of this battle.

⁵⁰ VOZÁRIKOVÁ, *Zápisky z frontu*, p. 88-90.

⁵¹ Probably in Mariupol.

intervention was equivalent to any heroism of a victoriously fighting Slovak soldier."⁵²

The same issue of the Slovak Red Cross magazine, which reported the awarding ceremony, included a four-page long report of the departure of another five-member group of nurses, heading „to the warzone“. The text, headlined „When the sisters of the Slovak Red Cross work together“, included few working photos from the packing process. While the sisters in the picture remained unnamed, great attention was paid to their equipment, which was „taken care of“ by the SRC. „They tried on warm furs and capes, which surely may serve them well in the bitter cold.“ It also commented briefly on their strategies of coping with fear, since their calm approach to their mission was viewed as „unusual for women. How can that be?“ They were said to shake off all fear by „the desire to be caring, which grew under the protection of the Red Cross and that was cultivated by its noble ideas.“ The expected radical change of their life routines was embodied in changing their „soft civilian shoes for harder, studded boots.“⁵³

In a short story, Ján Domasta, himself an employee of the propagandist department of Hlinka's Youth, developed the „women squaring with men“ motif in an accepting tone.⁵⁴ Certain Betka, freshly graduated from the nursing school, envied the boys around her that for them „the day of June 22. 1942 will be noted as a date that when they embarked to heroic journey“ providing them with so many chances for „real acts of love and self-sacrifice.“ A reason of the military campaign itself was explained very vaguely here: „the monotonous hot summer was interrupted by protective shots. Slovakia joined the fight in the East.“ But soon, Betka's brother, recovering from a minor injury in a field hospital, urged her to join its staff. Not listening to their mother's reservations that it is possible to „take care of poor and weak children, of insufficiently provided for children, of abandoned, sick mothers“ at home, she volunteered to „go to the front“. To persuade parents to let the girls go, it was stressed that the field hospital is located „ten, twenty or even more kilometres behind the frontline“.⁵⁵

This short story culminated when, still exhausted from the journey, Betka was woken up and informed about having a blood type suitable for transfusion to help a seriously wounded man. Her immediate willingness to donate was interpreted as an act of „sacrifice of her blood for her country“, since she was saving a soldier, whose own blood was poured directly „on the altar of holy duties“. Significantly, it was her selfless character, not her professional nursing qualification, what was celebrated. Besides, her help was primarily interpreted as a „patriotic“, not a generally humanistic act. In the climax, she proudly repeated to herself that she „doesn't even have to be a boy“ to match their deeds. Considering the genre, it unsurprisingly turned out that the wounded man she saved was her future brother-in-law, who doubted the women's courage and determination before. This all was reflected in the headline „The Midnight Victory“.

⁵² VOZÁRIKOVÁ, Zápisky z frontu, p. 88-90

⁵³ Slovenský červený kríž, 1942, vol. 4, 2, p. 30-33, Keď rukujú sestry Slovenského Červeného kríža.

⁵⁴ Slovenský červený kríž, 1942, vol. 4, 2, p. 34-37. DOMASTA, Ján. Polnočné víťazstvo.

⁵⁵ DOMASTA, Polnočné víťazstvo, p. 34-37.

The next closest public mention about the nurses at the Eastern Front appeared in the press on June 10, 1942, when the next group departed. In this case, the news mentioned neither the names nor the number of involved women. It was only stated that prior to their departure they were officially received by the chairman of SRC Sokol and the deputy chairman Dr. Skotnický.⁵⁶ The public also learned that from the beginning of 1942, a Relief Fund of the SRC was established for the care and compensation of members who „suffered physical or health injuries in the service“.⁵⁷ Such move could be likened to the risks of groups, which were active in war field.

Through the whole year the state propaganda focused on presenting the Red Cross mission as being fully compatible with current political line. Given the obvious contradiction between a duty to „help all people without distinction“ and the regime's behaviour towards political opponents and minorities, this presentation was ultimately an impossible task. It had to encompass both justifications for the war of aggression and for deportations of the citizens of Jewish origin to Nazi extermination camps. Propaganda „success“ fully depended on thorough suppression of any counter-arguments in the public space.

Rallying for mass membership

In early May 1942, the *Gardista* newspaper tried to provide the public, potentially disoriented by the contradictory propagandist messages, a textual clue entitled „Is the World Red Cross Movement a Relic?“ In the introduction, the author reflected on the alleged „occurrence of opinions“ occasionally „seeping through“ and claiming that „the ideology of the Red Cross is already obsolete“.⁵⁸ Apparently, claimed the author, some even labelled the SRC „doubtful“, since „in today's gigantic struggle, which, going to the consequences, absolutely and recklessly exhausts every strength and every possibility, there is no time or willingness for ‚sentimentality‘“. According to such inadmissible opinions, basically echoing the regime's practical policy, calls for „love of one's neighbour, deeds nobility and goodness, self-sacrifice for humanity and chivalry“ and „Samaritan deeds“ could actually be harmful. To refute such thoughts, the author attributed the phenomenon of war to „hereditary sin“ and the „incurability of humanity“, claiming that this only confirms the necessity of the Red Cross ideal. In the closing paragraph, the public was invited to join the SRC. Similarly, the ruling party daily *Slovák* described the SRC membership as an ideal opportunity for the readers to help their loved ones at the front.

Series of articles published over the following days in various media confirmed that this was the beginning of a new promotion campaign for SRC. It was supposed to ensure the mass membership and public presence of the organization, which would strengthen the international position of the Slovak state at the time when it was entering negotiations on the exchange of prisoners of war, missing persons etc. Presenting the SRC as a mass body of devoted volunteers

⁵⁶ *Gardista*, 12. 6. 1942, p. 2, Ďalšie sestry SČK na front.

⁵⁷ *Slovák*, 25. 3. 1944, p. 3, Päťročná bilancia SČK.

⁵⁸ *Slovák*, 8. 5. 1942, p. 4, Je celosvetové hnutie Červeného kríža prežitkom?

and their willing supporters was already problematic. The already mentioned forced departure of Czech families (including many founding members of local Red Cross branches) in the fall of 1938, together with marginalisation and pauperisation of the Jewish population, was followed with the general decline of interest in SRC membership. For those Slovaks who disagreed with the political „reforms“ enforced on SRC and on the whole social life, not joining or not renewing a membership in the organization, now fully controlled by the regime, became one of the ways to safely express their personal distance. Moreover, since the 1930s, the populist anti-democratic rhetoric was based on critique of state cultivation of diverse public sphere, which was interpreted as weakening the ideal of „unity“. Promotion of membership in different civic organisations was labelled as „burdening the common people with fees for various membership stamps“. Since autumn 1938, this plurality was politically suppressed in favour of levelling of public life in one political party, which should roof all social life.⁵⁹ However, the intention to suddenly shift argumentation toward promoting mass SRC membership and its rising through the recruitment of loyal regime supporters did not work well.

The media also tried to play up the motives of both proximity and contrast of the red cross and the „original“ symbol of the passion of Christ.⁶⁰ According to the Slovak Red Cross magazine, published at the end of 1941, „after the storm“ the „white cross of Christ should shine“ in replacement of its red variant. In another version, offered in the spring of 1942 in *Slovák*, it was other way round. The desire to survive and save the people from suffering „turns our steps, our eyes, our thoughts and efforts to the eternal symbol - to the cross“, (that is, to its original religious variant), which „in the self-sacrifice of war and its bloody consequences turns into the Red Cross.“⁶¹

The speaker of the Parliament and chairman of the SRC, Martin Sokol, stressed in his opening address for Instant financial collection for the SRC the civilian dimension of its mission. He namely emphasized different ways of assistance to repatriates and guest workers returning from abroad, providing help during natural disasters such as floods and epidemics, carrying on educational activities, manning the first aid stations and ambulances, as well as training the volunteers. Service in frontline hospitals was not mentioned at all. Sokol also commented in quite a strange manner on one of the most traditional activities of volunteer nurses, the work „in our families, especially when caring for children“. He described it as a „quiet but highly-valued service“ but also being „a relatively unknown field“.⁶² In the days to come, the SRC press office joined him in focusing on celebrating the home service and its role in „getting life back on track“. Cliché about the importance of „love, mutual service, willingness and understanding“ served as a clearly decodable reminder about regime view of nurse's place. They

⁵⁹ BAKA, Igor. Politický systém a režim Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1939 – 1940. Bratislava 2010.

⁶⁰ *Slovák*, 9. 5. 1942, p. 4, Kde je miesto každého, kto chce pomáhať zmierňovať vojnové utrpenie v Červenom kríži.

⁶¹ *Slovák*, 9. 5. 1942, p. 4.

⁶² *Slovák*, 10. 5. 1942, p. 3, Práca a ciele Červeného kríža.

were encouraged to look for „healthy compromises and practical considerations for life“.⁶³

On the contrary, *Gardista* went on publishing the images promoting SRC front-line activities. However, its editors took care to describe the war in pictures fitting the general propagandist line. The war brought „suffering pain, so that a new life would come out of them, better than the one for which the weapons had to rattle on the battlefield“. It was fought against the unnamed „greatest pest of humanity“, while Slovakia participated in it „at the behest of European solidarity of nations and for the protection of its own independence“.

The core text on the topic was brought in by an author, who personally visited the Eastern Front and „fully realized the importance of non-combat activities on the front“. He reminded that the nurses not only take care of the wounded, but also take preventive medical care of soldiers, who „need to be in a full health to perform their heavy tasks with a weapon in hand“.

While he conveyed to the home audience an eye witness testimony about the presence of the unnamed „trio of nurses who bravely bear the burden of their difficult profession and the hardships related to being at the Eastern Front“, he also hinted at the problem of their lack of social appreciation. His sympathetic portrait showed a „Slovak Samaritan woman with two roses on her cheeks“, „patiently enduring her hard share of life“ and calmly carrying on her mission in difficult environment, since „that’s what her calling tells her to do.“ However, she confided the journalist a modest wish „if only there was more understanding for our tasks at home, at least a little smile when there is no money“. He echoed the motif once more, slightly rephrased: „their grey uniform is lost in the wide corridors of the hospital, but it should not be lost at home!“⁶⁴

At the beginning of 1943, propagandists managing the official picture of the Slovak Red Cross had to cope more intensively with two external influences: rising number of Slovaks, who became prisoners of war, and rising political force of the Czechoslovak government in exile and its structures, including the exile Czechoslovak Red Cross.⁶⁵

In relation to the POWs, the medial picture the Slovak Red Cross nurse acquired an additional superpower. Besides her classical characteristics earned in the field hospitals, such as „coming to the heroism of a brave warrior, thereby writing the name of a Slovak woman among the heroic women of the current historical struggle“, she figured a source of hope for POW families. According the official media, recent arrival of the first news from the Slovak soldiers held in Russian captivity was to be ascribed to the nurses involved in international networking within the Red Cross apparatus.⁶⁶

In March 1943, another group of six nurses returned to the town of Prešov from the 1st Field Hospital of the Security Division, about whom we do not know any

⁶³ Slovák, 12. 5. 1942, p. 4, Pod znakom Červeného kríža!

⁶⁴ *Gardista*, 4. 11. 1942, p. 4, ELEN, Kalo M. Polhodinka v poľnej nemocnici.

⁶⁵ TAKÁČ, Ladislav – ŽUFFA, Vladimír. Len sa nikdy nevzdať! Liptovský Mikuláš 2000.

⁶⁶ Slovák pondelník, 11. 1. 1943, p. 2, Slovenský Červený kríž. Z prejavu predsedu Snemu Dr. M. Sokola pri otvorení výstavy slovenských umelcov v Banskej Bystrici.

further details yet. In their place, another team of six departed on April 8th, consisting of certified nurses Anna Macháčková, Jana Valášková, Emília Bačíková,⁶⁷ auxiliary nurse Ľudmila Jariabeková,⁶⁸ and volunteer sisters Mária Matušková and Mária Zajacová. They set out from the town of Žilina, so they were probably accompanying an ambulance train.⁶⁹

Their number indicates that in the meantime, the standard size of rotating groups has increased from the original five to six nurses. Such arrangement was definitely helpful for facilitating the work in shifts of two and three.

In order to strengthen both the position of the Slovak government and that of its Red Cross on the international stage, another mass membership recruitment campaign was announced in Slovakia in spring 1943.

The SRC president and Parliamentary speaker Martin Sokol contributed with a set of answers refuting frequently used excuses from joining SRC. Claiming the Christian character of Slovak state, he required application of Christian principles at every possibility, following „the sign of the cross.“ His slogan, coined for the campaign, combined confessional and ethnic identification: „whoever is a Christian by belief and Slovak by ethic consciousness, shall be a SRC member, too!“⁷⁰

President Tiso, „the Protector“ of the SRK, who repeatedly criticised the politics of the interwar common state for its „lack of closeness and friendliness“ towards Slovaks, viewed his „new“ SRC as an important player in building the Slovak state. He also expressed his trust that it can „certainly find a special approach to the heart of today’s Slovak community“. When comparing it to other traditional, especially church charities, he emphasized the potential of SRC for representing the state in the field of international relations. According to the president’s explanation, „international relations are used most during wars“, SRC is the medium through which „the name of our state is brought into international life“, it „brings our independence forward as a fact backed by power“. While doing so, it shall be helped to pose as an organisationally strong entity.⁷¹ Or put in another way: through SRC, the Slovak nation „opens the door to the international forum and the pedestal of the first nations of this world“.⁷²

By the end of March 1943, the campaign set a target to reach the membership number of „100,000 noble people“. Prospective success of this rally was presented

⁶⁷ Emília Bačíková later served as nurse in northern Slovakia in Dolný Kubín. At the arrival of German occupational forces in 1944, she was seriously wounded from a missile fire. OBUCHOVÁ, Marta. Za slobodu vlasti. In KROPILÁK, Miroslav – GERSTLOVÁ, Šarlota – LIETAVEC, Jozef. Slovenské národné povstanie a Červený kríž. Bratislava 1959, p. 90.

⁶⁸ Ľudmila Jariabeková was one of the first Slovak evangelical deaconesses. ČERNÝ, Aleš. Kronika obce Podtureň 1999-2010, p. 203. <https://adoc.pub/kronika-obce-je-vdy-riedlom-informacii-ovote-v-obci-v-pred.html>

⁶⁹ VHA Bratislava, f. MNO, dôverné, 1943, kr. 369, súčinnosť Ministerstva národnej obrany Slovenskej republiky so Slovenským červeným krížom.

⁷⁰ Slovák, 20. 4. 1943, p. 3, Pod zástavy Červeného kríža. (z rozhlasového prejavu predsedu SČK M. Sokola).

⁷¹ Slovák, 18. 4. 1943, p. 1, Dr. Jozef Tiso. Význam Slovenského červeného kríža.

⁷² Slovák, 1. 5. 1943, p. 8, ZVONÁR TIEŇ, Jožo. I tam Vás čaká vlasť!. O prvej celoštátnej členovskej akcii SČK pod heslom 100 000 šľachetných ľudí.

as „a certificate and an honourable ticket to the tribune of the nations of the new Europe“. Thorough planning and central implementation of this campaign of mass recruitment was very much alike to later recruitment campaigns to various mass organisations under the Communist regime. The press and radio were entrusted with „psychological preparation“ of the population. The „Leader and President“ Jozef Tiso invited his clerical colleagues to include the topic to their Sunday sermons. Brass bands of the armed forces, Hlinka's Guard, Hlinka's Youth and Hlinka's Slovak People's Party were ordered to „create a favourable mood in public places“. Tons of leaflets and brochures, as well as application forms for individual and collective applications were distributed through local party organizations. From there, activists were sent to „symbolic visits to the homes of leading citizens“ and then to make errands in the whole neighbourhood.⁷³

In addition to the traditional humanist and Christian content, propagandist appeals directly referred to the political importance of the campaign: „Our times are serious, our vital interest is to fulfil all the needs of war-time care and also all the post-war tasks.“ This was to be the „categorical imperative of our existence and also of the future“, because failure to support the SRC mobilisation for rising its membership, so it can fulfil all its tasks, means „failing one's own nation“ and „betraying ourselves“.⁷⁴

The culmination of the recruiting campaign was scheduled to match the official visit of the International RC delegation to Slovakia in May. After a grand welcoming ceremony in Bratislava, including greetings from thirty members of the women's emergency unit in parade uniforms, the visitors toured the famous hot mineral water spa in Piešťany and continued to the High Tatra mountains sanatoria for lung diseases.⁷⁵

The international agenda of the Red Cross again worked its way into the daily news in relation with the autumn appeal of the International Committee, calling the warring parties to refrain from violence against the civilian population and urging them to abstain from revenge and hostage-taking⁷⁶. Understandably, the Slovak official media did not note that the aforementioned call also applied to the soldiers of the Slovak army on the eastern front.

At the beginning of 1944, the SRC commemorated five years of its existence. In the activity report, self-congratulatory statements alternated with euphemistic reflections on current situation at the front and corresponding public moods in the rear. Radical statements were avoided in favour of celebrating the discreetly provided relief, claiming that „Christian love was our only weapon“.⁷⁷

⁷³ Slovák, 1. 5. 1943, p. 8.

⁷⁴ Slovák, 1. 5. 1943, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Slovák, 11. 5. 1943, p. 3, SČK bude čestne a dôstojne reprezentovať. Zástupcovia Medzinárodného ČK u slovenských vládnych činiteľov.

⁷⁶ Gardista, 18. 9. 1943, p. 2, Apel na ľudský cit vojnu vedúcich. Výzva medzinárodného výboru Červeného kríža.

⁷⁷ Slovenský Červený kríž, 1944, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 37-38, ZVONÁR, Jozef. Hrdý pomník činu. Pracovná bilancia SČK k 5. výročiu slovenskej štátnosti.; Slovák, 25. 3. 1944, p. 3, ZVONÁR, Jozef. Päťročná bilancia SČK.

Retreating into oblivion

Both due to approaching front from the east and rising awareness that Slovakia could already be in the range of the allied bombers, the SRC prepared plans for creating a central register of all civilian certified nurses, making them available for alert service.⁷⁸ Then, after the outbreak of the anti-Nazi uprising, hundreds of Slovak nurses, nursing assistants and voluntary sisters suddenly found themselves directly on the front line.⁷⁹ Moreover, any hastily trained health personnel, sometimes lacking even minimal qualification, began to be referred to as sisters and used the Red Cross symbol. Among them, Oľga Vozáriková was probably not the only veteran of the Eastern front, who thus served as a nurse on both sides of the front during the war.

For the moment, the last known summary data about the SRC nurses serving in the front hospitals, comes from a brief mention in the celebratory commemorative „Five-year balance“ of the SRC, which was published in March 1944. According to the press office of the Slovak Red Cross, since the beginning of war, 50 certified and auxiliary nurses spent some time rotating in the field hospitals of the Slovak Army. However, this number included both SRC nurses working in Slovak field hospitals on the Eastern front and those from the Italian front. In fall of 1943 the Slovak units on the East were found „unreliable“ from the point of view of the Berlin command and transferred to Italy.

In the above quoted report, it was stated that for their devoted work, four nurses were awarded the Cross of Merit by the State Defence officials. Its author, Jozef Zvonár, was a long-time press officer of the Slovak Red Cross, with direct access to the editorial archive and other information. It therefore cannot be concluded whether he made a mistake due to inattention, or whether he deducted the graduated physician Dr. Hanová from the original number of five „honoured sisters“. Already in the spring of 1944, there may have been some reason to officially “forget” some other sister from this group. On the other hand, this report confirms that since the return of the first group of female volunteers, no other SRC nurse has been honoured for her service in the field hospital.

Despite the lack of information on the subject, the mention of the total number of up to fifty SRC veterans of field hospitals service on the Eastern Front gives hope that some personal correspondence or memoirs, capturing their immediate individual experience more comprehensively, can still be found in some personal archives and collections.

Conclusions

Since the outbreak of WWII, the Nazi-oriented Slovak state went ahead with enforcing its own vision for the local Red Cross. This included resignation on universal humanism and on Christian principles of helping those in need regardless

⁷⁸ Slovák, 25. 3. 1944, p. 3, Päťročná bilancia SČK.

⁷⁹ NOVÁ, Hanka. Z denníka povstaleckého zdravotníka. In KROPILÁK, Miroslav – GERSTLOVÁ, Šarlota – LIETAVEC, Jozef. Slovenské národné povstanie a Červený kríž. Bratislava 1959, p. 136-137.

of ethnicity, race etc. Rewriting of the Slovak Red Cross identity appeared both in its structure and culture.

With the concurrent decline of membership and the gradual intensification of the warfare the state intensified its campaign to recruit new members. This was one of the culminations of the process of gradual militarisation and nationalisation of the Red Cross.

Deployment of Slovak Red Cross nurses in the Slovak army field hospitals at the Eastern front earned an ambivalent and very constrained official presentation to public. Handling of this topic by the contemporary official propaganda, together with subsequent disappearance of these nurses as historical actors from public memory, can be perceived as a case study of contesting women role models in both war time and post-war periods.

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