

Štefánik and his mission to the United States (1917)

In 1917, while the First World War was raging in Europe, Milan Rastislav Štefánik travelled to the United States with a crucial mission: to recruit Czech and Slovak volunteers to build an army able and willing to fight for the independence of their homeland. Czechoslovak legions in Italy and Russia were already organised and motivated, but the situation in America was very different to that in Europe. Czechs and Slovaks over there were scattered, they were often far removed from the realities of war and less aware of the urgency of enlisting. Štefánik quickly realised that it was not enough to rely on spontaneous patriotism: he would have to convince and mobilise people, and to do so, he used all the tools of propaganda and persuasion at his disposal.

A unique context: America in 1917

In 1917, the United States had only just entered the war, and public opinion was still developing. The Czech and Slovak communities, although supportive of the Allied cause, were not all ready to enrol in the armed forces. Štefánik knew that he had to create momentum and a sense of urgency, and above all he had to show that the independence of Czechoslovakia depended on their active participation. To achieve this, he relied on public speeches, symbolic meetings, and a strong media presence.

The Carnegie Hall speech: a turning point

On the 16th of September 1917, Štefánik took part in a huge public meeting at Carnegie Hall in New York, chaired by the Mayor of York. The event was marked by a resounding speech delivered by the French politician Franklin-Bouillon who declared that *'no peace is possible until the complete victory of the Allies, the best defenders of small oppressed nations*. These words resonated as a call to action. The participants, moved by the idea that their commitment could change the course of history, enlisted en masse. Influential newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Sun* covered the event, amplifying its impact and encouraging other Czechs and Slovaks to join the cause.

The involvement of women: a strategic lever

Štefánik did not limit himself to addressing men. On the 11th of October 1917, he also organised a meeting with Czech and Slovak women who were active in associations such as the Slovak League and the Bohemian National Alliance. He flattered them by declaring that his bachelorhood was due to the absence of Slovak women around him, but above all, he reminded them of their essential role in the struggle for independence. Even if they could not fight, they could support the soldiers, sew clothes, organise collections and, above all, encourage their husbands and sons to enlist.

A symbolic moment marked this meeting: a little girl approached Štefánik and offered him a rose. Moved, he promised to wear it over his heart during his next battle. This simple yet powerful gesture illustrates the link between individual sacrifice and collective hope. Štefánik went further by demanding that women urge their loved ones to enlist, with powerful words: *'We, Czech and Slovak women, will no longer bring our children into the world for servitude, but for a free nation.'*

Effective propaganda

Štefánik used all available means to reach as many people as possible. He made many public appearances, he relied on the press, and on emotion to mobilise support. His message was clear: the independence of Czechoslovakia was not a matter of luck or negotiation but was one of will and sacrifice. By involving women, organising symbolic events, and ensuring that the media reported on his actions, he succeeded in creating an unprecedented movement of solidarity and commitment.

A lasting legacy

Štefánik's mission to the United States was a success. Thanks to his propaganda and mobilisation efforts, hundreds of Czech and Slovak volunteers joined the ranks of the Czechoslovak Legions. These soldiers would play a key role in the international recognition of Czechoslovakia in 1918. In this way, Štefánik demonstrated that freedom is not only won on the battlefield, but also through persuasion, organisation, and the ability to unite a community around a common goal.

Today, his example reminds us that great causes require not only charismatic leaders, but also an effective communication strategy and the mobilisation of all segments of society.



In this photograph Štefánik can be seen with Albert Mamatey, president of the Slovak League in America (on his left) and Ludvík Fisher, president of the Bohemian National Alliance (on his right), in Washington D.C. in 1917. Czechoslovak official photographer, 1917, Washington D.C.

IWM (Q 112729), <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205355288>.

Sources:

Michal KŠIŇAN : L'homme qui parlait avec les étoiles, ISBN 979-10-96982-08-0, 344 p., EurOrbem éditions.