# BETWEEN NATURALISM, MACHIAVELLIANISM AND (DE)MYTHIZATION: THE IMAGE OF SVÄTOPLUK IN JÉGÉ'S NOVEL *SVÄTOPLUK*

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**Abstract:** VAŠŠ, Martin. *Between Naturalism, Machiavellianism and (De)Mythization: The Image of Svätopluk in Jégé's Novel Svätopluk.* The article examines the image of Svätopluk in the novel *Svätopluk* (1928) by L. N. Jégé, using the techniques of textual, historical and literary-historical analysis, as well as interpretation and comparison. In examining the image of Svätopluk, emphasis is placed on the methods of construction and instrumentation of this image, taking into consideration extra-literary goals, within which we devote special attention to the author's instrumentalisation of historical facts and analyse the author's conception of the novel in relation to his political views and his understanding of the concept of Slovak and Czechoslovak history. In analysing literary-historical factors, we reflect on the influences of naturalism and the intertextual connection to the concept of the The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli. Jégé's image of Svätopluk is conceptually multilayered, ambiguous and ambivalent, which is manifested, based on our findings, in the oscillation between three basic aspects – the naturalistic, Machiavellian and (de)mythization aspects. Within the naturalistic aspect, Jégé demonstrates the formative influence of the environment on the individual through the figure of Svätopluk. Within the Machiavellian aspect, he constructs Svätopluk as a Machiavellian ruler and reformer of his era. Finally, within the mythization aspect, he searches for parallels between the first Czechoslovak Republic and Great Moravia and monumentalises the figure of Svätopluk in opposition to the figure of Rastislav, while simultaneously demythicizing Svätopluk through naturalistically conditioned regressions.

**Keywords:** *Svätopluk, image, L. N. Jégé, Great Moravia, Slovak novel, naturalism, Machiavellianism, mythization, demythization*

In the Slovak literary context, the tradition of the historical genre is above all associated with Romantic prose, which was determined by a national-constructivist-didactic function, which had a tendency to use historical figures to discuss problematic aspects within the national mentality. In the context of the emergence of the literary realist generation in the 1880s, it is symptomatic that this generation did not cultivate historical genres in prose at all and that such genres occurred only in the poetic epics, dramas and ballads of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (Mráz 1959, 34). The realist author Martin Kukučín also grasped historical topics in a similar way, when he thematised sections of national history to show examples of collective failure that could have been avoided, by which he also wanted to point out other possibilities for the development of the national presence. According to René Bílik (2008, 99-100), Jégé's historical prose represents a completely different case in this regard, in view of his primary focus on the individual in the context of the influence of the (historical) environment on his formation and in the process of his journey through life.

Jégé is thus not a "common" author of historical prose, and in some respects his realistic approach is even weakened, despite his programmatic efforts at realism. Vladimír Petrík (1956, 9-10) thinks that Jégé, paradoxically, best found himself as an author in his historical prose,

whose value he saw not so much in extensive knowledge of historical facts or the fidelity of the historical reality depicted, but in a convincing knowledge of the person he portrayed in a given work. As a result, his prose with historical themes seems much more convincing and vivid than the historical novels of any other Slovak author. Aside from a series of historical short stories published in the collections *Wieniawski Legenda* (1922) and *Z dávnych časov* (1927), Jégé also published two historical novels, *Adam Šangala* (1923) and *Svätopluk* (1928), which is the object of our textual analyses and within which we will note how Jégé constructed and instrumentalised the image of Svätopluk (as well as Great Moravia) not only in his depiction in the text and historical understanding, but also in relation to his efforts to historically instrumentalise this significant historical figure in relation to the political reality at the time of the creation of the given work. Therefore, we have no intention to conduct a detailed and exhaustive historical analysis of factual errors and anachronisms in the work, but, on the contrary, to attempt to grasp the key aspects of Jégé's construction[1] of the image of Svätopluk.[2]

L. N. Jégé welcomed the founding of Czechoslovakia because, among other things, he saw in it the realisation of historical rights and a more just socio-political reality compared to Austria-Hungary. From his student days, he had a close relationship with the Czech nation and culture, which in the first Czechoslovak Republic was manifested by his inclination towards political and intellectual elites based on Czechoslovak statehood and Czechoslovak national unity.[3] These facts need to be mentioned and emphasised for a better understanding of the choice of *Svätopluk* as a subject for a historical novel, which by coincidence was issued in the year of the tenth anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia. Jégé's entry into the field of historical prose itself in the new state-legal reality after 1918, when there was no significant need to return to historical literary genres, is also deserving of a more thorough explanation.

Aside from the above-mentioned enthusiasm for the new socio-political reality after 1918, Jégé's broad-mindedness not only in literature, but also in history and philosophy, needs to be pointed out. Namely, thanks to his knowledge of history, he could experience it as a living reality that also intervened into the present in a broad-spectrum way. The awareness of this relationship

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1 For the issue of constructing historical narratives and the phenomenon of historical imagination, see the central work of the narrative-constructivist approach *Metahistory* (White, 2011).

2 L. N. Jégé also worked as a doctor after the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and, in contrast to the period before the First World War, he performed public work with great enthusiasm, especially in the health sector. He welcomed the establishment of Czechoslovakia with joy, because he saw it as the liberation of the Slovak nation. Jégé's activism after the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic found its expression in the publication of critical articles in which he came to terms with the recent past and reflected on the future of Slovak society in the new political and legal conditions of the Czecho-Slovak state. He published most of his articles in *Národné noviny*, *Slovenský denník*, *Naša Orava*, *Národný denník* and *Slovenské pohľady*. Unlike the autonomists, however, Jégé cultivated and outwardly declared his own highly positive relationship towards the Czech nation. Although he was not completely passive in political activity – in the 1920 elections he ran for the Slovak National and Peasant Party and in 1925 for the Czechoslovak People's Party; he was not elected in either case. However, in his public activities he was mostly limited to the Orava region (Gregorec 1957, 52-54, 71). He was criticised by his contemporaries and reviewers for various anachronisms in the novel *Svätopluk*. Let us at least mention the critical observations of Jégé's friend Štefan Krčméry: *"A historian, when he reads this book, can legitimately ask himself all sorts of questions. Is it possible to talk about the burning of corpses or the killing of brides and their giving away to family members in Great Moravia under Rastislav? Is it possible to imagine Rastislav and his surroundings as so pagan, with the rule of Grubica, when Rastislav's predecessor, Mojmír, was already a Christian and Pribina built a brick Christian church in Nitra? Is it possible to speak of governors in the land of Svätopluk?"* (Krčméry 1959, 60).

3 Compare: Mráz 1959, 27-29.

sparked in him the urge to take the past as a literary material that would be updated through literary processing and could thus influence the thinking of his contemporaries. Another motivation was the discovery that historical subjects turned out to be the most suitable and pliable article for his compositional methods.

Jégé's choice of Svätopluk as the main character of a historical novel was not accidental; it was closely related to his views and beliefs regarding the issue of Slovak and, in a broader sense, Czechoslovak history. His concept (or rather, idea) of Slovak history was based on the belief that Slovaks were ahistorical due to the long-term (negative) influence of Hungary, which led him to lean towards the concept of Czechoslovak history: *"Slovakia does not have a history itself, only one shared with Hungary. And that is not ours at all; nothing is recorded in it about us as Slovaks. We begin to live, as such, in the 18th century. Matthew Csák of Trenčín and Pongrác of Liptovský Mikuláš are figures who have been dragged into Slovak history by the hair. But that is easy to help with this. Having no history of our own, let us cling body and soul to the history of Bohemia"* (Jégé 1983, 52). It is in this context that Jégé's choice of the figure of Svätopluk, who suited him in that he had considerable potential to fulfil several national-didactic and national-myth-forming functions, needs to be perceived.[4]

First of all, it was to help fill the "empty" Slovak history and assist in fulfilling the definitional tools of "Slovakness"[5] in the process of his creation in the dynamic new conditions of the Czecho-Slovak state: *"The figures of Rastislav and Svätopluk stand like Memnon's statues in the desert in our empty history. I wanted to do our nation a kind of service by depicting a great ancestor, and I could not choose another great, guaranteed Slovak figure than Svätopluk"* (Jégé 1983, 139). In his correspondence, he argued in this context that Slovaks must have some image of the past, and it would be awful if they were to remain without a past. Jégé thus intended with his novel to contribute to the formation and, in particular, the reinforcing of Slovak historical consciousness, and in doing so to pursue political and social goals. The mentioned authorial intention was almost absent in Jégé's first works of historical prose and was manifested more fully in his later historical works, where it reached its peak in the novel *Svätopluk*.[6]

The figure of Svätopluk also had significance in Jégé's thinking about the past, because his rule was also associated with the control of the Czech lands, thus creating a welcome analogy with the existing newly founded Czecho-Slovak state.[7] Namely, in the deep ideological substructure

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[4] Svätopluk was the son of Rastislav's brother, who was traditionally called Svätomír. Historian Martin Homza specifies further*: "He entered history as Rastislav's co-ruler (prince of the Nitra Principality – in the contemporary sense, a king) before 869, when his Nitra Principality was ravaged by the Frankish army of Carloman, son of the East Frankish king Louis (the German). This mention is found in the* Annales Fuldenses*, where he is mentioned as Rastislav's nephew. The same annals refer to Svätopluk's territory as a kingdom... There is no doubt that his kingdom was spread over Slovakia with a possible centre in Bratislava or Nitra... In 871 he became the sovereign ruler of Great Moravia"* (Homza 2013, 15).

[5] In the contemporary context of searching for a definitional framework for defining everything that is Slovak (or "Slovakness"). Contemporary Slovak art played a large role in this regard. The use of the term "Slovak myth" was also common in this context. For more information, see: *Slovenský mýtus* (Hrabušický 2006).

[6] Petrík 1956, 14. In the opinion of Kornel Földváry (1959, 168), it is specifically the introduction of an extra-literary intention that harms this work, because it means that Jégé can no longer fully apply his naturalistic analytical method.

[7] This analogy was often used not only by historians who sought to build a concept of Czechoslovak history (Václav Chaloupecký, Albert Pražák, Kamil Krofta), but also by many politicians who promoted the concept of Czechoslovak national unity. In this context, we must not forget that Jégé was in systematic and friendly correspondence with the leading Czechoslovak historian Albert Pražák, whom we will mention later in relation to the origin of the novel *Svätopluk*.

of his work, Jégé effectively polemicised with Slovak and Slovak-Czech disunion, which he could see in the political life of the young Czechoslovak Republic. Therefore, we can here identify an analogy between the effort to preserve the unity of the Czecho-Slovak state and Svätopluk's effort to preserve (in the case of the novel, to secure) the unity of Great Moravia. Thus, we find here an additional motive for why Jégé's *Svätopluk* not only was, but also "had to" be anachronistic in the retroactive application of the optics of the then current Czecho-Slovak statehood.[8]

Nearly all relevant experts on Jégé's work agree that Jégé transferred his views of his time to the characters in the novel *Svätopluk* and had a tendency through history to debate his own present.[9] Therefore, we cannot attribute the anachronistic elements of Jégé's *Svätopluk* only to gaps in the author's historical knowledge, but also to the very concept of this work, which was written to speak to the present and his contemporaries through the past. On the other hand, Jégé's friend and supporter Štefan Krčméry (1959, 56) justified the anachronisms by the author's need to support the "inner truth" of his plot, which was also related to the effort to manifest Jégé's deterministic conception of a life philosophy based on emphasising the formative influence of the environment on the individual.

However, in the case of Jégé's *Svätopluk*, the relationship between the individual and the environment also operates in reverse, which could be explained by a certain split between Jégé's naturalistic determinism and the mentioned extra-literary goals present in this work. In this context, Vladimír Petrík (1956, 22) noted that in the novel *Svätopluk*, Jégé sometimes transferred the conditions of the public life of his time to the times of Great Moravia in a mechanical way. However, in the framework of this mentioned approach, Jégé did not apply a straight-line schematism, because he wanted to critically debate the present with images from the past of Great Moravia.[10]

Czech literary historian Albert Pražák, with whom Jégé was in correspondence even while working on *Svätopluk*, described this novel as only "seemingly apolitical", because in his view, Jégé wanted, through this novel, to project serious reminders to his contemporaries. In Pražák's view, the novel had a clearly national focus, because Svätopluk's battle with the Franks (then Germans) in Jégé's work seemed analogous to the national struggle of Czechs and Slovaks with Germans and Hungarians, while the "internal political" struggle at the court of the Great Moravian rulers evoked the disputes between Czechs and Slovaks, or even Slovaks among themselves. Pražák (1959, 81, 83-84) thus confirmed the hidden political message of Jégé's *Svätopluk*, which he thought was constructed on the basis of Czechoslovak national and state unity.

By selecting and by reflecting the character of Svätopluk in literature, Jégé also supported the then current conception of Czechoslovak history, as evidenced by the manuscript introduction to this novel, in which he labelled Svätopluk as the greatest figure in Czechoslovak history: *"My aim was to draw attention to the great figure of Svätopluk, of whom there is none greater in Czechoslovak history"* (Jégé 1973, 750). In this context, Jégé's conceptual originality in choosing the character of Svätopluk should be highlighted. At the time, Czechoslovak historiographical discourse - particularly among proponents of the idea that Great Moravia represented the first common

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8 Ján Gregorec (1957, 84), in his monograph on the work of L. N. Jégé, did not find anachronisms in the depiction of the historical period in his historical prose, but he acknowledged that they can be observed in the depiction of the psychological makeup of the characters and in this context he mentioned the character of Svätopluk.

9 The mentioned features of Jégé's work in relation to the anachronism of the characters in his historical works and their polemical nature were convincingly grasped and justified by Kornel Földvári (1959, 166) in his study *Jégého historické polemiky* [*Jégé's Historical Polemics*].

10 Andrej Mráz also points out this fact (1959, 36-37).

state of Czechs and Slovaks (a view championed in Slovakia primarily by Václav Chaloupecký) - tended to portray Svätopluk's uncle, Rastislav, as the more significant ruler. In this regard, Martin Homza (2024, 108) states that this created a historiographical stereotype within contemporary Czechoslovak historiography, which presented Rastislav and St. Methodius as bright figures and portrayed Svätopluk only as a "temporarily successful" ruler, whose actions ultimately contributed to the collapse of the first state unit of Czechs and Slovaks.

Therefore, with Jégé's choice of Svätopluk as the main character of a historical novel and the considerable degree of mythization attached, the possibility comes to the fore that by choosing Svätopluk (since in the novel he appears as a prince of the Nitra fief), Jégé was actually trying to emphasise the Slovak rather than the Czechoslovak historical aspect. Regarding the mythization of Svätopluk in Jégé's work, the following comments of Štefan Krčméry are pertinent, as he compares Jégé's Svätopluk to the mythical figure of Jánošík: *"In the fermenting events of 9th-century Central Europe, the figure of Svätopluk stands like some fantastic cliff. The waters swell and ebb around him... He is invulnerable, like Jánošík from the legends, until fate touches a magic string on his belt"* (Krčméry 1959, 62). The common frame of reference in this case is the combination of mythization and its deconstruction through the naturalistically conditioned weakening of the mythified hero.

In this context, Ján Gregorec (1957, 131) emphasised that Jégé's novel above all pursued national-didactic goals. The mentioned goals, however, were far from identical with the idealising and mythologising goals of Slovak romantic historical prose. In contrast, Alexander Matuška, in the framework of Jégé's polemicising approach to the past, pointed to the author's effort to show the "inner truth" of that past (and in this way prove Jégé's main naturalistic thesis that man does not change in principle in the course of history) through the destruction of the accretions of legends and idealisation – that is, to demystify it and show that the past also had an equally ruthless face as the author's present.[11] One can thus see how the complexity and certain ambiguity of Jégé's thinking about the past is reflected in his authorial approach to the novel *Svätopluk*.

We must remember that Jégé was motivated to write not only this novel, but also other texts with historical themes, by the intellectuals and writers close to him, Štefan Krčméry and Albert Pražák, which is also confirmed by Jégé's correspondence, while Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav, with whom he was in contact, may have also had a certain influence on him in this regard.[12] The novel *Svätopluk* was preceded by the novella *Horymír* (1926), in which, on the encouragement of the Slavicist and Bohemianist František Trávníček, he processed the Czech legend about Prince Horymír.[13]

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[11] Kornel Földvári (1959, 157) refers in more detail to this method of Matuška's interpretative approach.

[12] In a letter to Štefan Krčméry dated 5 April 1924, Jégé wrote regarding his encouragement to write the historical novel *Adam Šangala*: *"... And I can tell you that I am very, very grateful to you, because after all, apart from your enemy Pražák, you are the only one who encourages me a little, so that I not only keep pumping into myself, but also pump something out... Dear Števko, if Šangala is really worthy of something – and sometimes I myself think that perhaps he is – then it is only thanks to you that he lives again. I would have never started that work without your encouragement"* (1983, 209-210). Štefan Krčméry also acted as a fundamental driving force in motivating playwright Ivan Stodola to write his historical drama *Kráľ Svätopluk*. In his published memoirs, Stodola recalls their meeting, which motivated him to write the historical drama *King Svätopluk*, thus: *"After a Martin premiere, I met Štefan Krčméry. In the conversation, he suggested that we really needed a drama from our history and suggested using themes from the history of the Great Moravian Empire. Well, I studied history, especially the period of Svätopluk, whose character I borrowed for writing my play"* (Stodola 1965, 192).

[13] Jégé was not satisfied as an author with the novella *Horymír* and would not have revised it into its final form if he had not received support from Štefan Krčméry. Correspondence with Štefan Krčméry shows that Jégé planned, if this novella were received positively, to continue with another historical prose work

This was followed by the laborious and frequently interrupted (for almost two years) work on the novel *Svätopluk*, in the scope of which he wanted to portray this Great Moravian monarch as a great personality who was driven by national interests and, to an even greater extent, by hatred of his enemies and the desire to humiliate them – that is, he also tried to point out his great flaws. Jégé decided that it would be easier for him to write a novel in the form of individual images from Svätopluk's life; therefore, he gave up the idea of a large continuous novel: *"I changed my mind. I will write images from his life that characterise him the most and give some kind of plot of the whole. This is much easier than writing a continuous novel, also because there are tedious gaps that I can peek through. I am thinking a bit of Gobineau's figurative dialogues from the Renaissance. Well, I will see how it turns out"* (1983, 283). Jégé in the end fragmented the plot of his novel into eight scenes, which are set one after the other based on respecting the chronology.

It is evident that in forming his conception of Svätopluk he sought inspiration in Renaissance models and characters as well as characters from Frankish history.[14] He was also interested in a heroic concept of Svätopluk, but not in the form of romantic idealisation. In this context, however, in line with Štefan Krčméry's judgments, it would be more pertinent to speak of a Machiavellian concept of Svätopluk, but also in the same breath of a naturalistic concept of Svätopluk. Jégé, in the margins of criticism of his concept of portraying Svätopluk, stated the following in the article *Fatum libelli* in 1934: *"I wanted to portray a man of great goals, not looking at any moral principles, because that's how all those great rulers were – and that's how they are today"* (Jégé 1983, 141).

Ján Števček (1989, 260), following on Štefan Krčméry's original observation, demonstrates with specific examples the intertextual connection between Machiavelli's political-philosophical treatise *The Prince* and Jégé's novel *Svätopluk*, which he therefore rightly calls an "epic study of political Machiavellianism" or a Machiavellian novel.[15] One of the fundamental ideas of Machiavelli's work is the idea that Italy must become a nation-state and that the situation needs to be resolved by force if necessary, i.e., all means must be used to achieve a noble goal. Svätopluk is also concerned with the nation-state of the Slavs and the unification of the voivodeships into a whole. Machiavelli also acknowledges the necessity of cruelty after seizing power and that his prince should focus mainly on military power and not on pleasure. Machiavelli states in the 14th chapter of *The Prince*: *"A ruler must have no other goal, no other concern, no better ability than to wage war and know the rules of the military art and army leadership... And in contrast, we see that rulers who thought more about comfort than about weapons lost their power. Therefore, he who neglects the military art will lose power, but he who devotes himself to it will gain power."* (2024, 61)

Throughout the entire novel, Jégé's Svätopluk focuses mainly on military matters, even though partially on pleasure, too (a passionate affair with Jarslava), which at the end of the novel – as a kind of Machiavellian (but also naturalistic) memento – costs him his life.[16] It is specifically in

that would draw on a Slovak theme (1983, 222). Jégé opens the novella *Horymír* as follows: *"The event that I will talk about took place in Bohemia a thousand years ago, during the reign of Prince Kresomysl"* (1943, 97). However, he wrote the novella *Horymír* for young people.

[14] L. N. Jégé stated in this context: *"I wanted to paint a large figure (and a person with human feelings). Whether I succeeded and to what extent, I really don't know"* (1983, 251).

[15] According to the findings of Ján Števček (1989, 601), L. N. Jégé most likely read the Czech edition of Machiavelli's *The Prince* from 1900.

[16] In this context, Ján Števček (1989, 265) points to the fact that Svätopluk tries to give priority to politics over eroticism in his relationship with Jarslava and therefore refuses to physically remove her fiancé Holeš because he needed him politically. L. N. Jégé justified the creation of the fictional character of Jarslava by saying that he needed a female character to enliven the character of Svätopluk and the entire plot: *"With her, I introduced a tragic element into his life, which makes people closer to our feelings and moderates our judgment of their mistakes, because they, too, were only controlled by feelings, imperfect*

his relationship with Jarslava that Svätopluk does not behave like an ideal Machiavellian ruler, because he trusts her so much that he betrays the strictest military secrets of his state to her, and she subsequently reveals them to the Franks. Even though Svätopluk kills her with his own hands after discovering this betrayal, this does not change the fact that the Frankish court already knows about his military reforms: *"It also weighed heavily on his soul that Jarslava had revealed everything and in detail to his worst enemies"* (Jégé 2005, 125). We can find additional analogies between Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the character of Svätopluk in the relationship between the ruler and his subjects, in which the ruler is supposed to behave like an actor and always feign feelings based solely on the current requirements.

At first glance, it may seem surprising in this context that in terms of the period of the novel Jégé chose to depict the development of the character of Svätopluk approximately in the period 860 – 871, i.e., the period of Svätopluk's youth and the time of his maturation as a statesman. To the question of why he chose this particular period, Jégé's own conception of Svätopluk as a reformer offers us an explanation. In this case, Jégé, as a novelist, is not so much interested in consequences in the form of historical acts, but more in the causes and motivations for his acts and later successes. Therefore, he chose as the focus of the novel the "non-historical" period in Svätopluk's life, the period of his youth, formation and growth. This also opened up wide possibilities for him to develop his own insights and ideas (including fabrications) about this significant figure in Slovak history and to shape his character based on his own preferences.[17]

In this way, he could contrast him with Prince Rastislav, who, contrary to historical reality, appears in the novel as a negative, weak, sickly and indecisive figure. Jégé's Rastislav is unable to prevent the plundering of Germanic forces and opens the door to his court to the German clergy.[18] In contrast to him Svätopluk appears as a patriot, soldier and strategist: *"And no matter what, there is no land for me except Great Moravia"* (Jégé 2005, 38). Jégé also monumentalises and idealises Svätopluk's character consistently in opposition to that of Rastislav through descriptions of their physical appearance.[19] Jégé thus adds greatness to Svätopluk's character, in line with his authorial intention, but idealises him in line with naturalistic postulates.[20]

It is useful to compare the time frame of Jégé's *Svätopluk* with that of the historical drama *King Svätopluk* by playwright Ivan Stodola, which was published only a little later in 1931. Stodola chose Svätopluk's last days in a completely opposite way, and his entire authorial concept is in opposition

*people"* (1983, 145). Oskár Čepan stated in evaluating the function of female characters in Jégé's works: *"The emotional life of Jégé's hero is regulated by women... She is the closest companion, but also an alien element that forces the external world into the inner life of a person as an isolated personality"* (1959, 249).

17 Vladimír Petrík aptly notes in this regard: *"Against the backdrop of a dark and bloody era, Svätopluk grows into a heroic figure whom we do not admire or love, but whom we understand and comprehend well"* (1956, 24).

18 *"– And Rastic suffers! He presses the bandit Germans on us, saying they are teaching us a new faith"* (Jégé 2005, 47).

19 Jégé's physical description of Rastislav was the antithesis of Svätopluk's appearance: *"In the sprawling, low, wooden hall of Devín Castle, a man of about fifty years of age, of medium height, was pacing anxiously, limping on his left leg, which he could not bend well at the knee. His sparse, greying, whitish hair fell in curls on his shoulders, and he was nervously pulling at his greying beard with a wrinkled hand"* (2005, 5). He contrasted this with a description of the young Svätopluk: *"A young, athletic man of above-average height, with limbs so large and strong that he gave the impression of a much larger man than he really was, leaned against a thick oak column of one of the arches. His features were sharp, his chin strong, his nose straight, too large, his lips full, almost always pursed, his eyes mostly peering out of the corners, as with people who do not want to reveal their thoughts; he had a small dark chestnut moustache and short-cropped hair. In his large, veined hands he held a straight, broad sword as if he were about to draw it from its scabbard..."* (2005, 5).

20 Compare: *Ladislav Nádaši-Jégé* (Trylčová 1966, 7).

to Jégé's conception of Svätopluk. Although Stodola's Svätopluk is, like Jégé's, domineering, cruel and still quite gifted militarily, he is at the same time sick, mentally torn and depressed. Stodola wanted to point out in his drama the causes of the demise of Great Moravia, which he saw in the betrayal, disobedience and disputes of Svätopluk's sons.[21] We can also find a common denominator in these two works, however, which is Svätopluk's efforts to control and build a unified state in order to effectively defend against the onslaught of the Franks (then Germans), which represents a mythization element with a reference to the still forming founding myth of the first Czechoslovak Republic.

Jégé emphasises in his novel the building of the Great Moravian state (or empire), which is also an analogous situation to the building (or founding ethos/myth) of the First Czechoslovak Republic. The stabilising factor of Svätopluk's state, in Jégé's view, is the Christian religion combined with administrative and military reforms: *"Such a great spirit as Svätopluk, according to the results of his life's work, had to have seen that he would only be able to maintain himself if he raised his nation, through faith, administratively and militarily, not only to such a high level as his most dangerous rivals, but, also taking into account their disproportionately greater power, to an even higher one"* (Jégé 1983, p. 145).

Thus, in his novel Jégé presents Svätopluk as a ruler-reformer who has his leader's gaze fixed on the future and finds the necessary initiatives for his reforms in line with Jégé's authorial Machiavellian concept in the Byzantine Empire as a great power alternative to the East Frankish Empire: *"The focus of Svätopluk's efforts and later also his activities was to reform the Slavic empire, to reform its military forces, administration, internal organisation, etc. and to give it a solid political structure. Only in this did he see the possibility of saving the Slavs and their successful resistance to German pressure. Only for this reason did Svätopluk go to Byzantium, where he learned and enriched himself with new knowledge of a more advanced culture and a more perfect state system"* (Petrík 1956, 23).

Therefore Jégé, in line with his creative intentions, had Svätopluk in the second scene of the novel sent with a message to Emperor Michael III, despite the fact that there were no references in the sources to the historical Svätopluk ever being present in the Byzantine Empire.[22] In this part of the novel, Jégé was not so much concerned with matters related to the arrival of missionaries to

[21] Stodola's Svätopluk addressed his sons thus as he was dying: *"Unhappy, scattered descendants! Are you calling the enemy against you? Do you know what awaits you? You will enslave our tribes and not a single scrap of my empire will remain. The centuries will curse you! They will tear the country apart! What you sow, others will take away from you! Your speech will be the speech of servitude! You will work and someone else will pick the fruit! They will tell you that you are eating foreign bread! They will build castles against you from your own bloody calluses!"* (2005, 443) It is evident that Stodola's work focused on the figure of Svätopluk was also intended as a response to the current state-legal reality of the Czech-Slovak state and meant to look for analogies between Great Moravia and the first Czechoslovak Republic. Stodola also incorporated into the above quote the myth, then supported by the Czechoslovak historiography, of the thousand-year enslavement of the Slovak nation after the demise of Great Moravia. In connection with Stodola's Svätopluk, Kornel Földvári (1959, 158) states that, compared to Jégé's Svätopluk, he is a romantic, hesitant and indecisive weakling and that conceptually he returns deeply to the idea of romantic historical drama. Zuzana Kákošová evaluates Stodola's *Svätopluk* as the best-known and most significant historical drama of the first half of the 20th century with the theme of Great Moravia (2013, 76).

[22] Historian Lubomír E. Havlík (1994, 30) emphasises that Svätopluk's name is found next to Rastislav's when the Moravians sent a message to Constantinople around 862, which we have recorded in the fifth chapter of the *Life of Methodius*, but he considers it uncertain whether Svätopluk participated in this message and asks whether Svätopluk's name was not attributed by the authors of the mentioned legend out of respect for the great ruler at the time when the legend originated, i.e., at the height of Svätopluk's power. Historian Matúš Kučera (2010, 45-46) concluded that Rastislav and Svätopluk agreed on the need to

Great Moravia as with Svätopluk's acquisition of new administrative-legal and military-technical knowledge, which he was later to apply in the Principality of Nitra (or Great Moravia) as a way to make his country more capable of confronting German expansion: *"Svätopluk had already been in Byzantium for two years and had learned not only about Christianity, but also about other aspects of this empire. He saw with amazement, later with great understanding, that the Byzantines considered every step permissible to achieve a goal... The longer he thought about the possibilities of defending against the Germans, the more convinced he and his comrades were that he must have at least several corps of trained troops according to the Byzantine model"* (Jégé 2005, 33, 46). Thus, Svätopluk, in line with Jégé's Machiavellian inspiration, was to undergo training in Machiavellian practices in Byzantium from the world's leading figures of the time.

By incorporating relatively extensive descriptions of the Byzantine environment, Jégé was also able to utilise his extensive knowledge of the history of the Byzantine Empire, thanks to which the descriptions of its environment sound much more rounded and colourful compared to the descriptions of the Great Moravian environment.[23] However, it is rather likely that Jégé wanted to depict the contrast between the ideal – the Byzantine Empire – and the country that was to rise to the said ideal, i.e., Great Moravia. Work on the novel was demanding for Jégé due to his lack of knowledge about Svätopluk and his time, even though he later mentioned that he had no intention of creating an "archaeological scholarly work", but "only" a novel: *"A novel contrived, perhaps ninety-nine percent of which is plucked out of thin air, simply put together on the basis of a compilation"* (Jégé 1983, 141).

At the same time, this fully corresponds to Jégé's own ideas and a multi-layered concept of Svätopluk.[24] As we have already indicated, his Svätopluk is not at all a prototype of the mythical hero from the epic of Ján Hollý, and certainly not some kind of spiritualised symbol from Hviezdoslav's poem. Although on the one hand, we can say that Jégé's Svätopluk has a noble goal – to help the community of Slavic tribes achieve unity and political stability – on the other, the means he chooses are tyrannical and violent; so, in terms of the application of cruelty, he may even

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establish their own "national" church, thanks to which the influence of the Bavarian church centres, and thus the East Franconian Empire, would be eliminated.

[23] Jégé succeeded in capturing the character of Byzantine Emperor Michael III quite realistically, dipicting him as an irresponsible, frivolous man, which is also confirmed by the nickname "The Drunkard" that was assigned to him and which is pointed out by the historian Matúš Kučera (2010, 48). Ján Gregorec, in association with a certain exaggeration and descriptions connected with the second scene of the novel, centred on Svätopluk's fictional stay in the Byzantine Empire, points out that Jégé had a greater number of sources and a thorough knowledge of Byzantium history thanks to the fact that even before the outbreak of the First World War he was preparing to write a novel set in the Byzantine environment (1957, 135). In contrast, in relation to the Great Moravian environment, Jégé often suffered from a deficit of resources, as evidenced by his requests in a letter to his son Mikuláš dated 10 April 1927, for the acquisition of any literature on Devín so that his imagination would have something to grab hold of (1983, 285).

[24] In this context, Vladimír Petrík (1956, 22) noted that the character of Svätopluk contained a synthesis of the positive and negative qualities of the heroic pair of knights Donč and Matthias Csák of Trenčín, in that Svätopluk possesses the rationality and insight of one and the cruelty and brutality of the other. In Jégé's words (1983, 142), for the purposes of conceiving the novel Svätopluk, he studied these sources: *"To familiarise myself with the cultural environment of my novel, I read Niederle's* Antiquities*; to familiarise myself with history, I studied several more extensive histories of the Middle Ages, and to acquire the foundations of thought and emotion, I toiled over the* Nibelunglied*, the* Gudrunlied*, Simrock's* Kleines Heldenbuch*, as well as various literary histories and rather extensive excerpts from the most famous epics of world literature. I had long been familiar with Greek and Roman literature in considerable detail from excellent English translations. I have read the Iliad and the Odyssey several times."*

surpass Machiavelli's Prince: *"The Slavs must be united, and they will be! You must obey, or you will go to hell!"* (Jégé 2005, 49).

Svätopluk's cruel methods, in line with Jégé's naturalistic and Machiavellian concept, are dictated by circumstances and the period, and in this understanding he is compelled to accrue the means to be successful in implementing his plans. On the other hand, Jégé only wants to put him in the conceptual framework of the rulers of that time. Svätopluk's cruelty in the novel is manifested in most cases when the lords resist his reforms and innovations and instead cling to traditional views and customs. In Svätopluk's decision-making, the rule "the end justifies the means" is always at the forefront, which can also be shown by Svätopluk's betrayal of his Uncle Rastislav and his refusal to fight against the Germans (Jégé 2005, 107). Even Svätopluk's support for Christianity as the new state religion of Great Moravia is dictated as having a purpose: *"Svätopluk is right; we must convert to Christianity. The Germans have killed all the pagans, including our own, and we will not have peace from them either if we do not accept Christianity"* (Jégé 2005, 17). Jégé's Svätopluk appears to be a person who shows no interest in religion – be it pagan or Christian religion: *"Svätopluk knew Christian teachings, but he looked at them just as indifferently as he looked at pagan teachings and fables"* (Jégé 2005, 13). Svätopluk applies the Machiavellian principle of subterfuge/deceit/betrayal as a political method of Renaissance governance throughout the entire plot of the novel and applies it to the characters of Kroza, Kojat, and his Uncle Rastislav. Jégé thus conceptualises Svätopluk essentially as a cunning, Renaissance ruler.

Jégé in this context, in line with his naturalistic conception of man, is able to suddenly reveal Svätopluk's real motives for his actions, driven more by a thirst for domination than love for his own family, even though he "humanises" Svätopluk's character through corrosive reproaches: *"His heart gnawed at him that it was not love for his family that led him, but power. Why did he not obey the noble Slavomír? Would he not be tormented by the images of how terribly the great prince Rastislav, whose hand had so often caressed his youthful head, had perished through his sin*" (Jégé 2005, 122). The author lets Svätopluk question his conscience even when in Frankish captivity, but in the end, thanks to his Machiavellian skills of subterfuge, he is permitted to defeat the Franks before Devín, thereby creating all the prerequisites for him to be able to seize the leadership of Great Moravia and turn it into a powerful empire and become a terror to the Franks: *"The Battle of Devín took place in the year 870. Svätopluk governed his empire until 894 and expanded its borders from the middle Oder almost to the Adriatic. He was a glorious, powerful ruler before whom the Germans trembled. When the news of his death spread throughout their country in the year 894, all the bells rang out with joy and the people sang hymns of gratitude that God had called away their most dangerous enemy"* (Jégé 2005, 137).

In the novel's epilogue, which is set in the year of Svätopluk's historical death (894), Jégé has Svätopluk perish through the betrayal of Jarslava's already adult son in order to avenge his mother's death, which can be interpreted as the ending of the novel through an ethical reminder: *"He saw that his own deed was killing him: he was suffocated by the blood that gushed out of Jarslava's breasts. But then a great brightness appeared above the darkness, illuminating all his endless lands. From the brightness emerged the figure of Methodius, who flew towards him at great speed. When Methodius was nearby, he grabbed his splendid cloak and exclaimed: 'I have disobeyed you; I have sinned against the holy truth, and therefore, even with the best of intentions, I have only brought misfortune upon my people and myself! Holy apostle, pray for us! Methodius', the holy apostle, raised his hands and made a broad gesture with them: it seemed to him that he was blessing him and his empire, which was disappearing in the clouds of the distance"* (Jégé 2005, 138).

Thus, at the end of the novel, as he is dying, Svätopluk experiences a sudden spiritual transformation and regret for his actions, with the figure of St. Methodius unexpectedly becoming the mediator of the eventual forgiveness of his deeds. This is unexpected, because St. Methodius

is given absolutely minimal and marginal attention in the novel and has almost no influence on the course of the plot (Vančo 2023, 137). However, the epilogue can also be read, according to Ján Marták (1959, 98) or Ján Menšík (1959, 104-105), in the context of Jégé's naturalistic emphasis on human inclinations, on which the fate of the empire can also turn, which could be described as a naturalistic relic with an ethical subtext.[25]

## Conclusion

On the basis of an analysis of the methods of construction and instrumentation of the image of Svätopluk in Jégé's novel *Svätopluk* (1928), we have come to the following conclusions. First of all, Jégé's image of Svätopluk is, from a conceptual point of view, multi-layered, ambiguous, ambivalent and cannot be described as homogeneous after all. The author deals with historical facts freely, in line with his own authorial conception and with his own understanding of the meaning of Czechoslovak and Slovak history, where he does not fully take a clearly defined position, although the choice of Svätopluk is dominated by a more Slovak than a Czechoslovak factor, which also correlates with the author's contemporary statements. Jégé's image of Svätopluk in some respects achieves a significant degree of ambiguity and ambivalence, which is expressed primarily in the oscillation between the three basic aspects that we have identified and through which, in our view, Jégé illuminates his Svätopluk: through the naturalistic, Machiavellian and (de)mythization concept. In the scope of applying naturalistic determinism, Jégé primarily strives to demonstrate in the figure of Svätopluk the formative influence of the environment on the individual, which can also be seen to a large extent in the case of intertextual connection to Niccolò Machiavelli's concept of the Prince, within which Jégé strives to construct and conceptualise his Svätopluk as a Machiavellian ruler and reformer of his time. Within the mythization of the figure of Svätopluk, the most striking level is the search for parallels between the first Czechoslovak Republic and Great Moravia in terms of accentuating the founding myth of the state as well as monumentalising the figure of Svätopluk in contrast to the figure of Rastislav. One cannot speak only of mythization, however, but also of demythization of the figure of Svätopluk through a naturalistically conditioned weakening of the image of the mythicized hero-ruler, when he systematically points out his failings.

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