

Czechoslovakia: Transcarpathia (*Csilla Fedinec*)

The government of Mihály Károlyi, in Act X/1918,²³ granted autonomy to the Rusyn (Ruthenian) people of the variously named northeast Felvidék (Upper Hungary), one of the most backward parts of the country. The name given to the territory in the act was Ruszka Krajna (Rus'ka Krajna, in English: Ruthenian Border Territory). In December 1918, a Ministry for Rus'ka Krajna was set up under Oreszt Szabó (Orest Sabov), and a Munkács-based governor, Avgusztin Stefán (Avgusthyn Shtefan), was appointed, but foreign armies advanced into the territory in January 1919 and the borders of Rus'ka Krajna receded before them.²⁴ The Upper Tisza district came under Romanian control, while Czechoslovak forces occupied the western part up to the River Ung, including the city of Ungvár (Ukrainian: Uzhhorod, Slovak: Užhorod). The foreign forces continued to advance under the Hungarian Soviet Republic (March 21–August 6), whose constitution²⁵ recognized a Rusyn autonomous area, but it existed for only 40 days in March and April before being overrun by Czechoslovak and Romanian military forces.²⁶ But the major influences on the destiny of Transcarpathia were not confined to the Hungarian government, which sought to retain possession of the Rusyn-inhabited areas and to prevent secessions or detachments from them.²⁷

One such influence was the so-called Ukrainian line, which had the strongest influence in the Máramaros County. Its main aim was to annex Transcarpathia to Ukraine. From November 1918 to May 1919, a body called the Hutsul People's Council was based at Kőrösmező (Ukrainian: Jasyna, Slovak: Jasiňa) and declared a Hutsul Republic, but this was ended by the Romanian invasion.

The other main initiative came from the Rusyn-Ukrainian émigré community in North America. Several organizations were founded but the decisive influence on events was the American National Council of Ruthenians founded at Homestead, Florida, and chaired by Nicholas Chohey. The aims of the Council were formulated by Gregory Zhatkovych, a lawyer. It joined the Mid-European Democratic Union chaired by T. G. Masaryk, signed the Declaration of Common Aims of the Independent Mid-European Nations,

and voted at Scranton, Pennsylvania, on November 12, 1918, for annexing the Rusyn-inhabited counties of historical Hungary (Szepes, Sáros, Zemplén, Abaúj, Gömör, Borsod, Ung, Bereg and Máramaros) to the new Republic of Czechoslovakia, provided that the latter gave autonomy to the majority population, the Rusyns. US President Woodrow Wilson was informed of the Scranton resolution as well.

Thereafter, the Rusyns who were invited to the Paris peace conference that opened on January 18, 1919, by Edvard Beneš and Karel Kramář, representing the Czechoslovak government, were not local figures sympathetic to Hungary or the Ukrainian line, but representatives of the émigré American National Council of Ruthenians, including Gregory Zhatkovych and Anton Beszkid (Anton Beskyd), president of the Rusyn Council of Eperjes (Slovak: Prešov), who was resident in Czechoslovakia by then. The Czechoslovak claims in Transcarpathia were endorsed by the Paris peace conference on March 12, 1919. On May 8, 1919, the Rusyn councils of Eperjes, Ungvár and Huszt (Ukrainian: Khust, Slovak: Chust) held a joint meeting in Ungvár (by then occupied by Czechoslovakia) to found the Central Russian (i.e. Rusyn) National Council, which declared “voluntary” annexation to Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak government took steps in August to introduce civil government alongside the military administration in force there since the beginning of the occupation.

That was the situation when the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye was signed by the Allied and Associated Powers and the new Republic of Austria on September 10, 1919.²⁸ To the Czechoslovak Republic was ceded Transcarpathia – the most of the counties of Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa and Máramaros, under the designation “Podkarpatská Rus” (Subcarpathian Russia) – with more than 600,000 inhabitants, of whom 370,000 described themselves in 1921 as Rusyn (or Russian or Ukrainian), 102,000 as Hungarian, 80,000 as Jewish, and smaller numbers as Romanian, Czech, Slovak, German and Gypsy.²⁹ Czechoslovakia committed itself under the treaty to running the territory as an autonomous self-governing unit. Until this commitment should be met, a provisional Rusyn Autonomous Directory was appointed under the chairmanship of

Gregory Zhatkovych, who moved to Užhorod with his family in the summer.

The constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic adopted on February 29, 1920, confirmed that Transcarpathia was to receive wide autonomy.³⁰ On May 5, Zhatkovych was appointed as governor, again provisionally, until autonomy should be granted. One reason given for the provisional status was the fact that the Romanian army had yet to withdraw. That was also why the region was omitted from the first Czechoslovak elections to the National Assembly and the Senate, held in the spring of 1920. The Romanian withdrawal was completed at the end of August that year, but still no change was made in its status. Zhatkovych could make no progress in his talks with the government and resigned in disillusionment. After an official farewell to Užhorod on May 17, 1921, he moved back to the United States over the summer.³¹

Simultaneously with these Transcarpathian events, of importance primarily to the Rusyns, the Hungarian community was following its own route. It took a long time for it to sink in with the Hungarians that these new borders were permanent, not temporary. The first steps were to try to save Hungarian as a language of instruction in secondary schools – petitions were drawn up or efforts made to start private gymnasia in Munkács (Ukrainian: Mukacheve, Slovak: Mukačevo), Beregszász (Ukrainian: Berehove, Slovak: Berehovo) and above all Ungvár – and to establish political organizations. That early period marked the beginning of several Hungarian parties in Transcarpathia: the Hungarian Party of Law, the Autonomous Party of the Indigenous, the Christian Socialist Party and the Smallholders, Artisans and Agriculturalists' Party. The Hungarian branch of the Czechoslovak Communist Party also had a strong influence on the public initially.³²

The Hungarian population of Transcarpathia experienced the change of state sovereignty and its results in a way specific to itself. It took a while before people realized what life under a new state entailed. People interpreted the events around them quite unrealistically until the peace treaties had been concluded. Officials and government employees in the early days refused to

swear allegiance to the new Czechoslovak state. The Hungarian intelligentsia viewed uncomprehendingly the sudden political self-confidence of the Rusyns, who now had no desire to fall back on Hungarian politics and wanted to further their own interests. Only after the international treaties that decided the fate of the whole of Transcarpathia had been concluded did the Hungarians grasp their real situation, treating what had happened to them and their mother country as a drama, a tragedy. As a way of suffering the tragedy more easily, they sought a scapegoat for what had happened, and their choice fell on the Jews. Once it was realized that the borders could not be changed, their attention shifted: if there was to be a border between them and their mother country, let it be permeable, not sealed. The Hungarian community experienced for the first time what it was like to live as a minority. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had contained a great many national groups, and the peace agreements that ended the First World War typically acknowledged them by detaching them as new states, and by creating a new national minority, the Hungarians themselves.³³

The Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom (*Enikő A. Sajti*)

The Zagreb National Council of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes declared its secession from Austria-Hungary on October 29, 1918, and proclaimed the State of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. On November 24, it announced the unification of the South Slav lands, including Vajdaság (Vojvodina). Due to a dispute with Zagreb about unification procedure, the Novi Sad Grand National Assembly, on the advice of the Serbian National Council in Újvidék (Novi Sad), announced separately on November 25 that the Bánát (Banat), Bácska (Bačka) and Baranya (Baranja) were detached from Hungary and annexed to the Kingdom of Serbia. This assembly did not reflect the ethnic composition of Vajdaság: 750 of the 757 delegates were Slavs – 578 Serbs, 84 Bunjevci (Bunjevac), 62 Slovaks, 21 Rusyns, 3 Šokci and 2 Croats – with only 6 Germans and 1 Hungarian, but it passed a resolution proposed by Jaša Tomić, head of the Újvidék Council of Nationalities ensuring minority rights for non-Slav peoples.³⁴

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