
This book is about a small land (approx. 13,000 sq. kilometres) located in the heart of the European continent. It has had many names, and among the versions in English are: Ruthenia, Subcarpathian Rus’, Carpatho-Russia, Carpatho-Ukraine, and Transcarpathia. Each of these designations correctly conveys the sense that the territory in question is located in the Carpathian Mountain range and that its inhabitants are the people of Rus’, or Rusyns. Certain writers (including the author of this book) believe that the term Rusyn is only an older name for Ukrainians.

From the eleventh century to the end of World War I, Ruthenia, or Subcarpathian Rus’, was an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary. In turn, Hungary at varying times during those 800 years was an independent state or was subject to the House of Habsburg as part of the Austrian Empire and later Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. After the end of World War I, Ruthenia’s political fate was to change several times. In 1919, it was incorporated into the new state of Czechoslovakia, and during the last months of that country’s existence (October 1938-March 1939) it functioned as an autonomous land called officially both Subcarpathian Rus’ and Carpatho-Ukraine. In March 1939, it was re-annexed to Hungary and called Subcarpathia (Kárpátalja). In 1945, it was renamed Transcarpathian Ukraine and annexed to the Soviet Union as the Transcarpathian oblast’ of the Soviet Ukraine. Finally, since 1991 it has been part of an independent Ukraine.

While Ruthenia’s political evolution may seem complicated, for the author of this book the story of its inhabitants is much more straightforward. According to Shandor, those inhabitants are East Slavs who for nearly a millennium were separated from their Ukrainian brethren north and east of the mountain crests. Despite such externally imposed separation, the local East Slavs remained true to their Rusyn/Ukrainian ethnolinguistic heritage and longed to unite with their “Ukrainian motherland.” This age-old desire reached its first stage of fulfilment in 1938-39, when Carpatho-Ukraine came into existence, and was completely realized when the region was “re-united” with the Soviet Ukraine in 1945.

While the above scenario is straightforward, it is by the same token simplistic and a distortion of the historic record. But this matters little to Shandor, who is less interested in relating the diverse and often politically contradictory record of Ruthenia’s history in the twentieth century than in trying to prove – if after half a century proof is still necessary – that the territory should, on the basis of the ethnic origins of its inhabitants and international law, be a part of Ukraine. Such a “case,” like any case (Shandor frequently reminds us that he is trained in international law), can be “proved” by selecting an appropriate body of facts and, of course, leaving out the inconvenient ones.

For instance, following the disintegration of Austro-Hungary at the close of World War I, Rusyn civic leaders set up several national councils to decide the fate of their homeland. The various councils proposed differing political alternatives: Hungary, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, or independence. Shandor informs us, however, only of...
those councils which favored the Ukrainian solution, giving the impression that the other alternatives were non-existent or not serious. Those other alternatives were present, however, because the East Slavic inhabitants themselves had not yet a clear perception of their national identity. Some of their leaders felt they were Russian (which meant denying the very existence of a Ukrainian nationality); others that they were Ukrainian; still others that they were a distinct nationality called Rusyn or Subcarpathian Rusyn. This tri-partite division lasted at least until the Soviet annexation in 1945, when the Communist authorities simply banned all alternative explanations about national identity and proclaimed every East Slav living in Ruthenia to be Ukrainian.

But the reality of multiple identities does not fit Shandor’s teleological needs. This is most evident in his discussion of Carpatho-Ukraine’s five months of autonomy from October 1938 to November 1939, which takes up nearly half the book (pp. 67-189). He argues that the very existence of Carpatho-Ukraine is proof that its East Slavic inhabitants were expressing their Ukrainianness. The high point of these aspirations allegedly came with elections to a local diet in February 1939, when 93 percent of voters cast ballots for the pro-government party, the Ukrainian National Union. The problem here, as the author does admit, is that all other parties were banned on the eve of the election. Although there were certainly other political and nationality orientations (the first government of the autonomous province was hardly Ukrainian), Shandor unashamedly concludes that “the sui genus democratic character of the elections” (p. 145) revealed “the stalwartness [of our people] in forming its state and proclaiming itself to being an integral part of the Ukrainian nation.” (p. 144) What those elections really proved, however, was that it was the specific political circumstances of post-Munich Czechoslovakia that had allowed the Ukrainian orientation to come to power in that country’s autonomous eastern province, and not that all (nor perhaps not even a majority) of its inhabitants had agreed with its policies or felt themselves to be Ukrainian.

Carpatho-Ukraine in the Twentieth Century is a kind of extended personal memoir couched in the style of a historic monograph with an extensive scholarly apparatus based largely on materials published three or four decades ago. Although Shandor had been an official of the Carpatho-Ukrainian government (he was its representative to the central government in Prague), Czechoslovakia’s capital, which was over 1,000 kilometres to the west of Ruthenia. Hence, he was not an eyewitness to the events as they were unfolding in the region that he represented. Such spatial and chronological distance would not be a problem for a serious historian. On numerous occasions, however, Shandor’s text implies that he had first-hand knowledge of the events he is describing. To be sure, some of the material Shandor provides does add details to the otherwise extensive literature on the topic. In the end, however, this book is neither a memoir nor a history, but rather an extended political tract defending the Ukrainian point of view about the evolution of Ruthenia. Even that might not be a problem, considering the fact that Ruthenia has been for over half a century an integral part of Ukraine. Unfortunately, Shandor’s entire “legal case” has become questionable during the recent post-Communist and post-Soviet era, when there has arisen in Ukraine’s Transcarpathia as well as in neighboring states a vibrant movement made