ARTICLES

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National Assimilation: The Case of the Rusyn-Ukrainians of Czechoslovakia

During the past century and a half various ethnic groups in Eastern Europe have been consolidated into clearly defined nationalities. The intelligentsia has played a crucial role in this process. An ethnic group represents a population which usually possesses a distinct territory, related dialects, and common ethnographic, historical, literary, and religious traditions. However, members of ethnic groups are not necessarily aware of these interrelations and it is the task of the intelligentsia to foster in them a sense of national consciousness. Possession of such a state of mind among a significant portion of a given population allows for the transition from the status of an ethnic group to a nationality.

In the initial stages of this consolidation process, there were frequently several choices open to the intelligentsias of Eastern Europe. For instance, in the multinational Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires, a member of a national minority could have identified with the ruling nationality or with the ethnic group into which he was born. Hence, Czechs or Poles might have become Germanized; Ukrainians or Belorussians Russified; Slovaks, Jews, or Croats Magyarized. For those who did not join the ruling group, there were sometimes other choices: an ethnic Ukrainian in the Austrian province of Galicia could identify himself as a Pole, a Russian, or a Ukrainian, while an ethnic Slovak in northern Hungary might become a Magyar, a Czech, or remain a Slovak. The respective intelligentsias did not operate in an ideological vacuum; their decisions were influenced by the limitations and requirements of contemporary political reality. It was the degree of skill in balancing intellectual ideals with political exigencies which determined the success or failure of national movements.

1. Ukrainian (Kusyn) is the official designation of the population that lives today in Czechoslovakia. Historically all Rusyns living south of the Carpathian Mountains were known in Western literature as Ruthenians, Subcarpathian Ruthenians, Rusins, Carpatho-Ukrainians, or Carpatho-Russians. Traditionally Czechs referred to these people as rusiny or podkarpatški rusiny; Slovaks called them rusín or rusíny; Hungarians used the terms magyaronos, ruszn, rusin, now ukrán; Ukrainians called them karpato-rusyny, and recently zakarpatsko-ukrainy. In Czechoslovakia the people still refer to themselves as ruskatsi (Rusnaks) or rusyny (Rusyns), terms also used by their famous national writers (A. Dukhnovych, A. Pavlovych, Iu. Stavrovs'kyi-Popradov).

By the early twentieth century, and especially after the political changes brought about by World War I, many of the former ethnic minorities had developed into full-fledged nationalities. Some even had their own states, and most enjoyed the fruits of universal education in the national tongue. A few groups, however, had not yet achieved national consolidation. Among these might be mentioned the inhabitants of Macedonia, where Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Macedonian ideologists competed for the allegiance of the people. It was not until 1945 that within Yugoslavia a clear-cut Macedonian orientation was implemented. Indeed, the process of national consolidation has still not been achieved in every part of Eastern Europe. One such territory is the Rusyn-inhabited Prešov Region in northeastern Czechoslovakia.3

Before World War I, Rusyns had the choice of identifying themselves with the Russian, Magyar, or Slovak nationalities. After 1918 the Magyar option became less feasible, though new choices-Carpatho-Rusyn, Ukrainian, and "Czecho-Slovak"—were added to the list. Since 1945, the competition has been limited basically to three orientations: Russian, Ukrainian, and Slovak. This study will attempt to explain why the Slovak orientation has proved to be the most successful.

Rusyns who live south of the Carpathian Mountains (both in present-day Czechoslovakia and in the Soviet Union) have traditionally inhabited a border region and as a result they share ethnic characteristics with peoples in the surrounding territories. Most important among these are the Galician Ukrainians north of the Carpathians, the Slovaks to the west and southwest, and the Magyars on the lowland plains to the south. Although there is evidence of earlier settlement, most Rusyn villages were founded by colonists who came from north of the Carpathians in several successive waves of immigration between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.4 These newcomers brought with them a language closely related to the Ukrainian then spoken in Galicia and an Orthodox culture which had predominated among the eastern Slavs. In their new homeland, however, the Rusyns were geographically and politically separated from Galicia. Physical movement was restricted by the high crests of the Carpathians which coincided with the northern boundary of the Hungarian kingdom. Within Hungary, the Rusyns, like the Slovaks, never had any separate political status; rather, they were spread throughout several counties in the northeastern part of the country. In terms of social status, they were almost

3. The Prešov Region (Priashevshchyna) is the geographical region where Rusyns live. This name has never been official though it often appears in local publications and speech. Other terms used are Priashevskia Rus' (Prešov Rus'), Skhidna Slovachchyna (Eastern Slovakia), and recently Pidduklians'-kyi krai (the land under the Dukla Pass). Ivan Vanat, "Do pytannya vzhvyania terminiv 'Zakarpattia' ta 'Priashivshchyna'," in Zhovten' i ukraiins'ka kultura (Prešov, 1968), pp. 602-603. The term "Eastern Slovakia" will be used to designate the present-day administrative unit, Východné Slovensko.