

Sub-Carpathian Region of Czechoslovakia

Jan-Ruth Mills

Key Points:

- Ethnicity is the key to the conflicts between and within the countries of East Central Europe. Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Hungarians considered themselves part of a nation based on their ethnic background and linguistic group rather than loyalty to a state.
- After World War I, American President Woodrow Wilson successfully promoted the idea of “self-determination” for the peoples of Europe.
- Not all ethnic groups were allowed to choose statehood, however. Others were too small to hope for stability among larger, traditionally expansionist neighbors.
- Fearing occupation by Austria, Hungary, or Russia, Sub-Carpathian Rus joined the Czechs and Slovaks in the newly created Czechoslovakia.
- Hungary invaded Sub-Carpathian Rus in March 1939 at the instigation of Nazi Germany.

Self-Determination in Practice

According to the principal of “self-determination,” ethnic groups which had been minorities in the former Empires of Germany, Austro-Hungary and Russia had the right to independent statehood. Austria and Hungary were, of course, separated after defeat. Poland, which had been divided between the former empires, regained statehood. However, Sudeten-German former citizens of Austro-Hungary were not allowed to choose Austrian citizenship. Instead, they were included in the newly created Czechoslovakia. Like many peoples who found themselves minorities in states created by post-war treaties, Sudeten Germans identified more strongly with their ethnic/linguistic group than with their new country. Twenty years later, Nazis would capitalize on these nationalist sentiments and claim the Czechoslovakians, particularly Czechs, were abusing their German speakers among them. This became the excuse for demanding Sudetenland’s “return” to the “German Reich” in the 1938 Munich Pact as well as the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939.

The Russian Threat

Since Russia signed a separate peace with Germany in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, it did not join its former Allies in the negotiations with Germany that led to the Treaty of Versailles. Russia would not join the League of Nations for nearly fifteen years. For several years after the end of World War One, Russia was mired in civil war. But Russia nevertheless posed a threat to the post-war balance of power. If the Whites won, Russia might once again claim territory held by the Tzarist Empire. If the Reds won, Bolsheviks might spread their influence through revolution, a threat which seemed more likely after the brief but startling revolutions in Bavaria and Hungary in 1919.

This perceived threat caused Britain and France to support creating smaller states, based on ethnicity as friendly buffers between the West and Russia. However, they objected to “self-determination” according to ethnicity if the result would create or strengthen nations hostile to their aims. They were

against allowing their former enemies, Germany and Austria, from joining into one larger German speaking state. Similarly, Sudeten Germans were separated from Austrians. Poles were allowed an independent state, as were Lithuanians, among others. New boundaries left large minorities in each state. When ethnic tensions and nationalist movements arose, Jews were often seen as “outsiders” regardless of how long their families had resided in a region. As such, they were made scapegoats for both economic and social problems.

Czechs, Slovaks and Sub-Carpathian Rus

Czechs and Slovaks were culturally quite different. Not only did they speak different languages, but Czechs were Western in orientation while Slovaks were Eastern European. However, after World War I, they created a joint state known as Czechoslovakia, hoping the union would be more politically and economically viable. The Treaty of Versailles, signed with Germany on 28 June 1919, recognized this new state.

Post-war negotiations between the Allies and defeated Austria and Hungary continued for another year. These talks determined the future of yet an even smaller region variously called Ruthenia or Sub-Carpathian Rus. Occupied by Hungary prior to World War I, after the war Sub-Carpathian Rus was also wary of its proximity to Russia. Sub-Carpathian Rus sought a measure of security by joining Czechoslovakia. The 1919 Treaty of St. Germain-en-Lave with Austria and the 1920 Treaty of Trianon with Hungary both establish “Ruthenia” as part of Czechoslovakia.

A Nation for Four Days

This poor region, known for tolerance towards the 90,000 Jews living there before World War II, is not mentioned in the 1938 Munich Pact nor in the public discussion in the wake of the Third Reich’s destruction of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. However, letters from M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin to M. Georges Bonnet, French Minister for Foreign Affairs, present the sad events as “Sub-Carpathian Russia” tried to maintain independence from both Nazi Germany and Hungary. On March 12, 1939, as German troops massed on the borders of Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakian fascists prepared to render their state a puppet of Nazi Germany, tiny Sub-Carpathian Rus proclaimed itself an independent nation. But in secret negotiations, Germany had offered Ruthenia to Hungary in hopes that German troops would be allowed to cross Hungarian soil on the way into Poland and eventually into the Soviet Union.

On March 16, when Hungary invaded, Sub-Carpathian Rus begged France for help in becoming part of Romania. But no help came.

The Hungarian occupation resulted in an increase in antisemitism, Sol Rosner recalls. When Germany invaded Hungary in 1944, Sol’s family, along with 90,000 other Jews from the Carpathian region of former Czechoslovakia suffered the Holocaust with their Hungarian co-religionists.

After liberation, only six thousand Jews from Sub-Carpathian Rus survived. Like Sol Rosner, they identified themselves as Czechoslovakian. Sub-Carpathian Rus is now in Ukraine.

For further information: USHMM

[Subcarpathian Rus](#)
[Holocaust in Subcarpathian Rus](#)
[Czechoslovakia](#)
[Slovakia](#)

Yad Vashem

Australian Treaty Series: 10 September 1919 [Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye](#)

Brigham Young University: June 4, 1920 [Treaty of Trianon](#)

Yale University Avalon Project Primary Documents

[Munich Pact](#). Concluded at Munich, September 29, 1938, between Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy

From the French Yellow Book

Diplomatic records from the Munich Agreement to September 3, 1939

[Item No. 65](#): M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 14, 1939

[Item No. 66](#): M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 14, 1939.

[Item No. 73](#): M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 16, 1939.

[Item No. 80](#) M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 19, 1939.

Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 7, Fifty-Seventh Day, Tuesday, 12 February 1946, page [329](#), and Vol. 7, Day 214, Thursday 29 August, 1946 Defense Exhibit 908 ([D 908, GB-534](#)).

Judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Trial of German Major War Criminals: [Seizure of Czechoslovakia](#)

[Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry](#): Report to the United States Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, Lausanne, Switzerland, April 20, 1946

Secondary Sources

Palmer, Alan. *The Lands Between: A History of East-Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna*. Macmillan: New York, 1970

Pauley, Bruce. *From Prejudice to Persecution*.

Weinberg, Gerhard L. *A World At Arms*. Cambridge University Press, 2005