

Carpatho-Russia:
The Long March towards Spiritual Freedom and Political Nationhood.

Foreword

On 25 October 2008 at their European Congress in Mukachevo in the Ukraine, Carpatho-Russians proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Subcarpathian Russia (Podkarpatska Rus). The proclamation of Europe's newest country needs explaining to those in the Western world who are not aware of the facts. In the article below we will try and explain the historical background to this event.



‘Russia’

It will be noted that the name ‘Subcarpathian Russia’ contains the word Russia. This word comes from the root ‘Rus’, which needs explaining before all else.

Some academics have speculated that ‘Rus’ is a Scandinavian word in origin. For instance, it could be linked with the name Rurik (Roerig), or the Swedish word for rowers (the Vikings rowed their boats), or else the word for red-haired (‘ruotsi’) - apparently the Vikings were red-haired. Another theory says that it comes from the name of a Slavic tribe which lived near Kiev. They speculate that it may be linked to the Russian word ‘rusy’, meaning light brown and so with the Latin word ‘russus’ meaning red-brown (the English russet), used to describe hair colour.

All these theories are interesting, but ultimately irrelevant. Whatever its origin, the fact is that the term ‘Rus’ simply means East Slav and by implication Orthodox Christian and using the Cyrillic alphabet. ‘Rus’ is used of the four different groups of East Slavs: the Great Russians, the Little Russians (nowadays usually called Ukrainians), the Belorussians (meaning White Russians – some speculate that this name may come from the abundance of white birch trees in Belarus) and the Carpatho-Russians. Thus, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch of

Moscow is not a mere ethnarch, merely the Patriarch of Russia (Great Russia), but Patriarch of Moscow and ‘All Rus’. This can be translated into English as Patriarch of Moscow and All the Russias, which includes the many different Orthodox peoples who live in this vast territory.

Carpatho-Russia



Carpatho-Russia is situated on the southern border of the original homeland of all the Slavs. This was in south-east Poland, southern Belarus and the north-east Ukraine, as it was before the Slavic migrations in the middle of the first millennium A.D. It is in and on the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. The word Carpathian itself is linked to the Slavic word for hump or crest (gorbat, khrebet). This is also the origin of the name of the Croats, the Slavic tribe who in the seventh century emigrated to the Adriatic from the Carpathians. At that time they were known as the White Croats – no doubt from the snow on the Carpathian mountains where they lived.

At the present time, as in the past, Carpatho-Russia does not exist as an independent country, though part of it has recently been proclaimed as one. Carpatho-Russia has historically been known by the name of Ruthenia and its inhabitants as ‘Ruthenians’. This is a medieval Latin corruption of the word ‘Russian’. In Carpatho-Russian itself this is exactly what people call themselves - ‘Rusin’ (also transliterated as ‘Rusyn’) and, colloquially, ‘Rusnak’. Rusin, or Rusyn, can literally be interpreted as ‘son of Rus’. Sometimes the more technical term ‘Carpatho-Rusyn’ is also used, although this seems like the unnecessary hair-splitting of academics. Since ‘Rusin’ or ‘Rusyn’ is just the ancient form of the much more familiar ‘Russian’, we use the term Carpatho-Russian.

The territory of Carpatho-Russia with its 1,000 villages and small towns is currently split between different European countries. In the south-west Ukraine some two thirds of its territory is known by the recently invented name of Transcarpathia, meaning across the Carpathians, which it is - as seen from the viewpoint of the Galician regime in power in Kiev. From a Carpatho-Russian viewpoint, it is Kiev and Galicia that are 'Transcarpathian' - across the Carpathians. Historically, before the Second World War, this Transcarpathian area was called Subcarpathian Russia, as it is again today since the October 2008 proclamation of independence.

Carpatho-Russians

'Carpatho-Russians' are those Russians who live in the Carpathians and have a history and language quite distinct from the other East Slav peoples, the Great Russians, the Little Russians and the White Russians. The Carpatho-Russians are by far the smallest group of Russians, numbering just over one and a half million.

Today most Carpatho-Russians, some 800,000 in all, live in the province which the Ukrainian government calls 'Transcarpathia'. Others are to be found in the corner of south-east Poland (known as the Lemko Region), elsewhere in Poland after the forced deportations of the Polish government in 1947 and also in north-east Slovakia (known as 'Priashevskaja Rus' - Presov Russia). In Slovakia there are perhaps some 100,000 Carpatho-Russians, though many more have become so slovakised that they can only be distinguished from the Catholic Slovaks by their Uniat rite. (Uniat, also spelled Uniate, means a Roman Catholic who imitates outward aspects of the Orthodox Church and Faith).

There are also a few Carpatho-Russian villages in northern Hungary, northern Romania and Serbia. Apart from these, Carpatho-Russian emigrants can be found in many countries, such as the Czech Lands, Croatia, Argentina, Australia and Canada, but above all in the USA. Here it is said that there are some 600,000 people of Carpatho-Russian origin, descendants of some 220,000 who emigrated there mainly between 1880 and 1914.

Among the minority of Carpatho-Russians who live in the mountains there are three small sub-groups. In the Beskids of south-east Poland, extending to north-east Slovakia, there are the Lemkos, in the mountains of the north of the centre the Boikos and in the eastern mountains the Hutsuls. Each of these small Carpatho-Russian groups has been influenced by the migrations and customs of neighbouring peoples. Thus, in speech and folklore, the Lemkos are influenced by Poles and Slovaks, the Boikos by Galicians (west Ukrainians) and the Hutsuls by Vlachs (Romanian shepherds). However, they all basically belong to the Carpatho-Russian people.

Christianisation

In the ninth century Sts Cyril (+ 869) and Methodius (+ 885) went to Christianise the Moravian Empire, centred in the east of what is now the Czech Republic. Its borders extended to the western part of Carpatho-Russia and this is how Christianisation began here.

Using ancient Christian rites and the Slavonic language for services, their mission was highly successful. However, they and their disciples were expelled by semi-Christian Germanic and pagan Hungarian invaders from the north and west of the Moravian Empire. The missionaries fled, notably to lands such as Bohemia, Poland, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Hungary and also Carpatho-Russia. Here they continued the task of Christianisation that had been forbidden them towards the unfree west. Thus, Hungarian records state that the Slavs in the area already had bishops by the end of the ninth century. The beginning of the Christianisation of Carpatho-Russia is traditionally dated to 863.

Thus it was that Carpatho-Russian Orthodox were able to take part in the Christianisation of Kievan Russia that began in 988. It can truly be said that Carpatho-Russia was the first part of Russia to be Christianised, the cradle of East Slav Orthodoxy. This is why the Carpatho-Russian language has kept so many ancient words and phrases that go back directly to the Church Slavonic language of Sts Cyril and Methodius. In the eleventh century three brothers from the region, Sts George, Ephraim and Moses the Hungarian, became saints in Kievan Russia.

It seems that Carpatho-Russian Orthodoxy was reinforced by Orthodox from Bulgaria and later by those expelled from the monastery of St Procopius at Sazava in Hungary. These founded the monastery at Ugolka. Another early monastery was founded at Hrushevo. During the thirteenth century Carpatho-Russia suffered from the Tartar invasion, though a revival followed in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This was led by Fiodor Koriatovich (c. 1320-1414), who from about 1396 rebuilt and refounded the monastery in Mukachevo, originally founded in about 1360. To the west and north Carpatho-Russian Orthodoxy was also supported by the Diocese of Przemysl (now in Poland), as well as the Serbian Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Persecution

Separated from the rest of Russia, in about 1050 Carpatho-Russia came under Hungarian control. At first this control was friendly and Christian, but unfortunately Hungary fell away from the Church and its Orthodox Christianity and came more and more under the influence of the new Roman Catholicism that developed in Rome during the eleventh century. By the end of the thirteenth century, Hungary was more or less fully Catholicised. By then their behaviour had become like that of the Normans earlier in the British Isles, who had been sent from the same Rome to invade, 'reform' and so destroy the spiritual traditions of its peoples. The sign of the sinister and oppressive Roman Catholic feudal presence, as all over Western Europe, could be seen in its castles, the ruins of which still stand in Carpatho-Russia.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many parts of Carpatho-Russia suffered from the Turkish invasion of Europe, which reached the gates of Vienna. However, the worst persecution came from Roman Catholicism, which in 1646 began to bribe and force Carpatho-Russians into Uniatism. Resistance was led by Bishop Ioannicius (Zeykan), who in 1663 was forced to leave the monastery at Mukachevo and moved to Ugolka in the east. Ten monasteries were founded here, near Maramuresh. Other bishops continued the struggle, together with Romanian aid.

These included Bishop Joseph (Stoika – 1690-1711) and Bishop Dositheus (Fiodorovich - 1717-1735).

Despite this resistance and that of the priest and fiery writer Mikhail Andrella (1635-1710), who fled to the village of Iza and died there, the persecution from Roman Catholic Austria and later Hungary grew so severe that by the mid-eighteenth century there were officially no Orthodox left in Carpatho-Russia. The persecution and ensuing Catholicisation were very strong in the west of Carpatho-Russia. This explains why most Carpatho-Russians in Slovakia today are still Uniat and their children sometimes indistinguishable from Slovak Catholics. This is also the case of most descendants of Carpatho-Russian emigrants to the USA, most of whom emigrated there from what is now Slovakia and remain Uniats.

Rebirth

Despite this, most Carpatho-Russians remained Orthodox in their hearts. The rebirth of Orthodoxy began in the last years of the nineteenth century among immigrants in the freedom of the USA and in the early twentieth century in the village of Iza in eastern Carpatho-Russia. This fightback had been prepared by the awakeners of Carpatho-Russian national consciousness, like Fr Alexander (Dukhnovich) (1803-1865) and especially Fr Ioann (Rakovskiy) (1815-1885), priest in Iza, whom some say was martyred by the Hungarian Catholic authorities.

In North America, tens of thousands returned to Mother-Church, led by St Alexis of Wilkes-Barre (+ 1909). After the First World War and their show trials and martyrdoms in the Nazi-like concentration camps of Austria (Thalerhof and Theresin), Carpatho-Russian began to return to their ancestral faith. Led by their new Apostle, St Alexis of Carpatho-Russia (+ 1947), Carpatho-Russians in the homeland returned to the Orthodox Church in their tens of thousands. Politically free of Austro-Hungarian persecution, the Carpatho-Russians in North America were greatly supported in this spiritual rebirth by the Russian Church and in the homeland by the Serbian Church.

Despite the ‘Sabbatian schism’ of the early 1930s, named after Bishop Sabbatius who had been consecrated in a power-bid by the notorious freemason and modernist, Patriarch Meletios (Metaksakis) of Constantinople, the rebirth of Carpatho-Russian Orthodoxy continued. By 1936 there were 13 monasteries, convents and sketes, 127 parishes (in 1900 there had not been a single one) and 160,000 faithful. Today, despite some forty years of Soviet Communist persecution between 1945 and the 1980s, there are 520 parishes and 35 monasteries and convents in the two Carpatho-Russian Orthodox dioceses in Transcarpathia. In Slovakia there are about another sixty such parishes and in Poland there are also several parishes.

Afterword

The challenge for Carpatho-Russians today is to resist Galician-led Ukrainianisation in Transcarpathia (a policy that is both Fascist and Soviet in origin) and to resist Slovakisation and Catholicisation in Slovakia. The idea that one day all Carpatho-Russians in the Ukraine, in north-eastern Slovakia and in south-eastern Poland, might

return to Orthodoxy and be united in one Carpatho-Russian State remains a remote ideal.



Nevertheless, piece by piece it has moved much nearer than one hundred years ago. Then the numbers of Orthodox were fewer than three hundred and all Carpatho-Russia groaned under the ethnocide of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The proclamation of the Republic of Subcarpathian Russian in October 2008 will go down as a significant historic landmark in the Carpatho-Russian people's thousand-year long march towards spiritual freedom and political nationhood.

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