How the Soviet Empire Relied on Diversity

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Territorial Expansion and National Borders at the End of World War II in Ruthenia

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'How far is Russia going to go?' asked Walter Bedell, the new American ambassador while presenting his credentials to Molotov on 4 April 1946.[1] At that time, the westward expansion of the USSR's territory was considerable. During the post-war conferences, in Tehran and Potsdam for instance, and later in the peace treaties with former satellites of Hitler's Germany, the Allies – who had little scope for choice – endorsed the new border delineations. Years before, these had been planned ahead by the Soviets, who were eager to obtain the recognition of the territories they had annexed in 1939 and 1940 (i.e. Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina). By 1941, Stalin had already raised the issue before Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary. At the end of the war, these territorial demands were reasserted once again. Moreover, the Soviets acquired new territories at the expense of the vanquished, particularly Petsamo, a port on the Arctic Ocean, together with the surrounding area taken over from Finland, and Königsberg and its region on the Baltic Sea won from Germany (Eastern Prussia).[2] Stalin also negotiated, with Beneš, the last western Soviet annexation after the war: Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Stalin, Molotov and the Soviet diplomats did their best to improve and redraw the borders of their countries while expanding the Soviet Empire. In spring 1948, a range of agreements, mutual assistance treaties and internal reforms paved the way for the exportation of the Soviet system to Eastern European countries. Rumours spread in East and West predicting a new enlargement of the USSR. Which country would become the next Soviet republic? Romania? Czechoslovakia or Poland?[3]

1   Walter Bedell Smith, *My Three Years in Moscow* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1950), p. 53.
2   See Mikhail Narinski, 'Le gouvernement soviétique et le problème des frontières de l'URSS (1941-1946)', *Frontières du communisme*, ed. Sophie Cœuré and Sabine Dullin (Paris: Découverte, 2007), pp. 198-215.
3   About the rumours that circulated in spring and autumn 1948, see Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères français (AMAEF), Europe 1944-1960, Rumania, vol. 28, p. 117; Hungary, vol.

The traditional Cold War historiography contributed to reinforcing this interpretation. Its main narrative described Soviet expansionism and its motivations in the wake of World War II, though it left in the dark the other prominent features of the post-war situation. Looking back in retrospect to analyse the historical events within Eastern European countries led to an overestimation of the shared destiny of the Ukrainians, the Baltics, the Romanians, the Hungarians and the Poles, all under Red Army control during the post-war period. The prophesy Winston Churchill made about the Iron Curtain in March 1946 was no reality at that time. No barbed wire fences divided the European continent until 1949. The ties and relationships between European countries across the continent remained substantial until 1948. Demarcation lines dividing Austria and Germany along the occupation zones were tightly controlled but permeable. As Mark Mazower wrote: 'in those critical years from the end of the war until 1948, it was not all clear that Bulgaria and Romania shared more with Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic than they did with, say, Greece or that anything useful was to be gained from placing Prague and Dresden in some putative "Eastern Europe".[4]

In 1944-1945, from Moscow's perspective, Eastern Europe was not an undifferentiated bloc. There were, obviously enough, images based on Bolshevik political culture and experience that helped to unify views of the Soviet occupied zone in Eastern Europe. The geopolitical image of the hostile 'cordon sanitaire' was still very strong. Having obsessed the Bolsheviks since the end of World War I, it had been reactivated with the German invasion on 22 June 1941. Soviet strategy was then trying to turn it into a friendly buffer zone, first in 1939, then in 1944.[5] New images emerged from the 'new deal' at the end of World War II in the Eastern European countries that had seen the rise of anti-fascist fronts and expectations for

25, p. 241; Czechoslovakia, vol. 58, p. 382, quoted in Emilia Robin-Hivert, *Le thème de l'Europe dans les rapports de la France avec les pays communistes (1943-1958)* (PhD thesis, University of Paris IV, 2008), p. 106; see also Natalia Egorova, 'La formation du bloc de l'Est comme frontière occidentale du système communiste (1947-1955)', in *Frontières du communisme,* op. cit., p. 248-271. These rumours came from remarks reported during late-night drinking sprees. Khrushchev's memoirs bear witness to this fact particularly as they relate a scene in Stalin's dacha, on the Black Sea, when an intoxicated Gottwald is supposed to have said: 'I'm asking you, Comrade Stalin, let us sign a treaty to add Czechoslovakia to the Soviet Union': Nikita Khrushchev, *Mémoires inédits* (Paris: Belfond, 1991), p. 167.

4   Mark Mazower, 'Reconstruction: The Historiographical Issues', in *Post-War Reconstruction in Europe: International Perspectives, 1945-1949*, ed. Mark Mazower, Jessica Reinisch and David Feldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 20.

5   Vojtech Mastny, *Cold War and Soviet Insecurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

social change. For these countries, Soviet and Hungarian experts invented a new concept: they were labelled the 'countries of the new democracy' and compared with the old bourgeois democracies of the West.[6] Since the beginning of the Cold War, endless debates have taken place among historians on the nature of Stalin's plans for Eastern Europe after the war.[7] After consulting the archival sources, historians tend to think that whilst Stalin succeeded in creating a synthesis for action, both imperialistic and revolutionary, there was no big plan for Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, many little plans were drawn up in order to govern each front and organize each country after the war. This does not mean that everything was different from one territory to another: violence perpetrated by Red Army troops and Stalinist modes of control and government were easily recognizable in every occupied territory. Nevertheless, the main point revealed in the archives was that the Soviets, both in word and deed, took into account the variety of situations. As in other empires,[8] the politics of difference guided Soviet imperial rule in new, conquered territories, a point which deserves to be investigated thoroughly.

In the wake of the war, the modalities of occupation by the Red Army, and the control of the politics of retribution and purges were more varied than it appears at first glance. Local and national realities did have an impact on Soviet policies. Soviet officials enjoyed the full benefit of possessing thorough and up-to-date information on the countries in which they operated thanks to the intelligence gathering carried out by their agents. On the ground, contemporaries were at first preoccupied with territorial and national issues until the Paris Conference brought definite answers that benefited the interests of the Soviets and either satisfied or disappointed their neighbours.

Stalin, both a map lover and a man of borderland territories, effectively proved that he was skilled at designing state and national boundaries. He

6   On the concept of the 'countries of the new democracy', which preceded that of the 'countries of the people's democracy', see notably Lars Haga, 'Imaginer la démocratie populaire: l'Institut de l'économie mondiale et la carte mentale soviétique de l'Europe de l'Est (1944-1948)', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 109 (January-March 2011), pp. 13-30.

7   See, for example, the debate that divided the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Norman Naimark, 'Post-Soviet Russian Historiography on the Emergence of the Soviet Bloc', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 5/3 (Summer 2004), pp. 561-580.

8   The study of the USSR and of its expansionism can indeed benefit from approaches developed by the new historiography on empires, see notably Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

had displayed his talent as the People's Commissar for Nationalities at the beginning of the 1920s when he had given shape to the national within the Soviet federation.[9] He had demonstrated his skill in the negotiations conducted with Hitler in 1939, letting himself be guided, unlike his interlocutor, by the Ukrainian, Byelorussian or Lithuanian ethnographic lines that had been trampled by the Treaty of Riga. He had also ratified, through an agreement with the Reich on exchanges of population, the organization of the final departure of German civilians from the annexed zones. All of these decisions favoured the establishment of ethnically homogenous republics.[10] At the end of the war, acting on the strength of his experience and for his own benefit, he championed an uncompromising nation-state, proving himself to be ready to misrepresent some realities in this perspective. In the negotiations between the Allies, in bilateral discussions, when approaching Eastern European interlocutors, and when addressing populations, the ethnographic argument was always present, notably when his own border was at stake, thus providing the crucial argument with a view to establishing a stable, permanent and legitimate border. The consensus on this matter was widely shared by European decision-makers, who were concerned not to reiterate the mistakes made at the end of World War I and wanted to be done with national minorities.

At the level of the eastern and central European states, and despite a few projects for a federation, it was also first and foremost a national view that prevailed. The territorial claims at the end of the war were not solely the prerogative of Soviet imperialism. As in 1918, all the USSR's western neighbours had disputes to settle and objectives to reach in this field. As was the case at the end of World War I, the Allies held the keys to the negotiations. However, behind the Allied Control Commissions and the sessions of the Council of Foreign Ministers, in which the three Allies were involved, Moscow was definitely the only arbiter of the territorial disputes in its sphere of influence and the sole decision-maker when it came to the territorial compensations granted in exchange for its own annexations.

Regarding the negotiations that led to the 1947 peace treaties, in which the territorial and compensation issues were essential, there exists a

9   Among many works on Stalin and the national question in the USSR, see Juliette Cadiot, *Le laboratoire impérial. Russie-URSS, 1860-1940* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2007); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1922-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Iuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 53/2 (1994), pp. 414-452.
10   Catherine Gousseff, 'Des Kresy aux régions frontalières de l'URSS: le rôle du pouvoir stalinien dans la destruction des confins polonais', *Cultures d'Europe centrale*, 5 (2005), pp. 25-46.

historiographical deficit. The analysis of the Cold War and of the satellitization of the Eastern countries has, so to speak, absorbed the history of the national settlements of the post-war period.[11] Between 1944 and 1947, what was at stake for each state was victory or defeat regarding the territorial objectives followed since the Peace Conferences of World War I. The huge body of documentary and research work of the scholars of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences testifies to this fact.[12] The Soviets were kept considerably busy with the national and territorial free-for-all in Eastern Europe. As they were likely to rally a consensus between former far-right legionnaires, liberals, and Communists, the territorial claims which pitted the Romanians against the Hungarians over Transylvania and the Czechs against the Poles over Cieszyn/Těšín and Ratibor/Racibórz guided a great many political choices. To follow Holly Case's analysis in a monograph on Transylvania,[13] the years 1944-1947 saw the culmination of the Hungarian-Romanian dispute in which Romania won the first round in Trianon and lost the second after the Vienna arbitration. Antonescu's overthrow and the Romanian switch in allegiance in 1944 derived for the most part from a concern for the recovery of Transylvania. As Karel Kaplan and Valentina Marina have demonstrated,[14] by handing over Ruthenia, the Czechs aimed at obtaining Moscow's total support in the far more important matter of the expulsion of the Germans and the Hungarians as well as the territorial demands regarding Poland.

Consequently, how are we to grasp Soviet expansionism in its entirety in the context of both the conquests of the Red Army and the consideration devoted to post-war social and national claims?

Studying the construction of the border on different scales can, in my opinion, provide possible answers to these issues. What techniques did the victorious party use? What was needed to ratify a new border right

11   There are, however, recent books that correct this historiographical failing, notably Ignác Romsics, *Parížska mierová zmluva z roku 1947* (Prague: Kalligram, 2008).

12   T.V. Volokitina, ed., *Sovetskyi faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope 1944-1953*, vol. 1, 1944-1948 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999); V.V. Marina, ed., *Natsionalnaia politika v stranakh formiruiuschegosia sovetskogo bloka, 1944-1948* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004); T.M. Islamov, ed., *Transil'vanij Vopros. Vengero-Rumynskij territorial'nyi spor i SSSR 1940-1946. Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000); T. Volokitina, G. Murashko and A. Noskova, eds, *Moskva i Vostochnaâ Evropa: vlast' i cerkov' v period obshestvennyh transformacij 40-50-h godov XX veka* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008).

13   Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

14   Karel Kaplan, *The Short March: The Communist Takeover in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1948* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987); Valentina Marina, *Zakarpatskaia Ukraina v politike Benesha i Stalina* (Moscow: Novyi Khronograf, 2003).

after the war? Were military occupation and/or the consent of the Allies sufficient? In what ways could the border represent a means of national and social emancipation?

To do so, I shall put forward a case study of a little-known Soviet border that was newly set up between Czechoslovakia and the USSR in 1945. It was established between Czechoslovakia and the USSR in the borderland region of Subcarpathian Ruthenia.[15] As it constitutes one of the last Soviet conquests with Kaliningrad and the Kuril Islands, this annexation allows us to query a diplomatic and geopolitical way out of the war other than the major Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. Indeed, this annexation was carried out off the international stage as a result of national claims, political changes on the ground and bilateral friendship.

The sources used are, firstly, the Soviet archives. In addition to the Central Archives of the State and of the Party in Moscow, this chapter draws on the security services' archives at Kiev, notably documents from SMERSH (a Russian acronym meaning 'Death to the spies').[16] This body was created in the Second World War context as a military counter-intelligence service and as a means of political surveillance behind the front line. It was supervised by Abakumov at the level of the USSR. Then, it also makes use of reports and documents of the delegation of the Czech government on site, the best part of which has been published.[17] Lastly, this study relied on the memories of the period collected from the inhabitants of the border cities and villages in Transcarpathia during a series of interviews held during October 2007 and in the course of July 2008.[18]

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15   This border region is situated in Ukraine today. It shares a border with Poland in the north, with Slovakia and Hungary in the west and Romania in the south.

16   Arkhiv upravlinnia Sluzhby bezpeky Ukrainy, Kiev (AUSBU), fonds 13/928, 'Zakarpatskaia Ukraina, 1945', a 323-page file containing documents of the 2nd SMERSH department of the 4th Ukrainian front.

17   F. Nemec, V. Moudry, *The Soviet Seizure of Subcarpathian Ruthenia* (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1955); *ČSR A SSSR 1945-1948. Dokumenty mezivládních jednání* (Brno: Doplněk, 1997); *Československo-sovětské vztahy v diplomatických jednáních 1939-1945. Dokumenty,* 2 vols (Prague: Státní ústřední archiv v Praze, 1999); *Zakarpatskaia Ukraina v politike Benesha i Stalina*, op. cit., pp. 184-286.

18   This research work benefited from the financial help of the Institut universitaire de France and was undertaken on the ground in Transcarpathia with the scientific help of Tatiana Zhurzhenko, a sociologist and researcher at the Vienna Academy of Sciences.

The 'Last Piece of Ukraine': Shared Interests in Moscow, Kiev and Prague

On 29 June 1945, the treaty ceding Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the USSR was signed between Stalin and Beneš in Moscow. From then on the border roughly followed the former administrative limit separating Slovakia from Ruthenia.[19]

This borderland region belonged to the Hungarian side of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1914. It had been added to Czechoslovakia in the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1919. Officially speaking, the viewpoint shared by the exiled Czech Government and the Soviets was all for the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Czechoslovak Republic within the borders it held prior to 29 September 1938. Ruthenia was therefore to be allotted to Czechoslovakia at the Liberation. The victorious advance of the 4th Ukrainian front in autumn 1944 was accompanied by the arrival on site of a delegation of the exiled Czech government in charge of restoring Czech sovereignty.

Why then proceed to an annexation a few months later? Here, the eth-nographic argument was prevalent. After Galicia, Volhynia and Northern Bukovina, it was, to use Soviet words 'the last piece of Ukraine' to return to the bosom of the motherland: in so doing the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine had been considerably enlarged since 1939. Nikita Khrushchev, then at the head of the Ukrainian Communist Party, had been campaigning in favour of annexation since the beginning of 1944. Manuilski, the commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ukraine and a leading member of the disbanded Komintern, argued along the same lines. On 1 February 1944, the chairman of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet stated that 'all the Ukrainians [had] to be reunited'.[20] As it happened, the decision to annex the area was made in Moscow and Kiev during the final months of the war.[21]

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19   Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. 5446 (Council of People's Commissars), op.47a, d.417, p. 6. There is however an important modification: Csop station, in command of both the line serving the main cities in the Carpathians and the one going to Lvov, located until that time on Slovak territory, now part of Ukraine.

20   Quoted in Marina, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

21   The Commission for the Preparation of Peace Agreements and the Organization of the Postwar Period, headed by Litvinov, in a report dated 9 March 1944, considered the possibility of incorporating Ruthenia into the USSR and, by way of compensation, ceding a portion of Upper Silesia to Czechoslovakia. See *SSSR i germanskyi vopros 1941-1949*, note from Litvinov to Molotov, 9 March 1944, in *Dokumenty iz Arkhiva Vneshnei Politiki RF* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1996), p. 438.

The secession of Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the USSR following the Treaty of 29 June 1945

Source: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. 5446 (Council of People's Commissars), op.47a, d.417, p. 6

However, the Ukrainian national claim was not the only one in an area whose multi-ethnic and multi-religious character is quite noteworthy[22] – a point which explains why, in the course of a session of the Czech Affairs Committee to delineate the borders in May 1919, an Italian delegate had already declared that this was 'a patch of land that [would] be cause for trouble for everyone'.[23] Each of the communities in the area, whether Hungarian,

22   For a detailed history of the province during the interwar years, see Peter Švorc, *Zakliata krajina. Podkarpatská Rus 1918-1946* (Prešov: Universum, 1996).
23   AMAEF, Europe 1918-1929. Tchécoslovaquie, vol. 48, p. 16.

Czech or Ukrainian, had its own ideal map of the post-war boundaries. The numerous Magyar-speaking communities had harboured Hungarian irredentist claims since the Treaty of Trianon which had provisionally prevailed in Hitler's shadow in two separate phases. First, Hungary received, in addition to a piece of Slovakia, western Ruthenia near Uzhgorod, Mukachevo and Beregovo during the Vienna arbitration on 2 November 1938. Then in March 1939 it occupied the whole province. Moreover, there existed during the interwar period a movement in favour of autonomy within the Czechoslovak Republic founded on a Carpatho-Ukrainian, Ruthenian or Carpathian-Rusyn identity that was supported by the Communists.[24] In September, the Karpatorusskii Avtonomnyi Soiuz Natsional'nogo Osvobozh-dennia (KRASNO) – the Carpatho-Russian Autonomous Union – was set up. It maintained contact with both the Slovak resistance movement and the Czechoslovak liberation movement abroad. KRASNO consequently welcomed a declaration by the Slovak National Council in October 1944 which stated that resurrected Czechoslovakia should consist of three equal nations: the Czechs, the Slovaks and the Carpatho-Rusyns.

Ultimately, during the interwar years, the area had seen the development of a national Ukrainian movement oriented towards eastern Galicia which had achieved short-lived success at the outset of 1939 when the Voloshin-Revay Government, that the Germans supported for a while, was established in Khust.

From the autumn of 1939, the geopolitics of wars and annexations gave a boost to the claims for Ukrainian national identity that could not do without the Soviet presence. When the Red Army entered eastern Poland, following the Soviet-German Pact and the annexation of eastern Galicia by the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, Ruthenia was situated right across the border from the Soviet Union for the first time in its history. Conversely, the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the existence of an independent Slovakia as a German Protectorate removed the area from its Czech foothold.[25] Thus, while it was called Ruthenia or Subcarpathian Rus in the interwar years, the name Transcarpathian Ukraine started to prevail in 1939, a clear sign of a change in perspective both on a geographical and on an ethnic level. It had been viewed from the West, and was henceforward envisaged from

24   Although it is not listed in the present Ukrainian censuses, this nationality is claimed by the populations originating from the Carpathians who are differentiated from the Ukrainians by their local language and the practice of the Orthodox religion.

25   However, the plans to unite Slovakia and Ruthenia under German Protectorate in autumn 1940 should be mentioned.

the East. Asserting Ukrainian identity replaced the inaccuracy of the noun 'Rus', which referred to a variety of Slavic peoples. The Hungarian occupation also came into play. The deep animosity felt by the Slavs towards the occupying forces fed a flow of Carpathian-Rusyn migrants towards Slovakia. It also enhanced the attraction felt for the Soviet Union. As the Red Army advanced in Bukovina and in Bessarabia in summer 1940, many Ruthenian villagers were also ready to welcome the Red Army soldiers. However, the latter stopped before the Hungarian border, which was then considered by Soviet diplomacy as 'one of the most stable in Europe'.[26] A great many youngsters, feeling they benefited from the new joint border, then decided to flee Hungarian Ruthenia to reach the USSR, but there were limitations to cross-border fraternity in those times of war and Stalinism. Indeed, they were absolutely not welcomed as expected. When crossing the Uzhok Pass, they were intercepted by the Soviet border guards who had little knowledge of the multinational subtleties in an area that was, from then on, subjugated by Hungary. They therefore arrested the Czech-Ukrainians whom they labelled Hungarian spies and deported them to the Gulag.[27] The prisoners were not liberated in the direct aftermath of the Barbarossa invasion and the signature of the alliance between the USSR and Czechoslovakia on 21 July 1941, as the area truly appeared as Hungarian. Not until spring 1942 did the 3,000 or so Carpathian-Rusyns leave the camps and then join, after a period of physical recovery and military training, the 1st Czechoslovakian Army Corps led by General Svoboda which fought alongside the Red Army, notably during the bloody Battle of Kiev and the difficult liberation of Slovakia.[28]

The converging perspectives of Moscow and Prague regarding Ruthenia – several conversations Beneš participated in during the war[29] bear witness

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26   *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki, 1940-22 iunia 1941*, kniga 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1995), document no. 43, conversation between the Soviet Plenipotentiary representative and the Hungarian minister for Foreign Affairs, 13 February 1940, p. 86.

27   Though not as well-known as the epic episode of the Poles of the Anders Army, this story is persistent in collective memory in Transcarpathia today; interview of Petr Ivanovitch in Strazh, 7 July 2008, *Reabilitovani Istorieiu. Zakarpatskaia oblast'*, 2 vols (Uzhgorod: Vidavnitstvo 'Zakarpattia', 2003); Françoise Mayer, 'L'URSS, terre de promesses?', in *Déportés en URSS. Récits d'Européens au goulag*, ed. A. Blum, M. Craveri and V. Nivelon (Paris: Autrement/RFI, 2012), pp. 29-47.

28   Svoboda, *Ot Buzuluka do Pragi* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1969).

29   In addition to the Beneš-Maisky conversation in London on 22-23 September 1939, during which the Ruthenian issue was broached, the negotiations for a Friendship and Mutual Aid Agreement mostly provided the subject under discussion, before the decisive meetings on 21 March and 23 March 1945, that led to Beneš's unofficial engagement. See *Československo-sovětské vztahy v diplomatických jednáních 1939-1945,* op. cit., vol. 1, p. 86, vol. 2, pp. 171-172, 177-182, and 496-522.

to that fact – were also rooted in the common memory of the Munich crisis. The idea of a common border with the Soviets in this area, characterized by contemporaries as the 'door to the Danubian Plain', could indeed be of strategic importance should Hungary or Germany decide on an attack. As early as December 1943, when negotiations for the Friendship and Mutual Aid Agreement were under way, Beneš used the terms Ukrainian Transcarpathia, thereby showing he was not averse to handing over Ruthenia in the long run. From the Czech viewpoint, given the hostility against Hungary and its irredentism, the prevailing feeling was that it was better to have a Ukrainian than a Hungarian Ruthenia. Moreover, the Czechs were not exactly eager to hold a border in common with Romania. However, any potential change as regarded the border delineation was postponed de facto until after the war, since it called for a decree of the future Czech parliament. In the meantime, the restoration of the Czechoslovak State as the state of three Slavic peoples was supported by all the anti-fascist political forces, including the Communists. For those opposed to Beneš, meanwhile, and for both the Czech and Slovak anti-Communists, the 1943 Agreement was 'the instrument of the extension of Soviet imperialism in Central Europe'.

From the autumn of 1944 onward, the one thing that sped up the process of incorporating Ruthenia into the USSR was the growing spontaneous popular movement that was organized in Ruthenia. It was presented in Moscow as an internal Czech affair and officially perceived in Prague as an initiative launched from Kiev, thus becoming a strong argument in the course of the bilateral negotiations. As a result, on 27 December 1944, Vyshinski, like Molotov on the following day, whilst reaffirming Moscow's fidelity to the previous commitments that were made, observed the necessity of taking into account the strong ongoing popular movement in Transcarpathia.[30]

Furthermore the rivalry between Prague and Warsaw also came into play to win over the Kremlin's good graces, in view to obtaining a favourable arbitration of the territorial disputes between the two countries. The Poles, who had no choice but to accept the loss of eastern Galicia to the USSR, seemed to be ahead of the Czechs when it came to obtaining some compensation from Moscow. Hence, the Czechs feared a favourable arbitration over Cieszyn/Těšín as well as the Ratibor/Racibórz District

30   Telegrams from Fierlinger, the Czech ambassador in Moscow, about his talks with Vyshinski and Molotov, 27 and 28 December 1944, *Československo-sovětské vztahy v diplomatických jednáních 1939-1945,* op. cit. vol. 2, pp. 406-410. The documents, which have been translated into Russian, are also published in Valentina Marina, *Zakarpatskaia Ukraina*, op. cit., pp. 253-257.

then under Polish occupation.[31] The negotiation over Cieszyn/Těšín was to take place in Moscow on 18 June, which quickened the decision on the Czech side. By ceding Ruthenia, the Czechs hoped at least to be placed on an equal footing with the Poles. This was how Gottwald, then at the head of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, argued along with Hubert Ripka who militated for a pragmatic approach to the issue.[32] More importantly, Beneš was determined not to alienate the Soviets, whose support was crucial to oust the Germans and the Czech Hungarians, one of a set of priorities for the new government.

Blurred Boundaries

When the troops led by General Petrov on the 4th Ukrainian front fought off the Germans and the Hungarians in autumn 1944, the future incorporation of the area remained an open-ended issue for most of the administrations and populations involved. The deployment of military operations in the area was carried out in coordination with those on the second front led by General Malinovski, whose target was Debrecen followed by Budapest. Though largely made up of soldiers from the Carpathians, the troops of the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps commanded by General Svoboda followed a more northerly route through the Ducla Pass to enter Slovakia. In addition, from May to October 1944 in Ruthenia, over which the Wehrmacht and the Red Army were fighting, 262 partisans had been sent by the staff of the Ukrainian partisans to set up a partisan movement which numbered about 1,700 fighters in the autumn and created five underground Communist organizations 720 men strong.[33] Such a mobilization, though it was supported by the Foreign Bureau of the Central Committee of the Czech Communist party, admittedly counted a small number of men and was exogenous – the partisan groups were supervised by Soviet officers. It remained no less crucial to provide the network of informers and agents needed at the liberation to maintain control over the territory and the population.

The attitude of the Soviet troops and, behind the front line, of SMERSH under the leadership of General Kovalchuck and its political commissar Lev Mekhlis, bear witness to a kind of ambivalence. Was Ruthenia a hostile

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31   AMAEF, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie-URSS, vol. 58.
32   Karel Kaplan, *The Short March: The Communist Takeover in Czechoslovakia*, op. cit., pp. 19-32.
33   Marina, op. cit., p. 45.

or a friendly territory? On 18 October 1944, when the 4th Ukrainian Army crossed the Carpathians and occupied several Ruthenian villages, Stalin stated that it had penetrated from 20 to 50 kilometres into Czechoslovak territory.[34] This was therefore an allied country. The poor peasants in the Orthodox mountain villages of the Carpathians welcomed the Red Army soldiers as liberators and SMERSH operatives devoted themselves to the recruitment of informers and Communists.[35] However the strong presence of Hungarian communities in the plain of former Pannonia, which stretches to Budapest, implies that the area was also identified with vanquished Hungarian land.[36] In the Magyar-speaking villages and cities, the prevalent mood was one of revenge. The Soviets acted according to the principles of collective responsibility and collective punishment. For instance – and the same thing would happen a few days later in Hungary – the soldiers walked the streets around town saying *'Davai chasy'* – 'Give [me] your watch' – words that the people who were children at the time still remember. The phrase stood as a euphemism behind which there lay other memories of plunders and of summary executions of the fathers and older brothers who had collaborated with the Hungarian occupying forces, and the departure of the men aged eighteen to fifty-five on account of a *'malenkaia rabota na tri dnia'* (a little three-day job).[37] In actual fact, they were led to the Svaliava camp, where typhus was rife, before leaving for the Donbass mines as part of disciplinary battalions. Two-thirds of them came back in 1948.[38] There were thus limits between supposed loyalty and unspoken betrayals which crisscrossed the map of Transcarpathia and created dividing lines between localities and districts alike.

34   F. Nemec, V. Moudry, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

35   AUSBU, 13/928, pp. 55-65, 73-76, 229.

36   AUSBU, 13/928: list of the towns predominantly populated by Germans or Hungarians, pp. 8-10, on the results of the dismantling of the Hungarians agents on the territory of Transcarpathian Ukraine, pp. 176-191.

37   Interviews carried out in Csop, Kisszelmenc and Kigýos, interviews with the curator of the Berogovo museum, 16-23 October 2007. Since the end of the USSR, and because of the dynamism of the Hungarian memorial projects, 130 villages host monuments that are reminiscent of this episode.

38   A decree of the State Defence Committee had ordered the internment of the whole German population of working-age people (men aged 17-45 and women aged 18-30) for the territories liberated by the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Ukrainian fronts, namely Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia, and that they should be sent as part of disciplinary battalions to the Donbass for the reconstruction of the coal industry, *Sovetskii Faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope 1944-1953*, vol. 1: *1944-1948. Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999), pp. 116-117. In Transcarpathia, in November and December 1944, nearly 23,000 former conscripts of the Hungarian Army from the area were interned, as well as 8,500 Hungarians and Germans.

At the end of 1944, the only obvious borders, temporary though they proved to be, were the front lines heading west. The capitals of the political liberation of Carpathian and Danubian Europe were located in the eastern periphery of the national territories that were still under occupation. The post-war programmes were thus officially declared by provisional governments in Mukachevo and Khust (in Ruthenia), Banska Bystrica (in eastern Slovakia), and Debrecen (in eastern Hungary).

The demarcation line then divided the rear of the front line, which was under Red Army administration, and the territories handed over to civilian administration. In this area, the limit between the military and the civilian represented at the same time the boundary between Soviet rule and non-Soviet law.

The military administration of the territory by the Soviet High Command was one way of leaving the question of subsequent annexation undecided. In Ruthenia, on 8 May 1944, the Soviet-Czechoslovak Agreement negotiated between the Soviet Plenipotentiary Lebedev and Hubert Ripka provided

first that the Soviet commander in chief [would] possess the supreme authority and responsibility in all matters essential to the conduct of the war in the zone of war operations and, second, that a Czechoslovak Government delegate for the liberated territories [would] be appointed with the task of organizing the administration of the liberated territory, to reconstitute there the Czechoslovak armed forces and to ensure the active cooperation of the country with the Soviet armies.[39]

The battle for a concrete sovereignty over the liberated territories took place in the aftermath of the agreement setting Frantisek Nemec, appointed delegate to the liberated territories, and the twenty-two members of his delegation,[40] against General Petrov and Mekhlis. Their one obsession was to hold the ground as soon as possible in the immediate vicinity of the front line. By 26 August, the Czech delegation was ready to leave Moscow for Ruthenia. Relying on a successful military insurrection in Banska Bystrica,

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39   For the whole passage, see F. Nemec and V. Moudry, *The Soviet Seizure of Subcarpathian Ruthenia*, op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

40   Nemec was surrounded by experts from the ministries of the government in exile in London and by representatives of the different Czech, Slovak and Ruthenian political parties. Among them there are three Ruthenian Communists: Pavel Tsibere and Ivan Petruschak came from London and Ivan Turyanitsa from Moscow. As for military affairs, two generals, one of them being Nizborski, who was appointed military commandant of the liberated territories, were in charge.

they flew to Slovakia on 7 October 1944 only to discover defeat and the German troops holding the ridgeline. Not until 18 October did the 4th Army break the stranglehold of the Carpathians and enter Ruthenia. Stalin told the Czechs, and Beneš ordered the delegation to make their way there as fast as possible. On 28 October, Petrov, Nemec and Mekhlis held their first meeting on the road from Lvov to Uzhgorod.

The first encounter immediately, and unsurprisingly, demonstrated Soviet supremacy. The commander in chief had a free hand to define the geographical area of the war operations. Thus, when Nemec insisted on establishing his staff in the capital, Uzhgorod, Petrov refused, arguing from a military viewpoint that the front line was too close. The demarcation line was then drawn on the map and divided the Ruthenian territory: it would remain unchanged afterwards despite the Czech requests for a modification, even when the front line had moved considerably further away. It stretched from the north to the south and left the main Ruthenian cities of Uzhgorod, Mukachevo and Beregovo under Soviet military rule. It only granted the Czechoslovak authorities the eastern perimeter of the area. Nemec had to set up his cabinet in Khust.[41]

Moreover, the Czech delegation remained in a state of complete isolation. It was entirely dependent upon the army-instituted communications system that imposed non-coded messages. Since the beginning of November 1944, contact between Khust and Moscow had been no easy matter. Only a few telegrams were received or forwarded from the Czech embassy in Moscow; others were set aside. When Nemec came to Moscow at the beginning of December, he discovered a great many copies of telegrams he had never received in Khust. He suspected the Russians as well as Fierlinger, the Czech ambassador, who was close to the Soviets. At the beginning of November, the Czech delegate asked the military authorities to grant him direct radio contact with London and reiterated his request on several occasions in the course of the month but the Russians invariably refused. They explained that such a practice would be dangerous if the Germans came into possession of the Czechoslovak cipher. It can be noted, as an indirect result, that the details on what was happening in Ruthenia in the files of the Quai d'Orsay are of little quality. The latter are exclusively based on information provided by London.[42]

41   For an account of these episodes: Nemec, *The Soviet Seizure*, op. cit., chapter by Hust, pp. 83-124.
42   AMAEF, Europe series. URSS. Ruthénie subcarpatique. vol. 82, p. 59.

On the ground, the battle for sovereignty took on different forms. The most blatant of these was conscription. Indeed, what was at stake was to ascertain whether the mobilized soldiers belonged to the Czech Army or if they had voluntarily joined the Red Army. The demarcation line laid down by the military and the no-go area status ascribed to their zone made the battle a lopsided affair. The Czechoslovak recruiting agents were not allowed to enter or interfere west of the line while, conversely, Red Army recruitment was organized at the level of the whole of Ruthenia. At the end of 1944, 520 recruiting stations had been established, allowing for the mobilization in the Red Army of 15,000 to 16,000 men. The Czechoslovak delegation proved unable to recruit more than 1,500 to 2,000 men.[43] General Petrov played the ethnic card in the negotiations with the Czech delegation: for him, the Russians and the Ukrainians had the right to serve in the Red Army if they had expressed the wish to do so. It was impossible for Nemec to agree with this because, from a legal point of view, Czechoslovak citizens could only serve in foreign armies if the President of the Republic had previously given his consent. He sent telegrams to London underlining the political aspect of the question.[44] In fact, the recruitment of volunteers for the Red Army might have led the local population into believing that Ruthenia would be annexed to the USSR. Indeed, to a peasant, the army one fought for gave an indication as to the country one belonged to.

The right to print and post declarations and decisions that had been made was also the subject of hard-fought battles. Many incidents are documented in the SMERSH reports and in the protests emanating from the Czech delegate. The censure upon the declarations issued by the Czechs was exerted by the Khust military commander who is called '*nash kommandant*'[45] (our commandant) in the SMERSH reports. The process of disseminating Czech decisions in the cities and villages was most often blocked. But the Czech officers tried to resist. For example, they systematically seized and tore the leaflets proclaiming the union between Ruthenia and Soviet Ukraine.

In this context of unstable sovereignty in the Ruthenian territory, the campaign in favour of incorporation into Soviet Ukraine aimed at presenting the future annexation of the region as justified on the ground by the plebiscite of its inhabitants.

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43   Marina, op. cit., p. 64, p. 190.
44   Nemec and Moudry, op. cit., p. 101.
45   AUSBU, collections 13/928, special communiqué on the Khust incidents sent to Kovalchuk, 11 December 1944, pp. 275-284.

By the Will of the People

If we are to believe the report signed by Captain Safranco, a Ruthenian ex-officer of the Czech Army, and twelve of his soldiers, and then transmitted to Bamborough, the British Consul in Czechoslovakia,[46] the Soviet occupying regime and the threat of the use of firearms led to a forced annexation of Ruthenia:

> In September 1944, immediately after the liberation of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the Soviet Military authorities in Uzhorod summoned the local population to the building of the former 'provincial office' where a Red Army major agitated for the annexation of Subcarpathian Ruthenia by SSSR. After a few minutes the audience hastily left the hall. Two days later a second meeting was summoned, and on leaving the hall, each member of the audience was complied to attest a 'voluntary' petition for union with SSSR. The military guard in attendance took objectors into arrest. In the villages, the population was summoned to the school buildings and, under the muzzles of automatic weapons, each individual was forced to sign a declaration favouring voluntary union with SSSR. Later the Red Army visited every house and collected signatures by force of arms. In some cases individuals were compelled to write as many as fifteen different names on the petition to bring the signatures up to the required number.
> School children from the age of seven years were also compelled to sign. There were instances where children, warned by their parents, avoided signing by escaping through school-room windows on the appearance of the Red Army; they went into hiding for many months (this happened at Maly Berezny, Zarici, Dubrivic and elsewhere).

The military rights of the strongest (e.g. of the occupying force) and terror would therefore seem to explain everything. However, one question remains unanswered: why did the Red Army, which was by then in total control, need to build up this moment of democratic turmoil?

The Ruthenian plebiscite affair that I shall discuss here should be situated in two different contexts that somewhat put in perspective both its novelty and specificity.

First of all, the 1939-1940 annexations had already given rise to electoral processes characterized by the fact that they were hastily organized in

rural borderland areas that were relatively impervious to what might be termed high politics. Moreover, this was done at a particularly unpropitious time for the dispassionate organization of democratic elections: the Soviet army occupied the area and the situation, in the aftermath of the war, was still chaotic. Jan Gross has depicted such phases in the case of annexed eastern Poland.[47] Besides, from Kiev, the same protagonists, in particular Khrushchev and Grechukha, organized the same kind of seemingly direct democracy that was favourable to Greater Ukraine.

Moreover, the recourse to externally democratic processes was a consensual obligation in the immediate post-war period, a time when political modalities had to endorse the rupture with the preceding Nazi order. By the spring of 1944, the popular will was presented as being at the heart of the recovery of territories by both the Soviets and the East European political leaders who took part in national fronts. The reorganization of political life in Czechoslovakia – that was still under occupation – had to be effected in a similar way to most of the European countries by organizing, in the parishes, districts and provinces, people's committees that were to be the foundation of the new post-war democratic order. It should be noted that in nearby, vanquished Hungary, national committees were being set up and organized elections for a provisional National Assembly as early as December 1944. The elections were marked by Communist voluntarism and the interventionism of the Red Army. Peter Kenez gives the following account of the electoral procedure:

> [T]he Soviet Army lent trucks to help the process of elections: these went around the liberated countryside asking people to elect delegates and then immediately took them to Debrecen that was at that time the temporary capital of the government. In a little more than a week, more than a million and a half people participated in the elections at a time when hardly more than half of the country was freed and there existed no system of communication or transportation. The politicians considered it important that the legitimacy of the government should arise not from an interparty agreement but from a National Assembly created by free elections. Since the members of the cabinet had been chosen in Moscow,

47   In eastern Poland, two elections were organized during the first six months of Soviet occupation: in October 1939 and March 1940. The most significant took place on Sunday, 22 October 1939, and produced the National (People's) Assemblies of the Western Ukraine and of Western Belorussia that voted for integration into the Soviet Socialist Republics of Ukraine and Belorussia, Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 71-113.

the election was a mere formality; nevertheless this formality gave the government a greater legitimacy than if it had simply been put together by consultations among various political parties. 230 people were elected and 40 per cent of the delegates were affiliated to the communists. The date chosen for the first meeting was December 21, Stalin's birthday. Officially, the Provisional National Assembly elected the government on December 22, 1944.[48]

The process undergone in Ruthenia is similar but at the same time different. The objective was also present for the Soviets, who relied on the Ruthenian Communists, to establish, through highly varied and more often than not questionable means, instruments of power able to claim some democratic legitimacy. The view taken by the American and British allies carried little weight, unlike in Hungary where their representatives were present even if they had no power within the ACC. The Czechs appealed to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) delegation for a public health mission in Ruthenia: they were still waiting for their visas on 12 March 1945.[49] On the other hand, the view taken by the Czechs and the Slovaks is vital. The stake of incorporating the USSR had to be endorsed not only by the government but also by Czechoslovak public opinion. The chosen method was to hold a plebiscite in favour of the union with Soviet Ukraine.

The committees were organized on the ground from the spring of 1944 onwards. All collaborators were officially excluded from them, a term which designated, in Ruthenia, not only the German and Hungarian parties, but also the Ukrainian nationalists close to the Ukrainian People's Army (UPA) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

On the ground, the coercive measures Captain Safranco and his soldiers described were unquestionably one of the privileged means whereby Soviet law could be forced upon the population, especially in the villages where the liberation by the Red Army brought its share of punishment for collaborators and traitors alike.

However, the people who inhabited the area, as they evoke the aftermath of the war and the agents of the Muscovite regime, summon up memories of manipulations and material incentives against a background of helplessness and disastrous living conditions in terms of food and health. In the

48   See Peter Kenez, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 31.
49   AMAEF, vol. 82, pp. 24-27.

Magyar-speaking villages, the inhabitants very often signed the text in favour of the union with the USSR in a language they did not understand and on the basis of a lie: the petition supposedly asked Stalin for the return of the men who had been arrested. Moreover the sheets with the signatures bore absolutely no other text. In other villages, flour was handed out while the signing of the petitions was taking place. For Transcarpathian Ukraine, 250,000 *poods* of wheat – about 4,000 tons – had been provided, which the commanding officers of the Ukrainian front were distributing in trucks and cars in the cities and villages.[50] The disastrous living conditions in terms of food and sanitation must be once again brought to the fore. Associating active propaganda with the retention of information liable to be detrimental to the principle of annexation provided another well-tried method. It is thus interesting to dwell for a moment upon the affair of the leave of absence granted to the Czechoslovak soldiers who were quartered in Slovakia. After the tough battles of October, General Svoboda allowed the officers and soldiers on leave, the vast majority of whom originated from Transcarpathia, to go back to their villages. The arrival of the officers and soldiers reinforced the propaganda, both in favour of Czechoslovakia and hostile to the Soviet Union, in the villages where people had not forgotten their first encounter with Soviet border guards and their recent experiences as *zek* – a Russian term for a forced labour camp inmate – in the Gulag. The SMERSH documents express worries about this propaganda that could act as a counterweight to the Communist propaganda in Ruthenia and demand that General Petrov forbid soldiers on leave to go back home.[51]

Nevertheless, running parallel to these coercive, manipulative and censure-imposing methods, the mobilization led by the apparatuses of the Red Army and SMERSH to develop a pro-Ukrainian activism of Communist allegiance did remain prevalent. Even though the years of Hungarian occupation had contributed to decimating the ranks of the local Communists, it must nevertheless be remembered that in the 1935 Czechoslovak elections, the Communists did well in the area (around 26.5 per cent of the vote).[52] The mobilization came under several guises and mixed ethnic Ukrainian claims, Sovietophilia and Russophilia, which noticeably characterized the Rusyn Orthodox communities, with increasingly virulent criticisms against the Czechs. Targeted work enabled SMERSH to recruit pro-USSR activists at the

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50   Interviews with Arpad Iosifovich (Uzhgorod) and with Sandor Balogh (Csop), 18 October 2007.
51   AUSBU, collections 13/928, pp. 278-280.
52   Marian Tokar, *Proukrajinski polityčni partii Zakarpatta v 1919-1939 rokach*, Užgorod, 2001.

smallest local scale.[53] Obviously, the certainty of the German-Hungarian defeat and the victory of the Red Army was a strong incentive to win the population over to the Soviet cause, in particular as far as young people were concerned.

By relying on people's biographic data, SMERSH skilfully exploited ethnic divisions: in the Ruthenian villages, it was all a matter of dissociating the Rusyns from the anti-Soviet Ukrainian partisans. Besides, a past marked by collaboration and a fear of purges, one of its corollaries, were determining individual factors when it came to creating devoted Communists. Finally, the social and religious divisions were widely put to use, all the more so as they often tied in with ethnic differences. The promise to distribute land favourably influenced a great many Rusyns, who hoped to recover the land that was vacant at a time when the Hungarians and the Germans had either fled or been taken prisoner.

Such work, as it was carried out on the ground and spurred on by the victories of the Red Army, ensured the expansion of the groups of Communist activists. The Communist Party appeared rather rapidly as the only national force in the immediate post-war period and the Communists held a dominant position in the People's Committees, which were most often organized as organs of power and which worked in direct contact with the occupying authorities, bypassing the Czech representatives around Nemec. The pro-Ukrainian and pro-Soviet bent of the Ruthenian Communist Party, at that time, differed from the position in favour of the maintenance of the former borders of Czechoslovakia upheld by the Czech and Slovak Communist representatives in their dealings with the delegation.

The campaign for the union of Ruthenia with Soviet Ukraine was then launched in autumn 1944 on the initiative of the committees in which the Communists held a predominant position. On 4 November, one week after the delegate arrived, meetings were held in the villages. The mobilization reached a peak during the week of 12 to 19 November. The slogans referred to both Ukrainian patriotism and the love of the great Soviet Union: 'We are part and parcel of the great Ukrainian people', 'the land is Soviet land from Uzhgorod to the Kremlin'.[54] The role of the Communist Party of Transcarpathian Ukraine (KPZU), backed up by the military, was essential. Turyanitsa had arrived with the official Czech delegation as the representative

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53   For instance, AUSBU, collections 13/928: notes on the Uzhgorod population, pp. 244-247; data collected on the inhabitants of the village of Turian Remeta (2000 inhabitants) by Balakirev, assistant head clerk of the 1st department of SMERSH, 9 November 1944, pp. 161-175.

54   Marian Tokar, *Proukrajinski polityčni partii Zakarpatta v 1919-1939 rokach*, Užgorod, 2001.

of the Ruthenian Communist Party and, as early as 16 November, had settled at his mother's home in Mukachevo in the military zone, where he became assistant chairman of the city's National Committee. On 19 November, he organized a conference of the Communist Party during which twenty-four members of the new Central Committee of the KPZU were elected. The circulation of the Communist newspaper *Zakarpatskaia Pravda* increased at the same time from 4,000 to 8,000 copies. When a delegation of the Czech Communist Party office abroad went to Uzhgorod at the end of November, they were struck by the political weight of the KPZU and by the scope of the unofficial plebiscite that was taking place.[55] The religious aspect of the mobilization is also quite interesting. On 18 November 1944, a congress brought together twenty-three Orthodox priests who asked Stalin that the Carpatho-Russian Republic be incorporated to the Soviet Union and that their church, which depended upon the Serbian Church, should join the Moscow patriarchate.[56] Basically, the Communist schoolteachers and the Orthodox priests happened to be, in numerous villages, the agents for change whether they perceived it as being Russian, Ukrainian or Soviet.

Conversely, Nemec unsuccessfully tried to measure up to his opponents. The conference of the delegates of the National Committees of the five districts of his zone, which he meant to organize on 21 November, could not be held for lack of an agreement with the staff officers of the 4th front. The measures taken against the pro-Soviet agitators in the districts supervised by the Czechs immediately gave rise to meetings and protest demonstrations which challenged Czech law and influence, thus compelling the delegation to back down.[57]

The movement in favour of the incorporation to the USSR took the form of a series of meetings and of petitions sent to Stalin. The collected petitions stemmed from varied collectives such as the People's Council in the village of Zolotarevo (on 12 November 1944, 60 signatures), a meeting in the town of Volova (19 November, 70 signatures), a meeting of peasants from the village of Senevir in the Volovski District (226 signatures), a petition by the citizens of Goriana (17 November, 48 signatures), in the village of Korolevo

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55   Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik* (Sofia: Universitetsko izd-vo 'Sv. Kliment Okhridski', 1997), p. 449. Out of 4,715 members of the KPZU in October 1945, 2,553 had joined the Party since the autumn of 1944. Report from Khruschev to Molotov on the situation in Trancarpathian Ukraine, 12 November 1945, RGASPI, 82/2/154, p. 209.

56   A chapter is devoted to this issue in T. Volokitina, G. Murashko and A. Noskova, eds, *Moskva i Vostochnaâ Evropa: vlast' i cerkov' v period obshestvennyh transformacij 40-50-h godov XX veka,* op. cit., pp. 374-415.

57   Nemec and Moudry, op. cit., p. 111.

on the river Tisza (25 November, 147 signatures), delegates of the People's Committee of the Tiatchev District (November, 366 signatures), inhabitants of Golubino in the Svaliava District (19 November, 371 signatures) and so on.[58] Some of the petitions took the form of entreaties to Stalin. Thus the publication in the *Zakarpatskaia Pravda* on 17 November of the plea of V. Dianicha, who was at the head of a group of partisans, addressed to Stalin:

> Listen to us and understand Iosif Vissarionovitch! Welcome us as one of your family. [...] You have given us a new lease of life, for up until now we were almost dead. This is why we appeal to You as to our father. [...] Take our poor little mountainous and farming countryside into your indestructible Union of free Republics. We shall level out the Carpathians, if they are an obstacle, we shall overcome every obstacle if only we hear your paternal [answer]: Yes![59]

The plebiscite display in Transcarpathia was a cause of mobilization, division, and disgust. In his memoirs, Frantisek Nemec remembers his surprise at the speed at which the events unfolded – two weeks – and the swing of the population in favour of Czechoslovakia to the pro-Soviet side.[60] Vasyl Markus, a historian and a witness of these events, has devoted a book to the subject in which he strives to find out what derived from true aspirations and what emerged out of Soviet manipulation procedures.[61] The present-day inhabitants who were then adolescents often remember this period with accuracy. On 25 and 26 September 1944, after collecting petitions for several weeks, 663 delegates who supposedly represented 80 per cent of the cities and villages gathered in Mukachevo in the military-controlled zone. The political bodies of the Soviet army, since they issued the passes and the logistical aid to transport the delegates, were the true organizers of this congress. This assembly, which was labelled the first National Congress of the People's Committees and was presided by Turyanitsa, unanimously voted for the return to the soil of the Ukrainian homeland and incorporation into the Soviet Union. It elected a popular Rada comprising seventeen members, ten of whom were Communists. The manifesto of the congress was then addressed to Stalin and Khrushchev and brought to the knowledge

58   *Arkhiva Vneshnei Politiki RF*, 06/6/56/765, pp. 11-27, quoted in Marina, p. 79.
59   Quoted in Marina, op. cit., p. 78.
60   Nemec and Moudry, op. cit., p. 107.
61   Vasyl Markus, *L'incorporation de l'Ukraine subcarpatique à l'Ukraine soviétique, 1944-45* (Louvain: Centre ukrainien d'études en Belgique, 1956).

of the Transcarpathian adult population: 4 million people signed it before 1 January 1945. The number stood in lieu of democratic debate: 20,000 people had volunteered in the Red Army, 300,000 had voted, and 4 million had signed.

Thus there was a clear desire to have the whole body of the nation participate in the plebiscite in favour of the USSR and thereby to give it a constitutional value. Ruthenia had never been part of the tsarist empire and there were strong bonds of friendship between the Czechs and the Soviets at the end of the war. There had never been a border where one was delineated in the wake of 29 June 1945. All these elements entailed the necessary public legitimation of the change in allegiance. On 26 November 1944, a copy of all the petitions that had been collected was thus addressed by the Department of External Affairs of the People's Commissariat of Defence to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs then in charge of preparing the negotiations with the Czech authorities for the transfer of Ruthenia.

The narrative that got the upper hand for foreign public opinion was that of an irredentist movement supported by the Ukrainian Communists which expanded spontaneously, and that the Czech and Soviet governments had from then on no other choice but to take into account.

The Border: A National and Social Means of Emancipation?

However, this Ukrainian narrative, while being the most understandable on the European stage at the time, masks more than reveals when it comes to the real motives behind the relative success of the plebiscite. There is a consensus among historians who consider that one-third of the inhabitants were possibly in favour of the change in allegiance, especially in the east and in the south of the country, whereas another third remained in a state of uncertainty. The inhabitants of these borderland areas that were formerly Austro-Hungarian proved, on the ground, to be more Russophile or pro-Soviet than pro-Ukrainian. The true Ukrainian nationalists were indeed in the anti-Soviet camp and in the extreme north of the area, where they fought alongside the Galician UPA.[62] The people's militias that emerged as early as December 1944 to defend the population against the enemy, whether internal or external, were most often supervised by former partisans such as Tkanko, a hero of the Soviet Union, whose reputation was derived from his

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62   Note on the activities of the OUN and the UPA in Transcarpathia, 14 November 1944, AUSBU, 13/928, p. 242.

commitment to Moscow, not to Kiev.[63] The horizon of the agrarian reform was a crucial medium in the rallying of the people to the law of the Red Army soldiers. Between December 1944 and March 1945, by decision of the Rada and according to the record transmitted to Molotov by Khrushchev, it entailed the confiscation and the sharing out of the land taken from the Hungarians and the Germans as well as from the Kulaks whose property was limited to 70 acres in the mountains and to 55 acres in the plains. A little more than 40,000 families profited by it and gained an additional 2 to 5 acres. 1,600 families in the mountain villages were relocated to the plains within this context.[64]

In autumn 1945, at the moment when commissars came to mark out the new border, it is interesting to note the agency of the Communist activists in the border villages, who in some cases played a part in the choice of the border line depending on their agrarian concerns. Along the new border, the partition of the common soil could benefit the handful of poor inhabitants that had taken sides with the victorious party.[65]

The importance of the Orthodox religion is another essential way of supporting the expansion of the Russophile feeling. In a recapitulative report to Molotov dated 12 November 1945, Khrushchev specified that he had advised Turyanitsa, the president of the Rada, to support the Orthodox priests in their fight against the Uniates.[66] As early as 1946, the Greek Catholic Church in the area was submitted to intense campaigns of repression.[67]

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63   Marina, op. cit, p. 45; on the formation of the militias, AUSBU, 13/928, pp. 249-250.

64   Report from Khruschev to Molotov on the situation in Transcarpathian Ukraine, 12 November 1945, RGASPI, 82/2/154, pp. 204-205.

65   In this way Kisszelmenc, a Hungarian village, was divided in two by the new boundary. Seemingly, this division is due less to the arbitrariness of the demarcation commissars than to the interested motives of some poor peasants who had become influential since the arrival of the Red Army: the houses of the rich peasants located in the western part of the village stayed on the Czechoslovakian side whereas their lands located in the eastern part became soviet. Interviews carried out in the village of Kisszelmenc, October 2007; Miklos Zelei, 'Et le rideau de fer tomba le 23 décembre 2005… Réunification aux confins de l'Union européenne', *Courrier international*, 799 (23 February-1 March 2006).

66   Report from Khruschev to Molotov on the situation in Transcarpathian Ukraine, 12 November 1945, RGASPI, 82/2/154, p. 212.

67   As from 1945, the NKGB had organized, in western Ukraine, a pro-Soviet Greek Catholic movement and an assembly that met in Lvov on 8-10 March 1946 staged a rupture with Rome. The Greek Catholic priests were then hunted as they refused this manipulation that also spread in Transcarpathia. Khrushchev was particularly involved in this fight which led to the assassination of Romzha, the bishop of the diocese of Mukachevo. See Iuri Shapoval, 'The Ukrainian Years, 1894-1949', in *Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. W. Taubman, S. Khrushchev and A. Gleason (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 8-43.

Such social and religious motives for preferring the Soviet Union also rested on complex identity claims. Indeed, Ukrainian identity was less vivid than in the north, in Galicia, and the sense of belonging to a specific Carpatho-Ukrainian culture most often induced the inhabitants to describe themselves as Rusyns. The Soviets played that Rusyn card to establish their power in the area. At the same time, the space where this regional identity spread was not restricted to Ruthenia but rather extended to eastern Slovakia. This fact was noticeable during the campaign for incorporation into the USSR, which also developed within the National Committees and peasants' meetings in Slovakia in the Prešov area at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945. During the Mukachevo congress, several delegates who originated from Slovakia were present. Such a gradual expansion of the popular plebiscite, a potential cause for challenging the territorial integrity of Slovakia, alarmed Prague, Bratislava and Moscow. The subject was brought up several times: on 23 January 1945, during the six-hour discussion between Gottwald, Stalin and Molotov about Czech internal affairs, and in March 1945, when Beneš came to Moscow. Since January 1945, the Slovak National Council had been calling for the immediate recognition of the principle of self-determination for Ruthenia.[68] There remained, in the background, a concern for the interruption of mobilization on the ground that, in the long run, could possibly threaten the integrity of the Slovak territory.[69] In Prešov, for instance, the president of the local council did not acknowledge the authority of the Czech provisional government, whose headquarters were in Kosice, and deemed himself bound by the decisions taken at the Rada's seat in Mukachevo.[70] Yet it was an established fact at the level of the governments that the development of the scenario in Ruthenia was in no way to be re-enacted in Slovakia. The directives of the 4th Ukrainian front requested that no volunteers for the Red Army be recruited on Slovak territory. Besides, as early as 21 March 1945, the solution consisted of establishing the right to opt out for the inhabitants. To Beneš, it was a matter of giving a guarantee to the Ruthenian Czech and Slovak inhabitants who did not want to find themselves subjected to Soviet law and, at the same time, of putting

68   Letter to Beneš, 24 January 1945. Among the four members that signed the letter, there were two Communists, a former Agrarian and later a prominent leader of the Slovak Democratic Party and Dr Srobar, who was not affiliated to any specific party but was always considered a liberal and a non-communist (Moudry and Nemec, op. cit., p. 162).

69   At the end of the war, the influential Carpathian-Ukrainian emigrant community in the United States and in Canada was in favour of the incorporation into Soviet Ukraine of a territory larger than Ruthenia and including the Prešov area.

70   Marina, op. cit., p. 150

an end to Carpatho-Ukrainian irredentism in Slovakia. The right to opt out before January 1946 was included in the 29 June Agreement.[71] The latter was based on strictly ethnic criteria and did not take into account individuals' choices. Thus, a great many Ruthenian inhabitants who wished to remain in Czechoslovakia because they had fought in the Czech Army were not granted the right to do so. The departure of the Czechs and the Slovaks from Ruthenia emptied out some villages like Strazh, an outpost of Czech settlers facing the Hungarian plain since the 1920s. In all, the opting commission in Uzhgorod registered 1,551 families, that is to say 5,000 persons, who left, but the figures in Prague and Bratislava point to a number of 15,000 to 20,000 people from Transcarpathia who really opted out.[72] As far as the Slovaks are concerned, a certain number of families of poor peasants decided to leave, attracted by Communist agitation in favour of annexation and by the way in which the Communists had painted the rich land available in their true Soviet homeland in glowing colours. The Bovalik family were among them and regretted it. They thought they would be able to settle near the Slovak border in familiar surroundings; they were sent to the Rovno region where, due to collectivization, they lost everything they had brought along, particularly their cattle. Thanks to their tenacity and the help of a former Communist partisan they managed, when the *kolkhoz* was set up in 1950, to settle in Huta, a village on the border of Slovakia. Another villager from Huta called Maria, who also came as a little girl from Slovakia in 1945, was still filled with wonder as she recollected her first ever train journey.[73]

The question of the expansion of the plebiscite to eastern Slovakia is rather symptomatic of the agency of the Communists on the ground and of the local populations whose national and social aspirations grew owing to imperial and national strategies.

71   The right to opt out was then prolonged until the end of 1946. Besides, a new law on the right to opt out was signed on 10 July 1946. It extended this right to the Czechs from Volhynia (GARF, 5446, 47/66, pp. 3-4, 48/50, pp. 5-15, 48a/219, pp. 3-11).

72   Ivan I. Vovkanič, *Čehoslovaččina v 1945-1948 rokah* (Uzhgorod: Vidavnictvo V. Padiaka, 2000), p. 260.

73   Interviews carried out in Huta, 6 July 2008. The destination of the Slovaks who opted out was generally speaking Volhynia, so as to replace the Czechs who had left. Few managed to settle in Transcarpathia right away (less than 2,000 people). Many later tried to go back to Slovakia (Vovkanič, ibid., pp. 262-263).

Conclusion

The new border established between the USSR and Czechoslovakia in these borderland areas, which were formerly Austro-Hungarian and subsequently Ukrainian, emerged out of different dynamics. As the Red Army advanced to liberate Czech territory, the preliminary condition for Soviet expansionism was most obviously met. However this is far from providing an explanation. Indeed, most of the other East European territories liberated by the USSR kept their sovereignty. It can be noted that Soviet imperialism was guided less by success earned in armed action than by national limits whose ethnographic representation had existed since the First World War. In this instance it concerned the Ukrainian border. The westward expansion of the territory was not limitless. In 1949, Malenkov congratulated himself on the stable, permanent borders acquired by the USSR.[74] At the end of World War II, the national issues that had remained unresolved at the end of World War I were settled.

Moreover, the annexation of Ruthenia fell within the scope of a dynamic of bilateral friendship built between Moscow and Prague in the wake of the Munich crisis and given a new impulse by the December 1943 Mutual Aid Agreement. The dissymmetry in the relationship is blatant. However, while Beneš needed Stalin in the context of his anti-German and anti-Hungarian priorities, Stalin also needed the Czech ally for his European policy both in the East and in the West. The issue of Ruthenia and its borders had been dealt with by the countries of the Entente at the end of the First World War within the framework of the proceedings of the Saint-Germain-en-Laye Conference. In 1945, it only resulted in a negotiation which was quickly conducted against the background of an organized plebiscite and without the involvement of the other Allies. While the Ruthenian borders were partly ratified by the peace treaties signed with Hungary and Romania in 1947, the section of the border stretching from Ukraine to Slovakia was only validated by the ratification of the provisional Czechoslovakian Assembly and the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union on 22 and 27 November 1945. This was done following a delineation renegotiated several times in the course of the autumn.[75] The dissymmetry is even more blatant, however,

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74   Malenkov, *32-aia godovshina Velikoj Oktiabr'skoj socialisticeskoj revoliucii* (Moscow, 1949), p. 5.
75   GARF, 5446/47a/437. There is notably a dispute over six villages located on the border, *ČSR A SSSR 1945-1948. Dokumenty mezivládních jednání,* op. cit., document 64, pp. 142-143.

if we examine the concurrent actions of the Soviet and Czech authorities on the ground.

Moving the border also brought into play strategies of social and national emancipation supported by the Russian and Ukrainian conquerors as well as by part of the local population, both among the elites and the common people. The cultural, national and religious diversity of these borderland regions was not unknown to the agents of the new Soviet order, who made use of the information. It was admittedly absent in the simple rhetoric of the return of Ruthenia into the bosom of the Ukrainian homeland but it was taken into account in the mobilization and incitement techniques of the populations in support of adherence to the Soviet Union. To Jan Gross, the Soviet construction of a sham democracy in eastern Poland in autumn 1939 aimed at achieving a form of legitimacy on the international stage; it also proceeded from the Soviet manner of making the population aid and abet what was going on:

> from the October elections on, the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia were tainted. By submitting to the authorities and casting a ballot, they had lost their innocence. They had made a contribution; they were implicated. For the only interpretation that makes sense of the otherwise absurd herding of the people into pre-election meetings and then voting booths lies in the recognition that the Soviet authorities have never sought engagement from the population in their custody, only complicity.[76]

In Ruthenia, the plebiscite, the annexation and the implementation of the new border appear as so many moments when, for motives of a national, social, religious, but at the same time (and above all) of an individual nature, some people can make choices and affirm their commitment for what lies ahead: collaborating or standing back, fleeing or staying. The ideological preoccupations of the new occupying force led to the emergence of local interests that effectively found therein the possibility for both expression and action.

All things considered, when compared with eastern Galicia where the Ukrainian resistance movement against the Soviets held the forces of the Soviet order in check for several years, the annexation was relatively easy and the Soviet regime got settled quite rapidly due to the ability of the

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76   Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 113.

Soviets to handle a diversity that proved beneficial for them. Herein lies the entire paradox of the Stalinist regime. Its contribution to the ethnicization of the border areas and to the affirmation of national identities should not make us forget the fact that, to Stalin as well as to a great many leaders of empires, diversity policies remained the best method to rule over territories and, in the Soviet case, were the most effective lever to export his model of society.

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