H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mária Mayer, János Boris, Paul R. Magocsi. *The Rusyns of Hungary.* Boulder, Colo.?: East European Monographs, 1997. xiii + 320 pp. $40.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-387-0.

Reviewed by Anthony J. Amato (Saint Mary's College)
Published on HABSBURG (September, 1999)

NATIONS AND A PEOPLE

In *The Rusyns of Hungary*, Maria Mayer traces the development of the Rusyn national movement in pre-World War I Hungary. Mayer's book, which was first published in Hungarian in 1977, is divided into six chapters, each of which covers a different topic and time period. Mayer opens the book by noting that the Rusyns of Subcarpathia "had a low level of socio-economic development," and this "backwardness" shaped the Rusyn national movement. (p. 4) For most of the past two centuries, the movement was confined to a small group of intellectuals, and it took "more than a century … for Rusyns to evolve into a nationality." (p. 4)

Backwardness also translated into controversies of identity among Rusyns, with competing factions espousing different cultural and political orientations. The differences between these factions were reflected in the names they favored: "Carpatho-Russian," "Carpatho-Ukrainian," "Subcarpathian Rusyn," "Ruthenian-speaking Hungarian," and "Greek Catholic Magyar." Backwardness also meant that "external factors" had a "decisive influence" on the national movement. (p. 4) The orientation and goals of the movement were influenced by external events, including the Russian suppression of the Hungarian Uprising (1849), the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1867), and the Celebration of the Millennium of the Hungarian State (1896).

Taking her cues from memoirs and earlier studies, Mayer focuses on two crucial decades between 1849 and 1914, the 1860s and the 1890s. During both decades, the language question dominated debates, and external events transformed the national movement. The intervening two decades, the 1870s and 1880s, witnessed new publishing and press activity, but few noteworthy events. In chapter one, Mayer examines the national "revival" that took place between 1860 and 1871. The presence of Russian troops in Subcarpathia in 1849 set the stage for this "revival." Impressed by similarities in language and religion, two generations of educated Rusyns embraced Russia and encouraged their countrymen to think of themselves as Russians. Rusyn Russophiles became involved in local administration and parliamentary politics. The most famous Russophile politician, Adolf Dobrians'kyi, won election to the Hungarian Parliament.

In 1864, Dobrians'kyi and other Russophile politicians founded the St. Basil Society. Devoted to Russian culture, the society defended the Eastern Rite against Latinization and embarked on an ambitious Russian-language publishing program. Authors of its publications shunned the Rusyn vernacular and imitated the literary language of Moscow and St. Petersburg as best they could. The society and the Russophile movement suffered a major setback shortly after 1870. Pressure from the Hungarian government and Bishop Istvan Pankovics (Shtefan Pankovych) led to a shakeup in the society's leadership. The Russophile leadership was voted out, and a new leadership favoring assimilation was installed. Feuding further weakened the society, leaving the once vibrant organization moribund.

In chapter two, Mayer examines publishing in the 1870s and 1880s. She focuses on the periodicals *Karpat*, *Ungvar*, *Ungvari kozlony*, *Slovesnost'*, *Listok*, and *Kelet*. The newspaper *Karpat*, published between 1872 and 1886, serves as a guide to the political and cultural landscape of the 1870s and 1880s. The pages of *Karpat* reflected a new Rusyn consciousness. *Karpat*'s editors rejected the Russophilism common in the 1850s and 1860s, and they argued that the printed language should be based on local speech. They ruled out possible alliances with the Rusyns of Galicia, whom they characterized as "poor" and "weak," and stressed that the Rusyns of Subcarpathia could rely on no one but themselves. Citing a trend, even among peasants, to adopt Hungarian, the editors questioned the use of all Slavic languages in the Subcarpathian press. By the 1880s, Rusyn had almost vanished from the pages of *Karpat*. The absence of Slavic languages from the Rusyn press in the 1880s did not

mean that the press was hostile to the national "awakening." Articles in the Hungarian-language newspapers *Ungvar*, *Kelet*, and *Ungvari kozlony* described peasants' lives, advocated national rights, and debated the nature of a Rusyn literary language.

In chapter three, Mayer analyzes the formation of the nationalist intelligentsia at the turn of the century. Three developments transformed Rusyn political life in the 1890s: the creation of the Hungarian Catholic People's Party, the reestablishment of the St. Basil Society, and the growth of interest in economic questions and rural life. Founded in 1895, the Catholic People's Party energized political activity in Subcarpathia. The party's platform, designed to appeal to both clergy and peasants across Hungary, promised protection for artisans, tax relief for farmers, fairness and equity for non-Magyars, and an expanded role in education and government for clergy. Committed to a conservative agrarian agenda, party leaders hoped to unite opponents of the urban, pro-government Liberal Party. Ultimately, the Catholic People's Party fared poorly in elections, but it forced the government to take an interest in national rights and in life in the countryside.

In Mayer's opinion, the reestablishment of the St. Basil Society, many of whose members were People's Party supporters, was of equal importance. The revived society, which eschewed Russophilism, "relied solely on the people." (p. 76) The society's new approach signaled a new popular and local emphasis in the national movement. Concern over the growth of Pan-Slavism and a Return-to-Orthodoxy movement among Greek Catholics led the Ministry of the Interior to investigate the society. Although the society was exonerated of playing any part in either movement, its members, intimidated by the scrutiny, voted to disband in 1902. Members redirected their efforts and focused on economics and party politics.

Chapter four investigates the Return-to-Orthodoxy movement among Subcarpathia's peasants. Mayer emphasizes the social and economic roots of the movement. In the early twentieth century, peasant protest against authorities, clergy, and the Hungarian elite gave rise to a mass movement among Greek Catholics to convert to Orthodoxy. Poor peasants and land-hungry peasants who travelled abroad to earn money were the most receptive audience for Orthodox propaganda, much of which was disseminated by the U.S.-based convert, Fr. Alexis Toth. With its Russophile and Pan-Slavic orientation, the Return-to-Orthodoxy movement challenged both Rusynophiles and advocates of assimilation. The Greek Catholic Church's efforts to stop the schismatic movement backfired. The church turned to Hungarian officials, who took advantage of the situation and pushed for further Magyarization of the church. The new Magyarization measures only increased parish hostility to the church hierarchy. The schismatic movement, which declined rapidly after 1910, had a lasting impact on the national "revival." The controversy reinvigorated Rusyn discussions of identity and nationality, and the movement forced Hungarian officials to support popular educational organizations.

Chapter five explores the process of Rusyn-to-Hungarian assimilation and the attitudes of those who assimilated. For Rusyns who lived in towns, Magyarization was an unconscious process, but for members of the intelligentsia, Magyarization was "a definitely deliberate and conscious act." (p. 153) Assimilated Rusyns were not indifferent to cultural questions and political issues. In the 1890s, Magyarized intellectuals advanced their own religious, educational, and political programs. The National Committee of Magyars of the Greek Catholic Faith demanded recognition for Hungarian as a liturgical language in the Greek Catholic Church. The Pal Vasvari Circle, a group of Greek Catholic students at the University of Budapest, sought to teach the inhabitants of Subcarpathia to be proud Magyars. Articles in the newspaper *Gorogkatolikus hirlap* warned of the danger of assimilation (Hungarian to Rusyn), discussed the need for "reassimilation," and rebuked government officials for using the term "Rusyn." Advocates of Magyarization sought to counter Rusynism and secure a place for the Greek Catholic Magyar in Hungary.

Mayer concludes her study with an examination of American Rusyns and their role in the national movement. The U.S., the cradle of Fr. Toth's Return-to-Orthodoxy movement, was also home to the Greek Catholic Union (GCU). This fraternal organization, under control of Rusyn nationalists, advocated national rights for Rusyns in Hungary, and successfully blocked Hungarian efforts to control the Greek Catholic Church in the U.S. The organization also sought to protect Rusyn parishes from Galician domination. The GCU's Rusynophile leadership opposed the selection of Soter Ortynsky as the first Greek Catholic bishop in the U.S. (Ortynsky, a monk from Galicia, supported the Galician Ukrainian movement.) Hungarian and Galician efforts to control the Greek Catholic Church created solidarity among Subcarpathian immigrants.

In each of the six chapters of her study, Mayer discovers common discussions about nationality and nation. By

integrating many seemingly disparate events and trends in one study, she sheds new light on the turning points of the Rusyn national movement. Her accomplishments are no small feat, given the movement's complexities.

Although Mayer succeeds in illuminating crucial developments in the Rusyn national movement, she could have done more to describe the prize in this struggle – the several hundred thousand peasants who inhabited the southern slopes of the Carpathians and comprised "the nation." Her book only scratches the surface of the countryside. A more thorough inquiry into Rusyn villages may have led Mayer to revise her emphasis on external factors. One study can only do so much though, and to her credit, Mayer includes a valuable appendix with several previously unpublished documents describing life in the countryside.

Some will question the scope and balance of *The Rusyns*. Mayer's focus on pre-World War I developments leaves the story of the Rusyns incomplete. In the 1920s and 1930s, a strong Ukrainophile trend emerged in Subcarpathia, and today there is a conflict between Rusyns who consider themselves Ukrainians and Rusyns who consider themselves part of a separate Rusyn nation. Recent developments indicate that the debate about nationality in Subcarpathia is by no means resolved. Mayer is not above the controversy: she takes a pro-Rusyn or a pro-Hungarian stance on many issues. Critics will no doubt fault her for taking sides, but criticism for taking sides in the Rusyn debate comes with the territory.

Others will fault *The Rusyns* for its lack of a comparative framework. Mayer draws from Hungarian and Soviet works on Subcarpathia and national movements in Eastern Europe as well as from the small number of Western works on Rusyns, but readers will not find Benedict Anderson or even Miroslav Hroch in the bibliography. Since *The Rusyns* was first published, historians of East Central Europe have expanded their discussions, and one consequence of this trend is that *The Rusyns* no longer fully engages the literature on nationalism and national movements. More recent studies of Subcarpathia and Galicia have not only engaged the literature on national movements, but they have made significant contributions to our understanding of nationalism and nationality. Two of these studies in particular stand out for their contributions: Paul Robert Magocsi's sweeping *The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus', 1848-1948*, which drew on Mayer's work, and John-Paul Himka's *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement*, with its concern for peasants.[1] It is unfortunate that Mayer did not see fit to update *The Rusyns* to acknowledge the newer literature when the decision was made to translate it.

Although *The Rusyns of Hungary* does not transform our understanding of nationalism or nationality, the book offers valuable insights into the national movement in Subcarpathia. The book's focus on the pre-war press and political parties complements the emphasis on language, literature, and biographies in Magocsi's *The Shaping of a National Identity*. *The Rusyns* also forces historians to reconsider some aspects of national movements. Chapter five explores the parallel process of assimilation. Ignored by many studies of nationalism, the politics of assimilation have shaped more than one national movement. Mayer also examines the role of Rusyn emigres in defining national consciousness. Often overlooked by scholars, emigres have been integral in many national movements.

In conclusion, *The Rusyns of Hungary* is a valuable contribution to scholarship on East Central Europe. Accessible to a broad audience, including advanced undergraduates and amateur historians, Mayer's work is sorely needed in a world where the Rusyns of Subcarpathia have been ignored, misunderstood, and even mistakenly characterized as having "the potential of becoming the Kurds of East Central Europe."[2]

Notes

[1]. Paul Robert Magocsi, *The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus', 1848-1948* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); John-Paul Himka, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

[2]. Andre Liebich, "Getting Better, Getting Worse," *Dissent* (Summer 1996) as reprinted in *Global Studies: Russia, the Eurasian Republics, and Central/Eastern Europe*, Seventh Edition, Edited by Minton F. Goldman (Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1999), p. 254. Timothy Garton Ash has recently challenged this description. See his "Hail Ruthenia!," *The New York Review of Books* (22 April 1999).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Anthony J. Amato. Review of Mayer, Mária; Boris, János; Magocsi, Paul R., *The Rusyns of Hungary*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. September, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3417

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.