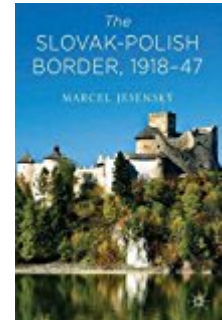


Marcel Jesenský. *The Slovak-Polish Border, 1918-1947*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. 264 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-137-44962-7.



Reviewed by Pavol Jakubec

Published on H-Poland (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Paul Brykczynski

While the Czechoslovak-Polish border conflict over Teschen, if still missing a research monograph in a major European language, at least rings a bell with students of Central European history, the confrontation between Slovakia and Poland over the Slovak-Polish borderlands tends to shrink to a footnote. Therefore, this debut publication by Marian Jesenský, a Slovak-Canadian historian, is likely to become a reference work and deserves a closer look.

The study is logically structured. Its six-chapter core mirrors the vicissitudes of the dispute over the northern fringes of the former (Austro-)Hungarian counties of Orava and Spiš, including the emergence of nation-states; the clash at the Paris Peace Conference leading to the partition by award (1918-20); a complicated border demarcation (1921-24); the dormant phase and the renaissance of the dispute in the shadow of a disintegrating Europe (1938-39); and the postwar echoes (1945-47). The World War II chapter has very little to say: in exile, the problem of Orava and Spiš became extremely marginal to both gov-

ernments;[1] Czechs and Poles alike advocated a status quo antebellum, yet they differed in their opinion as to the way to proceed.

Jesenský promotes a reconceptualization of the historiographic question of Polish-Slovak border issues/controversies. However, the opening chapter includes an introduction with little reflection about earlier research. Rethinking is possible only when the material has already been thoroughly studied and widely discussed. This level of awareness is unlikely among readers with regard to an internationally peripheral border dispute. The author's historical outline, containing irrelevant and highly debatable information (in particular on medieval history), does very little service to the analysis that follows. Instead, I would welcome at least some background concerning the inclusion of ethnic peripheries into emerging national communities instead. This question has not yet been studied adequately with regard to Orava and Spiš.[2]

A closer look at the abundance and variety of sources and literature reveals just how demanding Jesenský's subject is. The author's heuristic method, mirroring the dispersion of sources, is to be commended. He has visited many archives in different countries and his broad scope is no doubt unique. At the same time, his approach causes difficulties. While the impact of the US and Canadian (!) archives appears to be ephemeral, the impressive list of utilized, often voluminous, collections provokes a question: was Jesenský able to delve deeply into his sources? It is important to note that he did not use a lot of valuable interwar material from the Czech Foreign Ministry Archives in Prague (collections of its political, intelligence, or legal sections) or from the Slovak National Archives in Bratislava (Ministry for Administration of Slovakia and Land Administration Authority). The very same is true of the provincial archives. Indeed, Jesenský appears to be aware of this deficit and pays vivid attention to memoirs and regional historiography. The inclusion of published sources is limited as well. For instance, only selected volumes of the Czechoslovak diplomatic papers (*Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky, DČZP*) were consulted: A/2/1 (November 1918 to June 1919) and A/20/1-2 (1938-39). Polish diplomatic papers (*Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, PDD*) and the "wartime" series of *DČZP* are completely absent. Such lacunae certainly pose a problem for Jesenský's book.

Furthermore, we can ask, to what extent is a single author able to present, in detail, a territorial dispute with a three-decade long history in two hundred pages? Jesenský's predecessors have always confined themselves to a particular stage of the dispute in the context of Czechoslovak-Polish relations.[3] While their books tend to communicate the results of a long-term interest, it appears that Jesenský ignores much of this earlier research and has less experience with his topic. Throughout his study, Jesenský ignores post-2009 publications, for the most part, although he refers frequently to marginal contributions.[4] For ex-

ample, the two-volume biography of Edvard Beneš is not mentioned at all.[5] Studies in international diplomatic history are only occasionally mentioned.

The dispute in question was initiated, on an inter-state level, by Poland, with Warsaw playing a more active role than Prague. Therefore, it is essential to address the subject as an element of Polish foreign policy, which, unfortunately, Jesenský discusses only in a schematic manner with no reference to some classic investigations into Czechoslovak-Polish relations.[6] A well-documented account of the Polish question at the Paris Peace Conference by the Danish historian Kay Lundgreen-Nielsen deserves mention. In *The Polish Problem at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Policies of the Great Powers and the Poles 1918-1919* (1979), Lundgreen-Nielsen revealed relevant excerpts from the story of the American intervention and brought to light how successful pro-Polish activists from Orava and Spiš were with President Woodrow Wilson. It is also problematic that the main source of Jesenský's knowledge of the so-called Third Europe policy or of Polish attitudes to the Anschluss is Milica Majeriková's *Vojna o Spiš: Spiš v politike Polska v medzivojnovom období v kontexte česko-slovensko-poľských vzťahov* (2007). Majeriková deals with these issues in vague terms and in a secondary manner. As H-Poland readers know, the Second Republic and its foreign policy have always been subject to an active research interest, and Jesenský should have employed a broader source base in his analysis.[7]

It is also important to note that Czechoslovak-Polish relations in the period of Jesenský's interest have recently become a rather dynamic field. For instance, many relevant documents of various origins have recently been published. In addition, new research has attempted to elucidate stages, problems, and contexts, and to show how the dispute over Orava and Spiš forms part of the bigger picture of Czechoslovak-Polish relations.[8] Jesen-

ský's conclusions are, unsurprisingly, influenced by the lacunae in his sources. For example, the author could have elaborated his hypothesis: "An alliance between Czechoslovakia and Poland could have lessened French influence in Poland and decreased Poland's reliance on French assistance" (p. 62). Since both countries were and would remain members of the French alliance system, was there any realistic possibility of altering this dependence? The claim that Polish-German rapprochements lessened tensions between Warsaw and Moscow is also tenuous. In fact, the German-Polish Non-Aggression Declaration of January 26, 1934, led to the deterioration of Soviet-Polish relations, but Polish diplomacy managed to assuage most of the negative effects.[9]

Unfortunately, there are frequent errors in Jesenský's book. For example, Erazm Piltz had never been a Polish foreign minister (p. 6). The Czechoslovak-Polish borders are not related to the Peace Treaty of Sévres (August 10, 1920) (p. 10). Rather, they were mentioned in another international treaty which was signed in the very same place on the very same day, but which has never come into effect.[10] As far as the Czechoslovak-Polish talks in Cracow (June 1919) are concerned, it should be noted that the Czechoslovak delegation originally lacked the mandate to engage in any negotiations about Orava and Spiš. When the decision was met by the Supreme Council at the Paris Peace Conference on September 27, 1919, that the plebiscite was to be held in Teschen, Orava, and Spiš "within three months," the starting point was not specified (p. 49); thus, the deadline remained vague.[11] With regard to the Polish offer to exchange the villages of Kacvín and Nedeca for that of Javorina in March 1921, Jesenský's statement, about an "almost uninhabited territory," is misleading (p. 65). The older Galician-Hungarian dispute over a mountain lake, Morskie Oko, was resolved on September 14, 1902, and not in 1907 (p. 134n7). Václav Vážný was a Czech, not Slovak, linguist (p. 144n52); Bishop Marián Blaha's

see was that of Banská Bystrica, not Spiš (p. 162n58).

A further problem includes Jesenský's use of terminology. In an empirical study such as this one, a historian should abstain from contemplations about ethnical representativeness. Writing Czechoslovakia with a hyphen (Czecho-Slovakia) disregards the actual usage for most of the state's existence. Such orthography is prone to deform historical terms. Further examples of errors are less sophisticated. *Gwara* means "dialect" in Polish in general, and does not refer to a particular one (p. 18). There were not three Czechoslovak-Polish border disputes, as stated in chapter 3, but only two (some Orava-Spiš distinction is meaningless).

The place-names used are problematic as well. One example is the Spiš village of Javorina initially located in Orava. Misspellings are frequent (*Wołynia* versus *Wołyń*, p. 30; *Czadecki* versus *Czadeckie*, p. 135n14), and an unusual language has been employed (for example, Tešín [!] versus Teschen Silesia, Frýdek versus Frydecki district [pp. 41, 152n33]). Jesenský's characteristics of locations are rather arbitrary and might mislead readers to demographic expectations out of proportion. It is doubtful how useful the *verbatim et litteratim* principle is if, for instance, a historical place-name is not identified by referring to its current name. For example, Rychvald is Velká Lesná (p. 30); Velická dolina (i.e., valley) becomes "Velká [i.e., Big] Dolina" (p. 42). In mentioning the 1920 plebiscites in the Lower Vistula region (Allenstein/Olsztyn, Marienwerder/Kwidzyn), Jesenský is familiar with German place-names only. Indeed, no "Malá Lubovňa" exists (p. 73). Although Czechoslovakia aspired to incorporate some tiny pockets in the Czech-German-Polish borderlands in the early 1920s, Hlučínsko (Hultshiner Ländchen), having fallen to Czechoslovakia already in the Peace Treaty of Versailles (June 28, 1919), was not one of them. Jesenský confuses Hlučínsko with Hlubčicko (known also as Głubczyce and

Loeben [p. 120, although correct on pp. 123, 125]), the two other pockets in question being Kladsko (known also as Kłodzko or Glatz), and Ratibořsko (known also as Racibórz or Ratibor). It is important to note that on page 128 all three regions have been identified according to their German names only. It is true that Central European topography is complicated. However, this situation makes proper standards even more important, especially with regard to a nonexpert audience.

It is possible to write positively about Jesenský's work, too. He is among the very few who admit that the Slovak press did identify some "otherness" in the borderland population early in the twentieth century; that the Poles have to some extent succeeded in promoting a Polish identity in Orava; or that, when asked to identify themselves with a particular nation-state, the local population in Orava and Spiš faced a dilemma. French and Polish indications that Czechoslovakia (August-September 1919) signaled greater flexibility on the issue of Orava and Spiš than on Teschen, and observations of Polish procrastination tactics capitalizing on military advances against the Soviets during the spring of 1920, are new. The claim that the Polish request for Javorina was meant as a *rapprochement* and Warsaw was looking for a way to pacify domestic public opinion in perceived losses in Teschen is plausible; Beneš did not reject the idea, but he was not able to find enough support for it among Czechoslovak politicians. Jesenský has a valid point when he states that declaring the Munich Agreement null and void meant that territory delimited to Poland in 1920 and 1924 and occupied by Slovakia in 1939 would have to be returned to Poland. Jesenský is, again, one of the very few to include the tiny border corrections of the Carpathian border in eastern Slovakia in 1938. However, Czechoslovakia did not reject the Polish proposal to prolong the two-year Annex Protocol to the Alliance Treaty of March 1947 (p. 203n73). Prague unwillingly

agreed, but the talks were withheld from public opinion.[12]

In conclusion, Jesenský's well-structured study presents the Czechoslovak-Polish border dispute over Orava and Spiš for an international audience. The author's aim to paint a broad picture of the situation is commendable. He disagrees with the partition of the borderlands and hints that this was the place where Poland received compensation for its Teschen losses; yet he does not cultivate antipathy vis-à-vis parties and actors who were in conflict and mentions several valid points. Despite Jesenský's great effort, however, his choice of sources is deficient. The book is unfortunately flawed in many areas. To err is human; yet far too many mistakes, inaccuracies, and vague or dubious formulations are included. These shortcomings come as rather an unpleasant surprise, given the status of the publisher. The demanding subject is partly responsible. The end result is tentative and seemingly hastily written, not a mature monograph. At the same time, students of Czechoslovak-Polish relations should take the study into consideration.

Notes

[1]. Jan Němeček, *Od spojení k roztržce: Vztahy československé a polské exilové reprezentace, 1939-1943* (Prague: Academia, 2003), 53, 64, 233 (this principal study is absent from the bibliography); and Dušan Segeš, *Dvoj-kríž v siločiarach Bieleho orla: Slovenská otázka v politike polskej exilovej vlády za 2. svetovej vojny* (Bratislava: Veda, 2009), 355.

[2]. Jerzy M. Roszkowski, "Zapomniane kresy": *Spisz, Orawa, Czeddeckie w świadomości i działaniach Polaków, 1895-1925* (Nowy Targ: Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, Oddział w Nowym Targu, 2011).

[3]. Petr Jelínek, *Zahraničně-politické vztahy Polska a Československa v letech 1918-1924* (Opava: Matice slezská, 2009); Marek Kazimierz Kamiński, *Konflikt polsko-czeski 1918-1921* (Warsaw: Instytut Historii Polskiej Akademii Nauk,

Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2001); Milica Majeríková, *Vojna o Spiš: Spiš v politike Poľska v medzivojnovom období v kontexte česko-slovensko-poľských vzťahov* (Cracow: Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2007); Milica Majeríková-Molitoris, *Vojna po vojne (Severný Spiš a Horná Orava v rokoch 1945-1947)* (Cracow: Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2013); Dagmar Perman, *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State: Diplomatic History of the Boundaries of Czechoslovakia, 1914-1920* (Leiden: Brill, 1962); Alina Szklarska-Lohmannowa, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki dyplomatyczne w latach 1918-1925* (Wrocław, Cracow: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, 1967); Jaroslav Valenta, *Česko-polské vztahy v letech 1918-1920 a Těšínské Slezsko* (Ostrava: Krajské nakladatelství, 1961); and Piotr S. Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies 1919-1925: French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from the Paris Peace Conference to Locarno* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962).

[4]. Viktor Borodovčák, Ludovít Holotík, Fedor Gondor, and Jozef Hrozienčik, *Poliaci a my* (Martin: Osveta, 1964); Rudolf Žáček and Mečislav Borák, “Ukradené vesnice”: *Musí Češi platit za 8 slovenských obcí?* (Český Tešín: Muzeum Těšínska, 1993); or general histories of Bohemia, Poland, and Slovakia.

[5]. Jindřich Dejmek, *Edvard Beneš: Politická biografie českého demokrata*, 2 vols. (Prague: Karolnum, 2006–2008).

[6]. Wiesław Balcerak, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski w dobie Locarna* (Wrocław, Warsaw, Cracow: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, 1967); and Andrzej Essen, *Polska a Mała Ententa 1920-1934* (Warsaw, Cracow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992).

[7]. For example, see Anna M. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939: A Study in Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968); Marek Kornat, *Polityka równowagi (1934-1939): Polska*

między Wschodem a Zachodem (Cracow: Arcana, 2007); Marek Kornat, *Polska polityka zagraniczna 1938-1939: Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Oskar, 2012); and Marek Kornat, *Polen zwischen Hitler und Stalin: Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Berlin: be.bra, 2012). For a discussion among Polish historians home and abroad during the Cold War, see the round table discussion, “Poland between Germany and USSR, 1926-1939: The Theory of Two Enemies,” *Polish Review* 20, no. 1 (1975): 3-64. See also Sandra Cavallucci and Annalisa Lombardo, “Jagiellonian Federation, Intermaria, Third Europe, From Piłsudski to Beck: The Development of Polish Regional Aggregation Plans in the Interwar Period,” *Storia delle relazioni internazionali* 14, no. 2 (1999): 99-129; and Hans Roos, *Polen und Europa: Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931-1939* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1957).

[8]. Dariusz Dąbrowski, *Rzeczpospolita Polska wobec kwestii Rusi Zakarpackiej (Podkarpackiej), 1938-1939* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2007); Isabelle Davion, *Mon voisin, cet ennemi: La politique de sécurité français face aux relations polono-tschécoslovaques entre 1919 et 1939* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009); Jiří Friedl, ed., *Zaolzie w świetle szyfrogramów polskiej placówki dyplomatycznej w Pradze oraz Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych w Warszawie, 1945-1949* (Czeski Cieszyn: Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej, Ośrodek Dokumentacyjny, 2007); Jiří Friedl and Zdeněk Jirásek, *Rozpačité spojení: Československo-polské vztahy v letech 1945-1949* (Prague: Aleš Skřivan ml., 2009); Marián Hronský, *Trianon: Vznik hraníc Slovenska a problémy jeho bezpečnosti (1918-1920)* (Bratislava: Veda, 2011); Pavol Jakubec, “Formovanie spišského úseku československo-poľskej hraničnej čiary počas Parížskej mierovej konferencie (1919-1920),” *Slovenský prehľad* 96, no. 5 (2010): 575-618; Sławomir Nowinowski, *Polska w dyplomacji czechosłowackiej, 1926-1932* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2013); and Marta Przyłuska-Brzostek,

ed., *Ekspertyzy i materiały delegacji polskiej na konferencję wersalską* (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2009).

[9]. Oleg Ken, *Collective Security or Isolation? Soviet Foreign Policy and Poland, 1930-1935* (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskiy Dom, 1996), chaps. 2-4.

[10]. Jan Krčmář, “Československo-polská hranice na území spišském (Javorina) před Stálým dvorem mezinárodní spravedlnosti v Haagu a před Radou Společnosti národů v Paříži,” *Zahraniční politika* 3, no. 1 (1924): 10-11.

[11]. Jakubec, “Formovanie spišského úseku,” 600.

[12]. Jiří Friedl, “Dva dokumenty k otázce prodloužení dvouleté lhůty dodatkového protokolu československo-polské smlouvy z roku 1947,” *Slovanský přehled* 95 (2009): 483-489.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Pavol Jakubec. Review of Jesenský, Marcel. *The Slovak-Polish Border, 1918-1947*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45558>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.