

The Hungarian Minority of Czechoslovakia and its Press

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In Czechoslovakia the number of ethnic Hungarians changed frequently over the past fifty years. Of the 896,271 Hungarians registered for the present area of the country by the last Hungarian census, that of 1910, only 650,597 remained by 1920. By 1930 their numbers had decreased further still, to 596,861. In the wake of the Vienna Award of 1938, the Hungarian census again registered 800,000 ethnic Hungarians in the area annexed to Hungary, besides whom there were another 53,128 left in Slovakia. After 1945 the plan was to resettle Czechoslovakia's Hungarians in Hungary. As a result of this population transfer, some 117,000 Hungarians were relocated in Hungary. An additional 41,640 Hungarians were deported to the Sudetenland in westernmost Czechoslovakia, while those Hungarians who remained in Slovakia were compelled to request "re-Slovakization." Although their disadvantaged status ceased after 1948, their number fell to 368,000 in the 1950 census. Following further improvement in their situation, those declaring themselves Hungarian rose to 534,000 in 1961 and to 573,000 by 1970. However, we know their real number to be around 650,000.

During these decades the ethnic composition of Slovakia's formerly almost homogeneous Hungarian communities has changed, as migrations and resettlement gave rise to mixed populations in them. This trend affected mainly cities with Hungarian majorities in 1910. In these communities their proportion dropped from 93.8 to 17.5 percent. The loss is particularly conspicuous in Kassa [Kosice] (down from 75.4 to 3.9 percent), in Léva [Levice] and Losonc [Lucenec]. With the exception of Komárom [Komarno] the Hungarians became a minority in other cities as well: Érsekújvár [Nové Zámky], Rimaszombat [Rimavská Sobota], Rozsnyó [Roznava]. In Pozsony [Bratislava] a mere 9,932 Hungarians lived in 1970 despite that city's vast demographic growth of the past decades. This compares with 31,705

Hungarians registered there in 1910. Hungarian populations have disappeared almost completely from the towns located in Slovakia's traditionally Slovak-speaking areas. . . .

In the rapidly developing local administrative centres the decrease of the Hungarian population was greater than average: their ratio dropped from 93.8 to 52.5 percent. In five of the fourteen communities of this kind (Pozsonypüspöki [Podunajské Biskupice], Galánta [Galanta], Szenc [Senec], Vágsellye [Sal'a], Szepesi [Moldava nad Bodvou]) they lost their absolute majority, but elsewhere too, their ratio declined significantly.

Most successful in preserving their original character were the villages where the proportion of the Hungarian population was still 75 percent even in 1970, as compared to 98.2 percent in 1910. In 182 of the 491 settlements in this category Hungarians accounted for over 90 percent of the population even in 1970. Their former majority was still preserved in 422 communities, but in 69 they became a minority. The latter figure does not include the 60 settlements that had a Hungarian majorities in 1910, where the latest Czechoslovak censuses registered Hungarian populations of more than 10 percent or less than one hundred people.

The demographic conditions of the Hungarian-populated communities scattered in a belt of several hundred kilometers north of Hungary have changed a great deal since 1910. The number of Hungarians rose the most in the Csallóköz and the Bodrogeköz, that is at the westernmost and easternmost edges of the Hungarian settlement area. On the other hand, there was a conspicuous decline in their numbers in the vicinity of Léva and Kassa. This is partly due to the magnitude of the deportations there and is in part connected with low birthrates. . . .

A county-by-county analysis of the settlements with one-time Hungarian majorities revealed that even in 1970 Hungarians continued to constitute a sizable majority of the population in settlements formerly belonging to Győr County (95.8 percent), in the Dunaszerdahely district of Pozsony County (92.0 percent), in the Csallóköz district of Komárom County (87.3 percent) and in the Bodrogeköz district of Zemplén County (86.6 percent). Also, their ratio remained over 70 percent in the Somorja, Galánta and Udvardi districts, in the formerly Hungarian villages of Esztergom, Hont, Gömör, Torna and Ung counties. This means that from Gutor to Szob settlements with Hungarian majorities still flanked the Danube. The Csallóköz core of the Hungarian settlement area in western Slovakia also remained almost completely intact. Contiguity with the Hungarian settlements situated along the River Ipoly is ensured by the populous communities of Komárom and Esztergom counties.

In this area the Hungarian population declined primarily along the Hungarian-Slovak linguistic boundary. In Pozsony County the number of Hungarians decreased mainly in local administrative centres, but in the Szenc

district the smaller villages were no exception either. The absorption of the Hungarian population of the communities situated in a Slovak linguistic environment in the vicinity of the town of Nyitra increased, and the Slovak penetration of Nagysurány [Surany] broadened.

Even greater changes can be observed in Bars County, where the 50 settlements near Léva lost their one-time Hungarian majority or their entire Hungarian population. For the time being it cannot be determined whether the decrease in the Hungarian population was mainly due to the prevalence of the one child only family model, the resettlements, re-Slovakization and migration, or whether the censuses are actually distorting the situation.

The narrow band of Hungarian settlement stretching towards the north-east in Nógrád County is in the process of gradual break-up between Zsély [Zel'ovce] and Losonc. In the vicinity of Fülek [Fil'akovo], however, it once again broadens and some 200 Hungarian villages, mostly sparsely populated, line up, primarily on the territory of Gömör County, up to the Torna Plateau. In this general region, the Hungarian majority has eroded in the towns and the more rapidly developing villages, as well as in some settlements along the linguistic boundary.

The situation is far more serious in Abaúj County, where the Hungarian population of Czechoslovakia suffered its greatest losses. Between Kassa and the Hungarian border the latest Czechoslovak censuses did not register any Hungarian population at all in communities with one-time Hungarian majorities. In another thirteen settlements their proportion dropped to below 50 percent. In this region the number of Hungarians had decreased by some 50,000 between 1910 and 1970. As a result of this, the line of Hungarian settlements formerly stretching up to Eperjes [Presov] along the Hernád River was further reduced. Gradually, even the remaining Hungarian diaspora faded into oblivion. . . .

Similarly, a substantial decrease can be observed in the Sátoraljaújhely district of Zemplén County, where eighteen communities with one-time Hungarian majorities are missing from the Czechoslovak census of 1970. In another five settlements their ratio dropped to below 50 percent and almost everywhere the number of Hungarians decreased significantly. On the other hand, the Hungarian villages in the Bodroghköz district and those with Hungarian majorities that at one time belonged to Ung County, solidly retained their considerable Hungarian majorities; however, they are totally isolated from the rest of the Hungarian-populated areas of Czechoslovakia. Numbering some 50,000 and concentrated in 50 settlements, this group has even shown slight population increase over the past few decades.

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The historical self-awareness of Czechoslovakia's minorities leaves a great

deal to be desired. Amongst the factors contributing to this state of affairs special mention must go to the total absence of historical scholarship on the history of the Hungarian minority. The products of interwar bourgeois historiography are unknown. Indeed, in practical terms, they are accessible to those interested, mostly amateur researchers, only in Budapest. The most serious reason, is, however, the dogmatic approach to tradition, under which *only the revolutionary traditions* are considered worthy of exploration and publication. . . .

Concerning the origins of Czechoslovakia's Hungarian minority, it was only in the course of the debates of 1968 that Hungarians pointed out that it was not of their own free will that they ended up living in Czechoslovakia. (Today Czechoslovak historical scholarship also acknowledges the violation of the principle of national self-determination with respect to minorities living in Czechoslovakia.) Generally, however, it is customary to stress that the post-war peace settlement brought about the liberation of the small nations of central Europe. Seen from this perspective, the birth of the bourgeois democratic Czechoslovak state is seen as significant progress in every respect.

Two things deserve special mention from the first twenty years of the Hungarian minority's history. The first is the idealized image presented in the periodical *Sarló* [Sickle]: a straight and smooth path from the recognition of national and social problems to the acceptance of communist ideals, the formulation of a new democratic definition of being Hungarian for all Hungarians, the uncritical acceptance of minority messianism. The second is the stereotype investigation of the activities in southern Slovakia of the Czechoslovak Communist Party—making a contribution only to scholarship on local history. Of the latter, attention is regularly being focused on the Whitsun strike by agricultural workers in the community of Kosut in 1931, in which several people died. (Special attention is paid here to the role of István Major, a leading functionary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.) The same holds true for the anti-fascist rallies of 1938. Special attention is paid to the writings and reminiscences of the labour movement veteran Dezső Roják. His works and the tone of the contemporary Czechoslovak communist press, incidentally, indicate that amongst the Hungarian minority of the interwar period the Czechoslovak Communist Party, which advocated a radical programme of national self-determination, enjoyed broad-based support. (It is quite another matter and characteristic of Czechoslovakia's present nationalities policy that all of these events, persons and movements are presented in Slovak scholarship in a way that the minority connections of the southern Slovak communist movement are impossible to discern.). . . .

The subject of the "years of homelessness" between 1945 and 1948 surfaced in the press of Slovakia's Hungarian minority only during the Prague

Spring. Although in the rehabilitation documents of the condemned Slovak communist leaders, the Czechoslovak Communist Party's Central Committee denounced the negative policy pursued against the Hungarian minority after the war, the act of rehabilitation itself remained rather ambiguous. According to the rehabilitation documents, the anti-Hungarian measures expressed the opinion of the entire leadership of the party at the time. . . .

Traces of the Hungarian minority's Magyar historical consciousness in Slovakia's Hungarian press are for the most part confined to the post-1948–49 period. In connection with the various anniversaries of the launching of *Új Szó* (New Word) [in late 1948] and of the founding of CSEMADOK (Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kulturális Egyesülete; literally: the Cultural Association of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia) [1949], this organization's weekly, the *Hét* (Week), carried a grandiose article series of recollections from the “torch-bearers”—official appraisals from the national and district leaders of the organization and from the Slovak leaders in charge of the nationalities question in the district councils. There is not very much in these recollections beyond an enumeration of cultural and organizing activities. There is no mention in them of the cultivation of the language, only a discussion of amateur theatricals and folk song competitions. Admittedly, the latter, too, have always possessed a community-forging power. However—and this is characteristic of amateur movements—organizational instability and general apathy are growing in the ranks of the minority. This is seemingly contradicted by the constant growth of CSEMADOK membership: in the seventies it rose from 55–60,000 to 80,000. (It must, however, be noted here that only a very tiny proportion of the membership is in fact active, and that recruitment is rather routine—for example involving pupils in schools, and so on.)

Whereas in the fifties CSEMADOK—much like the minority cultural federations in Hungary at the time—was considered “a lackey dressed in folk dress,” by the end of the sixties had tried to turn into a kind of ethnic lobby. After being officially reprimanded in the seventies, its leadership adopted a bureaucratic style and, under the slogan of “quality in cultural work,” it shifted the emphasis to ideological work. . . .

It is important to add that the dearth of publications in the field of historical scholarship has prompted literature and literary history to undertake the task of creating a healthier historical self-awareness for the minorities. However, this is a rather difficult undertaking on account of a very narrow readership and because it demanded daring and inventiveness on the part of writers. The results of these efforts are not comparable to those prevalent in Hungary. . . .

Each year, two Hungarian historical anniversaries are marked by Slovakia's Hungarian minority press: 1848 and 1919. The former usually consists of a report on the traditional ceremony staged annually at the Petőfi statue in Pozsony. Invariably, there are articles on the role of the Hungarian War of Independence in European progress and on the "procrastinating" and "misguided" minorities policy of the Hungarian Revolution. As it has already been indicated, . . . not even in 1968–69 did Pozsony's Hungarian journalists indulge in the euphoric spirit of 1848. Their commemorations always remained within the conceptual sphere of central European national interdependence and brotherhood. . . .

In connection with the subject of Hungarian historical consciousness attention should be paid to the questions raised in the literature of Slovakia's Hungarian minority that probe the relationship of collective Hungarian history and the traditions of the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. In one study examining the theoretical problems of Hungarian historical scholarship in Czechoslovakia, Sándor Varga, the CSEMADOK secretary in 1968–69, attempted to clarify this theme in 1977: "The notion of a Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia was non-existent prior to 1918. . . ." Precisely for this reason the history of this ethnic group up to 1918 is an organic part of the history of the Hungarian state and nation. In 1918, this segment of the Hungarian people became, almost overnight, an adjunct of an entirely different, new, political and economic entity. The two to three years that constituted the transition were unable to change significantly the Hungarian people's centuries of tradition and customs. A situation arose whereby groups of the Hungarian people differing from each other in many regards (here the author is thinking of the ethnic sub-groups of the Hungarian regions of Slovakia: the Mátyusföld, Garammente, Csallóköz and the Palócság) suddenly came to possess numerous common traits. They became the "Hungarians of Czechoslovakia. . . ."

Before we turn to the examination of the treatment of the Hungarian minority's historical anniversaries, mention must be made of the fact that the more extensive and more unequivocal commemorations than those found in either the Transylvanian or Vojvodina press, indicate that the Hungarian minority in Slovakia adheres to universal Hungarian traditions, perhaps, to a greater extent than the Magyar minorities of Rumania and Yugoslavia. . . . The great Hungarian men of letters are regularly present in the Hungarian press of Slovakia on the pretext of their connections with Upper Hungary. . . .

The Hungarian press of Slovakia is not, however, concerned only with the classical Hungarian literary heritage. The achievements of post-1945 Hungarian culture may also be found in the three papers investigated in

this study, albeit to a far lesser extent. As a matter of fact in this regard the second half of the seventies witnessed a conspicuous setback. (This was especially noticeable in book distribution, restricted opportunities for subscribing to journals published in Hungary, and in the misunderstandings which surfaced in connection with the publishing of works by certain Hungarian writers.)

In the seventies, during the aftermath of the “crisis period,” writing about the historical traditions of minorities became rather restricted. Contemporary reporting was confined to such themes as the actions of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in southern Slovakia with respect to the Hungarian minority, and its leaders of Hungarian nationality. At the same time, writing in the *Sarló* became confined to Edgár Balogh, László Dobossy, Ferenc Horváth, and a few others who turned communist and also won admission to the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Subjects such as Czech-Hungarian and Slovak-Hungarian attempts at *rapprochement* and cooperation, also came into focus. . . .

Naturally, the Hungarian minority’s historical consciousness is already dominated by the events of Czechoslovak history. Whilst the anniversary of the establishment of the Czechoslovak state—following the practice of the Czech and Slovak press—passes almost unnoticed, the anniversaries related to party history (the forming of the Czechoslovak Communist Party [1921]; the electing of the Gottwald leadership [1929] . . . and so on) are given prominence. Also, each year the lessons of the year 1938 furnish an opportunity in the minority press, too, for praising the positive role played in the struggle against fascism by Czechoslovakia’s emerging united front—under communist leadership.

In the discussions of the wartime resistance movements the subject that dominates is the Slovak National Uprising. In fifteen years of commemorative literature only one negative comment can be found. In his August 1969 recollections, the scholar and teacher Kálmán Hamar of Nyitra lamented that the internationalism of the uprising’s leaders suddenly disappeared into thin air after 1945. Only the anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia and of the events of 1948 in Czechoslovakia are marked for comparable attention in the Hungarian minority press.

Celebrated under the name February Victory, the anniversaries of the “people’s democratic” takeover of 25 February 1948 serve as an opportunity for discussing the consequences of “Ice-Breaking February” on nationalities policy—to use the expression of Andor Sas, a former incumbent of the Chair of Hungarian Studies at the University of Bratislava. The usual cue for this is the stereotype cliché according to which the “taking over of power by the working class also of necessity raised the prospects of a positive solution of the nationality question.”

It has already been mentioned that the anniversaries of the launching of

Új Szó, CSEMADOK and the other Hungarian cultural institutes provide ample opportunity for the evaluation of the post-1948 period. . . . It usually becomes the task of literary historians to debate the truth or otherwise of the tenet “starting from scratch.” Its real basis is the void in the wake of the expulsion to Hungary of the majority of the Hungarian intelligentsia, its “voluntary” departure and the three- or four-year gap in the functioning of the Hungarian schools and press. The enthusiastic will to act of the emerging new Hungarian minority intelligentsia in the years of the personality cult . . . was not followed by steps to institutionalize minority public life. . . .

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It may be stated that no relations exist on a regular basis between the Hungarians of Czechoslovakia and those living in Rumania and Yugoslavia. Some rare contacts in fact do take place—a case in point is, for instance, cooperation between the pedagogical research institutions of Bratislava and Novi Sad [Újvidék], over the methodology of teaching the majority language to minority children. But apart from this, mention in Slovakia’s Hungarian media of the Hungarian minorities living in other countries is few and far between. Zoltán Fonod’s 1970 report on his trip to Transylvania is a unique exception in the history of *Új Szó*. It is another matter that in spite of all this, these contacts are clearly discernible in the realm of literature. Thanks to the relationship between Gyula Duba and Ernő Gáll, reviews of the works of Hungarian writers living in Rumania and Czechoslovakia are published several times a year in both *Irodalmi Szemle* [Literary Review] and in *Korunk* [Our Time]. On the other hand, more recently, there is less and less in the one- or two-page literary columns of *Hét* or *Új Szó* from the works of the outstanding representatives of Transylvanian literature.

The new Hungarian literary generation in Slovakia appeared on the scene around 1968. Under the banner of avant-garde rebelliousness it turned its back on the former united Hungarian literary and cultural front in Slovakia. Strangely enough, it regarded the youth rallying around *Új Szó* [New Symposium] of Vojvodina as its paragon. . . .

Hungarian writers in Slovakia have pressed for more regular contact with their counterparts in Rumania and Yugoslavia—mainly in the realm of book publishing and book distribution. They did so in vain. László Dobos had, at the time, planned to launch an East-Central European paper, similar to *Korunk* [Our Time] of the interwar period, covering all the Hungarian minorities. Subsequently he was attacked for this idea too.

As regards the irregularity and superficiality of these contacts, let it suffice to mention that we have failed to encounter a single article analyzing

Yugoslav practice in nationalities policy. . . . It is in the introductions to book reviews that one might come across facts pertaining to and analyses of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Rumania and Yugoslavia. From these it turns out that even in Pozsony the network of Hungarian minority institutions in Vojvodina are seen as an example, a goal to be attained. . . .

On the basis of a comparison of the condition of the Hungarian minorities we believe that the Hungarian minority living in Yugoslavia is better off than its counterparts in Rumania and in Czechoslovakia—in every way. Despite its occasional drawbacks, “self-management” in Yugoslavia has provided the opportunity for the establishment of a network of institutions which rendered minority rights (also theoretically existent in Czechoslovakia) attainable in practice. In contrast, the basic principle of Rumanian practice is a “self-sufficiency” of sorts, which, it is true, regards the Hungarian minority as an active factor. On the other hand, however, it makes every effort to impede or make impossible contact with Hungary—contact indispensable even in the case of the Hungarians of Transylvania. The aim is clearly to speed up the process of assimilation.

In Czechoslovak practice neither the principle of “self-management,” nor that of “self-sufficiency” are asserted. The minority is the passive subject of the state’s policy under the full control of the majority nation, just like the “self-sufficient” Hungarian minority of Transylvania. Because it is not “self-sufficient,” but rather, the beneficiary of support from Hungary, it cannot put in a claim for the development of its own cultural institutions, or secondary and higher education networks. (It is another matter that at one time the promise was made that the lack of higher education in Hungarian would be compensated by scholarships to Hungary. However, today there are fewer and fewer opportunities for this. A case in point is the discontinuation of training for actors in Hungary.) There is no need, the authorities claim, for another daily newspaper . . . or a Hungarian scientific journal . . . since in any case Hungarians are “reading” (would like to read) the papers published in Hungary and watch Hungarian television.

This ambiguous minorities policy practice in Czechoslovakia already boasts significant *results*: the weakening of ethnic consciousness amongst the ranks of the Hungarians living in Slovakia has reached a stage when, even in the short run, it may corroborate the Slovak and Czech claims that the nationality question no longer exists in Czechoslovakia. . . .

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Editors’ note: This paper is an excerpt from a larger study by Magda Ádám on the subject of ethnic awareness, patriotism, and internationalism as revealed in the media of the Hungarian minorities of Czechoslovakia,

the USSR, Rumania, and Yugoslavia. Parts of this larger work have been translated from the Hungarian with the help of Zsuzsa Béres of Budapest. Funds for financing this and other translation work have been received from the Soros Foundation. Presumably because this original study was prepared for a strictly Hungarian audience, geographic designations were given in it only in Hungarian. Whenever such names came up for the first time, we included their appropriate or closest present-day Slovak equivalents in parentheses. It might be added here that if a place has a distinct Magyar name, Hungarians will use that name, even if the particular location is beyond the borders of Hungary. For example, they always call Vienna by its Magyar name “Bécs,” and never the German “Wien.”

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Author’s note: Research on the subject has been based primarily on the following press publications of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia: *Új Szó* [New Word], *Irodalmi Szemle* [Literary Review], *Hét* [Week].