For the modern generation of Subcarpathian Rusyns (Ruthenians), King Matthias Corvinus – rex Hungariae (1440–1458–1490) – is known as a beloved folklore character of numerous legends rather than a historical figure. Nevertheless, these legends teem with local toponyms and often reflect real historical events and facts. Along with his late successors, Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676–1735) and Maria Theresa (1717–1780), he was a prominent representative of grand rulers who left indelible traces in common Rusyn people’s memories. While we have plenty of historical evidence from the 18th century, it is mainly King Matthias’ 500-year presence in Rusyn folklore that we can rely on to validate such an assertion. This presence is undoubtedly an indirect reflection of the fact that he brought the country to the European standard with regard to economy, culture, welfare as well as external security. At the same time, he preserved a non-nation state, satisfying all the peoples inhabiting his kingdom. In tales, legends, and folk ballads, the fair ruler delivers justice which is to common people’s liking. The Rusyn popular saying “за края Матиша” means “in days of yore” which, sadly, will never come back.\(^1\) National variations of King Matthias folklore show quite distinctly which aspect of his multifaceted career has been recognized as most relevant to the destiny of the given nation. In Rusyn folklore, King Matthias and his military leader Pál Kinizsi are acting as Rusyns; the tales of King Matthias come forth with local national and historical coloration. In this way, people unintentionally allude to King Matthias’ great services in refining the legislative definition of Rusyns’ privileges and rights, which exerted real influence upon the development of their national identity.

It is certainly true that Rusyns did not arise in a vacuum. King Matthias entered the historical scene along with a legitimate Subcarpathian Rusyn people. After the Tatar-Mongolian invasion of 1241–1242, an active colo-

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\(^1\) Вархоł, Івченко 1990: 82.
nization of Subcarpathia started with the purpose of turning the province into the front line of the country’s defense against further aggression; the colonists were mainly Rusyns along with Hungarians, Germans, and Vlachs. Antal Hodinka (1864–1946), member of the Hungarian Academy, pioneer of Slavistic studies in Hungary, and a native of Subcarpathia, investigated this colonization in depth in his book titled *A kárpátaljai rutének lakóhelye, gazdaságuk és múltjuk* (The Place of Living, Economy, and Past of the Subcarpathian Rusyns). Hodinka wrote this book primarily in Rusyn and published it under the name of “An Orphan from Sokyrnitsa” most probably in 1921, and a reprint was brought out in 2000. The historian gave details about King Matthias’ legal system, approved by the diet in Hungary in 1484, wherein Rusyns had been mentioned for the first time as a legitimate Subcarpathian people and certain privileges were granted to them. He also comprehensively portrayed the forthcoming 200-year struggle of Rusyns to retain their rights, in the course of which they consistently relied on Matthias’ laws. During 260 peaceful and successful years of pre-Matthias colonization, in other words for 13 generations, having been united by the common mission and destiny, Rusyns had formed a mature community aware of its self-reliance. When King Matthias strengthened their awareness by promulgating laws on Rusyns’ privileges and rights and mentioned the Rusyn diocese of Munkács (today: Mukačevo) in his charter, he performed deeds of historic magnitude. Shortly after King Matthias died, in the middle of the 16th century and at the height of the Reformation, the *Postilla of Nyagovo* appeared. This great achievement of Subcarpathian Rusyn literature established the Rusyn language, which has survived almost unchanged up to the present. This is further evidence of the great importance the Age of Matthias had in shaping Rusyn national consolidation and culture. Even 200 years after King Matthias’ death his laws continued to serve as a shield protecting Rusyns’ relative independence and well-being.

Quite naturally, King Matthias also ranked as an outstanding figure of medieval history in the works of many other pre-Soviet authors of Rusyn, Russian, or Ukrainian nationality. Among others, mention must be made of

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2 Hodinka 1923.
3 Hodinka 2000.
5 Postilla 2006. The manuscript of an unknown author, it was originally published by Alexey Petrov in St. Petersburg in 1914 and 1921 (2nd edition). The book is now a rarity, therefore a new facsimile edition has recently been brought out by Slavists in Nyíregyháza.
Irén Kontratovics, Peter Sova, Eugen Perfeckij, and Zenon Kuzelia. Kontratovics refers to King Matthias’ deed, brought out in 1458 and nominating Presbyter Lucas (Lukács) as head of the cloister of Munkács “with his own habitual authority”, as de facto foundation of the diocese of Munkács. It is supported by the fact that in 1491, Ioann, Lucas’ successor, was mentioned as bishop.\(^6\) In his history of Ungvár (Uzhgorod), Sova portrays the process of uncontrollable decay which started in the country after King Matthias’ death and finally culminated in a peasant uprising and the gradual deterioration of the situation of common folk.\(^7\) Perfeckij, the Russian historian, emigrated to Czechoslovakia and studied Rusyn history during the reign of Matthias Corvinus in depth.\(^8\) Like Hodinka, he based his work on a meticulous analysis of the social situation and economy of the Rusyn people in Subcarpathian Rus. He also studied Rusyn folklore about King Matthias and he came to an unambiguous conclusion: “The Rusyn people struggled for their social and economic status and were supported in this fight by their defender – King Matthias Corvinus – even if they did not always become aware of the basic fact, that this way they also fought for their national self-dependency and that their greatest ally in the struggle for the preservation of Rusyn identity at that time was Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus himself.”\(^9\) Kuzelia had a similar opinion arguing that the decisive factors in forming people’s attitude to and appreciation for Matthias Corvinus were their social and economic status, peaceful life and respect for national culture and traditions.\(^10\)

After the Subcarpathia had been annexed to the Soviet Union it was predetermined that Rusyns were to disappear (they were forced to become Ukrainians), and King Matthias was also doomed to disappear from their history. From then on, Rusyns were exclusively found in museums displaying them as ancient relatives of Ukrainians oppressed by Magyars, and King Matthias was supposed to remain only a folklore hero. The fact that he was a real and highly influential figure in Rusyn history was to be blotted out in every possible way. Under totalitarian rule, no school of thinking is allowed to deviate from the official line.

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\(^6\) Кондратович 1924: 44.

\(^7\) Сова 1937: 85–88.

\(^8\) Перфекий 1995: 35–40.

\(^9\) Перфекий 1926: 8.

\(^10\) Кузеля 1906: LXX, 104–105.
Soviet prejudices concerning Rusyns and King Matthias did not perish with the Soviet Union. They have been adopted and become official in independent Ukraine. In a comprehensive history of the Subcarpathia published by the State University of Uzhgorod in 1993 (among its authors are well-known Rusyn historians I. Hranchak and I. Pop), no mention is made of King Matthias and his Rusyn connections. Unfortunately, this neglect has had an influence on serious overseas authors, too: neither in the bulky Encyclopaedia of Rusyn History and Culture nor in the latest and widely-distributed Illustrated History of Carpatho-Rusyns dubbed “The People From Nowhere”, can one find a single record of King Matthias or his laws related to Rusyns. However, authors who try to get rid of the habitual, ideological and political approaches can also meet with approval. H. Pavlenko, for instance, the author of a short encyclopedic dictionary titled Public Persons of Subcarpathian History, Science and Culture, not only mentions King Matthias, but highly appreciates his attitude towards Rusyns. Also, reprints of works by Kontratovics and Sova have been published (in 1991 and 1992, respectively), in which one can read about King Matthias. It is now possible to upset the status quo and justly interpret the facts of Rusyn history and culture. Ukrainians are eager to take a similar opportunity when they look back to the Age of Cossacks and polish it to make it presentable to the general public. Exactly what the Age of Cossacks means to Ukrainians, King Matthias’ reign means to Rusyns. It is worthy of being interpreted in an honest and just way.

11 Гранчак 1993.
13 Magocsi 2006.
15 Кондратович 1924.
16 Сова 1937.
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