

# THE AUTONOMY OF RUTHENIA AND THE CZECHO-SLOVAK MINORITY QUESTIONS

BY

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It was the struggle of the Sudeta Germans to obtain autonomy that brought to the fore all the minority questions of Czecho-Slovakia. There can be no doubt that considerable weight attaches to the demands of the Sudeta Germans as being the biggest minority in Czecho-Slovakia; and the support of a Great Power — the Germany which has a population of 75 million souls — naturally adds to the significance of those demands. The Czech Government opened up negotiations first with the Sudeta Germans as contributing most effectively to the seriousness of the situation; but the question has been broached also of the other Czecho-Slovak minorities.

Strange to say, however, the question of Ruthenian autonomy has been relegated entirely to the background. Yet the autonomy guaranteed by Czecho-Slovakia both by international treaty and in her legislation was a *sine qua non* of the adherence of the Ruthenian people.<sup>1</sup> The Czech Government undertook a solemn obligation to that effect; but so far it has not put the autonomy into force. The value of the promises made by Prague in minority questions is very strikingly illustrated by the postponement of the work of carrying the autonomy of Ruthenia into effect.

It will be very much to the point at this juncture to

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<sup>1</sup> V. Dr. Hodinka et Dr. Illés-Illyasevics: "Informations relatives à l'organisation du territoire des Ruthènes au sud des Carpathes, présentées par les émigrés au Secrétaire Général de la Société des Nations" (1922).

explain how the adherence of the Ruthenians was brought about. On May 8th, 1919. at Ungvár, the Ruthenian National Council decided in favour of adherence to Hungary; and it was only after the resolution taken by the Ruthenians of America that the Ruthenians of Upper Hungary nevertheless determined to adhere to Czecho-Slovakia. It was on the basis of this determination that the Great Powers came to an agreement with Czecho-Slovakia in the matter of the guarantees to ensure the autonomy of Ruthenia.

In Articles 10—14 of Chapter II. of the Treaty of Saint Germain concluded on September 10th., 1919, with the Principal Allied and Associated Powers the Czecho-Slovak Republic undertook an obligation in respect of the autonomy of Ruthenia. Security for the fulfilment of this obligation was given under the said treaty by the Principal Allied and Associated Powers — i. e. by the United States of North America, Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan. The consistent failure on the part of Czecho-Slovakia to carry the autonomy of Ruthenia into effect seriously affects also the prestige of the signatory Great Powers and in particular of Great Britain and the United States. For in this case what we have to deal with is no mere minority treaty, but an international convention which has been incorporated among the fundamental laws passed by the Czecho-Slovak legislature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The French (original) text of the Articles in question runs as follows. "*La Tchêco-Slovaquie s'engage à organiser le territoire des Ruthènes au Sud des Carpathes, dans les frontières fixées par les principales alliées et associées, sous la forme d'une unité à l'intérieur de l'Etat tchêco-slovaque, munie de la plus large autonomie compatible avec l'unité de l'Etat tchêco-slovaque.*" (Art. 10.) "*Le territoire des Ruthènes au sud des Carpathes sera doté d'une diète autonome. Ladite diète exercera le pouvoir législatif en matière de langue, d'instruction et de religion ainsi que pour les questions d'administration locale et pour toutes autres questions que les lois de l'Etat tchêco-slovaque lui attribueraient. Le gouverneur du territoire des Ruthènes sera nommé par le Président de la République tchêco-slovaque et sera responsable devant la diète ruthène.*" (Art. 11.) "*La Tchêco-Slovaquie agrée que les fonctionnaires du territoire des Ruthènes choisis, autant que possible,*

Occasionally experiments serving the purpose of throwing dust in the eyes of the world were made apparently in the direction of autonomy. Such an experiment was, for instance, the division of the Czecho-Slovak State into four provinces and the establishment of administrative organs for the purposes of intermediate administration. But this purely administrative division of the country has nothing whatsoever to do with autonomy; being exclusively an administrative, and not a political, solution. The second attempt to throw dust in the eyes of the world was what happened last year — in 1937. Using a veritable fanfare of press trumpets the Czech Government announced the determination of the sphere of authority of the Governor and the establishment of the Governing Council. The establishment of this Governing Council has also nothing whatsoever to do with autonomy. The Governor is appointed by the President of the Republic, to whom he is responsible — and to no other forum whatever. The Governing Council itself is exclusively an advisory body; most of its Members being appointed, not elected, so that its political significance is nil.

This misleading procedure on the part of the Czech Government has for its sole object, as I have said, to throw dust in the eyes of foreign countries. In reality not a single letter of the Articles of the 1919 Treaty relating to Ruthenian autonomy has been put into practice. So far there is no sign of any Ruthenian Diet, — of that Diet which should exercise the right of self-determination of the Ruthenian people in matters of religion, language and internal administration. Ruthenian autonomy means the representation of the will of the Ruthenian people by its elected deputies

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*parmi les habitants de ce territoire." (Art. 12.) "La Tchêco-Slovaquie garantit au territoire des Ruthènes une représentation équitable dans l'Assemblée législative de la République tchêco-slovaque, à laquelle ce territoire enverra des députés élus conformément à la constitution de la République tchêco-slovaque. Toutefois, ces députés ne jouiront pas du droit de vote dans la Diète tchêco-slovaque en toutes matières législatives du même ordre que celles attribuées à la Diète ruthène." (Art.13.)*



sitting in the Ruthenian Provincial Diet. Article 14 of the Treaty of Saint Germain guarantees the self-government of Ruthenia by providing that every infraction of the rights involved shall be regarded as a breach of international law. The Treaty is safeguarded by the guarantee of the League of Nations: and any disputes that may arise are subject to the competence of the Permanent International Tribunal.

The sad situation of Ruthenia — known officially as "Podkarpatska Rus" — was revealed some years ago by the Report submitted to President Masaryk by Governor Zsatkovics.<sup>3</sup> M. Gregory Zsatkovics was the first Governor of Ruthenia: he had the lion's share in the work of ensuring the adherence of the Ruthenians to Czecho-Slovakia; and he has given us an authentic history of that adherence. From his report it would appear that the Ruthenians who had emigrated to America during the eighties of the nineteenth century and had definitively settled there, were anxious when the Great War was over to do what they could to help their kinsfolk in the Old Country. Their object was to provide that the Ruthenians living at the foot of the Carpathians should obtain full autonomy; and Dr. Masaryk actually made a promise to that effect, that promise being the basis of the resolution taken by the Ruthenians of America in the question of adherence. It was after the American Ruthenians had adopted this attitude that the Ruthenian Central National Council declared in favour of incorporation in Czecho-Slovakia. From what M. Zsatkovics tells us it appears that already in 1921 — during his term of office as Governor—it was quite evident that the Czech Government did not intend to put the autonomy of Ruthenia into force. The Ruthenians of America realised the mistake they had made and submitted to the League of Nations a large number of memorandums urging the realisation of Ruthenian

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<sup>3</sup> "Exposé adressé au Président et au Gouvernement de la République Tchêcho-Slovaque de la part du Gouverneur Zsatkovics" (reproduced also in the Memorandum entitled "Informations..." by Dr. Hodinka and Dr. Illés-Illyasevics).

autonomy. And last month (June) the Ruthenians of America sent a delegation headed by Dr. Gerovszky to study the present situation of their racial brethren in Europe on the spot. After completing its work of investigation the delegation declared in the presence of the Central National Council — the body which in 1919, acting under the influence of the Ruthenians of America, had declared in favour of incorporation in Czecho-Slovakia and had been called into being once more for the occasion — that it would report its experiences to its mandatories in America. This enlightenment of the Ruthenians of America as to the real state of affairs will ensure the development of a unanimous public opinion, which will enter the lists against the prolonged cajolery and jugglery of the Czech Government.

We cannot help asking ourselves the question why the Czech Government has overreached its own fundamental law? From the very outset there could be no doubt whatsoever that Prague was endeavouring by the creation of a North-Eastern Slav corridor to establish direct communication with Moscow. When ten years ago Prague endeavoured to account for the postponement of Ruthenian autonomy in this manner, the attempt was regarded as fantastic. Today, however, everybody realises that what was then regarded as fantastic has become a sad reality. The treaty between Czecho-Slovakia and the Russian Soviet explains why Ruthenia had to be denied even the most elementary rights of self-determination. The Soviet aerodromes constructed at the foot of the Southern Carpathians, the military bases and the strategic roads, show what was the object of the proposed North-Eastern Slav corridor. We must not forget that during the Great War the Russian offensive against the Central Powers also had Ruthenia for its objective.

We must warn the Western Powers that it is not merely a question of the rights of a people of almost a million souls, but of a European problem the solution of which cannot be lightheartedly ignored. Is it really a matter of indif-

ference to Europe that the subversive ideas of Bolshevism should find their way uninterrupted right into the heart of Europe? Let us not forget the words of Masaryk, who spoke of Ruthenia as "un depot irregulière" which Czecho-Slovakia would only retain possession of until required to surrender it to Russia. Or would it be a matter of indifference to Europe that a Ukranian State with a population of 30—35 million souls should break away from Russia and absorb Ruthenia? Now the coming into being of a Greater Ukraine is no mere dream. This is proved by the support given to the Ukranian movements by Prague, by the establishment of a university and of other cultural means, as also by the very considerable material sacrifices made by the Czechs for the purpose. And there is another Central European Power which is offering this movement positive material and moral assistance.

The proposed North-Eastern Slav corridor would be fatal to the interests of Poland. For an eventual establishment of a Ukranian Empire would act like a magnet on the Ukranian minority (3.5 million souls) living in Poland and would in consequence endanger the very State and political existence of the Polish nation as a whole.

In pre-War days Serbia was able in the service of the Russian Czar and of pan-Slav interests to act a part which made her directly responsible for the world cataclysm which ensued: do the Western Powers not see that the part played then by Serbia may very easily be played today — against her will — by Ruthenia? — by that Ruthenia which is the first stage on the road towards the fulfilment of Soviet Russia's dreams of expansion? The question of Ruthenian autonomy is therefore one of European significance; for that autonomy may serve as a breakwater to stem the tide of endeavours which threaten to set the whole of Europe ablaze.

The realisation of Ruthenian autonomy would not only save the Ruthenians from the danger of bolshevisation, but might serve to provide a line of communication between



two friendly Powers — Poland and Hungary —, an issue which would also provide an impregnable bulwark to resist all Russian endeavours at expansion.

We do not know yet how Czecho-Slovakia will solve the very grave minority problems with which she is faced; nor do we know yet how far she will yield to pressure from without. But there can be no doubt at all that the policy of cunctatorism pursued by the Czech Government in the question of Ruthenian autonomy justifies our mistrusting the intentions of the Czech Republic. How is Czecho-Slovakia going to guarantee the adjustment of the legal position of her minorities when she persists in the procedure followed by her for the past twenty years of postponing the carrying into effect of the international treaty ensuring the self-government of Ruthenia and of the Czecho-Slovak law in which that treaty has been incorporated?

Seeing that the Czech Government has not complied with the condition on which the Ruthenians adhered to the Republic — viz. the putting into force of Ruthenian autonomy —, there is no other alternative but to go back to the original state of things and to ask the Ruthenians living to the South of the Carpathians whether they desire to maintain their present connection with the Czecho-Slovak State? Czecho-Slovakia cannot possibly refuse to comply with the demand for a plebiscite — the most elementary of all rights of self-determination; for Ruthenia was not absorbed in the Czecho-Slovak State by right of conquest, but adhered to that State voluntarily and of her own free will.