

Geoffrey Brown

“THE SPIRIT OF DICTATORS”

Rusyn Accusations of Corruption and Imperialism against František Svojše and Officials in Czechoslovak Ruthenia

The establishment of a Czechoslovak administration for the small territory of Carpathian Ruthenia in 1919 began with claims of noble intentions. Having acquired the territory unexpectedly during the Paris Peace Conference negotiations, the Prague government expressed its wish to help a fellow Slavic nation stand on its own feet after centuries of Hungarian rule. At the same time there was an urgent need to establish order and secure Czechoslovakia's control in this far eastern territory of the republic. The collapse of Hungarian rule had left a legal vacuum, and the first Czechs who arrived in the region had to begin building a regional administration from scratch. The Treaty of St. Germain had stipulated that “officials in the country of the Ruthenians will be chosen as far as possible from the inhabitants of this territory”,¹ but in practice Czechs filled nearly all positions of power. The Prague government argued that the small Rusyn intelligentsia had no experience in governing, and that a firm Czech hand would be needed to maintain stability while Hungarian irredentism and Bolshevism still loomed. Rusyns would have to undergo years of training and education before being ready to run the administration themselves. Ruthenia held great geostrategic value for the republic as a link to Little Entente ally Romania, thus keeping a strong grip on the territory was a matter of state interest.

Huge challenges in the post-war environment tested Czech resolve as they began to create a functioning civil administration in Ruthenia. Some of the local Rusyn intelligentsia were hostile towards their presence, and most Czech officials made little effort to learn the Rusyn language and engage in social contact with the local population. Rusyns complained of corruption and theft by Czech officials, particularly those working in the countryside, and Czech government reports confirm that many officials tried to profit from their positions. Low morale, hardship, and isolation increased the challenges for Czech officials in the early years of their administration. From the original aim of building unity with a fellow Slavic nation, a growing gap in trust and understanding developed between the Czech officials and the Rusyn inhabitants. Corruption and immoral behaviour by Czech officials offered the Rusyn intelligentsia a means of delegitimizing Czech rule, a chance to claim the moral high ground in the ongoing discourse over the question of autonomy.

Czech gendarme, journalist, and publisher František Svojše became a figurehead of the perceived shift in Rusyn eyes from Czech humanitarianism towards impe-

¹ From the text of the Treaty of St. Germain reproduced in *Shandor*, Vincent: Carpatho-Ukraine in the Twentieth Century. Cambridge/Mass. 1997, 23.

rialism. In their view, Czechs should only have come to Ruthenia to help Rusyns develop their culture and living standards. Svojše's promotion of Czechization in the administration and school system and contempt for the Rusyn intelligentsia confirmed for Rusyns that Slavic idealism had its limits. Forced to respond to stinging accusations of imperialist behaviour, Czech officials in Uzhhorod sought to reject the label of imperial rulers. They promoted broader knowledge of the benefits Czechoslovakia had brought to the Rusyn territory, including improved infrastructure, public health, and economic potential. Despite such attempts, the perceived drift towards imperialism would contribute significantly to the rise of the Rusyn autonomy movement in the late 1920s, and eventually to Czechoslovakia's loss of Ruthenia.

Before approaching this topic it is necessary to establish some terminology regarding places, names and ethnonyms. Scholars have long debated the appropriate toponyms and terminology to refer to the territory of the region known today as Zakarpattia oblast in Ukraine. Numerous names have appeared in English scholarship, including Transcarpathian Ukraine and Carpathian Rus'. However, the use of "Rus'" and "Ukraine" in these names may suggest preference for Russian or Ukrainian particularist views of the territory's national loyalty. Even the geographical terms "Subcarpathian" and "Transcarpathian" are subject to political interpretation, as they imply viewpoints from opposing sides of the Carpathian Mountains. Subcarpathian (*Podkarpatská* in Czech) describes the territory as if viewed from the Czech lands to the west, placing it below or beneath the Carpathian Mountains. Meanwhile Transcarpathia (*Zakarpattia* in Ukrainian) views the territory from Kyiv and the Ukrainian steppe to the east, placing it behind or beyond the mountain range. All options are politically sensitive, but this study uses the term "Carpathian Ruthenia", shortened in most instances to "Ruthenia", in an effort to limit connotations. The author is aware that some scholars may disagree with this usage, particularly as the term "Ruthenia" can also be applied to a much larger historical territory. However, non-Carpathian Ruthenia as a region has no particular role in this study, and shortening "Carpathian Ruthenia" to "Ruthenia" will save significant space. "Czechoslovak Ruthenia" will also be used in some instances to help specify the time period from 1919-1939 in the territory.

The national ethnonym to describe the Slavic inhabitants of Ruthenia is also problematic, particularly the appropriate adjective, which in English is usually given as "Rusyn" or "Ruthenian". The adjective "Ruthenian" can apply to the Slavic inhabitants of Ruthenia, but also to the inhabitants of Ruthenia regardless of their nationality. Use of "Ruthenian" also invites confusion as it overlaps with historical usage of the word for Slavs living in the north-east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This study will use "Rusyns" and the adjective "Rusyn", though the author anticipates that some scholars may think differently as there is no common consensus. Translations of the adjectives *ruský* and *русский* are similarly problematic; they can be translated as "Rusyn" or "Russian" depending on context.² For reasons of consis-

² Transliterations in footnotes follow the Library of Congress format for Russian and Ukrainian, with modifications for Rusyn based on guidelines by *Rusinko*, Elaine: *Straddling Borders: Literature and Identity in Subcarpathian Rus'*. Toronto 2003, xiii.

tency this study will translate these words as “Rusyn” unless the historical author is clearly making a statement showing Russophile preference. In interwar Czechoslovakia, three main national factions existed among the Rusyn intelligentsia: Russophiles, Ukrainophiles, and Rusynophiles. Russophiles have since faded into the background, but disputes between Ukrainophiles and Rusynophiles continue to prevent consensus over the appropriate terminology.

The existing anglophone historiography on interwar Ruthenia generally portrays Czechoslovak rule as helpful and beneficial for the Rusyn population. Judy Batt refers to it as a “golden age” for Rusyn cultural and economic development,³ and Elaine Rusinko calls the Czechoslovak period a “true renaissance” for Ruthenia following on the heels of Hungarian rule.⁴ Such claims reflect the interest of these scholars in focusing primarily on Rusyn cultural and literary achievements, but the Rusyn cultural awakening in Czechoslovakia presents only one aspect of a relationship that, at the time, many Rusyn intellectuals, as well as Czechs, labelled as imperialist and hostile to Rusyn interests. Twentieth-century scholars of Czech heritage focused on the relative advantages inclusion in Czechoslovakia had for Ruthenia compared with neighbouring Poland, Hungary, or Romania.⁵

Although the relationship between Czechs and Rusyns has yet to be properly addressed, twenty-first-century scholarship on interethnic relations in interwar Czechoslovakia has attempted to poke holes in the enduring myth of the good Czech nation. Andrea Orzoff’s *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe 1914-1948* and Mary Heimann’s *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed* deconstruct the legends surrounding relations between Czechs and other national groups in the republic and demonstrate that Czech (and Slovak) nationalists had been “no more immune from the temptations of authoritarianism, bigotry and cruelty than anyone else”.⁶ Heimann thus declares it is “time to abandon the Whig interpretation of Czechoslovak history”,⁷ an approach that this study embraces.

Paul Robert Magocsi occupies a unique place in English-speaking scholarship on Ruthenia, having studied the history of the Rusyn nation for the past four decades.⁸ His analysis of the Czech-Rusyn relationship in Czechoslovakia focuses primarily

³ Batt, Judy: Transcarpathia: The Centre of Europe. In: *Batt/Wolczuk*, Kataryna (eds.): *Region, State and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe*. London 2013, 166.

⁴ *Rusinko*: *Straddling Borders* 296 (cf. fn. 2).

⁵ *Nemec*, František/*Moudry*, Vladimir: *The Soviet Seizure of Subcarpathian Ruthenia*. Toronto 1955, 41. – See also *Mamatey*, Viktor/*Luža*, Radomír (eds.): *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918-1948*. Princeton 1973.

⁶ *Heimann*, Mary: *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*. London 2009, xxi. – *Orzoff*, Andrea: *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948*. Oxford 2009.

⁷ *Heimann*: *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed* 324 (cf. fn. 6).

⁸ Selected titles from the large publication record on Ruthenia by *Magocsi*, Paul Robert: *The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus’, 1848-1948*. Cambridge 1978. – *Magocsi*: *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*. Toronto 2010. – *Magocsi/Pop*, Ivan (eds.): *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*. Toronto 2002. – *Magocsi*: *With Their Backs to the Mountains: A History of Carpathian Rus’ and Carpatho-Rusyns*. Budapest 2015.

on Rusyn actors while highlighting Czechoslovakia's role in the development of Rusyn nationalism.⁹ Magocsi explores the tensions between Rusyn intellectuals and the Prague government over the questions of autonomy, language rights and placement of territorial borders, concluding that Czech intentions were largely well meant despite the friction, and that Czechoslovak democracy had "a very positive effect" on Ruthenia's development.¹⁰ Although Magocsi identifies instances of animosity between the Rusyn intellectuals and Czech officials, the extent of corruption by the officials and the resulting loss of Rusyn trust in the regional administration has yet to be analyzed. The role of Czech gendarme and newspaper publisher František Svojshe in souring Rusyn attitudes towards the Czechoslovak administration has also yet to be considered in scholarship.

In a Strange New Land

The first significant numbers of Czech civilian bureaucrats began to arrive in Uzhhorod in August 1919. President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk sent Jaromír Nečas, trained as a civil engineer, to be his representative and adviser during the transition period.¹¹ During the establishment of Czechoslovak control, the territory remained under the administration of French General Edmond Hennesque, who commanded Czechoslovak military forces until stability of the frontiers had been secured.¹² In the summer of 1919, Czech legionaries still controlled only the western half of Ruthenia, with Romanian soldiers occupying the region to the east of Mukacheve.¹³ Arriving Czech officials set up operations in Uzhhorod since it lay in the region where they exercised the most control.

The conditions that Czech officials experienced after stepping off the train in Uzhhorod were unfamiliar and discouraging. Jaromír Nečas described the situation he saw there in 1919 as "challenging and dangerous".¹⁴ He felt the city's transport infrastructure needed immediate improvements, lamenting that the "roads were in a desperate state, and the railway lines were insufficient".¹⁵ Police official Antonín Veselý recalled that in the earliest days

⁹ *Magocsi: The Shaping of a National Identity* 191 (cf. fn. 8).

¹⁰ *Magocsi: A History of Ukraine* 646 (cf. fn. 8). – Magocsi describes Czech-Rusyn relations in greater detail in *Magocsi: The Shaping of a National Identity* 191-246 (cf. fn. 8).

¹¹ Many of Nečas' reports for Masaryk have been preserved in the collection Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky [Czech Presidential Office Archives], fond (f.) PR [Podkarpatská Rus, Subcarpathian Ruthenia], hereafter abbreviated as AKPR f. PR.

¹² General Hennesque ministru obrany k 1 máji [General Hennesque Addresses the Minister of National Defence on the 1st of May]. In: *Národní politika*, 03.05.1919, 2. – Ruthenia would remain under military rule until January 1922.

¹³ *Magocsi: The Shaping of a National Identity* 192 (cf. fn. 8).

¹⁴ *Nečas, Jaromír: Začátky státní technické služby* [The Beginnings of the State Technical Service]. In: *Vzpomínky průkopníků technické služby v zemi Podkarpatoruské* [Memories of the Pioneers of the Technical Services in the Land of Subcarpathia]. Uzhhorod 1933, 3-4.

¹⁵ *Nečas: Začátky státní technické služby* 3-4 (cf. fn. 14).

every Czech official in Ruthenia was a pioneer, [...] in all the region there was uncertainty. [...] There wasn't enough wood, coal, bricks, lime or cement; everything had to be imported with great difficulty. [...] The city and its vicinity were infested with typhoid.¹⁶

The challenges they faced on a daily basis led several officials to describe their task in biblical terms. Karel Křivanec, the first administrator for public works in Uzhhorod, recalled that their work in 1919 “began like the creation of the world, from nothing”,¹⁷ and an anonymous official interviewed in *Podkarpatské hlasy* (Subcarpathian Voices) recalled nostalgically that “in the beginning there was darkness, like the start of the bible; [...] Like biblical heroes we worked with a hammer in one hand, a sword in the other”.¹⁸

The first small group of officials to arrive in Ruthenia had to work together to succeed in their new environment. In the beginning, “all the administration of Ruthenia occurred daily around a long dining table in the Hotel Berecseny in Uzhhorod”,¹⁹ and those who were part of this first group described a wonderful sense of camaraderie. Nečas recalled that he and the other officials had “bonded socially among ourselves in Uzhhorod, due to the dangers we faced and the fact that we had to depend on each other”,²⁰ and the anonymous official interviewed in *Podkarpatské hlasy* referred to the year 1919 as “a golden age, with friendships regardless of title [...] we didn't have one hour for our own lives”.²¹ Many of those who first arrived in 1919 believed that the Czech presence in Ruthenia and the territory's inclusion in Czechoslovakia might only be temporary due to the fluid nature of political developments in Bolshevik Hungary and the Ukrainian territories.²²

The reasons why Czechs agreed to go east to work in Ruthenia varied, with some drawn by a sense of adventure, others by humanitarian motives, the possibility of earning a good salary in a government job, or in some cases because they could find no other employment as an official in the Czech lands.²³ Many officials considered their role in Ruthenia to be a high and worthy cause, assisting the poor and neglected Rusyn people. The anonymous official in *Podkarpatské hlasy* described their actions in the earliest period as a selfless act of caring:

¹⁶ Veselý, Antonín: Uzhorodské vzpomínky kolem r. 1920 [Memories of the City of Uzhhorod Around the Year 1920]. In: Vzpomínky průkopníků technické služby v zemi Podkarpatoruské 16-21 (cf. fn. 14).

¹⁷ Křivanec, Karel: Začátky referátu veřejných prací [The Beginnings of a Report on Public Works]. In: Vzpomínky průkopníků technické služby v zemi Podkarpatoruské 5-6 (cf. fn. 14).

¹⁸ Na počátku byla tma ... [In the Beginning There Was Darkness...], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 28.10.1928, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Nečas: Začátky státní technické služby 3-4 (cf. fn. 14).

²¹ Na počátku byla tma ... (cf. fn. 18).

²² Systematisace úřednických míst v Rusínsku [Systematization of Administrative Jobs in Ruthenia], *Tribuna*, 22.10.1920, 2.

²³ Archiv Ústavu T. G. Masaryka [T. G. Masaryk Institute Archives], f. T. G. Masaryk – Republika, Podkarpatská Rus [Republic, Subcarpathian Ruthenia], hereafter abbreviated as AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. D. Mecher: Politické poměry v Podkarpatské Rusi [Political Conditions in Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 10 December 1921.

The first concern of the Czechoslovak administration was people's suffering, they worked here for a beautiful ideal [...] risking their health and life daily for an unknown land which was neglected and poor, for an illiterate nation which had degenerated under the Hungarian "master".²⁴

Karel Křivanec described his decision to go to Ruthenia as a welcome challenge for his organizational abilities:

To go to a territory which was fully unknown to me was a great personal sacrifice. [...] Here I saw ahead of me a field waiting for a diligent ploughman, for me it was like being given a blank white sheet of paper on which I had to write the first lines.²⁵

Such great responsibility meant the future of the Rusyn people was truly in their hands; the Czech daily *Tribuna* (Tribune) felt that stability in Ruthenia "stands or falls at any given moment with the Czech officials".²⁶

Many of the Czech gendarmes and officials who came to Ruthenia had previously worked as administrators in other regions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during its final years, particularly in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some of these officials were packed onto trains and transported directly to Uzhhorod from their previous Bosnian assignment.²⁷ Jan Liewald, a Czech gendarme who went by train from Mostar to Uzhhorod in 1920, described how he and his companions had first learned about Ruthenia before their transfer:

Uzhhorod – yes, we had heard of it, but I had forgotten where it was. In Subcarpathian Ruthenia? We really didn't know anything about it, and we couldn't find it in an atlas. An explanation came to us by chance in an issue of *Czech World* in an article about Ruthenia. The opening words didn't cheer us much: "The darkest corner of our republic is Subcarpathian Ruthenia."²⁸

The sixteen-day journey by train to Uzhhorod did not bother him, for he claimed "we weren't in a hurry, because we had spent happy years living in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ruthenia didn't hold much promise as 'the darkest corner of our republic'".²⁹ Although Liewald and his companions knew little about what awaited them in Ruthenia, their Bosnian experiences helped them to adapt to the new environment more readily than those who came directly from the Czech lands.

The uncomfortable living conditions in Ruthenia would prove to be one of the biggest drawbacks for the officials who arrived in the first few years of the new republic. Antonín Veselý recalled that accommodation was so limited that when they first arrived in Uzhhorod "many new arrivals had to stay in the train station".³⁰ Writing to President Masaryk, Nečas reported that the living conditions for Czech officials had to be improved: "Unmarried people sleep in their offices, married people with

²⁴ Na počátku byla tma ... (cf. fn. 18).

²⁵ *Křivanec*: Začátky referátu veřejných prací 5-6 (cf. fn. 17).

²⁶ Systematisace úřednických míst v Rusínsku (cf. fn. 22).

²⁷ *Liewald*, Jan: Z Mostaru do Užhorodu v roce 1920 [From Mostar to Uzhhorod in the Year 1920]. In: *Vzpomínky průkopníků technické služby v zemi Podkarpatoruské* 22 (cf. fn. 14).

²⁸ *Ibid.* 22-23.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 30.

³⁰ *Veselý*: Užhorodské vzpomínky kolem r. 1920, 16-21 (cf. fn. 16).

families are crammed into totally inadequate premises (often with the whole family in one small room), yet they still pay a lot of money for such small and unclean accommodation.”³¹ Czech Vice-governor Petr Ehrenfeld, appointed in February 1920, made building new accommodation for officials a priority upon assuming the office: “I am working hard in this regard; we are building wooden houses ourselves, so that this year at least 70 families will finally have housing with two rooms and a kitchen.”³² Ehrenfeld recognized the important correlation between the quality of housing for officials and their morale for working in the new environment.

Some officials found the hardships too difficult and wished to return to the familiar comforts of the Czech lands. The Czech publication *Tribuna* reported that the “flight of Czech officials from Ruthenia seriously endangers the entire administration of the territory”, and felt more had to be done to retain skilled officials.³³ Conditions in the villages and small towns were especially difficult, and the younger gendarmes and notaries without families were often left longing for other Czechs for companionship. Karel Křivanec spoke of the hardships and isolation he endured: “We often felt cut off from the whole world, lacking both letters and news and left to rely only on ourselves.”³⁴ *Tribuna* stressed the lack of culture available to Czechs posted in the countryside: “A Rusyn doesn’t have such cultural needs as our mentally mature officials, who are in many places completely isolated from higher forms of culture, especially native Czech culture.”³⁵ Jaroslav Zatloukal wrote of the need to put time limits on the service of Czechs in the territory:

Because the position of Czechs in this land is difficult and grueling, especially the gendarmes and border guards in total wilderness, it is necessary to take into account their period of stay and grant requests for transfer. Otherwise depression and dissatisfaction will develop among them.³⁶

Some of those who came to take up official positions as gendarmes or notaries in the regions saw opportunities for personal profit, through both legal and illegal means. State inspector D. Mecher reported that when recruiting officials for the new territory, “the people who willingly come to Ruthenia do so because it is more profitable, they are only trying to get rich”.³⁷ Vice-governor Ehrenfeld admitted that Ruthenia attracted officials who were prepared to abuse their positions for profit:

There are many officials in the ranks which I would rather not have here. Many officials wanted to come here only so that they could earn money and then go back again. Unfor-

³¹ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

³² AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. Petr Ehrenfeld: Report for the Interior Ministry, 26 August 1920.

³³ Systematisace úřednických míst v Rusínsku (cf. fn. 22).

³⁴ *Křivanec*: Začátky referátu veřejných prací 14 (cf. fn. 17).

³⁵ Systematisace úřednických míst v Rusínsku (cf. fn. 22).

³⁶ *Zatloukal*, Jaroslav: Za hlubším a objektivním poznáním Podkarpatské Rusi [For Deeper and More Objective Knowledge of Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. In: Podkarpatská Rus [Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. Bratislava 1936, 11-12.

³⁷ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. Politické poměry v Podkarpatské Rusi. Czechoslovak Interior Ministry report by inspector D. Mecher, December 1921.

tunately there are ample opportunities for such activities here, and recently I have had to intervene six times and they were sentenced in court.³⁸

Common offenders were usually notaries and gendarmes at the village level where government scrutiny of daily activities was minimal.³⁹ National Democratic Party organ *Podkarpatská Rus* (Subcarpathian Ruthenia) described how this symbiotic process of corruption occurred: "The gendarmes, who have firm control over the Rusyns, are often fully aware of despotism among the notaries, yet about this they remain cautiously silent like diplomats."⁴⁰ In an environment of disorder where regional officials were left to take care of themselves, corruption and financial fraud spread quickly.

When Czech officials first arrived in Ruthenia, they encountered a small but vocal Rusyn intelligentsia that was divided into three competing groups: Russophiles, Ukrainophiles, and a smaller number of Rusynophiles. Whereas first two factions promoted their intention for Rusyns to belong ethnically and linguistically to either the Russian or the Ukrainian nation respectively, the third extolled a distinct Rusyn particularist orientation. Among these groups, the Prague government initially offered cultural support for the Ukrainophiles, which led Russophiles and Rusynophiles to become harsh critics of government policies.⁴¹ The Prague government suspected that the Rusynophile and Russophile movements were closely aligned with the Hungarian revisionist movement and were actively working against the interests of the Czechoslovak state; in late 1919, Prime Minister Vlastimil Tusar's administration declared the Russophile movement to be "working for the detachment of Subcarpathian Ruthenia from the Czechoslovak Republic."⁴² While Ukrainophiles remained mostly loyal to Prague, Russophiles and Rusynophiles became campaigners for autonomy and were the first to use corruption and mismanagement by Czech officials as political ammunition in their fight against the government.

By the summer of 1920, complaints by Rusyn intellectuals about corrupt Czech officials in their towns and villages became known in Prague. A report by the Ministry of the Interior from this period summarized government concerns about the illegal activity: "There are many complaints against officials. In the Czech administration our Czech people are accused of negligence and bribery. It is thought that people in certain locations 'made' a great deal of money after a short period of time."⁴³ Numerous Czechoslovak Interior Ministry reports bear out the truth in the

³⁸ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. Petr Ehrenfeld: Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 26 August 1920.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Kde jsou meze služební horlivosti? [Where are the Limits to Zealousness in the Service?], *Podkarpatská Rus*, 19.03.1927, 3-4.

⁴¹ *Magocsi*: The Shaping of a National Identity 204 (cf. fn. 8).

⁴² Archiv Národního muzea [Czech National Museum Archives, hereafter abbreviated as ANM], f. Brandejs, kart. 2. *Růžička*, Otokar: Politické proudy v Příkarpatské Rusi [Political Movements in Carpathian Ruthenia], document for the Czechoslovak Ministry of Post and Telegraph. Prague 1919, 1.

⁴³ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. Uzhhorod Administration Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 6 August 1920.

corruption accusations made by Rusyns. Writing to the Interior Ministry, Vice-governor Ehrenfeld listed the names and crimes of notaries arrested since the beginning of 1920, mostly for embezzlement of funds, fraud and abuse of office.⁴⁴ He worried about the negative impact such behaviour was having on relations with the Rusyn people: “It is unfortunately true that the people complain about Czech officials. [...] I always say that one bad official can cause so much evil here that the greater number of good officials will be unable to repair the damage caused”.⁴⁵ The National Democratic Party organ *Podkarpatská Rus*, perhaps seeking to score points against the ruling Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants (hereafter referred to as the Agrarians), hinted at a government cover-up: “Sadder still is when we see that an official investigation held after complaints by local inhabitants avoided any mention of these realities.”⁴⁶

Rusyns began to question whether the Czech officials living among them could be trusted once examples of corruption came to light. Inspector D. Mecher reported to the Interior Ministry in 1921 about Rusyn dissatisfaction: “There are complaints that our officials in Ruthenia are not up to the task; [...] they complain that the people are not qualified, that in Bohemia and Moravia they would not be accepted”.⁴⁷ The Ukrainophile Rusyn newspaper *Rus’ka nyva* (Rusyn Field) expressed this sense of growing distrust and anger towards the officials in 1921:

In every nation, even in the Czech nation, there are different types of people, honest and dishonest. Many Czech officials came to Ruthenia for the purpose of exploitation, and when they arrived a very sad impression was made on our nation. We know and we have already noted many times that these people are like vermin in Ruthenia.⁴⁸

The loss of trust in Czech officials was a worrying trend for the Prague government, as they feared greater instability and irredentism. An Interior Ministry report expressed concern over the deterioration of relations with the local Rusyns: “The current state of affairs in Ruthenia is impossible. The inhabitants not only don’t have faith in the government in Uzhhorod, they even hate it, since it has already disappointed them so many times.”⁴⁹

Direct personal contact with corrupt or disrespectful Czech officials also left a very negative impression on Rusyns. An inhabitant of Velykyi Bychkiv, a town on the border with Romania, wrote to the Rusyn newspaper *Karpato-Russkii vîstnyk* (Carpatho-Rusyn Bulletin) to complain about corruption and discrimination shown towards him by Czech border guards:

Here at the border they live in paradise, bringing cheap food and products across the border from Romania for themselves, but if you – poor Rusyn – are carrying something across the

⁴⁴ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. Petr Ehrenfeld: Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 26 August 1920.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Kde jsou meze služební horlivosti? (cf. fn. 40).

⁴⁷ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 400. D. Mecher: Interior Ministry Report Politické poměry v Podkarpatské Rusi, December 1921.

⁴⁸ AKPR f. PR, kart. 3. Petr Ehrenfeld: Článek ‘Ruské nivy’ [Article in ‘Ruské niva’]. Report for the Czechoslovak Presidential Office, 19 March 1921. Document PR 258/21.

⁴⁹ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. A. Novotný: Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 26 April 1921.

border for yourself and your family the border guards shout "Not Allowed!" They call you a smuggler, they confiscate everything and then beat you until you are bleeding.⁵⁰

Such unpleasant encounters did not match the images of brotherly love and Slavic unity that Rusyns had hoped for in 1919, and they could see that Czechs did not consider them as equals in the republic. The growing sense of hatred towards Czech officials and such overt accusations of imperialism in Rusyn publications led to hand-wringing in Prague and Uzhhorod. Vice-governor Ehrenfeld confirmed for the Ministry of the Interior just how low relations with Rusyns had sunk by 1922:

It is possible to say that a significant part of the local Rusyn intelligentsia show no love towards our republic and towards the Czech nation. [...] It is said that Czechs are here only as guests and that after 1,000 years Hungarians failed to conquer them and the Czech nation will not succeed in doing so during the next 1,000 years.⁵¹

Popular contempt for Czech officials naturally led to discussions about how to improve relations with the population in Ruthenia. Jaromír Nečas felt that one factor above all others made developing a trustworthy relationship with the Rusyns difficult:

There is one significant mistake for which nearly all Czech officials can be criticized. They do not learn the mother tongue of the people and this separates and closes them off from the local intelligentsia and the people. This is a very significant mistake, because the people do not have full confidence in those who cannot speak their mother tongue.⁵²

Little progress occurred in the area of Rusyn language skills, which Nečas had to reiterate the urgent need for officials to learn Rusyn when writing to Masaryk six years later: "A big mistake made by Czech officials in Ruthenia is that they don't learn the local language. [...] Czech people speak to them in a related language but still a foreign one".⁵³ Nečas also felt that Czech officials had to do more to connect socially with Rusyns in order to bring their divided communities together: "[I]n the towns they gather in their clubs, sokols and other groups, they speak Czech among themselves, office paperwork is also in Czech, so they live in Ruthenia like a foreign element".⁵⁴ British scholar Carlile Aylmer Macartney made similar observations: "The Czechs are not only a ruling class, but also a foreign one. They have their own clubs and coffee-houses, patronize, to a large extent, their own shops, and mingle little with the natives, except to order their destinies."⁵⁵ In order to improve re-

⁵⁰ Afrykanský Poriadky [African Orders], *Karpato-Ruskii vĕstnyk*, 21.01.1923, 10-11.

⁵¹ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Petr Ehrenfeld: Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 17 February 1922.

⁵² AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T.G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

⁵³ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401, file Nečas – Referat o Podkarpatské Rusi [A Report on Subcarpathian Ruthenia], part A, section 5. Jaromír Nečas: Úřednictvo na Podkarpatské Rusi [Bureaucracy in Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. Draft Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 1927.

⁵⁴ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

⁵⁵ *Macartney*, Carlile Aylmer: *Hungary and Her Successors: The Treaty of Trianon and Its Consequences*. London 1937, 226.

lations, Nečas recommended two clear policy changes to President Masaryk, firstly to make learning Rusyn mandatory with testing, and secondly to promote “closer interactions between officials and the local inhabitants in non-official contexts”.⁵⁶

In spite of hopes for better relations, the Uzhhorod administration introduced a system of surveillance of Rusyn political parties and their publications in response to growing anti-republic sentiment in Ruthenia. Censorship of the Rusyn press increased, with entire articles sometimes removed in anti-government publications such as the Rusynophile autonomist *Russkii vĭstnyk* and Russophile *Russkaia zemlia* (Rusyn Land).⁵⁷ Officials in Uzhhorod collected and translated any irredentist or anti-Czech publications and sent them to the Ministry of the Interior in Prague for thorough risk analysis.⁵⁸ For example, when Ukrainophile *Rus'ka nyva* referred to Czech officials as “vermin in Ruthenia” in 1921, the Ministry of the Interior launched an investigation to discover who had written the piece.⁵⁹ Gendarmes carefully watched the day-to-day movements and social interactions of Rusyn leaders, particularly Rusynophile Ivan Kurtiak and Russophiles such as Andrey Gagatko.⁶⁰ Czech notaries attended the public meetings held by Rusyn political parties in villages throughout the territory, and they transcribed the speeches and discussions for analysis by the Ministry of the Interior.⁶¹ Local gendarmes also had the power to call off Rusyn public meetings if speakers expressed anti-republic sentiment. For instance, when a party member shouted “Czechs are our enemies” during a public meeting of the Carpatho-Rusyn Labour Party, the gendarme sprang into action: “I gave them a strong warning that the rest of the meeting would be cancelled. The speaker took note of the announcement and withdrew as he didn’t want to cause the cancellation of the session. In the speeches which followed the tone was suitably changed.”⁶²

Increasing levels of anti-Czech agitation led to concerns about the personal safety of Czechs and their families living in Ruthenia. Nečas reported to President Masaryk that many officials worried about what would happen in the event of an uprising against them:

Among the officials, especially those who are married, there is concern for the future because of the instability of affairs, unrest and agitation. [...] Their fear of a revolution is understandable due to the manner of the agitation for autonomy, in which Czech officials are directly bombarded with hatred.⁶³

⁵⁶ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T.G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

⁵⁷ For examples of fully censored articles see *Russkaia zemlia*, 19.06.1920, 2. – And *Russkaia zemlia*, 09.02.1922, 2.

⁵⁸ Many reports about Rusyn publications are available in the collections of AKPR f. PR.

⁵⁹ AKPR f. PR, kart. 3. Petr Ehrenfeld: Článek ‘Ruské nivy’. Report for the Czechoslovak Presidential Office, 19 March 1921. Document PR 258/21.

⁶⁰ Many surveillance reports about Rusyn leaders exist in the collections of AKPR f. PR.

⁶¹ Examples of transcriptions of Rusyn political party meetings sent for analysis exist in AKPR f. PR.

⁶² AKPR f. PR, kart. 9, document 280/27. František Velichovský, regional official for the Town of Velký Sevljuš. Report prepared for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry about a meeting of the Carpatho-Rusyn Labour Party in the village of Mali Kopani, 27 May 1927.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

By 1921, there were already almost 20,000 Czechs living and working in different regions of Ruthenia, and protecting them in the event of an open revolt would be an enormous challenge.⁶⁴ To maintain order, Nečas felt that the government must be ready to act against "all visible and invisible enemies of the republic", while Antonín Novotný suggested to the Ministry of the Interior that "placing Czech legionaries from Russia here would bring positive results".⁶⁵ The eventual decision to offer land in Ruthenia to Czech legionaries as settler colonists may have resulted partly from these concerns about anti-republic and irredentist behaviour.

The first Czechoslovak state elections held in Ruthenia in 1924 resulted in anti-Czechoslovak parties winning a majority of the vote. The Ruthenian branch of the Communist Party received the greatest share of the vote at 39 per cent, while the ruling Agrarian party received 6 per cent.⁶⁶ Responding to the anti-republic results in the election, the Czech newspaper *28 říjen* (28 October) blamed the behaviour of Czech officials: "One of the causes of the poor judgement of the inhabitants is certainly the unsuitable administration which we have introduced in Ruthenia, and the poor morals of our officials at the beginning of our administration, which still has not been completely cured."⁶⁷

Czech authors and journalists outside Ruthenia often overlooked the increasingly troubled relationship with Rusyns and continued to spread an image of Czech officials as humanitarian caregivers. Writing in 1924, Karel Matoušek described the work of the officials as a noble cause in a formerly backwards region:

Czech officials in Ruthenia have carried out a significant and worthy task. We have established this territory, turned the tyrannical Hungarian regime into Czechoslovak justice and democracy, improved communications, re-established respect for the law. We are gradually bringing order to this land of former Oriental disorder and confusion, along with discipline and west European democracy and culture.⁶⁸

Matoušek spoke of the "true Slavism" and "honesty and efficiency" shown by Czech officials while avoiding mention of the scandals and ongoing unrest.⁶⁹ An Interior Ministry report for the League of Nations in 1928 also tried to suggest that Rusyns had been grateful for Czech help in the early years of the republic: "Ruthenia provides overwhelming evidence that the inhabitants were indebted and still today are indebted to Czech officials for the difficult and successful work which they did in 1919 and 1920. [...] Today it is possible to say with a clear conscience that the officials are good".⁷⁰ Such examples gloss over the undesirable aspects of the

⁶⁴ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

⁶⁵ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. A. Novotný: Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, 26 April 1921.

⁶⁶ *Rezultaty výborov v Karpatskoi Rusy* [Election Results in Carpathian Ruthenia], *Russkaia zemlia*, 20.03.1924, 1.

⁶⁷ ANM, f. Starý, kart. 1. *Češi v Podkarpatské Rusi* [Czechs in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], 28 říjen, 26.03.1924.

⁶⁸ *Matoušek*, Karel: *Podkarpatská Rus* [Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. Praha 1924, 207.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. Czechoslovak Interior Ministry document. Informace pro

Czech administration in order to present the appearance of a happily united republic. Maintaining this image would only become more difficult as the Rusyn autonomy movement gained strength during the second half of the 1920s.

František Svojše as a Symbol of Czech Imperialism

Among the Czech gendarmes transferred from Bosnia to Ruthenia, one went on to play a high-profile role in relations with the Rusyn people. František Svojše started as a gendarme captain when he arrived in Ruthenia and later rose to the position of head administrator for the state press service in Uzhhorod.⁷¹ In January 1925, he became a lightning rod for Rusyn anger against Czech officials when he began publishing his own newspaper, *Podkarpatské hlasy*, which attacked the Rusyn intelligentsia and promoted Czech superiority and Czechization for a reading audience of Czech officials. The newspaper's mandate, written below the header in every issue, declared *Podkarpatské hlasy's* purpose to be "defending the interests of Czech people in Ruthenia and Eastern Slovakia".⁷² In the editorial of the debut issue, Svojše cast Czech officials as a beacon of civilization in a land of darkness: "Today in the east of the republic dawn is coming, the Carpathian peaks are already illuminated with the brightness of knowledge and there, where the goal of our pilgrimage was once lost in the dark, now there is light. And with this light let us lead!"⁷³ Svojše repeatedly contrasted such images of Czech superiority against images of Rusyn inferiority; many issues of *Podkarpatské hlasy* in 1925 and 1926 included cartoons depicting Czech surprise and shock at the infantile, drunken or uneducated behaviour of Rusyns.⁷⁴

From the outset, Svojše declared that "our first enemy is the local intelligentsia", and constant friction with Russophiles and Ukrainophiles marked the first years of *Podkarpatské hlasy's* publication.⁷⁵ Svojše considered the intelligentsia to be an obstacle to development in the territory, and saw Rusyn autonomy as a danger to Czech progress. As a result, he promoted the construction of Czech schools in Rusyn villages as a means of gradually achieving linguistic and cultural assimilation.⁷⁶ To further those aims, he advocated the adoption of the Latin script (using Czechoslovak orthography) for the Rusyn language rather than the traditional Cyrillic.⁷⁷ He claimed that this would improve communication between Czechs and Rusyns, but the Rusyn intelligentsia saw his enthusiasm for a Czechoslovak Latin

společnost národů o autonomii pro Podkarpatskou Rus [Information for the League of Nations about autonomy for Subcarpathian Ruthenia], document no. 39894/1928, 18 June 1928.

⁷¹ Bojovníci proti 'Příšerné reakci' [Fighters Against 'Terrible Reaction'], *Štit*, 23.02.1928, 7.

⁷² *Náš směr* [Our Direction], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 03.01.1925, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ The first such cartoon appeared in: *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 17.01.1925, 3.

⁷⁵ *Naši největší nepřátelé* [Our Greatest Enemies], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 10.01.1925, 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *P. Hlasy proti kyrilici a pravoslaví* [*Podkarpatské hlasy* against Cyrillic and Orthodoxy], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 30.03.1926, 1.

script as a further step towards their assimilation.⁷⁸ Czech-language National Democratic Party publication *Podkarpatská rus* condemned Svojshe's slogan "Out with Cyrillic, it must disappear from Ruthenia!" as a dangerous form of Czechization, and called on the Rusyn intelligentsia to "battle against the impact of Svojshe".⁷⁹

Rusyns quickly rallied to show their opposition to the publication of *Podkarpatské hlasy*, with Russophiles, Rusynophiles, and Ukrainophiles presenting an uncommonly united position. *Svobodnoe slovo* (Free Word) responded to Svojshe's attacks on the intelligentsia by confirming that they were indeed his enemy: "It's true, true, little Mussolini! After your vicious attacks on the Rusyn intelligentsia you are hated by all of them."⁸⁰ Russophile *Ruskaia zemlia* declared that Svojshe represented nothing less than "the rapid Czechization of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, starting with the school system",⁸¹ and Ukrainophile *Vpered* (Forward) bluntly stated that "*Podkarpatské hlasy* is in the service of Czechization of Rusyns".⁸² Russophile leader Andrei Gagatko protested that state laws prohibited media publications to be owned by government officials, but Svojshe had left his position as head of the state press service after founding *Podkarpatské hlasy*, and could claim that his editorials represented the voice of a private citizen.⁸³

Podkarpatské hlasy began without open affiliation to a political party, but within a year of publication it had revealed its links with the ruling Agrarians.⁸⁴ This encouraged Rusyns to view *Podkarpatské hlasy* as a tool of the Czech administration, particularly of Vice-governor Antonín Rozsypal, who replaced Ehrenfeld as vice-governor in 1923.⁸⁵ Ukrainophile leader Avhustyn Voloshyn blamed Rozsypal for withdrawing government support for the Ukrainophile newspaper *Rusyn*, which had been supported by former Vice-governor Ehrenfeld, and in place of it "supporting Czech daily *Podkarpatské hlasy* which promotes a program of Czechization in Ruthenia".⁸⁶ Russophile *Ruskaia zemlia* considered Svojshe to be so influential within the government hierarchy that he was above the law, an untouchable force that Rusyn protests could not dislodge.⁸⁷ Czechization policies that Svojshe promoted in *Podkarpatské hlasy*, particularly for the expansion of Czech schools in Rusyn villages, often later became reality, leading Rusyns to label *Podkarpatské*

⁷⁸ Pochopit pravou slovanskou politika [Understanding the True Nature of Slavic Politics], *Podkarpatská rus*, 30.01.1926, 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Cheshskaia iumorystycheskaia hazeta 'Podkarpatske hlas?' [Amusing Czech Newspaper *Podkarpatské hlasy*], *Svobodnoe slovo*, 19.02.1925, 2.

⁸¹ Institut ohlupieniia ili Russkaia shkola? [Institute of Foolishness or a Russian School?], *Ruskaia zemlia*, 26.02.1925, 1.

⁸² 'Podkarpat. Hlasy' v sluzhbi krainoi Chekhyzatsii Rusinov [*Podkarpatské hlasy* in the Service of Extreme Czechization of Rusyns], *Vpered*, 22.08.1925, 2.

⁸³ ANM f. Starý, kart. 1. Nový časopis v Podkarpatskej Rusi [New magazine in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Slovenská politika*, 31.01.1925.

⁸⁴ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. Avhustyn Voloshyn: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 6 April 1928.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Bosniaky y Russkii Ivan [Bosnians and Russian Ivan], *Ruskaia zemlia*, 17.03.1927, 1.

hľasy a “political meteorologist” that could predict future government trends.⁸⁸ After a slow start, *Podkarpatské hľasy* sold well among Czech officials because it was the only Czech-language daily newspaper in Ruthenia and because of the notoriety surrounding its confrontational editor.⁸⁹ Svojše dared to say things in print that other Czech officials may have thought inwardly but had never expressed publically.⁹⁰

Svojše personified the worst fears of Rusyns who felt threatened by the spread of Czechization. Voloshyn’s party organ *Svoboda* (Freedom) referred to *Podkarpatské hľasy* as “Podkarpatské prase” (“Subcarpathian pig” in Czech),⁹¹ and *Podkarpatská rus* called *Podkarpatské hľasy* a radical example of “Czech provincial chauvinism”.⁹² After just one month of *Podkarpatské hľasy*’s existence, the editor of Russophile *Ruskaia zemlia* lamented that “the cultural goals of *Podkarpatské hľasy* had already been accepted” among many Czech officials and gendarmes.⁹³ *Svobodnoe slovo* declared that due to Svojše’s negative influence, “our ‘brother Czechs’ are now doing the same thing that they did to their German population [...] Czechizing Subcarpathian Ruthenia by force”.⁹⁴ Gagatko’s Carpatho-Rusyn Labour Party drafted a “Resolution against *Podkarpatské hľasy*” in July 1925, saying that they had to “act to defend the Rusyn nation”.⁹⁵ The resolution called on all Rusyns to “protest against the intentional neglect of the Rusyn nation by this group of Czech journalists and the impact they have had among members of Czech society”.⁹⁶ A gathering of like-minded Czech officials developed around Svojše and they used *Podkarpatské hľasy* as a means of spreading their message of Czechization.

Svojše could see the firestorm of anger hurled against him in the Russophile and Ukrainophile newspapers, but the anti-Rusyn tone of his editorials continued unabated. He responded directly to the accusations that he promoted Czechization by suggesting Rusyns would willingly assimilate once they realized the benefits it could have for them:

We don’t want to Czechize anyone in Ruthenia; the idea has never even occurred to us! [...] For Czech children in Ruthenia there will be Czech schools, and Czech schools can also be for you, if in the interests of a better future for your children you wish to send them to a Czech school!⁹⁷

He wished to modernize Ruthenia as quickly as possible, and the Rusyn intelligentsia’s demands for autonomy had to be pushed aside for the greater good. His

⁸⁸ Sensace Užhorodu a celé Podkarpatské Rusi [The Affair of Užhorod and All of Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Našinec*, 17.02.1928, 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Podkarpatské prase [Subcarpathian Pig], *Svoboda*, 19.11.1925, 2.

⁹² P. Hľasy proti kyrilici a pravoslaví (cf. fn. 77).

⁹³ Kul’tura ‘Podkarpatských hľasů’ uzhe prynymaetsia [The Culture of *Podkarpatské hľasy* Has Already Been Accepted], *Ruskaia zemlia*, 12.02.1925, 1.

⁹⁴ Uchytes po Cheshsky [Learn the Czech language], *Svobodnoe slovo*, 04.07.1925, 1.

⁹⁵ Rezoliutsiia protyv ‘Podkarpatských hľasů’ [Resolution Against *Podkarpatské hľasy*], *Ruskaia zemlia*, 02.07.1925, 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Česká škola na Podkarpatské Rusi [A Czech School in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Podkarpatské hľasy*, 07.02.1925, 1.

reaction to the intelligentsia's hatred of him appeared in a cartoon in *Podkarpatské hlasy* in February 1926; Svojše stood between menacing Russophiles and Ukrainophiles pleading for them to remember the principles of Slavic brotherhood between Czechs and Rusyns.⁹⁸

Svojše expressed his vision of Ruthenia as a Czech imperial colony in bold and controversial statements. In the editorial of *Podkarpatské hlasy*'s second edition, he directly compared Czech officials in Ruthenia to British officials in India, with the only difference between them being that conditions for officials were better in India:

There is no other region in Europe which is as uncultured as Subcarpathian Ruthenia, it can be fully compared with Asia. And here we will dare to make a small comparison: The English government, when they send their officials to India, pay them hundreds of thousands in salary, give them a whole staff of servants, and a luxurious bungalow to live in. Our government sends us there to face conditions which are even worse, but they send us on our way with only a sack, as if we were intended to go begging.⁹⁹

As a former gendarme, Svojše could relate to the day-to-day concerns of the common Czech gendarme, notary or local official, and low wages in relation to the cost of living had been a common complaint.¹⁰⁰ Although Czech officials were his intended audience, the colonial message in Svojše's "India" comparison did not go unnoticed among Rusyns. *Svobodnoe slovo* reprinted the offensive "India" passage and its editor declared that Svojše "clearly hadn't learned any geography" and asked two questions rhetorically: "Who is forcing you to stay here in Carpathian Ruthenia? It's not logical to live here if this place is 'Asia' for you, so why don't you stay in your wonderful Europe?"¹⁰¹

Drawing unflattering parallels with Bosnia and Herzegovina gave Rusyns a means of criticizing Svojše and Czech officials. Among the Rusyn intelligentsia, Svojše and the journalists behind *Podkarpatské hlasy* became known as the "Bosnian Czechs" because many of them had come from previous positions in Bosnia during the last years of Austro-Hungary.¹⁰² The label served as a means of lowering the status of these officials as a show of disrespect for their authority. *Svobodnoe slovo* mockingly referred to Svojše in many of its articles as the "Bosnian gendarme" rather than using his real name.¹⁰³ Kurtiak's organ *Russkii vîstnyk* (Rusyn Bulletin) pointed out the dangerous influence of Svojše and the "Bosnian Czechs" had on other officials who did not approve of Czechization:

Czechs who were not in Bosnia did not at first understand the methods of Svojše and the "Bosnians" and many of them protested against the articles he published in *Hlasy*. However, the ideas of the "Bosnians" have begun to spread more and more widely among Czech offi-

⁹⁸ Myšlenka slovanské vzájemnosti jak se na Podk. Rusi praktikuje [The Idea of Slavic Reciprocity as It Is Practiced in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 23.02.1926, 3.

⁹⁹ Naši největší nepřátelé (cf. fn. 75).

¹⁰⁰ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 401. Jaromír Nečas: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 18 August 1921.

¹⁰¹ Cheshskaia iumorystycheskaia hazeta (cf. fn. 80).

¹⁰² Nashi Bosniaky [Our Bosnians], *Russkii vîstnyk*, 07.04.1927, 3-4.

¹⁰³ *Svobodnoe slovo*, 06.01.1925, 1.

cials. Now we can count on our fingers the number of officials that have yet to be infected with the Bosnian illness.¹⁰⁴

The “Bosnian illness” referred to the wave of Czechization and corruption that *Russkii vĭstnyk* suggested was sweeping across Ruthenia. *Russkaia zemlia* vented its anger at the corruption it saw among the officials it labelled “Bosnians” working in Ruthenia: “Freedom has brought Subcarpathian Ruthenia many good things, but also many bad things, a lot of evil to Ruthenia. The greatest evil came from Bosnia, giving us Czechs who stole like crows.”¹⁰⁵

Despite Rusyn concerns about the imminent dangers posed by these “Bosnian Czechs”, not all Czech officials in Ruthenia supported Svojše’s Czechization plans. Several other Czech-language weekly newspapers existed in Ruthenia for an audience of Czech officials and gendarmes, including the Czechoslovak National Democratic Party organ *Podkarpatská rus*, and *Hlas východu* (Voice of the East), backed by the Social Democratic Party. Both publications favoured a more moderate approach and promoted cooperation with the Rusyn intelligentsia,¹⁰⁶ and both criticized Svojše for his dangerously polarizing influence on Czech-Rusyn relations, with *Podkarpatská Rus* referring to *Podkarpatské hlasy* as “the sadly notorious organ of Svojše”.¹⁰⁷ However, Rusyns worried that Svojše’s brash Czechization rhetoric had become a widespread political consensus among the officials, pushing moderate Czech voices into the background.

Svojše’s notoriety among Rusyns increased as his status as a voice for Czechization in the administration grew, but his influence came to an abrupt halt in February 1928. Gendarmes arrested Svojše after discovering that he was a pedophile involved in regular sexual encounters with children from one of the local public schools in Užhorod.¹⁰⁸ Svojše’s crime was considered so unpalatable that many Czech newspapers in Prague referred to the charges against him simply as “crimes against decency”.¹⁰⁹ Prosecutors accused Svojše of “arranging sexual meetings which involved 8-to-14-year-old boys and girls”, meetings that had taken place for at least two years “in his flat and even supposedly in his office”.¹¹⁰ The Czech daily *Našinec* (Ours) alleged that Svojše had tried to bribe some of the parents of the children involved to remain silent after they had learned of his activities.¹¹¹ In addition to charges of public indecency, the subsequent investigation looked into accusations that he had embezzled government funds during his time as a gendarme.¹¹² The Czech publica-

¹⁰⁴ Nashi Bosniaky (cf. fn. 102).

¹⁰⁵ Bosniaky y Russkii Ivan (cf. fn. 87).

¹⁰⁶ Novoroční úvaha v r. 1928 [New Year’s Reflection in the Year 1928], *Podkarpatská rus*, 05.01.1928, 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Podkarpatská rus*, 13.03.1928, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Sensace Užhorodu a celé Podkarpatské Rusí 4 (cf. fn. 88).

¹⁰⁹ ANM f. Starý, kart. 1. Nemožné poměry na Podkarp. Rusí [Impossible Conditions in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Lidové listy*, 28.02.1928.

¹¹⁰ Sensace Užhorodu a celé Podkarpatské Rusí (cf. fn. 108).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Bojovníci proti ‘Příšerné reakci’ (cf. fn. 71).

tion *Štít* (Shield) claimed that 100,000 Czech crowns had disappeared from a treasury office Svojše had been responsible for as a gendarme,¹¹³ and *Našinec* questioned how Svojše could have afforded to buy the large house he owned in the hills outside Uzhhorod.¹¹⁴ He received little sympathy from the Czech media, with *Lidové noviny* (People's Newspaper) drawing attention to Svojše's weight (140 kg) and former life of excess in Uzhhorod in which "20 beers and 2 litres of wine were his normal daily intake".¹¹⁵

The scandal caused a sensation across Ruthenia as the Rusyn intelligentsia watched the very public downfall of their hated enemy. *Russkii vĭstnyk* rejoiced that a man who "we [Rusyns] feared" and "symbolized the guiding light of the Czech nation in this eastern part of their empire" would no longer pose a threat.¹¹⁶ The criminal charges silenced Svojše as a voice for Czech assimilation, since just a few weeks after his arrest pressure from government prosecutors forced him to sell *Podkarpatské hlasy*.¹¹⁷ Although *Podkarpatské hlasy* continued to act as a voice for Czech officials, without Svojše at the helm it lost much of its confrontational style and stopped openly promoting Czechization.¹¹⁸ Despite the loss of his newspaper Svojše did not quietly disappear from the public eye; during his court proceedings he sued the editor of rival Czech-language Uzhhorod newspaper *Hlas východu* for slandering his reputation.¹¹⁹ Svojše also tried to bring a case of slander against the editor of *Četnické listy* (Gendarmerie Journal), a Prague-based magazine for Czechoslovak gendarmes, claiming that he had a "destabilizing influence" among the gendarmes and legionaries in Ruthenia.¹²⁰ The criminal case against Svojše dragged on through various courts and appeal sessions until finally a guilty verdict and sentence of three years in prison was upheld in the Czechoslovak Supreme Court in Brno in 1932.¹²¹

Even from prison, Svojše continued to exert considerable influence on Ruthenian politics. A report by presidential advisor Ivan Parkanyi in 1929 claimed that "notorious Svojše's clumsy and abusive writing" had caused a lot of damage in relations with Rusyns, and that his influence and thinking still remained strong among certain groups of officials in Ruthenia.¹²² Parkanyi claimed that *Podkarpatské hlasy* had "pretended to be 'an independent daily defending the interests of Czech people in

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Sensace Užhorodu a celé Podkarpatské Rusí (cf. fn. 108).

¹¹⁵ *Lidové noviny*, 01.03.1928, 1-2.

¹¹⁶ Frantyshek Svoishe arestovan [František Svojše arrested], *Russkii vĭstnyk*, 16.02.1928, 1.

¹¹⁷ ANM f. Starý, kart. 1. Vydavatelstvo 'Podkarpatských hlasů' prodáno v kriminále [Publishing company *Podkarpatské hlasy* Sold From Prison], *Moravské-slezské denník*, 03.04.1928.

¹¹⁸ Attacks on *Podkarpatské hlasy* in Rusyn newspapers went from very frequent from 1925-1927 to almost none after Svojše's departure from the newspaper in 1928.

¹¹⁹ František Svojše žaluje [František Svojše sues], *Lidové noviny*, 05.03.1930, 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* – See also Případ Svojše a četnictvo [The Case of Svojše and the Gendarmerie], *Četnické listy*, 15.05.1931, no.10, 1.

¹²¹ Konce Františka Svojšeho [The End of František Svojše], *Lidové noviny*, 20.10.1932, 8.

¹²² AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. *Parkanyi, Ivan: Poměry na Podkarpatské Rusi* [Conditions in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], 12 June 1929. Presidential office document no. T 737/29.

Ruthenia and Eastern Slovakia”, but that Svojše’s promotion of Czechization for the territory did not reflect the opinion of the majority of Czech officials.¹²³ Interior Ministry documents had mentioned the existence of *Podkarpatské blasy* prior to Svojše’s arrest, but condemnation of his Czechization policies appears to have arisen only after the criminal charges had been laid against him.¹²⁴

In the wake of Svojše’s downfall, some Rusyns labelled him an example of all that had gone wrong with the project of Czech administration for Ruthenia. Ukrainophile leader Voloshyn, long a supporter of the Czech administration, wrote to President Masaryk a month after Svojše’s arrest to protest against the corruption and low morals he had witnessed among Czech officials. The Svojše scandal appears to have inspired his letter, since he repeatedly referred to “the affair of the editor of *Podkarpatské blasy*” arrested for “a scandalous orgy with young girls and boys”.¹²⁵ More broadly, however, Voloshyn’s letter suggests he considered Svojše merely symptomatic of the general trend towards immorality and disrespect for Rusyns that had developed among Czech officials. He described this gradual transition from humanitarianism to corruption and imperialism:

During the first years the Republic assigned officials to us who learned the Rusyn language and supported our cultural and economic work. Now these Czechs behave differently, they behave contemptuously towards us and they act with the spirit of dictators. This is the result of a decline in morals which is sadly proven by affairs which have been written about extensively by journalists.¹²⁶

To impress on Masaryk the failure of morals among Czech officials serving in Ruthenia, he listed “only the most recent scandals which have occurred”, including Svojše and three cases of embezzlement and fraud involving the Uzhhorod police captain and financial auditors.¹²⁷ Considering that the Rusynophile and Russophile leaders Kurtiak, Gagatko, and Iosif Kaminskii were already hostile towards the Uzhhorod administration, the accusations from Voloshyn served as a signal to the Prague government that relations with Rusyns had reached a new low.

The Ruthenian Communist Party also used Svojše’s scandal to their advantage, calling it a prominent example of the corrupt regime operating in Ruthenia, “a colonial system which is as dark as any in Africa”.¹²⁸ In March 1928, a month after Svojše’s arrest, Ruthenian Communist member of parliament József Gáti addressed the Czechoslovak National Assembly with a speech focused on the many “day to

¹²³ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. Parkanyi, Ivan: Poměry na Podkarpatské Rusi, 12 June 1929. Presidential office document no. T 737/29.

¹²⁴ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. Uzhhorod Administration Report for the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry, July 1925.

¹²⁵ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403. Avhustyn Voloshyn: Report for President T. G. Masaryk, 6 April 1928.

¹²⁶ AÚ TGM f. TGM-R, kart. 403, document no. 2258/28. Avhustyn Voloshyn: Letter to President T. G. Masaryk, 19 March 1928.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Gáti, József: Speech to the Czechoslovak National Assembly, 13 September 1928, Session 159. URL: <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1925ns/ps/stenprot/159schuz/s159008.htm> (last accessed 10.07.2017)

day scandals of the governing colonial regime", highlighting among them "[t]he head of the Czech chauvinist press, Svojše, [...] who has gone to prison because of an orgy with boys and girls who were younger than fourteen".¹²⁹ Gáti feigned surprise that gendarmes supposedly loyal to such a corrupt and powerful figure as Svojše had willingly arrested him.¹³⁰ Gáti also accused the Prague government of "consolidation of the colonial system" in Ruthenia through the use of "Asian methods of oppression used against the indigenous population".¹³¹

Responding to such accusations made against them, Czech officials sought to defend their record in Ruthenia. One of the most passionate defences of the work done by Czech officials came from Agrarian Party appointee Jan Brandejs, who by 1928 had become an important figure in the Uzhhorod administration.¹³² Writing in *Podkarpatské hlasy* in October 1928, Brandejs addressed Gáti and others who had accused Czech officials of imperialism:

The biggest lies told are about a colonial economy, about an administrative dictatorship, about unjust rule. [...] The Czechoslovak state considers Ruthenia to be a colony and arranges the system there like a colonial economy. This was said this year by some in our national parliament. [...] Is the Czechoslovak state regime in Ruthenia of this character?

Brandejs then presented the accomplishments of the administration as evidence that Czech rule should not be considered colonial:

The Czechoslovak state administration has, for ten years, protected the inhabitants from dying of hunger, [...] cared for the health of the people, [...] made great effort to support public education, and so on. Where is the mark of a colonial regime here? Where is the mark of oppression here? [...] It is not a colonial Czechoslovak regime in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the truth is that a colonial regime ruled here very cruelly before the year 1918 during Hungarian rule.¹³³

In support of his claim that Czech officials were not imperialists, Brandejs highlighted the benefits that Czechoslovak rule had brought to Rusyns: "The Czechoslovak state has invested 100 million crowns in Ruthenia, [...] the colonial Hungarian regime invested nothing in Ruthenia and left the land and the people neglected. The Czechoslovak state administration is building a land of civilization, culture, a better life for citizens".¹³⁴ Brandejs published these comments in *Podkarpatské hlasy* in the edition celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic, but in Uzhhorod there was little reason to celebrate. Rusyns of most political backgrounds actively opposed the Czech administration and desired autonomy.

The first ten years of Czech rule in Ruthenia ended in a state of intense distrust between the Rusyn intelligentsia and Czech officials. The union of 1919 had ini-

¹²⁹ Gáti, József: Speech to the Czechoslovak National Assembly, 22 March 1928, Session 138. URL: <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1925ns/ps/stenprot/138schuz/s138006.htm> (last accessed 10.07.2017).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Ještě k otázce urbaniální úpravy [More on the Question of Urban Adjustments], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 25.02.1936, 2.

¹³³ Brandejs, Jan: Deset let práce republiky na Podkarpatské Rusi [Ten Years of Work by the Republic in Subcarpathian Ruthenia], *Podkarpatské hlasy*, 28.10.1928, 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

tially offered such wonderful promises of Slavic brotherly love that it came as a shock to Rusyns that Czech officials could take on a similar mantle as their previous Hungarian rulers. Although many Czechs who came to work in Ruthenia did so in the true spirit of Slavic solidarity, a considerable number did so for personal profit. Corruption and abuse of office flourished in the Ruthenian countryside where there was little official oversight of transactions and activities. Disrespectful behaviour towards Rusyns showed them that Czechs did not consider them to be equal citizens in the new Czechoslovak republic. The corruption and abuse of office by Czech officials provided the Rusyn intelligentsia with an opportunity to delegitimize Czech rule of their territory, particularly in the ongoing discourse over the issue of autonomy.

The appearance of Svojše and his promotion of Czechization in *Podkarpatské hlasy* became the spur that drove the Rusyn intelligentsia to organize and actively struggle for autonomy. For the autonomists, Svojše symbolized what they thought the Czech administration had become, a colonialist system that did not have the best interests of the local inhabitants in mind. Although Rusyns rejoiced at the downfall of Svojše, he had been partly responsible for getting Russophile, Rusynophile and Ukrainophile Rusyns to cooperate together in the fight against a common enemy. As a symbol of Czech imperialism and assimilation policies, the “Bosnian gendarme” had been a catalyst for the growing Rusyn autonomy movement. Czech officials such as Brandejs saw the danger of allowing accusations of imperialism to go unchallenged, but the Czechoslovak government would find itself rejecting such accusations repeatedly during the second decade of the First Czechoslovak Republic as the geostrategic importance of Ruthenia intensified.