

ARTICLE

Transcarpathian Hungarians in the Communist Movement, 1919–24

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The article examines the participation of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia in the Czechoslovak communist movement between 1919 and 1924. Its aim is to demonstrate that during the inter-war period, the Hungarian community in the region was not only characterised by ethnonational political organisation but also played a significant role in the communist movement. The article focuses on the activities of the Transcarpathian organisation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which – amid the social and economic chaos that followed the First World War – engaged effectively with the Hungarian minority, particularly through its response to social and economic hardship. In exploring the local characteristics of communist party-building in Czechoslovakia, the article argues that the communists were successful in mobilising the local Hungarian population, just like ethnically focused Hungarian parties. The analysis highlights the social diversity of the Hungarians who were involved in the communist movement and examines the communists' political success through an exploration of their networking efforts.

Introduction

The splash of oars echoed through the night among the acacias lining the banks of the Tisza. On the dark water of the river, a recently assembled raft moved silently from the Czechoslovak side towards the Hungarian border. It was the 1920s in Transcarpathia and the raft was piloted by Bertalan Bíró, the *bíró* (elected foreman) of the Hungarian settlement Vari near Berehove, who mediated between the settlement's inhabitants and the state administration.¹ Ever since the change in political power and the drawing of new borders, such nightly journeys from the right bank of the Tisza to the left had become just as common as the Rusyn log rafts floating downstream had been a few years earlier. Smuggling had become commonplace along the newly drawn borders, driven by price differences and disrupted supplies, despite the efforts of border guards and customs officials. However, in addition to typical smuggled items – such as alcohol, tobacco, or perhaps salami – this particular raft carried another form of cargo: leaflets containing communist propaganda.

After 1920, the communist movement in the Kingdom of Hungary had been driven underground. The counter-revolutionary regime of Miklós Horthy considered the Hungarian Soviet Republic, communism, and far-left ideologies in general as its antithesis and primary legitimising counterpoint.

¹Since its establishment as an administrative unit in 1919, Transcarpathia – today Ukraine's westernmost region – has been known by various names. In Czech, it was called Podkarpatská Rus (Subcarpathian Rus); in Hungarian, Kárpátalja (Subcarpathia); and after the Soviet occupation in 1944, reflecting a shift in perspective, it became known as *Zakarpattia* (Transcarpathia). For simplicity and to facilitate understanding for readers, I consistently use the region's current official name, Transcarpathia, throughout the article.

Whereas in post-war Hungary the movement could exist only as a hidden, underground current, in inter-war Czechoslovakia – and especially in Transcarpathia, the republic's most economically underdeveloped, poorest, and most remote region – the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had operated legally since 1921 and gained remarkable popularity. As seen in the above anecdote, this even provided a new dimension to cross-border Hungarian–Hungarian relations.

Bertalan Bíró, who organised the operation, ran into conflict with the Czechoslovak authorities during the 1920s due to his active involvement in the communist movement in Czechoslovakia, as well as his occasional related illegal activities.² This locally respected inhabitant of the border village was not unusual among Hungarians in Transcarpathia. Rather, he was one representative of a broader political and community-based organising effort, which was among the most popular with the Hungarian minority between the two world wars.

In the present day, Transcarpathian public discourse is characterised by two primary images of communism or other far-left ideas: either a negative assessment of the Soviet Union or biased nostalgia. The communist movement between the two world wars and the Transcarpathian Hungarians' participation in it has almost completely been removed from collective memory. We have little knowledge of the role of the communist movement in the life of the local Hungarian community in Transcarpathia during this period.

Following the establishment of new states after the end of the First World War, including the creation of Czechoslovakia and the new territory Podkarpatská Rus within it, the Hungarian population in the six formerly Hungarian counties (mostly Ung, Ugocsa, Bereg, Máramaros, Szatmár, and Szabolcs) became part of a so-called forced community.³ The fact that Hungary was forced to sign the Treaty of Trianon on 4 June 1920 formed a mental dividing line for the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia. The separation of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia from their kin communities across the border was endorsed and supported by the governments of both Czechoslovakia and Hungary. This situation encouraged the development of a specific Transcarpathian Hungarian identity, which was promoted and supported by minority elites in the region, and the first signs of group activity emerged. The importance of identity-building, community, and togetherness also formed the basis of the new elites' legitimacy.

The intentions of the Hungarian minority elite, a group that was barely visible, were not enough to form a regional identity. There had to be certain social and cultural conditions that helped the ideas of the elite to prevail, as well as specific structures to disseminate elite ideas to the members of the community.⁴ The construction of regional identity required not only political discourse but also educational institutions, as Peter Haslinger has demonstrated using the example of Burgenland, a region also annexed from Hungary by Austria following the peace treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1919.⁵ Other researchers argue that the press, science, political parties, the arts, and education are the most suitable channels for disseminating identity, related memory policy, and symbolic practices.⁶ The literature on the history of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia between the two world wars has mainly focused on the mobilisation of national discourse by Hungarian opposition parties, which

² Miklós Rotman, *Kik érted haltak. Forradalmár elődenik arcképcsarnoka* (Uzhhorod: Kárpáti Kiadó, 1982), 16.

³ The use of the term 'forced community' (*kényszerközösség*) is today generally present in the scholarly discourse on Hungarian minority communities after the First World War. A couple of examples include Nándor Bárdi, *Otthon és haza* (Jyväskylä–Pécs: University of Jyväskylä, Faculty Of Humanities, 2013); László Szarka, 'A közép-európai kisebbségek tipológiai besorolhatósága', *Kisebbség* 8, no. 2 (1999): 168–75. The origin of the concept itself presumably goes back to the tripartite classification that was developed by Pál Teleki, according to which he distinguished three types of minorities in Europe: traditional minorities, voluntary minorities, and forced minorities; Pál Teleki, *Időszerű nemzetközi politikai kérdések a politikai földrajz megvilágításában* (Budapest: Jancsó Benedek Társaság, 1931).

⁴ Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without Groups', *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 170–1.

⁵ Peter Haslinger, 'A regionális identitásépítés Burgenlandon', *Regio* 4 (2000): 76–7.

⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Rossz közérzet az emlékezetkultúrában. Beavatkozás* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2016), 37.

has meant that we know most about the role of political discourse in forging a group identity.⁷ In the case of the First Czechoslovak Republic, scholars have already examined Hungarian activism that occurred outside the framework of the Hungarian opposition parties, as well as the impact of communist ideas on youth movements.⁸ However, this body of scholarship has not yet examined the Hungarian community living in Transcarpathia.

The success of a political party is most often measured by its effectiveness in elections. The elections in Transcarpathia between 1924 and 1935 show that the Hungarian opposition parties were not the only parties engaging with the Hungarian electorate. In this period, one of the most successful parties in the region's elections was the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which in some cases not only competed with ethnically organised Hungarian parties or party blocs in Hungarian-majority settlements but also managed to garner a greater proportion of the votes. Following the first Czechoslovak legislative election in Transcarpathia in 1924, the victorious communists sent as many Hungarian representatives to Prague as the Hungarian opposition parties (2–2 people).⁹ Therefore, the communist movement in Czechoslovakia was successful within the Hungarian community, just like Hungarian oppositional political movements. Despite this, the history of this left-wing alternative is absent from scholarship on the development of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia as a distinctive regional minority group.

While writing this study, I encountered a unique situation compared to my previous research experiences. Researchers working on the history of Transcarpathia typically have ample opportunity to conduct primary research and examine previously unused sources. In contrast, the history of the communist movement in Transcarpathia is remarkably well explored and documented. Since the Soviet occupation of the region in 1944 and the establishment of Uzhhorod State University in 1945, intense historical research has been conducted with the goal of uncovering and documenting the region's communist past.¹⁰ Despite this abundance, much of this research was ideologically motivated and partly conducted to showcase the historical precedents for communist party organisations and left-wing movements in the region. This ideological bias is likely connected to the fact that several individuals who were active in Transcarpathian communist movements during the inter-war period later assumed administrative and/or party positions in Soviet Transcarpathia. Consequently, numerous analytical publications, popular history articles, document collections, and memoirs exist, but they offer a distorted history of the communist movement in Transcarpathia. This, alongside the broader political atmosphere in East-Central Europe, has contributed significantly to the 'forgetting' or dismissal of the role played by Transcarpathian communists – particularly Hungarians – as either trivial or inherently 'false history'.¹¹

⁷József Botlik, *Egestas Subcarpathica* (Budapest: Hatodik Síp, 2000); Csilla Fedinec, 'A magyar szent koronához visszatért Kárpátalja' 1938–1944 (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2015); László Brenzovics et al., eds., *Kárpátalja története: Örökség és kihívások* (Beregszász: II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola, RIK-U Kiadó 2021); Molnár D. Erzsébet, Natália Váradi, Karolina Darcsi, Ildikó Orosz, and István Csernicskó, *Struggle for Survival: The Transcarpathian Hungarians (1944–2022)* (Budapest: Méry Ratio Publishing 2022); Csilla Fedinec, *A kárpátaljai magyarság történeti kronológiája 1918–1944* (Galánta–Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Intézet, 2002); Csilla Fedinec, *Iratok a kárpátaljai magyarság történetéhez 1918–1944. Törvények, rendeletek, kisebbségi programok, nyilatkozatok* (Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Intézet, 2001).

⁸Attila Simon, *Az elfeledett aktivisták: Kormánypárti magyar politika az első Csehszlovák Köztársaságba* (Somorja: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2013), and Attila Simon, 'A magyar szociáldemokrácia útkeresése a húszas évek Csehszlovákiájában', *Múltunk – Politikátörténeti folyóirat* 58 (2013): 36–64; Ildikó Bajcsi, *Kisebbségi magyar küldetés Csehszlovákiában: A sarlós nemzedék közösségi szerepvállalása Trianon után* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2021).

⁹Csilla Fedinec, 'Kárpátaljai magyar képviselők és szenátorok az első Csehszlovák Köztársaság parlamentjében', in *Nemzetiségi parlamenti képviselet. Nemzetiségi képviselet Magyarországon és az utódállamok parlamentjeiben (1868–1918/1920–1990)*, ed. Nándor Bárdi and Iván Gyurcsik (Budapest: Országház Könyvkiadó, 2022), 108–12.

¹⁰Paul Robert Magocsi, 'An Historiographical Guide to Subcarpathian Rus', *Austrian History Yearbook* 9 (1973): 244; Gabriella Mádi and Imre Szakál, 'Silenced Voices, Faded Memories, Hidden Multilingualism: Revisiting Vilmos Kovács's "Holnap is élünk"', *Acta Academiae Beregsiensis, Philologica* 5, no. 1 (2026): 68–9.

¹¹Regarding the term 'false history', see Ronald H. Fritze, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

In this article, I compare post-1945 historiographical works with archival materials from the State Archives of Transcarpathian Oblast in Ukraine. My aim is to explore how the Transcarpathian branch of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia conducted political community-building efforts among Hungarians in the region and how Hungarian inhabitants engaged with the political movement between 1919 and 1924. The history of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's collapse and the Hungarian Soviet Republic are beyond the scope of the article, as my primary interest lies in examining how alternatives to already well-known national-oriented community-organising efforts emerged in the context of a forcibly created minority community. Thus, I begin the narrative with the formal establishment of this new territory, which subsequently evolved into an identity-forming entity. I consider the year 1924 significant because it marked the first legislative elections in Transcarpathia, which provided the first democratic opportunity to quantify the political preferences of this new minority community and identify which ideological movements were more successful in competing for the community's support.

The New State Framework

At the end of the First World War, the First Czechoslovak Republic incorporated territories with differing historical backgrounds, as well as distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics.¹² For the Czech population of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, as well as for the Slovak and Rusyn societies of Slovakia and Transcarpathia, the creation of this complex nation-state represented significant progress compared to their previous situation. To varying degrees, they benefited from the fact that Czechoslovakia received the largest share of the former Habsburg territory, something that the Prague government capitalised upon effectively. Among the countries that arose from the ruins of the monarchy, Czechoslovakia was the wealthiest. The new country's territory inherited more than two-thirds of the monarchy's industry, although it contained only about one-quarter of its population. The Czech lands possessed a strong industrial base and substantial arable land, while their armaments industry even surpassed that of Italy.¹³

Czechoslovakia had one of the most ethnically mixed populations in Europe, with German, Hungarian, and Polish minorities living along the borders, adjacent to their respective homelands. Relations among Slavic peoples – Czechs, Slovaks, and Rusyns – were also tense and complex.¹⁴ At the same time, Czechoslovakia, like other new nation-states, institutionalised the self-determination and nationalism of its majority ethnic communities, Czechs and Slovaks. The complex ethnic composition of the First Czechoslovak Republic is well illustrated by the fact that even the so-called Czechoslovak state-forming nation was not truly a single nation; there were significant tensions between Czech centralist and Slovak autonomist political forces. Other ethnic communities, such as Hungarians and Germans, were also strongly represented, in terms of both their share of the population and their contributions to the national economy.

The Hungarian community in Czechoslovakia embarked on a path of development that was by no means unique. The literature on minority sociology and minority history is well acquainted with the concept of the forced community. This refers to a linguistically and ethnically distinguishable group that begins to organise itself as a minority community under specific conditions, brought about by the majority society of the new state framework, separation from the homeland, and the legitimising ambitions of newly emerging minority elites. This process of community formation can take many forms. Some scholars argue that a true community does not even emerge, while others maintain

¹² Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe 1914–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

¹³ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1974), 89.

¹⁴ Joseph Rothschild, *Csehszlovákia története a két világháború között* (Szeged: JATE, 1995), 10.

that these efforts do not affect all members of the group and instead the phenomenon of ‘national indifference’ persists.¹⁵

Within this mosaic, the first task of the new state was to foster political unity. This goal was to be served by the ideology of Czechoslovakism, which predated the establishment of the First Republic but fulfilled its main function – though not successfully – during the inter-war period. It sought to bridge the paradox that, although the First Czechoslovak Republic had been declared a nation-state, it was in fact a multi-ethnic state, which served to legitimise its existence.¹⁶ In some interpretations, the idea of Czechoslovakism – which focused on the unity of the Czech and Slovak nations – extended even to include the Rusyns of the Republic, although the imagined unity did not function as expected even between the two state-forming nations themselves. Despite its ethnic diversity and regional economic inequalities, the Czechoslovak Republic functioned as the most stable democracy in East-Central Europe during the inter-war period. Although American diplomat George Kennan likened the inter-war Czechoslovak politicians to little boys quarrelling over a stolen melon, both the *Hrad* (the Castle, symbolising the president’s deep influence on the social fabric) and the *Pětka* (The Five, a coordinating body of the leading parties) served as guarantees that political disputes and conflicting interests could be transcended for the sake of the unity of the Republic. At the same time, the new state regarded its national minorities as a challenge and mistrusted old elites, particularly Hungarians and Germans.¹⁷ Partly, this general state anxiety was characterised by distrust towards minorities and fears about the potential disunity of the state, and it determined the fate of the Hungarian community, who struggled to adapt to the new order.¹⁸

Networking: The Communist Movement in Transcarpathia between 1919 and 1924

The spread of communist ideas in spring 1919 in Transcarpathia did not occur in a vacuum or without precedent. The proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on 21 March 1919 represented the culmination of a longer process that was deeply rooted in the socio-economic tensions of Dualist-era Hungary, the radicalising effects of the First World War, and the international resonance of the Russian revolutions of 1917.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Hungarian working class was politically represented by the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (*Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt*; MSZDP), which was founded in 1890. The MSZDP primarily focused on the organised industrial working class and sought to achieve its goals – such as the introduction of universal suffrage – through reformist means and emphasised the importance of parliamentary struggle. This strategy largely ignored the millions of agrarian proletarians and landless peasants, whose main grievance was the large estate system that was burdened with the remnants of the feudal period.¹⁹

This shortcoming was particularly evident in Transcarpathia, one of the most underdeveloped and agrarian peripheries of historical Hungary. In 1910, 69 per cent of the population in the counties of Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa, and Máramaros made their living from agriculture, while only 11 per cent worked in industry, mainly in unskilled, seasonal jobs provided by small-scale forestry and mining

¹⁵Tara Zahra, ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’, *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.

¹⁶Elisabeth Bakke, ‘The Making of Czechoslovakism in the First Czechoslovak Republic’, in *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918–1938. Politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten*, ed. Martin Schulze Wessel (München: Oldenbourg, 2004), 23.

¹⁷Bakke, *The Making of Czechoslovakism*, 446.

¹⁸Claire Moleron, ‘State Legitimacy and Continuity between the Habsburg Empire and Czechoslovakia: The 1918 Transition in Prague’, in *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 43–63.

¹⁹István Papp, *A magyar kommunisták* (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2024), 36.

enterprises.²⁰ The percentage of industrial workers in Transcarpathia was lower than the national average. In the Kingdom of Hungary, the proportion of industrial wage earners was 16.9 per cent in 1910.²¹ The share of industrial labourers in Transcarpathia remained below the national average in the Czechoslovak period too. According to nationwide Czechoslovak figures, the share of the industrial workforce was 33.8 per cent in 1921, though this masked substantial regional disparities. While it exceeded 40 per cent in the Czech lands, in Slovakia it barely surpassed 17 per cent and it remained around 11 per cent in Transcarpathia.²²

The cataclysm of the First World War and the Russian revolutions of 1917 fundamentally transformed the situation. The October revolution not only offered the radical left a successful model for seizing power but also provided tangible means for spreading ideas. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers returning from Russian captivity – who had been exposed to intense Bolshevik propaganda and organisational work in the prison camps – became the main transmitters of revolutionary ideology.²³ After the Aster Revolution, which marked the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in Hungary and the creation of the First Republic in the autumn of 1918, local workers' councils were established in Transcarpathian towns, including Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, and Berehove, initially under the direction of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary. However, these councils soon became arenas for the struggle between the two workers' parties. The radical agitation of the Communist Party of Hungary (*Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja*; KMP), carried out by returning prisoners of war and activists sent from the Budapest headquarters, began to resonate strongly among the disillusioned and impoverished population, which paved the way for the communist takeover in the spring of 1919.²⁴

During this chaotic period, the weakened state administration and the transformation of state power facilitated the successful spread of communist ideas.²⁵ In the case of Transcarpathia, broken public order was the most common feature of everyday life from autumn 1918.²⁶ The Hungarian Soviet Republic initially only had negligible support in the area – mainly from social democratic intellectuals and poor peasants flocking to the Red Guard in exchange for money – and after the fall of the Hungarian Commune in August 1919, many left-wing leaders began emigrating to Czechoslovakia under the close supervision of the Czechoslovak authorities.²⁷

At the end of November 1918, the Central Committee of the Hungarian Party of Communists, including the Communists of Transcarpathia, began to operate. The Central Committee included two people from Transcarpathia, Ernő Seidler and Ottó Korvin. In one of the best-known histories of Transcarpathia that was written during the Soviet period, it is claimed that the group of communists in Transcarpathia had 600–800 members at the beginning of 1919.²⁸ The first communist group was established in Mukachevo in 1918, along with numerous levels of party organisations, cells, and party groups.

²⁰ Gyula Kosztyó, *A kommunizmus nagy története nem tudott hódítani. A Tanácsköztársaság Kárpátalján* (Budapest: Clio Intézet, 2022), accessed 9 Feb. 2026, <https://mek.oszk.hu/23200/23245/>.

²¹ *A Magyar Szent Korona országainak népszámlálása. A népesség foglalkozása részletesen és a vállalati statisztika* (Budapest: Magyar Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1914).

²² Ludmila Fialová and Branislav Šprocha, 'The Population of Czechia and Slovakia in 1918–1945', *Demografie* 60 (2018): 161–83; Branislav Šprocha and Pavol Tišliar, *Populačný vývoj Podkarpatskej Rusi 2: štruktúra obyvateľstva* (Bratislava: Infostat, 2009).

²³ Hajdu Tibor, 'Katonák, hivatásos tisztek szerepe a magyar és az orosz forradalmakban (1917–1921)', *Történelmi Szemle* 4 (2009): 519–39.

²⁴ Kosztyó, *A kommunizmus nagy története*.

²⁵ Gábor Egry, 'Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions. Local Societies and Nationalizing States in East Central Europe', in *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 15–42.

²⁶ Imre Szakál, 'The Year of Change: The Transcarpathian Hungarians in 1919', *Acta Ethnologica Danubiana* 21 (2019): 171–79.

²⁷ For the latest on the topic, see Gyula Kosztyó, *A Tanácsköztársaság Kárpátalján* (Budapest: Erőszakutató Intézet, 2023).

²⁸ Sz. O. Miscsenko, ed., *A boldogság felé: Kárpáton túl vázlatos története* (Uzhhorod: Kárpáti Könyvkiadó, 1975), 79.

The formation of the communist movement and Hungarian participation within it was further facilitated by the establishment of the Group of the Hungarian International Social Democratic in Uzhhorod, whose members primarily consisted of Hungarian and Jewish citizens and workers from Uzhhorod. The head of the Party was József Gáti, a lawyer and journalist from the town.²⁹ The Party dedicated some time to direct political organising but primarily focused on addressing disruptions in public supply and maintaining public order during a time of instability. Their political outlook was focused on the ideals of socialism and internationalism, yet at the same time, they continuously criticised Bolshevism: 'Bolshevism is the death of peace, the destroyer of freedom, and the murderer of socialism.'³⁰

At the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920, the communists held secret meetings, mainly in cities and towns where larger industrial facilities operated. Party organisation continued gradually. The International Socialist Party of Podkarpatska Rus was established on 21 March 1920 and led by Iván Mondok, a Rusyn teacher, and Ernő Seidler, a prominent representative of the former Hungarian Soviet Republic. This party founded the *Munkás Újság* (Workers' Journal), which was one of the main newspapers that promoted the Transcarpathian communist movement among Hungarians from its first issue in 31 January 1920. The newspaper's most obvious antecedent was *Ungvári Munkás* (The Ungvár Worker), the official paper of the aforementioned Ungvár group of the Hungarian International Social Democratic Party and the Ungvár Workers' Council. *Ungvári Munkás* had an anti-Bolshevik slant and was edited by József Gáti, a lawyer whose name defined the Hungarian communist movement in Transcarpathia until his death in 1945. After the Czechoslovak occupation, the newspaper continued to operate until the creation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, after which it was banned by the Czechoslovak authorities. *Munkás Újság* launched a year later and saw itself as the heir to *Ungvári Munkás*, because it started as the second edition and was also edited by József Gáti. The paper became the official paper of the International Socialist Party of Transcarpathia. A year later, it was published as the newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.³¹

The Transcarpathian District Organization of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia officially was established in May 1921. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was the only communist party in East-Central Europe that was able to operate legally on a sustained basis and with parliamentary representation. The nation-state anxiety that was characteristic of the Czechoslovak government manifested itself primarily as distrust towards those segments of society that were perceived as a threat to the symbolically articulated and administratively established unity of the state, including national minorities, political extremists, and foreign citizens.³² It is clear from the archival documents that the Czechoslovak authorities paid serious attention to the operation of the movement, monitored their activities with the help of police agents, and produced internal reports³³

When we examine the archival materials of the civil and military administration of Transcarpathia, the most significant security risk in the area was deemed to be the communist movement first and foremost, and secondly, the Hungarians who lived in Transcarpathia. It is noteworthy that the agents of the Political Department of the Civil Administration Office (later the Provincial Office), the body responsible for governing Transcarpathia between the two world wars, also saw the communist movement as the biggest threat. In 1923, Antonin Rozsypal was appointed as the second Vice-Governor of

²⁹ Párthírek, *Ungvári Munkás*, 12 Jan. 1919, 2.

³⁰ Internacionálé, *Ungvári Munkás*, 15 Jan. 1919, 1. The original source of the quote is an official government proclamation that was issued by the Council of the People's Deputies (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) and published on 14 January 1919 in the central organ of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the *Vorwärts – Berliner Volksblatt*.

³¹ Miklós Rotman, *Fáklyavivők. A Munkás Újság rövid története* (Uzhhorod: Kárpáti Könyvkiadó, 1972).

³² Moléron, 'State Legitimacy', 43–63.

³³ Most sources on this topic can be found in the archives of the Political Department of the Civil Administration Office of Subcarpathian Rus (1919–1928) within the State Archives of Transcarpathian Oblast (*Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpatskoyi oblasti; DAZO*), f. 29.

Transcarpathia and remained in this position until 1937. Rozsypal was the crown witness in the infamous treason trial against the Kladno communists in 1921 and the prosecutor who played a leading role in the dismantlement of the communist organisation in Kladno district.

The Transcarpathian District Organization of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia operated among the multi-ethnic population of Transcarpathia, including the Transcarpathian Hungarians. The district centre was in Uzhhorod, and lower-level administrative centres were established in several settlements with large concentrations of workers, including Mukachevo, Perechen, Berehove, Vilok, Vinohradov, Veliky Bichkov, Hust, and Solotvino.³⁴

The organisational work of the communist movement was multifaceted. The primary and most important sphere of activity involved organising local party branches, maintaining existing ones, and training new agitators. Activists who returned from prisoner-of-war camps played a prominent role in establishing local party organisations because they already possessed ‘communist knowledge and experience of the movement.’³⁵ These activists also participated separately in agitator-training courses that were organised by the regional party organisation. A secondary sphere of organisational activity related to the operation of the trade union network. Worker protection acquired particular significance during regime change. Unions were responsible for not only defending workers’ interests against employers but also assisting workers with issues arising from the change of currency, communication in the newly introduced administrative language, and support for disabled veterans and war widows.³⁶ The pace of establishing both local party branches and the trade union network largely depended on the rate at which the new Czechoslovak administration was established. The First Czechoslovak Republic could only assert full authority over the entire Transcarpathian territory in August 1920 because the Romanian army withdrew from the south-eastern part of the territory only after the signing of the Treaty of Trianon. Consequently, organisational efforts intensified significantly from August 1920 onwards, particularly in the areas of the former Ugocsa and Máramaros counties.³⁷ Building the trade union network complemented party organisation efforts positively because it allowed the communist movement to address various occupational groups, often from different social strata, with tailored messages focused on their specific issues. Ultimately, this multidirectional approach in political community-building served the Communist Party’s interests well.

The communist movement not only tried to reach the Hungarian population by building specific party organisations but also established youth organisations, workers’ homes, and trade unions. Party secretariats were founded in most settlements, which established courses to eradicate illiteracy and organised workers’ matinées on weekends.³⁸ Workers’ matinées were an important form of leisure activity for the workers in Transcarpathian towns. According to contemporary reports, they attracted large audiences with a diverse range of programmes, including musical performances, theatrical productions, and lectures with explicit ideological content. In addition to the Party organisations, the operation of the trade unions and the Workers’ Public Culture Association were particularly important. They operated an advisory service to resolve workplace disputes, provided assistance in the process of exchanging money, and in some cases even spoke out against restrictions on the use of the Hungarian language.

Another important element of organisational expansion was the communist movement’s activities in the cultural sphere. The Communist Party organised literacy courses, partially in cooperation with the Czechoslovak educational authorities. In major urban centres like Uzhhorod and Berehove, workers’ clubs were established to host cultural events, theatre performances, literary evenings, and educational lectures promoting communist ideas. A close analysis of *Munkás Újság* reveals

³⁴Directive No. 47 from Ernő Seidler to the district party bodies, 23 Oct. 1921. DAZO, f. 29, op. 3, spr. 8, ark. 51.

³⁵Directive No. 47 from Ernő Seidler to the district party bodies, 23 Oct. 1921. DAZO, f. 29, op. 3, spr. 8, ark. 39.

³⁶*Munkás Újság*, 10 Nov. 1920, 1–3.

³⁷DAZO, f. 29, op. 3, spr. 8.

³⁸Matiné, *Munkás Újság*, 12 Nov. 1920, 3.

the high frequency of these cultural events, which served both educational and agitational purposes. For instance, in Uzhhorod alone, between mid-November and mid-December 1920, the Party organised three major Sunday 'matinées' (morning performances) and several evening theatre productions.³⁹ These events brought together high culture and ideological education: the programme on 14 November included classical music by Schubert, poetry, and a lecture on 'Worker Psychology'.⁴⁰ On other occasions, the repertoire included works by Verdi and Dvořák alongside revolutionary tableaux.⁴¹ The 'Worker Academy' also held educational sessions three times a week – on Mondays, Fridays, and Saturdays – demonstrating a structured and intensive effort to engage the Hungarian-speaking urban working class.⁴² Contemporary press reports claimed that attendance at these events was quite high and that they proved especially popular among urban workers. In 1920, the movement even established a sports organisation, the Proletarian Athletic Association.⁴³ The Party clearly defined its target audience: workers, poor peasants, retailers, craftsmen, and tailors. Most revolutionary activists did not even come from large-scale industry because there were hardly any major industrial establishments in Transcarpathia, but there were many from the intelligentsia and small-scale industrialists employed in small workshops within the communist movement.⁴⁴

The Czechoslovak authorities paid special attention to the organisational activities of the communist movement. Police and secret service agents regularly attended most communist-organised events, meticulously tracking the movement's development and current objectives through detailed reports. They frequently responded to strikes and organisational growth with forceful interventions. In certain cases, the authorities utilised the unsettled citizenship status of certain monitored communists against them, which led to activists being expelled from the republic. One such example was Ernő Seidler, a member of the regional organisation's leadership, who was expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1925.⁴⁵ Another incident involved an impending waiters' strike in Uzhhorod, where the authorities neutralised the consequences by simply deporting a waiter who had been dismissed following the strike.⁴⁶ Strikes were the communist movement's most visible mobilising action in Transcarpathia. During the period under examination, various strikes of different scales occurred throughout each year in industrial centres, often resulting in clashes between law enforcement and strikers. Although they were typically triggered by disputes over wages, collective agreements, overtime, and holiday work, their significance also lay in the work of organisation: keeping participants together, coordinating relief, collecting and distributing strike funds, and holding meetings that combined practical guidance with political education. Through these routines, strikes fostered solidarity and a shared emotional community, thereby strengthening local networks.

The portrayal of communist events differed noticeably between contemporary police reports and the Party organisation's press. A vivid example of this contrast can be found in the reporting of the Hrusovo (Hrušovo) incident, which began as a protest against the implementation of the land reform in a village in Transcarpathia and later escalated into a violent clash between gendarmes and local villagers in June 1922. While the authorities regarded the gathering of villagers as a security threat – described in official reports as a 'Bolshevik gang' that assaulted gendarmes – *Munkás Újság* presented an opposing narrative.⁴⁷ According to the newspaper, the locals were peaceful observers, primarily women, children, and the elderly, who were brutally attacked with bayonets by the gendarmerie at

³⁹ *Munkás Újság*, 18 Nov. 1920, 3 Dec. 1920, 10 Dec. 1920.

⁴⁰ *Matiné*, *Munkás Újság*, 18 Nov. 1920, 3.

⁴¹ *Munkás Újság*, 10 Dec. 1920, 3.

⁴² *Munkás Újság*, 19 Nov. 1920, 4.

⁴³ Rotman, *Kik érted haltak*, 34.

⁴⁴ Rotman, *Kik érted haltak*, 6.

⁴⁵ Rotman, *Kik érted haltak*, 141.

⁴⁶ DAZO, f. 29, op. 3, spr. 250, ark. 11.

⁴⁷ Hrusován, *Munkás Újság*, 25 June 1922, 1.

the orders of the district chief administrator without any dispersal order. While the official investigation concluded that ‘everything is in order in Hrusovo’ and only the authorities were harmed, the press detailed severe injuries that had been inflicted on the population, framing the event not as a riot but rather as state-sponsored terror against the impoverished Rusyn and Hungarian peasantry.⁴⁸ This stark divergence illustrates how the communist movement utilised the press to reframe police interventions as proof of the capitalist state’s oppressive nature, thereby strengthening internal solidarity.

The authorities’ suspicion towards the Transcarpathian Communist Party organisation was intensified by its active involvement in the international communist movement. Communist agitators, as identified by police reports, arrived almost monthly from Vienna, Moscow, and Berlin and assisted with organisational tasks, exchanged information, and occasionally provided financial support.⁴⁹ Members of the Transcarpathian communist movement themselves often travelled to the Soviet Union.

Propaganda materials from both the Czechoslovak Republic and abroad not only enabled local party organisations to effectively carry out ideological education but also provided the authorities, in cooperation with the postal services, the opportunity to identify recipients and thus map the extent of the communist network. Police reports on communist activities in Transcarpathia thus offer insight into who received publications by Marx, Engels, or Trotsky and reveal that the international connections of the Transcarpathian communist movement were not only ideological but also tangible. The Czechoslovak authorities were particularly intrigued by the occasional presence of agents from the Soviet security organisation known as the OGPU (*Ob’edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, the Unified State Political Directorate) in the region.⁵⁰

The Czechoslovak authorities’ distrust of the communist movement intertwined with distrust towards Hungarians as a minority. This distrust stemmed from the fact that the early period of the communist movement in Transcarpathia was significantly shaped by figures from the Hungarian Soviet Republic, who spent part of their emigration in Transcarpathia. The Czechoslovak authorities presumably assumed that these Hungarian communists would primarily seek connections within the local Hungarian population. Consequently, they made substantial efforts to monitor ‘communist-suspect Hungarians’, and in 1920–1, the Political Department of the Civil Administration Office registered nearly 1000 individuals based on police and secret service reports.⁵¹

The Transcarpathian Hungarians in the Communist Movement

The entry of Transcarpathian Hungarians into the communist movement was heterogenous and complex. Researchers have access to substantial source material and have gained insight into the community party recruitment process within the Hungarian community. For security purposes, detailed records on communists and communist suspects in Transcarpathia were meticulously maintained by the Czechoslovak authorities between 1919 and 1938 and by Hungarian authorities between 1938 and 1944. These sources, which are readily accessible in numerous fonds in the State Archives of Transcarpathian Oblast, include extensive police and secret police reports, as well as court and prosecution documents containing thousands of pages on individuals of varying significance within the movement, their connections, and details about their socialisation. Similarly rich archival material can be found in the Czech National Archives within the records of the Ministry of the Interior.⁵²

⁴⁸Hrusován, *Munkás Újság*, 25 June 1922, 1.

⁴⁹Numerous reports with similar content are available in DAZO, f. 29, op. 3.

⁵⁰DAZO, f. 29, op. 3, spr. 260, ark. 74.

⁵¹DAZO, f. 29, op. 3.

⁵²National Archives of the Czech Republic (Národní archiv České republiky, hereafter NACR) MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

Based on the aforementioned documents, there are four distinct groups of Hungarians who joined the communist movement in Transcarpathia between 1919 and 1924 and who can be categorised according to the ways in which they began to engage with communist ideology. It is important to note that it is quite difficult to determine who can truly be considered Hungarian within the communist movement. We can only see individuals who the authorities recorded as Hungarian, as well as those referred to as Hungarians in memoirs and historical works. There is no definitive evidence determining the criteria according to which the contemporary authorities categorised individuals as Hungarian. From sources that also recorded religious affiliation, it can be assumed that the language spoken was an important factor because Jews were also categorised as Hungarian. It can further be presumed that the ethnic character of the community in which the individual was active was decisive. For example, members of communist cells operating in Hungarian villages were identified as Hungarian.

The first and perhaps most influential group consisted of individuals who participated in political life within the Hungarian Soviet Republic, who were already active in the Hungarian communist experiment of 1919, and who emigrated to Czechoslovakia following its collapse. Although not all members of this group had prior connections to Transcarpathia, their role in establishing the region's communist party structure was nonetheless significant. Among the activists who emigrated to the First Czechoslovak Republic after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Ernő Seidler was perhaps the most active in the communist movement in Transcarpathia.

Although he was born in Uzhhorod, Seidler spent his youth in Budapest, where his connections to the communist movement deepened. He worked as a technical official, was a member of the Society for Social Sciences, participated actively in the Galileo Circle (a materialist student organisation), and was affiliated with the Social Democratic Party. During to the First World War, he joined the ranks of Hungarian prisoners of war who were sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. He returned to Hungary along with Béla Kun and became one of the leading figures of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. He was among the founding members of the Hungarian Communist Party and served as commander of the Hungarian Red Army's 53rd Infantry Regiment.⁵³ Following the collapse of the Commune, he emigrated first to Vienna, then returned to his hometown Uzhhorod, where he became a prominent organiser for the Transcarpathian branch of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and a member of the Central Committee. With considerable enthusiasm, he centralised efforts to establish local party groups and actively promoted the marginalisation of more moderate, social democratic factions within the regional organisation. He frequently clashed with the authorities and was deported from Czechoslovakia in 1925 on the basis of not being a Czechoslovak citizen.

The second group was comprised of soldiers who had been conscripted from the territory of Transcarpathia. These individuals became prisoners of war on the Eastern Front during the First World War and encountered communist – particularly Bolshevik – ideology while imprisoned on Russian territory. Several fought in the Red Army and later participated in the Hungarian Soviet Republic, generally returning to Transcarpathia in the early 1920s. Members of this group typically hailed from lower social and economic backgrounds, usually from rural communities, and were predominantly landless peasants or day labourers whose discontent towards the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, particularly the Hungarian Kingdom, stemmed primarily from social grievances.

Armed with new ideological convictions, many intensively engaged in political activity within their local communities. Acting as 'catalysts' even within the smallest villages, they sowed the seeds of revolutionary hope on the conviction that revolutionary forces had the potential to alleviate poverty within these peripheral areas. They became local organisers whose efforts were acknowledged even by local Hungarian nationalist parties after the spring 1924 elections: 'The communists entered the

⁵³Rotman, *Kik érted haltak*, 141.

electoral struggle most effectively organized, having established local branches within five years in every significant village and industrial centre.⁵⁴

Among the most effective local organisers was undoubtedly Bertalan Bíró, whose life exemplified the 'typical career path' of a Hungarian communist in Transcarpathia. Born in 1895 in Vari, a small town situated along the Tisza River, he was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1914 and became a prisoner of war in 1915. He encountered the Bolshevik movement at a prisoner-of-war camp in Penza and eventually joined the Red Army. He fought throughout the Russian Civil War as part of Mikhail Frunze's division and subsequently became involved in the political education of former Hungarian prisoners of war in Samara in summer 1920. Returning to his native village in 1921, he became a highly active figure within the local communist movement. His recognition in Vari is demonstrated by his election as a foreman of the settlement by local residents during the local elections of 1924. In addition to playing a significant role in organising the communist movement among Hungarian peasants, particularly around Berehove, he was also responsible for distributing propaganda materials for the Communist Party of Hungary.

The third group of Hungarians who participated in the communist movement in Transcarpathia was comprised of individuals who already sympathised with social democracy and the political left prior to First World War. Their role was particularly significant, as their earlier organisational efforts – which began around autumn 1918 in the form of newspaper publishing, organising popular assemblies, and informational activities – laid the groundwork for the more radical but arguably more effective organising efforts of emigrants from the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Perhaps the figure with the greatest political experience in the 1920s was József Gáti. Born in 1885 into an urban middle class family in Uzhhorod, Gáti completed his secondary education locally and obtained a law degree from the university in Budapest. He practiced law in Uzhhorod while also working as a journalist for the local paper, *Határszéli Újság* (*The Borderland Newspaper*). Gáti, a lawyer who was sympathetic to social democracy, became politically active during the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By 1920, he was representing the International Socialist Party in Ungvár, and in 1921 he joined the Transcarpathian branch of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Due to his strong organisational skills and local recognition, he became a member of the Czechoslovak parliament representing Transcarpathia in 1924 and served on the Executive Committee of the regional Communist Party until 1929. Contemporary press coverage did not overlook the influence of Hungarians like Gáti within the communist movement. In the autumn of 1920, the *Rusziinszkói Magyar Hírlap* (*Hungarian Newspaper of Rusinsko*), one of the most important publications of the Hungarian opposition in Transcarpathia, quoted an interesting excerpt from the national newspaper *Venkov* (*Countryside*): 'In Ruthenia, all movements are led by three pure Hungarian Jews, namely Dr. Gáti, Füzi, and Simon. They are fanatic Hungarians who typically avoid the spotlight, despite being the true driving force behind the entire communist movement.'⁵⁵ Regarding Gáti specifically, the *Venkov* noted: 'That he is a sincere Hungarian who feels deeply attached to Hungary cannot be doubted.'⁵⁶ We know for certain that the aforementioned József Gáti was of Jewish descent. Because his Jewish roots were mentioned here in connection with both his integration into Hungarian culture and his involvement in the communist movement, it is clear that these characteristics were seen as mutually reinforcing factors that warranted distrust.

Finally, the fourth group recruited into the communist movement consisted of a new generation of young people who joined the Party primarily due to the organisational efforts of the aforementioned groups between the two world wars. These individuals attended cultural events, learned the key ideological tenets from teachers connected to the movement, sold newspapers, and distributed

⁵⁴ Dühöng a választási harc, *Rusziinszkói Magyar Hírlap*, 13 Mar. 1924, 3.

⁵⁵ Ruthenia was one of the names for Transcarpathia at this time. 'Ki képviselte Rusziinszkót a kommunisták gyűlésén?', *Rusziinszkói Magyar Hírlap*, 3 Oct. 1920, 3.

⁵⁶ 'Ki képviselte Rusziinszkót a kommunisták gyűlésén?'

leaflets. Their perceptions of communism and the Soviet Union, which they considered to be the political and social embodiment of communism, were shaped by the Party at a relatively early stage. This became particularly significant after 1938 and again after 1944. Some joined as early as 1919, but their numbers significantly increased following the legalisation of the Communist Party in 1921. Throughout the two decades of the Czechoslovak Republic, the membership of this group steadily expanded. Most members tended to hail from disadvantaged social backgrounds and most had roots in one of the region's few industrial centres. The communist movement in Transcarpathia provided unique opportunities for women's political participation. The first woman nominated in an election within the region was Anna Bacsó, a worker employed at a dry-cleaning facility in Uzhhorod and who was born in Levoča. She ran as a candidate in the municipal council elections in Ungvár in 1923. Orphaned at an early age, Anna Bacsó grew up in extreme poverty and shared the hardships of those living in one of the poorest areas of the monarchy. This made communist ideals particularly appealing to her, and she actively began engaging with the movement in 1920. She participated in a strike organised by dry cleaners and later became a party member in 1921 at the age of twenty-four. According to her memoirs, she was greatly influenced by Béla Illés and Ernő Seidler, both of whom were prominent figures within the Hungarian Soviet Republic. She also met her husband, József Figula, within the movement, and she was an active participant in strikes and demonstrations throughout the early 1920s. In 1924, she was sentenced to three months in prison for violence against police officers during a demonstration, after which she was closely monitored by both the Czechoslovak authorities and later the returning Hungarian authorities.⁵⁷

In the inter-war period, the issue of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia was frequently discussed alongside the communist movement in Czechoslovak official documents. The reason for this was twofold. On one hand, distrust towards national minorities was closely linked to the general suspicion directed at the communist movement. On the other hand, contemporary evaluations and the rhetoric of communists in Czechoslovakia itself make it clear that the question of minorities was not a priority for the movement. The main message directed towards the Hungarian community was essentially the same as that expressed at a communist rally held in Prešov in 1921: that the national question could only be resolved after the triumph of the proletarian revolution.⁵⁸ Thus, the Czechoslovak Communist Party's main message to the Hungarian population was that their economic and social difficulties were caused by the capitalist nature of the Czechoslovak state. As the police reports that diligently document the communist meetings reveal, the Party addressed the minority community not primarily through a discourse centred on nationality issues but rather through class-based politics.⁵⁹ Thus, the attention directed towards the 'Hungarian dimension' cannot primarily be explained by state anxieties about the Communist Party's potential to deepen national divisions. Rather, the Party's activities attracted heightened scrutiny because Hungarian émigrés from the Hungarian Soviet Republic and returned Hungarian prisoners of war played a key role in organising the communist movement in Czechoslovakia, especially in Transcarpathia. The source of anxiety and distrust in this case was primarily directed against Bolshevism, whose spread – particularly in the case of Transcarpathia – was most strongly associated with former Hungarian prisoners of war and with individuals who had participated in the Hungarian Soviet Republic and subsequently sought refuge in Czechoslovakia. Owing to linguistic factors alone, their activities were most likely to find points of connection first and foremost within the Hungarian community.

Although national issues were not a core concern of the Communist Party, there is also evidence to suggest that the Party's agitation efforts specifically targeted social groups with a high proportion of ethnic Hungarians. For example, a 1921 secret police report from the Ministry of the Interior stated that the communists were particularly dangerous in the cities of Košice, Uzhhorod, and Mukachevo,

⁵⁷ Rotman, *Kik érted haltak*, 11.

⁵⁸ NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

⁵⁹ NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

where they sought to establish a foothold among postal and railway workers in order to organise strikes.⁶⁰ Although the Czechoslovak takeover also involved the replacement of officials working in public administration, this was a gradual process, and maintaining the functionality of the occupied territories meant that the new authorities had to preserve a certain degree of administrative continuity. As a result, a significant proportion of postal workers at that time were still Hungarian, and the presence of Hungarians on the railways remained substantial throughout the Czechoslovak period.⁶¹

At the same time, the Interior Ministry reports also suggest that, despite official perceptions, there was no indication that the leaders of the communist movement itself sought to treat Hungarians as a separate group. On the contrary, the sources indicate that the central Party leadership encouraged the strengthening of joint organisations of Rusyn and Hungarian-speaking workers in Transcarpathia.⁶² At that time, however, the leading role within the movement was undoubtedly attributed to its Hungarian leaders. Efforts to ensure that the Party's message reached the widest segment of the Hungarian population as possible were also unmistakably evident. Owing to the composition of the leadership, there was always at least one Hungarian speaker at public meetings and most leaflets were printed in both Hungarian and Rusyn or Russian.

The secret police mapped the routes taken by Hungarian-language leaflets. They were produced by the Hungarian Red émigrés in Vienna, who also organised their distribution. From there, they reached Transcarpathia via the Vienna–Bratislava–Košice–Uzhhorod route. The materials were usually sent by post or through booksellers, and a significant portion of them eventually made their way into Hungary with the help of smugglers. In addressing the Hungarian community, communication in the Hungarian language naturally played an important role. This was facilitated by the fact that the leaders of the Transcarpathian district were partly Hungarian or Hungarian-speaking. As a result, the natural language of cultural events – or political meetings disguised as such – was often Hungarian. At the same time, efforts were made to ensure that Hungarian-language propaganda materials reached Transcarpathia as widely and abundantly as possible. In addition to the leaflets, Hungarian-language communist agitation was spread primarily through the press – financed largely by funds arriving from Vienna, as well as through various amateur theatre groups and cultural circles. The detectives of the time also noted that Hungarian teachers with communist sympathies played a significant role in disseminating these ideas.⁶³ One of the most effective representatives of this movement during the period was Samu Czabán and the newspaper *Új Korszak* (*New Era*), which he edited.⁶⁴ Among the propaganda materials, an important element was likely the smuggling of booklets containing various revolutionary songs into the region. In connection with this, singing circles and song evenings were organised, which proved to be particularly popular in the villages.⁶⁵

According to a Transcarpathian secret police report received by the Praesidium of the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior in 1921, the Party's organisers sought to exploit the divisions that were generated by national and linguistic tensions during their gatherings.⁶⁶ However, this was likely not an endorsement of Hungarian nationalism, but rather a tactical fusion of social and minority grievances. While the Communist Party officially subordinated the national question to the class struggle, in practice, local organisations recognised that for the Hungarian minority, the new state apparatus represented both a 'capitalist oppressor' and a 'foreign occupier'. By addressing practical

⁶⁰NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

⁶¹Imre Szakál, 'Hajótöröttek. A kárpátaljai magyar tisztviselők helyzete 1918 után', in *Kultúra, művelődés, agrárium. Tanulmányok ifj. Barta János 80. születésnapjára*, ed. Klára Papp, Attila Bárány, Róbert Kerepeszki, and László Pallai (Debreceni Egyetem: Debrecen, 2020), 309–20.

⁶²NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

⁶³NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

⁶⁴Samu Czabán (1878–1942) was a leading representative of the socialist teacher movement in Czechoslovakia, accessed 9 Feb. 2026, Magyar életrajzi lexikon 1000–1990, <https://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/ABC02469/02913.htm>.

⁶⁵NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

⁶⁶NACR MV PMV 1918–1940 1075/1 Karton 50.

grievances – such as difficulties with the new administrative language or the perceived arrogance of incoming Czech officials – the movement could mobilise those who might have been indifferent to purely abstract ideological slogans. Thus, while the authorities may have exaggerated the irredentist threat based on the ethnic composition of the leadership, the communists indeed successfully channelled minority resentment of the Czechoslovak state structure into anti-capitalist mobilisation. It is also noteworthy that communist agitation employed not only political but also social rhetoric, emphasising issues of injustice, impoverishment, and the perceived ‘foreignness’ of the Prague government. At the same time, it is important to approach such assessments with caution. Secret police reports tended to interpret communist activity through a security-driven lens, often exaggerating its subversive potential and framing social mobilisation as deliberate national provocation. The available evidence suggests that while communist organisers did not pursue an explicitly nationalist agenda, they were nevertheless willing to instrumentalise existing national and linguistic grievances as part of their broader mobilisation strategy.

Conclusions

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, by the very nature of the First Republic, was a multi-ethnic political organisation. This characteristic became particularly evident in the case of Transcarpathia, where the motivations behind the population’s gravitation towards the Party primarily stemmed from social and economic dissatisfaction. The national question appeared in the Party’s toolkit largely because communists made use of national movements to serve their own purposes.⁶⁷ As mentioned above, the primary motifs of the Party’s communications were not nationalist in nature. Both at the level of the republic and within Transcarpathia, the manifestations of national communism in linguistic terms were essentially reactions to demographic realities. This stemmed partly from the ethnic diversity of the Party’s local leadership and partly from the diversity of the population it sought to engage with.

Although Hungarian communists spoke Hungarian to Hungarian voters, the content of their communications revolved around social and economic issues. This is further supported by the degree of the Party’s local embeddedness. In many cases, activists of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia were able to provide practical assistance to their target audience, which may have strongly appealed to the local population during the uncertainty-ridden period of regime change. Efforts to eradicate illiteracy, help provided during currency exchanges, assistance in maintaining contact with the new officials, and, more generally, support in navigating the newly established state system likely also increased people’s willingness to vote for the communists. One of the particular features of the Czechoslovak communist movement’s Transcarpathian chapter lies in the fact that this region had, proportionally, the largest number of supporters within the republic. By the 1930s, the proportion of Hungarian members within the Transcarpathian district organisation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had almost reached 30 per cent, even though Hungarians made up only around 15 per cent of the region’s total population.⁶⁸

At the same time, the local leadership was ethnically diverse – Rusyns, Jews, and Hungarians all participated in directing the regional Party organisation. One consequence of this was the unique role that the communist movement played among the Hungarian population of Transcarpathia. Here, the sparks ignited mainly by émigré communist leaders found fertile ground in locally rooted economic discontent, which contributed to the strengthening of communist influence among the Hungarians of the region. The participation of Hungarians from various social backgrounds, steadily growing membership, and the movement’s cultural and political embeddedness all increased the prospects

⁶⁷ Martin Mevius, ‘Reappraising Communism and Nationalism,’ *Nationalities Papers* 37, no. 4 (2009): 377–400.

⁶⁸ Viktor Bielousov, *Na shliakhu do peremohy. Z istorii komunistychnoi orhanizatsii Zakarpatskoi Ukrainy 1929–1938 rr.* (Uzhhorod: Zakarpatske oblasne vydavnytstvo, 1958), 235; István Molnár D., *Perifériáról perifériára. Kárpátalja népessége 1869-től napjainkig* (Budapest: Kalligram, 2018), 93.

for communist success among Carpathian Hungarian communities, while simultaneously making it more difficult for the ethnically based, Hungarian national elite engaged in organising the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia to achieve its goals.

The political identity and community-building of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia were diverse and did not unfold solely along traditional national narratives. Support for the communist movement, which was particularly evident from the results of the 1924 parliamentary elections, became a genuine competitor to the ethnically based Hungarian political parties. This is particularly substantiated by the election results from the Hungarian-majority settlements around Berehove, which highlight that class-based politics were initially more effective at mobilising the Hungarian community rather than ethnic politics. This was primarily due to the acute social and economic conditions, which were significantly worsened by the chaos surrounding the change of state authority. Under these destabilised social circumstances, the target audience of political community-building perhaps became more receptive to political organisations that addressed social and economic issues and provided practical assistance during the difficulties of transition. However, I do not think that this phenomenon can be identified with what Tara Zahra and Pieter M. Judson describe as national indifference.⁶⁹ Both the communist movement in Transcarpathia and the wider Czechoslovak communist movement clearly regarded their Hungarian members as Hungarians, and the members themselves made no distinction in this regard. In their everyday lives, they remained bearers of Hungarian ethnicity – something they did not forget, nor reinterpret later – yet their political choices were not primarily determined by their ethnic affiliation.

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⁶⁹Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities'.

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