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Orava and Spiš: Sources of Inspiration for the Polish Nationalist Program of the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

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This study examines the origins as well as the causes of the Czechoslovak-Polish territorial dispute over the northern Orava and Spiš regions, which escalated shortly after the First World War at the Paris Peace Conference. The author analyses how activists from the Kraków and Podhale region formulated their concept of the so-called Kresy południowe (Southern Borderlands) at the turn of the 20th century. Predicated on ethno-linguistic arguments and the “Highlander myth” (Goral myth), the theory categorized the Goral population on the Hungarian side of the Carpathians as ethnic Poles with a “dormant” national consciousness. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the internal conflict within the Polish national movement—specifically between Kraków-based Slavophiles and regionalists—concerning future strategies, particularly in relation to Hungarian state policy and representatives of the Slovak national movement.

The political map of Europe, which remains divided into the territories of individual nation-states to this day, offers a wide range of considerations regarding the stability of those borders. In the 20th century, and particularly in the aftermath of the First World War, the issue of the national identity of the populations residing in borderland regions became the common denominator for border demarcation. The language spoken by these groups of people alongside their religious affiliation and defining cultural attributes frequently served as a catalyst for protracted interstate disputes over the definition of various politico-administrative units. For this reason, certain borders are conventionally regarded as unstable—giving rise to frequent conflicts—while others are perceived as relatively stable. The latter are often characterized with adjectives like “historical” or “natural.”

The Hungarian-Galician border was considered such a “stable” frontier for a very long time. However, in the spring of 1919, during peace negotiations intended to determine the new configuration of post-war Europe in Paris, an unexpected dispute emerged before the international community. This was a conflict by two successor states then contesting territory of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Czechoslovak Republic and the Second Polish Republic.

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Although both states and their representatives primarily concentrated on the region of Cieszyn Silesia,¹ the “package” of Czechoslovak-Polish territorial disputes also included areas of the former northern Hungarian borderlands—specifically, the northern regions of Orava and Spiš. The conflict initially led to a decision to hold a plebiscite in the contested territory in September 1919. However, after a nearly year-long intense campaign, both parties submitted to an arbitration decision by the Allied powers in the summer of 1920. Even then, the dispute did not end, continuing to significantly influence mutual Czechoslovak-Polish relations throughout the entire interwar period.

The issue of Czechoslovak-Polish territorial disputes has received considerable attention in Slovak, Czech, and Polish historiography; however, scholarly focus has remained primarily on developments at the diplomatic level.² For the most part, these disputes have been examined within the broader context of Czechoslovak-Polish or Slovak-Polish relations during the 20th century.³ A significant body of available literature also addresses the process of demarcation and subsequent political development within the given territory, whether within the framework of the Czechoslovak Republic or the Second Polish Republic.⁴ Considerably less attention has been paid to the actual execution and nature of the plebiscite campaign during the brief interim period of preparations for the popular vote, from September 1919 to July 1920.⁵ Furthermore, even less scholarly focus—particularly within Slovak historiography—has been directed

- 1 The contested region of Cieszyn Silesia corresponded to the historical Duchy of Teschen, which was part of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. The reason this area received primary attention was the presence of extensive coal deposits and a vital railway connection to Slovakia.
- 2 For example, the works of Pavol Jakubec and Marcel Jesenský. JAKUBEC, Pavol. K československo-poľskému sporu o Oravu a Spiš. In *Český časopis historický*, 2015, vol. 113, no. 4, pp. 1009–1016; JAKUBEC, Pavol. Formovanie československo-poľskej hraničnej čiary (s dôrazom na jej spišský úsek) počas Parížskej mierovej konferencie, 1918 – 1920. In *Slovanský prehľad*, 2010, vol. 96, no. 5, pp. 1–52; JESENSKÝ, Marcel. *The Slovak-Polish Border, 1918–1947*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- 3 KÁZMEROVÁ, Lubica – ORLOF, Ewa et al. *Slovensko-poľské vzťahy 1918–1945 očami diplomatov*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; Veľvyslanectvo Poľskej republiky v Slovenskej republike, 2008; ORLOF, Ewa. *Stosunki polsko-czesko-słowackie w latach 1918–1945*. Rzeszów : Wydawnictwo WSP, 1992; JANAS, Karol – ŽENČUCHOVÁ, Anna. *Slovenské pohraničie v poľsko-slovenských vzťahoch v rokoch (1918–1959)*. Kraków : Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2020; JELÍNEK, Petr. *Zahranično-politické vzťahy Československa a Poľska 1918–1924*. Opava : Matice moravská, 2009; KAMIŇSKI, Marek. *Konflikt polsko-czeski 1918–1921*. Warszawa : Neriton, 2001.
- 4 The works of Milica Majeriková-Molitoris are particularly outstanding in this regard, see: MAJERIKOVÁ-MOLITORIS, Milica. *Vojna po vojne: Severný Spiš a Horná Orava v rokoch 1945–1947*. Banská Bystrica; Kraków : Univerzita Mateja Bela; Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2013; MAJERIKOVÁ-MOLITORIS, Milica. *Vojna o Spiš. Spiš v politike Poľska v medzivojnovom období v kontexte česko-slovensko-poľských vzťahov*. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2007; MAJERIKOVÁ-MOLITORIS, Milica (ed.) *Nepokojná hranica*. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2010; MAJERIKOVÁ-MOLITORIS, Milica. Tri roky–tri štáty. K problematike geopoliticko-spoločenských zmien na slovensko-poľskom pohraničí po páde Rakúsko-Uhorskej monarchie v roku 1918. In *Almanach XIX. Slováci v Poľsku*. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2018, pp. 13–15.
- 5 A notable exception is the recent work of Erik Dulovič, in which he analyses the involvement and activities of the Slovak political leadership in the territorial dispute over Orava and Spiš, as well as during the plebiscite campaign itself, see: DULOVIČ, Erik. „Bráňme si svoje!“ *Slovenská politická reprezentácia a československo-poľský spor o Oravu a Spiš v rokoch 1918–1920*. Kraków : Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2023. A partial perspective is offered by the studies of historians Pavol Matula and Martin Furmaník. MATULA, Pavol. Úloha cirkvi v zápase o národnú identitu obyvateľstva severného Spiša a Oravy v rokoch 1919–1939. In *Človek a spoločnosť*, 2007, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 27–34; FURMANÍK, Martin. Propagandistický súboj Československa a Poľska o severný Spiš. In *Almanach XIX. Slováci v Poľsku*. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2018, pp. 51–65.

toward the origins and underlying causes of this dispute.⁶ In other words, on the Slovak side of the Carpathians, it remains unclear how Polish territorial claims emerged in the spring of 1919 regarding areas that the Slovak public regarded as “naturally” Slovak. With this in mind, the objective of this paper is to provide at least a partial answer to the following questions: What was the ideological foundation behind the interest of Polish activist groups in the northern borderlands of the Kingdom of Hungary? Was there a consensus among intellectuals and activist groups in this regard, or did their positions differ?⁷

“Kresy południowe”—Term and the Thesis of the National Revivalist Movement

At the beginning of the 20th century, a group of activists from Kraków and the Podhale region became the primary proponents of the idea of a Polish national revival within the borders of Hungary, formulating a concept of the so-called Kresy południowe (Southern Borderlands). This term should be examined more closely, as an understanding is essential for appreciating the entire discourse of the Polish national movement. The term “Kresy południowe” was first articulated by Polish publicist and writer Włodzimierz Bugiel in 1898 in the article *Polskie osady na Węgrzech* (Polish Settlements in Hungary).⁸ The term “Kresy” holds a special place in Polish historical and political consciousness, and it is relatively difficult to find a single-word equivalent in Slovak (or English) that encompasses its full meaning. *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* (PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language) defines the term as “territories located on the edge of the state, borderlands.”⁹ However, the author of the entry, Witold Sienkiewicz, simultaneously notes that it is not merely a geographical term, but also an ethnographic and historical one, denoting the “Polish character” of a certain territory in terms of both language and culture. In other words, “Kresy” is synonymous with a “mała ojczyzna” (small homeland) for Poles who found themselves outside the borders of the Polish state.¹⁰

The term “Kresy południowe” refers to the territory of northern Slovakia, or more accurately, to the northern regions of the Kingdom of Hungary at the

6 Slovak historiography has addressed this topic only marginally, primarily in the form of a brief genesis of the Czechoslovak-Polish dispute and as an introduction to Czechoslovak-Polish relations. Understandably, it occupies a more prominent position within Polish historiography.

7 The aforementioned circumstances had a significant impact on the formation of Czechoslovak-Polish relations regarding mutual territorial disputes during the interwar period, as well as during the aftermath of the Second World War.

8 BUGIEL, Włodzimierz. *Polskie osady na Węgrzech*. „Prawda”. In *Tygodnik Polityczny, Społeczny i Literacki*, 25 May (7 May) 1898, pp. 6–7.

9 See the encyclopedic entry in the *Encyklopedia PWN* (PWN Encyclopedia). Available online at: (<https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/sloownik/kresy>) [last viewed on 30 April 2026].

10 In this sense, in Polish literature, yet also in everyday communication, we most frequently encounter the term “Kresy wschodnie” (Eastern Borderlands). This is a designation for the vast areas of the former Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) to the east of the Bug River (or the so-called Curzon Line), which still forms the state border of the Republic of Poland today. It is more problematic to answer the question of how far this territory extends to the east and whether this designation still fulfils its original meaning after the mass population transfers following the Second World War. In any case, this term carries a strong historical and political undertone and refers to the borders of the Polish state up to the 18th century. The Polish-ness of these territories is, however, mostly understood in terms of a cultural mosaic and cultural affinity.

beginning of the 20th century. An alternative expression, “Zapomniane Kresy” (meaning forgotten, overlooked, or neglected borderlands), was intended to illustrate a situation in which the local Polish ethnic group had to contend with intense Magyarization and, more significantly, Slovakization pressures, occurring without substantial interest or activity from the Polish social and political elites. As will be further expounded upon, both terms emerged during a period of significantly increasing interest among Kraków intellectuals and regional activists in the Goral population, primarily from the Podhale region. Numbers on the Hungarian side of the Carpathians were estimated at 100 000 to 200 000, though some estimates considerably exceeded these figures.¹¹ Such an extraordinary interest in the Hungarian Gorals built upon several ethnographic and linguistic studies that identified them as ethnic Poles based on linguistic affinity or similarity. As noted by historian Pavol Jakubec, this:

[...] ethnolinguistic argument gained weight over the final decades of the 19th century and led to narrow interpretations of the Spiš realities, as in this peripheral territory—from the perspective of both subsequent disputing parties—a sense of “local” belonging dominated over an emerging self-identification with a modern political nation.¹²

In accordance with this conviction, activists launched an extensive national revivalist campaign even before the First World War with the aim of “resurrecting” or “restoring” the “Polish spirit” and “Polish national consciousness” in Orava and Spiš.¹³ Consequently, both scholarly and journalistic literature frequently employ the term “revivalist” or “national revivalist action” in Orava and Spiš to describe the activities of these individuals. Since these efforts were not isolated occurrences, but rather distributed over a relatively long period with a long-term programmatic foundation, the term “Polish national revivalist movement” will be used for the purposes of this text.

Before proceeding to identify the specific actors within this movement and their activities prior to 1914, it is necessary to introduce the organization’s fundamental argumentative premises. These were formulated into a coherent framework only at the end of 1918, so as to serve the needs of the Polish delegation at the upcoming Paris Peace Conference.

11 In his work *Gwara Tatrzańska i jej pisemnictwo* (The Tatra dialect and its writings) Grzegorz Smólski mentions a total of up to 300 000 Polish-speaking inhabitants. SMÓLSKI, Grzegorz. *Gwara Tatrzańska i jej pisemnictwo*. Warszawa : Druk Aleksandra Ginsa, 1918, pp. 3–4. However, by the end of 1918, as the campaign to annex the border regions of Orava and Spiš was gaining momentum on the Polish side, the figures cited had shifted to between 110 000 and 120 000 inhabitants. Cf., for instance, the report prepared by the Powiatowa Organizacja Narodowa (District National Organization) in Nowy Targ, addressed to the Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna (Polish Liquidation Committee) in Kraków on November 27, 1918. See: Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie – ANK, sign. AN/29/3185/1, pp. 13–19.

12 JAKUBEC, Pavol. Formovanie spišského úseku československo-poľskej hraničnej čiary počas Parížskej mierovej konferencie (1919–1920). In *Slovanský prehľad*, 2010, vol. 96, no. 5, p. 580.

13 For example: ROSZKOWSKI, Jerzy M. Polska akcja ‘budzielska’ wśród spiskich, orawskich i czadeckich górali na przełomie XIX i XX w. In ROSZKOWSKI, Jerzy M. – Kowalski, Robert. *Góry i góralszczyzna w dziejach i kulturze pogranicza polsko-słowackiego Podhale, Spisz, Orawa, Gorce, Pieniny*. Nowy Targ : Podhalańska Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa, 2005, pp. 63–76; MATULA, Pavol. Poľská „buditeľská akcia“ v oravských obciach Suchá Hora a Hladovka v 20. a 30. rokoch 20. storočia. In *Almanach XIII. Slováci v Poľsku*. Kraków : Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2012, pp. 63–76.

On the “Polish-ness” of the Southern Borderlands—Argumentative premises of the National Revivalist Movement

On 23 November 1918, a group of activists from the Podhale region and Kraków formulated the fundamental theses of Polish territorial claims to the northern borderlands of Hungary (or Slovakia, respectively) under the collective title *Referaty w sprawie południowych kresów Polski przedłożone na zebraniu specjalnej Komisji Towarzystwa Tatrzańskiego w Krakowie w dniu 23. listopada 1918 r.* (Reports on the southern borderlands of Poland presented at the meeting of the special Commission of the Tatra Society in Kraków on November 23, 1918).¹⁴ This comprehensive document subsequently served as the primary argumentative basis for Polish territorial claims to the northern frontier regions of the former Kingdom of Hungary, which were then part of the emerging Czechoslovak Republic.¹⁵ Simultaneously, these reports represent the culmination of a long-term discourse that had been developing within the academic and journalistic circles of Austrian Galicia since at least the 1890s.

The content of the individual reports—authored by figures prominent in Polish ethnography, linguistics, and historiography, as well as in the movement for the “national revival of the Polish population” in Hungary—can be categorized into two fundamental levels; ethnographic and linguistic arguments on the one hand, and historical and geographical arguments on the other. Given that these arguments regularly appeared in the demands of the Polish delegation at the international level, as well as in the basic postulates of Polish agitation during the plebiscite campaign of 1919–1920, it is necessary to provide at least a brief overview.¹⁶

The ethnographic and linguistic dimension of this argumentation focuses on the presence of a sizeable Goral population in the regions of northern Kysuce (the Čadca region; Polish: Czadecko), Orava, and Spiš, as well as the affinity between Goral dialects and the Polish language. According to the au-

14 Muzeum Tatrzańskie Zakopane – MT-ZA, sign. AR/275. The document consists of three separate papers: a report by the Polish linguist and ethnographer Roman Zawiliński entitled *Dlaczego mamy przyłączyć ludność polską na Węgrzech do Państwa polskiego* (Why We Should Annex the Polish Population in Hungary to the Polish State), which outlines linguistic and ethnographic arguments; a report by historian and later professor at Jagiellonian University, Władysław Semkowicz, titled *Granica polsko-węgierska w oświetleniu historycznym* (The Polish-Hungarian Border in Historical Light), presenting historical arguments; and finally, a report by physician, artist, and publicist Stanisław Eljasz Radzikowski, titled *Sprawa granicy polskiej od Węgier* (The Issue of the Polish Border with Hungary), which summarizes and supplements the preceding papers while proposing specific territorial demands.

15 Specifically, they were submitted to the Biuro Kongresowe (Congress Office) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, see: ROSZKOWSKI, Jerzy M. „Zapomniane Kresy” *Spisz, Orawa, Czadeckie w świadomości i działaniach Polaków (1895–1925)*. Nowy Targ : Powiatowe Centrum Kultury w Nowym Targu, 2018, p. 220.

16 The following summary does not constitute an analysis of the aforementioned arguments, nor does it provide a subsequent confrontation with later scientific criticism, particularly from the perspectives of contemporary ethnography, geography, or linguistics. It serves merely as a concise overview of the Polish argumentative premises as they were presented and utilized by Polish representatives during the dispute over the border territories. To understand the events between 1918 and 1920, it is essential to be acquainted with these Polish points of departure. For further information on the linguistic aspects of Goral dialects, see, for example: DUDÁŠOVÁ-KRIŠŠÁKOVÁ, Júlia. *Goralské nárečia z pohľadu súčasnej slovenskej jazykovedy*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Prešovskej univerzity, 2016, p. 251; GRÍGEL, Marián. *Goralské nárečie-slovník*. Námestovo : ICN Námestovo, 2003, p. 460.

thor of the first report, ethnographer and linguist Roman Zawiliński,¹⁷ this linguistic connection—alongside material culture, customs and traditions, a persistent oral tradition, and a religious affiliation—collectively attested to the Polish character of this population. He predicated his theses on earlier research by Czech linguists and philologists Alois Vojtěch Šembera, František Pastrnek, and Jiří Polívka, Czech anthropologist and ethnologist Lubor Niederle, as well as Slovak linguist and philologist Samuel Czambel, among others. At the same time, however, he notes that while the aforementioned factors—primarily the similarity of Goral dialects to Polish—testify to the Polish national identity of the inhabitants of Hungary’s northern borderlands, they lack their own national consciousness due to illiteracy and the Hungarian policy of denationalization.¹⁸ Zawiliński admits the instability of these national categories when he states:

We heard a conclusion from a man from Orava that they themselves do not know what they are; because when they go to Poland, they are called Slovaks, and when they go down to Slovakia, they are called Poles. Is it therefore possible to base any decision on their own [subjective] feelings?¹⁹

In a similar vein, historian Artur Patek points to a practice in both older and more recent Polish literature, in which the nationally indifferent community in Spiš is described as “unconscious,” “dormant,” or “unawakened” Poles, unaware of their true identity.²⁰ Precisely on the basis of such linguistic affinity, Zawiliński’s report identifies at least 110 000 “Poles” south of the Hungarian-Galician border.²¹

The principle of linguistic determinism—the notion that language inevitably dictates national identity—was by no means uncommon in Central Europe at the beginning of the 20th century; on the contrary, it largely informed the positions and agitation of nationalist movements. This process frequently occurred without the participation or even the awareness of the subjects of such interest, namely the affected populations. In this context, British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm posits that the essence of linguistic nationalism at the turn of the 20th century did not stem from issues directly related to communication or its deficiencies in daily life, but was instead inextricably linked to politics, power, status, and ideology.²² Similarly, Artur Patek notes that in the construction of both academic and political categories, the national identity of the inhabitants in the regions concerned was often determined “over their heads.”²³ In contrast, the self-identification of the affected population functioned primarily within

17 Roman Zawiliński (1855–1932) was a Polish ethnographer, linguist, and educator. Between 1884 and 1891, he served as a secretary in the ethnographic department of the Akademia Umiejętności (Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kraków). He authored numerous linguistic and ethnographic works and also served as the editor of the bimonthly journal *Język Polski* (Polish Language) and the monthly *Poradnik Językowy* (Language Guide).

18 MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, p. 2.

19 MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, pp. 3–4.

20 PATEK, Artur. Wokół sporów o tożsamość narodową na polsko-słowackim pograniczu na Spiszu w XIX i XX wieku. In *Historický časopis*, 2020, vol. 68, no. 2, p. 80.

21 MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, p. 5.

22 HOBSBAWM, Eric J. *Národy a nacionalismus od roku 1780. Program, mýtus, realita*. Brno : Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2000, p. 107.

23 PATEK, Artur. Sprawa pogranicza spiskiego w polskiej i słowackiej historiografii. In STAWO-WY-KAWKA, Irena (ed.) *Obraz konfliktów między narodami słowiańskimi w XIX i XX wieku w historiografii*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007, p. 95.

regional categories or upon further inquiry, shifted into ambiguous national categories (such as Hungarian state identity, Slovak national identity, or frequently, composite identities). Regarding the ethnic situation in Spiš during the 19th century, historian Dušan Škvarna aptly remarks in this connection that “the correlation between national (ethnic) consciousness and language (dialect) may not be at all necessary in every case.”²⁴

At the end of the 19th century, the application of linguistic determinism within the discourse of social and nationally oriented elites became markedly pronounced in Austrian Galicia, specifically along the Hungarian border. Within the Polish milieu, which had been divided into three partitioned territories since 1795, this was further fuelled by a fascination with Goral folk culture and the Tatra environment in particular. It was precisely within the Goral population that Polish literati sought the primordial purity of the Polish language and culture, which they believed could serve as a foundation and a source of inspiration for the national movement. The Podhale region—referred to at the time as the “Polish Piedmont”—and especially Zakopane, became exceptionally popular retreats for Kraków urban social classes at the turn of the century. This region, and notably the Tatra mountain range with its Goral inhabitants, provided the motifs for several now-classic works of Polish journalism and belles-lettres.²⁵ In this context, both older and contemporary Polish ethnography speak of the creation of a “Goral myth”—a significantly romanticized conception that idealized the Goral as a bearer of a distinct character and culture, while simultaneously serving as a romantic archetype of “Polish-ness.”²⁶

In her analysis of the “Goralomania” phenomenon at the turn of the 20th century, ethnologist Maria Małanicz-Przybylska goes even further. Regarding

24 ŠKVARNÁ, Dušan. Multietnicita Spiša a národnoemancipačné procesy na ňom. In GŁADKIEWICZ, Ryszard – HOMZA, Martin (eds.) *Terra Scepusiensis : Stav bádania o dejinách Spiša*. Wrocław : Centrum Badań Śląskoznawczych i Bohemistycznych Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2003, p. 672.

25 An illustrative example is the collection of journalistic articles by prominent Polish painter, architect, ethnographer, writer, and art theorist Stanisław Witkiewicz, published collectively in 1903 under the title *Bagno* (Swamp). This was followed by numerous other so-called Tatra essays, later compiled and published as *W kręgu Tatr* (In the circle of the Tatra Mountains). In these works, Witkiewicz describes the environment of Zakopane and the Podhale region, local folk culture, its artistic expression, and the character of the Goral population. He translated his theoretical artistic premises into the creation of the so-called “Zakopane Style,” which was intended to represent a kind of archetype for a national style in Polish architecture. Another significant literary work inspired by the Tatra environment—incorporating the literary figure of Jánošík—is the novel *Legenda Tatr* (The legenda of the Tatras) by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, who later, in 1919, assumed the leadership of the National Committee for the Defense of Spiš, Orava, the Čadca Region, and Podhale.

26 Antoni Kroh, Polish ethnographer and author of the now-classic work of Polish ethnography *Sklep Potrzeb Kulturalnych* (Cultural Needs Store), notes in this connection, “The romantic admiration of Goral freedom was a myth, widespread among people who visited the Tatras solely out of a need to spend an enjoyable moment and who knew only as much about Podhale as they wished to know. It was also a myth based on patriotism, largely stemming from the conviction regarding the primordial Polishness of Goral culture: since, according to this view, the inhabitant of Podhale is a particular sublimation of the Pole, and Poles love freedom, the Goral must love freedom even more”. See in: KROH, Antoni. *Sklep Potrzeb Kulturalnych po remoncie*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo MG, 2013, p. 35. For more recent works, see, for example: DZIADOWIEC, Joanna – WIĄCEK, Elżbieta. *Góralczyzna, góralskość—konstruowanie i funkcjonowanie podhalańskiego mitu*. In WIĄCEK, Elżbieta (ed.) *Semiotyczna mapa Małopolski*. Kraków : Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015, pp. 251–354.

the interest of the Polish intelligentsia in Podhale and the Gorals, she posits the following hypothesis:

And yet the inhabitant of the Tatras, as we read about him in texts from the 19th and early 20th centuries, did not exist. And perhaps no existed before. Perhaps Gorals became Gorals only when we—the gentlemen from the city—uncovered them, when we discovered and described the Tatra customs, architecture, fine arts, music, character, and the very image of the mountain people?²⁷

She continues by arguing that it was the Polish intelligentsia and national revivalist activists who created “Podhalanism,” which she—referencing the earlier concepts of Edward Said and Arthur Balfour—regards in a sense as an expression of Orientalism within the Polish cultural environment. The distinction, however, is that “the Goral alter ego of all Poles formed an ideal image rather than a negative one, as was the case with the so-called Orientals.”²⁸ This seemingly peripheral approach may explain, at least partially, the exceptionally vivid interest of Polish cultural life in Podhale and Zakopane, to which an attraction to the neighbouring regions of northern Spiš and Orava was added by the 1890s at the latest.

Alongside linguistic and ethnographic arguments, the discourse at the turn of the 20th century also featured historical theses regarding the Goral/Polish character of extensive parts of these Hungarian border counties. For a concise summary of these claims, we may again refer to the aforementioned document from 1918.

The author of the second report,²⁹ historian, lawyer, and activist Władysław Semkowicz,³⁰ challenges the notion of the immutability or permanence of the Hungarian-Galician (or Hungarian-Polish) border. He contends that the northern regions of Hungary—referred to as “Kresy Zakarpackie” (Trans-Carpathian Borderlands)—were, to some extent, part of the Polish Kingdom, or at least within the sphere of Polish political and economic influence since the reign of Bolesław the Brave (992–1025). According to Semkowicz, Hungarian state power became established in the mountain basins of Kysuce, Orava, and Spiš only gradually from the 12th century onward, arguing that the process was accompanied by “colonization” from the south and west by Hungarian (without further specification) and—particularly in the case of Spiš—German or “Saxon” populations. However, he adds that the Polish settlement of the peripheral areas of northern Orava and Spiš, migrating from the north through what were initially impenetrable forest belts (*puszcze*), never ceased. As he further noted, this population of Lesser Polish (*małopolské*) origin never abandoned these areas and through continued contact with the Polish lands, never lost its original Polish character.³¹

In the case of Spiš, Professor Semkowicz understandably recalled the pledge of the thirteen Spiš towns, which (along with a circuit of adjacent villages) were

27 MAŁANICZ-PRZYBYLSKA, Maria. Góralczyzna istnieje...? In *Konteksty: polska sztuka ludowa : antropologia kultury, etnografia, sztuka*, 2013, vol. 67, no. 1, p. 4.

28 MAŁANICZ-PRZYBYLSKA 2013, p. 4.

29 *Granica polsko-węgierska w oświetleniu historycznym*. MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, pp. 12–42.

30 Władysław Semkowicz (1878–1949) was a prominent Polish historian specializing in the Polish Middle Ages. He was a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and a member of the Polska Akademia Umiejętności (Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences).

31 MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, pp. 13–14

under the administration of the Polish Crown from 1412 for three and a half centuries. Since the amount for which the Hungarian King Sigismund pawned them to the Polish monarchs—37 000 *kopa* of Prague groschen (i.e. Prague groschen coins)—was never repaid, the Polish nobility subsequently began to consider these territories an unquestionable part of the Polish Crown based on the right of usucaption.³²

Such historical and legal arguments are finally supplemented by Stanisław Eliasz Radzikowski, author of the next report,³³ who provides perspective on the geographical relief of the landscape. He points out that the northwestern part of the Spiš County in particular, with the valley of the Poprad River, is part of the Vistula basin and thus naturally fell under Polish economic, political, and cultural influence. He even designates the High Tatra mountain range as a key geographic dividing line and splits the sub-Tatra regions into two categories: those with a river flowing to the Danube and the Black Sea (Orava and Liptov), and those with a river flowing into the Vistula and the Baltic Sea (Spiš and Podhale). He therefore considers the Tatras a neuralgic point on the map and a crucial starting point for a future border demarcation for the entire area.³⁴

The above brief overview of argumentative premises does not fully explain the cause or development of the exceptionally vivid Polish interest in Orava and Spiš, an interest which first fully manifested at the beginning of the 20th century and was accompanied by a discourse centred around two periodicals: the monthly *Świat Słowiański* (Slavic World) and the biweekly *Gazeta Podhalańska* (Podhale newspaper). An examination of their editorial boards, their ideological framework, and their range of activities can therefore offer significant insights. Nevertheless, the path there was relatively long, with the initial interest in the “Goral question” first emerging within the minds of linguists and ethnographers.

Slavophiles vs. Pragmatists—Klub Słowiański of Kraków and the Podhale Regionalists

The genesis of interest among the Polish scholarly community (initially, primarily literary or linguistic in focus) and the broader public regarding Upper Hungary, the Gorals, and notably, the Slovaks, has relatively deep roots. In a two-volume work, *Slováci polskými oczami—obraz Slovákov v polskom písomníctve* (Slovaks through Polish eyes – the image of Slovaks in Polish literature), Polish publicist Michał Jagiełło traces this interest back at least to the revolutionary years of 1848–1849.³⁵ Although this is not a conventional historiographical study, the author provides an impressively broad and useful overview of the mutual contacts and rich cultural exchange between the Polish and

32 In this context, Professor Semkowicz cites, among other evidence, proceedings before the court of arbitration convened in 1490 by Pope Innocent VIII in Wrocław. In the dispute between Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus and Polish King Casimir IV, the court recognized the Polish side's right to usucaption (Pol. *przedawnienie*) of the contested territories. In this regard, the historian bases his assertion on a record preserved in the Wrocław City Hall. See: MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, p. 30.

33 *Sprawa granicy polskiej od Węgier*. MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, pp. 48–72.

34 MT-ZA, sign. AR/275, p. 58

35 See: JAGIEŁŁO, Michał. *Slováci polskými oczami (II)*. Nowy Targ : Euroregion „Tatry“, 2014, pp. 89–114.

Slovak milieus dating back to the first half of the 19th century. However, the so-called “Goral question” only came to the fore during the aforementioned period of increased interest in the Podhale region among the Polish—particularly Kraków-based—public. It was not until the 1890s that the Gorals, and the population of the Hungarian-Galician borderlands in general, became the focus of a more broadly conceived ideological interest among Polish nationally oriented activists.

During this period, the ethnographic character of the populations in Podhale, Orava, Spiš, and northern Kysuce as well as other regions began to be more intensively addressed in the works of Polish ethnographers and linguists. In this regard, Roman Zawiliński’s articles from 1893 and 1896 collectively titled *Przyczynek (II) do etnografii górali polskich na Węgrzech* (Contribution to the ethnography of Polish highlanders in Hungary), are considered seminal.³⁶ In these works, the author posits that during the 1870s and 1880s, the Polish element in the borderlands gradually weakened as a result of the development of the Slovak national movement. He identified the lack of interest among Polish cultural elites in their “blood brothers” in these regions as one of the primary causes.³⁷ Over the following years, what was initially strictly academic discourse³⁸ began to shift into the daily press, thereby influencing a segment of public opinion. An illustrative example is a series of articles by physician and publicist Włodzimierz Bugiel. In one such article, published in the newspaper *Dziennik Poznański* (Poznań Daily) in 1901 under the title *Zapomniane Kresy. Polacy na Spiżu i w przyległych węgierskich komitatach* (The Forgotten Borderlands: Poles in Spiš and the Adjacent Hungarian Counties), he discusses the “forgotten” Poles in Spiš, who were facing threats from both Magyarization and Slovakization, and draws a parallel to the ongoing national struggle against the Germanization of Silesia.³⁹

Terms such as “forgotten borderlands,” “southern borderlands,” “neglected,” “forgotten,” or “dormant Polish/Goral population” in Upper Hungary appeared with increasing frequency in the journalism of the period. The issue of “Polish-speaking” Gorals definitively entered the public discourse with the establishment of the journal *Świat Słowiański* in 1905 (published until 1915). This periodical served as the official organ of the Kraków-based Slavophile

36 This position is also attributed to them by the historian Jerzy M. Roszkowski. See: ROSZKOWSKI 2018, p. 59.

37 Roman Zawiliński draws his conclusions regarding the ethnographic character of the borderland population from the studies of earlier authors and from his two journeys through the northern Kysuce region in the vicinity of Čadca. Among other points, he notes, “My observations have led me to the conclusion that the situation encountered by A. V. Šembera in 1876, at least regarding the Čadca region, has changed to the detriment of the Polish language. Less than twenty years—years that were nonetheless highly significant for the national development of the Slovaks—could have brought about this change. In short, it is a forgotten Polish borderland.” See in: ZAWILIŃSKI, Roman. *Przyczynek II do etnografii i górali polskich na Węgrzech*. Kraków : Akademia Umiejętności, 1896, p. 3.

38 The work of Roman Zawiliński was further expanded upon by Grzegorz Smólski, who in his 1901 study *Gwara Tatrzańska i jej pismnictwo*, cites a total of approximately 300 000 “Polish souls.” He contends that despite the linguistic affinity of their vocabulary with Slovak and Moravian dialects, their speech originates fundamentally from a Polish linguistic base. See: SMÓLSKI 1918, pp. 3–4.

39 BUGIEL, Włodzimierz. *Zapomniane Kresy. Polacy na Spiżu i w przyległych węgierskich komitatach*. In *Dziennik Poznański*, 1 July 1901, pp. 1–2.

association known as Klub Słowiański (Slavic Club), later renamed Towarzystwo Słowiańskie (Slavic Society).

The broad circles of editors and contributors to the monthly *Świat Słowiański* included prominent names in Polish Slavic studies, such as bibliographer and pedagogue Edmund Kołodziejczyk, the aforementioned linguist and ethnographer Roman Zawiliński, Jagiellonian University professor Marian Zdziechowski, and August Sokołowski—a member of the Polish Club in the Reichsrat (Imperial Council) and also a professor at Jagiellonian University. The position of editor-in-chief was held by historian and publicist Feliks Koneczny.

Naturally, the issue of the Polish “trans-Carpathian borderlands” constituted only a peripheral part of the journal’s focus, as it profiled itself primarily as a Polish contribution to the broader framework of Slavic studies. Unsurprisingly, within the contemporary political and social context of Austria-Hungary, which included Galicia, the monthly had to defend itself from the outset against suspicions of propagating Pan-Slavism. In the Transleithanian part of the monarchy, Pan-Slavism was chiefly perceived as a power/ideological tool of the Russian Empire and a disintegrative element. The editorial board therefore maintained that Klub Słowiański (the periodical’s publisher) was not a political association and pursued no political objectives.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, by the very nature of its focus, the journal could not avoid evaluating the national situation, especially in Hungary. Ultimately, the editorial board defined its relationship toward Hungary as a unified entity only in a geographical but not an ethnographic sense, adding:

In the Hungarian state, Slavic elements held precedence over the Magyars for many centuries [...] The object of traditional Polish sympathy was Hungary as a harmonious unity of national elements, not the Magyar race, which only later placed itself at the head of the country and oppressed those over whom it gained dominance.⁴¹

It was precisely this anti-Hungarian or anti-Magyar stance that Hungarian authorities cited as a grievance against the Kraków Slavophile centre. Consequently, individual issues of the journal *Świat Słowiański* were frequently confiscated and its editors faced harassment or were outright barred from staying in the northern Hungarian counties.⁴² In her study *Polskie badania słowackie: historiografia XX wieku* (Polish Slovak Studies: 20th Century Historiography)—perhaps the most detailed overview of Polish historiography and scholarly interest concerning Slovaks in the 20th century—Polish historian Ewa Orlof notes that *Świat Słowiański* fulfilled the significant role of a platform through which the Polish public could, for the first time, become more closely acquainted with Slovakia and the Slovaks.⁴³ Roman Zawiliński, Edmund Kołodziejczyk, and Grzegorz Smólski were particularly active in this regard. An article by the latter, *Odgłosy z Słowaczyny* (Echoes from Slovakia)

40 GRZYMAŁA-SIEDLECKI, Adam. Klub Słowiański. In *Świat Słowiański*, 1905, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 8.

41 GRZYMAŁA-SIEDLECKI 1905, pp. 9–10.

42 Roman Zawiliński, for instance, frequently complained in this vein, noting that the Hungarian authorities imposed various obstacles to his ethnographic research in Upper Hungary.

43 ORLOF, Ewa. Polskie badania słowackie: historiografia XX w. In *Dzieje najnowsze*, 1998, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 87.

(1908), informed the Polish public in detail and with overt sympathy on the Slovak national movement, while conversely expressing unfavourable views on Hungarian nationality policy.⁴⁴ The monthly definitively established its reputation in Hungary as a “Pan-Slavist” periodical with the 1910 article *Bankructwo madiaryzmu* (The Bankruptcy of Magyarism, signed only with the initials K. J.K.). This article described contemporary Hungarian state policy as universally despised among both the minority nationalities and the ethnic Magyar population. Simultaneously, the piece reflected shifts in the Slovak national movement and Slovak politics, stating:

The time has long since passed when the Slovaks waited with folded arms for the Liberator Tsar. Slovak society is working. [...] If this continues, the Slovaks will become a second set of Czechs, already combining their economic ingenuity with the wisdom of the Polish Club.⁴⁵

Naturally, the “Goral question” was also granted significant space within the pages of this periodical. Authors believed that the issue should be resolved in the future through understanding and a consensus with Slovak representatives, thereby creating a joint effort between Slovaks and Poles to affect changes in the political life of Hungary. However, the activities of the Kraków centre and the monthly *Świat Słowiański* never exceeded beyond the framework of journalistic activity throughout its publication period. Consequently, they can be characterized merely as a space or platform for freer discussion concerning the political realities in Hungary within the more liberal environment of Austrian Galicia. A fundamentally different approach was adopted by the second group of activists within the national revivalist movement, whom we may term the Polish regionalists, given their practical agitation directly in the regions of Podhale, Orava, and Spiš.

The majority of this second group began to organize around Jan Bednarski,⁴⁶ a physician, activist, and member of the Sejm Krajowy (Galician parliament) from 1898 to 1914. His circle included several activists, most notably Ferdynand Machay, Aleksander Matonóg, Eugeniusz Stercula, Jan T. Dziebic, Tomasz Buła, the brothers Antoni, Eugeniusz Sikora, and others. A common denominator for many of them was the fact that they originated directly from the regions of the Hungarian-Galician borderlands, or frequently from the proclaimed southern Polish borderlands.⁴⁷

Jan Bednarski’s first success was the establishment of a gymnasium (secondary school) in Nowy Targ in 1904, which was intended to educate a new generation of nationally conscious Poles, not only from the Podhale region, but also from the neighbouring areas of Orava and Spiš. In the following years, Bednarski himself contributed to this goal by providing personal financial support to students coming to the Podhale school from the Hungarian borderlands.⁴⁸

44 SMÓLSKI, Grzegorz. Odgłosy ze Słowaczyny. In *Świat Słowiański*, 1908, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 237.

45 K. J. K. Bankructwo madiaryzmu. In *Świat Słowiański*, 1910, vol. 6, no. 65, p. 287.

46 This key position within the circle of Kraków and Podhale activists is emphasized particularly by the Catholic priest and one of the movement’s most prominent members, Ferdynand Machay, in his memoir. See: MACHAY, Ferdynand. *Moja droga do Polski*. Kraków : Agad-Print, 1992, pp. 36–44.

47 Ferdynand Machay originated from Jablonka in the Orava region, while Eugeniusz Stercula, Aleksander Matonóg, and the Sikora brothers were natives of *Podwilk* (Slovak *Podvilk*) in Orava.

48 See: ZIĘBA, Karolina. Działalność Bronisława Piłsudskiego na rzecz ludności Spisza i Orawy.

Subsequently, a trio of activists and close associates of Bednarski—Machay, Matonóg and Stercula—became particularly active.

In 1911, they published a short pamphlet titled *Co my za jedni* (Who we are), which can be identified as the first programmatic manifesto of the regionalist movement. Two years later, they were part of the founding of the weekly *Gazeta Podhalańska*.⁴⁹ In the ensuing years, this periodical became the official organ of the entire movement and played a pivotal role in the Polish plebiscite campaign during 1919 and 1920.

The *Co my za jedni* pamphlet provoked a relatively turbulent response, not only within Austrian Galicia, but also across the Hungarian border among representatives of the Slovak national movement.⁵⁰ The individual texts explicitly called for cooperation with Hungarian representatives and authorities, despite the fact that the authors did not deny the threat of gradual Magyarization of the Goral population. However, they identified the successes of the Slovak national movement in Orava and Spiš as a significantly greater danger. The Polish activists emphasized that a more immediate threat to the Polish population than Magyarization was its gradual Slovakization, occurring through the use of the Slovak language in primary education and religious services, as well as through the widespread Slovak press.⁵¹ Given that, from a linguistic acquisition perspective, Slovak was far more accessible to this population than Hungarian, this threat was perceived as more imminent. Therefore, the primary objective of the new initiative was to adopt a much more active approach, not only toward the Goral population, but also in relation to Hungarian authorities.

This perspective, or rather this shift in strategy within the national revivalist movement, was not without cause; it built upon a preceding, albeit partial, success—namely, the 1910 Hungarian census. Following intensive agitation by Polish activists centred around Aleksander Matonóg and Eugeniusz Stercula, and thanks to close contacts with certain Hungarian representatives—most notably Hungarian literary historian and linguist Adorján Divéky,⁵² they succeeded in adding a new category to the census forms in northern Orava. Within this framework, nearly 17 000 people declared Polish as their mother tongue.⁵³ Furthermore, these activists anticipated that cooperation with the Hungarian authorities would lead to the recognition of a new Polish national category and consequently, the implementation of basic linguistic rights.

Na marginesie listu do Bolesława Wysłoucha. In *Krakowski rocznik archiwalny XXVI*. Kraków : Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2021, p. 118.

49 The editor-in-chief of the weekly *Gazeta Podhalańska* was Feliks Gwiżdż.

50 MACHAY, Ferdinand – STERCULA, Eugeniusz – MATONÓG, Aleksander. *Co my za jedni*. Rabczyce, 1995, pp. 2–24.

51 MACHAY – STERCULA – MATONÓG 1995, pp. 7–8.

52 Polish historian Jerzy Roszkowski identifies Adorján Divéky as a pivotal figure in Polish-Hungarian cooperation during the period preceding the First World War. See: ROSZKOWSKI 2018, pp. 124–148.

53 Despite being considered a partial success by Polish activists, the 1910 census was problematic as Polish was not a direct language option on forms but listed under “other language,” later interpreted as Polish affiliation. A Polish area on the Orava border appeared on P. Teleki’s map based on this census. More information is available on the <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bt-v1b53192700m> [last viewed on 26 March 2026].

For a clearer understanding of the motives driving the Podhale regionalists, contemporary readers may turn to Ferdynand Machay's memoir *Moja droga do Polski* (My Way to Poland). In it, the author describes his own dilemmas and hesitation regarding which of the two sides—Slovak or Hungarian—was more desirable to choose when advancing their program.⁵⁴ Ultimately, the regionalists opted for a more pragmatic approach, perceiving greater opportunities for success through cooperation with Hungarian officials. However, as historian Marcel Jesenský adds, political calculation existed on the other side as well:

Budapest skilfully manipulated the so-called Goral question to break down Slovak-Polish cooperation against the Magyarization, which also posed a challenge to the Galician Poles. Galician Slovakophiles and Slavophiles hesitated to be manipulated by Budapest against the Slovaks, but some activists believed that the support of the Hungarian government for their activities would be beneficial, even at the price of Slovak sympathies.⁵⁵

Conclusion

An analysis of the roots of the Czechoslovak-Polish border dispute over the Orava and Spiš regions demonstrates that this conflict was not a random by-product of the post-war chaos of 1919 and 1920, but rather the culmination of long-term ideological influence and the sustained interest of Polish intellectual elites and national movement activists. A key factor at the very outset of the process was the formulation of the concept of “Kresy południowe.” Primarily based on the ethnolinguistic similarities between Goral dialects and the Polish language, this idea defined the population of the northern frontier regions of the Kingdom of Hungary as fundamentally “Polish” in character. The interest of Kraków-based intellectuals in these regions was also a result of the preceding creation of the “Goral myth,” which idealized the Gorals as bearers of primordial Polish culture and language, despite the fact that their own national consciousness was often merely regional, most commonly expressed by the term *tunajši* or “local”. Consequently, from the beginning of the 20th century, Polish supporters of the so-called national revivalist movement worked systematically toward “awakening” a Polish consciousness within this pre-defined population.

When confronted with the reality of the Kingdom of Hungary's nationality policy in the years preceding the First World War, the Polish national revivalist campaign was forced to define a fundamental strategy. Two paths were available: cooperation with representatives of the Slovak national movement or cooperation with representatives of Hungarian state policy. This very question split the movement into two circles, or centres of Polish interest regarding the Southern Borderlands. While the Kraków Slavophiles, largely associated with Klub Słowiański, sought a solution through cooperation and consensus with the Slovak national movement, the group of “regionalists” adopted a significantly more pragmatic stance, aiming to achieve partial successes through alignment

54 MACHAY 1992, pp. 45–50.

55 JESENSKÝ 2014, p. 21.

with Hungarian state policy, even at the cost of confrontation with the Slovak movement. These foundational positions pre-defined the Polish stance toward the demarcation of the Czechoslovak-Polish borders after the First World War and marked the beginning of the diplomatic conflict between the two states.