

# The Hungarians in Transylvania: Victims of Romanian Nationalism

*by Sara E. Popham*

Since the end of World War II, the Hungarian minority living in Transylvania: has suffered discrimination under Romanian rule. During the Communist Era, Marxist-Leninist internationalism gave way to nationalism in Romania, and the Hungarian minority suffered under the policies of leaders Georghiu-Dej and Ceausescu. Unfortunately, the fall of Communism has not provided relief. Rampant nationalism exhibited in the violence in Tirgu-Mures and the rise of right-wing nationalist parties show that discrimination continues. The status of Hungarian minorities in Transylvania: from 1945 to the present is evidence that the preservation of minority rights is incompatible with nationalism.

Transylvania was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until after World War I, when the treaty of Trianon reduced Hungary to one third of its former size and lowered the population by three-fifths. The region became part of the newly formed Romania. Admiral Horthy of Hungary demanded that the borders be redrawn, and in 1940 he got his way in the Vienna Diktat, which gave northern Transylvania: back to Hungary. <1> Near the end of World War II, however, this situation changed.

Violence against the Transylvanian Hungarians began as soon as the Armistice Agreement between Romania and the Soviet Union was signed in 1944. The agreement, in which Romania abandoned Hitler and joined the Allied powers, promised at least part of the region to Romania. <2> Pogroms in the name of anti-fascism were launched against the Hungarians, whose nation of origin was still allied to Germany. Soviet troops were able to move quickly enough to stop the infamous Maniu Guard pogrom of October 1944, and on November 11, the U.S.S.R. ordered the Romanian administration out of Transylvania. <3>

With this action the Soviets gained the support of the Hungarian minority. Many joined the left-wing MADOSZ, which was the Hungarian National Workers' Party. Elemer Illyes remarks that "the internationalist character of communism appealed to the dissatisfaction felt by oppressed national minorities," and points out that most communists in Romania were Hungarians and Jews. <4> G.M.Tamas notes that:

It is easy to forget that what appears today as a fossil of asocietal and cultural monster was originally mapped out asa utopia designed to liberate mankind. The Soviet Union. . . successfully separated ethnicity and politics. <5>

Stalin used the support of the Hungarian minority to defeat anti-communism in Romania, and promised them full equal rights if Romania annexed Transylvania. <6>

Stalin ordered Romania's King Michael to support Petru Groza as Prime Minister to preside over the "transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat." <7> Under Groza,

minority representatives were sent to the Romanian Council of State and Council of Ministers. Hungarian broadcasts were played on Radio Bucharest, and the Hungarian Bolyai University in Cluj was established. <8> Groza also supported the 1945 Nationality Statute which guaranteed rights and freedoms for national minorities. <9>

There were, however, some sinister developments under the Groza government. The agrarian reform law was designed to confiscate the land of Hungarians or Germans who had left their homes in order to escape from Antonescu or had retreated with the German Army. <10> The C.A.S.B.I. decree sequestered the property of all "presumedly" hostile persons. <11> The 1945 Citizenship Law denied any social benefits to anyone not in Romania during the "Antonescu Terror." <12> During this time the Communist doctrine of land redistribution was enacted; 80% of the redistributed land formally owned by Hungarians, however, became Romanian, <13> and the citizenship of 300,000 to 400,000 Hungarians and Germans was put into question. <14>

The Hungarian minority in Transylvania: received little protection at the Paris Peace Conference in 1946. As Hungary had allied itself with the Axis Powers, Hungarians everywhere became "the object of condemnation and collective punishment." <15> Stalin decided that Transylvania: would go to Romania instead of Hungary because he felt that communism was more likely to be established in Romania, and although Britain and the US. suggested some territorial modifications in Hungary's favor, Stalin had his way. <16> A significant fault in the Conference was the failure to recognize collective rights, as the World War I treaties had. These treaties recognized only individual rights, and that, says Illyes, meant that minority rights were reduced to an internal matter instead of an international right. <17>

In 1947 King Michael was forced to abdicate and Georghiu-Dej of the Romanian Workers Party took over. Georghiu-Dej consolidated his power through a series of purges in which he expelled "foreigners" and "agents of Moscow," such as Ana Pauker and Lazlo Luca in favor of home-based Romanian communists. He reduced the Bolyai University to a secondary school and restricted travel so that Hungarians in Transylvania could not see their families in Hungary. He also began a campaign against the Hungarian Peoples Party, which started with the arrest of its leaders on false charges of espionage, and ended with the party's abolition in 1953. By 1949, the West was complaining of human rights violations in Romania. <18>

This virulent nationalism worsened after the death of Stalin in 1953. Georghiu-Dej declared that the problem of national minorities and discrimination was solved. One could be punished for even speaking of the issue. <19> A process of "Romanianization" began. Bilinguality of advertisements, announcements, conferences, and public discussions was abolished. All institutions were declared "national," and no minority could obtain a position of importance in them. The RCP (Romanian Communist Party) was referred to as a national party, and all other political organizations were outlawed. There was much discrimination in industry, where it was very difficult for a member of a minority to obtain a managerial position. <20> Two events in 1956 affected Romanian policy towards its Hungarian minority: the XX Party Congress, in which Khrushchev

denounced Stalin and acknowledged separate paths to communism, and the revolutionary ferment throughout the Eastern bloc, which reached a particularly high level in Hungary. The nationalist goals of Romania fit in with the concept of de-Stalinization and the Eastern bloc countries asserting their individuality, but the Hungarian Revolution of Imre Nagy caused problems. Hungarian students in Transylvania organized anti-Soviet and anti-Romanian demonstrations. Georghiu-Dej declared that all of the Hungarians in Transylvania were collectively guilty of "revisionism" and "counter-revolutionary attitudes." In a series of waves, he had 40,000 people arrested. <21>

During the 1960's, three major events shaped Romanian policy toward the Hungarians in Transylvania: The Valev debate centered around a Soviet plan to combine southeast Romania, northeast Bulgaria, and southern Bessarabia into a unit. This frightened Romania, which had been attempting to gain a degree of political and economic independence since 1955. They saw it as an attempt by the Soviet Union to destroy their national unity. <22> This could only intensify the already manic nationalism in Romania.

The 1965 Ninth RCP Congress confirmed the election of Nicolae Ceausescu as General Secretary of the RCP. <23> His policies would prove to be very destructive to the Transylvanian Hungarians. Also confirmed in 1965 was a new constitution which emphasized a "unified, indivisible Romania." Any outsiders who tried to defend the national minorities were declared to be "infringing on national sovereignty." <24> Romanian nationalism forbade the Hungarians any international help.

The third influence of the 1960's was the Czechoslovakian uprising in 1968. The intervention of the Warsaw Pact in that country terrified the Romanians into making some surface-level concessions to minority rights. A Council of Working People on Nationalities was created. A Nationality Directorate was installed in the Ministry of Education, and a Hungarian Council was permitted to raise issues such as Hungarian textbooks and bilingual signs. Illyes points out, however, that these concessions were largely "window-dressing," and nothing was done about the problems raised by the Hungarian Council. <25>

An example of the true motives of the Ceausescu regime is displayed in the fate of the Magyar Autonomous Region. It was established in the 1952 Constitution in response to Soviet pressure. It was in line with Marxist-Leninist ideology regarding national minorities, and it served a role in propaganda. It never really had self-government, and scarcely one-third of the Hungarians in Transylvania lived there. <26> In 1968, however, the Ceausescu regime abolished it when they re-established the "judet" county system. Illyes claims that the new counties were "distributed in such a way so as to ensure a Romanian majority everywhere." <27>

Michael Sozan defines ethnocide (for which he holds Romania responsible) as "any action by representatives of a dominant culture which aims at obliterating another sociocultural tradition through a coercive policy of assimilation." <28> The code phrase for these assimilationist policies during the 1960's and 1970's was "irrespective of nationality." <29> This seemingly benign classification of human rights, claims Illyes,

served as a sinister cover for "a policy of assimilation into a state which insists on the exclusiveness of its national character." <30> Opposition to these policies came from within the Communist Party. Karoly Kiraly, vice-president of the Hungarian Nationality Workers' Council, alternate member of the Politburo in Romania, and former Central Committee member, wrote a letter to the Central Committee in 1978, deploring the treatment of minority nationalities in Romania. After describing numerous violations of the constitution (such as removing Hungarian officials from towns and cities, forbidding minority language use, and various school policies), he wrote:

It is clear from only this much that a multitude of factual realities violate the constitution . . . I am one of those Communists who is convinced of the truth of our ideals . . . What is occurring . . . has nothing in common with Marxist Leninism, fundamental human rights, humanism, or ethical behavior and human dignity. <31>

The one responsible for these policies, Ceausescu, was elected President of the Republic in 1974. <32> According to Illyes, Ceausescu tried to divert attention from the fact that living conditions were significantly better in Hungary by becoming "even more stridently nationalistic." As a result, the Hungarian minority became a scapegoat in Romania. <33> He established laws in 1974 which made all historical documents, archives, libraries, and anything else of cultural or scientific value property of the state and then barred Hungarian scholars and researchers from access to them. <34> During the process of urbanization he dispersed the population so that Hungarians were forced into the Regat (Romania proper) and Romanians were placed in Transylvania. <35> He also discouraged tolerance of minority language use, stating that "the task of the minorities is to acquire the Romanian language . . . and to fulfill the plans of the Party, not to deal with such problems as education and language maintenance." <36> He later remarked that "[w]ithout speaking Romanian one cannot expect equal rights." <37> Rather more serious was the 1977 arrest and torture of Hungarian intellectuals, one of whom was found dead in his home shortly after his release. According to the Committee for Human Rights in Romania, it was "part of a sweeping effort to silence all possible signs of independent-minded expression within the Hungarian minority." <38>

1989 saw the end of Ceausescu and a hopeful beginning to an interim regime. Romanians and Hungarians alike took part in the coup d'etat which ousted Ceausescu after police threatened Hungarian human rights activist Lazlo Tokes. A new party of former communists called the National Salvation Front (NSF) took control. Its Declaration of Rights of National Minorities in 1990 established individual and collective rights. It promised proportional representation of the minorities in parliament and the reopening of the Bolyai University. <39>

Unfortunately this trend was not to continue. The end of Communism "unleashed destructive national passions." <40> Once the "socialist utopia" was finished, the ruling powers attempted to replace it with "national independence" and "ethnic or racial purity." <41> The nationalist backlash took the form of the Vatra Romaneasca (Romanian Cradle) Party.

This nationalist group was responsible for an anti-Hungarian rally in Tirgu-Mures in 1990 in which eight people were killed and 800 injured in a dispute over schools and bilingual signs. <42> The people of Tirgu-Mures "battled with clubs and pipes and bottles." <43> The 1991 report on the incident said that "some agents of the former political police" (Securitate) were involved in the ethnic violence. <44>

With the rise of the ultra-nationalist PRNU (the political wing of Vatra Romaneasca), things have gone badly for the Transylvanian Hungarians. This party won many local elections in 1992. Most distressing is the election of Georghe Funar, the chairman of the PRNU, as mayor of Cluj. He has removed all Hungarian signs, opposed Hungarian schools, and banned international symposia which he claimed were based on Hungarian irredentism. The resulting tension forced the government to send in troops. <45> Although some have called his actions unconstitutional, the government is reluctant to confront him. The growing nationalism in Romania has forced the DNSF (the successor party to the NSF) to cooperate with PRNU. This is demonstrated in the fact that in the new constitution, the PRNU was able to insert measures forbidding the use of Hungarian in judicial procedures and council meetings, and dictating central appointment of prefects to prevent local autonomy by the minorities. <46> President Ion Iliescu of the DNSF has even appointed a PRNU member as Minister of Education. <47>

The Hungarian Democratic Federation of Romania (HDFR), the party which represents the Hungarian minority, has had little success in fighting nationalism. In March 1993, after they had requested more decentralization, two Hungarian prefects were replaced in the mostly Hungarian counties of Harghita and Covasna, one of them by a member of Vatra Romaneasca. Although the government also set up a Council of National Minorities which was intended to facilitate Romania's entrance into the Council of Europe (CE), the HDFR found that it was as useless a body as those under Ceasescu, and walked out in September 1993, after filing a complaint with the CE. <48> Romania still refuses to sign a guarantee of minority rights, claiming that it is an internal matter. <49> Kovrig asserts that Romania is "seemingly intent upon fostering a national unity that is inimical to multiculturalism." <50> Hungary has taken an interest in its minority in Romania, although it confirms that it has no irredentist ambitions. It seeks an agreement with Romania similar to the one it has with Ukraine regarding Hungarian minorities in Transcarpathia: one which grants extensive collective rights. Romania, however, objects to Hungary's interest in its minorities and will not sanction collective rights. Kovrig notes that if this continues, Hungary could itself "veer toward more radical nationalism." <51>

Already some radicals in Hungary are calling for more aggressive methods. One radical politician, Istvan Csurka, has demanded Hungarian "living space," frighteningly similar to Hitler's "Lebensraum." Gerza Entz, the Hungarian official responsible for relations with Hungarian minorities in other countries, warns that if nations like Romania do not change their policies, "this will sustain a system of violence, further economic decline, killing of people, massacres." <52>

Hungary uses the situation in the former Yugoslavia as evidence of what could happen if the CSCE does not support its case. <53> Jose-Maria Mendiluce, when he stepped down

as chief of the UN refugee program, cautioned that the crisis in the Balkans could repeat itself elsewhere:

People can be transformed into hating and killing machines without too much difficulty . . . All it takes is an economic crisis and a few cynical politicians who blame it on immigrants or poor people or people who are somehow different. <54>

The problem of Romanian nationalism has not disappeared with the fall of communism; it has steadily continued. The prospect of another Yugoslavia in Romania or some other Eastern European nation should send a chill through the West. Since nationalism is at the root of the persecution of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania: the West should search for ways to curtail it. Kovrig claims that the expansion of such organizations as the European Union and NATO into the Eastern bloc could provide "leverage" which would "dampen national animosities and reinforce the legitimacy of international norms." <55> Such organizations should have the power to enforce their requirements concerning human rights. In this way, the nationalism which has been the cause of discrimination and suffering might be defeated.

#### Notes

1 McPherson, William, "The Transylvania: Tangle," *Wilson's Quarterly*, Winter 1994: p. 64.

2 Illyes, Elemer, *National Minorities in Romania: Change in Transylvania*: Struktura Press, Hamilton, ON, C. 1982: p. 95.

3 Ibid., 101-102.

4 Ibid., 102.

5 Tames. G.M. "A Legacy of Empire." *Wilson's Quarterly*. Winter 1994: p. 79.

6 Illyes, 103.

7 Ibid., 96.

8 Ibid., 104-105.

9 Ibid., 108.

10 Ibid., 109.

11 Ibid., 110

12 Sozan, Michael, "Ethnocide in Rumania." *Transylvania and the Theory of Daco-Romanian Continuity*, Committee of Transylvania: c. 1980, p. 97.

- 13 Illyes, 109.
- 14 Ibid., 110.
- 15 Ibid., 100.
- 16 Ibid., 98.
- 17 Ibid., 107.
- 18 Ibid., 111-116
- 19 Ibid., 119.
- 20 Ibid, 120-121.
- 21 Ibid., 123 124.
- 22 Ibid., 126.
- 23 Ibid., 129.
- 24 Ibid., 133.
- 25 Ibid., 131.
- 26 Ibid., 117-118.
- 27 Ibid., 119.
- 28 Ibid., 93.
- 29 Illyes, 132
- 30 Ibid., 139.
- 31 Sozan, 95-98.
- 32 Illyes, 141.
- 33 McPherson, 66.
- 34 Illyes, 143-144.
- 35 Ibid., 146.

36 Sozan, 100.

37 Illyes, 146.

38 Sozan, 94

39 Kovrig, Bennett, "Hungarian Minorities in East-Central Europe," *The Atlantic Council of the United States - Occasional Paper Series*, March 1994, p. 14.

40 Engelberg and Ingram, Stephen and Judith, "Now Hungary Adds Its Voice to the Ethnic Tumult." *The New York Times*. Jan. 25, 1993, A3:1

41 Tamas, 80.

42 Kovrig, 14.

43 McPherson, 60.

44 Ibid., 60.

45 Kovrig, 16.

46 Ibid., 15.

47 Ibid, 16.

48 Ibid, 17.

49 McPherson, 65.

50 Kovrig, Bennett, "Hungarian Minorities in East-Central Europe: To Create Harmony in an Ethnic Mosaic," *Bulletin of the Atlantic Council of the United States*, Vol. V, No. 4. May 12,1994, 3.

51 Ibid., 3.

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53 Ibid.

54 Kinzer, Stephen, "U.N. Official Warns Europe on Ethnic Strife." *The New York Times*. May 18,1993, A6:4.

55 Kovrig, Bulletin, Op.Cit. 4. 3

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