

PARTICULARITIES:

The Culture and Education of the Czechs in Eastern (Soviet) Volhynia during 1921–1941

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The implementation of the “socialist cultural revolution” was part of the Bolshevik monopoly of power. This “revolution” was intended to elevate the overall cultural standard of the population, particularly in the countryside. The Bolshevik regime established a Czechoslovak section at the Governorate Department of People’s Education in Žytomyr to manage cultural work among the Volhynia Czechs, which established a reading room where the Bolshevik press and Marxist literature could be studied, as well as singing, drama, natural science and atheistic groups. The Czechs endeavoured to revive their cultural activities that had been interrupted by the events of war at their settlements. The best results were achieved by amateur dramatics.

Key words: *Czechs; USSR; Volhynia; 1921–1941*

The cultural elevation of Czech villages occurred particularly after the First Convention of Czech Teachers in Kiev in 1927. Teachers established drama, choir and recital groups everywhere, and organised libraries and brass bands. There were fire brigades and insurance societies in every town and village. Some farmers subscribed to agricultural magazines from the Czechoslovak Republic, enabling them to apply new agricultural techniques on their farms, particularly in hop cultivation.

The Bolshevik regime also endeavoured to publish Czech newspapers. The first was *Kronika (Chronicle)* in 1921, which was meant to come out as the magazine of the Czech Office of the Volhynia Governorate Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, though only two editions were published.

This attempt was followed by the publication of the newspaper *Volyňská Pravda (Volhynia Truth)*, again as an organ of the Bolshevik Party. The first edition, edited by the Czech communist Jaroslav Petrlík, came out in September 1921. An insufficient readership following the division of Volhynia between Poland and the USSR

and the poor reception the newspaper received led, however, to its demise, which meant there were no Czech newspapers here after 1922.

Evžen Rychlík, who was interested in the folklore, language and economic relations of his compatriots, undertook research into the Czech colonies in eastern Volhynia in the years 1920–1927 with the help of an extensive network of correspondents comprised of Czech teachers, public officials and farmers who completed questionnaires that were sent out. Rychlík came from the family of a Czech farmer in Olšanka (born 1888) and studied at grammar schools in Kiev and Prague and universities in Kiev and Berlin. From 1917 onwards he was a private professor at the Ukrainian People's University in Kiev, and from 1926 a professor at the Institute of People's Education in Nezhin near Chernihiv and the Czech Seminary at the Institute of People's Education in Žytomyr.¹ In Nezhin he published an ethnographic study on the Czech colony Olšanka in which he considered the speech of the local Czechs in lexical terms. He found a considerable influence made by the Russian and Ukrainian languages. In another study, he presented an overview of the literature to date on the Czech settlements in Volhynia.

A council of national minorities, which acted as an umbrella organisation for this ethnographic research, was established in 1929 at the initiative of the Ethnographic Commission of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Evžen Rychlík's 120-page treatise *The Czechs in the Ukraine* was meant to be published here by 1932. The project was, however, interrupted by his arrest in 1931 and his conviction and sentencing to imprisonment in a gulag, where he died in 1939.

Czech cultural officials in Volhynia, largely teachers and students, met up in the Council of National Minorities which was attended by the Czech School Inspector, male and female teachers, and students from the teaching seminary. An expanded methodological session of Czech cultural officials in Volhynia took place here in September 1929 and considered the government's nationalities policy and the tasks of the cultural revolution, as well as the situation on the ground, the state of and perspectives for cultural education work among the Czech population, new plans for work schools, Czech publishing activity, the training of Czech teachers, and the prospects for the Czech teaching seminary. The discussion drew attention to the shortage of Czech books in town and school libraries and the shortage of suitable theatrical plays and Soviet Czech newspapers, magazines and books. A recommendation was made at the end of the session to secure scholarships and literature for the students of the Czech teaching seminary.²

1 MUŠINKA, A.: Evžen Rychlík – Zapomenutý slavista českého původu. In *Češi v cizině (Czechs Abroad)*, vol. 6. Prague 1992, pp. 85–92.

2 The Institute of Art History, Folklore and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine in Kiev, collection: Kabinet nacmen (KNM), no. 28.

In the middle of the 1930 s, the regime prepared the publication of a Czech magazine in the USSR, though this plan was never implemented. One publishing house in Moscow published merely a few Czech books and brochures with both political and entertaining content. Hašek's *The Good Solider Švejk*, Včelička's *The Café on the Main Street* and Urx's book of reports from the USSR entitled *In Socialist Fields* came out in Czech in the USSR. This literature was intended to replace imports of books, magazines and textbooks from the Czechoslovak Republic, whose content was objectionable to the Soviet regime.³

In the first years of the Bolshevik regime, the authorities also mobilised the teaching staff of Czech schools to perform various administrative tasks. Teachers helped collect taxes in kind, keep agricultural statistics and conduct land reforms. Schools did not receive funds either for school requisites or teachers' salaries, and teachers were forced to look for ways of making money on the side. Their work came under continuous scrutiny by the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution, from 1922 onwards the State Political Directorate. The school attendance record of pupils was poor due to frequent epidemics and a shortage of warm clothing in winter. Parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the abolition of religious instruction.

The Czech school system was originally to have been run by the Czechoslovak section at the Volhynia Governorate Department of People's Education. There were eight Czech schools in the Volhynia Governorate in the first half of the nineteen twenties.⁴ The Ukrainian People's Commissariat for Public Education permitted the engagement of a number of teachers from the Czechoslovak Republic and established a Czech inspectorate at the commissariat in Charkov which was charged with the task of supervising Czech schools and settlements.⁵ Children up to the age of sixteen had to join the Pioneer organisation, while Communist Youth Association organisations were established for young people between the ages of 16 and 23. The originally benevolent approach taken by the regime gradually began to change. Teachers from Czechoslovakia had to take special examinations, and textbooks from Czechoslovak were considered ideologically unsuitable.⁶ In the middle of the nineteen twenties, 343 of the total number of 1,033 Czech children of school age attended seven Czech schools (with 13 teachers). Three schools with six teachers and 225 pupils were Ukrainian-Czech schools, and one school with 39 pupils was a Ukrainian-German-Czech school. These schools were subject to the Czech

3 *Krajan (Compatriot)*, 3, 1934, no. 1, p. 4; no. 21, p. 2.

4 *Naše zahraničí* (hereafter merely NZ), 6, 1925, pp. 108–109.

5 NZ, 7, 1926, vol. 4, p. 108.

6 *Idem*, vol. 2, p. 102.

inspectorate.⁷ In August 1927, the Commissariat for Public Education held two-week holiday courses for Czech teachers in the Ukraine. Fifteen teachers, including Czech inspector Josef Hájek and Professor Evžen Rychlík, attended courses in Kiev. These courses were the first attempt to organise Czech teachers in the Ukraine.⁸ They had to take instruction in the Ukrainian language, educational theory and the institutions of the USSR. This first convention of Czech teachers in the Ukraine was followed by a second convention in Žytomyr in June 1929.

Czech teachers in the villages not only organised education for children, young people and adults, but also organised all aspects of cultural life: hobby groups, amateur theatre and choir singing. Their standard of living was, meanwhile, low, and at the beginning of the nineteen twenties they still received part of their salary in kind. In the 1921–1922 school year, a teacher had to settle for 144 kg of rye a year. In the 1922–1923 school year, teachers received 160 kg of rye a month. Not until the 1923–1924 school year was their salary stipulated in monetary terms. A teacher received 18 R (300 CZK) and a head teacher 21 R (360 CZK) a month. In 1924–1925 this monthly salary rose to 27 R (460 CZK) and in 1925–1926 to as much as 35–42 R (ca 700 CZK) a month.⁹ The material conditions in schools were also not favourable. In many places there were no school buildings, and instruction took place in rented rooms that were unkempt and unheated. In place of school benches, pupils had simple tables and long benches. There were no exercise books, writing implements or, most importantly, Czech textbooks.

Teachers used textbooks imported from the Czechoslovak Republic as there were no approved Soviet Czech textbooks. Even in this unfavourable situation, teachers endeavoured to cultivate a national awareness among their pupils through the reading of Czech poems, the singing of Czech songs, the rehearsal of dramatic performances and the study of maps of the Czechoslovak Republic.¹⁰ Evžen Rychlík and Antonín Vodseďálek, who arrived in eastern Volhynia along with other teachers in 1927 at the instigation of then Chairman of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and Deputy in the Czechoslovak Parliament Josef Haken, deserve great credit in this respect.¹¹ At the end of the nineteen twenties, however, it became clear that the existing teachers were not satisfactory to the regime.

7 AUERHAN, J. – TURČÍN, R.: Přehled československých zahraničních menšin a krajanských aglomerací. In *Krajané v cizině a jejich styky s domovem (Compatriots Abroad and Their Relations with the Homeland)*. Ročenka Československého ústavu zahraničního. Prague 1930, p. 223.

8 NZ, 8, 1927, vol. 4, p. 189.

9 NZ, 7, 1926, p. 181.

10 *Věrná stráž (Faithful Guard)*, 3, 1948, no. 13–14, p. 7.

11 ENT, A.: *Východní Volyně*. Rkp. p. 5.

At the turn of the nineteen twenties and thirties there were 19 Czech schools with 24 teachers and 1,057 children in the Ukraine.¹² It still proved possible to hold the Third Czech Teachers' Convention in Žytomyr in 1930, though this proved to be the last as all those taking part in the convention were arrested by the NKVD. The arrest of these teachers also meant the temporary dissolution of the Czech schools and the suspension of contact with the homeland and cultural life in the Czech settlements.

The dissolution of the old cadres of teachers necessitated the training of new teachers for the Czech schools in the Ukraine. In 1931 the teacher training college in Korostyšiv near Žytomyr organised four-month courses for Czech teachers and Czech teaching was then restored. A Czech department was established at the teacher training college in Kiev in 1933. There were around sixty students in three school years who studied eight subjects in Ukrainian and seven in Czech.

Chairman of the senatorial group of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Josef Haken, who went to Moscow for this reason in 1933, also played a part in the organisation of Czech schools and courses and the preparation of new textbooks.¹³ Following his return from the USSR, Haken wrote about the shortage of qualified Czech teachers who would also prove satisfactory from the political perspective. In his words, all the Czech schools should be equipped with cheap new pictorial textbooks. A new primer and arithmetic book came out in 1934, a grammar textbook was at the printers, and a reader and science textbook were in preparation. The Charkov state publishing house planned to issue twelve Czech textbooks in 1934, but this plan was not fulfilled due to the shortage of experts who would have written them. In June 1935, during his visit to the USSR, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czechoslovak Republic Edvard Beneš visited the Czech department at the teacher training college in Kiev. The school, however, closed the department after 1935. Some of the students were allowed to continue their studies of Ukrainian or Russian.¹⁴

Teaching in minority schools was brought to a halt in 1938. All children had to continue attending schools at which teaching was conducted in the Ukrainian or Russian language. By dissolving the Czech school system, the Stalinist regime attempted to suppress the last vestiges of the identity of the Czech minority in the Ukraine, which was to merge along with other nationalities into an undifferentiated, easily manipulated mass of Soviet citizens without rights.

12 KLÍMA, S.: *Československá péče krajská*. Prague 1931, p. 19.

13 *Nové knihy*, 1984, no. 22, p. 2.

14 ANDRES, E.: *Zločiny proti lidskosti spáchané KSSS na Češích a Němcích na území bývalé Volyňské gubernie*. In *Stálá mezinárodní konference o zločinech komunismu (Permanent International Conference on the Crimes of Communism)*. Prague 1991, p. 168.