

# Pavol Matula

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## Slovak-Polish relationships in 1938-1947 in the context of border disputes

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Pavol Matula\*

## SLOVAK-POLISH RELATIONSHIPS IN 1938–1947 IN THE CONTEXT OF BORDER DISPUTES

After World War I Poland demanded a connection to the northern part of the former Kingdom of Hungary (Spiš, Orava and Kysuce). This area was also claimed by Czechoslovakia. The regions became the subject of the Czechoslovak-Polish territorial dispute. The Supreme Council decided by plebiscite on the regions of Tešín, Orava and Spiš on 28 September 1919. In the end it was not a plebiscite which decided about the controversial territory, but international arbitration. The Conference of Ambassadors decided on dividing Spiš and Orava between Poland and Czechoslovakia on 28 July 1920. Most of the inhabitants disagreed with the decision. Another border dispute occurred in 1938 after the signing of the Munich Agreement, when Poland made a claim not only to other parts of Orava and Spiš but also Kysuce. The Slovak-Polish Delimitation Committee was attacked by inhabitants of disputed territory several times, resulting in the Polish army occupying the area. After the beginning of the Second World War all parts of the regions of Spiš, Orava and Kysuce became part of Slovakia, as Bratislava collaborated with Berlin. At the end of WWII the border was returned to the pre-Munich position but the situation in the disputed territory was unstable for a long time after 1945.

Key words: Slovak-Polish relations 1918–1947, Spiš, Orava, Kysuce, border disputes

Until World War I Poland did not have any claims on Slovak territory and generally the historical borders between Poland and Hungary had been recognized. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a segment of Polish society, mostly in Cracow, showed their interest in the territory of Orava and Spiš, but their interest was mostly in the areas of ethnography and linguistics (Deák 1991: 20).

In December 1918 Polish troops occupied part of Spiš, but a month later they had to withdraw after intervention of the Supreme Council. Both countries appealed to the Paris Peace Conference which decided on 3 February 1919 that the borders between the two countries would be established by the Supreme Council. By the order of the Great Powers in July 1919 negotiations between Czechoslovakia and Poland took place in Cracow, where the Polish side suggested solution of the feud by plebiscite. Poland claimed the territory of the whole districts of Trstené, Námestovo, Kežmarok, Lubovňa, Čadca, Kysucké Nové Mesto and half of the districts of Levoča and Poprad (Miškovič 1941: 47–48). The Supreme Council decided on a plebiscite on 28 September 1919. It was to take part in the regions of Tešín, Orava and Spiš (Ciągwa 1995: 154–165). For both countries it was more important to

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\* Comenius University Bratislava, [matula.pavol777@gmail.com](mailto:matula.pavol777@gmail.com)

acquire industrial Tešín, which historically was part of the Bohemian Crown, but about 50% of its inhabitants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Polish. The area was temporarily divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia on 5 November 1918 by interim agreement of local self-government councils, the Polish *Rada Narodowa Księstwa Cieszyńskiego* and the Czech *Národní výbor pro Slezsko*. The Czechoslovak government had not confirmed the agreement. When the Polish government announced an election for the Polish Parliament within the disputed territory, Prague claimed that the delimitation was only interim and the Czechoslovakian army occupied most of the region of Tešín. The Polish party interpreted it as a breach of the agreement (Borák-Žáček 1993: 8–11).

As regards Spiš and Orava, the Czecho-Slovak party responded to the claim with arguments based on historical principle. Poland used arguments based on ethnical principle as according to Poland the inhabitants on the claimed territory were of Polish origin. They proclaimed that inhabitants of the regions were ethnic Polish because of phonetic similarities between the Goral dialect and the Polish language.<sup>1</sup> The Slovak party, while considering Gorals identity, pointed out the national feeling of Gorals, who, in most cases felt themselves to be Slovaks (Bielovodský 1946: 24–27).

After the plebiscite was proclaimed both sides started with propaganda to win as many votes as possible. Plenty of well paid agents were involved, trying to persuade voters not only verbally, but even by buying votes. They gave out products like flour, kerosene, salt and sugar, which were very precious at that time (AMTZ: AR/NO/382, 379, AR/248, 315, 300; Varinský 2002: 126; Machay 1992: 180). On both sides there were cases of violence and even murder (Chalupecký 1993: 15–16; Miškovič 1941: 52; Tomaszewski 1995: 330–331; Koźmiński 1991: 163; Orlof 1995: 23).

Ultimately the effort of both sides to sway as many voters as possible was in vain because no plebiscite decided the controversial territory, but international arbitration which was agreed to by both countries in Spaa on 10 July 1920. On behalf of the Supreme Council, the Embassy Council decided on the dispute on 28 July 1920. On the basis of that decision the controversial territory was divided. Slovakia lost 25 villages with 25,000 inhabitants.

The tragic impact of the Munich agreement of 1938, by which Czechoslovakia was forced to cede Sudety to Nazi Germany, was followed by territorial demands of other states, Hungary and Poland, which took advantage of the weakened republic and took part in its partition. Budapest gained a large part of southern Slovakia by the Vienna arbitrage of 1 November 1938. In October, Warsaw gained Tešín territory, also called Zaolzie. The Polish demands should have been thus satisfied.

Poland initially did not have any territorial demands toward Slovakia, which gained its autonomy on 6 October 1938, as even though the government was pressed by various groups regarding Goral citizens in Spiš, Orava and Kysuce as Polish, although the majority of them

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<sup>1</sup> Most Polish historians support this thesis even today and some are trying to provide evidence that in earlier times Goral citizens surrendered to slovakization under the influence of Slovakian teachers and priests. See the conference proceedings TRAJDOS, M. Tadeusz (ed.): *Spisz i Orawa w 75 rocznicę powrotu do Polski północnych części obu ziem*. Krakow : Secesja, 1995. On the contrary, Slovakian historian Ivan Chalupecký asserts that the relatedness of the Goral dialect and the Polish language originates from polonization. Chalupecký, Ivan: K otázke goralských nářečí na Spiši. In *Studia historica Tyrnaviensia IV*, 2004, p. 161–172.

declared (registered) themselves as Slovaks. They were mostly the associations situated close to Cracow centre, such as the General committee for Spiš, Orava and Kysuce (Główny Komitet dla Spisza, Orawy i Czadeckiego), which was delivering letters, analyses and memoranda to the government. Warsaw had been resistant to that press so far. If territorial demands were declared at an inappropriate time and to an unreasonable degree, the main goal of Polish foreign policy could be in danger, as it aimed to divide Czechoslovakia and create common Polish-Hungary borders by annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia (Podkarpatská Rus) to Hungary. It was to be done by separating Slovaks from Czechs. Moreover, Warsaw tried to include Slovakia in its sphere of influence. However, by gaining autonomy, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party regarded its political program to be complete and did not want to focus their activity on gaining full independence of Slovakia, at least not in the near future (Deák 1991: 204–209).

In late October Warsaw thus delivered a note to the government in Bratislava with demands it considered as restrained. It mentioned only small adjustments to the borders so as not to disrupt Polish-Slovakian relations too much. A few days later, under the impression of unsuccessful diplomacy in competition with Germany, Warsaw was tougher and expanded its demands. Originally they were to be about uninhabited regions, but the new version also concerned populated areas. The Czechoslovakian side accepted them on November 1, 1938.

It was not so easy for the common Slovak-Polish delimitation commission to demarcate the limits. The affected citizens were strongly against it. The first serious confrontation between the Polish part of the commission and local citizens took place on 18 November 1938. At the beginning, in a hotel restaurant in Čadca where they were staying three members of the Polish delegation were verbally insulted. Later, on the way back from Raková to Čadca, the commission was confronted by groups of people going to join the demonstration against the annexation of their region to Poland. According to the plans of organizers, the demonstration was intended to be peaceful, but the atmosphere there changed very quickly (Šimončič 2003: 319–320; Gotkiewicz 1998: 121).

The police, concerned with the safety of Polish members of the commission, transported them in an unlit police bus. They also drove the commission's bus with the interior light on so that the demonstrators could see that the Polish delegates were not inside. In this way, they were able to make their way through the disorderly crowd, which was armed with sticks and stones, and escape from the town (Šimončič 2003: 322–323; Gotkiewicz 1998: 128–129).

The next clash with resentful citizens took place on 21 November 1938. Close to Čadca, near the settlements called Privary and Magonky, the commission was confronted by two women with rakes, who started to curse its members. They threatened them with murder, screaming that they did not want to join Poland, that they would rather beat their children than send them to Polish schools. Men later joined them and started to threaten the Poles. The atmosphere was becoming more and more dangerous, so that the police had to secure the commission by special cordon. The commission changed its plans and crossed to the Polish side of the border (Gotkiewicz 1998: 117, 130).

Supporters who considered north Kysuce as part of Poland did not change their attitude even after facing the resentment of local citizens. They believed that those "provocations" were inspired by German sympathisers from Hlinka's Slovak Peoples Party, who supported the unaware citizens in anti-Polish protests (Gotkiewicz 1998: 117, 130).

Warsaw strengthened its pressure on the Slovak side at the end of November 1938. After anti-Polish protests of citizens from the Čadca area, Javorina and Oravský Podzámok, it began occupation of the demanded territory by force, even before completing the work of the common Slovak-Polish delimitation commission. As the Polish and Czechoslovak armies were fighting against each other near Čadca and Javorina, it did not come about without bloodshed (Borák 1998a: 65–90; Borák 1998b: 3–24).

Based on an agreement signed in Zakopane on 1 December 1938, Slovakia had to cede 226 km<sup>2</sup> of its territory along with 4,280 citizens to Poland. It concerned the villages of Javorina and Lesnica in Spiš, Suchá Hora and Hladovka in Orava, and Svrčinovec, Čierne and Skalité in Kysuce.

The annexation of new areas of northern Spiš, Orava and part of Kysuce as well as the behaviour of the Polish authorities in the annexed areas resulted in an anti-Polish sentiment in Slovak society. It culminated on 1 September 1939 when Slovakia joined the German invasion against Poland. Slovak propaganda explained the Slovak participation in the invasion by previous annexations of the Slovak territory by Poland and the political situation there. The Slovak Republic thus regained territories annexed by Poland in 1938, 1924 and 1920. Although regained territory officially became a part of Slovakia after the Slovak-German Treaty was signed on 21 November 1939, the first political and administrative bodies in the regained area were created in the first half of September (APNT: Jablonka, no. 1–8, Szczawnica, no. 10; AMTZ, no. AR/306; Baka 2006: 165).

Northern Spiš and Orava, which had belonged to the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Spiš until 25 October 1925, were returned back to their jurisdiction on 25 September 1939 by decision of the Vatican (Bielovodský 1946: 138–139). A new problem, what to do with mostly Polish priests serving in the area, arose. On 11 October 1939 the Spiš diocese sent them a questionnaire where, aside from other information, they were to express if they were ready to pledge allegiance to the Slovak Republic (ASD, Correspondence, no. 2798/1941). The demand for the pledge of the priests was important not only because of their loyalty towards Slovakia but mostly because of their capacity to perform marriages (Bielovodský 1946: 140–141).

But the majority of the Polish priests left their parishes voluntarily in the autumn of 1939 (AÚPN: no. S-1410). Those who stayed were gradually recalled by the Spiš diocese because they refused to pledge allegiance to the Slovak Republic or they answered negatively to some questions on the questionnaire (AKM: no. 33; ASD: no. 1509/1940, no. 1847–1848/1940, no. 2045–2046/1940; Bielovodský 1946: 141).

Still, some Polish priests stayed in their parishes, even in 1940. However in March they were told to leave them by the end of June (AÚPN: no. S-1410). In September 1940 they were ordered by the local office in Spišská Stará Ves to leave their homes, but they were allowed to move to any part of Slovakia, aside from incorporated areas (AÚPN: no. S-1410). A two-week time limit for movement from the regained area which was stated by the local authorities in Spišská Stará Ves had been broken (AÚPN: no. S-1410).

It can be said that although the situation of Polish priests in the Slovak Republic from 1939–1945 was not simple, it was much more acceptable in comparison with the situation in occupied Poland. This is evidenced by the effort of many of them to stay in Slovakia in spite of the obstacles. Moreover, the attitude of the Bishop of Spiš as well as Slovak authorities in

this case can be considered as benevolent in comparison to the attitude of Polish authorities in a similar situation, when areas of northern Slovakia were annexed by Poland in 1938 and later in 1945–1947 (*Rozmowa z ojcem polskiej Orawy...* 1945: 3).

When in January 1945 the Red Army liberated the Spiš and Orava regions, Slovak teachers, clerks and priests stayed to operate in the region. A Slovak militia was created by local inhabitants to keep public order. Local National Committees were created as well. The borders were controlled by Soviet military troops (Kwiek 2002: 7).

In February 1945 the Polish side had started its effort to control the territory. In some places police stations were created. In the places where Polish offices were established, Slovak clerks and teachers were suspended. Polish flags and coats of arms were placed on the buildings (Garek 2007: 158). New teachers were sent to the territory to control the local schools (AAN: MAP, no. 774, B-1793, 4–5; Syrný 2005: 138). Slovak inhabitants did everything they could to prevent Polish activities. They even tried to protect their area with guns, so there were some clashes with Polish militia (Kwiek 2002: 8).

At the end of April Soviet military leaders decided to conduct a quick plebiscite on the territory. It found that more than 90% of the local population was of Slovak nationality. On the basis of that and discussion with local Slovak representatives, Soviet officers set the border according to its pre-1920 position and the Soviet troops controlled the line (Kamiński 1990: 70; Kwiek 2002: 9–10, 29; Garek 2007: 159–160).

But it was not the first plebiscite concerning national identity of local population on the territory after liberation. In February 1945 a spontaneous people's plebiscite took place in which 98% of the local population proclaimed their Slovak nationality (Ciagwa 1995: 15; Garek 2007: 160).

Polish representatives refused to accept the plebiscite and argued that it was an action of the Czechoslovak army and police. Another argument was that the inclination of the population towards the Slovak nation was the result of an economic boom in the Slovak state in 1939–1945 (Bielovodský 1946: 21; Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 67; Machay 1945: 2).

In April representatives of inhabitants of the controversial territory decided to take their demands to the President and Czechoslovakian government representatives. First, on 7 April inhabitants of Orava, and later on 21 April inhabitants of Spiš, delivered a memorandum along with the results of the census of February 1945 to President Edvard Beneš (Kwiek 2002: 10; Garek 2007: 160; Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 67). Both delegations asked their home territory to be a part of the Czechoslovak Republic. The President promised them he would “do his best in this case and expressed the wish that nobody of government and local authorities would leave the region because it is a Slovak region. Neither in the case of victims“ (Bielovodský 1946: 20–21).

The Czechoslovak government considered the issue of northern Spiš and Orava at their meeting on 5 April in Košice (Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 68). There they decided to return the territory back to Poland, without any conditions, although the Slovak character of that territory was stressed (Kwiek 2002: 11).

The official handover of the territory took place on 20 May 1945 in Trstená. The Czechoslovak side was represented by delegates of the Slovak National Council. Not being ready for the Czechoslovakians' suggestion, the Polish side was surprised and had no Polish government

representative present. Only representatives of local authorities – Powiatowa Rada Narodowa Nowy Targ – took part in the meeting (Syrný 2005: 138). The delegates of both sides signed a treaty, by which territory was handed over to the Polish government and the borders were restored to the state they were before the Munich Pact (1938). Later negotiations were to lead to a definite state of borders (Syrný 2005: 138–139).

According to some Polish historians, the sudden handover of controversial territory to Poland was connected with consolidation of Czechoslovak administration in the region of Zaolzie, which was economically more important to the newly restored Czechoslovakia. When the territories of northern Spiš and Orava were returned to Poland, the Czechoslovakian side had arguments to keep the borders status quo from the period before the Munich Pact even in the region of Tešín (Garek 2007: 162; Kamiński 1990: 83). The protests of the inhabitants of the Slovak-Polish borderland failed to influence the attitude of Czechoslovakian government representatives. As soon as they learned of the treaty of Trstená they started to organize demonstrations. 3,000 people demonstrated in Jablonka against the annexation of their villages to Poland. They signed petitions, moved their property to Slovakia, and attacked the newly formed police stations of the Polish militia. In the first months the Polish side was unable to control the newly gained territory so local Polish representatives were forced to ask the army for help (Kamiński 1990: 84; Kwiek 2002: 12–13, 16–17). The help came in summer. On 17 July 1945 the Polish army appeared in northern Spiš and on 14 August 1945 even in Orava. In some places inhabitants “welcomed” the marching Polish troops as enemies, with shouts and stones. Transfer of Slovak teachers, priests and members of the militia gradually started. Naturally, the inhabitants protested against it (Kamiński 1990: 83; Kwiek 2002: 13, 18–19).

The Czechoslovak side used this situation while negotiating with Polish side. If Warsaw complained about the situation of the Polish minority in the region of Tešín, Prague pointed at the situation of Slovaks in Orava and Spiš. In summer 1945 deputations from inhabitants of annexed territories came with complaints of terror committed against them by Polish authorities. They repeatedly asked to become a part of Czechoslovakia again. The National Council of annexed villages with Ludmila Verčeková as its leader was created as a reaction to the incidents. Verčeková informed the Slovak National Council about the violence in the area. All the accumulated information was later submitted by State Secretary of Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vladimír Clementis to Polish Ambassador Wierblowski in form of a note on 23 August and later on 5 and 6 September 1945 (AMSZ: DP, w. 8, t. 135, pp. 203–206, 229–231, 235–238; Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 128).

Wierblowski reacted to the note with pressure on the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych – MSZ) to create a government commission to investigate individual cases and inform Prague about the results of the investigation. The attitude of the Polish ambassador was probably based on his conviction not to worsen the relationships with Slovaks who were more open in the case of Tešín region than were the Czechs. And it could be helpful for the Polish side in future. Warsaw accepted Wierblowski's advice and on 15 September Clementis was informed about the creation of a commission to be sent to the region. The commission was sent there on 22–25 September 1945.

However Clementis later continued to bombard the Polish ambassador with information about terror committed against Slovak inhabitants (AMSZ: DP, w. 8, t. 135, pp. 203–206, 229–231, 235–238; Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 128–129). He received the results of the commission investigation only on 4 November 1945, because of discord between the Polish Ministry of Public Administration (Ministerstwo Administracji Publicznej – MAP) and the MSZ. While the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked to punish representatives of local authorities responsible for offences in Spiš and Orava, the MAP asked for a hard line against anti-Polish propaganda in the controversial region. At last, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs pushed through its solution to the problem and the district superintendent (starosta powiatowy) in Nowy Targ was recalled and a few members of the militia were punished. Only then was Clementis informed about the results of the investigation (Friedl and Jirásek 2008: 129–130).

In following years in spite of the interventions of Czechoslovak representatives the situation in northern Spiš and Orava was not satisfactory. Even in autumn 1947 local Polish agencies were expressing their discontent to officials with the inadaptability of Slovakian citizens, who were under the strong influence of anti-Polish propaganda from Slovakia. However, Polish agencies were more afraid of reports and other indications suggesting the existence of secret organizations among Slovakian citizens preparing for armed protests. A large amount of retained leaflets and many smuggled and concealed weapons were the hints (AAN: MAP, no. 776, B-1795, 1–2).

After signing a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the Czechoslovak Republic and Poland on 10 March 1947 the conditions in the region slowly began to change<sup>2</sup>.

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*Archiwum Muzeum Tatrzańskiego Zakopane (AMTZ)*, AR/NO/382, 379, AR/248, 315, 300, AR/306.

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<sup>2</sup> For a closer look on the course of situation on a territory in issue after 1947 see also: AAN, MAP, no. 777, B-1795; Kowalski, Robert: *Sprawozdania Tadeusza Kosmali inspektora Ministerstwa Administracji Publicznej z sytuacji gospodarczej i społeczno-politycznej na górnej Orawie w latach 1947–1949*, in: *Rocznik Orawski III*, Zubrzyca Górna 2001, p. 79–114; Andráš, Matej: *Komentár k správe Tadeusza Kosmala o situácii slovenskej menšiny na hornej Orave v rokoch 1947–1948*, in: *Almanach Slovácy w Polsce / Slováci v Poľsku XII – Matej Andráš a jeho Diplomacia srdca*, Krakov 2011, pp. 349–362.



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#### SŁOWACKO-POLSKIE RELACJE W LATACH 1938–1947 W KONTEKŚCIE DYSKUSJI O GRANICACH

Po pierwszej wojnie światowej Polska domagała się północnej części dawnego Królestwa Węgierskiego (Spisza, Orawy i Czadeckiego/Kisuc). Również Czechosłowacja miała roszczenia do wymienionego obszaru. Regiony stały się przedmiotem polsko-czechosłowackiego sporu terytorialnego. Rada Najwyższa 28 września 1919 roku zdecydowała o plebiscycie w rejonach Cieszyna, Orawy i Spisza. W końcu nie plebiscyt zdecydował o kontrowersyjnym terytorium, ale arbitraż międzynarodowy. Konferencja Ambasadorów w dniu 28 lipca 1920 roku podjęła decyzję o podzieleniu Spisza i Orawy między Polskę a Czechosłowację. Większość mieszkańców obszaru nie zgodziła się z decyzją. Nowy spór graniczny nastąpił w 1938 roku po podpisaniu układu monachijskiego. Polska zaczęła domagać się nie tylko dalszych części Orawy i Spisza, ale również Czadeckiego. Członkowie słowacko-polskiej komisji delimitacyjnej zostali przez mieszkańców spornych regionów kilka razy zaatakowani, więc polska armia zajęła wymienione obszary. Po wybuchu drugiej wojny światowej oddzielone części Spisza, Orawy i Czadeckiego zostały przyłączone do Słowacji, która w kampanii wrześniowej była sojusznikiem Niemiec. Pod koniec wojny granica wróciła do stanu przedmonachijskiego, ale sytuacja na spornych obszarach była niestabilna jeszcze długo po 1945 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: słowacko-polskie stosunki 1918–1947, Spisz, Orawa, Czadeckie, graniczne spory