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JA RUSYN BYL (I am Rusyn):
Household Folk Music as Resistance to Oppression

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Abstract

The Rusyns are a people indigenous to the Carpathian Mountains and its surrounding areas. Despite attempts by the Ukrainian government and surrounding nations to silently erase Rusyn culture from history, the Rusyn people have a distinct identity independent from that of any bordering nation. This unique identity is best outlined through Rusyn folk songs which depict pastoral images of the Carpathian homeland and patriotic tales of Rusyn ancestry. Much work to date has already been done documenting post Velvet Revolution revival of Rusyn culture. Because of this, I will instead focus on the lesser-known time prior and leading up to WWII and the Soviet bloc to highlight the slow practice of cultural repression of Rusyn folk culture by Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, the Soviet Union, and Hungary. I will dig up forgotten Rusyn folk songs from the 1919-1939 Czechoslovak occupation of the Carpathian Rus’ which assert Rusyn heritage in protest to the oppressive pro-Ukrainian regime. It was because of this period of cultural repression that many Rusyns left their homeland giving way to a vast Rusyn diaspora. Within my family’s reel to reel tapes, scrapbooks, and oral history, lie Rusyn folk songs and personal accounts I will connect to existing documentation to shed new light on published works. Sources used to explore unique Rusyn identity will include peer-reviewed collections of Carpatho-Rusyn scholarship, primary and secondary folk song collections, newly discovered audio recordings with sheet music transcriptions, as well as first-hand interviews with first- and second-generation immigrants.

Who Are the Rusyns?

Rusyns are a people native to the Carpathian Rus’, a mountain range in Eastern Europe which borders the nations of present-day Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania. The Rusyns have inhabited these lands since the 9th century developing a distinctive culture of song, dance, food, language, folklore, and worship among themselves settling the uninhabited Carpathian mountain range as pastoral farmers.¹ Tracing back their origins to the 9th century, the Rusyns went largely undiscovered by surrounding

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¹ Magocsi, *With Their Backs to the Mountains*, 38.
civilizations for hundreds of years; however, once their existence became known, Rusyns have been subject to brutal oppression enduring exiles, occupations, gentrifications, and campaigns of forced assimilation throughout their history as an ethnic group.

**Historical Background of Rusyn Oppression**

The slow creep of oppression began when Rusyns allied with more powerful bordering tribes in the 10th century which progressed to outright colonization by the Kingdom of Hungary in the 11th century. In the eyes of their Hungarian rulers, Rusyn people were looked down upon as simple servants with the word for the Rusyn people at the time being *Ruthenus* meaning doorman. By the 13th century, the Rusyns were nearly extinguished for the first time due to a Mongol and Tartar razing of villages within the Kingdom of Hungary committing genocides en masse and destroying the Rusyn way of life. Soon after this, the Rusyns found themselves under Galician control after fleeing their torched villages and once again were dangerously close to extinction, this time at the hands of the Hungarians. Fleeing for their lives and having endured so much already, Hungarian Kenéz enslaved the already beaten down Rusyns and sold them into slavery to the nearest land owners taking what little was left of the Rusyn people’s autonomy. With the word *Kenéz* referring simply to entrepreneur in Hungarian, the lack of care for the Rusyn people within broader Hungarian culture at the time is obvious to see.

Within four centuries of forming as an ethnic group, the Rusyn people were already enslaved and in the centuries that follow a similar pattern of oppression would continue to repeat itself. This cycle has

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4 Magocsi, *With Their Backs to the Mountains*, 59.


continued up until the present day continually escalating and evolving throughout history resulting in a persistent denial of Rusyn autonomy.

**Rusyn Oppression Under the USSR**

Continuing up until 30 years ago, the most recent instance of persecution against the Rusyn people in modern history took place during the USSR’s Eastern Bloc (Soviet Bloc) which started in 1947 and ended after the Velvet Revolution (Nežná Revolúcia) in December of 1989.8 During this time, the Rusyn people were under intense scrutiny by the USSR mainly in present-day Ukraine. Under Soviet rule, extreme measures were taken to control the everyday lives of citizens and cultural minorities such as the Rusyns were all but obliterated in order to construct a conformist and assimilated society.

Once under USSR control, the Rusyns were immediately expelled away from their homeland of the Carpathian Rus’ and spread out through Ukraine and Russia in what was referred to as operation Vistula.9 Rusyns had no rights, no religious freedom, and no education; what they did learn in school was disinformation aimed at reeducating Rusyn children effectively attempting to erase every sense of individuality Rusyn children at this time still possessed including their language.10 Following the Velvet Revolution which ended their oppression under USSR control, Rusyns were again able to freely express themselves and practice long repressed cultural traditions leading to a Rusyn cultural revival all around the world.11 Much research has already been done on the topic of USSR oppression and the effect of the Velvet Revolution on Rusyn Culture so I will not belabor the issue.

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8 Metil, “Rusynak Song, Metaphor of Skin for Identity”, 104.

9 Righetti and Silvestri, Воскресение народа

10 Metil, Post-Velvet Revolutionary Cultural Activism, 8. Also see Righetti and Silvestri, Воскресение народа

11 Metil, Post-Velvet Revolutionary Cultural Activism, 13.
What I instead will focus on is the Czechoslovak occupation of the Rusyns from 1919 to 1939. During this lesser-known period of time, much of the same oppression that occurred during the Eastern Bloc began under Czechoslovak rule during a previous cycle of oppression. Learning of the Czechoslovak oppression of Rusyns gives context to tactics the USSR used to control and erase the Rusyn people during the Eastern Bloc and marks an evolution in tactics nations used against Rusyn identity: state sponsored propaganda campaigns.

The Czechoslovak Occupation

When Czechoslovakia was formed after the conclusion of World War I, Rusyns were prohibited from singing in Rusyn or dancing to Rusyn folk songs, wearing traditional clothing, worshiping Rusyn Christian faith, or publishing any Rusyn press under threat of violence from the government as these activities would strengthen Rusyn minority identity and power within the country. These oppressive restrictions went in direct opposition to what the Czechoslovak government promised as the “highest level of autonomy for Rusyn people” when inheriting the Carpathian Rus’ during the Treaty of Trianon. Because of the oppression Rusyns faced during the Czechoslovak government’s inheritance of the Carpathian Rus’ from 1919-1939, this time period is referred to as the Czechoslovak Occupation.

During this occupation, Rusyn school children were forced to speak in Czech and learn a fictional set of events masquerading as history all in an aim to control the Rusyn population through propaganda and disinformation. The Czechoslovak government feared the Rusyns would wish to return to the rule of Hungary if given the autonomy they were promised, so to combat this perceived threat the Czechoslovak government taught Rusyn children a false tale of a thousand-year oppression Rusyns endured under

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15 Righetti and Silvestri, *Воскресение народа*
Hungarian rule so loyalty to the Czechoslovaks would be more favorable to that of the Hungarians.\textsuperscript{16} These propaganda campaigns display the lengths the Czechoslovak government was willing to go to in order to maintain control over the Rusyn people and their Carpathian homeland.

**Resistance to Oppression**

Realizing the Czechoslovak government had no intentions of giving rights or autonomy to the Rusyn people, former American Rusyn National Council leader and then governor of the Carpathian Rus’, Gregory Zsatkovich, petitioned the League of Nations and the United States revealing oppressive conditions detailing Czechoslovak suppression, exploitation, and imperialism.\textsuperscript{17} However, none of these nations would take these petitions seriously due to the Czechoslovak government’s propaganda campaigns countering requests for basic human rights. Not having agency to resist oppression on a political or institutional level during Czechoslovak control due to the failure of other nations to respond to pleas by Zsatkovich and other Rusyn cultural leaders, the Rusyn household became the people’s stronghold of resistance where Rusyn identity, culture, and music could be celebrated and passed on.

**The Significance of Rusyn Diasporic Cultural Practices & Archives**

The struggle for basic human rights many Rusyns endured under the Czechoslovak occupation led to a vast Rusyn diaspora of migrant families fleeing the Czechoslovak government.\textsuperscript{18} Many of these families came to America during and prior to the early years of the occupation from the 1910s to the 20s.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, my family came to America during this time period with my *baba* Mary Sirock Polakovic (great grandmother, pictured next page) immigrating in 1925 and *zedo* (grandpa) coming to the U.S. in

\textsuperscript{16} Bonkáló, *The Rusyns*, 37. Also see previous section in document. The actual history is much more complicated where the Hungarians were originally colonizers/loose allies but then became oppressors who enslaved the Rusyns centuries later.

\textsuperscript{17} Bonkáló, *The Rusyns*, 37.

\textsuperscript{18} Metil, “Rusynak Song, Metaphor of Skin for Identity”, 117.

\textsuperscript{19} Crispin, *The Carpatho-Rusyn Immigrants of Pennsylvania’s Steel Mills*, 32.
1937. The diasporic Rusyn-Americans hold the keys to understanding the cultural practices of Rusyns before the oppression of the Czechoslovak government forced them to assimilate. Within the traditions, songs, dances, food, language, customs, and religious practices of these families lies a time capsule displaying Rusyn culture untouched by the Czechoslovakian government. The importance of diasporic Rusyn-American families is echoed by documented trips that Rusyn priests of the Byzantine Catholic faith took to America following the Velvet Revolution in Eastern Europe to relearn the Byzantine traditions and hymns that were forgotten due to the religious oppression Rusyns in the USSR faced.\textsuperscript{20}

During the Czechoslovak occupation, Rusyn culture would have been wiped off the map entirely if not for the enduring resistance of household folk music. Rusyns were forbidden from nearly every public expression of their culture and because of these extreme measures used to suppress the Rusyn cultural minority group, many Rusyns were forced to abandon their traditions, clothing, language, religion, and way of life to avoid persecution.\textsuperscript{21} However, the private practice of singing folk songs in the house was something the Czechoslovak government could not stop. Proud songs declaring Rusyn ancestry, descriptive scenes romanticizing the Carpathian homeland, outlining hopes of finding a Rusyn spouse, and the forbidden hymns of the Divine Liturgy became the staple of the Rusyn cannon cementing folk song as the cornerstone of enduring Rusyn cultural practice even under intense oppression.

My family, just like countless other diasporic Rusyn-Americans, passed down rare cultural artifacts that would have been wiped out had we stayed under Czechoslovak rule. One prominent example

\textsuperscript{20} Jumba, \textit{Zaspivajme}, 86.

\textsuperscript{21} Bonkáló, \textit{The Rusyns}, 34.
is the *Vinčuem (Christmas Toast)* recording we have of my great grandmother Veronica Matola giving the Christmas Toast in Rusyn.\(^{22}\) As a native speaker who grew up in Uzhhorod, this recording is an artifact which captures dialect, pronunciation, and word choice with undeniable authenticity. Collections of Rusyn folk music and traditions like are carried on in diasporic families outside of the Carpathian Rus’ meaning the large volume of pre-occupation Rusyn cultural material is located in America and other diasporic countries rather than the Carpathians further highlighting the importance of these traditions to be archived and contributed to a body of research to trace the history of the Rusyn people.

**Nationalistic Agendas Within Rusyn Scholarship**

Due to their long history of oppression, Rusyns have not had opportunities to academically document and narrate their cultural history since many were uneducated and had immigrant or refugee status. As a result, scholarship on Rusyn culture largely reflects the views of Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Czech scholars who distort history to meet their national affiliation.

For example, Alexander Bonkáló’s pro-Hungarian book *The Rusyns* (1940) asserts that Rusyn people are merely misled Hungarians; that because the Czechoslovak government’s propaganda campaigns during the 1920’s, Rusyn people’s identity was falsely constructed by the Czechoslovaks to deter Rusyn sympathy towards the Hungarian government.\(^{23}\) Bonkáló acknowledges that the Rusyns are in fact a distinct people but refuses to see them as ethnically different from Hungarians. This incorrect version of history is made worse by western media outlets citing Bonkáló as a “native Ruthenian” representing “his group’s origins, historiography, and ethnography” misleading the audience believing that he is Rusyn speaking of Rusyn people when he is in fact Hungarian speaking of Rusyns but simply grew up in the geographical location of former Ruthenia within the Carpathian Rus’.\(^{24}\) Music offers one


of the clearest counter arguments to this claim in the form of Aleksander Duchnovič’s song *Ja Rusyn Byl* (I am Rusyn). Written in 1849 while Duchnovič was imprisoned by Hungarian authorities for failing to denounce his Rusyn identity, this hymn was written as a devotion to Rusyn ideals, culture, and heritage:

I was, I am, and will be Rusyn,
I was born a Rusyn,
My honored lineage I shall not forget;
I remain its son.

My father and mother were Rusyn,
All my family is Rusyn,
My sisters and brothers are Rusyn,
And my large group of friends is Rusyn.

I first saw the light of this world under the Carpathian (Beskid) ranges.
The first breath I drew was Rusyn.
I was raised on Rusyn bread.
It was a Rusyn who rocked my cradle.25

Once reading the lyrics of *Ja Rusyn Byl* and understanding the context of its writing, it is clear pro-Hungarian ideology does not hold up under scrutiny.

Beyond the problematic pro-Hungarian stance of Bonkáló, many pro-Ukrainian writers and scholars assert a much more sinister claim: the Rusyns categorically do not exist. They claim that Rusyns are native Ukrainians, that Rusyns are the ancestors of the people of Ukraine, and that anyone claiming Rusyn identity is actually claiming Ukrainian identity.26 These statements on the surface appear to be the ones of a misled author or uneducated citizen but upon closer inspection their true intentions are revealed. The Ukrainian government has led a systematic campaign to wipe out the Rusyn minority population within their country continuing the pattern of oppression of the Czechoslovak government and USSR beginning with gentrification and forced migration breaking up Rusyn communities within the Carpathian Rus’, reeducating these divided people in Ukrainian and discouraging the use of the Rusyn language,


renaming Rusyn villages in Ukrainian, coopting Rusyn cultural festivals to Ukrain-ize local Rusyn culture, and finally blatantly rewriting history all in an effort to skirt dissent of the Ukrainian government. This silent genocide which continues to this day came to a head in 2003 when the Ukrainian government removed the Rusyn ethnicity from its census and discouraged citizens from proclaiming Rusyn identity in order to not acknowledge the indigenous population and strengthen national ties to the Ukrainian government.

It is because of these assertions by Ukrainian, Hungarian, and other scholars that I find it imperative, now more than ever, to present a unique Rusyn identity, especially to a Western audience.

Folk Music as Evidence for Rusyn Identity & Resistance to Assimilation

Through the oral tradition of Rusyn folk song, strong evidence can be provided for a unique Rusyn identity as set apart from Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Slovak nationalities. Leading simple lives as farmers and laborers working outside in the fields in small villages, Rusyns used song to pass the time, entertain themselves, tell stories, worship, and preserve history and culture. My family led such a life in Eastern Europe circa 1880 pictured on their farm. From left to right: George, Andrej (my great grandfather), Josephine and grandmother with baby Mary (pictured previously)

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Folk songs of the Rusyns are so prolific they have been known even to neighboring countries where complaints of noisy and enduring singing from Rusyn serfs can be seen in chronicles and letters between landlords during the 11th to 13th centuries. In Rusyn villages, women working the field would often sing songs beginning with the eldest woman, the matriarch of the village. She would choose a song and begin to sing then each woman working in the field who heard her would join in, then as their sound carried to the next field over, they too would join, finally ending in a chorus of beautiful song as the whole village sings at once. The men too would sing, however they often waited until the work was over and they had a few drinks in them to raise their voices. Because of the Rusyn culture’s extensive use of folk songs for entertainment, storytelling, documenting oral history, and religious practice, Rusyn folk songs serve as historically well documented evidence of a unique cultural and ethnic identity.

The first and most recognizable difference between Rusyn folk songs and their surrounding nations is the use of the Rusyn language. To native Slovak or Ukrainian speakers, Rusyn might be mistaken for a different dialect of their own language because of a shared Slavic linguistic base; in fact, this has been a common mistake among ethnographers studying the region of the Carpathians because of a lack of familiarity with Rusyn culture. An example of this unintentional assimilation can be seen in the song *Hej, haj, zenelý háj* included in the book “Slovensky si Spievaj (sing Slovak songs) A Treasury of Slovak Folk Songs”. I have included this song below with the published (incorrect) version as a base with corrections included above and below gathered from interviews with my mother Laura Polakovic, whose Rusyn immigrant parents taught her this song as part of our family’s oral tradition.


30 This is common Rusyn knowledge from the “old country” passed down in oral history but also corroborated by the pamphlet included in the Rusyn ethnic group Kruzhok’s cassette collection *Zaspivajme*. Jumba, *Zaspivajme*.

31 Deutsch, *Slovensky si Spievaj*, 32.
The first linguistic difference is the Rusyn word *zenély*, meaning “music,” which was misunderstood for the Slovak word *zelený*, meaning “green.” This changes the meaning of the song from a song celebrating music to one about green pastures. Additionally, the Rusyn pronunciation of *šhajku* uses a ‘u’ while in Slovak *šhajko* uses an ‘o’ altering the timbre of the lyrics. Although this does not change the meaning of the word, this change in pronunciation/dialect delivers a much different musical experience.

Additionally, Rusyns set themselves apart from the surrounding peoples lyrically through reference to the Carpathian Mountains and Rusyn heritage – as evidenced by the previously mentioned song *Ja Rusyn Byl* and supported by various men’s secular songs such as *Rosmaria* which men sing wishing for a Rusyn bride to marry one day.  

I was, I am, and will be Rusyn,  
I was born a Rusyn,  
My honored lineage I shall not forget;  
I remain its son.

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32 Deutsch, *Slovensky si Spievaj*, 32.

My father and mother were Rusyn,
All my family is Rusyn,
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I first saw the light of this world under the Carpathian (Beskid) ranges.
The first breath I drew was Rusyn.
I was raised on Rusyn bread.
It was a Rusyn who rocked my cradle.\textsuperscript{34}

Another musical theme common in Rusyn folk music not found in surrounding cultures is the use
of syncopation in simple meters. Slovak folk songs use simple meter often however they do not syncopate
their rhythms nearly as much. While Romanian rhythms often have a syncopated feel, complex meters are
used such as 5/8 or 7/8. Additionally, a stylistic accent placed on beat three was missed during the
transcription of this Rusyn song since most Slovak songs follow a flowing, lyrical style. This syncopation
is found often in Rusyn children’s songs as well which often have accompanying dances and games such
as \textit{Ja Pa Robicks} and \textit{The Cabbage Dance} which use a simple meter and wildly excitable syncopated
rhythms one would expect a child to enjoy.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet another defining characteristic of Rusyn folk music is the consistent use of a major, diatonic
tonality slowing down to convey sadness in music rather than adjusting tonality. Most cultures in Eastern
Europe use minor and modal harmonies for their songs including music from Hungary, Ukraine, Bulgaria,
and other East Slavic countries. It should be noted that although Romanian music is a mix of major and
minor tonalities, the ornaments used to embellish melodies are chromatic in nature. Even when
embellishing existing melodies, Rusyn folk music uses diatonic ornamentation. Further evidence of this
point can be found in the recording of \textit{Narodil sa Kristus Pan} taken of my great grandmother.\textsuperscript{36} As a

\textsuperscript{34} Jumba, \textit{Zaspivajme}, 31.

\textsuperscript{35} Polakovic(s). \textit{Ja Pa Robicks}. \url{http://bit.ly/JaRusynByl} See also Polakovic(s). \textit{The Cabbage Dance}. \url{http://bit.ly/JaRusynByl}

\textsuperscript{36} Matola and Polakovic. \textit{Narodil sa Kristus Pan}. \url{http://bit.ly/JaRusynByl}
native speaker and native Rusyn immigrant, she never adds any deviation from diatonic melodic figures reflecting the simplistic and effortless nature of Rusyn folk song.

After reviewing the evidence of Rusyn identity from a musical lens it becomes apparent just how different Rusyn culture is from that of surrounding nations. Often times it takes a trained eye and ear to notice if a Rusyn song has been mistakenly assimilated and in the case of *Slovensky si Spievaj* I believe this was the case.

**Concluding Thoughts & Future Scholarship**

The fact that pre-occupation immigrant families just like mine all across America continue to pass down Rusyn folk songs detailing beautiful images of the Carpathians, proclaiming Rusyn heritage means we serve as living proof of a unique Rusyn identity, revealing the flawed historical reasoning in the scholarly writings of Bonkáló and Ukranian nationalist historians.

As for the future, it is my hope that more research will be done by Rusyns about Rusyns giving a fair representation of our culture where our ethnic and cultural identity can be explored rather than defended.


