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The Optation of 1945–1947 in the Collective Memory of Residents of the Slovak–Ukrainian Localities in Transcarpathia

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Abstract

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The present study offers an examination into how residents of the mixed Slovak–Ukrainian areas of Transcarpathia recall the optation process of 1945–1947. As most respondents did not experience the event directly, any knowledge obtained was derived primarily from intergenerational narratives passed down by parents and grandparents. This paper explores how the optation is remembered today and which interpretations and versions are maintained within the collective memory of the studied communities. Although most residents remained in the region, the Soviet Union invoked the optation as justification for limiting the minority rights of Slovaks. The direct impact of the optation varied across localities, with some areas seeing a significant proportion of Slovaks relocating to Czechoslovakia, whereas in others, only a small number departed. Research indicates that respondents generally possess only some vague knowledge of the events, with the exception of older respondents, who were either children at the time or were born shortly after.

One of the major consequences of the Second World War was the redrawing of state borders in Europe. Compared to the interwar period, the borders of countries such as Germany, Poland, Lithuania, the Soviet Union (USSR), Romania, and Czechoslovakia (CS) etc., were permanently altered. In an effort to homogenize territories ethnically and reduce any perceived threats to territorial integrity or political stability posed by national minorities, governments in Central and Eastern Europe implemented state-controlled population transfers and exchanges. In CS, these migration processes primarily involved the relocation of Germans and Hungarians back to Germany and Hungary, while at the same time, CS encouraged Czechs and Slovaks living abroad to resettle in their former country.

Population movements also took place between CS and the USSR, which annexed Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia (present-day Transcarpathia), a region that had formed part of interwar CS and was home to a significant Czech and Slovak minority. Based on a bilateral agreement, these minorities were granted the right to Czechoslovak citizenship and relocation to CS. Likewise, Ukrainians and Russians residing in CS were given the opportunity to move to the USSR.

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The term "optation" in this context refers to the legal, voluntary choice of citizenship by inhabitants of a territory who were transferred from one state to another, whereby individuals selected the citizenship of one of the successor states.[1] This paper examines how residents of the Slovak–Ukrainian areas in Transcarpathia recall the optation of 1945–1947 today. Based on field research, the study seeks to identify what motivation led so many Slovaks to remain in Transcarpathia rather than emigrate to CS, and also examines whether respondents remember how many Slovaks departed, who settled in their former homes, and how the Slovak minority in the region was affected by the optation.

Methodology

To address these research aims, ethnographic field research was conducted in Transcarpathia. According to anthropologist Martin Soukup, field research is a standard method in ethnography which involves the acquisition of ethnographic data through direct contact with the community under study.[2] Fieldwork here consisted of unstructured and semi-structured interviews as a means to gather relevant information from respondents.[3]

The research was carried out in Transcarpathia between 11 March and 11 June 2024, with shorter follow-up visits occurring in August and October 2024, and again between 5 and 30 May 2025. Interviews were conducted in the following settlements: Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, Perechyn, Velykyi Bereznyi, Turia Remeta, Kamianytska Huta,[4] Onokivtsi, Storozhnytsia, Hlyboke, Serednie, Antalovtsi, Kolchyno, Klenovets, Rodnykova Huta, Dovhe, and Lysychovo. In total, 111 respondents were interviewed, 59 women and 52 men, with 49 respondents identifying as Slovak. An additional 24 reported Slovak ancestry but declared themselves either mixed ethnic identity (nine), Ukrainian (fourteen), or Hungarian (one), and 38 identified as Ukrainian without any Slovak family history.

Interviews were conducted in Slovak and Ukrainian, including both standard and dialect forms, and were recorded with respondents' consent via smartphone. When consent for recording was not granted, detailed written notes were taken. Direct quotes have been translated into English for this paper. A table with basic demographic information on respondents cited in the paper is provided in Appendix no. 1. Not all respondents were able to comment on the optation. From those who addressed the topic, statements from 15 respondents which best represent the research findings were selected for analysis here. The research focused on specific strategies of preserving Slovak ethnicity in Transcarpathia during the Soviet period (1944–1991), and as well following

1 VOVKANYCH, Ivan – MARINA, Vasili – SIUSKO, Ivan. Transcarpathian and Eastern Slovakian Population in the Great Migration after Second World War: the Options from 1945–1947. In HORVAT, Irina Liuba – VEHESH, Anastasia (eds.) *Romanian-Ukrainian Relations. History and Present*. Satu Mare : Muzeului Sătmărean, 1999, p. 376.

2 SOUKUP, Martin. *Terénni výzkum v sociální a kultúrní antropologii*. Praha : Karolinum, 2014, p. 78.

3 An unstructured interview is an informal but purposeful way of gathering information. The researcher sticks to topics that interest him but does not direct or control the interview. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has prepared topics and their order in advance, but the interview is largely free flowing. SOUKUP 2014, p. 101.

4 The name Huta will be used when referring to this village.

the establishment of independent Ukraine in 1991; questions concerning the optation were part of the interviews.

The Optation

On 29 June 1945, a treaty between CS and the USSR was signed resulting in the incorporation of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia into the USSR. An integral part of the treaty was an attached protocol. Article two of the protocol granted individuals of Slovak and Czech nationality who had permanent residence in Transcarpathian Ukraine the right to opt for Czechoslovak citizenship by 1 January 1946. It also provided individuals of Ukrainian and Russian nationality residing in CS—in districts of Slovakia—with the possibility to opt for Soviet citizenship. Those who exercised this right were required to relocate to the state of their chosen citizenship within 12 months of receiving confirmation of their optation. The treaty stipulated that the property of optants would not be subject to export duties or fees and that they were permitted to take any tangible property. They were also entitled to compensation for real estate.[5]

The optation was further regulated by a decree of the Czechoslovak government on 24 August 1945 which extended the right to choose citizenship and migrate to soldiers of Russian and Ukrainian nationality who had participated in the war against Germany and the liberation of CS within the ranks of its legions, as well as to any family members residing in Transcarpathian Ukraine.[6] The issue was addressed again in another CS – USSR treaty of 10 July 1946, which primarily concerned the re-emigration of Volyn Czechs to CS, but also extended the option of Soviet citizenship to Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians from the entire Czechoslovak territory. Ultimately, 33 077 Volyn Czechs relocated to CS, while 12 401 Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Russians, and Slovaks from north-eastern Slovakia, were resettled in Volyn.[7] This particular agreement will not be addressed in this paper.

Until December 1945, no Czechoslovak institution existed in Transcarpathia, which had been under Soviet control since 1944, to receive optation applications, only individuals already residing in CS were able to submit applications. Consequently, CS and the USSR agreed to extend the deadline for applications initially to 1 March, and subsequently to 1 April 1946. A Czechoslovak optation commission was established in Uzhhorod in December 1945 and began accepting applications on 1 January, though only in Uzhhorod.

The Soviet authorities, led by Ivan Turianytsa, Chairman of the People's Council of Zakarpattia Ukraine, obstructed the optation process from the start, hindering the activities of the commission. For example, Turianytsa prohibited

5 Smlouva 186/1946 Sb. Mezi ČSR a SSSR o Zakarpatské Ukrajině. In Wolters Kluwer/ASPI, Smlouva 186/1946 Sb. - mezi Československou republikou a Svazem sovětských socialistických republik o Zakarpatské Ukrajině úplné a aktualní znění | ASPI | Wolters Kluwer ČR, a. s., [last viewed on 7 September 2025].

6 Nařízení vlády č. 61/1945 Sb. Vládní nařízení o přípravě opce podle smlouvy mezi Československou republikou a Svazem sovětských socialistických republik o Zakarpatské Ukrajině ze dne 29. června 1945. In *Zákony pro lidi*, https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1945-61 [last viewed on 7 September 2025].

7 ŠMIGEĽ, Michal. „Do Sovietskeho zväzu ľahko, späť cesty niet...". In *Pamäť národa*, 2017, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 6–7.

the dissemination of information on the optation in print and radio and refused to allow the commission to operate throughout Transcarpathia. He repeatedly cited an absence of instructions from Kyiv and Moscow as justification for such inaction. By the end of January 1946, the Czechoslovak commission was informed that local Soviet authorities would be responsible for collecting applications. However, these authorities failed to inform the population on the optation, refused to grant the commission access to applications submitted, and in some districts (e.g., Perechyn and Irshava) declined to accept applications altogether.[8]

Even after the application period closed in April 1946, obstacles from the Soviet side continued. Turianytsa unilaterally removed individuals from the opting lists and argued that only soldiers of the Czechoslovak legions who had enlisted prior to the Dukla operation were eligible. He also insisted that official documents must explicitly state Czech or Slovak nationality, which created difficulties as censuses taken during the interwar period had recorded only Czechoslovak nationality.[9]

According to historian Pavlo Khudish, these obstacles were intended to prevent Ukrainian and Russian opponents of the Soviet regime from using the optation as a means of escape.[10] Historian David Hubený further suggests that the Soviets also found it economically advantageous to prolong the optation process, as during the wait for emigration, applicants were often forced to sell property to sustain themselves, with that capital remaining in the USSR.[11] Many were dismissed from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and deprived of food rations, which led to impoverishment and the forced sale of property. Most transports to CS took place between 28 March and 26 September 1947, although some people waited more than a year and a half.[12] Under such circumstances, some attempted to cross the border illegally. In December 1946, František Kuracina, the chairman of the optation commission, reported that the Soviets had already imprisoned 150 individuals for such attempts.[13]

Due to Soviet-created obstacles, not all individuals who submitted applications were ultimately permitted to choose a new citizenship. Applications were submitted both in Transcarpathia and in CS. Khudish writes that by 1 March, a total of 23 168 optation applications had been filed, including 4 813 soldiers and 18 355 civilians; 15 132 people declared Czech or Slovak nationality.[14] In CS, applications were submitted primarily by those who had emigrated from Transcarpathia between 1938 and 1944. However, referring to data from the CS

8 KHUDISH, Pavlo. *Zakarpattia v konteksti czekhoslovatsko-radianskykh vidnosyn (1944–1948 r.).* (Ph.D. thesis). Uzhhorod : UZhNU, 2016, pp. 112, 122, 152.

9 HUBENÝ, David. *Ztráta Podkarpatské Rusi na konci druhé světové války* (Ph.D. thesis). Praha : Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, 2017, pp. 351–352.

10 KHUDISH 2016, p. 159.

11 HUBENÝ 2017, p. 346.

12 VOVKANYCH, Ivan – SVEZHENTSEVA, Oksana. Slovaky Zakarpattia v radiansko-czekhoslovatskykh optatsiynykh procesakh u 1945–1947 rokakh. In LIKHTEY, Ihor (ed.) *Slovaky i Zakarpattia*. Uzhhorod : Lira, 2013, p. 132.

13 GAJDOŠ, Marián – SIUSKO, Ivan. Optácia obyvateľov Zakarpatska v československo – sovietskych vzťahoch v rokoch 1945–1947. In *Človek a spoločnosť*, 1999, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 32.

14 KHUDISH, Pavlo. Pershyi etap optatsiinykh protseciv mizh Zakarpatskoiu Ukrainoiu ta Chekhoslovatskoiu respublikoiu: cherven 1945–kviten 1946 rr. (za materialamy cheskykh arkhiviv). In *Naukovyi visnyk UZhNU "Istoriia"*, 2014, vol. 2, no. 33, p. 68.

Ministry of the Interior, Vovkanych, Marina, and Siusko claim that the ministry had received 19 000 applications by 26 August 1946.[15] Administrative and political obstacles and the chaotic communication of Soviet authorities significantly shaped the reality of the optation, drastically influencing how it was later remembered within local communities.

The first three transports to CS departed in July and August 1946, taking 329 people.[16] These early transports further illustrate the Soviet attempts to obstruct the process. They were dispatched without prior coordination with Czechoslovak authorities, forcing the optants to spend several days at the railway station in Košice. After these incidents, transports did not resume until the end of March 1947. Notably, many of those on the 1946 transports were of Hungarian and Jewish origin.[17] Between March and September 1947, 25 train transports departed from Transcarpathia. Khudish estimates that 5 134 optants were relocated in 1946–1947,[18] while a 1950 report of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Social Welfare states 5 377 optants from Transcarpathia.[19]

Based on documents from the State Archive of the Transcarpathian Region, Vovkanych, Marina, and Siusko (1999) report that 1 551 families chose to relocate, predominantly from areas with significant Slovak and Czech minorities during the interwar period. This included 432 families from the Uzhhorod district (including Storozhnytsia, Onokivtsi Hlyboke, Serednie, and Antalovtsi), 287 from the town of Uzhhorod, 280 from the Mukachevo district (Klenovets and Kolchyno), 128 from Mukachevo, and 110 from the Perechyn district (Perechyn, Huta, and Turia Remeta). Up to 100 families came from other districts of Transcarpathia.[20]

The transports travelled through Chop to Košice, where a Commission for optants was established to oversee their resettlement. Each was allowed to take 1 000 rubles, which were exchanged at the rate of five Czechoslovak crowns for one ruble at the border. In practice, however, Soviet border guards frequently confiscated money and other property during personal searches despite the treaty provision that optants' property should not be subject to customs duties.[21] In CS, most were resettled in areas vacated by Germans and Hungarians.[22]

For example, 775 residents of Novy Klenovets (present-day Klenovets) and 66 people from Fridishovo, Shelestovo (now part of Kolchyno), and Nizhna Viznytsia were resettled in the Gemer region, including the towns and villages of Tornaľa, Kráľ, Abovce, Chanava, Číž, Lenka, Valice, Skerešovo, Rumince, and Chrámec.[23] The case of Klenovets is an example of near-total community displacement. As individual applications were subject to lengthy review,

15 VOVKANYCH – MARINA – SIUSKO 1999, p. 382.
16 KHUDISH 2016, pp. 130–131.
17 GAJDOŠ – SIUSKO 1999, pp. 29–30.
18 KHUDISH 2016, p. 254.
19 VOVKANYCH – SVEZHENTSEVA 2013, p. 134.
20 From Velykyi Bereznyi district 37 families left and from Irshava (Dovhe, Lysychovo) 53. VOVKANYCH – MARINA – SIUSKO 1999, p. 389.
21 BOLERÁCZOVÁ, Zdenka. *História a kultúra Slovákov na Zakarpatskej Ukrajine*. Užhorod : Mystetska Liniia, 2006, p. 90.
22 VOVKANYCH – MARINA – SIUSKO 1999, p. 396.
23 KUŠTEK, Vladimír. *Československý svet v Karpatoch*. Bratislava : Združenie inteligencie Rusínov, 2018, p. 130.

the Slovak inhabitants of Klenovets collectively petitioned Czechoslovak authorities, expressing the desire of nearly the entire village to relocate. On 21 January 1946, the Presidium of the Slovak National Council resolved to consider the application of the Klenovets Slovaks under an accelerated procedure.[24] According to respondents interviewed during the field research, only three or four Slovak families remained in the village. Klenovets had been predominantly Slovak during the interwar period, the optation significantly altered this ethnic composition. A similar pattern occurred in Huta and Onokivtsi, where almost the entire Slovak community departed and only a few families remained.[25] In other villages with compact Slovak settlements, only a minority chose to leave, while the majority stayed.

Overall, the optation represented a substantial intervention in the demographic structure of Transcarpathian Slovaks, although its impact varied considerably across regions. The uneven demographic impact of the optation across villages later became a crucial factor in shaping how the event was remembered within local collective memory. Available data indicate that between 1945 and 1947, slightly more than 5 000 people from Transcarpathia and thousands more from the territory of CS took advantage of the optation provision. However, not all of them were Slovaks.

Collective Memory

The present research examines contemporary perceptions of an event that occurred nearly 80 years ago, focusing on recollections of the specific reasons that led people to remain in Transcarpathia rather than relocate to CS. These remembrances include not only personal memories, but also mediated narratives transmitted across generations. The process of analysing how social groups interpret historical processes provides insight into the present, as our perception of contemporary reality is shaped by both direct experiences and the inherited past.[26] The way in which individuals and groups construct their past is integral to the formation of a collective identity and group consciousness.[27]

The concept of collective memory is employed here to analyse the current perspectives of residents in the Slovak-Ukrainian regions of Transcarpathia regarding the optation. Memory is understood in terms defined by ethnologist Monika Vrzgulová as "a specific database of experiences, information, and emotions, often uncritically and automatically acquired assessments and judgments (stereotypes and prejudices), gained not only by personal experience but also through mediation."[28] Vrzgulová further notes that although the ability to recall certain events is an individual capacity, the way in which a person remembers

24 VOVKANYCH – MARINA – SIUSKO 1999, p. 382.

25 According to 1930 census, Slovaks and Czechs made up 75% of the Huta population, 83.7% in Klenovets and 33.7% in Onokivtsi. DOSTÁL, Jaroslav. *Podkarpatská Rus. II. Vydání*. Praha : Kníhkupectví československých turistů, 1936, pp. 214, 227, 228.

26 HLAVÁČEK, Jiří. Kolektivní paměť a orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin. In *MEMO*, 2012, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 8.

27 KILIÁNOVÁ, Gabriela. Prehľad bádania o sociálnej pamäti a inšpirácie pre etnológiu. In *Etnologické rozpravy*, 1996, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 59.

28 VRZGULOVÁ, Monika. *Nevyrozprávané susedské histórie. Holokaust na Slovensku z dvoch perspektív*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2016, p. 26.

or forgets—as a member of certain social groups—is a process influenced by the social environment.[29] Similarly, historians Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka emphasize the social dimension of memory, asserting that individual memory develops through communication with others who are not merely random individuals, but social beings who construct group cohesion through a shared image of their past.[30] Collective memory may be understood as:

> Comprehensive historical information, or a reconstruction of specific elements of the past, (historical events, processes, and personalities), which, more or less consciously seeks legitimacy and relevance by bringing contemporary political, moral, and cultural lessons about the past, thereby conveying an educational message.[31]

Collective memory is dynamic and evolving; it is influenced by cultural frameworks, moral sensibilities, the needs of the social group, and demands of the present.[32] Every memory, even individual, originates from communication and interaction with the collective. Therefore, collective memory serves as the framework within which individual memories are embedded and interpreted, allowing us to comprehend the past through a collective memory.

With this in mind, the past is reconstructed within the social framework through which a group interprets it at a given moment. As new events and experiences enter memory, they may prompt reinterpretation and reconfiguration, resulting in a continual reshaping of the collective memory.[33] Moreover, society does not possess a single, unified collective memory. Rather, multiple collective memories coexist and reflect the diversity of social groups for whom such memories constitute the foundation of a collective identity.[34] Nor is any group's memory internally homogeneous. Within collective memory, different interpretations may compete, shaped by the complexity and heterogeneity of social experience.[35]

The study of collective memory must consider not only what is remembered, but also what is forgotten. Memory does not function as a comprehensive archive; it operates selectively, retaining certain elements while omitting others.[36] What is remembered, how it is interpreted, and what is muted all contribute to the formation of collective representations and group identity. Collective memory enables us to live in groups, and this fosters the construction of a memory.[37] People remember the past as members of groups and shared memory helps the collective build a sense of belonging and develop group solidarity.

29 VRZGULOVÁ 2016, p. 27.
30 ASSMANN, Jan – CZAPLICKA, John. Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. In *New German Critique*, 1995, no. 65, p. 127.
31 HROCH, Miroslav. Paměť a historické vědomí očima historika. In MASLOWSKI, Nicolas – ŠUBRT, Jiří a kol. (eds.) *Kolektivní paměť. K teoretickým otázkam*. Praha : Karolinum, 2014, pp. 47–48.
32 ASSMANN, Aleida. Dialogic Memory. In MENDES-FLOHR, Paul (ed.) *Dialogue as a Trans-disciplinary Concept*. Berlin; Munchen; Boston : De Gruyter, 2018, p. 211.
33 ŠUBRT, Jiří. Paměť jako sociologický problém. In *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philosophica Et Historica*, 1994, no. 2, p. 63.
34 ŠUBRT, Jiří. Antinomie sociální paměti. In *Sociológia*, 2011, vol. 43, no. 2, p. 150.
35 LUŽNÝ, Dušan – VÁNĚ, Jan. Koncept kolektivní paměti – základní východiska a závěry. In *Historický časopis*, 2017, vol. 65, no. 4, p. 582.
36 ŠUBRT 2011, p. 139.
37 ASSMANN, Jan. Communicative and Cultural Memory. In ERLL, Astrid – NÜNNING, Ansgar (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin; New York : De Gruyter, 2008, p. 109.

According to ethnologist Gabriela Kiliánová, memory is a fundamental component of identity because it ensures the continuity of time and allows a group to situate its development within a broader historical trajectory.[38] Collective memory can thus be understood as a set of shared memories and representations about the group itself. Because collective memory includes recollections transmitted across generations, people who did not directly experience particular events must "learn" and memorise the group's vision of the past. Aleida Assmann claims that such learned knowledge about the past differs from general knowledge in that it has an "identity index," it is knowledge that legitimizes us.[39]

Research Results

In this section, the perspective of respondents whose ancestors remained in Transcarpathia is analysed, including the specific motivations attributed to the decision of staying in the region and an exploration into how respondents perceive the impact of the optation on those Slovaks who did not choose to relocate. During the interviews, respondents were asked directly about the emigration. Notably, two respondents serving as chairpersons of Slovak associations independently referred to the optation as a milestone in the ethnogenesis of Transcarpathian Slovaks. In general, older respondents, particularly those over the age of 60 whose parents went through the process, were more inclined to discuss the topic. Respondents who were children during the optation also tended to address the issue directly.[40] The impact of the mass resettlement was emphasised by respondents from villages such as Huta, Onokivtsi, and Klenovets, which saw a substantial decrease in the Slovak population, significantly altering the ethnic composition of these areas. In contrast, in localities where only a minority of Slovaks left, some awareness of the optation existed but was seen as less consequential for the local community.

Respondent no. 1, who initiated discussion of the optation on his own, began with the following statement:

> Here is the situation, after 1945, an agreement was made between CS and the USSR that our Slovaks would be given a week or two to return to CS. Of course, not all our Slovaks used it. Those who were close, for example, to Mukachevo, where there was a railway, returned. Some, for example, the village of Klenovets, the entire village returned.

This interpretation diverges slightly from established scientific literature, particularly regarding the time frame of the optation process and the categories of persons eligible to opt—the right was not limited to Slovaks. Such discrepancies illustrate the selective and reconstructive nature of memory. The claim that

38 KILIÁNOVÁ 1996, p. 60.

39 ASSMANN, Aleida. Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past. In TILMANS, Karin – VAN VREE, Frank – WINTER Jay (eds.) *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*. Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press, 2010, p. 38.

40 Twelve of the cited respondents were alive during most of the transports in 1947; six of them were at least five years old at the time and only two were over 10. Given their age, their understanding of the optation was shaped primarily by their parents and grandparents rather than by direct personal experience.

proximity to the railway influenced decisions to opt cannot be fully verified; villages with comparable railway access did not necessarily experience similarly high levels of emigration.

Respondents generally considered the optation explicitly in terms of its local demographic impact, particularly the number of individuals who departed. While precise figures were rarely recalled, respondents were able to indicate whether a majority or minority of Slovaks had opted. Respondents from Huta, Onokivtsi, and Klenovets, where most of the Slovaks departed, emphasized the number of families that remained. In Huta and Onokivtsi, respondents estimated that up to 10 Slovak families remained, whereas in Klenovets only three or four families were said to have stayed. An exception was Respondent no. 2 from Turia Remeta, born in 1934, who had experienced the optation as a child. In an area where most Slovaks remained, this witness estimated that approximately fifteen families left and was able to recall several surnames, "About 15 families left. The majority stayed. Neupauers, three families left. Complovce [left], it was a big family. Tejglovce, Fejerovce [left]." Such variations in recollection demonstrate how collective memory is structured primarily around local demographic experience rather than precise historical chronology.

Two respondents from Velykyi Bereznyi recounted specific family experiences. Although their immediate families remained in Transcarpathia, some relatives opted. These interviews highlighted a common feature of the optation—the division of families. As a result, nearly every respondent reported having relatives in Slovakia, many of them emigrated to CS in 1945–1947. Respondent no. 3 stated "My mother's sister and her husband were born here in Velykyi Bereznyi. In the summer of 1947, they emigrated. They arranged the papers and went to Sobrance, and a month later the border was closed." Respondent no. 4 described the impact of the decision on her own family, "It was a choice, you stay here or you go. Because the borders were already closing. For example, there were five in our family and only one of my mother's brothers decided to go to CS." Both respondents emphasised the urgency created by the anticipated closure of the border. People were aware the opportunity to relocate to CS was limited in time and that once the border closed, the future regime would be uncertain. Respondent no. 3 also recalled the destination of his aunt in Slovakia (Sobrance), which was not common in other testimonies.

Respondents from Huta and Klenovets were able to identify the destinations of emigrants from their villages. According to them, inhabitants from Huta relocated to Sklené, "The entire village of Huta. After the war, everyone moved to Sklené and settled there. Currently, I am not sure if anyone remains there" (Respondent no. 5). However, when asked to specify the exact location of Sklené, interviewees were unable to provide further clarification, suggesting that a symbolic association with the place may have been stronger than precise geographical knowledge.[41] From Klenovets, Slovaks reportedly emigrated to the vicinity of Tornaľa, a fact confirmed by Respondent no. 6, whose close family remained in Transcarpathia, while members of the extended family—along

41 They possibly meant Sklené in the Turčianské Teplice district, where a German minority lived until the end of the Second World War and emigrated to Germany after the war.

with most Slovaks from Klenovets—relocated to Číž, Chanava, Behynce, Kráľ, and Nový Klenovec in the districts of Rimavská Sobota and Revúca in southern Slovakia. Many Hungarians from these settlements had emigrated to Hungary after the Second World War.

When asked why their families remained in Transcarpathia, respondents offered a variety of answers. One recurring theme was fear and uncertainty regarding the conditions in CS. Many Slovaks were unsure about the emigration procedure and their eventual place of settlement. Remaining in their ancestral locality—where families had often lived for generations, in some cases even prior to the establishment of CS in 1918—appeared the safer option. The decision-making process was not always straightforward, however. Individuals were often forced into last-minute choices and experienced severe doubts about whether to leave or stay. For example, when asked if her family intended to leave Huta, Respondent no. 5 answered "They planned to, but my father got scared." Respondents frequently framed the choice to stay or to leave in emotional terms, emphasising fear, uncertainty, or hesitation and highlighting the effective dimension of decision-making rather than political factors.

From a contemporary perspective, emigration from the USSR to CS might appear a clear-cut, rational choice. However, such an interpretation risks imposing present-day assumptions on post–war realities. At the time, people had to decide whether to leave a familiar environment, where their families had long been rooted for an unknown destination with an uncertain future. Moreover, central and eastern Slovakia had been heavily affected by wartime combat operations and was facing serious economic difficulties, comparable in many respects to those in Transcarpathia. In addition, the image of the USSR as a victorious power that contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany was far different in the post–war years from what it is today, although the perception was largely influenced by Soviet propaganda around building a "communist paradise." Consequently, relocation may not have been widely perceived as a favourable option. This contrast underscores how collective memory does not simply reproduce past events, but continually reinterprets the past considering present perspectives.

Respondent no. 7, from Dovhe, stated that a significant number of Slovaks left the village, though he was unable to provide an exact figure. He mentioned the experience of his father, who with the children's godfather, was preparing optation documents:

> Uncle says, one more door for the stamp. Father says, we leave the living, we go for the dead. You know what, Johan? We are not going anywhere, we are staying at home, and we did not go [...] Why did they stay? They certainly did not know what they were going there for. We can go but we will leave everything, and you will go there with one suitcase, that is it. And two, three children, me and two sisters here with me and my mother.

The decision to relocate was difficult, emotional, and complex, requiring families to weigh numerous factors. Although optants were not limited to a single suitcase, they were required to leave behind immovable property in Transcarpathia—a prospect many found unfavourable. Uncertainty regarding

conditions in both CS and in the USSR brought further hesitation, underscoring the significance of familial attachment and property ties in Transcarpathia, and revealing that the decision-making process took on both an individual and a collective (familial) dimension.

Most respondents emphasised that their ancestors had established strong familial and economic roots in Transcarpathia, which they were reluctant to abandon for an uncertain future in CS. The attachment to CS was not sufficiently strong enough for many Slovaks during 1945–1947 to outweigh existing social bonds. An illustrative example is provided by Respondent no. 8 from Turia Remeta, who initially discussed general motivations before referring to his own family:

> Maybe they stayed here because, for example, they already had children, they went to school, or something. Maybe the children were married to ours [Ukrainians and Ruthenians]. You know? I think there were already relationships. My grandfather was also offered to leave during the optation, but he already had adult children who had finished school, were married and did not want to leave.

In this account, interethnic marriages and established local relationships emerge as stabilising factors, discouraging migration.

The primary factor influencing the decision of Slovaks to remain in Transcarpathia despite the opportunity to relocate was familial ties. The second most prevalent reason was property ownership. Individuals were reluctant to abandon houses, land, and estates accumulated over generations. This sense of responsibility was expressed in the testimony of Respondent no. 9 from Hlyboke, whose father served as administrator of the bishop's estates in Hlyboke, Serednie, and Nyzhne Solotvyno during the interwar period. Although he considered optation, he chose to remain in order to manage these properties:

> In some villages, more people left during 1947; in some, more stayed. You know what it is like when you have a house and a family. My father had his optation papers drawn up, but in the end he stayed here. He was the administrator of the bishop's estates. In some villages, more people moved out, in some more stayed. But, you know, it's not so easy to move out when they have a house here, they have estates, something.

Despite his service to the church during the interwar period, which increased the likelihood of being perceived as an enemy of the USSR, the father of Respondent no. 9 remained in Transcarpathia, and faced state repression as a consequence:

> My father had a hard time, because he was considered, he served the church, so he was considered an enemy. Then he did not have a job for several years and we were a large family and we were still young children, six children. So those were very difficult times for my parents. We also had to save to feed ourselves. He lost his job. He was isolated.

The fate of the family of Respondent no. 9 illustrates that the decision to stay did not guarantee stability but for some families, to remain entailed social and economic hardship. Economic considerations were highlighted by Respondent no. 10 from Kolchyno, who noted that Slovaks in the village possessed property, employment, and a relatively satisfactory standard of living, "Everyone had

a job, a farm, those who worked, as my father said, at the factory, had a job." The possibility of emigration came with not only uncertainty, but also the loss of job and economic ties with one's place of origin.

Another reason for remaining was the need to care for family members who were unable to travel to CS due to age or health conditions. This was the case for Respondent no. 11 from Kolchyno, whose uncle lived in CS and invited the respondent's family to relocate, but they chose to stay due to the grandmother's health, "But what did mom say? Grandma was older, she could not do that, her illness, her legs hurt, and she could not leave her, so she stayed." A similar reason was offered by Respondent no. 6 from Klenovets, "Mother said she did not want to leave her mother alone, so they stayed here. My mother stayed."

The decision to relocate could lead to intra-family tension, when some members wished to emigrate while others preferred to remain. This dynamic is exemplified by Respondent no. 12 from Onokivtsi, whose mother supported relocation, while their father opposed it. The mother, accompanied by the respondent's elder sister, travelled to Chop, from where train transports were departing. However, their grandfather intervened:

> She was already with people in Chop, and my grandfather came to see her. Grandfather came and he was short, about 150 cm and my mother was about 180 cm tall, that is the kind of woman she was. My mother said how he hit behind her ear and said: home. And I went home crying, she said.

This episode illustrates how authority structures and a form of emotional pressure could shape decisions.

The optation also divided the family of Respondent no. 13 from Dovhe.[42] Her grandfather, grandmother, and uncle left for CS where they received a house formerly owned by Sudeten Germans in Děčín (present-day Czech Republic). Her mother remained in Transcarpathia because she had a husband, three children, a house and a job there. According to the respondent, many people were anxious about the optation due to the unclear and confusing information provided by the municipal council. Those who opted took their belongings to the railway station in Dovhe where they loaded it into freight wagons. They ultimately departed by train in 1947.

These testimonies indicate that the reasons for staying in Transcarpathia were less related to political ideology and more closely connected to family and property relations. Decisions were shaped by concrete circumstances—children, parents, employment, housing, and a fear of the unknown. For many Transcarpathian Slovaks, these factors outweighed the potential advantages of relocation to CS, even if it meant remaining in the USSR, albeit on what was perceived as the "land of their ancestors." This is probably one reason why, in the collective memory, the optation is represented mainly by personal or family stories rather than through abstract political interpretations. Property, kinship networks, intergenerational responsibility, and local reputation constituted forms of security that were tangible and socially validated, whereas the

42 Respondent no. 13 did not want to be recorded; therefore, this is not a direct quote but paraphrased.

promises of authorities associated with relocation remained abstract. In this context, leaving meant also the potential dissolution of social embeddedness. At the same time, the narratives demonstrate that remaining did not eliminate risk or uncertainty completely, highlighting how optation functioned less as a political choice and more as a negotiation between competing forms of stability and vulnerability.

For Slovaks who remained in Transcarpathia, an important question concerned the fate of the vacated houses. Following the departure of optants, the state nationalised these properties and reassigned them to new owners. "Many left and left the houses. And then the state nationalised them and distributed them," Respondent no. 8, Turia Remeta. Among the new settlers were Ukrainians and Ruthenians from the mountainous areas of Transcarpathia. Respondent no. 14 from Huta noted that Ukrainians from the Carpathian district of Verkhovyna were relocated to the village.[43] Similarly, Respondent no. 6 (Klenovets) stated "They moved others there from other Transcarpathian villages, Ruthenians."

In addition to internal migrants, vacated houses were allocated to Russians and Ukrainians from southern and eastern Ukraine and from Russia. Many of these newcomers were representatives of the Soviet state apparatus, including party officials, teachers, doctors, soldiers, and border guards. They gradually became part of the local communities and established familial ties. Respondents described it as follows:

> Respondent no. 12 (Onokivtsi): "When the landlords left, the Russians came, divided the houses, and the time came when they sold it all." Respondent no. 15 (Turia Remeta): "A lot of soldiers stayed here. They were ordinary, ordinary people, the wealthier ones were in Uzhhorod." Respondent no. 3 (Velykyi Bereznyi): "They moved immigrants from Russia here. How many war veterans were there? They all came. Teachers— all who came. Those who worked in factories and offices also came."

Immediately after the Second World War, the USSR initiated a process of Sovietisation in Transcarpathia, within which state-directed migration formed a key instrument. This initiative aimed to remove both actual and perceived opponents of the new regime from the region. Hungarians and Germans were particularly affected by forced deportations.[44] At the same time, the state relocated politically reliable representatives of the regime to Transcarpathia, predominantly Russian-speaking party officials, military personnel, members of the secret services, border guards, teachers, doctors, bureaucrats, and industrial managers from other parts of Ukraine and the USSR.[45] Historian Yuliia Makarenko writes that the USSR employed controlled migration as a strategy to mix ethnic groups, weaken traditional historical and cultural ties, accelerate the assimilation of ethnic groups, and establish structural interdependencies among the Soviet republics and regions.[46]

43 Respondent no. 14 did not want to be recorded; therefore, this is not a direct quote but paraphrased.

44 MAGOCSI, Paul Robert. *Chrbtom k horám. Dejiny Karpatskej Rusi a karpatských Rusínov*. Prešov : Universum, 2016, p. 385.

45 TYVODAR, Mykhaylo. *Etnohrafiia Zakarpattia, Istorychno-heohrafichnyy narys*. Uzhhorod : Grazhda, 2010, p. 53.

46 MAKARENKO, Yuliia. Sotsialno-politychni chynnyky derzhavnoi etnopolityky (dr. pol. XX st.).

The optation had far-reaching consequences for Slovaks who remained in Transcarpathia as well. The USSR utilised the optation as a means of addressing the so-called "Slovak question" and denied Slovaks any minority rights. During the Soviet period, Slovaks were deprived of their own educational institutions, media outlets, and ethnic-based associations.[47] The combined effect of the optation and the USSR assimilation policies significantly accelerated assimilation process. Respondents emphasised that the optation not only reduced the size of the Slovak population, but also enabled the USSR to utilise these departures to restrict Slovak rights.

Respondent no. 1 remarked, "Practically all Slovaks remained in the Transcarpathian region or in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. However, politicians made it taboo to acknowledge the presence of Slovaks here." This respondent suggested that following emigration, the USSR promoted the narrative that Slovaks were no longer present in Transcarpathia, thereby eliminating the need for any minority rights. In fact, the USSR recognised the Slovak presence in Transcarpathia, which is evident from the Soviet census. Respondent no. 9 articulated a similar interpretation:

> The optation helped the Soviet leadership's narrative that the Slovaks had emigrated, supported by an agreement between CS and the USSR permitting emigration. While many did emigrate, not all did so. Nevertheless, this allowed the Soviet leadership to effectively close the issue of Slovaks in Transcarpathia, or rather in Ukraine. They emigrated; thus, they do not need schools, media, or any elements essential to the life of a national minority.

These testimonies suggest that the optation was instrumentalised within official discourse to justify the marginalisation of Slovaks.

Assimilation in the USSR is reflected not only in the statements of respondents, but also in the demographic data, though we must interpret statistics from Soviet censuses carefully because some individuals may have been reluctant to declare Slovak ethnic identity. Available figures indicate a steady decline in the size of the Slovak population. As emigration was no longer possible, this decrease can largely be attributed to assimilation. According to an unofficial census conducted in 1946, 13 404 Slovaks lived in Transcarpathia (1.73% of the total population of the region). In 1959, 12 289 people (1.34%) declared Slovak ethnic identity; in 1970, 9 573 (0.91%); in 1979, 8 245 (0.71%), and in 1989, only 7 329 (0.59%).

A parallel trend can be observed in language use. In 1959, 61.49% of Slovaks reported Slovak as their mother tongue; by 1989, this figure had declined to 34.89 %. The proportion identifying Ukrainian as their mother tongue increased from 13.96% in 1959 to 33.22% in 1989, while Russian rose from 1.1% to 5.3%. The remaining respondents reported other languages.[48] These data in combination with testimonies of respondents show that the optation marked

In *Naukovi zapysky*, 2008, vol. 41, p. 104.

47 MALETS, Oleksander. Etnichni protsesy Slovakiv Zakarpattia v 40 – 80 r. 20. st. In VEHESH, Mykola (ed.) *Carpatica: Aktualni problemy ukrainskoi politolohii.* Uzhhorod : UZhNU, 2003, p. 210.

48 LEVENETS, Yuriy. *Zakarpattia v etnopolitychnomu vymiri*. Kyiv : IPiEND imeni I.F Kuratsa NAN Ukraini, 2008, pp. 648–651.

the beginning of a period characterised by an intensified assimilation of Slovaks, simultaneously reducing the number of Slovaks and serving the USSR as a primary argument to create an environment in which minority institutions were not restored and assimilation accelerated. This is also reflected in the perception of the optation in collective memory.

Conclusion

This paper examines the recollections of residents of the Slovak–Ukrainian localities in Transcarpathia regarding the optation of 1945–1947. Although the families of respondents did not emigrate to CS, the process impacted them in a variety of ways. It can be therefore hypothesised that the optation is embedded in the collective memory of these communities. The primary objectives of the study were to identify the motivation behind the decision of respondents' families to remain in Transcarpathia, to estimate the number of people who emigrated from the researched localities, to determine who settled in their houses, and to assess the impact of the optation on Slovaks in the USSR. These aims were pursued through field research based on unstructured and semi-structured interviews with respondents. As only 12 of 111 respondents were alive during the optation, and all were children at the time, most recollections were mediated through their parents and grandparents. The concept of collective memory, which individuals acquire as members of specific groups and use to construct their collective identity, facilitated our understanding of the process of transmitting information about past events within a social group.

The research revealed that older respondents, those who either experienced the optation as children or were born approximately 15 years later, and whose parents and grandparents experienced it, possessed more detailed knowledge about the events. Greater awareness was generally observed in localities where a significant number of Slovaks emigrated, such as Huta, Onokivtsi, Klenovets. However, this does not imply that memories were absent in other locations. Many respondents were unable to provide extensive details, frequently citing the considerable time period from the event and the passing of family members who had directly experienced it. For most families, the optation does not constitute a central turning point in the ethnogenesis of Transcarpathian Slovaks or in the historical development of the studied settlements. Notably, none of the visited villages contains a monument or commemorative site dedicated specifically to the optation.

Respondents consistently identified family ties and property ownership as the main reasons for remaining in Transcarpathia. These factors outweighed any perceived benefits of relocation to CS, of which Transcarpathia had formed a part during the interwar period. The lives of those who remained were further affected by the arrival of newcomers who settled in the vacated houses. These included Ukrainians and Ruthenians from the mountainous areas of Transcarpathia, as well as representatives of the Soviet state from south and eastern Ukraine and Russia—soldiers, border guards, party officials, members of the secret services, engineers, and managers of newly established industrial enter-

prises. The emigration of some Slovaks to CS was subsequently used by Soviet authorities to justify the denial of minority rights to those who remained, even though the majority had not emigrated. This policy, combined with broader Soviet approaches to nationalities and migration, contributed to a gradual assimilation of the Slovak minority. The preservation of the Slovak ethnicity in Transcarpathia in the context of the Soviet ethnic policies is a decidedly relevant topic for further research and analysis.

Appendix no. 1 (List of Respondents in the Paper)

	Gender	Year of Birth	Locality	Ethnic Identity	Language of the Interview
1.	Man	1957	Uzhhorod (origin in Dovhe)	Slovak	Slovak
2.	Man	1934	Turia Remeta	Ukrainian	Ukrainian
3.	Man	1945	Velykyi Bereznyi	Slovak	Slovak (dialect)
4.	Woman	1956	Velykyi Bereznyi	Ukrainian (Slovak origin)	Slovak (dialect)/Ukrainian
5.	Woman	1960	Huta	Slovak	Slovak (dialect)
6.	Man	1964	Klenovets	Slovak	Slovak
7.	Man	1934	Dovhe	Slovak	Slovak (dialect)
8.	Man	1963	Turia Remeta	Ukrainian	Ukrainian
9.	Man	1946	Hlyboke	Slovak	Slovak
10.	Man	1944	Kolchyno	Slovak	Slovak (dialect)
11.	Man	1960	Mukachevo (origin in Kolchyno)	Slovak	Slovak (dialect)
12.	Woman	1951	Onokivtsi	Ukrainian (Slovak origin)	Ukrainian
13.	Woman	1942	Dovhe	Slovak	Ukrainian
14.	Woman	1948	Huta	Ukrainian (Slovak origin)	Ukrainian
15.	Woman	1957	Turia Remeta	Ukrainian (Slovak origin)	Ukrainian