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## A Hiker's Pilgrimage in Carpathian Ruthenia

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# A HIKER'S PILGRIMAGE IN CARPATHIAN RUTHENIA

nick burdine (2016)



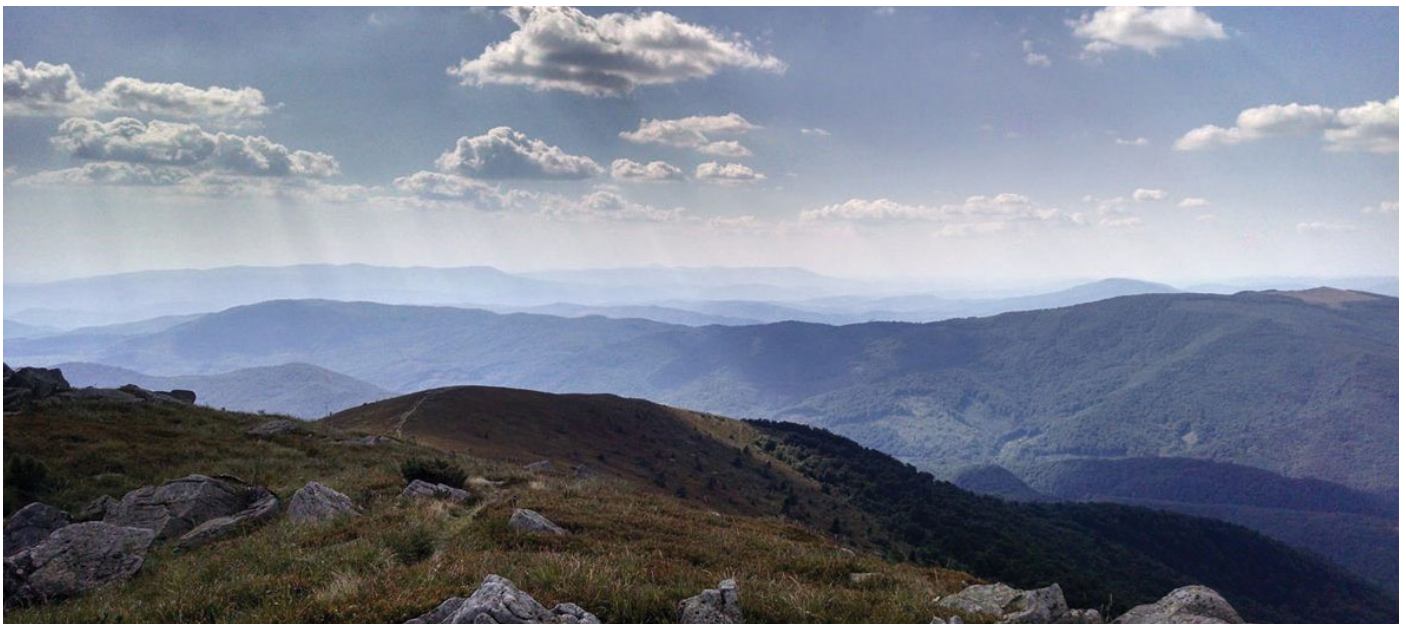
*Monument to the Ukrainian partisans  
who fought in World War II (photo by author).*

In the southwest corner of Ukraine lies the mountainous region of Zakarpattia. Its residents live in the valleys and hills of the Carpathian Mountains, and its rugged terrain, relative isolation, and distance from metropolitan centers such as Kyiv, Prague, and Budapest has created a people which are highly independent and culturally unique. Contributing to its cultural distinctiveness is the region's long and complicated history with its neighbors. At different times throughout its history, Zakarpattia has been a part of Ukraine, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and on multiple brief occasions, has even been its own autonomous country (often referred to as Carpathian Ruthenia). Due to its shifting political boundaries and valuable geographic position, Zakarpattia has long been seen as an important strategic location by military leaders ranging from the Princes of Kievan Rus and Kings of Hungary, to the generals of the Soviet Union and NATO.

In the summer of 2018, while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zakarpattia, myself and a group of other volunteers, along with a number of Ukrainians working at a cultural center based out of Uzhhorod, hiked to an abandoned Soviet military installation and war memorial high in the forested hills above of Uzhhorod.

My party and I met in the city of Uzhhorod, the administrative capital of Zakarpattia, and drove northeast into the hills. We watched as the black cobblestone roads and baroque churches of central Uzhhorod turned into pothole-laden highways and Soviet-grey apartment buildings found on the outskirts of many Eastern European cities. Those highways turned into the dusty dirt roads of small farming communities and the apartment buildings became vast fields of wheat and corn punctuated by small agricultural estates. We kept driving until we came to the mud tracks and steep forested slopes





of the Carpathian foothills. The traffic had all but stopped save for the odd farmer crossing the road with his livestock. Some with cows, then others with goats, some on horseback, and others with rickety carts filled with firewood. We had been driving for maybe two hours, but we couldn't have gone more than 50 miles because of how bad the roads are throughout the region.

We finally came to the location where we would be camping for the next two days. A stone and wood cabin built in the traditional Slavic style of the area, featuring a large hexagonal hearth and kitchen on the bottom floor, a second floor directly above the hearth where people would sleep, and all built around a long central chimney which would heat the entire structure. That night, we ate a traditional Carpathian meal which reflected the rich cultural tapestry of the region. There was shashlik (barbecued pork common across Eastern Europe), varenyky (dumplings filled with potatoes and served with sautéed onions and hot butter, similar to Russian pierogis), kremzlyky (fried potato pancakes most likely adopted from Polish Jews), bograch (hearty vegetable soup cooked with Hungarian paprika), brinza (mild goat cheese), salo (raw pig fat), pickled sweet tomatoes, beet and cabbage salad, and served with Romanian plumb brandy and homemade Carpathian wine.

The next day, we set out early on our nearly 30-mile roundtrip hike. The forest was rich with summer lushness, a sea of green from the resident birch, maple, and oak, and golden



*Top: A commanding view of Ukrainian-Carpathian foothills. Middle: The author and his party hiking through the forests of the Carpathian hills. Bottom: A cabin built in the traditional Slavic style of the region (photos by author).*





*Atop the Ukrainian-Carpathians, a Latin cross (left) and Orthodox cross (right) attest to the ethno-religious diversity in Ruthenia. The Latin cross is an important symbol for the Catholic Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, and Greek Catholic Rusyns. The Orthodox cross is a symbol important to Orthodox Ukrainians and Russians (photos by author).*

sunlight spilling over our heads. Our destination was a well-known hiker's pilgrimage—a mountain peak on the border between Ukraine and Slovakia with a commanding view of the surrounding hillside and a war memorial, built near the ruins of a Soviet military installation. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the site was used to house ground-to-air rockets as part of an anti-aircraft defensive matrix built throughout the

Ukrainian-Carpathian hills. The war memorial was built in the 1970s and was erected to commemorate the Ukrainian partisans (secret guerrilla fighters who sided with the Soviet Union and fought against the occupying Nazi forces in the Second World War).

We arrived at our destination around midday while the sun was directly overhead, before it started to retreat beyond the horizon where it would cast

long shadows over the forest. The clear summer skies and noontime sun afforded us a spectacular view of the remote hills sprawling out in every direction from our location. Two giant steel crosses had been erected at the peak where we were standing, as is common across the peaks of the Ukrainian-Carpathians. The first was a simple Latin cross, and the second a slightly more ornate Orthodox cross. These two crosses represented the major ethno-religious groups of the region. The first cross being a symbol of the Catholic Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians and Greek Catholic Rusyns (people believed to be the direct modern descendants of the people of Kievan Rus who settled the area in the 8th century); the second cross symbolizing the Orthodox Ukrainians and Russians. Standing next to these crosses beside the World War 2 memorial and looking out to the west, one can see the Slovakian border—demarcated by nothing more than wood and rock.

The military site was a series of small concrete buildings. There was a garage where the rockets would have been stored on the backs of large trucks and ready to be deployed at a moment's notice, a communications building where soldiers would have had radio and sensing equipment,



*Top: Garage where rockets were stored, the ruins of a Soviet military base. Bottom: The ruins of a Soviet military installation, evidence of the region's inclusion of a recently deceased empire (photos by author).*



*‘Wars are fought, empires fall, and boundaries change, but people do not always move. Expressions of culture—architecture, food, religion, language—have a habit of sticking around long after political borders are continually drawn and redrawn.*

and a small barracks where soldiers would have lived. Today, those buildings are long deserted and have turned to ruin. The concrete has crumbled to piles of rubble, water and mold occupy its chambers, vegetation has come to reclaim its walls, and local artists have turned it into a shrine for graffiti. Now, the compound is a monument to a dead empire of the not-too-distant past.

Outside, looking across the hills to the Slovakian border, I spoke in Ukrainian with our guides and friends from the Uzhhorod Cultural Center. They spoke mostly Ukrainian, but at times interjected it with words from Russian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Slovakian, or words believed to be derived from Old Ruthenian, the language of the ancient Rusyns. This is known as the Trans-Carpathian dialect and is often looked down upon and made fun of by the “pure” Ukrainian speakers of western Ukraine, and the Russian speakers of eastern Ukraine. To outsiders, this dialect seems to be a unified and cohesive language belonging solely to the inhabitants of the Carpathian hills, but in reality, it is a dynamic system of languages which changes in every valley and in every community. A village might speak a slightly different version of the dialect from another village merely 30 miles down the river, or just beyond the hills in another valley.

Wars are fought, empires fall, and boundaries change, but people do not always move. Expressions of culture—architecture, food, religion, language—have a habit of sticking around long after political borders are continually drawn and redrawn. Zakarpattia stands as one of the finest examples of these cultural mixing pots, sitting at the crossroads of so many Eastern European nations.



*The author (bottom right), several Peace Corps volunteers, and two guides from the Uzhhorod Cultural Center resting at a peak in the Ukrainian-Carpathian hills.*

NICK BURDINE graduated from Humboldt State in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in Geography. After graduation, he joined the Peace Corps and served in Ukraine for nearly two and a half years where he taught English and worked on various community development projects. Today, he works as a Park Ranger for the Bureau of Land Management in western Montana. In his free time, Nick enjoys planning hiking and camping trips across the United States and Europe, and he is an avid reader. “Humboldt Geography instilled in me a sense of exploration and curiosity,” he attests. “At HSU, I learned how to ask meaningful questions about the world around me and how to use physical, cultural, and political landscapes to answer those questions.”

