


ARTICLE

“Yugoslavia has Nothing. Yugoslavia has No Bread. But Hungary Gives Us Bread”: Access to Food and (Dis)loyalty in a “Redeemed” Yugoslav Borderland

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Abstract

This article illustrates the socioeconomic background of rural political discontent in the post-imperial Yugoslav border region Prekmurje. The author argues that during the post-Habsburg political transition and ensuing social transformation, the fundamental lack of loyalty to the Yugoslav state among an important segment of the rural population of Prekmurje was rooted in insufficient access to food. Documents of court proceedings, official state reports, and findings of individuals with deep understandings of the situation on the ground reveal that this rural political mobilization was not so much a reflection of Hungarian propaganda or a “lack of appropriate national identification” among the local population—although, of course, these two factors cannot be ignored in a contested and linguistically and ethnically diverse region—but rather an outcome of the impoverishment of large sections of the peasant population.

Keywords: food; provisioning; Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes

On the morning of 19 September 1921, a column of vehicles carrying the delegates of the Yugoslav-Hungarian Boundary Commission pulled up in the middle of Murska Sobota. The small rural town, located on the northernmost edge of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, stood some 60 km northwest from the Commission’s headquarters in Varaždin. The representatives from Great Britain, France, Japan, Italy, Hungary, and Yugoslavia—accompanied by their entourage—did not intend to stay for very long in the administrative center of the district of Prekmurje. After a short break for a cup of tea and a small snack at the Hotel Dobray, their itinerary envisaged a further ride toward the hilly, remote areas where the Yugoslav-Hungarian line of demarcation had been in place since August 1919. The purpose of their mission was strictly official. According to their mandate, received at the Paris Peace Conference, the delegates were to observe the economic and ethnographic circumstances in the villages along the border first-hand in order to make a solid decision on the exact line of the permanent boundary between Yugoslavia and Hungary.¹

¹On the Yugoslav-Hungarian Boundary Commission and the border in Prekmurje, see David Cree, “Yugoslav-Hungarian Boundary Commission,” *The Geographical Journal* 65, no. 2 (1925): 89–110; Rudy Kyovsky, “Trianonska pogodba in slovensko-ogrska meja (The Treaty of Trianon and the Slovene-Hungarian Border),” in *Revolucionarno vrenje v Pomurju v letih 1918–1920* (Revolutionary Upheaval in Pomurje, 1918–20), ed. Janko Liška (Murska Sobota, 1981), 236–59; László Göncz, “Življenje ob novi državni meji po priključitvi Prekmurja Kraljevini SHS in delo razmejitvene komisije na tem odseku (Life on the New State Border after the Annexation of Prekmurje to the SHS Kingdom and the Work of the Boundary Commission on That Section),” in “*Mi vsi živeti ščemo*”: *Prekmurje 1919: Okoliščine, dogajanje, posledice* (“We All Want to Live”: Prekmurje 1919: Circumstances, Events, Consequences), eds. Peter Štih, Kornelija Ajlec, and Attila Kovács (Ljubljana, 2020), 293–350; Matija Slavič, *Naše Prekmurje: zbrane razprave in članki* (Our Prekmurje: Collected Discussions and Articles), ed. Viktor Vrbnjak (Murska Sobota, 1999); and Miroslav Kokolj, *Prekmurski Slovenci: od narodne osvoboditve do nacistične okupacije: 1919–1941* (The Prekmurian Slovenes: From National Liberation to Nazi Occupation: 1919–41) (Murska Sobota, 1984), 120–26. Although the official name of the state was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1929 onward), it will be referred to as “Yugoslavia” or the “South Slav state” throughout this article.

Yet what was meant as a short respite soon turned into an increasingly tense event when a crowd of protesters packed the square in front of the hotel and began to shout anti-Yugoslav slogans. As the commander of the gendarmerie in Prekmurje pointed out in his detailed report a few days after the event, it all started with a harmless political provocation: Hungarian-oriented women and girls from well-off families in Murska Sobota threw flowers and bouquets onto the car of Hungarian delegation. It continued, however, with a protest composed of several hundred farmers and peasants, some of them drunk, who had flocked to the town from various parts of Prekmurje, carrying Hungarian flags and loudly chanting “*Éljen Magyarország* (Long Live Hungary).” Walking all night, many protesters arrived from villages right next to the demarcation line. Their number was so large that gendarmes and soldiers deployed at the outskirts of Murska Sobota could not prevent them from marching into the center of town. Later that day, protesters not only intercepted the motorcade in the village of Puconci, but also gathered in the thousands—once more waving Hungarian flags and shouting “*Éljen*”—in the village of Trdkova right on the border with Hungary. The next day, while the Commission met in Veliki Dolenci before departing for its headquarters in Varaždin, a fight broke out in the crowd after some pro-Yugoslav locals tried to stop the protesting crowd from singing the Hungarian anthem. Though the situation in Veliki Dolenci stood on the brink of escalation, the gendarmerie did not intervene with excessive force. Careful not to tarnish the democratic credentials of the South Slav state, the Yugoslav internal security forces dispersed the crowd and arrested several dozen alleged organizers only after the Boundary Commission had left Prekmurje.²

The outbreak of mass public discontent among the local population in Prekmurje astonished the Yugoslav public and the state’s political elite. It also surprised better-informed officials who were familiar with the political and socioeconomic situation on the ground. In August 1919, the government of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes ordered the occupation of those parts of what had hitherto been the western edges of the two Hungarian counties of Zala and Vas. They did so with the belief that Yugoslavia would bring national liberation to the densely populated Slavophone population in the region. The massive participation of the Slavophone peasantry in the pro-Hungarian protests thus stunned many members of the Slovene and broader Yugoslav public who struggled to comprehend this outburst of discontent by the local population. After all, the idea behind the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje was the redemption of their Slovenian brothers who had suffered for a millennium under the heavy yoke of Hungarian domination—a dominant trope in the triumphant Slovenian nationalist discourse after 1919. Why, then, were “the Slovenes of Prekmurje”—many of whom could not speak Hungarian at all—now protesting, seemingly without reason, against the very national government that had liberated them? What were the underlying causes of discontent among the broad rural masses, considered in the imaginary of the Yugoslav political and social elite as belonging to the Slovenian tribe of the Yugoslav nation? For what reason had thousands of “nationally liberated” Slovenes demanded the exact opposite—a reintegration back into Hungary—upon the arrival of a delegation that was supposed to unite them definitively and forever with the “Motherland?”

While trying to explain the seemingly irrational individual and collective agencies of the rural population of Prekmurje, many Yugoslav officials, members of the political elite, and representatives of the Yugoslav state apparatus resorted to two conventional post-imperial patterns of explanation. On the one hand, the causes of the local population’s anti-Yugoslav sentiments were to be found in the agitational activities of hostile foreign actors. In other words, farmers were being manipulated by Hungarian propaganda. On the other hand, the massive participation of the Slavophone population in anti-state demonstrations was rationalized as a symptom of insufficient national consciousness. Even though ethnographic and historical facts supposedly testified that the local population was without doubt ethnically Slovenian, local Slavophones were not yet aware of their true national identity and belonging. For various reasons, and unfortunate historical circumstances, they were therefore seen to have fallen prey to the manipulations of the local Hungarian and “*Magyaron*” elite.³

²Archives of the Republic of Slovenia (hereafter: ARS), SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V, Pov. št. 896/IV., Komanda V. žandarmerijske brigade, Demonstracije v Prekmurju.

³In the context of Slovenian ethnolinguistic discourse, the term “*Magyaron*” implied national apostasy and was used to designate individuals who were supposedly “of Slovenian ethnic origins” but who, for various reasons, had given up their true national identity and become Hungarians.

The aim of this article, however, is to illustrate the socioeconomic background of this episode of rural political discontent in Prekmurje. The author argues that during the post-Habsburg political transition and ensuing social transformation, the fundamental lack of loyalty to the Yugoslav state among an important segment of the rural population of Prekmurje was rooted in insufficient access to food. Documents of court proceedings, official state reports, and findings of individuals with deep understandings of the situation on the ground reveal that this rural political mobilisation was not so much a reflection of Hungarian propaganda or a “lack of appropriate national identification” among the local population—although, of course, these two factors cannot be ignored in a contested and linguistically and ethnically diverse region—but rather an outcome of the impoverishment of large sections of the peasant population. In other words, when the Prekmurian peasants shouted “*Éljen,*” they first and foremost expressed dissatisfaction with their difficult economic circumstances and demanded a radical improvement in the living conditions of the region. As it turned out, the South Slav state was not able to address their expectations entirely.

The Context: Political Perturbations, Destitution, and Geographical Isolation in Post-Imperial Prekmurje

As a denotation for the geographic area of the western parts of the two royal Hungarian counties Zala and Vas, the term Prekmurje had appeared in various Slovenian literary and scholarly sources already before the turn of the twentieth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Slovenian national activists in the Austrian part of the monarchy began to identify Prekmurje as a constitutive part of an envisioned Slovenian national space.⁴ Yet it was only after the end of World War I, in the maelstrom of the nationalist land-grabbing and revolutionary ferment that engulfed Central Europe, that the name “Prekmurje” became linked to the actual territory. As a consolidated geographical and administrative unit, Prekmurje was constituted in August 1919, the moment when the Paris Peace Conference allowed Yugoslavia to occupy the western parts of Hungary in exchange for military assistance in the Allied intervention against the Hungarian Soviet Republic.⁵

By the time Yugoslav forces occupied Prekmurje, the region—roughly 950 km² in size—was home to some 93,000 linguistically and confessionally diverse inhabitants. According to the first Yugoslav census of 1921, the population of Prekmurje variously reported Slovene (80.4 percent), Hungarian (15.2 percent), and German (0.7 percent) as their mother tongues. Of the total population, 71.9 percent were Catholics, 26.7 percent were Protestants, and 0.7 percent were Jews.⁶ The Hungarian census of 1910, however—which included a question on whether a person knew or spoke Hungarian—shows that approximately 50 percent of inhabitants on the territory of what came to be known as Prekmurje did not have a command of standard Hungarian at the spoken level.⁷ To put it simply, on the eve of World War I, monolingual Slavophones represented the largest section of the population in Prekmurje.

Prekmurje was a distinctly rural region. The majority of the population lived off the land, supplementing agrarian production on their own farmsteads with manual labor on the estates of the landed nobility. According to the 1910 census, 89 percent of the population in the future Prekmurje worked in agriculture, which remained constant during the first interwar decade. By 1931, the share had only

⁴On the national appropriation of the western parts of Hungary by Slovene national activists and ethnographers, see Jernej Kosi, “However, the Language Here is Changing Gradually, and in the Presence of So Many Local Dialects the Croatian and Its kindred Slovenian World Cannot be Separated Very Precisely” – Drawing the Slovenian-Croatian National Border in the Territory of the Present-day Prekmurje Region,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 57, no. 2 (2017): 33–50; idem., “The Imagined Slovene Nation and Local Categories of Identification: ‘Slovenes’ in the Kingdom of Hungary and Postwar Prekmurje,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 49 (2018): 87–102, here 90–94.

⁵On the context that paved the way for the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje, see Árpád Hornyák, *Hungarian-Yugoslav Diplomatic Relations 1918–1927* (Boulder, 2013), 46–49; Contributions in Peter Štih et al., eds., “*Mi vsi živeti ščemo.*”

⁶*Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31. Januara 1921. god./Résultats définitifs du recensement de la population du 31 Janvier 1921* (Sarajevo, 1932), 320–28.

⁷A Magyar Királyi Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, *A Magyar Szent Korona Országainak 1910. évi népszámlálása* (The 1910 Census of the Lands of the Hungarian Holy Crown) (Budapest, 1912). The data for Prekmurje was compiled and processed by Attila Kovács, whom I would like to thank kindly for providing me with the information.

decreased to 87.5 percent.⁸ In 1919, the region was overpopulated and suffered from insufficient sources of livelihood due to a combination of extensive farming on smallholdings and the creation of increasingly fragmented agricultural plots. Major concentrations of farmland remained the property of a dozen large estates.⁹ As a consequence, from the end of the nineteenth century to the early interwar period, parts of the local population migrated to the United States in several waves.¹⁰ With the exception of a highly developed local banking network, the forces of modernization only invigorated local economic activity in exceptional cases. The only two urban agglomerations of the province—Murska Sobota and Dolnja Lendava—were inhabited by a thin layer of members of the rural educated class and a few traditional craftsmen who covered local needs. By 1919, only two major companies operated in Prekmurje (a mineral water filling factory and an umbrella factory) and the industrial sector remained underdeveloped through the interwar period. On the eve of World War II, only a few hundred manual workers toiled in Prekmurje's slaughterhouses, mills, textile workshops, brickworks, and sawmills.¹¹

Even though the region remained far away from warzones, and later also from the centers of post-war revolutionary upheavals, almost every family in Prekmurje was directly affected by the consequences of the fighting and the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy. As a result, the Yugoslav authorities faced an impoverished and socially devastated local population in August 1919. Some 25,000 Prekmurian men, born between 1865 and 1900, were conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army, of whom some 3,000 died in combat, while many more returned from the fronts with minor or severe disabilities.¹² Meanwhile, the peasant population that stayed at home during the war, was subjected to state intervention in the production and circulation of agricultural products (in the form of requisitions and price regulations), a consequence of state authorities' imposition of collective participation in the war effort on the "home front."¹³ To make matters worse, in the last year of the war, the Hungarian state apparatus began to lose its monopoly on the use of violence. In the western plains of Hungary, many soldiers no longer returned from their annual leaves back to the front which led to the rapid growth of illegal armed groups—the so-called "Green Cadres." As the Italian front disintegrated, masses of soldiers poured through the

⁸Janez Malačič, "Demografski razvoj v Prekmurju 1919–2019: Upadanje prebivalstva ter modernizacija razvoja (Demographic Development in Prekmurje 1919–2019: Population Decline and the Development of Modernization)," in *Mi vsi živeti ščemo*, 355–57.

⁹Kokolj, *Prekmurški Slovenci*, 589.

¹⁰Mihael Kuzmič, *Slovenski izseljenci iz Prekmurja v Bethlehemu v ZDA: 1893–1924: naselitev in njihove zgodovinske, socialne, politične, literarne in verske dejavnosti* (Slovene Emigrants from Prekmurje to Bethlehem, USA: 1893–1924: The Settlers and Their Historical, Social, Political, Literary, and Religious Activities) (Ljubljana, 2001); Matija Maučec, "Prenaseljenost in sezonsko izseljevanje v Prekmurju (Overpopulation and Seasonal Migration in Prekmurje)," *Geografski vestnik* 9 (1933): 107–17; Ludvik Olas, "Razvoj in problemi sezonskega zaposlovanja prekmurskega prebivalstva (The Development and Problems of Seasonal Employment Among the Prekmurian Population)," *Geografski vestnik* 12 (1956): 176–208.

¹¹On modernization and economic development during the interwar period, see Metka Fujs, "Razvoj industrije in socialnopolitični položaj delavstva v Prekmurju med vojnama (The Development of Industry and the Socio-Political Position of the Working Class in Prekmurje Between the Wars)," in *Razvoj delavskega gibanja v Prekmurju med vojnama* (The Development of the Workers' Movement in Prekmurje Between the Wars), ed. Ludvik Sočič (Murska Sobota, 1987), 6–45; Rudi Čačinovič, "Politični in socialni razvoj Prekmurja med obema vojnama (The Political and Social Development of Prekmurje Between the Two Wars)," in *Prekmurški Slovenci v zgodovini: zbornik razprav o posebnih potezah zgodovinskega razvoja Prekmurja* (Prekmurian Slovenes in History: A Collection of Discussions on Special Features of the Historical Development of Prekmurje), ed. Bogo Grafenauer (Murska Sobota, 1961), 117–29. On the banking system in Prekmurje, see Ferid G. Keršovan, "Murskosoboške banke v preteklosti: spomini (The Banks of Murska Sobota in the Past: Memories)," *Kronika* 12, no. 2 (1964): 105–10.

¹²Gordana Šovegeš Lipovšek, *Prišo je glás: Prekmurci v vojni 1914–1918. Padli in pogrešani* (The Letter Arrived: Prekmurians in the War 1914–1918. The Fallen and Missing) (Murska Sobota, 2016).

¹³The contribution of Prekmurian locals to the war effort primarily included the purchase of government-backed war bonds, participation in the activities of local Red Cross branches, care for the wounded, and the collection of raw materials. See Miklós Melega, "Podnošenje žrtve i solidarnosti—Okrog Murska Sobota kao ratna pozadina (1914–1918) (The Sacrifice of Victims and Solidarity—The District of Murska Sobota as a Backdrop to the War (1914–1918))," in *Pomurje 1914–1920: zbornik radova/Mura mente 1914–1920: szöveggyűjtemény* (Pomurje 1914–1920: Collection of Works), ed. Branimir Bunjac (Čakovec/Csáktornya: Povijesno društvo Međimurske županije, 2011), 59–82; Darja Kerec, "Prekmurje leta 1917 (Prekmurje, 1917)," *Studia Historica Slovenica* 18, no. 3 (2018): 811–25.

area on their way back home, looting and intimidating the local population by means of armed violence.¹⁴

At the end of the war, in these conditions of lawlessness, soldiers who returned to the future area of Prekmurje settled scores with local representatives of the Hungarian state, while peasants looted the shops of mostly Jewish merchants who they blamed for profiteering during the war.¹⁵ In a region that bordered three successor states overnight—Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia—smuggling flourished and armed gangs roamed the villages.¹⁶ The overlapping territorial aspirations of the successor states and the democratization of political life at the local level contributed significantly to the overall feeling of instability, bordering at times on chaos.¹⁷

After years of sacrifice for the war effort, and the collapse of the social order during the turbulent post-imperial transition, the majority of the Prekmurian population faced dire conditions. In the first months after the Yugoslav occupation in August 1919, representatives of the Yugoslav regime sent numerous official reports to the administrative centers in Ljubljana and Belgrade, describing destitution, shortages, and logistical challenges that plagued the everyday lives of the local population. On 27 August 1919, the Civil Commissioner for Prekmurje—the highest Yugoslav official in the region—reported that there was absolutely nothing to buy in Prekmurje except for livestock, grain, and fruit: “There is not the smallest thing in Prekmurje that can be bought or is in stock. Starting from a spoon, everything has to be imported.”¹⁸ Similarly, at the end of November 1919, the commander of a Yugoslav gendarmerie company in Prekmurje reported to its headquarters in Ljubljana that the local population was “poorly provisioned,” for the Hungarian Bolsheviks, in the course of their control of the area, had requisitioned local resources and caused “immense price increases.”¹⁹ The local population lacked salt, sugar, matches, petroleum, tobacco, as well as underwear, clothes, and shoes. “The people are barefoot, naked, and, in the hills, hungry,” stressed Captain Sagadin, the company commander. At the same time, Prekmurje was completely cut off from the rest of the country: “Transport is nonexistent; to this day, we have not achieved direct communication with the hinterland and the post office doesn’t function at all. The same applies to the telephone.” Connections were not only hampered toward the interior of the Yugoslav countryside—hindered by the lack of bridges over the Mura River—but also in the direction of Hungary, where, until the occupation, some of the local population had migrated every spring for seasonal work. Half a year later, the situation was even worse. The Civil Commissioner for Prekmurje reported to the provincial government in Ljubljana that “the state of affairs with regard to food is just as difficult in Prekmurje as in the rest of Slovenia. Flour, sugar, petroleum, and petrol are particularly scarce.”²⁰

Slovenian politicians who travelled from Ljubljana to see the prevailing circumstances in Prekmurje first-hand came to the same conclusion. Describing the local mayors who presented themselves to him on his visit to Dolnja Lendava in October 1919, the President of the Provincial Government for Slovenia, Janko Brejc, wrote succinctly in his report that “the latter have made a miserable impression.

¹⁴Zoltán Paksy, “Dejavnost vodilnih teles za Međžimurje in Pomurje v letih 1918–1919 (Activities of the Leading Bodies for Međžimurje and Pomurje, 1918–1919),” *Zbornik soboškega muzeja*, no. 11/12 (2008): 7–22; Ibolya Foki, “Protest županije Zala protiv odcepljenja međžimurskih i pomurskih naselja (The Protest of Zala County Against the Secession of Settlements in Međžimurje and Pomurje),” in *Pomurje 1914–1920*, 303–12.

¹⁵On looting of shops in the village of Beltinci, see Ivan Jerič, *Moji spomini* (My Recollections) (Murska Sobota, 2000), 40–41.

¹⁶Ferid G. Keršovan, “Spomini na gospodarsko in socialno življenje v Prekmurju (Recollections of Economic and Social Life in Prekmurje),” *Kronika* 12, no. 3 (1964): 169–84.

¹⁷László Göncz, “Načrti avtonomne in upravne organiziranosti Slovenske krajine v obdobju Károlyijeve ljudske republike (od novembra 1918 do marca 1919) (Plans for the Autonomous and Administrative Organization of Slovene Lands in the Period of Károlyi’s People’s Republic (from November 1918 to March 1919)),” *Studia Historica Slovenica* 21, no. 3 (2021): 727–87; Julij Titl, *Murska republika 1919* (The Republic of Prekmurje, 1919) (Murska Sobota, 1970); György Feiszt, “Revolucionarni pokret u Prekmurju od 1918. do 1919. (The Revolutionary Movement in Prekmurje from 1918 to 1919),” in *Pomurje 1914–1920*, 345–52; Kokolj, *Prekmurski Slovenci*, 126–89; idem., “Prekmurje v prevratnih letih 1918–1919 (Prekmurje in the Revolutionary Years 1918–1919),” in *Revolucionarno vrenje v Pomurju v letih 1918–1920* (The Revolutionary Upheaval in Pomurje, 1918–1920), ed. Janko Liška (Pomurska založba, 1981), 153–205.

¹⁸ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (V 1919–1925), no. 10278.

¹⁹ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje V, no. 46 (Izvleček iz poročila komandirja orožniške čete za Prekmurje).

²⁰ARS, SI AS 60, box 6, no. 4007, Prekmurje, situacijsko poročilo.

Poorly fed and badly clothed.”²¹ The unsatisfactory situation had also been pointed out by Albin Prepeluh, the commissioner of the Provincial Government responsible for social welfare. In the report on his visit to Prekmurje in autumn 1919, Prepeluh stressed that the administration’s first concern should be “the provision of foodstuffs, especially salt and sugar, to the poor population there.”²²

Yet Yugoslav officials and members of the state apparatus did not only stress the problem of food shortages and the lack of basic necessities. On 15 September 1919, the commander of the regional gendarmerie company informed his superiors about the growing dissatisfaction of the local population and highlighted its economic causes. People had run out of tobacco and sugar, salt, matches, and petroleum: “The only way to satisfy the population is to make it as well provisioned as possible.”²³ A month later, he described the situation in much more alarming terms. With widespread shortages, a new state border that made seasonal migration impossible, and a traffic cut-off that prevented the local population from being able to trade their own agricultural produce, “the people who were all for us when we seized the region are now all against us.”²⁴ Dissatisfaction with provisioning was expected to create the conditions for successful pro-Hungarian agitation, which, in his opinion, could only be stopped if the Yugoslav authorities were able to provide the loyal population with the means to a prosperous life.

Even after two years of Yugoslav rule—in the meantime, the Treaty of Trianon officially ceded Prekmurje to the South Slav state—the socioeconomic situation in Prekmurje did not seem to have improved much. On 16 September 1921, just a few days before the arrival of the Boundary Commission, the district captain (a former civil commissioner who had received the new official title in the meantime) reported to the Provincial Administration for Slovenia that it should get ready for possible food shortages which could befall Prekmurje the following spring. In the densely populated region, the state’s ban on travel across the new international border to large Hungarian estates for seasonal work, combined with droughts and hailstorms, could result in people facing starvation.²⁵

The Demonstrations: An Expression of the Pro-Hungarian Sentiments of the Local Population?

In the days preceding the arrival of the Boundary Commission, anonymous propagandists began to distribute hundreds of leaflets among the inhabitants of Prekmurje, encouraging them to use the opportunity of the Commission’s arrival to express their discontent publicly. Written in the regional Slavic language, the leaflet read:

Brothers! Let us awake from our slumber, the hour we have been waiting for has arrived. The Commission that will determine our borders is here. It is up to us to decide what we want; it is up to us to decide to whom we want to belong; it is up to us to decide whether we want to have bread or to suffer hunger; it is up to us to decide whether we want to have our old language, which our fathers have spoken for a thousand years, or whether we want to learn a new one. Anyone is free to say what is on their mind in front of the Commission, and no one will be harmed. If anyone is harmed, he should contact the Hungarian confidant.²⁶

As it turned out, the local rural population responded en masse to the call for political mobilization.²⁷ As the sun rose on the day of the Boundary Commission’s arrival, crowds of locals began to swarm toward Murska Sobota from the countryside.²⁸ Among them was Jožef Rituper, a farmer, who led a group of

²¹ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje V, no. 12688.

²²ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (V 1919–1925), no. 12943 (8.11.1919).

²³ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (V 1919–1925), no. 20 (Razmere v Prekmurju).

²⁴ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje V, no. 46 (Izvleček iz poročila komandirja orožniške čete za Prekmurje).

²⁵ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 803 (Situacijsko poročilo).

²⁶Regional Archives, Maribor (hereafter: RAM), SI PAM/0645/003/00721 Kazenski spis Okrožnega sodišča Maribor (hereafter: KS) Vr IX 2037/21 (168/6).

²⁷Kokolj, *Prekmurški Slovenci*, 120–24.

²⁸RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (1).

several dozen fellow villagers from Tešanovci, waving a Hungarian flag bearing the inscription “*Talpra Magyar (On Your Feet, Magyar)*.”²⁹ The Yugoslav gendarmes, assisted by military units, tried unsuccessfully to block access to Murska Sobota. Several hundred protesters from near and far managed to get past the checkpoints and welcomed the delegation in the center of the town. Groups of locals also gathered to intercept the delegates outside of town, along the route to the hilly frontier villages in the north. Shortly after the motorcade left the Hotel Dobray in their rear-view mirrors, the crowd stopped them on a nearby bridge. While greeting them with the characteristic chants of “*Éljen*,” Ivan Mürec—the son of a local farm-owner—jumped “on a car carrying a Hungarian flag, unmasked himself, waved his hat in the air and shouted ‘*Éljen Magyarország*.’”³⁰ On the same day, the Commission was met by several thousand demonstrating locals in the village of Tvrdkova. The atmosphere was tense. The innkeeper Jožef Gašpar was later charged with rioting and inciting the crowd upon the Commission’s arrival. Gašpar, per the gendarmerie’s indictment, “stepped on a mound of gravel, took his hat in his hands and shouted ‘*Éljen Magyarország!* Let’s kill the gendarmes, today is our day, today we have a say.”³¹ The next day, a crowd of villagers from Šalovci went to demonstrate in Veliki Dolenci, where the Commission was examining the situation. On their way there, the angry group stopped in front of a village gendarmerie post and shouted “*Éljen Magyarország*” as well as “*Abzug, you dirty Slavs!*” and, later, “*Abzug Jugoslawien*.”³² In Veliki Dolenci, too, the gendarmerie, reinforced by customs officers and border guards, had great difficulty in subduing the demonstrators.

The widespread outbreak of dissatisfaction with Yugoslav rule exposed a significant lack of political loyalty to the South Slav state among a substantial portion of the local population. Officials on the ground, the Slovenian political elite, and the public were shocked and even horrified by the fact that thousands of Slavophones attended the demonstration, waved Hungarian flags, and demanded the return of the alleged national oppressor. Many Slovenian observers thus searched for an in-depth explanation of what exactly instigated the outbreak of popular discontent. In the ensuing days, two interpretations emerged in the public sphere, seeking to find a rationale which underpinned the locals’ anti-Yugoslav individual and collective political agencies. The first interpretation justified the population’s disloyal political articulations with the notion of a national lukewarmness, unawareness, or even indifference. By following a trope well-established in Slovene nationalist discourse, shocked Slovenian observers consoled themselves with the belief that, due to unfavorable circumstances and various contingent political reasons, the Prekmurian Slovenians had not yet developed enough consciousness of their own national identity. Just three days after the riots, the author of the article “On the events in Murska Sobota,” published in the newspaper *Tabor*, an organ of the Slovenian branch of the centralist and integralist-oriented Yugoslav Democratic Party, was already able to identify the underlying causes of the discontent in Prekmurje:

For a thousand years, this part of the Slovenian nation was under the influence of the Hungarians. In the last decades, systematic Magyarization has taken place among the inhabitants of Prekmurje. In schools, in offices, by all means. Is anyone surprised that the Prekmurje Slovenes have not developed their own national consciousness, that they have overwhelmingly considered Hungary to be their homeland? National consciousness is cultivated and nurtured by a national intelligentsia. The Prekmurje peasantry was alone. Their sons were educated in Hungarian schools and listened with contempt to the “simple” language of their parents. A young, talented man yearned for culture. The Hungarians knew how to bedazzle him. Of us, our literature, our progress, he had not heard. The “masters” took care of that.³³

²⁹RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (135, Jožef Ritoper) – The line is taken from Sándor Petőfi’s *Nemzeti dal* (National Song), recited on 15 March 1848 in Budapest, celebrated as the beginning of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–49.

³⁰RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (73, Ivan Mürec).

³¹RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (71, Jožef Gašpar).

³²RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (153).

³³This kind of argument is presented in the article “On the Events in Murska Sobota,” published in the newspaper *Tabor*, an organ of the Slovenian branch of the centralist and integralist-oriented Yugoslav Democratic Party. “K dogodkom v Murski Soboti,” *Tabor*, no. 215, 22 September 1921, 1.

An alternative interpretation attempted to explain the mass political mobilization against the Yugoslav authorities as a logical outcome of a systematic propaganda campaign carried out by the opponents of the South Slav state. Foreign agents and domestic propagandists—both allegedly financed by Hungary—misled local protesters into waving Hungarian flags, chanting “*Éljen*,” and singing the Hungarian anthem. As early as 24 September, an official report published by *Tabor* blamed a group of “Hungarian agitators inspired by the well-known renegade Professor Nikola” for the “noisy demonstrations for annexation to the Hungarian state.” A group of local elements hostile to Yugoslavia, the article claimed, “incited the population in the days and nights preceding the demonstrations to believe that this was about the plebiscite, whereas the Boundary Commission only had the task of fixing, on the ground, the border generally defined in the Treaty of Trianon in such a way that it corresponded to local economic needs.”³⁴ Aside from local state administrators, and representatives of the Yugoslav state apparatus, the Slovenian political elite also seemed to believe that local irredentist supporters should be blamed for the mobilization of the local rural population under the banner of a foreign state.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, following this line of reasoning and rationalization, the Yugoslav gendarmerie commenced an investigation and began to arrest and thoroughly interrogate supposed perpetrators. In the course of this process, the gendarmerie collected a pile of reports and testimonies, on the basis of which the state prosecution later tried to substantiate in criminal proceedings that the demonstrators had committed high treason.³⁶

Both explanations contain a grain of truth. Solid evidence suggests that both a lack of identification with the notion of “Sloveneness” and active Hungarian propaganda played important roles in the rural population’s mass mobilization to demand the reunion of Prekmurje with Hungary. After all, even Slovenian national activists and politicians acknowledged that, before the Yugoslav occupation, the majority of Prekmurian Slavophones did not identify with the modern ethnolinguistic categorization of Slovenian national identification.³⁷ Many Yugoslav officials who were in contact with the local rural population in Prekmurje came to the same conclusion: the local Slavophones mostly responded with suspicion, rejection, or ignorance to the siren call of Slovene nationalism. In addition, a part of the local social elite were undoubtedly opposed to the Yugoslav occupation and the annexation of Prekmurje to the South Slav state.³⁸ A number of lawyers, teachers, merchants, craftsmen, Lutheran pastors, and Catholic priests indeed maintained contacts with foreign and local propagandists for the Hungarian cause.³⁹ Many pro-Hungarian individuals in Prekmurje thus perceived the arrival of

³⁴Ibid. – Sándor Mikola (1871 in Gornji Petrovci/Péterhegy – 1945 in Nagykanisza), grammar school teacher of mathematics and physics. In the aftermath of the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje (and his birthplace), he worked as a Hungarian political activist and advocate of the theory of the Prekmurje Slavophones as a special non-Slavic community—descendants of the Vandals. During this period he maintained contacts with opponents of the Yugoslav regime in Prekmurje, participating as a member of the Hungarian delegation (expert on Prekmurje) at the Paris Peace Conference and editing a newspaper, *Domovina*. See Vilko Novak, “Mikola, Aleksander (1871–1945),” in *Slovenska biografija* (Ljubljana, 2013). <http://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi367787/#slovenski-biografski-leksikon> (14 November 2022); Julijana Vöröš, “MIKOLA, Sandor. (1871–1945)” (Kranj, 2020). <https://www.obrazislovenskihpokrajn.si/it/oseba/mikola-sandor/>.

³⁵The events were summarized in this manner by the “semi-official” newspapers of both the Slovenian liberal and the Slovenian Catholic political elite. See “Madžaronske demonstracije v Prekmurju,” *Slovenski narod*, no. 214, 25 September 1921, 2; and “Razmejitev med Jugoslavijo in Madžarsko,” *Slovenec*, no. 215, 22 September 1921, 1.

³⁶RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21.

³⁷Kosi, “The Imagined Slovene Nation,” 95–102; idem., “Summer of 1919: A Radical, Irreversible, Liberating Break in Prekmurje/Muravidék?” *Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (2020): 51–68, here 63–64.

³⁸In the years after the occupation, the Yugoslav security authorities kept a long list of “suspicious anti-Yugoslav elements” in Prekmurje. See ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 816 (Seznam politično sumljivih in državi nevarnih oseb in inozemcev območja 5. orožniške čete). In particular, Protestant pastors and Catholic clergy were said to be “overwhelmingly of Hungarian and *Magyaron* mind.” See Peter Ribnikar, ed., *Sejni zapiski Narodne vlade Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov v Ljubljani in Deželnih vlad za Slovenijo: 1918–1921* (Minutes of the Meetings of the National Government of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs in Ljubljana and the Regional Government for Slovenia), vol. 3 (Ljubljana, 2002), 263, 269.

³⁹Janez Nemeč (1912–2001) described in his “*Spomini na mlada leta* (Memories of My Youth)” how his father, a bilingual Hungarian-oriented owner of a hardware store in Murska Sobota, secretly read smuggled material in his bed. The unpublished memoirs are in the author’s possession.

the Boundary Commission as a potential boiling point, or as a window of opportunity for the realization of revisionist aspirations.

This was not merely wishful thinking. In fact, it was based on a document crafted in Paris—the so-called Covering Letter—which hypothetically left the door open to Hungarian territorial demands despite the conclusiveness of the Treaty of Trianon.⁴⁰ In addition to the Treaty, the delegates of the Yugoslav-Hungarian Boundary Commission were supposed to take the provisions from the Covering Letter into account, which, in short, gave the Hungarian side the possibility to propose minor revisions to the demarcation line if the delegates came across arguments showing that the proposed line would do injustice to the local population for ethnic or economic reasons. The intention of the document was not to significantly alter the existing boundary. Yet the Hungarian propagandists grasped the vague promise of the Covering Letter with both hands. By means of mass propaganda, they convinced the rural population that the Commission would listen to the wishes, views, and dissatisfactions of all the Prekmurje municipalities which attended the Commission's meetings. In other words, they convinced several thousand local inhabitants of Prekmurje that it would be possible to achieve the return of the entire territory of Prekmurje to Hungary by demonstrating en masse at anti-Yugoslav demonstrations.

However, a mere week after the protests, it became clear to state officials and gendarmes that neither national lukewarmness nor Hungarian propaganda were the two crucial causes of the outbreak of discontent. A thorough investigation showed that the main source of the unrest lay elsewhere. Only a few days after the demonstration, both the head of the gendarmerie and the district governor agreed that the root cause of the discontent had to be found in inadequate food provisioning, scarcity, and reduced earning opportunities. On 28 September, the commander of the gendarmerie brigade in Prekmurje, in a report to his superiors in Ljubljana, named pro-Hungarian agitators as responsible for the demonstrations, but also stressed that “the main reason why our people responded to this seduction and pressure was severe destitution in the northern part of Prekmurje.” Before the Yugoslav occupation, farmers from these villages migrated every year for seasonal work into the interior of Hungary, where they were paid with grain to feed their families over the winter. However, this was no longer possible, since crops had become “heavily taxed by the authorities when transported from Hungary to our territory—a fact which people have always and everywhere stressed to the Boundary Commission—as well as the fact that they lack any transportation links which would facilitate the cheaper import of foodstuffs from the rear.” For this reason, people “publicly shouted out during the demonstrations: ‘Yugoslavia has expensive bread, we want to belong where we earn our bread.’”⁴¹

The district captain similarly recounted to the Provincial Government in Ljubljana that he had approached groups of people demonstrating during the protests in frontier villages and asked them about the causes of their dissatisfaction. He received the same answer everywhere, “that they were satisfied with our administration and with the overall situation, only the prospects of survival were to be improved.”⁴² At the beginning of November, the district captain's report included even more specific information. The causes of discontent were, on the one hand, poor transportation infrastructure, which in northern Prekmurje had an impact on rising costs, and, on the other hand, customs restrictions, which severely limited the possibilities of a traditional source of alternative income, namely seasonal agricultural work.⁴³

In his statement to the court, Nikolaj Pinter, a prominent and wealthy attorney-at-law from Murska Sobota, highlighted the same reasons for the rural population's grievances. Arrested during protests in Murska Sobota as a supposed organizer, he refuted the charge, arguing that the possibilities for political agitation were very limited, as people were “totally demoralized and disobedient as a result of the

⁴⁰On the Covering Letter, see Cree, “Yugoslav-Hungarian,” 92–93.

⁴¹ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 896 (“Demonstracije v Prekmurju”. Komanda V. žandarmerijske brigade – Komandantu celokupne žandarmerije).

⁴²ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 845 (Okrajno glavarstvo v Murski Soboti. Situacijsko poročilo. 22.9.1921).

⁴³ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 1504 (“Razmejitev v Prekmurju, protidržavne demonstracije”. 6.11.1921).

war,” which was “partly due to the revolution, from 1918 to March 1919, and to communism, which reigned in August 1919.”⁴⁴ According to Pinter, the widespread discontent in Prekmurje had various socioeconomic and political causes. Small farmers who used to earn their living by going to Hungary to reap and thresh grain were no longer able to do so, or were unable to bring home the grain they earned—having been paid in kind—because of Yugoslav customs regulations. Moreover, they were punished when they returned home given the Yugoslav state authorities prohibited and penalised seasonal migration over the border. Furthermore, there was a lot of livestock in Prekmurje which people could not sell across the border because only one merchant had the exclusive right to buy livestock in Prekmurje, and could do so at prices he thought appropriate, exploiting the plight of the farmers. As the rail connection to Hungary through the north of Prekmurje had ceased to work after the occupation, goods in shops were very expensive because they had to be transported on wagons from the nearest railway station. Last, but not least, Pinter concluded, the Prekmurian dialect was not respected in church, schools, or in government offices, and some local officials had even been dismissed from their jobs and had to leave Prekmurje because of the way they spoke.

When the court asked the district captain to clarify such claims, he replied that “unfortunately, the causes of dissatisfaction as stated by the accused are true.” Poor Prekmurian peasants, especially those from the northern hills, had been accustomed to annual migration for harvesting work in the Hungarian interior, and were paid in kind. They now faced extensive obstacles. High customs duties took part of their earnings because of the new state border. Livestock farmers faced difficulties in finding markets to sell their livestock, as access to traditional customers in the interior of Hungary was denied, and connections to the interior of Yugoslavia were limited and costly, making them easy prey for livestock traffickers. There was no rail connection, resulting in the fact that essential commodities in remote villages were disproportionately more expensive than elsewhere due to transport costs.⁴⁵ Confirming Dr. Pinter’s explanations about the causes of the unrest, the district captain encouraged the Maribor District Court, which heard the gendarmerie’s charges against Pinter, to eventually drop the case.

The massive outburst of discontent in Prekmurje, expressed in the form of nationalist demonstrations in favor of Hungary, was hence a response by the local rural population to the socioeconomic precariousness of the post-imperial transition. The Hungarian national iconography that accompanied the protests, the slogans shouted by the protesters, and the singing of the Hungarian national anthem were to a large extent merely external expressions of the Prekmurian peasantry’s individual and collective political agency. In other words, although the demonstrations on a rhetorical and visual level represented clear Hungarian nationalist sentiments, the political and social reasons for the mass protests only partially overlapped with the ideological visions, premises, and vocabulary of modern nationalist movements.

In September 1921, the Prekmurian peasants did not fight for abstract political concepts, neither for the Hungarian national state, for the idea of national sovereignty, nor for the notion of the right to national self-determination. The main source of dissatisfaction was much more prosaic and easier to digest. A field worker, Mihael Fartek, put it vividly and succinctly. After venting his anger to gendarmes in Tvrđkova—asking “what are you looking for here on our land, bandits? Get lost, guns down”—Fartek added that “Yugoslavia has nothing, Yugoslavia has no bread. But Hungarians give us bread. We cannot live without the Hungarians. *Éljen a magyar*, down with Serbia.”⁴⁶ In a word, the Prekmurian peasantry’s political mobilization was driven by a demand for radical change in the way food was produced, circulated, and consumed.

It should come as no surprise that the mass political discontent which flared up in Prekmurje in 1922 occurred over limited access to food. There, food was a precious commodity. At the beginning of the 1920s, most of the population in Prekmurje lived by working the land one way or another. But paradoxically, the region yielded scarcely more than what was needed to adequately nourish the

⁴⁴RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (1).

⁴⁵RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (182).

⁴⁶RAM, KS, Vr IX 2037/21 (133, Mihael Fartek).

local population in an average year. A statistical estimation from 1922, prepared for the military by state officials in Murska Sobota, reveals that Prekmurje was barely self-sufficient, even under ideal conditions, when crops were not threatened by diseases or weather disruptions. All the more so since, in the early 1920s, a significant proportion of the region's agricultural produce was not destined for local consumption; around 100 wagons of grain per year were destined for buyers outside the region. This means that the foodstuffs and money brought home by seasonal migrants each autumn guaranteed the basic survival of many families. As a consequence, the official Yugoslav restriction on traditional seasonal migration consigned the local population to live in harsh conditions, if not pushing them to starve altogether.⁴⁷

Epilogue: Limited Access to Food in Prekmurje and the Consequences of Inadequate State Capacity in Yugoslavia

From the beginning of the occupation of Prekmurje in August 1919, Yugoslav officials who came into contact with the local population were conscious of the difficult socioeconomic conditions in the region. Numerous reports were sent to state administrative centers, detailing the problems and listing proposals that could improve local material conditions. Their aim was to reduce the potential for the peasant population's participation in mass anti-Yugoslav politics. Among politicians and state officials, there was no lack of commitment to solve the plight of the local Prekmurian population. Through administrative measures and financial investments, the South Slav state addressed two key sources of local discontent in the early 1920s. First, they sought to remedy the disastrous state of transport links to the Yugoslav interior, and, second, to ease the consequences of restrictions on the traditional seasonal migration routes that had been cut by the newly established border between Yugoslavia and Hungary. At the same time, the Prekmurian peasantry also saw the beginning of the implementation of a key nationwide measure to pacify the Yugoslav rural population: land reform.

As elsewhere in Central Europe, the promise of a better life became one of the central topics of the Yugoslav political imagination in the immediate aftermath of World War I. In a country where the majority of the population made a living from agriculture, the question of the ownership of arable land constituted an eminent political problem. Left unresolved, it could potentially escalate anti-Yugoslav, anti-state, and anti-monarchic resentments. The Yugoslav political elite was clearly aware of this. Soon after the collapse of the Dual Monarchy, the first promises of land reform were formulated. In January 1919, Regent Alexander Karađorđević issued a proclamation which announced the expropriation of landed estates and the distribution of arable land among veterans, poor farmers, and landless peasants. In February 1919, the first law on land reform was promulgated, stipulating that expropriated agricultural land would be granted on a temporary lease until the legislation was sorted out, and that large estates could keep up to a maximum of 200 hectares.⁴⁸

The second state-led intervention concerned seasonal migration and emigration, two traditional means of financial compensation for the economic constraints and demographic pressures that plagued the Prekmurian peasantry. From the mid-nineteenth century onward—a period when the region suffered from several consecutive years of drought and poor harvests—landless agricultural laborers and impoverished farmers began to offer their threshing services to wealthier farmers in

⁴⁷Murska Sobota Regional and Educational Library, SI_P1ŠK/0001/003/001/00075, 10/3 (Statistično poročilo sreza Murska Sobota, komandi mariborskega vojnega okrožja o prehrani, sanitetnih razmerah in mineralnem bogastvu v Prekmurju).

⁴⁸Questions surrounding land reform in Yugoslavia have been discussed many times and in great detail in existent historiographic literature. See especially Miliwoje Erić, *Agrarna reforma u Jugoslaviji: 1918–1941 god.* (Agrarian Reform in Yugoslavia, 1918–41) (Sarajevo, 1958); Bogdan Lekić, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Jugoslaviji: 1918–1941* (Agrarian Reform and Colonization in Yugoslavia, 1918–41) (Belgrade, 2002); Jozo Tomasevich, *Peasants, Politics, and Economic Change in Yugoslavia* (Stanford, 1955), 344–82; for Prekmurje, see especially Attila Kovács, "Agrarna reforma in kolonizacija na območju Dolnje Lendave med obema vojnama (Agrarian Reform and Colonization Around Dolnja Lendava Between the Two Wars)," *Razprave in gradivo*, no. 53/54 (2007): 68–97; Olga Janša, "Agrarna reforma v Sloveniji med obema vojnama (Agrarian Reform in Slovenia Between the Two Wars)," *Zgodovinski časopis* 18 (1964): 173–89; and Žarko Lazarević, *Kmečki dolgovi na Slovenskem: socialno-ekonomski vidiki zadolženosti slovenskih kmetov 1848–1948* (Agricultural Debts in Slovenia: The Socio-Economic Aspects of the Indebtedness of Slovenian Peasants, 1848–1948) (Ljubljana, 1994).

exchange for a share of the harvest. Eventually, they traveled in groups deeper into the interior of the prewar Kingdom of Hungary, where they worked on noble estates from spring to autumn and returned home with enough grain to last them and their families through the winter.⁴⁹ At the end of the nineteenth century, seasonal migration was paralleled by more permanent emigration to the United States. Many migrants embedded themselves in working-class and rural communities across the Midwest, or returned to their villages in Prekmurje after years spent abroad.⁵⁰

Similar to the immediate prewar period, seasonal migration and remittances from emigrants who found permanent residence abroad remained two key sources of livelihood between the two world wars. However, Yugoslav rule in Prekmurje radically transformed the migration patterns of thousands of Prekmurian peasant families. Soon after the region's occupation and subsequent annexation, the Yugoslav administration began to severely restrict migration to Hungary.⁵¹ By 1925, departures to the Hungarian estates in the vicinity of Lake Balaton slowed dramatically due to unfavorable currency exchange rates and high customs duties. At the same time, the state facilitated and, in some periods, strongly encouraged migration to other places. With the assistance of the local unit of the State Labor Agency (*Državna posredovalnica za delo*), peasants found work in the fields of Vojvodina and Slavonia, and also as masons in neighboring "Slovenian" parts of Yugoslavia. From the beginning of the 1920s, the Agency began to arrange transport to Germany and France as well as assist with permanent emigration to Argentina and Canada. In the 1930s, looking for work abroad became a crucial strategy of survival. Many Prekmurian peasants found employment in Germany, where a shortage of labor for the most difficult farm work began to emerge as the militarization of the economy and society accelerated. The scale and importance of migration as a source of income is reflected in figures. In 1939, for example, almost 10 percent of the total population of Prekmurje left for seasonal work, that is, some 9,000 male and female workers.⁵²

At the same time, the Yugoslav state also committed money to infrastructural projects that would significantly improve the accessibility of Prekmurje. Above all, the construction of new transport links was dictated by economic and security considerations. After Radkersburg—located in the former Habsburg crownland of Styria—was ceded to Austria by the Treaty of Saint-Germain, Prekmurje lost its land connection with the rest of Yugoslavia. Set between Prekmurje and the rest of the South Slav state, the Mura River now constituted the primary natural obstacle to the region's integration with the rest of the South Slav state. Commercial and passenger transit was therefore only possible via the bridge at Dolnja Lendava (towards Međimurje) or by crossing the half a dozen fords that dotted the length of the Mura. The construction of new transport routes, however, was slow. It was not until April 1922 that the first new bridge over the Mura was built, further connecting Prekmurje with the "Slovenian territories" of Yugoslavia.⁵³ The local population also pressed hard for improved rail links. By 1919, there were only two railway lines that operated in Prekmurje, both of which were directed toward the interior of Hungary. With the Treaty of Trianon, they were cut off from their previous network by the creation of the demarcation line. This made the export of agricultural products and the import of industrial and other goods extremely difficult. Finally, in 1921, a plan was adopted to connect these lines to the existing railway network west of Prekmurje, across the Mura. But it was only by the end of November 1924 that a line was built which linked Murska Sobota, across a bridge on the Mura, to Ljutomer in Styria and onward to the Yugoslav railway network.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Olas, "Razvoj in problemi," 179–81; Marietta Boross, "O življenjskih in delovnih razmerah železnožupanijskih slovenskih sezoncev med dvema vojnama (On the Living and Working Conditions of Slovenian Seasonal Workers in Vas County Between the Two Wars)," *Etnologija Slovencev na Madžarskem/A Magyarországi szlovének néprajza* 4 (2003): 9–40. Katalin Munda Hirnök, "Sezonstvo (Seasonal Work)," *Etnologija Slovencev na Madžarskem/A Magyarországi szlovének néprajza* 1 (1997): 19–66.

⁵⁰Kuzmič, *Slovenski izseljenci*.

⁵¹In February 1921, the regional government in Ljubljana issued a decree that opened up the possibility to migrate for seasonal work in Hungary only for those given approval by the State Labor Agency. Ribnikar, ed., *Sejmi zapisniki*, 260.

⁵²Olas, "Razvoj in problemi," 184–95; Maučec, "Prenaseljenost," 107–17.

⁵³Kokolj, 126–27.

⁵⁴For the history of railways in Prekmurje, see Zoltán Lendvai Kepe, *Poglavja iz zgodovine železnice v Lendavi/Fejezetek Lendva vasúttörténetéből* (Chapters from the History of Railways in Lendava) (Lendava, 2020); Kokolj, 181–82.

Thus, the Yugoslav state apparatus aimed to improve the socioeconomic situation of the rural population of Prekmurje in three areas. The first, land reform, sought to provide landless peasants and owners of tiny farms (as well as their families) with the necessary basis for subsistence farming. Second, by developing road and rail transport links, officials and politicians sought to improve the circulation of food. In doing so, the inhabitants of Prekmurje would be given the opportunity to buy cheaper domestic goods and likewise enter the Yugoslav market with their own agrarian products. Finally, by systematically diverting seasonal migration inland, issuing passports and organizing migration to other European markets, and, above all, tolerating emigration, the state offered the Prekmurian population the possibility to secure the additional financial resources needed to buy and consume food and other basic goods.

As it turned out, these efforts were too little, too late, and too slow. Indeed, in the absence of reliable statistical data it is in fact difficult to assess the success of the state's top-down intervention in the material circumstances of the Prekmurian peasantry. Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that the overall situation during the 1920s was at best only slightly improved. The onset of the Great Depression at the opening of the 1930s exposed the shaky foundations of the market-based Yugoslav economic development model.⁵⁵ A report published in 1936 by the Ljubljana Hygienic Institute—which had carried out research into the social, economic, and health conditions which prevailed in the region—revealed the abject misery existing among the peasants of Prekmurje. The Institute considered the food consumed by the local inhabitants to be “poor,” “simple,” “too meager,” “insufficient,” “inadequate,” and even “primitive.”⁵⁶ Farms with little arable land—the vast majority, comprising 72 percent of all farms in the region owned less than five hectares—suffered from deprivation or hunger.⁵⁷ Descriptions of shortages in different Prekmurian villages illustrate even more vividly the utter failure of state policies. In the village of Bratonci, located in the lowlands of Prekmurje along the Mura River, employees of the Ljubljana Hygiene Institute observed that the diet was “most often inadequate” and that “poorer families with many children are chronically hungry.” In neighboring Melinci, in 1936, “half the village had no bread. Children at school often lose consciousness because of hunger and the teacher treats them with a cup of bitter milk.” In the village of Križevci, in the north of Prekmurje, there were families that lived “for a long period of the year without bread and lard.” The nutrition in Domanjševci was also poor, especially in summer, while in winter “it is better because seasonal workers bring grain. One quarter of the families lack bread from April until the harvest.” Unsurprisingly, health conditions in the region were catastrophic: in the Drava Banovina, Prekmurje was the site of the worst general and infant mortality rates and the highest rates of tuberculosis.⁵⁸

Even though the situation in the Prekmurian countryside remained notoriously dire, mass political protests did not take place in the region after September 1921. This fact presented no paradox. By that time, Yugoslav authorities had already gained a lot of experience in violently pacifying popular

⁵⁵This is an issue beyond the scope of this article. However, it is generally accepted that Yugoslavia, at the time of its creation, was a country with an industrial base that had either been destroyed or remained underdeveloped and that also contained a predominantly peasant population—three quarters of the Yugoslav population lived from agriculture. It remained a predominantly agrarian and industrially underdeveloped state throughout the entire period. As a result, it was largely dependent on the economic situations in and political decisions of other European countries, particularly those to which it sold agrarian raw materials and semi-finished products in exchange for industrial goods. Agricultural productivity was low on average, and farms were heavily burdened by loans (for land purchases, operating capital, etc.). At the same time, the countryside was overpopulated; this meant that, in the absence of an industrial policy, the peasantry was forced either to emigrate or to live in scarcity and hunger on heavily indebted family farms. See Lazarević, *Kmečki dolgovi*, 33–71, for a good overview.

⁵⁶Ivo Pirc and Franjo Baš, *Socialni problemi slovenske vasi. Zv. 1* (The Social Problems of Slovene Villages, vol. 1) (Ljubljana, 1938), 90–91.

⁵⁷According to the criterion of how much land was needed to support a family of five, in the interwar period (after the land reform) about 80 percent of the farms in the northern hilly areas and 40 percent of the farms in the southern lowlands of Prekmurje were considered to be unsustainable. Olas, “Razvoj in problemi,” 178.

⁵⁸Pirc and Baš, *Socialni problemi*, 80.

discontent.⁵⁹ Instead of implementing an ambitious social welfare programme, Yugoslav authorities primarily used rifle butts and batons to subdue voices of discontent. The commandant of the Yugoslav gendarmerie company in Prekmurje tellingly boasted as early as December 1921 that “since the last demonstration, progress has been observed among the population in general; the population has become obedient.” The author of the report pointed out that the population was disarmed a number of times, the border was well defended, and the gendarmerie stations in difficult areas were equipped with heavy machine guns, which had “a very good impact regarding morale.”⁶⁰ In addition to physical violence, the Yugoslav state supported a collective resocialization of the rural Slavophone population—a multifaceted top-down process of nationalization in an attempt to divert Prekmurian peasants from holding onto loyalties and identifications that originated in pre-Yugoslav times. Throughout the 1920s and thirties, Slovenian teachers, leaders of voluntary associations, and Catholic priests tried to transform new generations of Prekmurian Slavophones into members of the Slovenian nation.

To conclude, in Prekmurje, the interwar Yugoslav regime showed no substantial commitment to forming and establishing social bonds and political loyalties through adequate food provisioning and sustainable welfare programmes. The peasants of Prekmurje, however, responded with a similar lack of interest. As Yugoslav citizens, they either ignored general elections or persistently voted for anti-centralist parties which offered nationalist or identity-based discourses as responses to social inequalities and the state’s inability to provide for the basic security of its citizens.⁶¹ Moreover, in the 1930s, many Prekmurian peasants began to show great sympathy for National Socialism, which they encountered during their seasonal work in Germany. Simultaneously, support also grew for the underground communist movement, which began to spread its influence systematically among impoverished agricultural laborers.⁶² With the privilege of hindsight, it is obvious that bearers of the Yugoslav idea in Prekmurje were not particularly successful in their endeavor to instill lasting loyalties in locals, neither to the regime, nor to the monarch, nor to the South Slav state. The final verdict on the loyalties of Prekmurian peasants came at the outbreak of World War II. In his seminal work, Jozo Tomasevich commented on the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia with the following words: “When the test came—the invasion of 1941—the whole fabric of the state simply disintegrated. Whole nations and the great bulk of the population, especially the peasantry, apparently felt that the state in the form in which it existed was nothing that belonged to them and thus was not worth fighting for.”⁶³ The same was true of Prekmurje, which German troops captured without a fight and soon handed over to Hungary. While the occupying Hungarian regime presented itself as a liberator, apart from a few local communists there was virtually no organized resistance in Prekmurje. But then again, could it have been any other way?

⁵⁹See, for instance, Lev Centrih, “‘Govorile so celo strojnice!’ Boljševizem v prevratni dobi na Slovenskem: med preprostim ljudskim uporništvom in vplivi ruske revolucije (‘Even the Machine Guns Spoke!’ Bolshevism in the Revolutionary Period in Slovenia: Between a Simple Popular Rebellion and the Influences of the Russian Revolution),” in *Slovenski prelom 1918* (The Slovenian Rupture, 1918), ed. Aleš Gabrič (Ljubljana, 2019), 311–27; Ivo Banac, “‘Emperor Karl Has Become a Comitatdji’: The Croatian Disturbances of Autumn 1918,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 70, no. 2 (1992): 284–305, here 302–05; Franček Saje, “Revolucionarno gibanje kmečkega ljudstva v Sloveniji 1917–1919 (The Revolutionary Movement of the Peasantry in Slovenia, 1917–19),” *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja* 7, no. 1–2 (1967): 141–50; Ivan Očak, *Afera Diamantstein: prvi antikomunistički proces u Kraljevstvu Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (1919) (The Diamantstein Affair: The First Anti-Communist Trial in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1919)) (Zagreb, 1988). See also the very informative text, if somewhat devoted to a broader audience, by Stefan Gužvica: “Represija nad radničkim pokretom: Dugo kretanje između fabričkih hala i vešala (The Repression of the Workers’ Movement: The Long March Between the Factory Halls and the Gallows),” *Mašina*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.masina.rs/represija-nad-radnickim-pokretom-dugo-kretanje-izmedu-fabrickih-hala-i-vesala/?fbclid=IwAR2-VjAAMLVMOSdARNdzng3xyVZcLIBiHaEFOozZlJjQ3Pebi6D96Da09RA>.

⁶⁰ARS, SI AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V (Prekmurje – razmere v Prekmurju), no. 11978 (“Razmere v Prekmurju,” 7. decembra 1921).

⁶¹For the election results see Kokolj, *Prekmurski Slovenci*, 96–101, 151–53, 189–90, and 234–37.

⁶²Fujs, “Razvoj industrije,” 15–16.

⁶³Tomasevich, *Peasants*, 261. It is worth bearing in mind that such a situation was not necessarily the result of internal political chaos, corruption, etc., but of the structural constraints of the capitalist mode of production, in which Yugoslavia, as an economically dependent state, was not in a position to conduct an independent economic policy. See also Tomasevich, *Peasants*, 645.

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