
The Impact of Carpatho-Rusyn Immigrants and Their Descendants on the United States

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Throughout its history, immigration has been foundational to the birth and development of the United States. Immigrants to the United States have come from every corner of the globe. Among the European immigrants largely unknown to Americans today are the Carpatho-Rusyns, or simply the Rusyns. The height of Rusyn immigration to the United States occurred in the early 1900s. Their peers often misidentified them as Hungarians, Slovaks or Czechoslovaks, Russians, or Ukrainians. Yet, in a manner similar to other European immigrants, the Rusyns played a crucial role in the shaping of their new homeland. The influence of Rusyn immigrants on the United States is substantial and worthy of note.

It is essential to examine four areas to understand the role that Rusyns have played in the United States. The categories include contributions made by Rusyns at a civil and military level as well as those of a social and cultural nature. In examining these four categories, one can gain a better understanding of the role that Rusyn immigrants and their descendants played in shaping America. By examining the origins of Rusyn immigrants, one can see how they and their descendants affected the United States, from holding key positions at the state and federal level of government, participating as marines, soldiers, and sailors in military operations, introducing Eastern Catholic rites, and influencing the entertainment industry in art, music, and film.

Identity and Origins of the Carpatho-Rusyns

To understand how Rusyns have affected the United States, it is important to be familiar with the people and their former home, Eastern Europe, specifically the area known as the Carpathian Mountains. Because the Rusyn homeland touches parts of Slovakia, Poland, and Ukraine, it has more than one name, such as, Carpatho-Ruthenia, Subcarpathian Rus', or Carpatho-Ukraine, as well as Carpatho-Russia.¹ From here on, the author will refer to their area of origin as Carpathian-Ruthenia and to the people as Rusyns. Although there are numerous names for this region, the Rusyns did not have their own country, which led to them being incorrectly associated with other European groups. The borders of European countries throughout the Carpatho-Ruthenia region determined the

nationality of the Rusyns, who are best considered as an ethnic group. Prior to the First World War, Rusyns were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and subjects of the Hungarian Crown. After the end of the World War I, the country of Czechoslovakia was born and Rusyns became Czechoslovaks. Today the countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary recognize Rusyns as a national minority with full rights.² Understanding the changing landscape from which the Rusyns came is only half the story. The lives of these people give insight into who they were and why they came to America.

Unlike urban dwellers within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Rusyns predominantly led a rural life in the Carpathian Mountains. Living in small villages that contained only a few hundred inhabitants, the Rusyns primarily worked at logging, small-scale agriculture, and shepherding.³ These occupations did not provide financial opportunity for the Rusyns. Life in the villages saw many working as serfs for Polish or Hungarian landlords until the Revolutions of 1848, which abolished serfdom. Following that period, many worked as poorly paid agricultural laborers.⁴ Living this way in the Carpathian Mountains provided the spark for many Rusyns to seek better economic opportunities. Many believed they could realize a better existence for themselves and their families in the United States.

Immigration to the United States

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, many Rusyns immigrated to the United States. Due to a combination of factors, the Rusyns held a low socioeconomic status in the Austria-Hungarian Empire. This included one, that wealthy landholders still controlled the majority of land. And second, that the Carpathian-Ruthenia region lacked industrial jobs.⁵ Life as a farmer or agricultural worker did not provide the financial means to support an individual, let alone an entire family. Poverty and low socioeconomic status were the main catalysts drawing Rusyns from their homes in the mountains and onto ships sailing the Atlantic Ocean towards North America.

The majority of Rusyns made their way to the United States prior to the First World War and “between 125,000 and 150,000 Carpatho-Rusyns arrived before 1914.”⁶ Numbers are not exact, as discrepancies exist between the 1920 federal census and the records of the United States Commissioner on Immigration. As such, the number of Rusyns that arrived in the United States from 1899 to 1915 has been assessed as low as 95,458 to as high as 259,969.⁷ This period brought the

bulk of Rusyn immigrants to American. The common destination for Rusyn immigrants sailing from Europe was the eastern seaboard of the United States.

New York was the main entry point into the United States for European immigrants, including the Rusyns. However, differences separated the Rusyns from many of their fellow European immigrants. Most of the Rusyns who came to America did not intend to remain in the country. They planned to stay for a couple of years, earn enough money, and return to their homeland to purchase land.⁸ This theory is supported by the significance of owning land in Rusyn culture. This elevated the socioeconomic status of the individual. Unlike the Irish who fled because of famine, or the Germans who left due to land shortages and political oppression, the Rusyns thought of America as a temporary work destination to earn more money and return to their homeland.

Unfortunately, plans have a tendency to change and this was the case for the Rusyns. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 marked an end to the large-scale immigration of Rusyns to America. In the 1920s, the “U.S. government began to restrict immigration from southern and eastern Europe” and the Communist governments who ruled their homeland placed restrictions on emigration.⁹ With these changes, together with the Rusyns adapting to their new country, the idea of returning to Carpathian-Ruthenia dissolved. As Rusyns settled into their new lives and started families in American, they began to prove influential in their newly adopted homeland.

Rusyns in United States Civil Affairs

As was the case with other immigrants, the Rusyns struggled to find job opportunities due to their low education level and the types of skills that they brought to the United States. As many Rusyns were poor peasants from Carpathian -Ruthenia, their background provided little opportunity for them. Many sought employment as unskilled laborers in industrial jobs. Some “found employment in the factories, mines, and steel mills of the northeast,” and they “gradually . . . moved up to become miners or semi-skilled and skilled factory laborers in their own right.”¹⁰ The first generation of Rusyn immigrants worked dangerous, underpaid industrial jobs, however, the sacrifices made by the first-generation Rusyn immigrants provided a strong base to support their children and grandchildren.

Coal mining was one of the first jobs that Rusyn immigrants found when they settled in the United States. By the 1880s and 1890s, the anthracite coalfields located in eastern Pennsylvania provided industrial jobs. Later, the Rusyns moved

further west to work in the steel mills located in and around Pittsburgh.¹¹ As the steel industry grew in western Pennsylvania, so did the population of Rusyns in the region. Soon, the unofficial capital of Carpatho-Rusyns in America was the greater Pittsburgh area.¹² While Rusyn immigrants were an integral part of the Industrial Revolution workforce, it would not be the only way they would contribute to their new home.

For those who came through Ellis Island, it is easy to understand why they would settle in and around New York City. Although Pittsburgh would be associated with the central settlement of Rusyns in America, New York and New Jersey were equally important to the first Rusyns seeking employment. Northeastern and north-central New Jersey, along with the New York City metropolitan area, attracted Rusyns and provided them with different manufacturing jobs, as well as employment in oil-refining plants.¹³ As immigrants flooded to the United States and the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, the Rusyns toiled in mines, mills, and factories to make a better life for their families. The initial wave of Rusyn immigrants provided the opportunity to their descendants to have an even greater effect on the United States. Rusyn immigrants made it possible for their children to receive a better education, attend college, and position themselves to obtain careers of significance and importance. In some cases, these positions would affect the everyday lives of Americans. One man who was able to obtain a better education because of parental sacrifices was Dr. Nick Holonyak Jr.

Holonyak was born to Rusyn immigrant parents and raised in Ziegler, Illinois. While his parents had not known each other in Europe, “they were from the same part . . . [of] the Carpathian Mountains.”¹⁴ He received his PhD in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois in October of 1954.¹⁵ After completing his schooling, Holonyak went on to work as a researcher for General Electric in the field of microelectronics. His major accomplishment came with his pioneering efforts in the field of physics, specifically with the light-emitting diode (LED). The influence of Holonyak’s work is evident today as the growing use of LED lights is now supplanting the use of incandescent light bulbs.

His was not the only civil influence that Rusyn descendants had on the United States. They have also held key government positions at both the state and federal level. One individual who held jobs at both levels was Thomas J. (Tom) Ridge. Born in the Pittsburgh suburb of Munhall, Pennsylvania, Ridge’s maternal grandparents were Rusyn immigrants. After serving a tour in Vietnam, Ridge went on to a career in politics. He served as a Pennsylvania State Representative from 1983 until 1995 and as the Governor of Pennsylvania from 1995 until 2001.¹⁶

Following the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, Ridge left his job as governor to serve in the federal government.

The terrorist attacks on New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania presented President George W. Bush and the federal government with a unique situation. The federal government proceeded to do something that had not occurred since the 1940s—create a new cabinet department—one charged to focus on the protection of the United States and its borders. The Department of Homeland Security became the first department added to the federal government since the Department of Defense in 1949. Former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge would then serve as the first Secretary of Homeland Security of the United States until February 1, 2005.¹⁷

Rusyns in the United States Armed Forces

While Rusyns and their descendants played critical civil roles in their new country, they would also play important roles in the military. Like other European immigrants, Rusyns have served in the United States Armed Forces. Immigrants, including Rusyns, would be a crucial asset to the US military. During World War I, roughly five hundred thousand immigrants from forty-six nations comprised eighteen percent of the United States fighting force in Europe. Their efforts led to more than 192,000 veterans of the war becoming legal citizens.¹⁸ Since the bulk of Rusyn immigration occurred prior to the outbreak of World War I, Rusyns added their influence to the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

Archpriest Andrew S. Slepicky mentioned the contribution of Rusyns to the AEF during World War I. He stated that Rusyn immigrants, “were called to perform military duties and many of them were killed on the battlefield.”¹⁹ Rusyns came to America to work and return home. Nevertheless, some found their way into the armed forces and served in World War I. Yet, World War I was not the only conflict wherein Rusyn immigrants aided the United States military. Instances of individual heroism demonstrate how Rusyns and their descendants played an important part in United States military history. A Rusyn immigrant participated in one of the most famous events in the Pacific Theater, which gained him lasting recognition.

The flag raising at Iwo Jima is one of the most iconic images of the United States Marine Corps and of World War II. What many do not know about the event is that one of the non-commissioned officers, Sergeant Michael Strank, was a Rusyn immigrant. Born in the Rusyn village of Jarabina, in what is today Slovakia, Strank’s father, Vasil, came to Johnstown, Pennsylvania in 1920. He

later sent for his wife and three-year-old son to join him in Pennsylvania.²⁰ Strank enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1939. Subsequent to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Strank's orders put him in the Pacific Theater to fight the Imperial Japanese forces. Eventually, fighting reached the island of Iwo Jima.

On Iwo Jima, the Marines raised a small American flag on Mount Surbachi. Later in the day, Lt. Col. Charles Johnson commanded that a larger flag replace the first one. Strank took his Marines and a full-size battle flag up the hill. Photographer Joe Rosenthal immortalized their actions with the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of 1945.²¹ Sadly, three of the six men who aided in raising the second flag fell in battle. Strank was one of the three who would never see the photo. Artillery fire killed him a week after Rosenthal took the photo.

Tom Ridge, an infantry staff sergeant during the Vietnam War, is another notable person of Rusyn descent with connections to the Armed Forces. Elected in 1982, he became the first enlisted man to serve in congress.²² For both Rusyns and Rusyn descendants, their service in the military and civil sectors of the United States is only a portion of what they contributed to the country. The social influence that Rusyns would have, not only affect the United States, but also Europe.

Social Impacts by Rusyns on the United States

Two prominent elements that make up a society are religion and politics. In these two areas, Rusyns have not only influenced America but have played a role on the international stage as well. Rusyns introduced Eastern Christianity to the United States. "Religion, in the form of Eastern Christianity, had always been an integral part of Carpatho-Rusyn community life" and when the Rusyns left Europe, they took their religion with them.²³ As Rusyns started coming to America in greater numbers, this created friction with other religious groups in the country.

The Greek Catholic Church was part of the Eastern Christian heritage that Rusyns brought with them to the new world. Since there were no existing churches for Rusyns, this prompted the establishment of new churches in the United States. The Roman Catholic Church, although a presence within the United States, did not view their Eastern European brethren or the Greek Catholic Church in a favorable light. This contention between the Roman and Greek Catholic Church in America led to the first Greek Catholic parishes in the country. Eastern Pennsylvania saw the establishment of three parishes—Shenandoah in 1884, Freeland in 1886, and Hazleton in 1887, as well as one in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1887.²⁴ Disagreements between the divergent branches of Catholicism were not the only

problem for Rusyns in the United States. Differing views within the Rusyn communities, due in part to the Roman Catholic Church attempting to make Rusyns conform to the Latin Rite of the church, led to a schism in the Greek Catholic Church. Some priests and parishes separated from the Greek Catholic Church, and by 1914 about 25,000 Rusyns split into Greek Catholics and Orthodox followers.²⁵ While the gap between Orthodox and Greek Catholics exists to this day, there is one important aspect to this that cannot be overlooked. Even though Rusyns suffered a split in their religion, they were successful in preserving and defining their distinctiveness from other European immigrant groups and in maintaining their Old World traditions in the United States.²⁶

In addition to religion, politics played an important part of the lives of Rusyn immigrants. Even as Rusyns lived in the United States, their families and friends still in the homeland were an important topic in the communities. The conclusion of World War I saw the end of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Its successor became a major concern for the inhabitants of Carpathian-Ruthenia. After years under Hungarian rule, Rusyns were no longer subjects to a king. The Rusyn immigrant community in the United States helped create a solution.

On July 23, 1918, Byzantine Ruthenian Catholic clergy and leaders of the Greek Catholic Union met in Homestead, Pennsylvania. There they created the American Council of Uhro-Rusins, which claimed to be the only legal representatives of Rusyns in the United States.²⁷ It also presented possibilities for what was to become of the Rusyn homeland. This meeting would prove to be extremely important not just for Rusyns, but it also played a part in the realignment of Europe. Gregory Zhatkovich became a leading figure for the Rusyns in America and in their homeland in Europe.

Originally from the Rusyn village of Holubyne, Zhatkovich and his family moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania when he was five years old.²⁸ As an adult, Zhatkovich became an integral part of the Rusyn movement that would decide the fate of the homeland. He met with President Woodrow Wilson and led a delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, which resulted in the incorporation of the Rusyn homeland into the newly formed Czechoslovakia.²⁹ Rusyn immigrants such as Gregory Zhatkovich were crucial in political activism. Their strong ties to their native homeland not only gave birth to a strong organization in the United States, but it helped to shape Europe after the World War I. The ideas of Rusyn immigrants gave birth to the country of Czechoslovakia. In addition, the descendants of Rusyn immigrants influenced the culture of the United States.

Rusyns in American Popular Culture

As Rusyn immigrants, their children, and grandchildren adapted to life in America, they influenced its culture through art, music and theater. Pop art and the name Andy Warhol are synonymous. Although Andy Warhol was a world-renowned artist, many Americans do not know that his parents were Rusyn immigrants. Born Andrew Warhola in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1928, Warhol influenced the art world with his paintings of mass-manufactured items such as Campbell's soup cans and his portraits of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.³⁰ Although his art had much to do with everyday life in America, his Rusyn roots were part of his artwork. Icons and church furnishings of the Byzantine Ruthenian Catholic Rite, along with ethnic customs like decorating Easter eggs, influenced his work.³¹ Rusyns have influenced theater and film as well as the art world.

Actress Sandra Dee became a star during the 1950s and 1960s. She was born Alexandra Zuk to a Rusyn family from New Jersey. She served as the inspiration for the name Danny Zucko and character Sandy Dee in the movie *Grease*.³² The reason that Sandra Dee inspired these two characters came from the way Hollywood typecast her. Often cast as a cute and glamorous teen on the verge of romantic maturity, movie roles throughout the 1950s and 1960s contributed to her becoming the symbol of an innocent America.³³ Sandra Dee and her roles have made her into the typical “All-American” girl. None of this would have been possible had her Rusyn grandparents not immigrated to the United States. In addition to film and art, American music would also have Rusyn ties.

Peter J. Wilhousky was born in Passaic, New Jersey to a Rusyn family from what is now north-eastern Slovakia, and like his parents, sang in the Passaic Greek Catholic Church.³⁴ As he grew up, music became his life passion, and it would form the career that made him known in American history. After graduating from the prestigious Juilliard School of Music in 1920, he returned to teach choral conducting and aid in the careers of students who would go on to perform at the Metropolitan Opera, Radio City Music Hall, and the New York City Opera.³⁵ His accomplishments were not confined to academia and influencing his students. Though conducting and choral settings were part of his profession, he made a name for himself arranging music. While the words of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” were penned during the American Civil War, Wilhousky’s arrangement of the score made it a standard in American music.³⁶ Along with arranging, teaching, and choral work, Wilhousky gained national repute as a lyricist. His arrangement and lyrics, coupled with the music composed by Mykola

Leontovych, a Ukrainian, resulted in one of the most popular Yuletide songs, the “Carol of the Bells.”³⁷ Two songs now considered American standards owe their popularity to a descendant of Rusyn immigrants.

Conclusion

Rusyn immigrants and their descendants have contributed to the United States on a large scale. For the initial Rusyn immigrants, working labor-intensive and high-risk jobs afforded them the chance to provide a better life and education for their children. This hard work provided their children and grandchildren with a better education, which led to Rusyns making advances in science like Dr. Nick Holonyak and to being elected to government posts like former Governor Tom Ridge. Rusyns immigrants and their descendants have served in the United States Armed Forces, sometimes giving their lives in the defense of the country like Sergeant Michael Strank.

Socially, Rusyns have played an important role in bringing Eastern Christianity to the United States. Even in the face of discrimination by other Catholics in the United States, Rusyns were able to retain their identity and preserve their religion in a new country. Politically, they kept in touch with friends and family back in Europe. Their love and passion for their homeland resulted in becoming active in politics. This led to the establishment of the new country of Czechoslovakia, along with helping to shape Europe at the end of World War I. Finally, Andy Warhol and actress Sandra Dee contributed significantly in their respective fields. The son of Rusyn immigrants would become one of the most iconic artists of the late twentieth century, and a woman born to a Rusyn family in New Jersey would one day come to symbolize the innocence of America.

Notes

1. Paul Robert Magosci, *The Immigrant Experience: The Carpatho-Rusyn Americans* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 13.

2. Ibid., 35.

3. Paul Robert Magosci, *The Peoples of North America: The Carpatho-Rusyn Americans* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 17.

4. Paul Robert Magosci, *Our People: Carpatho-Rusyns and Their Descendants in North America* (Toronto, Canada: Multicultural History Society of Ontario), 10.

5. Magosci, *Carpatho-Rusyn Americans*, 27-28.

6. Magosci, *Peoples of North America*, 40.
7. Magosci, *Our People*, 13.
8. Ibid., 17.
9. Magosci, *Peoples of North America*, 41-42.
10. Ibid., 19.
11. Magosci, *The Immigrant Experience*, 50.
12. Ibid.
13. Magosci, *Peoples of North America*, 50.
14. Babak Ashrafi, “Interview of Nick Holonyak,” March 23, 2005, *American Institute of Physics*, accessed August 4, 2017, <https://www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories/30533>.
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18. National Park Service, “Immigrants in the Military During WW1,” accessed August 7, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/immigrants-in-the-military-during-wwi.htm>.
19. Richard D. Custer, “Prjaševcy in America,” *The Carpatho-Rusyns of Pennsylvania*, January 2, 2017, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://rusynsofpa.blogspot.com/2017/01/prjasevcy-in-america-father-andrew.html>.
20. Curt Miner, “Biography: The Uncommon Valor of Michael Strank,” *Western Pennsylvanian History* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 4-6.
21. Ibid.
22. Tom Ridge, “I’m Glad I Had a Chance to Serve,” *Proceedings Magazine* 134 (July, 2008): 16.
23. Magosci, *Our People*, 22.
24. Ibid.
25. Magosci, *Carpatho-Rusyn Americans*, 59.
26. Ibid.
27. Magosci, *Our People*, 81.
28. Magosci, *Peoples of North America*, 91.

29. Magocsi, *Our People*, 81-82.

30. Magocsi, *Carpatho-Rusyn Americans*, 96.

31. Raymond M. Herbenick, *Andy Warhol's Religious and Ethnic Roots* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 20.

32. Magocsi, *Peoples of North America*, 94.

33. Ibid., 35.

34. Magocsi, *Carpatho-Rusyn Americans*, 90.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Magocsi, *Our People*, 77.

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