

FEAR IN THE CARPATHIANS

Mussolini's New Mountain Frontier

MUSSOLINI, it seems, has adopted a frontier on the watershed of the Carpathians. That, if anything, is the significance of the recent conference between his son-in-law Ciano and Count Csaky of Hungary, which followed so closely on Signor Gayda's revival of the old Italian threat that "Bolshevism would never be permitted to cross the Carpathians."

The actual extent of the advertised Italian-Hungarian accord is of course carefully veiled. But some commentators, including European correspondents of the *New York Times*, see in it a military alliance. Such an alliance, if it came about, would involve an Italian guarantee of Hungarian integrity against aggression, which Budapest now fears from the north as well as from the west. Since the collapse of Poland, the whole of Hungary's recently restored frontier with that country has been occupied by Russia. Mussolini's implacable hatred of Russia is a by-word, and it must therefore be assumed that his bolstering up of Hungary is a warning as much to his old foe in Moscow as to his old ally in Berlin.

Under Four Flags

Across Europe, Mussolini's renewed interest in the sublimely green and gold valleys of the Carpathians will be noted with much satisfaction and some chagrin. But to the inhabitants of those valleys, which have been the home of their people since their ancestors began to filter in at the end of the twelfth century, I don't think the possibility of a new guardian will make much difference. When once you have lived under four different flags in four successive weeks, you are apt to become apathetic about the emblem of your new nationality.

That, I think, is why, in the towns and villages of Ruthenia, the wild and forested "tail-piece" of the old Czechoslovakia, which was returned to Hungary little more than a year ago, I found a scepticism when I was there last summer which scarcely accorded with the enthusiastic faith in the region's future which I had met with in Budapest.

There, national sentiment was exuberant over the "inevitable" return of the province lost for twenty years from the flag of St. Etienne; in Ruthenia, or Subcarpathia, as it is now known, I found not only the predominating Ukrainians, but Czechs, Jews, and even Hungarians apprehensive for their standards of living under Hungary's genteel poverty. The build-

This is the third of the series on Europe by Leslie Verry, a journalist just back in New Zealand from a tour in the troubled Continent. This week he discusses key positions in the Balkans



WHERE the scythe still rules: A typical harvest scene in Ruthenia

ing, railway construction and other developmental programmes of the Benes regime had been summarily countermanded.

Strategic Valleys

The presence of Russians on the Carpathian summits will not quell the nervousness even of those whose dream is a Sovietised Ukrainian State. Should hostilities extend to Hungary's regained territories the land of these perplexed peasants must be scarred by war, whoever the combatants, and no matter with whom victory lies. A glance at the map shows the strategic importance of Ruthenia, with its parallel valleys, rising on what is the lowest sector of the Carpathian divide, all tumbling down to the plains until their waters disgorge into the Tisza and emphasise the unity of the mountain province with the fertile lands of the great Hungarian basin.

A Citadel of Peace

I prefer to think, though, of Ruthenia's future importance for Europe as a citadel of peace. For it is—as indeed the Czechs had realised—an ideal playground, rich in natural beauty, gemmed with historic towns, with castles as archaic as the Rhineland's, with intriguing villages set against a background of green slopes and rushing torrents. Though I first journeyed into the Carpathian fastnesses by an international express, the ultimate destination of which was Prague via Warsaw, the outside world has little to do with most of the Ruthenians, whose mode of life is still typified by the sickle, the ox-cart, and the fiacre which rattles you down the moonlit street.

Despite the impression it gave of Ruritania mis-

named, I found zest enough in travelling through Carpathian Hungary, which is inured to the chances of new disorders by their frequency in the past. When I was there, it was just three months since the Hungarians had completed their occupation, and they were busy effacing all traces of Czech rule.

Passports to the Cemetery

In Munkacs (Mukachevo), for instance, I noticed black daubs of paint under all the street names. Signs before had been trilingual, but the Hungarians had smeared out the Czech and Russian versions. Munkacs had been the storm centre of most of the affrays between Czechs, Hungarians, and Ruthenians during the troubled months that followed Munich. Here, in four successive weeks, there floated from the town hall the Czech flag, the old Tsarist colours when autonomy was proclaimed, the Ukrainian "republic" flag following a minor putsch, and finally the Hungarian.

But from November until March the town itself was included within the Hungarian frontier by a deep salient northward. Dependent villages, and even some suburbs, were cut off and remained in dismembered Czechoslovakia. To conduct a funeral, it was necessary for mourners from Munkacs (in Hungary) to obtain passports before crossing to the municipal cemetery (which remained in Czechoslovakia), where they were greeted with a guard of bayonets.

Telling their own tale, too, more than a score of shell-holes gaped from the municipal theatre, from shops, and from unrepaired houses. Border raiding during the critical days had taken its toll.

Carpathian Stronghold

In Munkacs, as well as in Ungvar (formerly Uzhorod) and other parts of Ruthenia, I heard authentic stories of evictions, of racial jealousies, of persecution, of newly-created poverty superimposed on an existence traditionally rugged and full of privation. I still see, on sunny afternoons, the long rows of reaping men and gleaning women whom I watched toiling at the harvest as the slow train—*personen zug*—chugged its way up the sun-drenched valley of the Latorcza, typical of a dozen valleys like it. Occasionally, cradled between two stakes driven in the ground, a baby, screened from the sun by an old shawl, slept while its mother bent to the swathes of grain. At the stations older, barelimbed youngsters came running with platters of wild strawberries from the woods, delighted with the new filler that fell into their palms, the equivalent only of a penny or two.

Life is like that in Ruthenia, the Carpathian stronghold which Mussolini appears to have taken under his wing. It is a place where new meets old and the new still reels and grows faint at the impact.

The land has escaped, for the present, Hitler's Ukrainian dreams. If other conquerors should yet mar it with battle, the dour inhabitants will suffer the process with abhorrence, but also with the stoic fatalism in which their long history has confirmed them. For theirs is an attitude to life inspired alike by the deep, brooding beauty of their landscape and by the full dread of the future, which, for them, has always been dark and tumultuous.