Profoundly National Yet Transboundary: The Tatra National Parks

Bianca Hoenig

Summary

Situated on the Polish-Slovak border, the Tatra Mountains are protected by two neighboring National Parks. The history of the parks, which began in the 1880s, is deeply marked by the situation of these mountains on an imperial, and subsequently national, borderland.

The Tatra Mountains are situated on the Polish-Slovak border and form the highest part of the Carpathian arc. They are protected by two neighboring national parks, established in 1949 and 1954 in Czechoslovakia and Poland respectively. The location of these mountains within an empire and on a national borderland shaped the history of these parks.



The lake Morskie Oko (Eye of the Sea) was the subject of a long-lasting dispute over property rights, giving rise to a national struggle for the Poles. It was finally settled by an international court of arbitration in Graz in 1902, in favor of the Polish side.

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The lake Morskie Oko (Eye of the Sea) was the subject of a long-lasting dispute over property rights, becoming a focal point of the Polish national struggle. An international court of arbitration in Graz settled the conflict in favor of the Polish side in 1902.

In 1888, the priest Bogusław Królikowski urged for the creation of a national park in the Polish Tatras, named after the distinguished Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. The former Polish Commonwealth had been partitioned by the Central European empires at the end of the eighteenth century. Since that time, the whole Tatra Mountains belonged to the Habsburg Empire as Slovakia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Under these political circumstances, the Tatras became a key symbol for both Slovaks and Poles. Scientists, writers, and artists

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of these two stateless nations promoted their respective side of the mountains as a national landscape beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century. The suggestion to create a "national" park within the framework of an empire was therefore a politically charged endeavor.

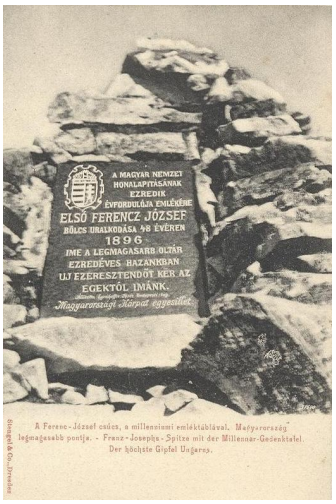


Title page of one of the earliest and immensely popular Polish tourist guides, displaying a Tatra highlander ("Góral") amidst the mountain landscape

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Title page of one of the earliest and very popular Polish tourist guides, depicting a Tatra highlander ("Góral") amidst the mountain landscape.



Postcard from 1905 of the commemorative plaque in Hungarian on the highest Tatra peak in Gerlach, Slovakia. The plaque was changed many times in honor of Emperor Franz Joseph, the Czechoslovak legionnaires, and Stalin.

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Postcard from 1905 of the commemorative plaque in Hungarian on the highest Tatra peak, the Gerlach, in Slovakia. The peak was renamed three times: in honor of Emperor Franz Joseph, the Czechoslovak legionnaires, and Stalin.

A new era for the national park project began with the dissolution of the empires and the subsequent emergence of nation states in East Central Europe after World War I. In a joint effort, Polish and Czechoslovak natural scientists promoted the establishment of several transboundary parks to appease unresolved border disputes. This idea developed simultaneously to the establishment of the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park at the US-Canadian border and aroused lively interest within the international nature protection scene. In one neighboring sector of the Carpathians, the Pieniny Mountains, the first European transboundary nature park was created in 1932. However, the Tatra National Park that represented the centerpiece of the ambitious plan was stalled due to conflicting activities in the area, ranging from a booming tourism sector to intensive sheep grazing. In 1939, the Polish state went ahead and unilaterally established a nature park on its side of the border. It eroded the initial idea of a jointly established nature preserve as it incorporated a territory that Poland had gained from

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Czechoslovakia in the wake of the 1938 Munich Agreement. The outbreak of World War II prevented further development of the park.



A Slovak 5 cent coin showing the Tatra peak Kriváň.

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A Slovak 5 cent coin showing the Tatra peak Kriváň, the Slovak national mountain.

After the war, both Czechoslovakia and Poland established national parks along the restored inter-war border. In 1992, the two parks became a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve under binational Polish-Slovak management. Although they were founded separately, the two park administrations and scientific advisory boards have been cooperating since the 1950s. Transboundary cooperation has included issues such as wildlife conservation and tourism.

The existence of the parks has triggered numerous conflicts around property rights, husbandry, infrastructure, and tourism within both Polish and Slovak society. Occasionally, those debates have gained a statewide dimension. Today, as it was under socialism, proponents and adversaries of the parks evoke national values, indicating the continued national significance of the Tatras.

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Related links:

- Štátne lesy TANAPu (TANAP State Forests) (in Slovak)
  http://www.lesytanap.sk/sk/
- Tatranský národný park (in Slovak)
  http://spravatanap.sk/web/
- Tatrzański Park Narodowy (in Polish)
  http://tpn.pl/
- UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Information
  http://www.unesco.org/mabdb/br/brdir/directory/biores.asp

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Bianca Hoenig is a research assistant at the chair for Russian and East European history at the University of Basel. She studied East European history and political science in Freiburg/Breisgau and Munich with stays in France, Poland, and the Czech Republic. She writes her dissertation about the Tatra Mountains in a transborder perspective. Her fields of interest include environmental and tourism history and the social and cultural history of Eastern Europe.

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