Battle of the Dukla Pass: Historian and Veteran
Visit C-RS New Jersey Chapter

By Susyn Mihalasky (C-RS, Blairstown, NJ)

On Saturday, May 13, the Carpatho-Rusyn Society’s New Jersey Chapter hosted historian Bill Tarkulich’s (C-RS, Lexington, MA) fascinating and detailed history of one of the largest World War II battles fought on Rusyn territory, the Battle of the Dukla Pass. A veteran of that battle, 83-year-old John Kulhan, was also on hand to provide his own eyewitness account of the battle.

This 1944 Soviet campaign to wrest control of a key Carpathian mountain pass away from the German Army, resulted in the deaths of over 138,000 combatants. The fighting occurred in a region populated largely by Carpatho-Rusyn villages; Carpatho-Rusyns were heavily represented among civilian casualties. Tarkulich provided a broad overview the battle, the events that precipitated it and its impact on the lands and people. Over fifty people were in attendance.

Tarkulich began his talk with a few notes about himself. A 26-year veteran of the computer industry, he first became interested in history when he began root searching in 1998. Of mixed Rusyn and German ancestry, Tarkulich began to study the history of his ancestors’ homeland and was surprised to discover that the large and bloody Dukla Pass battle was so little known in the west. The battle resulted in the largest number of casualties on Slovak soil, 138,000 combatants and civilians in 50 days (by comparison, Tarkulich pointed out, the Battle of the Bulge cost 160,000 lives in 40 days).

The Dukla Pass held a great deal of geostrategic significance for both the Soviet and Nazi German armies because it was a relatively low-altitude area (1,300-1,600 ft) that allowed for easier north-south passage between Poland on the one side and northwestern Slovakia and the Hungarian plains on the other. Indeed, the Pass was fought over by the warring Russian and Austrian armies during World War I, with the Russians taking it in September 1914 and the Austrians reclaiming it in December.

The story of the Dukla Pass battle is essentially the story of misjudgment...
of careful planning gone awry. With the Nazis suffering increasing setbacks in 1944, the Soviet plan in April 1944 had originally been to push across the flat Polish plains to Berlin and Vienna. The Dukla region was to be bypassed because it was in a mountainous region at the time strongly fortified with German heavy armaments, land mines and bunkers. Approximately 20,000 Germans with 200 artillery pieces controlled the Dukla region. The Germans had cut the forests to further enhance their visual advantage over the battlefield.

In June, the Allies landed at Normandy and anti-Nazi underground partisan resistance intensified among Slovaks and Hungarians. Hoping to aid and cooperate with the partisans, the Soviets and their Czech military allies revised their plans in September 1944 to come through the Dukla Pass. They expected little resistance and anticipated that the battle would conclude within a week. Within the first days of the early September offensive, however, both the Soviet and Czech armies became bogged down in German defenses around the Dukla Pass. Unknown to the Soviets, the Germans had successfully repressed the Slovak resistance and had refortified the area with their own troops in anticipation of a Soviet attack. Soviet intelligence discovered their error only on the second day of the battle.

The Rusyns’ role in this quickly-developing quagmire was to provide German soldiers. Villagers returning home from forest hideouts at the conclusion of battles often found scattered human and animal corpses, homesteads damaged beyond repair, hidden food supplies broken into and depleted or soldiers living in their homes.

Tarkulich’s presentation included historic photos, quotations and some statistics that effectively brought home the extent of the bloodshed and destruction. In the village of Snina, for example, 918 homesteads were destroyed and 2,000 heavily damaged. In the region around Snina, 11 villages were 90% destroyed, 250 cows were killed and 180 were injured by landmines. Svidnyk was virtually destroyed. The Soviets took 31,000 prisoners.

October 6th, the day the Soviet and Czech armies retook the Pass, is still commemorated today in Slovakia as “Liberation Day” (formerly “Czechoslovak Army Day”). This battle victory was not
the end of the campaign, however. The worst tank battles took place at the end of October in the “Valley of Death” (Rus.: Dolyna Smerty) around the villages of Nyžnja Pysana and Kapišova. The Soviets and Czechs reached Prešov on January 19, 1945, four months “late.” The battle that had been expected to last six days instead stretched out to a brutal three months. Also in January 1945, Auschwitz was liberated and in May, Berlin fell.

After the war, Tarkulich said, poverty and unemployment remained high in the region. No infrastructure was in place to provide housing, health services or schooling for children. As a result, scarlet fever, tuberculosis and diphtheria contributed to a high infant mortality rate. Refugees were still living in tents as late as five years after the war. One-quarter of the population remained illiterate. Paramilitaries and violent criminals continued to rove the woods for years after the battles, occasionally emerging to kill villagers.

Following Tarkulich’s presentation, Dukla Pass veteran John Kulhan spoke about his memories. Born in 1922 in Dolný Šileš, Czechoslovakia (today Dolný Vinodol, Slovakia), John was the second oldest son of 11 children. John was drafted into the Slovak army in 1939 at the start of Operation Barbarossa. Following a brief stint as a prisoner of war, John played a critical role in the Battle for the Dukla Pass, helping to destroy Poland’s oil fields in the Krosno region and then leading his soldiers on to the Dukla Pass. He was awarded the Order of the White Eagle for heroism and today has the additional distinction of being the last known living survivor of the battle.

Note: Bill Tarkulich maintains an excellent web page devoted to the Dukla Pass battle: http://www.iabsi.com/gen/public/Military_dukla_pass.html