

Aufsätze

Preface

Building Borders. State Authority in the Czech-German Borderlands

by

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The questions of how and why Bohemian society split into mutually hostile Czech and German communities have intrigued historians for decades. The reasons for the growing alienation of Czechs and Germans in the years leading up to the crisis of Munich and the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans after the Second World War are complex. Conflict between Germans and Czechs was played out in a number of arenas, including social and economic development, the cultural sphere, international relations, and politics. National defense associations exploited these differences to demonstrate to ordinary people on both sides of the language border that the interests of their own co-nationals differed significantly from those of the "other" nationality. Public demonstrations deepened the rifts. Together, these three papers throw new light on the complex relationship of Germans and Czechs in interwar Czechoslovakia.

Despite its long-standing image as the paragon of democracy in East Central Europe, the First Czechoslovak Republic's relationship with its national minorities was flawed from its inception. The exclusion of German, Hungarian, Ruthenian, and even most Slovak parties from the national assembly during its critical first months reflected the founding notion that Czechoslovakia was the nation state of the Czechs and the Slovaks. Although German delegates were represented in the Parliament from 1920, Germans did not join the cabinet until 1926. Even then, their participation provoked strong opposition from Czech nationalist organizations. Political rights accrued to the minorities as individuals, while nationalist organizations demanded protections for their collective rights to self-determination. Cultural rights, which were based on the percentage of minorities in the population of a particular town or district, became the focus of intense struggle during the censuses of 1921 and 1930 as Czech and German national protection societies sought to raise the number of citizens declaring the desired national affiliation. The right to education in the national language did not make up for laws that made Czechoslovak the state language. Nor did cultural autonomy compensate for the inability of the state to meet demands for regional and local autonomy.

Although the Czechoslovak constitution granted all citizens cultural, political, and economic equality, Czechoslovakia inherited from the Austro-Hun-

garian Monarchy a bureaucracy that was accustomed to discretion in implementing laws and regulations. In the eyes of the Sudeten Germans, the Czechoslovak bureaucracy undermined the democratic institutions of the state. Behind the veneer of the rule of law and constitutional guarantees of minority rights, Sudeten Germans saw the exercise of raw power on behalf of the "state-forming" nationalities. Government policies, such as letting state contracts, hiring employees for public works projects, and nationalizing the transportation network, seemed to favor Czech citizens. The appointment of "reliable" civil service personnel in positions as border guards, local police, and state railway, finance, and post officials seemed intended to undercut German employment opportunities. These missteps, which continued throughout the interwar era, contributed greatly to the hostility of the Sudeten German population toward the Czechoslovak state.

These three essays show how the German national associations made the Czechoslovak government appear weak and inadequate. With help from antagonistic German national forces, the Czechoslovak government failed to provide support for women and child clinics, to preserve order at demonstrations, or to secure the border. These failures undermined tentative Sudeten German support for state institutions in the 1920s and 1930s.

The articles also examine the means by which nationalist organizations created a sense of common purpose and common threat that could overcome the deep social, economic, and political divisions among the Sudeten Germans. Mother and child clinics, for example, attempted to impose middle-class morality, hygiene, and child-rearing practices on lower-class patrons. This effort at moral uplift was an integral part of German national defense associations from their inception in the 1880s and 1890s. Konrad Henlein and his supporters used spectacle, rhetoric, and underlying fears of violence or material loss to bring disparate groups of Sudeten Germans into one unified mass movement. When the Nazis allowed SA incursions over the border, they also were attempting to create a sense of unity – this time among the German people on both sides of the border.

Another common theme among these papers is the continual redefinition of borders. The authors show how, during the interwar era, formerly permeable social, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries were firmed up. Unique border identities and experiences were torn asunder. Common experiences, which could have created the basis for mutual understanding and cooperation – such as motherhood – were planted ever more firmly in the national soil and interpreted through national lenses.

Teresa Balkenende's study of health care raises issues about the boundary between local and state control over mother and child clinics. Mother and child clinics in German border regions were organized originally by national defense associations. Attempts to impose centralized oversight failed in the interwar era for several reasons. The Ministry of Public Health sought to impose expert medical oversight. The German Youth Welfare League responded by emphasizing the liberal values of self-reliance, which opposed govern-

mental supervision. But the German national resistance to central oversight was somewhat contradictory, since German communities wanted more consistent and better coordinated mother and child services but rejected government resources.

Caitlin Murdock's essay examines changing attitudes toward the state border between Germany and Czechoslovakia. She argues that German and Czechoslovak policies alternated between imposing stricter controls on border traffic and challenges to the border as an institution and concludes that "the Nazi rise to power transformed the German-Czechoslovak border from a state boundary to a political frontier." The region between Saxony and Bohemia had its own identity, in which cross-border social, economic, and cultural ties had flourished until the 1930s. Efforts to impose a stricter border failed to cut these ties completely, and the Nazi government both used and ignored the border when it suited its interests.

Michael Campbell's article shows how Konrad Henlein's 1935 speaking tour helped circumscribe in the Sudeten German imagination the boundaries of the territory for which they claimed autonomy. The Sudeten German party developed the tactic of "strategic legality" by provoking disturbances that the police could not contain and then using Sudeten German "order keepers" to restore order. In this way, the Sudeten German party outflanked its leftist opponents and undermined the authority of the Czechoslovak government.

The basic question these three articles raise is: Could the First Czechoslovak Republic have responded to the Sudeten German demands and managed nationalist provocations more effectively? It is all too easy from hindsight to emphasize the problematic aspects of the relationships among Bohemians. The articles presented here remind us of experiences and aspirations of Bohemians that transcended official state borders – including the opportunity to earn a livelihood, personal security and communal order, promotion of families and public health, and local and regional customs. Even during the turbulent interwar years Czechs and Germans could sometimes find common ground to cooperate. It was in the interest of nationalist organizations (and neighboring states like Germany) that such cooperation failed. Ultimately, the border between peaceful coexistence and overt hostility among nationalities was the most fragile boundary of the interwar years.