

Central Policy and Local Practice. The Changing Dynamics of the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands after 1933

by

Caitlin Murdock

On August 12, 1932, a group of German young men waving black flags marched to the German-Czechoslovak border near the town of Bad Elster. They knocked over the Czechoslovak border marker, spat on it, defiled it "indecently," threw rocks at the Czechoslovak state coat of arms and repeatedly called out "Slave Volk!" (*Knechtschaftsvolk*). They then took their flags, marched 100 meters into Czechoslovak territory and back, scrawled a swastika, "Heil Hitler" and "Germany awake!" across the border post, erected a swastika flag three meters inside Czechoslovak territory and marched back whence they had come.¹

Police reports of the incident quibbled over the details. They questioned whether the participants had been men or teenaged boys. They disagreed over whether they had been Nazi party members and over the degree to which the border post had been defiled.² One German policeman remarked that he had been able to wipe the "defilement" off the post with a handkerchief, proving that it was not very serious. But German and Czechoslovak officials and borderland residents alike knew that the significance of the incident lay not in the details of what had happened, but in the political message it sent. The young men had mounted a symbolic challenge to the existence and control of a state border whose location had not changed significantly since 1635. Their gesture reflected a profound change in how states and local people in both Germany and Czechoslovakia had understood and used the border since before the First World War, a change that was accelerated and magnified after 1933 by the Nazi rise to power in Germany. In making this symbolic challenge, the young men foreshadowed still greater changes for that border. In 1938, Hitler, with the blessings of European leaders, seized the Czechoslovak borderlands and incorporated them into the Third Reich.

Borders mark the outer limits of states. They can define economic and political units and national territories. But they are also areas of interaction among neighboring states, societies, and economies. They are areas in which culture and politics are produced as well as reflected.³ It is precisely because of their importance as zones of interaction that borders, even when they do

¹ Hauptstaatsarchiv (HStA) Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, p. 95.

² HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, pp. 96-97.

³ RENATO ROSALDO: *Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Boston 1989, p. 208.

not move, are subject to constant changes in meaning and function. As local, state, and international conditions change, governments and local people test and contest the meanings and uses of state borders. Political, economic, and demographic changes all serve to alter the ways specific borders function and the meanings they hold for the states and communities they define and divide. This article asks how and to what degree the 1933 Nazi rise to power in Germany shaped the meaning and dynamics of the Saxon-Czechoslovak borderlands. It argues that 1933 was indeed an important political turning point in a long-term pattern of change in these borderlands, a turning point that was shaped by changes both locally and at the German and Czechoslovak centers, and which was ultimately defined by the interplay of local and central interests and policies.⁴

The emergence of Nazi Germany sparked a period of struggle in the borderlands. Since The First World War, the German and the Czechoslovak nation state had sought to transform the Saxon-Bohemian borderlands into clearer lines defining the states, populations and economies they encompassed. At the same time, local people had pursued different goals for the borderlands – some supporting the border's articulation as a barrier while others continued to use it, as they had in the past, as an economic, political, and cultural resource. During the 1920s, most local people treated the state-defined border as an institution that was increasingly an impediment, but not a barrier to cross-border ties among family members, neighbors, trade partners, and political allies. But in 1933, the fact of Nazi rule in Germany introduced new rhetorical and practical issues into the shaping of the borderlands for states, local governments, and local people alike. The border was transformed from a line dividing two nation states into a contested frontier between fascism and democracy and between competing visions of German and Czech nationalism. Although 1933 did not mark a clear political turning point in Czechoslovakia, it nevertheless shifted the emphasis of Czechoslovak nationality politics and international relations with Germany. National Socialism in Germany gave new impetus to German nationalist movements on either side of the border.⁵ But until the late 1930s, German nationalists in Czechoslovakia, local nationalist groups in Saxony, and the German central government in Berlin, though using some of the same nationalist rhetoric, in fact had different, and often competing political agendas.

The Nazis came to power in 1933 in part on the strength of their revisionist position *vis-à-vis* the Versailles treaty and the new European order following

⁴ As Malcolm Anderson has pointed out, state policy is often constrained by the actual degree of state control in border areas. Therefore exploring the balance and interaction of state and local influences is critical to understand how borders work and change. See: MALCOLM ANDERSON: *Frontiers. Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*, Cambridge 1996, p. 2.

⁵ F. GREGORY CAMPBELL: *Confrontation in Central Europe. Weimar Germany and Czechoslovakia*, Chicago 1975, pp. 260-261.

it; on their anti-statist platform; and on their positions as anti-Semitic and anti-Slavic German nationalists. As such, the Nazis made Germany's eastern neighbors, including Czechoslovakia and Poland, whose borders had not been explicitly guaranteed by the Locarno treaty, nervous. Nazi rhetoric also breathed new hope into German-nationalist proponents of uniting the German-speaking peoples of the German Empire and the former imperial Austria in a greater Germany or *Groß-Deutschland*.

In the mid-1930s, in spite of its pan-German rhetoric, the Nazi government in Berlin did not openly pursue an expansionist policy. The new regime's first concern was to consolidate its power within Germany while not alarming its neighbors. And indeed, Hitler and his followers showed little interest in Czechoslovakia and the Sudeten German question when they first came to power.⁶ In Saxony, far from challenging the border with Czechoslovakia, the German central government and the Saxon regional government moved to reinforce it as a barrier, emphasizing its importance as both a political and a national dividing line.⁷ At the core of making the border a more potent line of division were efforts to restrict and control cross-border traffic. Suddenly, German citizens had to have visas to leave the country.⁸ German border police began keeping closer track of who crossed the border into Germany as well. After decades of relying on Czechs and Bohemian officials to be bilingual, local police and customs officials in Saxon border districts began taking Czech language classes so as to be more effective in dealing with Czech-speakers on the border.⁹ Thus, in spite of the fact that the majority of the po-

⁶ RONALD SMELSER: *The Sudeten Problem 1933-1938. Volkstumspolitik and the Formulation of Nazi Foreign Policy*, Middletown/CT 1975, pp. 10-11. In the second half of the 19th century Bohemia became home to a growing nationalities conflict between Czech and German Bohemians, a conflict characterized by competition for resources, whether in the form of territorial, economic, educational, or political power. In 1918, with the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I, some German-Bohemian nationalists argued that rather than be incorporated into a new Czechoslovak state, German Bohemians should be recognized as a distinct people with the right to self determination. The term "Sudeten German" came to be used by nationalists to unite German Bohemians from disparate regions, at least rhetorically. Similarly, the predominantly German-speaking Bohemian borderlands were dubbed the "Sudetenland." These terms remained in circulation in the 1920s, but in the 1930s they became an accepted part of public language and political rhetoric in both Czechoslovakia and Germany. The terms implied not only the unity and unified interests of German Bohemians, but opposition to the Czechoslovak state. Thus, although since the 1930s the term "Sudeten Germans" has been used to refer to all German-speaking Czechoslovaks, I use it to refer to those who embraced the particular political position that the term implied at the time.

⁷ Specific border policies were articulated by the Reich and Saxon foreign ministries.

⁸ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1848, p. 399. This was a significant change since Saxony had abolished visa requirements in 1862, a policy adopted by the German Reich as a whole after 1871. See: JOHN TORPEY: *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, New York 2000, pp. 77, 84.

⁹ HStA Dresden, Amtshauptmannschaft (AH) Schwarzenberg No. 2519, pp. 1, 9, 10, 29.

pulation in the Czechoslovak borderlands was German-speaking, new border restrictions led German officials to treat the border as a national and linguistic, as well as a political divide.

Official and semi-official efforts to control the border on the German side after 1933 reflected the complicated and contested power structure of the early Nazi state.¹⁰ After Hitler became Germany's Chancellor, he rapidly began placing Nazi party members in leading government positions first in Prussia, and later in the other German states.¹¹ Nevertheless, the incorporation of the Nazi party into the state proved difficult.¹² On the local level, Nazi party members treated Hitler's rise to power as license for them to take over many aspects of local administration. Thus, as police control of the Saxon-Bohemian border increased in 1933 and 1934, local police efforts were reinforced – officially and unofficially – by SA members, blurring the line between the ruling political party in Germany, the Nazi party's membership, and the state itself.¹³ While Czechoslovaks made few distinctions among representatives of the Nazi-era German government and members of the Nazi party, those distinctions became increasingly important inside Germany after 1934. In both the German central government in Berlin and in the Saxon regional government, Nazi leaders began trying to centralize power and to move away from the revolutionary aspects of the early Nazi movement that continued to find expression among local party members, and especially among the SA.¹⁴ Thus along the border in the early years of the Third Reich, German central and state governments tried to impose greater control over the border, while local party members and sympathizers, especially SA members, challenged the border as an institution, provoked Czechoslovak border officials, and sometimes took it upon themselves to hinder legitimate cross-border traffic, claiming to represent the ideals and interests of the new state.

State efforts in heightening control in the borderlands were not entirely new in the 1930s. In the 1920s, both Germany and Czechoslovakia had begun

¹⁰ Peter Diehl Thiele has made the case that the Nazi state was characterized by an ongoing struggle between the German state and the Nazi party for control of German policy and society. See: PETER DIEHL THIELE: *Partei und Staat im Dritten Reich. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von NSDAP und allgemeiner innerer Staatsverwaltung 1933-1945*, München 1969.

¹¹ MARTIN BROZAT: *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich*, New York 1981, pp. 96-106.

¹² PETER HÜTTENBERGER: *Die Gauleiter. Studie zum Wandel des Machtgefüges in der NSDAP*, Stuttgart 1969, p. 74.

¹³ See: *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade 1935*, I[8], p. 814.

¹⁴ ANDREAS WAGNER: *Partei und Staat. Das Verhältnis von NSDAP und innerer Verwaltung im Freistaat Sachsen 1933-1945*, in: *Sachsen in der NS-Zeit*, ed. by CLEMENS VOLLNHALS, Leipzig 2002, pp. 41-53; IDEM: *Mutschmann gegen von Killinger. Konfliktlinien zwischen Gauleiter und SA-Führer während des Aufstiegs der NSDAP und der "Machtergreifung" im Freistaat Sachsen*, Beucha 2001; BROZAT (cf. footnote 11), p. 107.

to impose new regulations and restrictions, often in the interest of maintaining economic stability within their own territories.¹⁵ But after 1933, the new German government's concern with controlling the borderlands was rooted much more in political than in economic concerns.¹⁶ German officials realized that the Nazis' persecution of their political opponents was making the borderlands into a focal point for political challenges to the new regime. While the Nazis were effective in infiltrating, influencing, or shutting down social and political organizations within their own territory, it was much harder for them to control those outside of Germany. Yet the Saxon-Bohemian border, along which many German and Czechoslovak communities abutted one another, provided opponents of the regime with access to Germany at the same time that they were able to stay largely outside the reach of the Nazis.

Thus in 1933, as the Nazis began arresting German socialists and communists, many such people fled to Czechoslovakia.¹⁷ Saxons among those political émigrés often settled just across the border. There, they were able to take advantage of the close cross-border relations, including a long-standing tradition of borderland smuggling. They held meetings which people from Germany could slip across the border to attend, collected information on conditions in Germany, and distributed anti-Nazi literature on both sides of the border in an attempt to undermine the new German state and the spread of National Socialism to Czechoslovakia.¹⁸ The German Social Democratic Party in exile organized six border secretariats in Czechoslovakia to coordinate such work.¹⁹ German police found that socialist publications were being smuggled into Germany by workers who lived in the Czechoslovak border areas and worked in Saxony; by Czechoslovak citizens crossing the border ostensibly to shop in Saxony; and by émigrés.²⁰ They found propaganda in water-tight containers submerged in the streams marking the border. German

¹⁵ CAITLIN MURDOCK: 'The Leaky Boundaries of Man-made states,' *National Identity, State Policy, and Everyday Life in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870-1938*, Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2003, chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁶ This was an important contrast to the Weimar period, during which relations between the two states had been greatly influenced by their close economic ties.

¹⁷ *Deutschland-Bericht der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934*, 1[5], p. 467; SILKE SCHUMANN: *Die soziale Lage der Bevölkerung und die NS-Sozialpolitik in Sachsen*, in: *Sachsen in der NS-Zeit* (cf. footnote 14), p. 58.

¹⁸ *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade 1934*, 1[5], pp. 465-466; LISA FITTKO: *Solidarity and Treason, Resistance and Exile, 1933-1940*, Evanston/IL 1993, p. 61.

¹⁹ Staatsarchiv (StA) Leipzig, Polizeipräsidium Leipzig No. 89, pp. 28, 39, 40; Polizeipräsidium Leipzig No. 1983, pp. 13, 127; Polizeipräsidium Leipzig No. 4672, pp. 57-58; HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1868, p. 475; *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934*, 1[5], p. 461; see also: MARLIS BUCHHOLZ, BERND RÖTHER: *Der Parteivorstand der SPD im Exil. Protokolle der Sopade 1933-1940*, Bonn 1995, pp. XXXIV-XXXVI.

²⁰ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1981, 10.4.1936; AH Zwickau No. 1602, p. 48; AH Schwarzenberg No. 2008, p. 75; AH Schwarzenberg No. 2169, p. 36.

communists living in Czechoslovakia posted anti-Nazi posters in trains headed to Germany.²¹ Anti-Nazi pamphlets even floated across the border attached to balloons.²² By 1935 émigré political activity had become effective enough that German police were instructed to arrest anyone even suspected of being an émigré in order to stem the flow of anti-Nazi propaganda across the border.²³

Although Saxon police and Nazi officials found the border frustrating in 1933 and 1934 because it was porous enough to let anti-regime propaganda into Germany yet restrictive enough to limit German officials' ability to act against those spreading that propaganda, by the late 1930s, the German central government and local Saxon officials found that, with the consolidation of the Nazi state they were able to extend their influence beyond the Czechoslovak border. German police got German-speaking mayors in the Czechoslovak borderlands to give them lists of German émigrés living in the area and tried to lure émigrés into Germany so that they could arrest them. They planted spies among émigré groups in Czechoslovakia.²⁴ By 1937, German officials even succeeded in pressuring the Czechoslovak government to move German émigrés out of border areas to central Czechoslovakia where they would be less able to wield cross-border political influence.²⁵

Opponents of Nazi Germany turned many of Germany's borders into centers of political opposition even as the regime itself tried to make the border an important site for enforcing the new political system. The Saxon-Bohemian border proved a particularly critical place for the face-off between German socialists and the Nazi regime. A highly industrialized region that had shared labor, raw materials, and markets since the late 19th century, Saxony had a tradition of close contact with northern Bohemia that Bavaria, the other German state with a border to Czechoslovakia, did not. Furthermore, close economic and social ties had contributed to the growth of cross-border political ties. Saxon and Bohemian social democrats and communists worked together in the interwar period, as did German nationalists on either side. Saxon branches of German nationalist groups like the *Alldeutscher Verband* had made the Czechoslovak borderlands a focus of their political efforts since the late 19th century and were continuing to do so in the early 1930s.²⁶ Thus, after 1933 local actors on both sides of the border, whether they were ordinary citizens, socialists, nationalists, or local officials, had both the inclination and

²¹ HStA Dresden, AH Zwickau No. 1603, p. 6.

²² HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 2169, pp. 267, 269.

²³ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 9657, p. 3, October 13, 1937.

²⁴ Ibidem; HStA Dresden, AH Zwickau No. 1603, p. 12.

²⁵ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 9657, October 13, 1937.

²⁶ Stadtarchiv Dresden (StAD), Alldeutscher Verband No. 83; GERALD KOLDITZ: Der Alldeutsche Verband in Dresden. Antitschechische Aktivitäten zwischen 1895 und 1914, in: Landesgeschichte in Sachsen. Tradition und Innovation, ed. by RAINER AURIG et al., Bielefeld 1997.

the resources to fight for political control of the borderlands. In doing so they demonstrated that their interests and methods were not always in agreement with official policies of the states in which they lived.

The Czechoslovak state also began to control access to the border more closely after 1933. The Czechoslovak government saw Hitler's regime as a threat to its autonomy – and perhaps to its survival.²⁷ That threat took a variety of forms. Czechoslovaks had worried about becoming too economically dependent on Germany throughout the interwar period, a worry heightened by the proposed German-Austrian customs union in 1931.²⁸ German rearmament in the mid-1930s raised concerns about possible military conflict or invasion. But as in Germany, the most persistent threat appeared to be cross-border political influence. Czechoslovak officials feared that contact with Nazi Germany would encourage Czechoslovakia's already discontented German minority to blame their government for their problems and to look to Germany and National Socialism for a solution. Such influence was especially widespread because it was exercised not only by the German state. German nationalist organizations, individual Saxons, and Sudeten German politicians living in Germany often claimed to represent the Nazi political agenda in their anti-Czechoslovak activities.²⁹

Czechoslovak border policies changed quickly. Regulation of cross-border traffic grew stricter.³⁰ The Czechoslovak government stationed more and more police along the border and began using airplanes to monitor activity on both sides.³¹ It replaced German-speaking police with Czech-speakers, suggesting both a need to assert Czechoslovakia's identity as a Slavic nation state at the border, and a greater confidence in the loyalty of Czechs than of German Bohemians.³² Police began closing the border whenever they thought a

²⁷ Hitler did not articulate a clear policy towards Czechoslovakia or German-speaking Czechoslovaks in 1933. Nevertheless, the Nazi pan-German rhetoric of *Lebensraum* and *Volk* clearly suggested a long-term mission for German expansion of some sort into Eastern Europe whether or not such plans really existed. See: JÖRG BRECHTEFELD: *Mitteleuropa and German Politics, 1848 to the Present*, New York 1996, pp. 52–54.

²⁸ Czechoslovak leaders saw the customs union as a German and Austrian attempt to create a German-led *Mitteleuropa*. See: MIROSLAV HOUŠTECKÝ: *Plán rakousko-německé cení unie v roce 1931 a postoj Československa* [The Plan for an Austrian-German Customs Union in 1931 and the Position of Czechoslovakia], in: *Československý časopis historický* 4 (1956), 1, pp. 30, 50; CAMPBELL (cf. footnote 5), pp. 220–221, 226; ROBERT KVAČEK: *Československo a Evropa po roce 1918* [Czechoslovakia and Europe after 1918], in: *Moderní dějiny* 2 (1994), p. 89.

²⁹ HStA Dresden, AH Auerbach No. 79, p. 176; OSWIN POETSCHKE: *Sachsen als Teil der deutschen Ostfront*, in: *Sachsen als Grenzland*, ed. by FRIEDRICH GROSCH, Leipzig 1936, pp. 17–27; ARTHUR GRAEFE: *Grenzmark Sachsen. Ein Vorposten im deutschen Schicksalskampf*, Dresden 1934, p. 8.

³⁰ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1987, December 4, 1936.

³¹ HStA Dresden, AH Marienberg No. 337, p. 109.

³² The replacement of German-speaking with Czech-speaking police also represented the replacement of local police with state police. See: ELIZABETH WISKEMANN: *Czechs and*

political event in Czechoslovakia might draw participants from Germany, or that one in Germany might encourage Czechoslovak citizens to join in Nazi rallies.³³ In September 1933, Czechoslovak officials at a border crossing to Saxony refused to let anyone carrying a German passport cross the border into Czechoslovakia, an attempt to keep Germans from attending a German-Bohemian gymnastics festival in the Czechoslovak town of Brandov (Brandau).³⁴ The border was closed down again on the eve of the Nazi rally in Nuremberg in 1935 to prevent German Bohemians from attending.

The presence of Nazi Germany across the border was added incentive for the Czechoslovak government to step up efforts begun in 1932 to curb domestic German nationalist radicalism. In 1933, government pressure that had been building since 1931 led the Sudeten German National Socialist party (DNSAP) and the German National Party (DNP) in Czechoslovakia to disband themselves immediately before they were officially banned by the Czechoslovak government in October.³⁵ Czechoslovak police took further steps to crack down on domestic National Socialism and the spread of Nazi influence from Germany. In 1934, Czechoslovakia outlawed the display of swastikas, Nazi flags, or other Nazi symbols. German Bohemians were also forbidden to say "Heil Hitler!". SA and SS members, even those who were German citizens, faced intensifying police attention and possible arrest.³⁶ For example, in 1934 a Saxon SA member was arrested on his way to his brother's wedding in Czechoslovakia on suspicion of having participated in a cross-border kidnapping attempt.³⁷ Thus, while SA members, German nationalists, and Nazi sympathizers on both sides succeeded in making the borderlands a focal point for attacks on the Czechoslovak state's sovereignty and stability, they did so at the cost of undermining their own access to the border and ability to maintain family and other ties across it.

Czechoslovak government efforts to control the border were a response to both internal and external developments. The state was trying to contain German-Bohemian nationalists who had experienced an upswing of popular support when the Depression hit the German-speaking Czechoslovak border areas disproportionately hard.³⁸ At the same time, it was guarding against ex-

Germans. *A Study of the Struggle in the Historic Provinces of Bohemia and Moravia*, New York 1938, p. 200.

³³ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1953, December 30, 1936.

³⁴ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1848, p. 450.

³⁵ HANS LEMBERG: *Die Tschechoslowakei im Epochenjahr 1933*, in: *Bohemia* 25 (1984), 2, p. 320.

³⁶ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1848, p. 421, No. 1842, p. 400; AH Schwarzenberg No. 1985, March 8, 1934.

³⁷ HStA Dresden, AH Marienberg No. 337, p. 129.

³⁸ JAROSLAV PÁTEK: *Economic, Social and Political Aspects of Multinational Interwar Czechoslovakia*, in: *Economic Change and the National Question in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. by ALICE TEICHOVA et al., New York 2000, p. 259.

cessive influence from Nazi Germany, a state that whatever its immediate foreign policy, could not be understood as friendly to Czechoslovakia. But just as German politics and rearmament alarmed the Czechoslovaks, so too did the growing Czechoslovak military presence in the borderlands, air patrols, and restriction of long-standing cross-border life alarm Saxons. Since the 1890s, German nationalists in Saxony had warned against the dangers of "Czechization" in the borderlands.³⁹ In the 1920s, the introduction of Czechoslovak military forces into the borderlands had frightened and outraged local Saxons. In the late 1930s Czechoslovakia's attempts to fortify its borders with Germany again prompted Saxons, despite their own government's increasingly anti-Czechoslovak rhetoric, to perceive Czechoslovak troops as a threat to their territory. Thus, by the 1930s, the new Czechoslovak state presence in the borderlands seemed to lend substance to stories of Czech oppression of German-speaking Bohemians and Saxons' fears of Czechoslovak military aggression.⁴⁰

Although by the mid-1930s both the German and the Czechoslovak central government tried to control their shared border more closely than before, in the borderlands themselves central government policies and the practice of local officials were often at odds with one another. In Czechoslovakia, some local officials helped German socialist refugees, though the Czechoslovak government often did not officially sanction their asylum. Others provided Saxon Nazis with information about Czechoslovak internal affairs or German refugees living in the Czechoslovak borderlands.⁴¹

In the early years of Nazi rule in Germany, even central government policies *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia and the Sudeten German movement were various and often contradictory as a result of the multiple agendas of the Nazi party and the established government bureaucracy. Despite its general policy of not upsetting relations with its neighbors in the mid-1930s, the German central government did, for example, provide financial support to the *Sudetendeutscher Heimebund*, a radical group of German-speaking Czechoslo-

³⁹ KOLDITZ (cf. footnote 26), *passim*.

⁴⁰ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1866, p. 130. In hindsight it seems difficult to take German fears of Czechoslovak aggression seriously. Nevertheless, German nationalists in both Saxony and Bohemia had been warning of the spread of Czech influence (Czechization) into German speaking areas since the late 19th century, and after the founding of Czechoslovakia there had been repeated rumors of Czechoslovak government plans for military action in the borderlands, rumors that were given substance by the (understandable) buildup of Czechoslovak military forces in the borderlands during the interwar period and especially in 1937 and 1938. See: MURDOCK (cf. footnote 15), pp. 66-67, 120, 329. In 1918 and 1919 some Saxons also saw Czech press support for the right of the Sorbs, Saxony's Slavic minority, to self-determination as a possible encouragement to Czechoslovak military intervention in Saxony. See: *Narodní politika*, January 23, 1919; HStA Dresden, Staatskanzlei No. 155, pp. 1, 7, 25, 85.

⁴¹ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 9657, p. 3, October 13, 1937; AH Zwickau No. 1603, p. 12.

vaks in Germany who supported irredentist policies, including the annexation of the German-speaking Czechoslovak borderlands by Germany.⁴² In 1933, the *Sudetendeutscher Heimatbund* in turn took Hitler's talk of a Reich that included all Germans and financial support from Berlin as sanction for its irredentist views *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia and quickly stepped up its political activities.⁴³ The group was especially active in Saxony, a product of the large German Bohemian population in Saxony. In 1934, Saxony played host to a Reich-wide conference in which the *Heimatbund* stressed the importance of the Sudeten German struggle against the Czechoslovak state to the larger project of Nazism and pan-German nationalism.⁴⁴ By mid-1934, the Reich government intervened with the leadership of the *Sudetendeutscher Heimatbund* to downplay its anti-Czechoslovak politics and claims to close ties to the Nazi regime, but not before the organization, and others like it, complicated the Reich government's attempts to avoid international conflict with their demands for territorial revision.

The *Sudetendeutscher Heimatbund* was not alone in challenging the German-Czechoslovak border and the Czechoslovak state in the first years of Nazi rule. On the local level, such challenges became common along the Saxon-Bohemian border. The Saxon SA and local police were chief among those who began to challenge the border in ways that ranged from the merely irritating to the patently illegal, all in the name of Nazi Germany. Such activity on the part of local officials blurred distinctions among Reich policy, Nazi party practice, and local activism.

In March 1933, Josef Salmann, a Czechoslovak farmer, was taking a break from work in his field about 15 meters from the German border when an armed SA member ordered him quite illegally to get back to work. Salmann pointed out that the SA man had no authority in Czechoslovak territory, and the SA man, though angry, retreated to German soil.⁴⁵ Local people in both Bohemia and Saxony complained that SA members shot at people near the border. Armed SA members were repeatedly found on Czechoslovak soil near the border.⁴⁶ SA members arrested and even kidnapped people in Czechoslovakia and took them to Germany, or they stopped people with legitimate border papers from crossing. When a Czechoslovak customs officer tried to inspect a ship crossing the border in May 1933, a group of SS officers shoved him, declaring, "We will drive all enemies out of the land, including the Czechs." In a similar incident, German SA members on a ship to Schmilka, just north of the Czechoslovak border, swore at Czechoslovak customs offi-

⁴² HStA Dresden, Gesandtschaft Berlin No. 276, August 17, 1933.

⁴³ SMELSER (cf. footnote 6), pp. 31-32.

⁴⁴ HStA Dresden, AH Auerbach No. 79, p. 176.

⁴⁵ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, p. 125.

⁴⁶ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, pp. 125-126.

cials, calling them "Bohemian dogs" and "Czech pigs."⁴⁷ One SA member, when warned that he was in Czechoslovakia and had no authority there declared, "If I am standing here, this is Saxony."⁴⁸

Saxon officials in the borderlands faced uncomfortable choices about how to police the border. Nazi and German nationalist rhetoric challenged the Czechoslovak border's legitimacy, championed the Sudeten-German separatist cause, and advocated close ties between Germans in the Reich and those outside its borders. The Nazi government in Berlin, though it made use of such rhetoric, was pushing for greater control of the border and sought to avoid provoking international conflict. On the local level, officials tried to balance central policy, regional conditions, and local tradition in their policies.

After Hitler's crackdown on the SA in 1934 there were fewer direct challenges to the border, and local control of it fell into a more regular pattern with fewer obvious divergences from Germany's general policy of cool but not provocative relations with the Czechoslovaks. Nevertheless, local officials continued to have to balance the pragmatic and ideological interests of their states and region as they made daily choices about how to grant or limit access to the border.

Since the late 19th century, Saxons had been more engaged with the Czech-German nationalities fight in Bohemia than Germans in other regions, in large part because of the proximity of the border and their close economic, political, and social ties across it.⁴⁹ By the 1930s, such traditions meant that Sudeten German politicians in Czechoslovakia and Sudeten German activist groups like the *Sudetendeutscher Heimatbund*, had won sympathy and support among Saxons and German Bohemians living in Saxony. Some Saxon officials argued that the border needed to stay open in order to maintain contact between Sudeten and Reich Germans and to prevent the Czechs from turning the state boundary into a linguistic and national border as well.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, a variety of incidents demonstrate that Saxons acting out of local interest were faster to impose border restrictions, sometimes even flying in the face of official Reich policy, than were representatives of the German central government in Berlin. In spite of protestations of friendship and support, after 1933 the Saxon government, in response to central government policy and local economic problems, included Sudeten Germans in new restrictions on foreign labor and discouraged the immigration of Czechoslovak citizens claiming to be political refugees. Saxon bar owners demanded that the SA stop Saxons from crossing into Czechoslovakia for beer. Officials from neighbor-

⁴⁷ These incidents were reported to the Reich foreign ministry by the Czechoslovak consul to Berlin who protested such treatment of Czechoslovak officials. Ibidem, pp. 436, 453.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, pp. 147-149.

⁴⁹ See: MURDOCK (cf. footnote 15).

⁵⁰ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1987, October 19, 1937, October 22, 1937.

ing Czechoslovak towns complained that despite Reich assurances that new border restrictions would not hinder local border traffic, officials in the Saxon district of Löbau were doing just that.⁵¹ In 1935, thirty-five men in the Saxon town of Johanngeorgenstadt were dismissed from the SA because they were Czechoslovak citizens and thus foreigners.⁵² In each case local officials, business people, and Nazi party representatives sought to give the border greater definition as an economic and political border as a result of local conditions and interests.

For local officials, protecting local economic and social interests was often more important than supporting their Sudeten German neighbors in the interest of national solidarity. They used Nazi ideological rhetoric when it was in line with their material interests, but often abandoned it when it was not. Saxony had been struggling economically throughout the interwar period.⁵³ The Saxon public and many local officials thought that Saxony could ill afford to prop up their German Bohemian neighbors in Czechoslovakia, whether by admitting them as refugees or as labor or by allowing Saxon border residents to shop in Czechoslovak stores. But in light of Nazi state ideology, officials offered national as well as economic justifications for their policies, albeit often as an afterthought. They argued that Czechoslovak Germans needed to stay in the Czechoslovak borderlands to keep German political and territorial claims there alive.⁵⁴ And, Saxon officials added political reasons to their economic arguments for maintaining the border as a barrier. Despite propaganda about the unity of Sudeten and Reich Germans, German officials doubted that German Bohemians could be counted on to support the Nazi regime. There were numerous signs that not all German Bohemians were eager to support the Nazis, as evidenced by the criticism of Nazi policies that appeared in both the German and Czech-language Czechoslovak press.⁵⁵ A border open to Sudeten-German immigrants might inadvertently admit "undesirable elements."⁵⁶

Local opinion proved divided. Sudeten German groups in both Saxony and Czechoslovakia complained about German border restrictions, calling them "inconsistent with *volksdeutsche* thinking."⁵⁷ But many such complaints appeared to be motivated as much by material interest and a sense of local tradition as by German nationalist sentiment. The German government received complaints from German-Bohemian business people and innkeepers in Czecho-

⁵¹ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1848, pp. 405, 407.

⁵² HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1952, May 31, 1935. This was a widespread phenomenon. See: AH Oelsnitz No. 850, p. 37.

⁵³ CLAUS-CHRISTIAN SZEJNMANN: *Nazism in Central Germany. The Brownshirts in 'Red' Saxony*, New York 1999, p. 6.

⁵⁴ HStA Dresden, AH Annaberg No. 3266, p. 103.

⁵⁵ For example, see: *Prager Presse*, 22.11.1934; *Lidové noviny*, March 21, 1935.

⁵⁶ HStA Dresden, AH Annaberg No. 3266, p. 103.

⁵⁷ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1848, p. 395; AH Annaberg No. 3266, p. 189.

slovakia who were losing valuable business when Reich Germans were prevented from crossing the border to shop and drink Bohemian beer.⁵⁸ One group of innkeepers from Liberec (Reichenberg) declared that limiting local cross-border traffic "hurts the centuries-old neighborly coexistence of the border population."⁵⁹ The Saxon *Oberlausitzer Tageszeitung* countered: "For all of our ties to our brothers across the border, we must nevertheless demand that our own domestic pubs not be forgotten. Every glass of Bohemian beer [we drink] supports the Sudeten German innkeeper, but it also strengthens the Czech state, which is neither politically nor economically well disposed towards us."⁶⁰ Such public efforts to restrict Sudeten Germans' access to the Saxon borderlands continued until 1938 when German nationalist and expansionist policies finally overshadowed local considerations.

Germany's and Czechoslovakia's attempts to exert new control over the border upset border residents, while growing local and international tensions over the border made them nervous.⁶¹ Saxon border residents objected to new SA border controls, and often defied rules supposed to keep them from crossing it.⁶² Local people on both sides complained when Czechoslovakia blocked paths, cutting off their access to the border.⁶³ They continued to try to use the border as they had in the past. Despite new restrictions, some Saxons still managed to drink Bohemian beer, and German Bohemians still worked and shopped in Saxony. Czechoslovak citizens still traveled to Saxony as tourists in significant numbers.⁶⁴ Indeed, in February 1938 the German and the Czechoslovak government reached a new agreement making it easier for German citizens to travel to Czechoslovak spas.⁶⁵ In age-old tradition, when the police banned carrying goods across the border, people turned to smuggling and avoided main roads when returning from shopping trips.⁶⁶ In 1937, the mayor of Johanngeorgenstadt argued that there was no sense in closing a local border crossing, reasoning that Czechoslovak citizens needed

⁵⁸ Ibidem, pp. 398, 427. In the second letter cited here German Bohemian political parties and officials from Czechoslovak borderland districts appealed directly to the German foreign ministry in Berlin.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 404.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 405.

⁶¹ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, p. 119; AH Schwarzenberg No. 1982, p. 1.

⁶² HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1846, p. 119.

⁶³ HStA Dresden, AH Oelsnitz No. 1806, p. 120.

⁶⁴ HStA Dresden, Staatskanzlei-Zeitungsausschnittsammlung No. 1159: Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten, May 3, 1936.

⁶⁵ Statní okresní archiv Děčín, Německý tělocvičný spolek Varnsdorf [The German Gymnastics Club in Varnsdorf], 41, Korrespondence [Correspondence] 1937-1941; Rumburger Zeitung, February 8, 1938.

⁶⁶ HStA Dresden, Außenministerium No. 1844, p. 264.

to cross there to get to work in Saxony, and smugglers would find ways to cross the border in any case.⁶⁷

By the fall of 1938, it was clear that the battle to control the borderlands was coming to a head both at home and abroad. Germany finally began shifting its local border policies to match its ideology. As Konrad Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten German Party, demanded that Sudeten Germans be allowed "*Heim ins Reich*," the German state encouraged more contact between Sudeten Germans and Reich Germans, allowed Sudeten German refugees across the border in growing numbers, and otherwise eased border restrictions.⁶⁸ The Czechoslovak government on the other hand made desperate efforts to fortify the border against German attack.

Throughout the interwar period fears of "creeping Germanization" and a desire to prove the Czechoslovak borderlands indisputably part of a Slavic national territory had led Czech nationalists to try to promote the migration of Czech-speakers into the borderlands, calling those who thus protected Czech national interests in the borderlands *hraničáři*. In the 1930s, the Czech nationalist press stepped up efforts to celebrate the efforts of the *hraničáři*, and the perilous position of the borderlands as a result of German influence.⁶⁹ There were even calls for a border zone in which only Czech-speakers would be allowed to settle, a proposal that outraged German Bohemians.⁷⁰ Although these efforts were initially carried out by non-governmental groups, by the late 1930s, the term "*hraničáři*" began to be applied to Czechoslovak military and police forces posted in the borderlands to protect against possible German attack as well. The Czechoslovak government's militarization of the border, and its use of Czech speaking troops in the borderlands thus blurred the line between state and private nationalist efforts to protect Czechoslovakia from German aggression, and lent the force of Czech national interests to Czechoslovakia's efforts to secure its borders.⁷¹ By 1937 and 1938, the Czechoslovaks moved beyond police and passport controls to secure the border, building cement barriers, earthworks, and ditches to block or restrict border cross-

⁶⁷ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 181, pp. 50, 86.

⁶⁸ HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1935, pp. 170, 183; Staatskanzlei-Zeitungs-ausschnittsammlung No. 2249: Flöhatal-Zeitung, September 16, 1938.

⁶⁹ MARK CORNWALL: 'National Reparation.' The Czech Land Reform and the Sudeten Germans 1918-1938, in: Slavonic and East European Review 75 (1997), 2, p. 267; *Narodní politika*, January 26, 1933.

⁷⁰ HEIDRUN DOLEZEL, STEPHAN DOLEZEL: *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag*, vol. 4, München 1991, pp. 177-178; OTA HOLUB: *Opatření k obraně a ochraně čs. Státní hranice ve 20. a 30. letech* [Measures in the 1920s and 1930s to Defend and Protect Czechoslovakia's Borders], in: *Historie a vojenství* 1986, 2, pp. 98-100.

⁷¹ See: EDUARD STEHLÍK, MARTIN VANOUŘEK: *Zapomenutí Hraničáři* [Forgotten Borderers], Mohelnice 2002; *Hraničáři mluví a žalují* [The Borderers Speak and Accuse], Liberec 1938.

sings from Germany. They even planted new trees in the middle of forest paths.⁷²

Ultimately, such efforts did not in themselves determine whether the border stood or fell in September 1938. As a result of the Munich agreement, Hitler won control of the Saxon-Bohemian borderlands not through military means, or through cross-border political propaganda, but through international diplomacy. Nevertheless, Hitler's international diplomatic success was aided by changes in local border conditions and policies. The battle for control of the border had been waged locally and regionally since 1933. In the late 1930s, German-speaking Czechoslovaks flocked to support Sudeten German demands for political autonomy, a shift that was a product of local economic and political conditions but that benefited from support from within the German Reich. Hitler could and did point to the growth of German nationalist discontent and the *Sudetendeutsche Partei* in the Czechoslovak borderlands to support his claims to the region. Saxons' ties to their German-Bohemian neighbors also proved important to popularizing the Sudeten German cause in Germany. Yet socialist campaigns against fascism in the Czechoslovak borderlands, the efforts of the Czech *hraničáři*, and Saxon objections to giving Sudeten Germans unrestricted access to the border show that, in spite of Nazis claims, public opinion in the borderlands was not unified in either 1933 or 1938. The picture is further complicated by the many cases, like those of the SA members violating the border, or Saxon organizations urging that Sudeten Germans be kept out of the German borderlands. Such local actors claimed to represent the interests and ideology of the state, yet were sometimes at odds with official state policy, contributing additional complexity to the local fight for control of the border.

The Nazi rise to power in 1933 transformed the German-Czechoslovak border from a state boundary into a political frontier. The border was a weak spot in the political system of each state, allowing and even encouraging opposition buoyed from the outside. At the same time, it became the focus of each state's efforts for self-definition and self-preservation. But states did not turn the borderlands into the site of political showdowns by themselves. It was local people, including SA members, border police, socialists, innkeepers, and private citizens who mounted political challenges to each state in the borderlands. And it was those same local people who demonstrated yet again that no state ever has complete control of its population or its boundaries.

⁷² HStA Dresden, AH Schwarzenberg No. 1988, November 5, 1937, No. 1982, p. 1, No. 181, pp. 85, 101; AH Marienberg No. 337, p. 267, 270.

Zusammenfassung

Zentrale Politik und lokale Praxis.

Die wechselnde Dynamik des sächsisch-böhmischen Grenzgebiets nach 1933

Grenzen definieren Staaten, Gemeinschaften und Gesellschaften, und ihre Bedeutung verändert sich mit den historischen Entwicklungen. Dieser Beitrag untersucht das sächsisch-böhmische Grenzgebiet nach der Machtübernahme der Nationalsozialisten 1933 und fragt nach den Auswirkungen dieser politischen Entwicklung in Deutschland auf die Dynamik der Grenzsicherung und auf das Alltagsleben im Grenzgebiet.

Das Entstehen Nazi-Deutschlands bedeutete den Beginn einer Periode von Auseinandersetzungen entlang der Grenze. Seit dem Ersten Weltkrieg hatten der deutsche und der tschechoslowakische Nationalstaat versucht, die sächsisch-böhmische Grenze klarer zu konturieren und damit auch die beiden Staaten, Bevölkerungen und Volkswirtschaften stärker gegeneinander abzugrenzen. Gleichzeitig verfolgten die Bewohner des Grenzgebiets auf beiden Seiten verschiedene eigene Interessen: Einige betrachteten die Grenze gemäß der offiziellen Darstellung als Barriere, während andere wie in der Vergangenheit weiter die mit ihr verbundenen politischen, ökonomischen und kulturellen Möglichkeiten nutzten. Der Beginn der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft 1933 brachte jedoch für die Regierungen der beiden Staaten, die lokalen Behörden und die Bewohner des Grenzgebiets gleichermaßen eine Veränderung der Situation, nicht nur in der öffentlichen Rhetorik, sondern auch in praktischen Belangen. Die Grenze wurde zum Gegenstand der Bemühungen beider Staaten um Selbstdefinition und Selbsterhaltung – zur umkämpften Trennlinie zwischen Faschismus und Demokratie, zwischen deutschem und tschechischem Nationalismus. Aber das Schicksal und die Rolle der Grenze wurden nicht allein von den Staaten, sondern auch von den Menschen vor Ort und ihren Interessen bestimmt. Es war das Zusammenwirken staatlicher und lokaler Politik sowie historischer Akteure, welches das sächsisch-böhmische Grenzgebiet in den 1930er Jahren entscheidend prägte.