

Central European History Society

---

National Mythologies and Ethnic Cleansing: The Expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans in 1945

Author(s): Eagle Glassheim

Source: *Central European History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2000), pp. 463-486

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of Central European History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4547004>

Accessed: 16-03-2020 17:36 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/4547004?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4547004?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Central European History Society, Cambridge University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Central European History*

# National Mythologies and Ethnic Cleansing: The Expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans in 1945

*Eagle Glassheim*

**B**EGINNING in January of 1946, trains filled with Sudeten Germans—forty wagons, thirty passengers per wagon—left Czechoslovakia daily for the American Zone of occupied Germany. By the end of 1946, the Czechoslovak government completed the “organized transfer” of almost 2 million Germans, and it did so in a manner that in many respects fulfilled the mandate of the Potsdam agreement that the resettlement be “orderly and humane.”<sup>1</sup> But a focus on these regularized trainloads of human cargo obscures the extent of the humanitarian disaster facing Germans during the summer months of 1945, immediately after the Nazi capitulation. By the end of 1945, Czech soldiers, security forces, and local militias had already expelled over 700,000 Sudeten Germans to occupied Germany and Austria. As many as 30,000 Germans died on forced marches, in disease-filled concentration camps, in summary executions, and massacres.<sup>2</sup>

Until recently, Czech historians and politicians have euphemistically called this three-month burst of violence in 1945 the “wild transfer” (*divoký odsun*), suggesting an essential affinity with the organized transfer of 1946. This nomenclature points to a focus on end results: the removal of Germans from Czechoslovakia. Radomír Luža, for example, grouped the two phases under the

A number of people gave advice and support as I prepared this article for publication. I would like to thank in particular István Deák, Volker Berghahn, Bradley Abrams, and the Czech reading circle at Columbia University. Thanks also to the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) for research funding.

1. Radomír Luža, *The Transfer of the Sudeten Germans* (New York, 1964), 279–86.

2. Though historians disagree widely on the number of deaths, a recent report from a Czech-German “Joint Commission of Historians” agreed on a range from 19,000 to 30,000 dead. The commission’s collective conclusions appear in *Konfliktní společenství, katastrofa, uvolnění: Náčrt výkladu německo-českých dějin od 19. století* (Conflictual Community, Catastrophe, Detente: An Outline of an Interpretation of Czech-German History from the Nineteenth Century) (Prague: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 1996). The commission’s figures included “more than 6,000 victims of acts of violence” and 5,000 estimated suicides.

*Central European History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 463–486

heading "Transfer" in his 1964 study *The Transfer of the Sudeten Germans*. Critics of the expulsion too have merged the two periods, subsuming them both under the label "ethnic cleansing," i.e., the forced removal of an ethnic group from a territory with the goal of creating a homogenous national state.<sup>3</sup> Many expellee historians and the crusading American human rights lawyer Alfred de Zayas have focused blame for the expulsions on Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš, Josef Stalin, and Western leaders.<sup>4</sup> Both sides have framed their arguments in moral terms; caught up in the macropolitics of the Cold War, they have tended to focus on the culpability of leaders, with little consideration of the role played in the expulsions by ordinary Czechs.

To Luža and many other Czech historians, both émigré and Communist, the expulsions were an unpleasant, but justified response to Sudeten German betrayal of Czechoslovakia and Nazi persecution of Czechs during the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia from 1939 to 1945.<sup>5</sup> Since the fall of communism, the tide has turned in Czech historiography of the expulsions; instead of building a moral and legal case for transfer, Czech historians are now working to document what actually took place in 1945 and 1946.<sup>6</sup> Though doubts about the morality of the transfer began to surface in émigré journals in the 1970s, the new approach owes much to Czech President Václav Havel, who has publicly apologized for the expulsions and rejected the concept of collective guilt in any form.<sup>7</sup> Havel's emphasis on individual guilt and responsibility has opened up new avenues of research on the expulsions. If we must judge perpetrators individually, we need to investigate both the wide and the narrow context of particular acts of ethnic cleansing.

Ground-level perpetrators are the crucial missing link in our understanding of ethnic cleansing. Though national and international influences contributed

3. See in particular Alfred de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944–1950* (New York, 1994).

4. See in particular Wenzel Jaksch, *Europe's Road to Potsdam*, trans. Kurt Glaser (New York, 1963 [1958]). Also: Alfred de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Expulsion of the Germans from the East* (Lincoln, 1989 [1977]).

5. Luža devotes ten of the fourteen chapters in his book to building a case for Sudeten German responsibility for the breakdown of Czech–German relations and for Nazi atrocities. Only three chapters deal with the expulsions themselves. See Luža, *Transfer*.

6. The foremost advocate of the documentary approach is Tomáš Staněk. See his *Perzekuce* (Persecution) (Prague, 1996) and *Odsun Němců z Československa 1945–1947* (The Transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia, 1945–1947) (Prague, 1991).

7. Václav Havel made this point on a number of occasions since 1989. See for example his speech during the visit of German President Richard von Weizsäcker on 15 March 1990. Reprinted in *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York, 1997), 21–28. For the Czech (and Slovak) dissident debate on the morality of expulsions, see Bohumil Černý, Jan Křen, Václav Kural, and Milan Otáhal, eds., *Češi, Němci, Odsun* [Czechs, Germans, Transfer] (Prague, 1990). Bradley Abrams summarizes and evaluates that debate in "Morality, Wisdom and Revision: The Czech Opposition of the 1970s and the Expulsion of the Sudeten Germans," *East European Politics and Societies* 9, no. 2 (1995): 234–55.

to the anti-German mood after the war, local conditions and popular mentalities were essential ingredients of the Czechoslovak expulsion fury in the summer of 1945. This article will document the evolution of the expulsion idea on the international, national, and popular levels. None of these levels developed in isolation. During the war, there was an ongoing dialogue on expulsion between Beneš, the Czech underground, and Allied officials. By 1945, all three levels had adopted an ideology of collective German guilt for the crimes of Hitler, which many Czechs fused with a preexisting cognitive model of Germans as dangerous colonizers in East Central Europe, a national enemy.<sup>8</sup> Amid the chaotic conditions in immediate postwar Czechoslovakia, rhetoric and nationalist mythologies took on an inordinate power to shape action and led many otherwise law-abiding Czechs to ethnic cleansing of Germans in hundreds of communities.

### Defining Ethnic Cleansing

Ethnic cleansing has received an increasing amount of press and historical coverage since the breakup of Yugoslavia, with the perhaps inevitable result being definitional sprawl. The widest definitions of ethnic cleansing portray it as a politically inspired design to engineer homogenous national states. Viewed in this context, the Czechoslovak transfers (both wild and organized) were part of a wave of postwar expulsions that resulted in the forced relocation of over 12 million Germans, 2.1 million Poles, 700,000 Ukrainians, and hundreds of thousands of Hungarians from 1945 to 1947.<sup>9</sup> Hitler began the great unmixing of peoples in East Central Europe during World War II. Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union finished the job, reengineering the borders and ethnic makeup of the region with the approval of France, Britain, and the United States.

Stepping back even further, broad definitions envision the postwar expulsions in the context of what Philipp Ther has labeled “the century of ethnic cleansing,” which began and ended with forced migrations in the Balkans. On the way, this jagged century also included expulsions and/or genocide of millions in Turkey, the Indian subcontinent, the Soviet Union, and Rwanda.<sup>10</sup> But global definitions like this tend to obscure more than they elucidate; they indicate a theoretical commonality of ends, but they tell us little about how cleansing was carried out.

8. The concept of a “cognitive model” comes from Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1997).

9. Philipp Ther, “The Century of Ethnic Cleansing: Forced Migration in Central and Eastern Europe between 1912 and 1995,” conference paper, presented at the American Historical Association Annual Convention, 9 January 1999.

10. *Ibid.*

The recent bursts of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia have focused attention on cleansing as a particular kind of ethnic violence, with characteristic methods. In 1994, a United Nations committee of experts concluded, "Considered in the context of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, 'ethnic cleansing' means rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area." The report goes on to describe particular means used by Serbs (and on some occasions Croats) in cleansing actions:

murder, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape and sexual assaults, confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property.

The committee stresses that these methods are crimes against humanity, and that ethnic cleansing, thus defined, is a clear violation of international law.<sup>11</sup>

With the exception of "wanton destruction of property,"<sup>12</sup> all these means characterized the Czech cleansing of Germans from May to August of 1945. But the massive, organized transfer of Germans in 1946 was different in crucial respects; it was carried out with the approval of the international community, and, though mandatory, it was accompanied by relatively little violence. In order to emphasize the difference between the two processes, I will focus on the wild expulsions in the summer of 1945 and exclude the category of organized transfer from my definition of ethnic cleansing. Nor does genocide, cleansing by extermination, fit this definition. These are not mere semantic quibbles: while the goals of ethnic cleansing, population transfer, and genocide are superficially similar—namely the creation of a homogenous nation-state—the means used to achieve them are dramatically different.

### Czechs and Germans up to 1945

To understand the ultimate collapse of Czech-German relations in Czechoslovakia, it is necessary to look back to the late nineteenth century, a period of rapid and aggressive nation-building in the Habsburg Empire. A growing Czech middle class and increasingly self-aware farmers and workers turned to nationalism as a way to assert their interests in the ethnically polyglot

11. Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994, par. 129. My thanks to Roy Gutman for providing me with this reference.

12. Czech settlers and so-called gold-diggers (*zlatokopové*) began moving into the Sudetenland within weeks after the German capitulation, and a series of presidential decrees in the summer of 1945 confirmed their claims to German property.

state. Like many rising nations in East Central Europe in the nineteenth century, the Czechs defined themselves and their interests through an evolving national mythology. By the late nineteenth century, the dominant Czech national discourse defined Czechs (democratic, bourgeois, crypto-Protestant) in opposition to the German Habsburgs (authoritarian, aristocratic, Catholic). Invoking the pre-1620 historical rights of the Bohemian Crownlands, Czechs claimed a right to self-determination within the Habsburg Empire.

The sizable German minority of Bohemia and Moravia resolutely resisted Czech demands for autonomy. Both sides pressed Vienna for protections and concessions, boycotted the other's commercial establishments, and fought the expansion of the other's linguistic territory. By 1918, when Bohemia and Moravia became the core of independent Czechoslovakia, the provinces' three million Germans and 7 million Czechs lived in parallel and largely separate societies, each with its own fully developed social structure, economy, and national mythologies.

The new Czechoslovakia was one of a number of nominally national but in fact multinational states created in East Central Europe after the collapse of empires in 1917–1918. In the Czechoslovak case, the high-minded principle of Wilsonian self-determination combined with the *Realpolitik* of postwar alliance politics to produce what is perhaps best described as an oxymoronic state. Though democratic, it was quasi-imperial in structure, with Czech Prague ruling German, Slovak, Hungarian, and Ruthenian peripheries. Though multinational, Czechoslovakia was founded and run as a nation-state, that is, in the name of a single (or here artificially double) nationality.<sup>13</sup> Czechs saw the state's 3 million Germans as an inconvenient legacy of centuries of foreign rule, most notably by the Habsburgs. When the first Czech president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk let slip in late 1918 a comment about German “immigrants and colonists,” he expressed a commonly held Czech view that Germans were outsiders in Bohemia.<sup>14</sup>

In popular mythology, Germans had settled in Bohemia as carpetbaggers (*přivandrovalci*) during historical eras of Czech weakness. The most important symbolic site in the Czech past was White Mountain (*Bílá hora*), a bump on the landscape of suburban Prague where a Catholic Habsburg army defeated Bohemian Protestant rebels in 1620. After the battle of White Mountain, the Habsburgs executed or exiled much of the native Czech nobility, parceling

13. Czechoslovakia was officially a state of the Czechs and Slovaks, referred to collectively as Czechoslovaks. Though a small minority of interwar citizens accepted this amalgam as their national identity, the vast majority was either Czech or Slovak. The two languages are closely related and mutually intelligible, but they are clearly not two dialects of one language.

14. Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (Seattle, 1992 [1974]), 80. By Bohemia, I mean the traditional “Lands of the Bohemian Crown,” that is the former Habsburg provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia (the territory of the current Czech Republic).

out their property to Catholic supporters from around Europe.<sup>15</sup> The newly arrived nobles became germanized and proved loyal supporters of the empire for much of the next 300 years. The Czech historian Jiří Rak points out that White Mountain was one of a string of historical battles in which nineteenth-century Czech nationalists depicted Germans as “brutal attackers” and foreign conquerors.<sup>16</sup>

After the Habsburg collapse in 1918, Czechs inaugurated their new republic with a stream of symbolic, verbal, and legal attacks on the legacy of White Mountain. Only days after the Czechoslovak declaration of independence in October of 1918, a crowd of 250,000 Czechs met at White Mountain to commemorate the battle and celebrate the fall of the Habsburgs.<sup>17</sup> From there, a smaller group marched to the Old Town Square in the center of Prague, the site of a Marian column erected in 1648 to celebrate the defeat of the Swedes in the Thirty Years’ War. Declaring the column a symbol of German Habsburg oppression, they pulled it down, reclaiming this central space for the Czech nation.<sup>18</sup> As historian Nancy Wingfield has pointed out, this was one of scores of symbolic attacks against statues with German and Habsburg themes in 1918–1921.<sup>19</sup>

Czech politicians sought to “redress” (*odčinit*) White Mountain legislatively by passing a comprehensive land reform in 1919. Though the reform was ostensibly social, supporters justified it in national terms by arguing that, in the 1620s, German nobles had received their land at the expense of Czechs.<sup>20</sup> Many legislators pursued a total reversal of the historical verdict at White Mountain. František Modráček, a leading Socialist parliamentarian, illustrated this in a representative speech during the land reform debate:

15. Contrary to Czech national mythology, White Mountain was more a religious than a national dispute. Czechs and Germans—noble and commoner alike—served on both sides of the conflict. See R.J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (Oxford, 1979), 195–216.

16. Jiří Rak, *Bývalí Čechové: české mýty a stereotypy* (Czechs of Old: Czech Myths and Stereotypes) (Prague, 1994), 107.

17. Nancy Meriwether Wingfield, “Conflicting Constructions of Memory: Attacks on Statues of Joseph II in the Bohemian Lands after the Great War,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 28 (1997): 149.

18. See Cynthia Paces, “Religious Images and National Symbols in the Creation of Czech Identity, 1890–1938” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998), 157–58.

19. In the years following Czechoslovak independence, crowds and local governments attacked or removed numerous statues of Joseph II, who was “generally considered the personification of Germandom.” Zdeněk Hojda and Jiří Pokorný, *Pomníky a zapomínky* (Memorials and Forgetting) (Prague, 1997), 133, 142. Hojda and Pokorný also document a wave of attacks on Marian columns in the Czech countryside (p. 30). See also Wingfield, “Conflicting Constructions.”

20. See the debate on land reform in the National Assembly on 16 April 1919 (session 46). Text at Elektronická knihovna—Český parlament: dokumenty českého parlamentu (Electronic Library—Czech Parliament: documents of the Czech Parliament) <<http://www.psp.cz/cgi-bin/win/eknih/1918ns/ps/stenprot/046schuz/>> (23 February 1999).

By these several paragraphs [of the land reform bill] we are deleting (*škrtáme*) the landed aristocracy from the future history of the Czech nation. Today we are ridding ourselves once and for all of that aristocracy that played such an infamous role in the history of our nation, and the especially sad role after the Battle of White Mountain up to the present.<sup>21</sup>

During the debate, Modráček and others portrayed Germans, Habsburgs, and aristocrats as a composite feudal enemy. The new Czechoslovak nation-state, in contrast, was the antithesis of the old feudal order, namely a middle-class Czech democracy. By redistributing German noble land to Czech smallholders, legislators saw the reform as both a symbolic and a real way to buttress the new state's legitimacy. In practice, land reform was not simply a national redistribution; Czech owners of large estates lost land too, and German farmers were eligible to receive confiscated land. But as anthropologist Ladislav Holy concludes, "In the perception of most people, the land stolen from the Czech nation through confiscation three hundred years ago was now simply to be returned."<sup>22</sup>

With land reform, attacks on statues, and countless other verbal and symbolic proclamations of national sovereignty, the Czechs sought to reconstitute Bohemia and Moravia's symbolic landscape. To legitimize their new national state, they asserted a Czech historical narrative to the exclusion of all others. Though Czechs did not publicly envision the removal of Sudeten Germans in 1918, symbolic exclusions and expulsions became a regular part of popular Czech discourse.

Germans were sensitive to these Czech slights and complained bitterly of discrimination in the form of land reform, purges of the state bureaucracy, and school closings. Almost as soon as the ink was dry on Czechoslovakia's minority protection treaty in 1919, Germans began flooding the League of Nations with petitions. There was some justification to these German complaints. Language requirements kept the number of Germans in the bureaucracy well below their percentage of the population; land reform took property from German landlords and redistributed it primarily to Czechs; and some German schools were converted to Czech instruction. Even so, Czechoslovak minority policy was among the most liberal in East Central Europe, guaranteeing Germans autonomous schools, proportional political representation, and the right to do official business in their own language.

By the late 1920s, Czechoslovakia's Germans appeared to have come to terms with their new situation, with close to two-thirds of the German electorate voting for so-called activist parties favoring participation in government coalitions. Though Germans held ministerial positions in the government from 1926 to

21. Modráček, National Assembly, Meeting 46 (16 April 1919).

22. Ladislav Holy, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation* (Cambridge, 1996), 121.



1938, activist momentum began to fail with the onset of the depression in the early 1930s. After 1933, the right-nationalist Sudeten German Party (SdP) of Konrad Henlein began its rapid rise, picking up over two-thirds of the German vote in the 1935 elections. Funded secretly by Hitler's Nazi Party, Henlein increased his party's support among Sudeten Germans to over 85 percent in the 1938 municipal elections. In the summer of 1938, Henlein and the SdP were willing accessories in Hitler's campaign to wrest the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. When the German Wehrmacht "secured" the region after the Munich conference, Sudeten Germans greeted the occupation with general enthusiasm. Exile president Edvard Beneš would later point to this evidence of Sudeten German disloyalty to the state as the centerpiece of his lobbying efforts for the removal of Germans from postwar Czechoslovakia.

### World War II and the Birth of the Transfer Plan

The wartime occupation of the rump of Czechoslovakia, known as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, was harsh and humiliating for the Czechs, but nowhere nearly as destructive as that of Poland or Yugoslavia. Henlein's SdP entered the Nazi Party in late 1938, providing Hitler with a number of zealously anti-Czech deputies, such as Karl Hermann Frank. These Sudeten Germans would later staff leading positions in the Protectorate. During the occupation, the Nazis closed Czech universities, expelled many remaining Czechs from the Sudetenland, and cracked down harshly on any signs of Czech resistance. They also sent tens of thousands of Czech and German Jews to their deaths in concentration camps such as Theresienstadt or extermination camps such as Auschwitz. After Czechoslovak paratroopers from Britain assassinated the Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in 1942, Hitler ordered the destruction of the small town of Lidice and the murder of much of its population. A wave of executions of suspected resisters followed during the so-called Heydrichiada.

Throughout most of occupied Europe, Nazi violence tended to be proportional to the degree of resistance the Germans encountered. The Jews, of course, were a special case, and they perished regardless of their behavior. But the harshest repression against non-Jews came in Poland and Yugoslavia, where massive resistance provoked massive reprisals. The Czechs, for the most part, kept their heads down, ensuring Hitler a reliable source of industrial goods and earning the Protectorate the nickname "arsenal of the Reich."<sup>23</sup> Other than occasional crackdowns on the Czech underground and student movements, the Nazis found the carrot approach more effective than the stick in the

23. On the relatively favorable conditions in the Protectorate and the lack of serious Czech resistance, see Vojtěch Mastný, *The Czechs under Nazi Rule: The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942* (New York, 1971).

Protectorate. This spared the Czechs the terrible destruction of cities and decimation of elites that changed the face of Poland during the war. But survival does not imply acquiescence. Many Czechs developed a brooding hatred of the German occupiers. A quietly observant Czech underground reported to exile president Beneš already in late 1939 that Czechs were increasingly radical in their views toward the Germans, and that “the nation today survives only on its hope for revenge.”<sup>24</sup>

Combining his reading of the domestic anger toward the Germans with his own sense of failure at Munich, Beneš began preparing a plan for the postwar removal of Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia. The idea for a population transfer appears to have come from a number of different sources. In early 1939 Beneš instructed the domestic underground to prepare proposals for a postwar order in Czechoslovakia. In October of that year, Professor Zdeněk Peška sent a memorandum to London “concerning the exchange of population,” in which he argued that the Greco-Turkish exchange of 1923–1924 provided an example and precedent for the successful removal of undesired minorities.<sup>25</sup> Citing the American scholar Stephen Ladas’s 1932 book on that exchange, Peška claimed that both Greece and Turkey had reaped economic and cultural benefits from it.<sup>26</sup> Though a complete “depopulation” of the Czechoslovak borderlands was “undesirable,” Peška recommended the removal of all Germans who could not prove that they had been loyal to Czechoslovakia in 1938.<sup>27</sup>

Beneš tentatively adopted this plan, though he realized he had to tread a fine line between the revenge demanded by Czechs at home and the apparent humanitarian reservations of the British and the Americans. In a November 1940 dispatch to the underground leadership (ÚVOD), he wrote, “The Czech nation also needs its *Lebensraum*” in a “greater” Czechia, a goal that can only be reached by “the departure or expulsion” of those Germans who had betrayed Czechoslovakia. But he cautioned, “We must not hold on to an unrealistic hope that it will be possible to destroy or exterminate (*vyhladit*) 3 million Germans, as several among us naively claim.”<sup>28</sup> He noted that for the time being he was proposing to cede to Germany two ethnically German border

24. “Dopis člena Politického ústředí informující o růstu radikálních postojů vůči Němcům” [Letter from a member of the Political Headquarters (PÚ) informing on the increase of radical views toward the Germans], 16 November 1939, in Jitka Vondrová, ed., *Češi a sudetoněmecká otázka 1939–1945* (Czechs and the Sudeten-German question 1939–1945) (Prague, 1994), 35.

25. Zdeněk Peška, “Pamětní spis o výměně obyvatelstva” (Memorandum on the exchange of populations), October 1939, in Vondrová, ed., *Češi*, 21–23.

26. Stephen Ladas, *The Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey* (New York, 1932).

27. Peška, “Pamětní spis,” in Vondrová, ed., *Češi*, 22.

28. Edvard Beneš, “Depeše pro ÚVOD s programem řešení německé otázky v Československu” (Dispatch for ÚVOD with a program for the solution of the German question in Czechoslovakia), 26–27 November 1940, in Vondrová, ed., *Češi*, 77–79.

regions and to create three all-German counties within the rest of a restored Czechoslovakia. Germans in the Czech interior would have to leave.

Correspondents from the domestic underground continued to press for a more radical "solution," the expulsion of all Germans from postwar Czechoslovakia. In response to Beneš's November letter, ÚVOD member Vladimír Krajina objected to ceding any territory: "There grows among the people such a fearsome desire for revenge that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to restrain them . . . The people see their *Lebensraum* in the historical [i.e., pre-Munich] borders; they consider the Germans everywhere to be carpetbaggers, who will have to be removed."<sup>29</sup> Throughout the war, members of the Czech underground pressed their point: no loss of territory and all Germans must go.

Over the next four years, Beneš would try to sell various expulsion plans to officials in Moscow, Washington, and London. He justified his transfer proposals in three ways: First, Sudeten German disloyalty had destroyed the Czechoslovak Republic and should be punished. Second, the Czech public was so aroused in its hatred of the Germans that the latter should be removed out of concern for their own safety. Third, to ensure postwar stability, the Allies should eliminate any excuses for future German revisionism.

By mid-1942, these arguments found an increasingly positive reception in Allied foreign policy circles. After receiving Beneš's latest proposal on population transfers, Bruce Lockhart, the British liaison to the Czechoslovak provisional government, wrote to the Secretary of State, "We have given some encouragement to the Polish-Czech proposals for a solution to the minority problem by a transfer of population." He concluded by noting, "Today the brutal treatment meted out to the Czechs is arousing widespread indignation, and from all parts of the world requests are coming for reprisals. The chief agents of this bestiality are the German Bohemians."<sup>30</sup> Though Beneš would have to wait until 1945 to get formal approval for a transfer, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt had all agreed in principle to the plan by the end of 1943.<sup>31</sup>

29. Vladimír Krajina, "Depeše pro P. Drtinu se vzkazem Z. Bořka Dohalského k Benešovu plánu tří německých žup" [Dispatch for P. Drtina with a message of Z. Bořek Dohalský concerning Beneš's plan for three German counties], 3 December 1940, in Vondrová, ed., *Češi*, 79.

30. Bruce Lockhart, memorandum marked "Secretary of State," 14 June 1942. Columbia University Special Collections, Jaromír Smutný papers, box 22, folder 7.

31. In a 1992 article on ethnic cleansing, Hans Lemberg shows how the idea of population transfer had gained legitimacy in Europe and America well before World War II. See "Ethische Säuberung: Ein Mittel zur Lösung von Nationalitätenproblemen?" in Lemberg, *Mit unbestechlichem Blick . . . Studien von Hans Lemberg zur Geschichte der böhmischen Länder und der Tschechoslowakei* (Munich, 1998), 377–96.

## Czechoslovakia in 1945

During the six-year Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, the Germans destroyed or discredited the administrative and security structures of interwar Czechoslovakia. When the Beneš government returned in 1945, it put in place a new system that had been planned in exile. Popularly elected National Committees would run local affairs. The Communist-controlled Ministry of Interior would oversee local security through a service called the Committee of National Security (*Sbor národní bezpečnosti* or SNB). While conditions in the borderlands were in the process of consolidation, the Ministry of Interior authorized a paramilitary force, the Revolutionary Guards, to help keep order there. In addition, the revived Czechoslovak army, based on a core of soldiers who had fought under General Ludvík Svoboda with the Soviet Union on the eastern front, soon emerged as a force for order (or disorder) in the borderlands. Above all this, the victorious Red Army remained a looming presence in all of Czechoslovakia except the far western portion, which was occupied by the American army.

From these various sources of power, a hierarchy of authority developed, with the Soviet and American armies on top, followed by the Czechoslovak army, the Revolutionary Guards, the SNB forces, and National Committees. But in practice in the summer of 1945, there were vast areas where the Allied armies did not exert their authority, where the Czechoslovak army had not yet established a presence, and where a Wild West atmosphere reigned. In some towns, National Committees were the only authority locally, often relying on self-proclaimed former partisans to maintain order. Though each level of the borderland hierarchy occasionally received directives from above on how to proceed, these orders tended to be vague and contradictory.<sup>32</sup>

This confusion reflected that of the government, which was trying to pull off a dual policy in pursuit of final Allied approval for a removal of Czechoslovakia's Germans. On the one hand, the government hoped to present the Allies with a *fait accompli* by expelling as many Germans as possible while conditions in Central Europe remained unsettled. On the other, President Beneš and some other members of the government were afraid of alienating the Allies with overly harsh treatment of the Germans. This dual approach appears most clearly in speeches made by Beneš and other members of the government, Communist and non-Communist alike. Most prominently, Beneš would declare repeatedly in May and June of 1945 that "the German question in our

32. On administrative chaos, see Emilia Hrabovec, "Neue Aspekte zur ersten Phase der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Mähren 1945," in *Nationale Frage und Vertreibung in der Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn 1938–1948*, ed. Richard Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner, Arnold Suppan, and Anna Drabek (Vienna, 1997), 117–40.

republic must be liquidated,"<sup>33</sup> but say elsewhere that Czechs must wait "patiently . . . to cleanse the republic" of Germans until after the Allies have given final approval.<sup>34</sup>

Predictably, the government's dual policy produced dueling directives to army units, security forces, and National Committees in the borderlands. In one example among many, on June 12 the Provincial National Committee in Prague sent all district National Committees a memo outlining "measures toward deporting Germans."<sup>35</sup> Two days later the same organ ruled that National Committees should stop all unilateral expulsions until the army and security forces gave them permission.<sup>36</sup> But the army was little better, transmitting contradictory orders to "cleanse" the borderlands and to act with restraint.<sup>37</sup> Predictably, local officials, army officers, and paramilitaries did what they wanted, or what they thought appropriate to the locales they controlled.

White Mountain rhetoric, so prominent in the early interwar period, returned full force in 1945. Only this time, it was used to justify far more than land reform. Redressing White Mountain now meant the mass expulsion of the entire German population. The Communist newspaper *Rudé právo* typically made the point most vividly (and distorted history most effectively):

The historical roots of the denationalization of Czech soil lead 300 years back, all the way to the catastrophe at White Mountain, where the majority of our soil came into the hands of a foreign nobility . . . We can today make the proud claim that finally, all these years after the White Mountain disaster, the cleansing process will be brought to a conclusion once and for all.<sup>38</sup>

On the first of June 1945, thousands of farmers and workers gathered on a field on the western edge of Prague, the mythical White Mountain, to hear politicians speak on the 325th anniversary of the battle. The Social Democratic prime minister, Zdeněk Fierlinger, made a clear connection of that battle with the German occupation from 1939–1945:

33. Beneš speeches at Brno and in Prague, 12 and 16 May 1945, and in Tabor, 16 June 1945. Printed in Edvard Beneš, *Odsun Němců z Československa* (The Transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia), ed., Karel Novotný (Prague, 1996), 138–39, 148. Politicians and newspapers from across the political spectrum regularly used the term "liquidate" in reference to the Germans in 1945. Though the term may have had domestic roots, it was likely an appropriation of Nazi terminology.

34. Speech at Plzeň, 15 June 1945, in *ibid.*, 146.

35. Provincial National Committee, Prague (ZNV Praha) to District National Committees (ONV), 12 June 1945, Státní ústřední archiv (SÚA) Prague, Ministerstvo vnitra-Noskův archiv (MV-N), carton 254, #160.

36. Stanislav Biman and Roman Čílek, *Poslední mrtví, první živi: české pohraničí květen až srpen 1945* (The Last Dead, the First Living: The Bohemian Borderlands, May to August 1945) (Ústí nad Labem, 1989), 116.

37. See Tomáš, *Odsun*, 61.

38. "Naše půda bude vyrvána z cizáckých rukou" (Our Soil Will Be Snatched Away From Foreign Hands). *Rudé právo*, 7 June 1945, 1.

We have gathered on the historical soil of White Mountain to celebrate one of our most important revolutionary acts: the confiscation of the land of our age-old enemies, the Germans and the Hungarians . . . With today's celebration we want to emphasize that the wrong inflicted upon us after White Mountain, which was again to have been repeated under the Nazi regime, will be completely rectified; that Czechs and Slovaks will again be the masters of their own land.<sup>39</sup>

Other politicians and newspapers dated German perfidy even farther back in Czech history. On 5 August 1945, the center-left newspaper *Lidová demokracie* wrote that an expulsion would "correct errors that go back very far in our history, to the times of the Přemyslids [the first Czech dynasty] when Germans were invited en masse to develop our towns and industry and subsequently destroyed the Slav character and culture of our land, with time becoming a danger and a threat to the very existence of the Czechoslovak people."<sup>40</sup> The wartime occupation escalated interwar rhetoric depicting Germans as immigrants and colonizers, and now Czechs used this rhetoric to sanction violence and expulsion.

The worst violence against Germans took place from mid-May to late July of 1945, after which government policy became more consistent in its calls for humane treatment of Germans waiting for transfer. A variety of perpetrators was responsible for the wild expulsions and executions of the summer, ranging from angry civilians to soldiers to paramilitaries, in some cases with orders from above, in others without. It appears that most decisions were made on the ground, locally, based on a general understanding of what was either desirable or permissible according to higher government policy. In all, around 700,000 Germans were expelled, 300,000 fled, and perhaps as many as 30,000 died in 1945.<sup>41</sup>

### Popular Anger, Politics, and Administrative Chaos: The Brno Death March

The expulsion of close to 20,000 Germans from Brno at the end of May 1945 illustrates the complex dynamic between central and local policy, as well as the influence of popular pressure on policy makers. Brno, the capital of the

39. Zdeněk Fierlinger, 1 July 1945, in *Odčítáme Bílou horu* [We Are Rectifying White Mountain] (Prague: Jednotný svaz českých zemědělců, 1945), 12.

40. Quoted in Andrei Bell, "The Expulsion of the Sudeten Germans: A Breakdown in the Ethnic Boundary Maintenance Mechanisms" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1997), 317.

41. Expulsion and flight figures are from Theodor Schieder, ed., *Documents on the Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern-Central-Europe*, vol. IV (Bonn: Federal Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims, 1960), 127. Czech and German sources have long disagreed on the number of deaths. German historians, many of them Sudeten expellees, have claimed upwards of 200,000 deaths during the expulsions from Czechoslovakia. See, for example, Friedrich Prinz, *Geschichte Böhmens*

province of Moravia, had been an ethnically mixed town in the interwar period, with a sizable German minority of close to 20 percent. This magic number was especially important, as towns with over 20 percent of a minority were officially bilingual and had to offer public services in both Czech and German. When the city's Germans just managed to stay above the 20 percent threshold in the 1930 census, Czech nationalists complained bitterly of irregularities and of Jewish betrayal in choosing German nationality.<sup>42</sup> Just as in many other bi-national towns in Bohemia and Moravia, Czechs of Brno attacked German signs and statues in 1918–1919.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the interwar period, tensions between the two sides remained high.

The oppression and humiliation of the Nazi occupation pushed the conflict to new levels of hatred. Having lived for six years in the shadow of Špilberk, the former Austro-Hungarian prison turned SS torture chamber, many Brno Czechs wanted revenge against Germans, guilty or otherwise. President Edvard Beneš gave voice to and encouraged this sentiment in a speech to Brno residents on 12 May 1945: “The German people . . . ceased in this war to be human . . . behaved like . . . a monster. This nation must pay for all this with a great and severe punishment . . . We must liquidate the German problem definitively.”<sup>44</sup> Two weeks later, Brno would carry out this implied threat, in a rushed decision to expel that led to hundreds of German deaths.

Immediately after liberation, Czech officials rounded up over 1,600 suspected German collaborators and interned them in the Kaunitz dormitory near the center of Brno. On May 22, local officials reported daily riots, with the Czech crowd demanding that the Germans be turned over to the people for popular justice. The local National Committee temporarily appeased the crowd by promising an extraordinary people's court to try Germans accused of collaboration.<sup>45</sup>

By the end of May, even the promised courts were not enough. On May 30, a citizens' group and union representatives came to the offices of the Provincial National Committee in Brno and threatened to begin demonstrations and strikes unless “a radical solution of the German question” was carried out at once.<sup>46</sup> They justified this demand by claiming that Germans were responsible

---

1848–1948 (Berlin, 1991), 468. A recent joint report of the Czech–German historians' commission has settled on the range of 17,000 to 30,000 dead, a more reasonable figure. See *Konfliktní společenství*, 29–30.

42. For a particularly nationalist and anti-Semitic take on the census of 1930, see *Moravská Orlice* (Moravian Eagle), 8 January 1933 and 2 April 1933.

43. Wingfield, “Conflicting Constructions,” 154.

44. Beneš speech, Brno city hall, 12 May 1945, Beneš, *Odsun*, 138.

45. Benjamin Frommer, “Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), 51–52. See also Karel Kaplan, *Poválečné Československo: národy a hranice* (Postwar Czechoslovakia: Nations and Borders) (Munich, 1985), 140.

46. This narrative and the quotes in this paragraph are from three internal Interior Ministry

for housing and food shortages in Brno. Given the “seriousness of the situation,” the National Committee ordered the expulsion of all nonemployed Germans to begin that evening. For good measure, the committee informed representatives of the Red Army of the pending expulsion. The typical reply was that the Soviets would “not get involved in the matter.”<sup>47</sup> In the meantime, Captain Bedřich Pokorný, the Brno National Committee’s (Communist) liaison with the Ministry of Interior, met that evening with Interior Minister Václav Nosek in a Brno hotel. Nosek did not oppose the expulsion, but ordered Pokorný to disperse the Germans within the boundaries of Czechoslovakia, and not across the Austrian border.

Late in the evening of May 30, National Committee security forces evicted close to 20,000 men, women, and children from their homes and began marching them in the direction of the Austrian border. By morning, the column of marching Germans was said to extend sixteen kilometers.<sup>48</sup> On May 31, Pokorný claimed in a report a few days later, a lack of suitable transportation prevented him from dispersing the column to internment camps. On June 1 he met with National Committee members and reported Nosek’s prohibition on expulsions to Austria. Two Czechoslovak army generals, recently arrived from Prague, indicated that “they have completely opposite orders from General Svoboda, to undertake a transfer of Germans immediately and decisively under the auspices of the Czechoslovak army.” They also reported that this was “the position of Minister of Justice Stránský<sup>49</sup> as well.” But faced with the opposition of the Ministry of Interior, the National Committee agreed to Nosek’s proposal of dispersing the Germans to internment camps.<sup>50</sup>

Pokorný raced from Brno to the marching Germans that evening, but he arrived too late. Two-thirds of the column, swollen to 28,000 people by the addition of Germans from intermediate towns, had already been forced to cross into Austria. Pokorný managed to get 10,000 Germans to temporary quarters in nearby villages, including Pohořelice, soon to be notorious as a deadly concentration camp. In a telephone call to the Ministry of Interior on June 2, Pokorný summarized his efforts. He reported that the column of Germans had been under the supervision of a Major Pistorius, with the assistance of “the Czechoslovak army, workers of the Brno munitions factory, partisans, and various local armed groups that emerged in southern Moravia after the departure

---

documents. SÚA, MV-N, carton 254, #160. Dates are 1 and 2 June 1945 and undated (June, 1945). See also Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 87–90.

47. *Ibid.*, 88.

48. Staněk, *Odsun*, 75.

49. Jaroslav Stránský was a leader of the Czech National Socialists, a left-wing nationalist party unrelated to the Nazi Party in Germany.

50. Telephone report of Bedřich Pokorný, Velitel Národní bezpečnostní stráže pro Moravu v Brně, to Ministry of Interior, 2 June 1945. SÚA, MV-N, carton 254 #160.



of the Red Army.” Given the confusion surrounding the whole event, Pokorný wanted to know what to do with the Germans he had diverted. Returning them to Brno, where internment camps were overfilled and the population was seething, was out of the question, “for reasons of prestige and politics.”<sup>51</sup> Between 4,000 and 5,000 Germans remained in internment camps indefinitely, with the rest eventually allowed to return to Brno and its surroundings.<sup>52</sup>

An internal memo of the Ministry of Interior concluded, “From the viewpoint of state security, this kind of half-organized transfer (*odsun*) of Germans is undesirable, because it does not provide for enough time for the division and selection of those Germans who have committed war crimes and other offenses.” The report recommended that the Interior Minister contact the ministers of defense and justice (Svoboda and Stranský) to determine whether they truly had sanctioned the Brno expulsions. In the event that they had, the report noted, it would contradict the position of the government, a problem that should be discussed by all ministers at the next ministerial council.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, this exercise in hate and confusion resulted in the deaths of over 1,700 Germans. The majority of deaths (1,062) were recorded in makeshift refugee camps in Austria, which at first refused to accept the expellees. On Czechoslovak territory 629 Germans were reported dead, most from epidemics in the Pohořelice camp.<sup>54</sup> Still more deaths, during the trek from Brno to the border, were not recorded.<sup>55</sup>

The case of the Brno Death March, as survivors came to call it, tells us a good deal about perpetrators, power, and politics in the summer months of 1945. The most complex, and still largely unexplored, aspect of the Brno expulsion is the nature of the popular pressure for a solution to the German question. This is one of many cases that summer when the masses proved to be more radical than the elites. But there is no question that the citizen delegation on May 30 had absorbed the elite vocabulary, seeking “a radical solution to the German question in Brno,”<sup>56</sup> a phrase similar to those used by Beneš, Communist leader Klement Gottwald, and others on numerous occasions. Just as interesting is their justification that Germans were taking up much-needed food and housing. Brno Czechs thought of their German neighbors as outsiders, latecomers who had less right to now scarce resources than Czechs did. As their material

51. Ibid.

52. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 89. That means that between 5,000 and 6,000 Germans of the original 30,000 were able to return home.

53. Referát plk. Bartíka p. ministru vnitra, undated (June 1945). SÚA, MV-N, carton 254 #160.

54. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 89–90.

55. See the accounts of the march reproduced in Schieder, *Documents on the Expulsion*. Maria Zatschek reported that “hundreds” died during the march (Schieder, 484).

56. As reported in Interior Ministry memo #Z-379/45, 1 June 1945. SÚA, MV-N, carton 254 #160.

interests dictated, they conflated the housing problem with the German problem and demanded immediate solutions.

The Brno National Committee met these demands, ironically, in the context of democratic contestation. Throughout Czechoslovakia, Communists and Czech National Socialists<sup>57</sup> were locked in a battle for the political allegiance of postwar Czech voters. The Germans became objects in a bidding war, in which leading parties sought to prove themselves the toughest, the most in tune with popular anger. In the Brno case, both Communist union leaders and a Czech National Socialist delegation made the expulsion demands on behalf of the populace.<sup>58</sup> Neither party in the divided National Committee felt it could afford to look soft, so both voted for the expulsion.

Had there been time, intervention from any of a number of authorities could have stopped the expulsion. The Soviet army could simply have denied permission when asked on May 30. The Czechoslovak army's approval was considered necessary, and it appears to have sanctioned the decision, as well as provided an officer to lead the column on its haphazard march. The Communist-led Interior Ministry, through its security representative, tried to redirect it, but was foiled by the haste of the expulsion and a lack of transportation. This is a chaotic administrative picture, where policies are unclear or conflict, where local actors have little incentive to resist radical demands for revenge and even murder.

### Werewolves on the Loose: Massacre at Ústí nad Labem (Aussig)

Almost as soon as the war ended, the Czech borderlands were filled with rumors of Nazi terrorist bands, known as werewolves. At the time, local officials and the central government repeatedly referred to such groups as justification for repressive measures against Germans. Political rhetoric accusing Germans of having served as a fifth column for Hitler fed public stereotypes of Germans as aggressive and dangerous. Drawing from Hitler's arsenal of methods for marking and isolating Jews, localities commonly required Germans to wear white armbands emblazoned with a large N, meaning German (*Němec*).<sup>59</sup> The massacre of Germans in Ústí nad Labem following a factory explosion at the end of July 1945 illustrates the ease with which werewolf rumors and Czech collectivist anti-German mentalities could fuel popular violence.

57. The Czech National Socialists were unrelated to the German party of the same name. Founded in the 1890s as a socialist alternative to the nationalist Young Czechs, the party evolved during the interwar period into a nationalist alternative to the Social Democrats. The party's most prominent member, at least before his election as president in 1935, was Edvard Beneš.

58. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 87–88.

59. Staněk, *Odsun*, 82.

An industrial center in northern Bohemia, Ústí was 77 percent German in 1930. After its annexation to the Reich in 1938, the city's official Czech population declined by almost 20,000, with Czechs making up around 8 percent (8,500) of the total in a 1939 census.<sup>60</sup> Most Czechs appear to have left Ústí after the Munich Pact, though some Czechs may have “switched” and become Germans.<sup>61</sup> At the end of the war, a group of local Czechs formed a “revolutionary national committee” in Ústí, taking control of the city from German authorities just in time to greet the first wave of Red Army troops on May 9. Revolutionary Guards began arriving from Prague on May 13 and would remain to keep a dubious order until the end of the summer. A Czech observer wrote of this first wave of guards, “They were primarily thieves and prostitutes, armed to the teeth, who walked the streets in the light of day shooting out German language signs and stealing whatever they could.”<sup>62</sup> The Czechoslovak army also sent a few hastily assembled units a few days later to secure Ústí's vital railroad connections.<sup>63</sup>

In the second half of May, a range of Czech armed groups, including army units, security forces, and Revolutionary Guards carried out “mopping-up” (*vyčist'ovací*) actions against Germans suspected of collaboration with the Nazi regime or of membership in werewolf bands. Czechs interpreted collaboration broadly, interning Germans accused of “*hejlování*” (using the *Heil* salute), membership in the Nazi Party or party organs, and even attending German social events after the liberation. Thousands of Germans ended up in internment centers and concentration camps over the next few months, with an official death count of 286 (many from typhus).<sup>64</sup> Army and security forces also worked with the local National Committee to “cleanse” selected neighborhoods and villages of Germans. From June to August, Czechs expelled close to 22,000 Germans across the nearby border into Saxony.<sup>65</sup> The German historian A. Bohmann

60. Zdeněk Radvanovský, “Nucené vysídlení a odsun Němců z města a okresu Ústí nad Labem v letech 1945–1946” (Forced Resettlement and the Transfer of Germans from the Town and District of Ústí nad Labem from 1945–1946), in *Studie o sudetoněmecké otázce* (Studies on the Sudeten German Question), ed. Václav Kural (Prague, 1996), 132–33.

61. Jeremy King documents a similar “switching” in the south Bohemian town of České Budějovice (Budweis) during the Nazi occupation. Around 11 percent of Czechs in the Budweis district made the switch in 1939. See King's “Loyalty and Polity, Nation and State: A Town in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848–1948” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998), 331.

62. A. Piříl, *Kronika města Ústí nad Labem za válečná léta 1938–1945* (Chronicle of Ústí nad Labem During the War Years 1938–1945), 1947. Quoted in Radvanovský, “Nucené vysídlení,” 137.

63. Radvanovský, “Nucené vysídlení,” 137–38.

64. *Ibid.*, 139–40. Radvanovský puts the official total of internees at 5,458, but adds that many more were interned before official records began in late June. The official death count of 286 included some violent deaths immediately following liberation and many from malnutrition and disease, including 160 deaths from typhus in late 1945.

65. *Ibid.*, 140–43. Around 1,600 Germans remained in concentration camps in the region at the end of July. Ministry of Information report to Ministry of Interior, 4 August 1945, p. 5. Archiv Ministerstva vnitra [Archive of the Ministry of Interior] (AMV), Prague, LM:11873.

argues that the goal of anti-German actions of the summer of 1945 in Ústí was “to destroy and change as fast as possible the German character of the town and the region.”<sup>66</sup>

As the official cleansing actions continued in July, reports of werewolf terrorist attacks kept Czechs on edge in the Ústí region. The Czech historian Tomáš Staněk views the reports as an effort by the Czech government to maintain a sense of urgency in its drive to win from the Allies formal acceptance of a population transfer.<sup>67</sup> But the reports were also the manifestation of a popular sense of German danger.<sup>68</sup> In a telling front page headline in early August, the Czech National Socialist newspaper *Svobodné slovo* proclaimed “The poison of the werewolf is in the soul of every German.” The only way to eradicate the werewolf threat, the article concluded, was “to carry out the transfer of the Germans.”<sup>69</sup> Historians have not uncovered evidence of any organized German terrorist activity, but werewolf hysteria nonetheless sparked repeated cases of violence against Germans during the summer of 1945.<sup>70</sup> The image of the werewolf, half-man, half-animal, both mirrored and encouraged Czech perceptions of German danger in the wild expulsion period. With Germans declared universally “unreliable” (*nespolehlivý*) by Czech officials, many Czechs saw them as potential wolves, inhuman killers waiting for an opportunity to attack.

When a massive explosion tore apart an arms depot in a suburb north of Ústí, Czechs immediately assumed it to be a case of werewolf terrorism.<sup>71</sup> Within minutes of the explosion, a group of Czechs began attacking unarmed Germans on Ústí’s main bridge, the point from which the billowing black smoke was best visible. Wearing the required white armbands, Germans were easy to identify on the bridge, and Czechs began beating them and then throwing them into the Elbe.<sup>72</sup> Revolutionary Guards joined the melee and shot at Germans floundering in the river below. A crowd of Czechs also gathered on Ústí’s main

66. A. Bohmann, *Die Ausweisung der Sudetendeutschen dargestellt am Beispiel des Stadt- und Landkreises Aussig* (Marburg, 1955), 50. Quoted in Radvanovský, “Nucené vysídlení,” 141.

67. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 131.

68. In a recent dissertation, Andrei Bell (a.k.a. Andrew Bell-Fialkoff) documents the common image in Czech periodicals in 1945 of Germans as “dangerous guests.” See Bell, “The Expulsion of the Sudeten Germans,” 293.

69. “Jed werwolfu v duši každého Němce” (The Poison of the Werewolf is in the Soul of Every German), *Svobodné slovo*, 7 August 1945, 1. The Communist press made a similar argument in a number of articles in July of 1945. See “Očistíme nemilosrdně naše pohraničí od německých vkladáků: Bezpečnost republiky vyžaduje rychlého vystěhování Němců” (We Will Cleanse Mercilessly Our Borderlands of German Werewolves: The Security of the Republic Demands the Rapid Removal of the Germans), in *Rudé právo*, 11 July 1945, 1.

70. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 138–52.

71. Ministry of Information report to Ministry of Interior, 4 August 1945, p. 2. AMV, Prague, LM:11873.

72. The Ministry of Information report claimed that the bridge violence began when a German cried out “Germany lives! Long live Germany!” *Ibid.*, p. 2.

square, where they attacked passing Germans, drowning a number of them in a water tank used to fight fires. The violence continued for around an hour, at which point the local National Committee declared a state of emergency and mobilized SNB officers to intervene.<sup>73</sup> Estimates of casualties vary widely, but a reliable source puts the number of Germans dead at between 50 and 100.<sup>74</sup>

Investigators never determined the cause of the Ústí explosion, but Czech officials and local Czechs attributed it to werewolves. The speed of the Czech popular response to the blast indicates how thoroughly collectivist the Czech view of Germans had become. The immediate assumption of Czechs on the Ústí bridge was that werewolves had staged an attack. Already accustomed to thinking of Germans as alien carpetbaggers, malevolent occupiers, and now werewolf terrorists, these Czechs looked at white-banded pedestrians and saw the glint of threat and a seemingly genetic evil. This vision provided a norm justifying retribution in the face of a specific perceived crime: Czech Guards, soldiers and civilians took aim at any Germans in sight, including women and children on the bridge and in Ústí's main square, and punished them for the imputed crimes of their ancestors and compatriots.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

Ethnic cleansing is not a uniquely twentieth-century phenomenon; various ethnic and religious minorities have been expelled, relocated, and murdered throughout recorded history. Examples range from the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 to the Cherokee Trail of Tears in America in the 1830s. But instances of cleansing have risen substantially in magnitude and number in the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> There are a number of reasons for this proliferation. First, this century's cleansing is a product of widespread national identification and

73. Radvanovský, "Události 31. července 1945 v Ústí nad Labem" (Events of 31 July 1945 in Ústí nad Labem) in Kural, *Studie*, 120–22.

74. Staněk, *Perzekuce*, 136.

75. Ironically, Minister of Interior Nosek and Minister of Defense Svoboda concluded that the Ústí "pogrom" happened because the Czech authorities had not dealt harshly enough with Germans in the previous weeks. "As long as we and the general public act firmly [toward the Germans]," Svoboda said the day after the explosion, "then the street will not rule." The assembled officials pledged a new wave of intervention to "liquidate werewolves" and the acceleration of the expulsion of the remaining two million "unreliable" Germans. Ministry of Information report to Ministry of Interior, 4 August 1945, p. 8. AMV, Prague, LM:11873.

76. In a perceptive article on genocide in history, Jared Diamond shows an interesting pattern in genocidal activity since the fifteenth century. Before 1900, most genocides took place as a result of colonial encounters, with Europeans (or descendants of Europeans) destroying aboriginal peoples. From 1900–1950, the locus of genocide moved to Europe, and the pace accelerated. Since 1950, there have been no fewer than seventeen genocides, predominantly in Third World countries in Africa and Asia. Diamond blames the twentieth-century increase in genocides on denser populations, improved communications, and improved technologies. See Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York, 1992), 284–97.

nationalism. It is the result of the logic of nation-building taken to an extreme end, that of a pure, or supposedly pure, national state. Second, it feeds off a modern urge to rationalize, to engineer societies and populations.<sup>77</sup> The Enlightenment spread the modern notion that governments can, through rational policy, change societies for the better. But the twentieth century has spawned the dangerous corollary that governments can force, rather than inspire, changes in their societies. Third, cleansing and genocide on the scale seen during this century have made ample use of modern technologies, in particular trains, machine guns, and bureaucracies.<sup>78</sup> This is not to condemn the modern age as inherently prone to such a disaster as ethnic cleansing, but it is an ever-present possibility in places threatened with the breakdown of stable legal and moral norms.

To understand how such a breakdown can lead to ethnic cleansing, I propose an analysis starting at the broadest level of causality and narrowing to a focus on perpetrators in particular cases of cleansing. In postwar East Central Europe we find a set of conditions shared by the regions that were ethnically cleansed. All had been occupied by Nazi Germany at some time during the war. All had witnessed unprecedented violence during the wartime years, much of it racially or ethnically motivated. All were pawns in the early stages of the Cold War, which was being played out in negotiations over the shape of postwar Europe. Even so, we cannot stop there, attributing the expulsions solely to Hitler's example and to Stalin's goal of building a bulwark of client states in Eastern Europe. Certainly Stalin allowed, even encouraged the cleansing of Poland and Czechoslovakia of Germans. But plans for expulsion originated with the Czechs and Poles, and they were responsible for the violent form cleansing took in the summer of 1945.

So we need to look more closely at the development of the expulsion idea among Czechs, Poles, and their leaders. In 1918, new national states found themselves with pressing minority problems, but scarcely anyone proposed the expulsion of minorities.<sup>79</sup> How, then, do we find this option being so hotly

77. There is a sizable literature on the relationship of "modernity" to the Holocaust and other twentieth century cases of human engineering. See in particular the stimulating *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989) by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. For a critical view of the modernization theories, see Michael Burleigh, *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, 1997) 169–82.

78. On technology and genocide, see Alan Beyerchen, "Rational Means and Irrational Ends: Thoughts on the Technology of Racism in the Third Reich," *Central European History* 30, no. 3 (1997): 386–402. Beyerchen makes the argument that bureaucracy, by shaping possibilities for action, functions as a kind of technology. Incidentally, the case of Rwanda suggests that old-fashioned methods (machetes) can be just as destructive as newer technologies.

79. The founding father and first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, raised and rejected the idea of a transfer of minorities in a 1918 book on the postwar shape of Europe. His reason seems quaint in retrospect: it would be impossible to convince them to move! Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Nová Evropa* (New Europe) (Brno, 1994 [1918]), 107–9.

debated in the Czech underground in 1939–1940, well before Hitler's final solution took shape? Certainly there is a good deal of truth to claims of Nazi influence on Czech policy; Václav Havel has recently labeled this the "infectious nature" of the Nazi "ethnic concept of guilt and punishment."<sup>80</sup> But while Hitler's *völkisch* vocabulary appears regularly in correspondence between Beneš's London government and the underground, we also find references to the precedent of the Greco-Turkish population exchange (overseen by the League of Nations) and positive evaluations of it by observers in the West. Hitler's radicalization of Europe may have been a decisive factor in sparking postwar cleansing, but the idea was in the air before he launched his murderous drive to reengineer Eastern Europe.<sup>81</sup>

The idea of transfer fit easily into Czech nationalist mythology. Familiar formulations, such as German colonization after the Battle of White Mountain, reappeared again and again in postwar public discourse. From the nineteenth century through the interwar period, many Czech nationalist thinkers believed that conflict with Germandom had played a crucial role in forming Czech identity. National identity is in essence a set of stories implying a common past and pointing toward a common future. Many stories central to the Czech canon depicted Germans in the role of invader, colonist, or overlord. Before 1918, these stories fed a modest resentment of Habsburg rule and a growing distaste for German neighbors in Bohemia and Moravia. After 1918, myth became a crucial buttress of Czechoslovak legitimacy. As Czechs toppled German statues and tried to legislate a reversal of White Mountain, they were seeking to cleanse the symbolic landscape of all remnants of German and Habsburg influence.

How did symbolic cleansing become the real thing? Battles over symbols are common to national struggles everywhere, both past and present, and such battles do not inevitably lead to violence and expulsion. In the Czech case, a particular set of conditions made the rhetorical real, and gave myths and language the potency of legal norms. By discrediting and dismantling Czechoslovakia's prewar political system, Hitler prepared the way for the moral and legal chaos that would follow liberation.<sup>82</sup> For months after the Beneš government's return

80. Václav Havel, address on Czech-German relations, 17 February 1995, reprinted in the *Newletter of the Embassy of the Czech Republic* 3, no. 3 (March 1995): 4.

81. In fact, American academia is still producing the occasional work that proposes population transfer as a legitimate solution to minority problems today. See Andrew Bell-Fialkoff's troubling book, *Ethnic Cleansing* (New York, 1996). Bell-Fialkoff considers "the transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia by the Allies [*sic*] in 1945-47 [*sic*]" a paradigmatic case of justified expulsion (p. 220). He draws on a similar argument by the American political scientist Joseph Schechtman in the 1960s. See Schechtman, *Postwar Population Transfers in Europe, 1945-1955* (Philadelphia, 1962).

82. Making a slightly different argument, Jan Gross cites "wartime experience of spiritual crisis, crisis of values, and normative disorganization" as a precondition for the Communist seizure of power in East Central Europe. Gross, "War as Revolution," in *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, ed., Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (Boulder, 1997), 24.

in 1945, it encouraged a retributive mood and failed (or refused) to establish consistent legal norms. Without legal consistency, local officials, paramilitary organs, and individuals frequently enforced their own law. In a sign of the times, a memorandum of the Ministry of Agriculture urged National Committees “not to wait until relevant laws are passed, but with [their] own democratic organs to take power in Czech villages and return control of Czech soil [currently inhabited by Germans] to Czech hands.”<sup>83</sup> Frequently left to their own devices when it came to Germans, many Czechs employed a code of conduct conditioned by decades of thinking of Germans as foreigners and seven years of thinking of them as lethally dangerous. This socialized belief system resided in a set of linguistic codes, which gained a particular power during the period of weak legal norms following the war. Among other stories vilifying Germans, the White Mountain myth became a rallying cry: the German carpetbaggers and werewolves must go!

The case of the Brno Death March indicates how multiple levels of causality interacted to produce an imperative for expulsion, and how administrative chaos, miscommunication, and malice combined to make many such cleansing actions deadly. Czech leaders, drawing from an international and popular discourse, set a tone that legitimized extreme solutions to the German problem. Local historical animosities combined with anger over the Nazi occupation to make Brno into a tinderbox. Food and housing shortages provided the immediate spark for demands that the Germans must leave. Local politicians acted on these demands for reasons of political expediency, and the Soviet army was indifferent. Administrative chaos prevented the central government from intervening to limit damage done.

In Ústí nad Labem, Czechs again took matters into their own hands, dispensing mob justice against innocent Germans after an explosion north of the city. Conditioned by a generation of collectivist anti-German rhetoric, many Czechs came to see all Germans as carrying the werewolf gene, deceptively human, but in reality terrorist monsters. The massacres in Ústí were unique in extent, but not in kind. Both Czech and German eyewitnesses and scholars have documented hundreds of cases of sadism and popular violence toward Germans during the summer of 1945. Very few of the perpetrators were punished or even investigated. The Czechoslovak government in fact encouraged expulsions and was not averse to popular justice as long as it did not excessively blacken the Czechs' reputation abroad.

83. “Směrnice pro Národní výbory o nejnnutnějších opatřeních v zemědělství” (Directives for National Committees Concerning the Most Pressing Measures in Agriculture), Ministry of Agriculture, 10 May 1945, p. 2. SÚA, Ministerstvo zemědělství (Ministry of Agriculture) (MZ-S), carton 372, #195.



But as I have shown, simply blaming the Czech government or Stalin or any other macro actor is insufficient for explaining the breadth and severity of ethnic cleansing in postwar Czechoslovakia. Likewise, those who blame a few sinister leaders for recent cleansing in the former Yugoslavia ignore the popular mentalities and local dynamics that inform the actions of individual perpetrators. The Czech case suggests a complex interaction between policy on the ground and policy in government, between popular mythology and elite political rhetoric. Ethnic cleansing is not new to the 1990s. It is time to draw on historical cases and think comparatively about this scourge of the twentieth century.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY