

❧ Introduction ❧

❧ Dítě, Bohumil Hrabal's Czech protagonist in *I Served the King of England*, longed to be buried in the forsaken German graveyard, perched on a hill, straddling the great divide between the Danube and Elbe river basins. The graveyard lay in a remote corner of the Czechoslovak borderlands, the former Sudetenland, cleansed of its German population after the war ended in 1945. Dítě went to the borderlands to start a new life, to escape his own sense of inferiority and the taint of collaboration with the defeated Nazis. But he couldn't escape the past in the haunted landscapes of the borderlands. Drinking from a stream below the abandoned cemetery, Dítě "could taste the dead buried long ago in the graveyard." Not only the water but also "mirrors held the imprints of the Germans who had looked into them, who had departed years ago. . . . As with the departed in the drinking water," Dítě mused, "I rubbed shoulders with people who were invisible . . . and I kept bumping into young girls in dirndls, into German furniture, into the ghosts of German families."¹

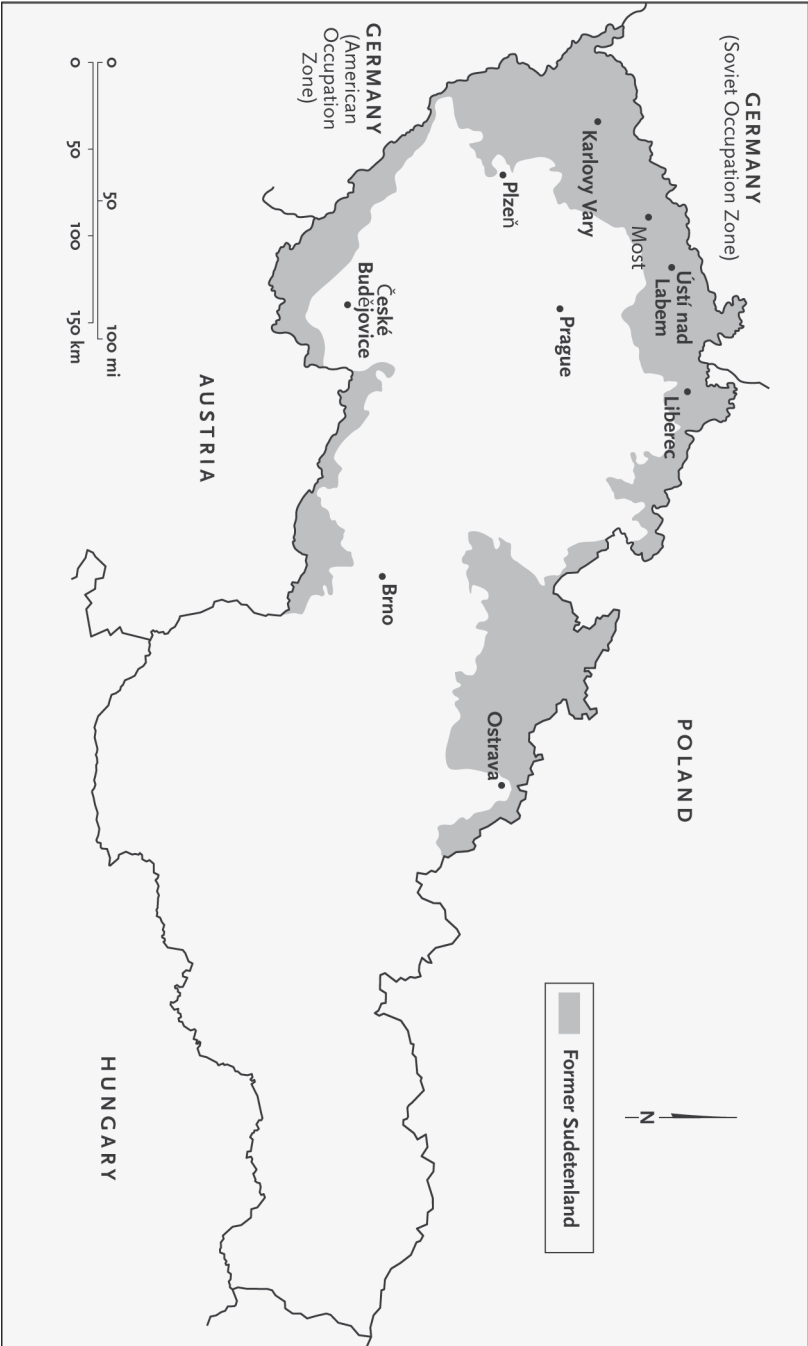


Figure 1. Czechoslovakia, 1946, with former Sudetenland shaded. Map by Bill Nelson.

But these were not ordinary ghosts. Typical ghosts are distant memories, projections within the present of an unsettled past.² Most of the departed Germans were still alive, settled just across the border in West and East Germany. Expelled in the aftermath of the Second World War, around three million Czechoslovak Germans had joined millions of other expelled Germans from the east in the largest wave of forced migration in history. Czechoslovakia's Germans grudgingly made new homes in a Germany scarred by war and pacified by occupation. Though cut off from their former homes by international borders hardened by the Cold War, expelled Germans vigorously engaged their lost homelands in] (homeland) gatherings and publications, as well as political speeches and Cold War propaganda.

At the same time, close to two million Czechs and Slovaks moved from the country's interior to settle the former Sudetenland, the extensive border regions where the Germans had lived.³ Stretching from the industrial northern borderlands of Bohemia and Moravia through the spa towns of the west and the impoverished, rural estate economy of the south, the landscapes of the Sudetenland still bore the marks of deeply rooted local cultures and a strong, if relatively recent, collective "Sudeten German" identity. Graveyards, glassworks, half-timbered houses, and the great arcades of Karlsbad and Marienbad stood as emblems of German culture. Often expelled on a moment's notice, Germans also left behind houses, books, and the manifold trappings of everyday life. For Czech and Slovak settlers and government officials, the specters of Germans past and present were persistent reminders of the shortcomings of resettlement and the need to consolidate new communities in the borderlands.

These shortcomings were glaringly apparent to observers on both sides of the Iron Curtain. German expellees lamented and publicized the decline of their former homelands, surreptitiously documenting decaying houses, roads, churches, and cemeteries. In the 1950s, Czechoslovak officials privately shared these concerns, devoting substantial resources to repopulation efforts and demolition of abandoned structures. Starting in the 1960s, Czech and Slovak reformers and dissidents saw the polluted and depressed borderlands as a touchstone of Communist failure to create an ideal society in Czechoslovakia.

BORDERLANDS

In fact, the borderlands held an inordinate symbolic importance from the moment cleansing began in 1945, if not before. In the early postwar years, Czechs referred to the borderlands as the “Wild West,” evoking both their unsettled (and initially lawless) nature and their emergence as a frontier for settlers who wanted to start a new life.⁴ Though much of the former Sudetenland did lie within fifty kilometers of international borders, the borderland designation (*pohraničí*) referred as much to its role as a settlement frontier as to its proximity to the border itself. Beyond its symbolic usage, the “borderland” was also a quasi-legal term that referred to a particular geographical space. Soon after the end of the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in May 1945, the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior issued a proclamation that the Sudetenland (Sudety) should henceforth be known as the “borderland territories” (*pohraniční území*).⁵ A presidential decree five months later defined the borderland even more precisely as “the territory that was occupied in 1938 by a foreign power.”⁶ From 1945 until around 1950, both official and popular usage of the term “borderlands” referred to the former Sudetenland, but with additional connotations related to the expulsion of the region’s German population and its status as a settlement frontier.

Though Czechoslovak officials declared resettlement a success by the late 1940s, many borderland regions remained sparsely populated, peppered with dilapidated and abandoned houses, and hobbled by decaying infrastructure. In the more densely populated northern districts, coal mines, chemical works, and power plants scarred the land and spewed toxic gases into the smoggy air. For many Czech observers, the visible decline of much of the former Sudetenland by the 1950s infused the term “borderlands” with negative connotations, suggesting an isolated, polluted, and neglected periphery. After the initial excitement of postwar settlement, few people moved willingly to the region.

So what kind of borderland was this, conceptually speaking? Certainly not the lively “contact zones,” “crossroads,” and “fluid transitional spaces” associated with scholarship on North American border regions, which dominates the vigorous subfield of borderland studies.⁷ The hardening of international borders accompanying the Cold War in the late 1940s cemented the region’s marginality, cutting off cross-border

contact and commerce.⁸ Though a significant portion of the Czechoslovak borderlands was proximate to international borders, the shifting popular and official uses of the term after 1945 rarely evoked the border itself.⁹ The prevailing Czech connotations of “borderlands”—former Sudetenland cleansed of Germans, settlement frontier, ecological moonscape, troubled periphery—referenced historically specific phenomena that had little to do with the nominal border. The borderland in people’s heads, to paraphrase the German novelist Peter Schneider, was only distantly related to the line on the map.¹⁰

If we expand our definition of the border in space and time, however, the Czechoslovak borderlands may speak to the conceptual literature after all. If we think of the borderland in terms of mental geography, it is easier to see it as a crossroads, a liminal space filled with ends, beginnings, and crossings, a space defined as much by bureaucrats in Prague and exiles in Munich as by the people who lived there.¹¹ Indeed, the borderlands became a projection screen for utopian and dystopian visions of past and future.¹² But crucially, these projections had very real physical consequences for the borderlands, as both the government and local residents transformed urban and rural landscapes within the matrix of postwar imaginings of borderland spaces. At the same time, the changing physical reality of the borderlands—their shifting ecology, topography, and social composition—continually informed conceptions of the region. This history was complicated by the persistent traces and memories of earlier topographies, ecologies, and social constellations. The borderlands were and remain a space always in dialog with their former history of German inhabitation. This means that it is in part a region that has been defined by absences, comparisons with what was lost, and both the promise and stigma of resettling a cleansed landscape.

The Czechoslovak borderlands, like borderlands throughout much of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, had a long history as religious, cultural, and linguistic contact zones. In the first half of the twentieth century, nationalist and revolutionary ideologies recast these contact zones as ethnopolitical fault lines. In the 1940s, nationalist governments, invading armies, and local populations cleansed tens of millions of national “others,” through either forced removal or mass murder. In this sense, Czechoslovakia’s postwar borderlands can be defined as a particular type of modern borderland: a cleansed former

contact zone.¹³ A key open question in post–Cold War Europe has been how to revive the former vitality of these once multiethnic spaces without more displacements or the return of nationalist animosities that cleansed them in the first place.¹⁴

ENVIRONMENTS

Ethnic cleansing was only the beginning of decades of massive social and environmental change in the borderlands. Many rural areas were never fully resettled, with farms left fallow and villages abandoned, neglected, or transformed into weekend getaways. Though parts of the former Sudetenland had a long industrial tradition, postwar planners rapidly escalated coal mining, energy production, and chemical industries in a large swath of territory running along the northern and western borders of Bohemia and Moravia. Air and water pollution were endemic by the end of the 1950s, and expanding coal mines erased villages and left massive open scars strewn across the landscape.

Many German expellees and Czech critics of the expulsions have drawn a direct connection between cleansing of the borderlands' German population and the subsequent physical and ecological decline of the region. Analysts of migration and ethnic conflict elsewhere have taken an interest in environmental change as a cause of forced migration, but there has been little work on environmental consequences of depopulation and resettlement.¹⁵ Given that Czechoslovakia's environmental crisis unfolded over several decades, under the sway of Communist industrial policies common across the Eastern Bloc, it is hard to separate migration from other causes of environmental degradation.

Rather than claiming a direct causal link between expulsions and the devastation of the borderlands, I see ethnic cleansing, Communist social engineering, and late industrial modernity as related and intertwined phenomena in postwar Czechoslovakia. All three derived from a complex that David Harvey has called "universal or high modernism"—an economic, social, and cultural order that flourished in the wake of the Second World War. With roots in the Enlightenment and more proximately in the 1920s and 1930s, high modernism "has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge



Figure 2. “Come with us to build the borderlands.” Settlement Office poster, ca. 1946. Osidlovací Úřad, Zpráva o činnosti OÚ v Praze, undated. Ministerstvo vnitra (MV-T), SUA, ic 1969 sig 265 k 37.

and production.”¹⁶ Several scholars have pointed to the rationalizing tendencies of the modern nation-state to explain cases of ethnic cleansing in Central Europe and elsewhere.¹⁷ Whether inspired and carried out from above or below, cleansing simplifies the body politic, rendering it more susceptible to state control.¹⁸ Others, including James Scott in the influential book *Seeing Like a State*, have pointed out the predilection of “high-modern” states for grandiose utopian schemes seeking to master both man and nature.¹⁹ Despite the conceptual affinity of these two literatures, no one has seriously considered the connections between ethnic, social, and environmental engineering.

The Bohemian borderlands provide excellent terrain for exploring this nexus. The cleansed Sudetenland’s human and natural geography made the region particularly susceptible to a postwar materialist revolution, focused on production and economic growth above all else. Faced with the unprecedented opportunity of settling an industrialized but rapidly emptying landscape, settlement planners considered the northern borderlands a frontier laboratory for the emerging state-socialist order. Confiscation, expulsion, and resettlement in 1945–1946 began an economic and social transformation often identified with the Communist seizure of power in 1948.

Over the next four decades, postwar productivism permeated official and local understandings of borderland identity, with profoundly negative consequences for the region’s landscapes and societies. Throughout the heavy industrialism of the 1950s, economic reformism of the 1960s, and the consumer socialism of the 1970s and 1980s, government planners continued to sacrifice the health of borderland citizens and landscapes in the name of economic growth. The regime took this productivist logic to extreme ends in northern Bohemia, where it leveled hundreds of villages to make way for expanding coal mines. Hungry for energy and unable to imagine alternatives, the regime decided in 1961 to mine a rich vein of coal under the large mining city of Most. Over the next twenty-five years, the government systematically destroyed the old city center, built an ambitious modernist city to replace it, and moved close to 20,000 people into new high-rise housing. Most, “the town that moved,” became emblematic of both the utopian possibilities of Communist modernization and the dystopian potential of extreme productivism.

HEALTH

Since the late 1940s, the declining vitality of the Czechoslovak borderlands has been a significant preoccupation of expellees, government officials, Communist reformers, and dissidents. Many observers have employed metaphors of health in diagnosing the social, cultural, and environmental decline of the region. Expellees wrote of the “unprecedented decline of the natural and . . . cultural landscape,” wasting away in the absence of former German inhabitants.²⁰ Officials, concerned with outmigration and a growing social crisis, used propaganda and investment in sporadic efforts to “revitalize” borderland communities. Czech and Slovak dissidents saw the “eco- and social-pathology” of the borderlands as an indictment of Communist materialism, and of modern consumer societies more generally.²¹ More recently, academic historians have largely shared in this tendency to diagnose borderland decline, writing of “socially weak” settlers, scarred natural and cultural landscapes, and unhealthy communities.²² As the Czech historian Tomáš Staněk has written, forced migration and totalitarianism combined to “leave behind not only numerous wounds in the landscape, but also in the people, in their lifestyle and mentality.”²³

More broadly, several historians have come to view the massive forced movement of populations in the twentieth century as a “pathological phenomenon in the history of mankind.”²⁴ It was the “century of ethnic cleansing” or the “century of the refugee.”²⁵ “Cleansing” focuses on the causes of migration, “refugee” on the outcome. “Cleansing” of the collective social/national/racial body was a common formulation in 1930s and 1940s Europe, with unwanted minorities often considered unhealthy, both collectively, in metaphorical terms, and individually, as disease carriers. Cleansing aimed to simplify and sanitize the social body, to homogenize and rationalize polities, to solve “problems” that seemed to complicate social and political life. In retrospect, we consider ethnic cleansing pathological, but many contemporaries (and most perpetrators) thought otherwise. As the future Czechoslovak minister of justice Prokop Drtina said in May 1945, Germans in Bohemia “were always a foreign ulcer in our body”; now, finally, Czechs were in a position to “cleanse” their land of Germans and “safeguard the future of the nation.”²⁶

Cleansing meant refugees, who have often been viewed as pathological, by contemporaries and, subsequently and more sympathetically, by historians.²⁷ In the wake of the Second World War, officials in both western and eastern occupation zones considered unsettled refugees to be potential “disease carriers,” who needed to be sanitized and perhaps quarantined before integration into new societies. Uprooted populations were also politically suspect, and therefore carefully monitored and controlled. By contrast, sympathetic physicians, sociologists, psychologists, and later, historians, diagnosed widespread “illnesses of uprooting” that plagued those forcibly removed from familiar geographical, social, and cultural coordinates.²⁸ Nostalgia, longing for a lost home, reentered the diagnostic toolbox of Central European clinicians.

Ironically, observers on both sides of the border saw Sudeten German refugees and Czech settlers alike as “unrooted,” prone to individual and social pathologies tied to placelessness, with the Czechoslovak borderlands serving as the “un-place” for both groups. For both settlers and exiles, the borderlands have functioned as a mirror, returning both utopian and dystopian images, of rootedness and rootlessness, of past and future dreams and nightmares, and of an unsettled and unfulfilled present. This book is a history of the Czechoslovak borderlands as a mirror, as both a real place and a reflection of utopian and dystopian visions of social, cultural, and material health. It is also an extended reflection on the idea of rootedness, an idealized condition that intertwines the health of landscapes, communities, and individuals.

The first chapter explores the rise of nationalist conceptions of rootedness that posited a natural connection of ethnic groups with the land they inhabited. Battles over “national property” threatened to unravel centuries of Czech-German intermingling and coexistence in Habsburg Bohemia. Though ethnic cleansing was not an inevitable outcome of these struggles over land, the Second World War radicalized both Czech and German populations, legitimizing extreme nationalist visions of ethnic homogeneity. Chapter 2 describes the postwar expulsion of Czechoslovakia’s three million Germans. It shows how a virulent political rhetoric of cleansing led to widespread violence against Germans, in both wild and more organized waves of forced migration in 1945 and 1946.

Chapter 3 follows the German expellees into occupied East and West Germany, where they were widely seen as threats to the health and

stability of indigenous German communities. The occupying powers worked with new German governments to sanitize and integrate the millions of new arrivals. Though these efforts were ultimately successful in a material sense, expellees, doctors, and historians have grappled for over half a century with the psychological traces of uprooting.

The fourth chapter focuses on the postwar Czechoslovak resettlement of the former Sudetenland, and the subsequent demographic, social, and environmental transformations of the region that spanned the next forty years. Though these intertwined transformations have often been associated with the Communist regime that ruled Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989, their roots lay in the immediate postwar period of cleansing and resettlement. The fifth chapter looks closely at how the postwar transformations played out in Most, the mining town displaced by a coal pit and rebuilt according to utopian planning principles. As social and ecological dysfunction spread in the Most region, the city became an emblem of the failures of Communism, but also of the dystopian potential of modernity itself, of demographic and social engineering in the name of growth and progress.

Chapter 6 widens this theme by examining Czech and German narratives of borderland decline from the late 1940s to the 1990s. Metaphors of ecological and social pathology crisscrossed the Iron Curtain and spanned ideological divides. Despite their political and national diversity, expellees, Communist officials, and dissidents shared both a preoccupation with the health of the borderlands and some crucial assumptions about what constitutes healthy landscapes and communities.

This is a history rife with metaphors. As the ecological theorist Brendon Larson has pointed out, the metaphors we use to describe the natural and social world are value-laden and have profound consequences for how we act and shape the world around us.²⁹ In the rhetoric of ethnic cleansers, metaphors of health have informed the pursuit of ethnically homogenous states and legitimized expulsions and genocide. Connections of rootedness and health have underlain both the ill treatment of refugees and efforts to strengthen immigrant communities. Ecological health, too, is a metaphor long informed by contested and shifting values, within both the scientific and wider communities.³⁰

The following chapters sift through these metaphors that have animated the history and historiography of ethnic cleansing and resettle-

ment in the Czechoslovak borderlands. I write about these metaphors because of their prevalence in a wide range of historical sources, but also because they speak to our contemporary concerns with social and ecological health. As the philosopher Richard Underwood wrote in 1971, “The resolution of the ecological crisis depends . . . upon the extent to which life-giving metaphors can be restored to our communal life.”³¹ This is more true than ever today, as the scope and intensity of ecological crisis continue to expand, and as waves of refugees once again push the limits of European tolerance and capacity to integrate difference. Amid this urgency, historians have a particular role to play in recovering and advancing hopeful and productive metaphors, while exposing and deconstructing noxious and dangerous ones.

But what are these “life-giving metaphors” and how might we restore them? Some possible answers emerge from a close consideration of the history of the Czechoslovak borderlands. Built into premises of borderland decline are also positive visions of social and ecological health. Despite their ideological, national, and political diversity, many Communists, expellees, and dissidents shared a recognition that the health of landscapes, cities, communities, and individual bodies were inextricably tied.³² Rather than a “no-man’s land,” wrote the dissident psychiatrist Petr Příhoda, the borderlands belong to us all. “In this piece of land, shorn of its roots, one can see the misery of Europe, even the whole world. . . . It serves as a concave mirror of our own infirmities, past and present.”³³ In the afterword to this book, I introduce a corollary to Příhoda’s mirror metaphor, suggesting that images and memories of loss can be a powerful impetus to the construction of vital new landscapes and communities. This is both a communal and a personal task. As Příhoda hints, to heal the borderlands is to heal ourselves.