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A Brave New World Out of the Same Old Pieces: Property Confiscation and Distribution in Postwar Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

This article deals with the confiscation of property from the German-speaking inhabitants of Czechoslovakia and its redistribution to the new settlers of the Czech borderlands. It shows how the social revolution—that is, the emergence of an egalitarian postwar society—was made possible by the national revolution—that is, the expulsion of the German-speaking inhabitants of Central Europe. Using the example of the industrial center of Liberec in northern Bohemia, the author shows how the Czech administration that was established after the Second World War applied the dichotomy of the Czech–German conflict to an ethnically complex postwar society and how, despite the ideology of distributing property to the “Slavs,” non-Czech minorities were discriminated against with respect to redistribution. Eventually, she analyzes how postwar Czechoslovak society was shaped, with an emphasis on the material demands of workers and collectives, even as individuals sought to achieve a middle-class lifestyle through participation in property distribution.

Keywords: confiscation; Czechoslovakia; expulsion; resettlement; forced migration

Introduction: Burgundy Wine for Everyone

On Labor Day 1921, a poem entitled *Slavný den* (*A Festive Day*) appeared in *Proletkult*, a communist magazine published in Czechoslovakia in 1921–1924 with the vision of “publishing only articles that will be clear and understandable even for an average reader” (Vlašín 1981, 483). The poem describes that year’s Labor Day demonstration and its goal: “No wars, no shenanigans, no such thing, / we want a new world, a world of our own making; / ... We’ve worked long enough for this bourgeois crap, / ... we’ve been long enough piling ducats into their pockets, / We free citizens, free to you, cowardly masters, / today we thunder in your ears: we want everything, we want more.” The poem’s author, the young poet and at that time Communist Party member Jaroslav Seifert, further elaborated on what these protesters wanted: “We want pork and cabbage for dinner, / or veal and stuffing for dinner, or paprika; / we demonstrate and say emphatically: let him not forget / none of you gentlemen up there, / we also want to drink bottles of Burgundy wine / and eat marinated eels” (Seifert 1985, 163). In other words, what they wanted was not only to have a lavish dinner with various dishes and wine but also for the authorities to remember their needs.

Later a Nobel prize winner in literature, Seifert mixed the Marxist ideology of class struggle with his own childhood memories of a delicatessen shop in the neighborhood he used to live in, where he could not afford to shop (Seifert 1985). He emphasized, “and because we have confidence in the iron logic of history / we believe that one day we too will drink from liquor bottles, / and for the hardships we and our ancestors have suffered, / ... we and our children will ride in cars.” Although he

personally had been expelled from the Communist Party at the end of 1920s and denounced this poem in his memoirs *Všecky krásy světa* (*All beautiful things of the world*; 1985, 164), his vision had indeed come true by the time it was published in the 1980s. Children of the protesters from the 1920s could by then be driving cars obtained thanks to the revolution that had overturned the social order of bourgeois Czechoslovakia.

Although traditionally the revolution that overturned the class order in Czechoslovak history is understood to be February 1948, when the Communist Party gained a monopoly of power through a coup d'état, this text draws attention to the social changes that took place in the immediate aftermath of the war as a result of the mass transfer of a German-speaking minority.

As history unfolded, after the Second World War the whole of Europe made a political shift to the left, partly through the influence of the Soviet Union but also through authentic support for the left-wing parties that had existed in Europe since the 19th century and that gained supporters through their emphasis on transforming the social order (Shore 2006; Bikont and Szczesna 2021). For Central and Eastern Europe, popular support if not of the Communist Party then of leftist politics in general was demonstrated by Abrams (2005, 9): “Although local Communists seized power with varying levels of popular support across the region, their task was being made considerably easier by economic, political, social and cultural changes brought by the Second World War. As a result of the massive demographic, economic and attitudinal shifts resulting from the war, radical social change was on the agenda across the region, and the Communist program was at least acceptable, and even preferable, to significant elements within these societies.”

The same can be said for Czechoslovakia, as the postwar state underwent radical social and economic transformation. The new government of the National Front consisted only of representatives of left-wing parties, and the bourgeois politics of the prewar republic was pointed to as having been a crucial cause of the war. The widespread nationalization of industry was one of the signals of the political system moving significantly to the left, toward a so-called strong state (Kalinová 2004). One of the aspirations of the postwar regime of the so-called Third Czechoslovak Republic, existing between 1945 and 1948, was to reduce individual economic disparities and redistribute property via the state, a process that continued after 1948.

Besides the social revolution, the postwar developments enabled another longer-lasting dream of the Czechs: to create an ethnically homogenous society within the historical Czech lands. The historical process that helped fulfill this vision was the expulsion of more than two million Czechoslovak Germans after the end of the Second World War.

The minority of Czechoslovak Germans, whose political representation had united with Nazi Germany to pressure Czechoslovakia for greater autonomy in the 1930s, had to leave Czechoslovakia post-1945 in atonement for their part in the breakup of the country in 1938. Their property was confiscated and redistributed to the new “Slavic” settlers, and thus the national revolution became a means for a social revolution, whereby ordinary people could also aspire to a higher standard of living.

Therefore, in this article I describe how the two processes of confiscation and redistribution intersected at the local level in the immediate postwar period. I claim that the national revolution, which was enabled by the expulsion of Germans, went hand in hand with the social revolution and newcomers could aspire to higher social position while taking over German property. Thus, it also paved a way to a series of deeper social changes in the Stalinist era, when the idea of communist revolution took the form of large property changes. I illustrate these processes and their complications, or *cul de sacs*, based on the example of the North Bohemian industrial center of Liberec—as the city of Reichenberg came to be called after the war. It is located in the so-called Sudetenland, which was the name for the northern, southern, and western areas of the former Czechoslovakia that had been inhabited primarily by German-speaking Bohemians and that became known as the Borderlands (*Czech pohraničí*) after the war.

Reichenberg became an important center of German Bohemians during the Industrial Revolution, when it grew to prominence as a center of the textile industry and later also of German

ethnopolitics, which lost its dominant position in Prague. It was also the capital of the secessionist province of Deutschböhmen, which in the chaos of the end of the First World War sought to become part of Austria rather than Czechoslovakia. Deutschböhmen was crushed by the Czechoslovak army already in December 1918. Political conflict has been a dominant mode of coexistence of these two ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia since. Reichenberg, as a seat of important institutions and informal capital of German Bohemians, was a center of German secessionist politics. This conflict escalated during the Sudetenland crisis in 1938 when Czechoslovakia lost the borderland parts and Reichenberg again became the capital of province that was now a part of Germany.

As a collective punishment after the war, most of Czechoslovakia's prewar German inhabitants had to leave and new settlers from different parts of the state came there, pursuing the vision of a new and materially secure life: German property was to be redistributed to them. Liberec was full of these so-called settlers (*osadníci* in Czech) early on because of its status as an industrial center with plenty of vacancies, but Liberec was also full of property that could be taken. Furthermore, because of the status Reichenberg/Liberec already had before the war, there was a complex society, ranging from industrialists to textile workers, with a network of social relations and institutions in place. New settlers came in from all over Czechoslovakia and from other countries, and they were about to build a society that was as complex as had been the prewar one.

Throughout this text, I concentrate on the period 1945–1948, when these processes took place most intensively. Furthermore, I argue that in the borderlands social changes were extreme right after 1945 relative to those after the coup in 1948.

Therefore, I ask the following research questions: How did the concepts of national and social revolution manifest themselves at the local level in the context of property relations? What factors influenced the implementation and outcomes of these revolutionary ideas on the ground? How did the management of property shape and reflect the dynamics of national and social change in the local communities?

To achieve my objective of showing how the postwar society of Liberec was constructed in the manner of confiscation and redistribution, I follow the stories of individuals and their objects, as well as their mutual relations. Objects were subjected to various changes of ownership between individuals or between individuals and the state: they were stolen, stored, bartered, given away, or demanded by individuals and by institutions. Individuals had or were ascribed various identities (national, ethnic, or social), and in accordance with them they had various relationships with objects.

In this article, I describe the system by which objects were to be distributed: what was the entitlement based on one's ethnicity or behavior during the war, what objects were to be recycled—that is, used again by the new settlers—and what objects no longer belonged in the new world. This system shows the rules by which it was envisioned that the postwar socialist and egalitarian society would emerge. But at the same time, the archival sources show how new inequalities were created in the postwar chaos through the redistribution of property and how people built their new lives through objects. As in Seifert's poem from the 1920s, the dramatic change of society was a mixture of high and low ideas and ideals about equality and desire.

Expulsion and Confiscation: State of the Art

Both the national revolution (i.e., the expulsion of Germans) and the social revolution (i.e., the social changes in postwar Central-Eastern Europe) have been topics of established research in both the Czechoslovak context and the wider context of Central Europe or the Eastern Bloc in general. This research also drives academic work on wider topics such as ethnic cleansing or confiscation that brings together examples from different regions and periods.

Initially, there were two reasons why the forced transfer of Germans became widely researched in the 1990s. First, after the fall of the communist regimes in Central-Eastern Europe, public debate in those countries became open to these topics and the archives became freely accessible to both

regional and international scholars. Already in the 1990s, there appeared seminal works by Tomáš Staněk and Adrian von Arburg (Staněk 1991; Staněk and Arburg 2006, 2010), describing all aspects of the forced transfer of Germans. This profound series of studies dealt with the level of national and local policies in the context of postwar violence toward Germans, with the central question of how many Germans were killed in the first months after the war. The authors did not, however, put too much emphasis on German property.

Furthermore, because the archives became more accessible and due to the renewal of interest in the region, foreign scholars also turned their attention to the subject of the expulsion (Smelser 1996; Bell 1997; Glassheim 2000; Douglas 2012) and to Czech-German relationships in longer historical context (Wingfield 2007; Zahra 2011; Cornwall 2012). At the same time, Czech society was also going through a delayed process of professional and social reflection on displacement and its long-term (mainly negative) consequences for society, landscape, and culture (Kopeček and Kunštát 2003).

Second, at the same time the term *ethnic cleansing* was gaining prominence—especially in research on current events but also in renewed scrutiny of earlier forced migrations. Thus, the term was used to describe and study the then-recent conflicts such as the 1990s Balkan wars (Mojzes 2011) or the genocide in Rwanda (White 2009), as well as past conflicts, frequently including ethnic conflicts and mass transfers of people in Central and Eastern Europe in both the 19th and 20th centuries (Martin 1998; Naimark 2002; Snyder 2003).

However, in line with Bulutgil (2018), I argue that the majority of contemporary studies are focused on the causes of ethnic cleansing, in either the short term (with war as a main cause) or the long term (describing the prewar conditions). Research that has developed since the 1990s has concentrated for the most part on the mechanisms of forced transfers on the national level and on the stories of the communities, families, and individuals who underwent the expulsion. Existing research has followed how Germans were treated after the war, but the confiscation and redistribution of their property to the new inhabitants has not been a prominent topic of research.

In a global perspective, the subject of confiscation was studied in relation to the more general issue of ethnic cleansing, including its causes and progression. That is to say, we can find a number of studies describing the confiscation of property as well as its redistribution during violent events in both the past (e.g., the migration of Jews from Spain in the 15th century, Faria 1998; or purges in the 1930s Soviet Union, Polian 2004) and contemporary times (e.g., the Kurds in Iraq, Salih 2022).

In the regional context, most attention has been given to the confiscation of Jewish property (Arad 2001; Dean 2010; Klacsmann 2016, 2020) as well as to its restitution after the war (Bilsky 2020; Kreutzmüller and Zatlín 2020). The case studies of Czech Jewish property exemplify that the Czech authorities did not seek to reestablish the status quo after the war (e.g., giving back property that was confiscated) but instead attempted to establish a new national and social order. This was the case when the social or national status of Czech Jews complicated their efforts to claim back their possessions (Jančík, Kuklík, and Kubů 2003; Krejčová and Krejča 2007; Gruner and Osterloh 2015), with wealthier or German-speaking Jews finding it more difficult to reclaim their property.

When analyzing what happened in the postwar Czech borderlands, the most attention has so far been given to describing different groups of newcomers and their subsequent integration (Heroldová 1978; Vaculík 1993). This kind of research started in the 1970s, when Czech ethnologists conducted studies among individual ethnic groups that had migrated to the borderlands, such as Roma (Grulich and Haišman 1986) or Slovaks (Nosková 1984a, 1984b, 1989). This tendency is still visible today, such as in the books by Spurný (2011) or by Kreisslová, Nosková, and Pavlásek (2019), who researched individual groups such as Germans who stayed or Czech emigrants from Yugoslavia or Volhynia. However, these studies focus on ethnic differences and traditions, leaving aside the problem of how the newcomers acquired property.

Again, the local circumstances of the distribution of property are also not a main focus in studies on the legal regulation of confiscation in the immediate postwar period (Wiedemann 2016; Kuklík and Němečková 2017). In the immediate postwar reality, legislation was issued in the form of presidential decrees known as the Beneš decrees, several of which legalize the confiscation of

German property and other anti-German measures. However, specific case studies may show how these regulations were implemented and what influence they had on the everyday life practices of the newcomers in the postexpulsion period. In terms of what was confiscated, attention has been paid to the confiscation of industrial plants and on an individual level to agricultural facilities—that is, the distribution of small farms. There is no common understanding of how furniture or clothing were distributed, even though Gerlach (2017) argues that the treatment of property was part of a wider process of ethnic cleansing.

Therefore, in this article I focus on the understudied phenomena of what was happening in the Czech borderlands after the end of the Second World War and how these changes fit into the broader changes of the postwar society. I address a topic that has not yet received much attention—namely, the confiscation and redistribution of everyday items (i.e., clothing, furniture, household items) on the local level of a given city. Confiscated shirts or carpets have not yet seemed as important to scholars as have transformations of the entire state economy. The means of their disposal was also hazy: the number of objects made them difficult to organize, and their ownership often changed in a variety of ways. Therefore, the handling of these objects shows a wider and more subtle range of relationships between the former and new inhabitants of the resettlement region in the light of the property that was left by the former and acquired by the latter. Understanding these processes exemplifies not only how Germans who were leaving their country were perceived by the newcomers, with confiscation as a part of a wider expulsion project, but also how people interpreted the new political and ideological regime.

Although the oral history method has been applied to some extent in the research on the resettlement of the Czech Borderlands (Neradová 2013; Buriánková 2015), the allocation of property has not been the main focus of these studies and the number of living witnesses who participated in these processes as adults is scarce. Thus, this article relies on archival sources while acknowledging their limitations. The archival sources that I employ are located at the State District Archive in Liberec (Státní okresní archiv v Liberci [SOKA Liberec]) and consist of materials from the provenance of the Municipal National Committee (*Městský národní výbor*) in Liberec from both the political negotiations on the organization of the removal and distribution (i.e., council meetings) and the daily agenda of the municipal administration departments that were responsible for the management of German property.

The challenge in processing these materials is that they mostly capture the perspective of the National Committee employees and the voices of people who would have stood in opposition to them were often suppressed. I describe this discrepancy in the analytical section and embed the archival materials in their ideological context. Particularly problematic is the attribution of ethnic identity: officials understood individuals as Germans, Slovaks, or Jews, even though their personal sense of identity may have been different. Another example of ideological embeddedness is the inclusion of female surnames. In postwar Liberec, officials used Czech variants of female surnames—that is, they attached the suffix *-ová* to their names. We cannot be sure what variant of their name the people that the materials refer to would have chosen, but we can only assume that women who felt that they were German used a variant without the ending. In such cases, then, I present both possible name variants in the analysis.

The second aspect of the archival materials is their fragmentation: although there is more material preserved in Liberec for the immediate postwar period than in the surrounding and less-urbanized districts, one is still unable to reconstruct the stories as a whole. Even where the voices of displaced German residents or new settlers are heard, we do not know whether their requests or complaints were settled. In this case, archival sources create an incomplete mosaic of postwar everyday life.

National Revolution: Forced Transfer of Germans and Confiscation of Their Property

In Reichenberg, which was soon to change into Liberec, the biggest wave of street-level violence started right when Czechoslovakia and most of Europe were already celebrating peace. The city had

not been affected by the war directly: its Jewish and Roma inhabitants were transported away, and the men were off fighting on the distant fronts. On the contrary, as the industrial center and administrative seat (German *Gauhauptstat*) of an administrative region of the German Third Reich (a region called Sudetengau), the city had been part of the war economy and its number of inhabitants grew, with people coming in from Germany but also as forced laborers from the Czech Protectorate and from other European countries.

Czechs, who had also lived in the city prior to the war, created a so-called National Committee during the war that was ready to take power after the end of the war. This is described in later documents, where the National Committee mentioned their secret meetings concerning the handover of control over the city after the war:

Two members [of the Committee] should attend a confidential meeting with the German anti-fascists in order to determine a plan for the occupation of the city of Liberec. In several meetings, a complete agreement was reached and the occupation and takeover of the Governor's Office and the Liberec Town Hall was carried out, so that when the Russian troops arrived, the entire local area as the city was already open and free of all resistance.¹

These meetings were successful, and the plan came to fruition. Moreover, the Czech National Committee gained the control over a garrison that was left by the Red Army. Approaching Soviet troops bombed the city only on the last day of the war, on May 9.

Soon it was clear that some of the main tasks of the Czech National Committee would be to expel the Germans who were sympathizing with the Nazis from the city to regulate the influx of coming Czechs and to redistribute the German property among them.

At the national level, the plan to expel most of the German-speaking population had seemed unrealistic at the beginning of the war, and the outlines only began to emerge during the war (Brandes 2009). Plans were discussed among the Czechoslovak resistance movement, which had become radicalized, as the Czechs were oppressed under German occupation (Frommer 2004), the Allies, of which only the Soviet Union supported the expulsion of most Germans, and the Czechoslovak government in exile in London (Brandes 2009). The dynamics of wartime events were such that the previously unthinkable forced transfer of the entire German population out of Czechoslovakia seemed inevitable at the end of the war.

In Liberec, the Czech National Committee started the expulsion of Germans from the city as early as in May 1945. People of German nationality who had moved to Liberec after September 28, 1938—that is, functionaries of Nazi organizations—had to leave it, mostly for the nearest border towns. Although Liberec was not a place of mass atrocities akin to the so-called Death March in Brno (Dvořák 2010) or the mass shootings in Postoloprty and other places (Mrňka 2020), here, too, people who were labeled as Germans were tortured and killed by members of the Revolutionary Guards (*Revoluční gardy*)—that is, volunteer and former army members mostly from nearby Czech regions who came to Liberec after the war to exact their version of revenge. Their actions in Liberec were so out of control that they were stopped by the regular Czech police, even in an atmosphere when such acts were generally being overlooked in the postwar chaos (Rytklová 2021).

As Staněk and von Arburg showed, both regular and irregular units tried to expel as many Germans as possible, with the approval of the Czech government, who feared that the Allies would not give their approval for a large-scale expulsion (Staněk and von Arburg 2006). In this atmosphere, many inhabitants of Liberec signed up for so-called voluntary removal (Bittnerová 2001). After the Potsdam Conference, an internationally recognized transfer of the German population from Central-Eastern Europe was initiated, the main phase of which took place in 1946. During this phase of “organized transfer,” two camps were set up in Liberec, where Germans were rounded up before being sent in transports (Bittnerová 2001).

However, there were several categories of people of German nationality who could avoid expulsion: those who had actively fought against Nazi Germany, people in mixed marriages, and

so-called reliable experts were allowed to stay (Spurný 2011, 458). Thus, the above-quoted document by the Czech National Committee was issued in June 1945 in fact to protect members of the German administration who had collaborated with the Czech resistance at the end of the war:

We are not only grateful to the above-mentioned German co-workers, but also promise to do our utmost to provide them with all personal security until they can return to their posts, which we also promise them. We therefore ask all security authorities and military units and headquarters to give these appointees full security and not to subject them to evacuation orders.²

Although these members of the former German administration of the city seemed clearly to be in the antifascist category at the end of the war, their status changed as the approach to the German minority in general shifted. Even when large-scale expulsion threatened the Czechoslovak economy, there was still a shared effort to expel as many Germans as possible. During the the war, the transfer of Germans had become not only one of the instruments of postwar retribution but also an instrument of overall national cleansing: if initially it was thought that only active Nazis should leave, gradually the pressure was directed at getting as many Germans as possible to leave. Even the antifascist Germans, who were the smallest group among those officially excluded from the expulsion, were still encouraged to leave for the emerging East Germany (Spurný 2011).

The ideology of national cleansing emphasized the transfer of Germans not just as a means of atonement for their guilt in the war but also as a way to put an end to centuries of historical coexistence that were judged to have been a mistake. “We will atone for the White Mountain,” the social-democratic Prime Minister Zdeněk Fierlinger declared about the forced transfer in June 1945, referring to the battle marking the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War, where the troops of the Bohemian Estates had lost out to those of the Catholic League (Glassheim 2000). Despite that soldiers of both nationalities fought in both armies, the battle was seen by romantic historians as the beginning of the oppression of the Czechs—a nation of small farmers—by the Germans—rich landowners. Therefore, expulsion was from the beginning connected with the new distribution of property.

One of the “antifascists” that had been promised their security by the Czech National Committee in the document issued in Liberec at the end of the war was a certain Gustav Schmidt. He was able to stay in the city until 1947; in the spring of that year, he tried to claim back silverware that had been confiscated from him when he had to move from his apartment in the city center to a less-prestigious address. He backed his claim with two arguments: first, he claimed the status of an antifascist activist, confirmed by the Czech National Committee and other documents, and, second, he had Austrian citizenship and Austrian property was not subject to confiscation.³ At first, the housing department of the city administration claimed that the requested objects were not and probably had never been in the flat, inhabited since fall 1945 by a Czech notary, identified only by the surname Morávek. A clerk from the housing department warned against Schmidt’s claims in the following manner:

Lately such requests from Austrian nationals have been growing, it is very important to demand from every such applicant the production of proofs of ownership, i.e. records... The confirmation of various persons cannot be taken into account, since, given the known mentality of the Germans and their henchmen, it is certain that they will confirm to their fellow-tribesmen the slightest request or circumstance which might help them.⁴

With this, the representative of the local authority made his own moral interpretation of the legislation guiding the confiscation of property, broadening the understanding of the category of “Germans.” In fact, Schmidt’s property was found, and he was about to get it back when another department of the city administration halted the process with this explanation: “Gustav Schmidt is a

nationally unreliable and defective person ... he was generally known as a German chauvinist,”⁵ citing his past memberships in German and national socialist organizations, without giving details of the source. We are unable to tell what that source may have been, but local authorities were able to consult the documents left behind by the local Nazi organizations, or sometimes people were giving testimonies. Given Gustav Schmidt’s high social position during the war, it is probable that he was a member of these organizations.

Thus, in the end Gustav Schmidt did not get his silverware back, even though there were two circumstances that excluded him from the scope of confiscation. Although he had supported the Czech resistance movement (however, we can question what motivation this well-off and influential bank director had had to do so) and he held Austrian citizenship, he had nevertheless been part of the Reichenberg/Liberec bourgeoisie, so the new Czech administration did not recognize his legal grounds for being treated differently from “Germans” *en masse*. The clerks at different offices of city administration were more inclined to follow the ideology promoted by the top Czechoslovak politicians: to ostracize “the Germans” as an imagined group of all former inhabitants of the Sudetenland and also use this historical opportunity to seize their property and redistribute it to Czechs.

Social Revolution: Resettlement and Distribution of Property as a Means of Social Revolution

Therefore, the war was a turning point for not only Czechoslovakia’s ethnic structure but also its social structure. The contours of the postwar social revolution were shaped by the phenomenon of displacement as well as by other factors including the experience of the war in exile, the domestic resistance, the attitude of the Allies, and political shifts across Europe. In the Czech Borderlands, a social revolution was happening at the same time as a national revolution—as was demonstrated by the above-cited case of Gustav Schmidt. From this case, we know that the apartment of a former bank director was inhabited already in the fall of 1945 by a Czech notary. He was one among hundreds of thousands of Czechs, Slovaks, and other “Slavs” who came to the borderlands to start a new life. By the end of the year 1945, around one million newcomers had come to the regions previously inhabited by Germans (Wiedemann 2016, 86) but who were at that point still mostly living there.

At the national level, as early as in 1942, when the contours of the forced transfer of Germans were not yet clear, Edvard Beneš, the Czechoslovak president in exile, published his book *Democracy Today and Tomorrow (Demokracie dnes a zítra 1942)*, where he outlined the starting point for the postwar organization of Czechoslovakia. He did not envisage a return of property relations to the prewar state but rather greater state intervention in the property sphere (Beneš 1942; Kalinová 2004, 28). This vision came to life in the so-called Košice Government Program (*Košický vládní program*) of the new Czechoslovak government from which the prewar right-wing parties were banned. The program was issued in Košice in eastern Slovakia at the beginning of April 1945: this part of Czechoslovakia had already been liberated by the Red Army, and Soviet influence supported the country shifting toward socialism. The Borderlands, where most of the previous social bonds and structure were to be erased, was an ideal space for such a vision. Thus, they became a laboratory of socialism (Spurný 2011). Furthermore, at the end of the war property changes were supported by a large portion of society (Kalinová 2004). But how did this happen on a practical level? How could a Czech clerk aspire to attain the apartment and silverware of a former bank director?

The first weeks after the war were characterized by an unregulated influx of newcomers to the Borderlands, and even before there was a legal basis for property confiscation, “Czechs” seized property that they considered “German.” To this very day, the image of a “wild west” where everyone claiming Czech identity could take everything from people ascribed with German identity dominates the public understanding of the era (Daniel and Lomíček 2013). There are many

documented cases of criminal activities regarding confiscated property of so-called gold digging, including from Liberec. For example, in February 1946 Michael Sideratov, an unemployed blacksmith living in Liberec, was charged with the offense of a “mischief capable of interfering with the confiscation and distribution of confiscated property.”⁶ This meant that a fur coat, tobacco, soap, and confiscated leather had been found in his apartment.

On the other hand, from the first weeks after the war there was also a strong effort on the part of state institutions to regulate the redistribution of property and play the role of distributor. The agricultural land in possession of Germans, as well as of Hungarians and other “national traitors”—collaborators—was confiscated by Presidential Decree No. 12 from June 1945, and the rest of their property was confiscated by Decree No. 108 from October of the same year (Muller 2003). However, both decrees merely legalized what was already happening on the local level. Several months before the second decree, the local authorities in Liberec established two departments that were redistributing property to common Czechs: the housing department was distributing furnished flats and the liquidation department distributed smaller household items and clothing.

It was staff members from the housing department who in November 1945 had inspected Gustav Schmidt’s former flat before Morávek moved there: they made a list of all furnishings that were a part of Morávek’s “flat decree”—a kind of lease agreement. If Morávek decided that he did not need a particular furnishing or if the staff of the housing department decided that he did not need a given object, it was taken to a warehouse that was run by the liquidation department. Later, these objects could be offered to another settler.

It was the local authorities who remained in charge of distribution. However, Decree No. 108 on confiscation established a separate national body called the National Renewal Fund (*Fond národní obnovy*), a central institution that was in charge of distribution of confiscated property. However, the National Renewal Fund was officially established only in spring 1946—when Dr. Pětiletý, representative of the fund’s local office in Liberec, visited a meeting of the liquidation department run by the National Committee in Liberec that had then been redistributing property for several months already. Although Mr. Pětiletý stated at the meeting that from then on his institution would take over the distribution, a month later he modified this assertion, probably because he had by then discovered how great and complicated a task it was, so the liquidation department was meant to continue redistribution, albeit in keeping with central regulations that were issued by the National Renewal Fund.⁷

Despite these conflicts, the institutions on both the local and central level emphasized that the redistributed property remained in the possession of the state. Whereas in villages the settlers took both houses and agricultural land into their possession (Slezák 1978; Spurný 2011), in Liberec the flats remained owned by the municipality and users were able to buy furniture only gradually at the end of the 1940s. The furniture that remained in the former apartment of Gustav Schmidt was owned by the liquidation department, and the new user, Morávek, had to maintain the furniture according to the official list. Therefore, in May 1946 he was already meant to give several objects back to Schmidt. The handover was indeed slated to happen on May 7, but it was postponed because scarlet fever allegedly occurred in the household and the health care authority in Liberec ordered a quarantine. This provided time for the National Committee to modify its aforementioned interpretation of Schmidt’s character and to alter its former decision ordering the restitution of his property.⁸

These entanglements of social and national revolution, historical sentiments, and political needs in northern Bohemia can be well illustrated by a speech given by Zdeněk Nejedlý, the communist Minister of Education, during his first visit to the region in June 1945. He declared,

The banner of revolution, which we hoisted over our heads under the power of the heroic Red Army, is not flying over the Czech land for the first time. Half a millennium ago, it was raised here by the beleaguered small people of peasants and craftsmen and they inscribed it into the program of their resistance against foreigners and masters. (*Stráž Severu*, June 6, 1945)

Rather than to the Marxist idea of the class struggle, Nejedlý instead referred to the Hussite revolution, a religious movement from the Middle Ages. In the imagination of the Czech national revival, it was held up as the first chapter of the independent Czech national movement. Thus, it became a central element of the national imagination during the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic as well. In such a way, the idea of the Czech-German conflict and its settlement linked prewar and postwar politics. As Abrams pointed out (2005, 99), “if the communists were to be successful in reinventing the Czech nation and placing themselves at the end of a glorious tradition, the Hussite movement had to be incorporated in their reconfiguration.” This is precisely what Nejedlý did when he stressed social rather than religious elements in the movement: “With the new land reform and the expropriation of industrial enterprises, the working man will be allowed to reap the fruits of his labor here on the frontier.... A joyful, happy life looms on the horizon” (*Stráž Severu*, June 6, 1945).

The tool for this revolution was property confiscation, and the Borderlands were the region where the vision of a new society would come true. Right after the war the vision was clear, but how was it implemented? The childhood dreams of Seifert’s generation were about to become a reality. Burgundy wine and marinated eels were just around the corner; the only problem was how they would get into the hands of ordinary Czechs.

German, “german,” and other Others: National Revolution at the Local Level

As I have demonstrated, the outlines of the national revolution in Czechoslovakia were already clearly visible at the end of the war and they were followed by national and local politicians, military units, and common people who poured into Liberec from the first weeks after the war. Regarding the issue of confiscation, this enthusiasm was demonstrated in its encompassing nature. Employees of both departments of Liberec municipality that were involved in confiscation were trying to collect, preserve, and process everything that they conceived as “german”: after the war, there was a dispute over whether the term “Germans” (*Němci*) should be written with small letter as “germans” (*němci*) and some of the local officials followed this practice.

The housing department, also acting on behalf of the new owner—Czechoslovakia—was meant to ensure that none of the things that recently belonged to Germans were lost and that nobody kept or acquired anything for personal use that was not first processed (e.g., confiscated, registered, and redistributed). Those most suspected of such actions were of course the Germans, and they were under constant scrutiny as long as they moved around Liberec. Until the transfer of the Germans, there were many investigations like the one of a certain Gertrude Swecena (or in the German version of this surname of Slavic origin, Sweceny). A bus driver noticed that she was traveling often from Liberec to the nearby village of Josefův Důl carrying large parcels. Although she claimed to be bringing things from her sister’s flat, she could not prove that this was her property and so everything that she was carrying was confiscated. The confiscated items were carefully listed by an unknown Czech clerk: 1 box of handkerchiefs, 1 box of smaller handkerchiefs, 1 old tablecloth, 2 white duvet covers, 4 white pillowcases, 3 striped pillowcases, 1 duvet cover striped, 2 towels, 9 handkerchiefs in different patterns, and one small alarm clock.⁹ The case was most likely not investigated further. If someone of German ethnicity did not have proof of their property, it was automatically assumed that this was a piece of confiscated property.

The Germans were seen as suspicious, and therefore evidence was actively sought against them. In April 1946, the Liberec police organized a raid. The declared objective was to find explosives, but in several apartments occupied by Germans, only clothes, coins, and one radio receiver hidden behind a chimney were seized.¹⁰ The local security authorities perhaps gave credence to or perhaps simply used the general narrative about Germans wanting to use violence to reverse the outcome of the war; nevertheless, in the end the raid facilitated the goal of securing all German possessions, even though the results may not have matched the effort.

The Germans, who in the interpretation of postwar Czech politics were meant to pay for the entire war and who faced many hardships and outright violence in their daily lives, were of course not trusted even in property disputes. In one of the many property disputes recorded in the Liberec archives, a member of the housing department staff describes, in general, why Germans are not to be trusted: “with the mentality of the germans [sic], it is clear that they were deliberating how best to confiscate property that would otherwise be subject to confiscation in favor of the Czechoslovak state.”¹¹ The effort to confiscate everything was there, but the major obstacle to the effort to seize all German property was how to define the “Germanness” of an object. As has been described in literature about lives of individual citizens, the line between ethnic identities in Central-Eastern Europe was blurred, which of course blurred the thin borderline in the case of individual ownership. Reichenberg/Liberec, although it was described by the prewar and postwar Czech national movement as a “German” city, was in fact multicultural, as an industrial center in Central-Eastern Europe. Therefore, the property that was confiscated by Czech authorities often actually proved to be “Dutch,” “Danish,” “Armenian,” or “Jewish,” and not just “German.”

For example, in November 1945 the Jensen family, with Dutch citizenship, filed a claim for their possessions that had already been confiscated. According to the housing department, their former flat had been robbed in the short period before July 5, when Czech citizens started to inhabit it, and also another flat where their possessions were supposed to have been stored and its cellars had been robbed “most probably by Germans, before they left.”¹² Therefore, the document blames “Germans,” who could be used as a general category to which all the negative things that happened at the end of the war could be ascribed. Although the Czech administration claimed that they did everything they could to investigate and that they could not possibly have anything that had belonged to the Jansen family, a request was forwarded to the liquidation department, with an inscription from one of the clerks: “I recommend the release of items according to the possibilities of the warehouses.”¹³ The Jansens ultimately did receive some property, although not their own things. They were given a list of things, clothes, and other everyday items and were able to secure such items from several warehouses of confiscated property that were operated by the liquidation department.¹⁴ Although their “Dutch” property could not be found, they were able to take something that was “German.”

But the Czech administration did not always try to be so helpful: Czech clerks apparently drew a distinction between citizenship and cultural or ethnic belonging. Although the Jansens were for some reasons treated as Dutch, others with Dutch citizenship were not so treated. The case quoted above about “G/german mentality” was actually regarding “Dutch” property. The clerk that gave a very negative overall opinion about “germans” was writing about a case when a Dutch citizen tried to save his property from confiscation. Marie Stich, wrote Stichová in postwar archival sources, was a German woman whose brother Jan Scholz had Dutch citizenship and was thus entitled to recover his possessions.¹⁵ His sister was claimed to have moved her belongings to his house, thus changing “German” into “Dutch” property. Although the local authorities tried to help the Jansens, the clerk from the housing department downplayed the claims of Marie Stich and her brother. The difference might be that whereas the Jansens had come to Reichenberg/Liberec during the war, Stich and her brother had grown up in the city as “Germans” and it was only after working in Dutch colonies that “Ing. Jan Scholze” received Dutch citizenship, whereas his whole family and life was rooted in prewar Reichenberg.¹⁶

A similar case is that of Sonja Serafiann(ová). She was born in Prague but moved to Reichenberg/Liberec from Linz in 1938. In 1945, she was living in Liberec with her mother, who was a “divorced austrian” (it is unclear whether the clerk believed that Austrians should also be written without a capital letter or whether this is only a grammatical mistake). Serafiann was of Armenian nationality after her father and held no citizenship. The local police investigated her and gave a detailed report to the housing department: where she lived and where she used to live and if she had moved her property with her to the home of her fiancée, who was a member of the Czechoslovak police.¹⁷ Once again, the objective was to find out if she might have taken objects from someone else to make them

“Armenian” and therefore to spare them from confiscation. The reason why she started being investigated is unclear, but this incident shows how people with connections to prewar Reichenberg were always suspicious.

Not only were prewar ethnic relations more complicated than was recognized by the postwar legislation, rooted in the idea of Czech-German antagonism, but the ethnic relations of the newcomers were also multilayered. The Czechoslovak government and its official legislation talked about how the Borderlands need to be given back to “Slavs”; however, it was clear from the beginning that not just Czechs would inhabit these regions but also Slovaks and so-called reimmigrants—Czechs and Slovaks who had left their home countries in previous periods and were expected to come back even after centuries of living abroad. Generally, the term “Slavs” was quite broad and therefore could accommodate different streams of migration, including even people who could not speak Czech or Slovak coming to the Borderlands.

Ultimately, then, the ethnic landscape of postwar Liberec was more complicated, as were the dispositions regarding the confiscated property. Michal Sideratov, whose case is quoted above as an example of people obtaining property without permission from official institutions, was in fact Greek, and his clandestine operations were also happening outside the Czech community. The investigation revealed the following:

One lady’s black coat was found in your apartment, which belonged to a German national, Gertrude Pohl, now in Germany. You confessed that the 50 decagrams of tobacco found came from an exchange with an unknown man of Slovak nationality for a coat, shirt and trousers. Six quarters of soap and two pieces of seized leather both came, according to your confession, from a broken warehouse in Hrádek nad Nisou [a town 20 km from Liberec] from some Greek.¹⁸

Ethnicities other than Czechs were depicted as tending to participate in clandestine property transactions more than Czechs did; this was not necessarily the case but—being Others—they certainly did come under closer scrutiny.

This is best evident in the example of Ruthenian Jews who were coming to Liberec in the aftermath of the war: inhabitants of Ruthenia, which had been part of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period, could apply for Czech citizenship under certain conditions (Šmigel and Kruško 2005), and it was often surviving Jews who availed themselves of this opportunity. However, they were not welcomed by the National Committee. At the meeting of the City Council in March 1946 their presence was discussed. In the official minutes from the meeting, they are characterized as follows: “these citizens are neither Czechs nor Slovaks, nor members of other Slavic nationalities ... besides, it soon became apparent that, with few exceptions, they are maladjusted and live in an unfair manner.”¹⁹

All these examples demonstrate how complicated the ethnic structure of postwar Liberec was, even though resettlement of the Czech Borderlands was based on the relatively straightforward idea of Czech-German antagonism. Reichenberg/Liberec was seen as a German city that needed to be seized, with everything there to be confiscated. But in the end, it was the Czech clerks, who were facing an ethnic landscape that was much more complicated in practice, who had to make the decisions regarding what is “German” and should therefore be confiscated. But also, the term “Slavic” was not at the end broad enough to accommodate all groups that were coming, and it was apparent that not all incoming groups were treated the same. Clerks at the housing and liquidation departments tried to fit these issues back into a dichotomy of Czechs versus Germans that had been developed since the 19th century and nourished in the Czech collective memory (Macura 1995). Therefore, it did not matter what citizenship people living in prewar Reichenberg actually held; in general, they were treated as Germans—the most suspected of all the postwar groups in the city. However, the newcomers who were not Czechs were also treated with suspicion.

Supply and Demand during the Social Revolution

Although the main goal of the postwar revolution in Czechoslovakia was to get “German” property into “Czech” hands, there was another axis that was important for how exactly this property was distributed. When Zdeněk Nejedlý spoke about settlement of the Borderlands and likened it to the Hussite movement, he talked about the need to fight not just against foreigners but also against masters. The postwar Czechoslovak society was not meant to be merely the same prewar society, *sans* Germans; other relations were to change as well, toward a more egalitarian society with a prominent place for workers. The redistribution of confiscated property shows how this new society was imagined, who and what was considered important. On the other hand, there was always demand from people who wanted to participate in the redistribution and whose needs sometimes corresponded to the vision of the new society, but sometimes they were stuck in the prewar social order.

The second objective of confiscation, besides the need to confiscate everything, was also that it needed to be confiscated by the state. The new government’s narrative about confiscation as a form of revenge was taken literally by many people who were coming to the Borderlands and taking what they considered to be German property. As mentioned before, the popular imagery of this period in the Borderlands is that of a wild west. This is how people’s behavior is described in a contemporary piece of literature about resettlement; the following scene depicts a new settler at the train station in Liberec:

crowded everywhere with people loaded with luggage, jostling for room in crowded carriages. Luggage flying over the top of crowded carriages ... There was no one there to bring order.... He finally realised. They are going back to the hinterland.... That’s impossible, these people are taking millions of people by train and no one is stopping them. Even the border guards, the two with the big radio and the luggage filled with cloth and alpaca. (Valach 2022, 6)

In opposition to this description of chaos, what we find in the sources from the period under scrutiny are efforts on the part of the Liberec authorities, who attempted to ensure that property would not be taken by individuals but that it would be processed by the state. For example, in April 1948 a certain Růžena Michlová had to pay a fine of 500 Czechoslovak crowns because in 1946 she had started living in a flat without a permit from the housing department.²⁰ Although there are many cases of theft, like that of Sideratov, or usage of flats, like that of Michlová, we cannot be sure if all such incidents were reported—but when they were, the staff at the respective departments of Liberec city council took them very seriously and investigated even when the real value of the stolen or mishandled objects was very low. Therefore, although literary descriptions tend to put emphasis on the postwar chaos and lack of state regulations, archival documents show perhaps a lack of state resources but nevertheless a strong emphasis on the rule of law.

Many conflicts between the state authorities and individuals were also a product of the specific ownership relations that existed in the postwar Borderlands. When new residents gained the right to use a flat, they did not own either the flat or the furniture or other movable objects. This created a kind of hybrid ownership, whereby users of a flat used its furniture as their own, yet staff from the liquidation department could come to the confiscated flats even when they were already inhabited and take the furniture. There was even one special type of ownership: sometimes there was a piece of furniture, usually a wardrobe or another type of storage, that had been left in the flat by the housing department but was not included on the new tenants’ list, and they were not permitted to use this furniture. This is how a certain František Kunc got into trouble. He moved such a sealed wardrobe from his flat into a common hallway in the house. Therefore, he claimed that he did not notice that the seal had been broken and someone had stolen several pieces of clothing.²¹ Much like many other new settlers, Kunc had furniture in his apartment that was not his, that he could not use, but for which he was responsible. Thus, this system of hybrid ownership was far more radical than any of the collectivization efforts after the

communist coup in 1948. It enabled representatives of the state to interfere in the intimate sphere of households in incomparable ways, and in fact this system ended by 1948, when tenants had the chance to buy the furniture they had in their flats.

This system was not popular among the public. In summer 1947, the newspaper *Mladá fronta* published an article entitled “The Unbelievable Behavior of the Housing Department in Liberec.”²² It describes the story of a single woman who “rented a flat and lived a peaceful life” until she had to go to Prague for a few days, and when she came back “she almost took a stroke. Her furniture, which had taken so much effort to find, was gone.” In fact, her furniture was not stolen; it had been taken away by the housing department, which was the owner and that had distributed it to other settlers. The article is very critical toward it and describes this as a systematic failure rather than a unique situation: “There are still many cases where housing officers and other staff do not realize that their powers are not that great.”

This was more of a rhetorical assertion, because changing furniture was indeed within the powers of the new authorities. Nevertheless, the housing department, which consistently made efforts to follow popular sentiments, made its own investigation of the case in which members of staff had to clarify several of the arguments raised in the article: Did they drink the alcohol that had been in the flat? Was there a mess before the crew came, or did they make it? Did they damage the doors? The investigation concerned how the change of furniture had been executed, but it did not call into question the legitimacy of the whole system or the right to enter a private flat.²³

When all that was previously German was secured by the state, the state had the right to regulate the redistribution in ways that would help to build a new postwar society, based on the principles explained by Fierlinger and Nejedlý. The objects that were stored in the warehouses of the liquidation department were not all freely sold. There was a difficult system in place, regulating what could be sold to whom, and it changed over time. At the beginning, individuals could buy things only with permission from the National Committee and they needed to demonstrate why they needed them. Later the National Renewal Fund issued regulations about what could be sold freely and what was limited. For example, in November 1946 furs, new textiles, medical instruments, sheet music, cameras, and radios could not be sold freely.²⁴ There were several reasons why different objects could not be sold freely—for example, high-demand items (textiles and furs), security reasons so that not everybody could listen to foreign information services (radios), or a preference for sales to institutions (public schools for sheet music).

Some items were in higher demand, and institutions always had the right to be served first. In April 1946, the National Renewal Fund, “allowed the sale of certain types of old laundry.... [I]t is certain that, for example, towels, which are still a much sought-after commodity today, would be sold for quite expensive prices, yet this will still be cheaper than in the shops. What would happen is that we would sell out of these very quickly. It is therefore necessary first to take into account the requests for towels from schools, hospitals, spas, local authorities and so on.”²⁵ Institutions, especially those that served collectives, had a priority. This is how the ideal of a society of egalitarian masses was realized in concrete policies.

Therefore, when institutions made pleas to acquire property they put emphasis on their position in the new social order. The Regional Trade Union Council made a request to the regional branch of the National Renewal Fund for 40 sets of bedding for a hotel that was about to host workers, union members, for recreation, and this request was approved in June 1946.²⁶ Only few weeks later the same branch was much more hesitant toward a similar request from the Union Committee of Prague Theaters:

I agree, quite exceptionally, that the District National Committee in Frýdlant shall issue you forty pillowcases and four sets of sheets on condition that the appraisal price determined by an expert be paid before the issue and that a reasonable share of this price be determined by an official expert as the price for wear and tear. If the loaned items are returned, the remainder of the deposit will be refunded.²⁷

In both cases, the authority in Liberec decided that the requested items would be obtained in the neighborhood district of Frýdlant, where resettlement was proceeding more slowly and where warehouses were still full of confiscated possessions.

Using the example of linen, which was quite a desirable item, we can illustrate the principles of property distribution and how they portrayed the ideas of the new society. Collectives and institutions were meant to take precedence over individual interests. But the above example also shows a hierarchy among institutions: in a society where the working classes were at the center of society and the role of trade unions or corporate recreation was emphasized, the recreation of members of the local working class was given preferential treatment over the recreation of artists from Prague theatres.

Individuals were then also to be rewarded based on their contribution to the transformation of the social order. The guiding principle was that those most affected by the war should be entitled to the confiscated goods. This did not have to mean only material losses: it was not always only those whose flat had been bombed, for example, who were to receive something; priority was given also to those whose property had been preserved, as the symbolic status of combatant or victim was important. For example, the woman whose apartment was searched in her absence, in the above-described example of hybrid ownership, is referred to as a “war hero’s widow”²⁸ in the newspaper article that discusses her problems. Her status, according to the authors of the article, increases the culpability of the people who took the furniture she had been using: “The widow of a revolutionary fighter with children has no place in the Borderlands?”²⁹ the author of the article asked suggestively.

Individuals therefore tried to point out their own merits in the liberation of Czechoslovakia to gain material benefits. At the end of 1947, a certain Rudolf Singer was in a dispute with the housing department. Again, the issue was that Singer had moved into an apartment where a Czech settler had lived before him; the latter had taken furniture with him, even though it did not belong to him. Singer demanded that the furniture be returned to him, or rather to the flat that he was using. In addition to his statement and scathing letters, Singer supplied the housing department with a letter from the Prague headquarters of the Union of Liberated Political Prisoners. The letter explains the legislation under which Singer had a priority right to the apartment and asks “that his appeal be promptly heard and processed.”³⁰ At the same time, however, references to heroism or suffering during the war did not always entail success in material disputes: even after submitting a letter of support, the housing department was unable to secure the return of the furniture to Singer.³¹

Although the organization that sponsored Singer’s pleas was called the Union of Freed Political Prisoners, Singer may have been Jewish and may have been imprisoned during the war precisely because of his ancestry. Jewish victims of the war had problems getting their status recognized after the war. In Liberec we can illustrate this again with the example of Jews who came to the city after the war from Subcarpathian Rus. If they were not directly of Czech origin, they could apply for Czechoslovak citizenship as long as they had actively participated in the struggle against the occupation. In the case of the inhabitants of Subcarpathian Rus, this meant primarily that they had joined the foreign troops that, together with the Red Army, liberated the rest of Czechoslovakia. The very Jews who were criticized by the city council for being “inadaptable,” as described above, were among those who were especially commended for their merits in the liberation of Liberec.³² Just as the Jews were excluded from the ethnically homogeneous postwar nation, their other privileged status as “heroes” was suppressed, which was reflected locally in the fact that they could not successfully participate in the distribution of property. A request to be able to rent space for a *mikve*—Jewish ritual bath—was rejected twice by the City Council, and a request to open a kosher restaurant was approved only on condition that such a restaurant would not be used only by Jews but would be open to all inhabitants of Liberec.³³

But there is no need to go to the specific group of Jews to find a similar example; people from Slovakia also wrote to Liberec to ask for property. Slovakia, already poorer than the Czech lands and especially than the industrial Sudetenland before the war, was also more devastated by the fighting.

Ján Timko, a teacher from Sobrance in eastern Slovakia wrote to Liberec in November 1945: the school where he used to live and teach was destroyed, and his family of eleven members lacked even basic clothes.³⁴ Although he was ideally in line with the image of a man affected by the war, the liquidation department did not grant his request,³⁵ although those filed by many others like him were granted. The reason for this may have been that, despite proclamations of the superiority of war-affected people, slowly emerging local ties or even traditional assumptions about who was or was not part of the nation were more important.

Even the demand, or lack of demand, for certain kinds of things shows the contours of the new postwar society. Some items were not in high demand because of the change of ethnic structure, such as leather pants (*kožené kalhoty* or *Lederhosen*), part of the German folklore dress that became a symbol of German identity and for Czechs a symbol of German treason. They were discussed individually at a meeting of the liquidation department because there were too many of them, with zero demand.³⁶ Similarly, lists of confiscated musical instruments note numerous zithers—an instrument that is popular for the performance of German folk songs.³⁷ But because the instrument has no tradition in Czech music, zithers were not needed by individuals or institutions.

Not all types of objects could be so easily “ethnicized,” and the demand was dependent more on the overall change in social structure. One type of article for which sale was regulated was tuxedos, much like other types of objects that were not everyday necessities. However, the Liberec administration was asking the central authority, the Fund on National Renewal, to be allowed to release tuxedos for free sale. The reasoning was, “Besides a few waiters, there is no demand for tuxedos, but our warehouses are full of them.”³⁸ In prewar Reichenberg, the industrial and cultural center of the Sudeten Germans, there might have been plenty of occasions when tuxedos were needed and plenty of people who owned them, but, on the other hand, tuxedos were not the kind of item that Germans would have packed into their suitcases, which in the case of forced transfer were often limited to 50 kgs. But in the postwar, egalitarian, Czechoslovak Liberec, there was no such need. In accordance with the new vision of society, tuxedos were needed only by certain members of the working class as a part of their uniform.

But not everything symbolizing the previous bourgeois era was now to be forgotten. There was a high demand for furs in postwar Liberec. Furs were to be reported as a one of the individual categories in a questionnaire that each municipality had to deliver to the National Renewal Fund in 1946, reporting all things confiscated in a locality.³⁹ Great demand for furs was also reflected in the media: an article published in 1946 in *Svobodné slovo*, the daily newspaper of the left-leaning Czechoslovak National Socialist party, asked, “Who can buy furs today? Do we have socialist country only in theory?”⁴⁰ The author was voicing a conviction expressed by individuals in requests and complaints to the liquidation department in Liberec: in the new era, everyone should have a fur coat. This naive yet pragmatic vision of social revolution was very aptly described in Seifert’s celebration of Labor Day. Even the very authorities distributing the property referred to the democratic need for fur coats for all and their practical value. In the winter of 1946, the liquidation department asked to be able to sell the coats freely, arguing that Liberec has a harsh climate⁴¹ (folk wisdom says that “when it does not rain there it snows”; Czech: *Když neprší, tak sněží*). The sale was not permitted until May of the following year,⁴² when, as another Czech proverb says, fur coats were “as useful as sleds in summer” (*Platný jako sáně v létě*).

In reality, this democratic vision of furs for everyone was not and could not be fulfilled. When the National Property Fund was established, an inspection of the Liberec warehouses revealed major discrepancies between what was on the lists and what was actually there. A large portion of these problems can be attributed to the well-documented chaos in the liquidation department. The National Property Fund also concentrated on only one type of object: missing fur coats. Following the investigation, it became clear that they had been acquired by people high up in the hierarchy of the new Liberec society—for example, directors of departments at the Liberec City Hall and lawyers—notwithstanding the existing regulations.⁴³

The problem was that there were never enough fur coats: even though the “Slavic” newcomers envisioned a “rich German city,” the prewar Reichenberg had been stratified according to wealth and the furs that had survived the war and were confiscated could not fulfill the demands of all the newcomers. The moment that such a commodity was not available to everyone, the rules of a hierarchical society applied, whereby an object in demand again belonged only to the social elites, similar to the prewar rules.

Conclusions

The case of Reichenberg/Liberec illustrates the far-reaching extent and the great complexity of the ethnic and social transformations that took place locally in postwar Europe. However, it also shows ideas of what the new society should look like—backed up by the ideologies already described by Beneš during the war and by the revolution upending centuries-old property relations promised by Fierlinger as atonement for the battle of the White Mountain.

These nationalist ideas had, in fact, a long history since the 19th century, but they were taken up by the Communist Party in early postwar period. Fierlinger (formerly chief of Social Democrats) himself became a member of Communist Party and therefore participated on execution of the promised atonement.⁴⁴

Despite that politicians tried to deliver the ideas of the brave new world, these promises were not fully realized. The ways in which they failed were not accidental and correspond to the ideas and possibilities that different groups of the city’s inhabitants had under scrutiny at the time. The national revolution was facilitated by the Czech-German binary that had shaped Czech politics since the 1880s. Its main principle was to seize everything that belonged to Germans. Although in the postwar reality of Reichenberg/Liberec it was often difficult to determine the nationality of people as well as things, the Czechoslovak administration nevertheless interpreted even borderline cases in terms of this simple dichotomy. It served as an ethnic and cultural criterion, and the actual citizenship of the owners did not really matter: those who had been part of Reichenberg/Liberec society and spoke German before the war were considered “Germans” regardless of their actual citizenship. As the examples adduced here show, this included people who held Austrian, Armenian, or Dutch citizenship.

Postwar declarations justified the property confiscation as a punishment for the war but also as a compensation for the long-standing property disparity between Czechs and Germans. In the local context, the simpler idea of a centuries-old conflict, bearing marks of a racial ideology, prevailed, and individual responsibility did not matter. One example is the case described herein of the bank director Gustav Schmid, who tried to protect his property by proffering evidence of his past anti-Nazi activities and his Austrian citizenship but remained simply a German to the Czech authorities.

Moreover, the persistence of the aforementioned Czech-German binary meant that despite the postwar rhetoric of the “Slavic resettlement” of the former Sudetenland, newcomers who were not specifically Czech were regarded as a potential danger and were not entitled to an equal share in the property redistribution. This applied to Slovaks but especially to Subcarpathian Jews, whose right to obtain and use former German property was often challenged.

The social revolution was even more complex because the framework according to which the local realities could be shaped was not so well defined. The main principle of the social revolution in the area of property management was that confiscation and redistribution should be carried out by the state and its institutions. Contrary to the beliefs about who was German and how their property should be distributed, the role of the dominant state was not understood by all actors, as indicated by the number of criminal acts in which people wanted to seize confiscated property.

Another tactic that was used by individuals and organizations was to request objects from confiscated property and to justify their demand for these scarce goods because of their desired position in the new social order. In the postwar social order, collective interests took precedence over individual interests. Therefore, institutions had priority in the allocation of property. Individuals, on the other hand, could appeal primarily to their social status or to their past activities

during the war. However, in the distribution of goods to individuals, it was the criteria that had been important before the war that still applied in practice: it was still easier for those who were higher ranked and more privileged to obtain scarce objects than it was for ordinary workers.

Therefore, the primacy and simplicity of the national revolution for the new inhabitants is evidenced by the fact that ethnicity overshadowed other traits that were supposed to guarantee a preferential right to property, especially involvement in the war. This applied to Germans, Slovaks, and especially Jews.

Therefore, I argue that the ethnic, economic, and social changes that occurred in the Czechoslovak Borderlands after 1945 normalized and in turn paved the way for the changes in the social structure that occurred after the communist takeover in 1948. The volume of property that changed hands was greater, as was social mobility. In redistributing necessary personal and daily items, the state institutions intervened in the intimate sphere of a larger spectrum of people, as they intended to regulate the flow of confiscated and redistributed property.

But the social revolution was not exactly happening according to ideological assumptions. The distribution at the local level was racialized—that is, ethnicity was more important than class. At the same time, the distribution and use of property also reproduced some inequalities and cultural practices rather than serving as a vehicle for the construction of a new society.

And so, much as in Jaroslav Seifert's poem, ideology and ordinary material needs intertwined in the construction of the new world. Eventually, however, it was something other than what Seifert had imagined. Instead of a brave new world born out of the ashes of the Second World War, it was a world put together out of the same old pieces that were left behind by the expelled population.

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Notes

- 1 Státní okresní archiv Liberec, SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Usnesení, May 11, 1945. If not stated otherwise, all sources were translated from Czech by the author.
- 2 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Usnesení, May 11, 1945.
- 3 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Vydání majetku rak.přisl.G.Schmidta, January 1, 1947.
- 4 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Gustav Schmidt- Žádost o vydání stříbrných předmětů, May 7, 1945.
- 5 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Gustav Schmidt- Žádost o vydání stříbrných předmětů, May 7, 1945.
- 6 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 272, Pletichy způsobilé rušit konfiskaci, March 4, 1946.
- 7 Státní okresní archiv Liberec, SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, Kniha zápisů ze schůzí likvidační komise, inv.nr. 91, Zápis o schůzi likvidační komise, March 5, 1946.
- 8 Státní okresní archiv Liberec, SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, May 14, 1947.
- 9 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, no date.
- 10 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Heidrich Heřman něm.příslušník v Liberci- zabavení stříbrným pam. mincí, April 28, 1946.
- 11 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Vyšetřování stížnosti holandského státního příslušníky Ing. J.K.Scholze, October 11, 1945.

- 12 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 271, November 22, 1945.
- 13 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 274, Žádost za poskytnutí nějakého šatstva, November 27, 1945.
- 14 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 271, Mimořádný poukaz, November 29, 1945.
- 15 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270, Vyšetřování stížnosti holandského státního příslušníky Ing. J.K.Scholze, October 11, 1945.
- 16 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 271, no date
- 17 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 271, Serafiannová Sonja- odvázení bytového zařízení z bytu v Liberci, October 18, 1945.
- 18 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 272, Pletichy způsobilé rušit konfiskaci, March 4, 1946.
- 19 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, Zápisy ze schůzí ÚNV 1945–1946, inv.nr. 44, February 11, 1946.
- 20 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 274, Neoprávněné obsazení bytu, April 26, 1946.
- 21 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 274, František Kunc- Ztráta zabavených svršků, May 8, 1947.
- 22 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, Mladá fronta, Neuvěřitelné chování bytového úřadu v Liberci, August 23, 1947.
- 23 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, no date.
- 24 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, November 11, 1946.
- 25 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, no date.
- 26 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 269, Žádost ROH v Liberci za propůjčení prádla na zotavovací akci dělníků, June 3, 1946.
- 27 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, Přidělení ložního prádla a radiopřijímače do ubytovny, June 6, 1946.
- 28 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, Mladá fronta, Neuvěřitelné chování bytového úřadu v Liberci, August 23, 1947.
- 29 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 269, Mladá fronta, Neuvěřitelné chování bytového úřadu v Liberci, August 23, 1947.
- 30 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 274, December 9, 1947.
- 31 SOKA, Městský národní výbor, inv.nr. 274.
- 32 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, Zápisy ze schůzí ÚNV 1945–1946, inv.nr. 44, Zápis, January 9, 1947.
- 33 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, Zápisy ze schůzí ÚNV 1945- 1946, inv.nr. 44, Zápis, February 11, 1946.
- 34 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 274, November 9, 1945.
- 35 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 274, November 20, 1945.
- 36 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, Kniha zápisů ze schůzí likvidační komise, inv.nr. 92, Zápis o schůzi, January 30, 1946.
- 37 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 269, Sklad národního majetku (Matiční škola)- Soupis zboží, March 11, 1946.
- 38 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 269. September 5, 1946.
- 39 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270. Prodej kožišinového zboží po Němcích, September 19, 1946.
- 40 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270. Pokorný, Ladislav. Kdo může dnes kupovat kožichy? Svobodné slovo, November 22, 1946.
- 41 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 269, October 30, 1946.
- 42 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 269, no date.
- 43 SOKA, Městský národní výbor Liberec, inv.nr. 270. Vyjádření k přípisu likvidačního oddělení, June 24, 1946.
- 44 Political tranformation of Zdeněk Fierlinger was described by Kaplan, Karel (2011).

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