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Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the post-war development of the State – historical overview

Chair:

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The main features of occupation policy in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the rest of the Czech Lands

When Nazi German troops occupied the interior of the Czech Lands in March 1939, the invasion marked the beginning of over six years of occupation which would last until the final days of the Second World War in Europe. On the basis of a decree issued by Hitler, the occupying authorities established an entity named the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; however, despite its proclaimed autonomy, the Protectorate was in fact entirely controlled by the German Reich, and the Reich's actions proved decisive for the fate of the Czech nation. When researching this period, however, we should not neglect the fact that there were other parts of the Czech Lands which lay outside the Protectorate throughout the war, as the Nazis had seized them from Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1938, before the invasion of what remained of the country. This seizure was a consequence of the Munich Agreement, which enabled Nazi Germany to annex the border areas in the historical provinces of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia; the Agreement was forced upon the Czechoslovak Republic, and ultimately led to the state's disintegration and demise. In September 1939 the Polish-occupied part of Těšín (Teschen/Cieszyn) Silesia were taken by Germany; from this point on, the entire territory of the Czech Lands (both the border regions and the interior) came under the direct control of the Third Reich. My paper will briefly outline these historic events, as they had an influence on the specific manifestations of the policies implemented by the occupying authorities – policies whose consequences are the subject of this conference.

The border regions of the Czech Lands were split into five administrative units which were incorporated into the neighbouring regions of the German Reich. The sixth administrative unit was established as an independent subdivision of the Reich, the Reichsgau Sudetenland. The situation "on the ground" differed somewhat among the various annexed regions – not only in terms of the national/ethnic composition and status of the local population, but also in terms of the methods of Germanization applied, the overall policies

implemented by the occupying authorities, the forms of resistance against the occupiers, and the number of victims of the occupation and the wartime events as a whole. The annexed border regions were incorporated into the Reich's administrative systems as follows.

The South Moravian border region (a broad strip of land from Břeclav/Lundenburg to Slavonice/Zlabings) and the south-eastern part of Bohemia (around Nová Bystřice/Neubistritz) were incorporated into what had formerly been Austria; after the Anschluss it had become the Gau Niederdonau (Lower Danube Gau). Local authorities known as Landräte were established in the towns of Znojmo (Znaim), Mikulov (Nikolsburg) and Nová Bystřice (Neubistritz), but several dozen communities were incorporated into the Reich Landräte of Waidhofen an der Thaya and Horn. Znojmo had a Gestapo office and a Regional Court subordinated to the Supreme Provincial Court in Vienna. The capital of the Gau (which also incorporated small areas of Slovak territory – Devín/Theben and Petržalka/Engerau) was originally intended to be Krems; however, the Gau authorities were located in Vienna, and remained there throughout the war.

The Gau Oberdonau (Upper Danube Gau) gained some territory from South Bohemia: the mountainous border area from the Šumava (Böhmerwald) mountains in the west to the Nové Hradky mountains (Gratzener Bergland) in the east (i.e. the entire Czechoslovak judicial districts of Vyšší Brod, Nové Hradky and Horní Planá), plus parts of seven other judicial districts. The town of České Velenice and the Vitoraz (Weitra) area (which had been given to the Czechoslovak Republic under the Treaty of Saint-Germain in 1919) came under the control of the Austrian town of Gmünd. Landräte were established in the towns of Český Krumlov (Krumau) and Kaplice (Kaplitz). The former District Courts were subordinated to the Regional Court and Supreme Provincial Court in Linz, which was the capital of the Gau Oberdonau.

The border areas of south-west Bohemia (the central part of the Šumava mountains and the piedmont region known as Pošumaví) were incorporated into the Gau Bayerische Ostmark, which in 1942 was renamed the Gau Bayreuth. Landräte were established in Kašperské Hory (Bergreichenstein), Prachatice (Prachatitz) and Železná Ruda (Markt Eisenstein). Several communities in the Chodsko (Chodenland) region (including seven villages with mainly Czech populations), which were annexed in November 1938

(shortly after the main annexation of the border regions), were incorporated into the German Landrat of Waldmünchen. The capital city of the Gau was Bayreuth; the District Courts were subordinated to the Regional Court in Deggendorf and the Supreme Provincial Court in Munich.

In the north-east of the Czech Lands, the area around Hlučín (Hultschin), between Ostrava (Ostrau) and Opava (Troppau), was incorporated directly into the German Reich. After the Habsburgs' defeat in the Prussian-Austrian war (1742), this territory had come under the control of Prussian Silesia; it remained part of Prussia for almost two centuries, until 1920, when the Treaty of Versailles allocated it to Czechoslovakia. In 1938 it was "returned" to Prussian Silesia, being incorporated the District of Ratibor (now Racibórz, Poland), in the Government District (Regierungsbezirk) of Oppeln (now Opole), part of the Provinz Schlesien, whose capital was Breslau (now Wrocław); in 1941 the province was split into two parts, and the Hlučín area became part of Upper Silesia (Provinz Oberschlesien, with its capital in Kattowitz/Katowice).

The last part of the Czech Lands to be incorporated into the German Reich was the territory in Těšín (Cieszyn/Teschen) Silesia that had formerly been part of Czechoslovakia before its seizure by Poland. This was a broad swathe of territory running along what is now the Czech-Polish border, from Bohumín through Karviná, Český Těšín and Třinec to Jablunkov. Under pressure following the Munich Agreement, the Czechoslovak government caved into Polish demands for this territory, and ceded it to Poland in October 1938. A year later, when Poland had been conquered by Nazi Germany, the Těšín (Cieszyn/Teschen) region formed part of the "Eastern territories" that were incorporated into the German Reich (October 1939). The Polish districts of Frysztat and Cieszyn were merged to form the Kreis Teschen, which ranked among the largest districts in the Reich in terms of both area and population. Like the Hlučín (Hultschin) area, the Kreis Teschen became part of the Reich province of Silesia (Provinz Schlesien), though it was controlled from the Regierungsbezirk of Kattowitz; from 1941 it was part of the province of Upper Silesia (Provinz Oberschlesien). The Regional Court in Teschen was subordinated to the Supreme Provincial Court in Breslau, and later in Kattowitz; the city of Kattowitz, as well as Bielitz (now Bielsko), also had Nazi "special courts" (Sondergerichte) and Gestapo field courts (the Gestapo also had an office in Teschen).

The largest administrative unit in the occupied border regions was the Reichsgau Sudetenland; it accounted for the majority of the territory seized from Czechoslovakia (78%) and also the majority of the population (82%). Unlike the other areas seized by the Nazis, this territory was not incorporated into neighbouring German Gaue or provinces; instead an entirely new Gau was created, which from the very outset was conceived as a “model” Reichsgau. This decision had no historical precedent, as the borders of the Bohemian Crown Lands had remained unchanged for a thousand years prior to the annexation. The new Gau was an artificial construct; it was too long and narrow, and its western and eastern parts were actually separated by a salient of Bohemian territory. The new Gau covered mainly mountainous and upland areas of the border regions, including an area stretching from south-western Bohemia (the Chodsko region) to the vicinity of Pilsen (Plzeň), the entire north-western part of Bohemia and the Erzgebirge (Krušné hory) mountains, the Riesengebirge (Krkonosé) mountains in the north, as well as other North Bohemian upland areas reaching into the interior of Bohemia as far as the towns Leitmeritz (Litoměřice) and Saaz (Žatec). The eastern part of the Gau incorporated the areas around Zwittau (Svitavy) and Mährisch Trübau (Moravská Třebová), the Altvatergebirge (Jeseníky Mountains), and other upland areas of North Moravia and Silesia, reaching along the broad Oder (Odra) River valley (known as the “Moravian Gate”) as far as the city of Ostrava (Ostrau).

The Gau’s administrative structure was on three levels. The highest level was represented by the Reich Governor (Reichsstatthalter), whose office was in Reichenberg (Liberec). Below this level were three Government Districts (Regierungsbezirke), each headed by its own Government President (Regierungspräsident): the Regierungsbezirk Eger (Cheb), whose offices were in Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary); the Regierungsbezirk Aussig (Ústí nad Labem), and the Regierungsbezirk Troppau (Opava). The lowest level of the structure consisted of units called Kreise, each with its own local authority (Landrat), which appointed the local mayor. This administrative system was based on the model used in the Reich, including the close integration of state structures with the Nazi Party and the Führer-principle replacing the idea of devolved local government. The police and judicial authorities were not subordinated to the Reichsstatthalter, but were instead controlled directly by the Reich. The court of the highest instance in the Gau was the Supreme Provincial Court in Leitmeritz (Litoměřice), which was controlled by the Reich Ministry of Justice.

There was also a “special court” (Sondergericht) in Leitmeritz, with two more Sondergerichte operating at the Regional Courts in Eger (Cheb) and Troppau (Opava). For the purposes of our research into looted property, it is important to bear in mind that the tax and customs authorities were also controlled directly from the Reich; the office of the Oberfinanzpräsident in Troppau, which was subordinated to the Reich Finance Ministry, was responsible for all tax and customs authorities in the Regierungsbezirk Troppau, as well as in part of the Prussian province of Upper Silesia. Up to 1942 there was a similar office in Karlsbad, which was responsible for the tax and customs authorities in the Regierungsbezirke Eger and Aussig; however, these were then brought under the control of the Oberfinanzpräsidenten in Dresden, Nuremberg and Munich.

This was the (considerably varied) situation in those parts of the Czech Lands which fell outside the control of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. From a legal and administrative perspective, the establishment of the Protectorate itself was an act of unprecedented aggression. The introduction of a dual administrative system – with on the one hand the Protectorate as an autonomous entity, including its own government and president, but on the other hand the presence of the Nazi occupying authorities, headed by the Reich Protector and the Secretary of State, whose role was to ensure that German interests were prioritized – was motivated by a desire to conceal from the international community the Nazis’ real goal: the complete incorporation of the Czech Lands into the German Reich. The first successful step towards achieving this goal was the seizure of the border regions (Sudetenland), which made up 38% of the total area of the Czech Lands (almost 30,000 km²) and 36% of their population (over 3.5 million people). Many industries were thus annexed by the Reich, including strategically important coalfields, metallurgical and mechanical engineering works, chemical plants and power plants, as well as glassworks, textile mills and paper factories. All of Czechoslovakia’s major banks and financial institutions lost control of their branches in the seized territories, which were either liquidated or incorporated into the Reich banking system. The new borders also caused difficulties for the transport network – railways, roads and river transport.

This situation made it all the easier for the occupying authorities to ensure that the Protectorate developed a strong dependency on the Reich, as German monopolies gradually gained control over the entire Czech economy.

An important contributing factor to this dependency was the customs union between the Protectorate and the Reich, as well as the incorporation of the Protectorate into the Reich's war economy. The ultimate goal was the complete dissolution of the Protectorate and the incorporation of its territory into the neighbouring German Gaue; this aim was already foreshadowed within the Protectorate by the incorporation of the Nazi Party's internal organizational structures into those of the Reichsgaue Sudetenland, Bayerische Ostmark, Oberdonau and Unterdonau. Moreover, from the very outset, those Czechs in the Protectorate who were deemed a threat to the security of the Reich were not tried in the Protectorate itself, but instead at the Reich Court in Leipzig and the People's Courts (Volksgerichtshöfe) in Berlin, Dresden, Leitmeritz, Breslau and Vienna.

The laws and regulations applied by the Nazi authorities and the German administration in the seized border areas (which became part of the Reich) differed considerably from the laws and regulations of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the Nazi authorities in all parts of the Czech Lands (whether the Protectorate or the Reich itself) were all pursuing the same goal: the elimination of the Jewish population, the complete Germanization of part of the local Czech population (or the Polish population, in the Teschen region) and the expulsion or elimination of the remaining part of the local population, all while maintaining uninterrupted production in order to feed the Reich's war economy. These goals could not be achieved rapidly – especially due to the lack of a suitable labour force to support the Reich's programme of "total war". Ultimately, the course of the war would make it impossible for the Nazis to achieve their goals.

Knowledge of the specific features of the Nazis' policies and actions in of what is now the Czech Republic – which I have outlined in this paper – is an essential basis for research into how the Nazi authorities proceeded in various parts of the occupied Czech Lands when confiscating and stealing works of art.



Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and Czech Border regions affiliated to the German Reich (as of 21. 9. 1939)