

*Jiřík, Václav: Nedaleko od Norimberku. Z dějin Mimořádného lidového soudu v Chebu v letech 1946 až 1948 [Not far from Nuremberg. From the History of the Extraordinary People's Court in Cheb, 1946-1948].*

Svět křidel, Cheb 2000, 727 pp. Illustrations, references, appendices, indexes, and bibliography.

In 1939 a mere 18000 Czechs lived amidst 780000 Germans in the Cheb (Eger) region of western Bohemia. Following the Nazis' defeat the Czechoslovak government expelled almost all of those Germans who had not already fled and thousands of new Czech settlers moved to the area. In the process a traditionally German region became Czech. While the train station witnessed the collective removal of masses based on nationality, the town's courthouse hosted individual investigations into guilt and innocence. In the first three years after the war the Cheb People's Court tried more than two thousand defendants for the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators. In "Nedaleko od Norimberku", Václav Jiřík has written an impressive study of that court and those trials.

The Cheb court was just one of 24 such tribunals established by the postwar Czechoslovak government to punish "Nazi criminals, traitors, and their accomplices". But in one important way it stood out: while throughout Bohemia and Moravia nearly two in five defendants were Czech, Jiřík has determined that the Cheb court tried only 47 Czechs (plus another 40 persons from mixed-marriages). Aside from treason cases dating from 1938, the overwhelmingly German wartime population meant that most trials also relied on the testimony of German witnesses. As the expulsion progressed, however, German victims became less and less willing to cooperate with the Czech courts.

The first three sections of the book are devoted to the prosecution of a wide range of offenses, classified according to defendants' occupations. From NSDAP functionaries to SS officers, from Sondergericht judges to Sicherheitsdienst agents, the Cheb court examined the entire local Nazi apparatus and punished hundreds of local

Germans with sentences ranging from a few months to death. Amidst rich portrayals of individual trials, the reader will find valuable descriptions of the Gestapo's local structure and its *modus operandi*. One fascinating if horrifying subsection is devoted to the prosecution of 20 female concentration camp guards, most of them originally from the Cheb area (pp. 324-342).

In the fourth section, Jiřík presents in depth what he terms the "Great Cases from 1938", trials for treason committed against Czechoslovakia during the tumultuous weeks surrounding the Munich Pact. In all the Cheb court tried 333 defendants for 1938 crimes – the second most common offense after membership in the SA. In particular, the court prosecuted dozens of former *Sudetendeutsche Partei* members for attempted putsches against local Czechoslovak officials on the evening of September 12/13, 1938. One case alone, the deadly but ultimately unsuccessful attack on the Habartov (Habesbirk) police station, accounted for a third of the death sentences handed down by the court (pp. 413-417). The book's detailed reconstruction of trial testimony offers a new, ground-level perspective on the September 1938 dismemberment of Czechoslovakia that complements countless diplomatic histories of the period.

The book's value to historians is further augmented by a nearly 60-page table listing each defendant, his/her date and place of birth, nationality, profession, date of arrest and trial, and sentence. The reader may wish that the author had more thoroughly analyzed the information himself, but the researcher will welcome the provision of case number and archive carton for each and every defendant. Despite borrowings by the secret police and the ravages of time, the court records are extraordinarily complete: only 50 of the 2037 case files are missing today. The book also offers 40 pages of photographs, but lacks a map.

Jiřík's thorough research has revealed clear cases of injustice. Many German defendants testified that they had been forced to confess under police brutality. Others complained that they could not understand the proceedings, carried out in Czech. Several verdicts clearly raise questions about the court's fairness. For example, the Cheb court convicted Andreas (Ondřej) Wurdack, a German teacher, even though he had been purged, arrested, and continually harassed by the Nazis for his anti-fascist beliefs. To escape persecution Wurdack had joined the SA, but after the war the locals had appointed him mayor because of his anti-fascist credentials. Although Czechs were willing to testify for him, the court refused to hear witnesses and sentenced him to 16 months in prison (p. 183).

Nonetheless, there is also considerable evidence to the Cheb court's thoroughness and fairness. Although some trials were clearly rushed affairs, others relied on extensive testimony by multiple witnesses in addition to that of the defendant. Jiřík illustrates numerous cases where Czechs stepped forward to testify for accused Germans, where defense lawyers vigorously (though often unsuccessfully) represented their clients, and where the court was persuaded by defendant's interpretation of events. In contrast to Wurdack, the judges acquitted another defendant who claimed that he had joined the Gestapo to save his family from persecution (p. 40-42). The court also justifiably punished war criminals, like the former director of the Bohemia factory in Nová Role (Neu Rohlau) who viciously ruled over the local con-

centration camp and sent 500 prisoners to their deaths in a forced march at the end of the war (pp. 239-244).

But the court did not always have the final say. The NKVD absconded with suspects without permission or even warning; the Czech secret police (StB) also seized records and withheld evidence from judges. Defendants from the town of Jáchymov (Joachimstal), with its uranium mines firmly in Soviet hands, remained largely beyond the court's control (pp. 129-130, 228). In general, so-called "specialists" – skilled German workers exempted from the expulsion – were judged benevolently, if they were ever tried at all. Just days before the Cheb court wrapped up its operations in May 1947, it rapidly acquitted 12 miners and 8 porcelain workers, many of whom offered suspiciously identical defenses (p. 277).

At nearly 600 pages of text, "*Nedaleko od Norimberku*" is not a quick read, but it is an inexhaustible source of human drama and historical evidence. In the introduction Jiřík immediately stresses the value of the court records for reconstructing the wartime past; much the same could be said of his book. It is a fascinating window onto life in the Cheb region during the Second World War and its aftermath.