

*Kovařík, David: Proměny českého pohraničí v letech 1958-1960. Demoliční akce v českém pohraničí se zřetelem k vývoji od roku 1945 [Change in the Czech Borderlands 1958-1960. The Dismantling Program in the Czech Borderlands, in Particular Developments Since 1945].*

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Academic and popular interest in the post-war fate of the Czechoslovak borderlands has been steadily growing since the 1990s. Following the expulsion of close to three million Germans in 1945 and 1946, Czechoslovak officials struggled to repopulate the cleansed borderlands with Czechs, Slovaks, and others. Though it was successful in many cities and towns, hundreds of villages remained partially or entirely empty of human inhabitants. Abandoned structures littered the borderlands well after the Communist seizure of power in 1948, posing what the communist government considered a safety and security hazard. The 1950 creation of a two kilometer security zone along the borders of Austria and the two Germanies added to the stock of ruins, which numbered in the tens of thousands by the mid-1950s. In this short, but thorough book, David Kovařík outlines the efforts of the Czechoslovak administration to inventory and then demolish the remainders of the former population in the borderlands.

During and after the expulsion of Germans in 1945/46, the Czechoslovak Settlement Office (Osídlovací úřad) directed new settlement to strategic industrial cities and the most fertile farmland of the borderlands. It proved much harder to entice settlers to populate remote and mountainous areas that ringed the borders with the Germanies, Poland, and Austria. As Kovařík points out, the former German inhabitants had over generations carved out narrow economic and cultural niches in those often hardscrabble regions. Czech and Slovak settlers had little taste for or knowledge of the local ecologies and economies of the mountainous borderlands, instead gravitating to adjacent lowlands where jobs were plentiful and property more valuable. Aware that there was little hope of settling many of the borderland villages, the Settlement Office worked with other agencies to develop new uses for them, including for military purposes and reforestation. The related National Land Fund (Národní pozemkový fond) was charged with removing relicts of settlement on agricultural land, but it proved unable to muster the bureaucratic or financial means necessary to undertake large-scale demolition.

With the heightening of Cold War tension in 1950, the government created the two kilometer border security zone and turned the demolition mandate over to the Ministry of Interior (Ministerstvo vnitra), whose internal security role made it the most effective bureaucratic force in Czechoslovakia. The Interior Ministry began demolition efforts in 1952, though most ruins still remained after efforts ceased in 1953. A second wave of demolitions occurred in 1957, though the vast majority came in 1959/60. Ironically, technological advances and easing international tensions made border security less of a concern in the late 1950s. Instead, Communist officials were more worried about international public opinion, as tourists visiting from Austria and West Germany were publishing pictures of abandoned and decaying structures

located in the former Sudetenland. The 1959/60 demolitions focused first on structures bordering Austria and visible from highways and railroads connecting to Austria, East Germany, and West Germany. During this third wave of demolitions, work brigades leveled 37698 structures, at tremendous cost, both financial and human. Some, but nowhere near all, of the cost was recovered by selling off salvaged materials. On the whole, the Interior Ministry considered this last push a success. Kovařík is more doubtful, noting that structures continued to decay in the borderlands, due to a shortage of population, inadequate investment in infrastructure, and enduring poverty.

This book is a useful, though limited, resource for scholars of the post-war resettlement of the Czechoslovak borderlands. It is primarily a bureaucratic history of the efforts to inventory and then remove abandoned structures. It contains a helpful collection of documents, in addition to a wealth of statistics. It does a good job elucidating a small, but important, piece of the much larger story of the post-war social, economic, political, and demographic transformation of Czechoslovakia's borderlands. It will be of note primarily to scholars and lay readers with a specialized interest in the borderlands.