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“MOUNTAIN MEN” ON “IRON HORSES”:
NATIONAL SPACE IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF
NEW RAILWAY LINES IN INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA

When Czechoslovakia was founded in October 1918, only one main line connected Slovakia with the Bohemian lands: the privately owned railway between Slovak Košice (Kassa, Kaschau) and Silesian Bohumín (Oderberg). The British historian Robert William Seton-Watson summed up the transport situation succinctly in 1924: “When the revolution came, Slovakia and ‘the historic lands’ were like two badly joined fragments”.¹ By the late 1930s, the railways in Czechoslovakia were an integrated, overwhelmingly state-owned network that offered reliable transportation between all parts of the country. Railway lines branched off from the core connection that traversed the country, running from Cheb (Eger) in western Bohemia via Prague and Košice to Jasiňa (Kőrösmező, Yasinia) in the easternmost corner of Carpathian Ruthenia. The transformation of the Habsburg infrastructure into a Czechoslovak national railway network mainly consisted of constructing links between existing lines. It was often improvised and haphazard; in Ruthenia, for instance, the previously Hungarian main line crossed the Tisa river and for several kilometres ran on Romanian territory before returning to the Czechoslovak side (travellers from Czechoslovakia had to stay on the train, but were not subject to customs or passport controls). Nonetheless, by 1938 the Bohemian lands, Slovakia, and Carpathian Ruthenia were well connected by the railway infrastructure.

“Work on National Space”:
Building a Railway Network in Interwar Czechoslovakia

The creation of a Czechoslovak national railway network was part of a process that the historian Peter Haslinger calls “work on national space” (*Arbeit am nationalen Raum*). Haslinger argues that a shared conception of the national territory was indispensable to create a mass national consciousness. The borders of this national space were not predetermined but had to be created through communication. When this discursive process was successful, he suggests, a nation and its space became intertwined to such an extent as to be synonymous:

As a rule, nation and territory are correlated on all relevant levels of communication. This makes it impossible to clearly differentiate between the two components. Only this discursive entanglement creates the shared conviction that the nation would cease to exist without “its” characteristic and stable space.²

¹ Seton-Watson, Robert W.: *The New Slovakia*. Prague 1924, 81.

² Haslinger, Peter: „Die Arbeit am nationalen Raum“ – Kommunikation und Territorium im Prozess der Nationalisierung. In: Haslinger / Mollenhauer, Daniel (eds.): „Arbeit am natio-

The creation of a national railway network was “work on national space” at its most non-metaphorical level: workers built railways to make travel within the country possible. By creating a network of transport connections, the Czechoslovak government thus also created a national space. The subject of this article is the discourse that went hand in hand with the physical transformation of the landscape. I will consider the opening ceremonies of new railways and new construction projects as discursive events that shaped not only the Czechoslovak public’s view of the railway network but also of their country’s territory and landscape. After giving an introduction to recurring themes, I deal in more detail with the opening of the railway between the central Slovak towns of Handlová (Nyitrabánya/Handlova, Krickerhau) and Horná Štubňa (Felsőstübnya, Oberstuben) on 20 December 1931.

By examining the image of Czechoslovakia expressed in the railway discourse, this article highlights the construction programme’s focus on the country’s former Hungarian east. When the Minister of Railways Václav Burger laid out the tasks of his department in 1921, he put the greatest stress on the construction of a “Central Slovak main line” (*Středoslovenská transversála*), which would run the length of Carpathian Ruthenia and Slovakia, thereby offering more connections to the well-developed network of the Bohemian lands:

The fact that our state railway network was built in the interest of the centralizing efforts of Vienna and Budapest became clear immediately after the revolution. [...] Railway lines that run along the longitudinal axis of the republic are inadequate in number and, in addition, are predominantly of weak construction and lack the facilities necessary for heavy use. [...] Slovakia, especially its eastern part, must be economically attached to the motherland [k mateřským zemím].³

An investment programme for the construction of this main line had already been passed by the parliament on 30 March 1920.⁴ It specified the construction of fifteen lines totalling 560 kilometres of new track within the next five years, of which ten were projected in Slovakia, two in Carpathian Ruthenia, one each in Moravia and Silesia, and one was to cross the border between Slovakia and Moravia. No new line was proposed for Bohemia. Although only nine of the planned lines were built (and

nalén Raum“. Deutsche und polnische Rand- und Grenzregionen im Nationalisierungsprozess. Leipzig 2005, 9-21, here 11.

³ Národní archiv České republiky [National Archives of the Czech Republic, hereafter NA], Fond Československá ústřední rada železniční [Czechoslovak Central Railway Council], Karton 1, Burger’s speech, 1921, 1-2, 6. – The speech given to the Czechoslovak Central Railway Council, an advisory body to the ministry, was published in the same year as: O vývoji a úkolech československého železničnictví [On the Development and Tasks of the Czechoslovak Railways]. Praha 1921.

⁴ Zákon ze dne 30. března 1920 o stavbě nových železničních drah na státní útraty a stanovení stavebního a investičního programu na léta 1921 až včetně 1925, číslo [č.] 235 [Law of 30 March 1920 on the construction of new railway lines at public expense and establishment of a programme of construction and investment for the years 1921 to 1925, number 235], Sbírnka zákonů republiky Československé [Body of Law of the Czechoslovak Republic]. Praha 1920, 524-526.

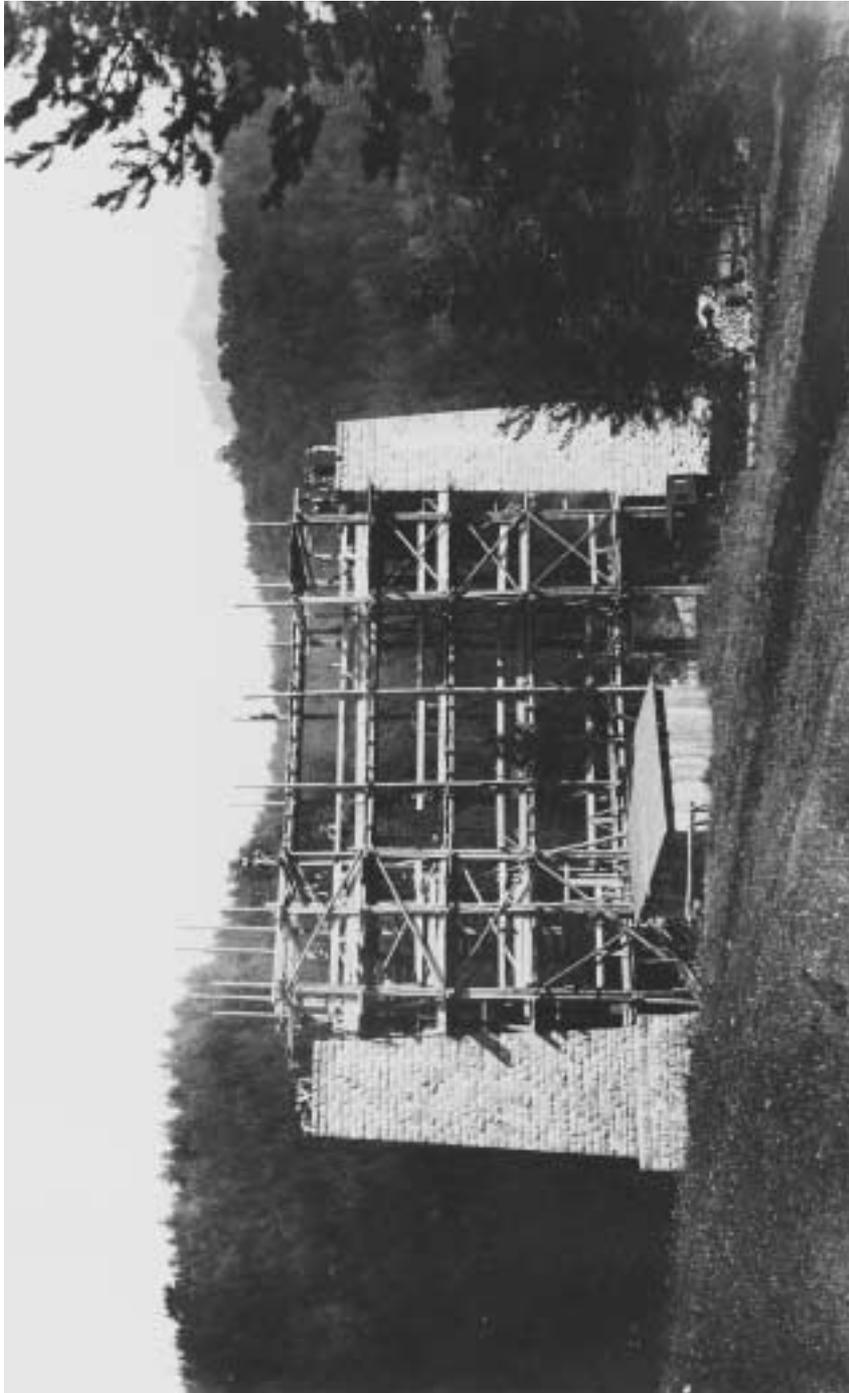


Fig. 1: Railway viaduct under construction in the countryside on the Handlová–Horná Štubňa line.

none within the original time frame), the programme nevertheless represented one of the largest construction projects in the country.⁵ Before mass motorization and the widespread construction of motorways, developing a railway network in Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia was an integral part of physical and discursive “work on national space”.

In Celebration of Czechoslovak Unity: Opening Ceremonies

The investment programme of 1920 came to fruition in the late 1920s and during the 1930s with official ceremonies marking the opening of new railway lines or new construction works becoming frequent events. They featured speeches by the minister of railways and other dignitaries, performances by local choirs or other artistic groups, receptions offering food and drink, and special trains that gave the guests the opportunity to inspect the new line. With newly built stations and other representative buildings decorated festively in the national colours, they were semi-official holidays for the local population, who dressed in folk costume or their Sunday best and who used the opportunity to showcase their local culture to a usually distant state elite. The ceremonies were also well attended by the press, which turned them into events of national significance. Film crews captured the openings for newsreels and gave cinema audiences in Czechoslovakia’s urban centres the opportunity to see with their own eyes the landscape of their homeland, now easily accessible by train.⁶ The Czechoslovak State Railways’ (ČSD) advertising slogan throughout the inter-war period was “Discover your homeland!” (*Poznejte svou vlast!*).⁷ The coverage of the new railways likewise invited Czechoslovaks to go on a patriotic journey – without having to leave their home.

The ceremonies celebrated the new railway lines as expressions of the unity of the Czechoslovak nation. They were presented as material confirmations of a brother-

⁵ These were Bánovce nad Ondavou–Vajany (opened 20 October 1921), Zvolen–Krupina (16 January 1925), Petrkovice–Hlučín (15 June 1925), Vsetín–Bylnice–Brumov (21 October 1928), Veselí nad Moravou–Nové Mesto nad Váhom (1 September 1929), Handlová–Horná Štubňa (20 December 1931), Červená Skála–Margecany (26 July 1936), Horní Lideč–Púchov nad Váhom (2 May 1937), and Zlaté Moravce–Zbehy (1 May 1938). The construction of a further two lines was started in this period and finished during the Second World War: Banská Bystrica–Diviaky (19 December 1940) and Kapušany–Strážske (5 September 1943). Most of these lines formed part of the Central Slovak main line or connected it to the Moravian railway network. The Veselí–Nové Mesto link offered access to Prague from the north via Olomouc, while the Púchov–Horní Lideč line connected to Brno and from there to Prague. For the dates, see *Štěpán, Miloslav: Přehledné dějiny československých železnic 1824-1948 [Concise History of the Czechoslovak Railways 1824-1948]. Praha 1958, 194-202.*

⁶ The Národní filmový archiv [National Film Archives] in Prague holds newsreels on the construction and/or opening of the following lines: Vsetín–Bylnice (1928), Handlová–Horná Štubňa (1931), Červená Skála–Margecany (1936), and Zbehy–Zlaté Moravce (1938). Correspondence with Jitka Kohoutová at the archive, 9 May 2013.

⁷ *Štemberk, Jan: Vývojové trendy v cestovním ruchu v meziválečné ČSR [Trends in the Development of Tourism in Interwar Czechoslovakia]. In: Cestování včera a dnes 4 (2007) 2, 62-64, here 62.*

hood that had always existed, but which the Austrian and Hungarian authorities had artificially suppressed. The construction of a Czechoslovak national railway system was seen as a necessity in order to rectify the unnatural mutual isolation of Czechs and Slovaks in the Austrian and Hungarian halves of the Habsburg Empire. On the occasion of the opening of the railway between Veselí nad Moravou (Wessely an der March) in Moravia and Nové Mesto nad Váhom (Vágújhely/Neustadt an der Waag) in Slovakia in September 1929, the prominent ministerial aide Josef Koněřza (1881–1971) wrote: "May this railway remain a permanent bond between two fraternal branches [of the nation], a route to mutual knowledge, understanding and appreciation, as well as economic development and security."⁸ In the words of the *Slovenský deník* (Slovak Daily), the opening of the railway between the eastern Moravian town of Horní Lideč (Oberlitsch) and the north-western Slovak Púchov (Puhó, Puchau) on 2 May 1937 featured crowds of people "in national costume and with songs on their lips, exhibiting their joy about this achievement in the most joyful and unabashed manner."⁹ The newspaper further declared:

This is an accomplishment for the better connection of the western lands of the republic with Slovakia, in times good and bad. All speeches featured the leading idea of Czechoslovak unity, cohesion, and firm belief in the future.¹⁰

One of the speeches was given by the president of the Slovak province, Jozef Országh (1883–1949), who "praised the new line as another important artery for the economic transfusion of life between the western lands and Slovakia and as a new significant contribution to the technical and material culture of Slovakia."¹¹ *Robotnícké noviny* (Workers' News), the organ of the Slovak Social Democrats, stressed that the railway shortens the journey time from Slovakia to Prague by an hour. "Every hour that we are closer to Prague has great significance, for it represents the attachment to all that is new, joyful, creative and progressive, that unites us and which we need in our very own interest."¹² The trains, it seems, promised to extend Czechoslovak political unity to the economic and emotional spheres. To this end, the railways were presented as a symbol and a confirmation of the country's consolidation.

⁸ Koněřza, Josef: Proslov [Introduction]. In: Stavba jednokolejné hlavní dráhy Veselí n. Moravou–Myjava–Nové Mesto n. Váhom. Zahájení provozu v dílčí trati Veselí nad Mor.–Myjava [The Construction of the Single-Track Main Line Veselí n. Moravou–Myjava–Nové Mesto n. Váhom. Opening of the Section Veselí nad Mor.–Myjava]. Praha 1927, n. pag. [5].

⁹ NA, Fond Ministerstvo železnic I – Tiskový referát [Ministry of Railways I – Press Department, hereafter MŽ I-TR], Karton 78, Nová železnice zo Slovenska na Moravu je 28 kilometrov dlhá [The New Railway from Slovakia to Moravia is 28 kilometres long]. In: Slovenský deník, 4 May 1937.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ MŽ I-TR, Karton 78, Nová železnica – symbol československej jednoty [The New Railway – A Symbol of Czechoslovak Unity]. In: A-Zet, 5 May 1937.

¹² MŽ I-TR, Karton 78, Niet hôr tak vysokých, aby oddelily Čechov a Slovákov a zabránily československej jednote [There Are No Mountains High Enough to Divide Czechs and Slovaks and Prevent Czechoslovak Unity]. In: Robotnícké noviny, 4 May 1937.

In order to further emphasize the unity of the country, there was an effort to Czechoslovakize the landscape by connecting it to Czechoslovak – rather than Austrian or Hungarian – history. In an official ministerial publication celebrating the opening of the line Veselí–Nové Mesto, not just the railway links and places were mentioned but also figures of Czech and Slovak history were alluded to. “This railway [...] connects Moravian Slovakia, the land of Comenius, Palacký and Masaryk, with the land of Štefánik.” The train traversed the Hurban Valley, where “allegedly [the Slovak national activist Jozef Miloslav] Hurban went into hiding in 1848”. From the mountain range of Poľana, which was crossed by the railway through a tunnel named after Milan Rastislav Štefánik,

one can see Bradlo with the grave of General Štefánik on its steep limestone peak, one can see his home village of Košariská, and even Brezová, the hometown of MP [Štefan] Osuský. These two names characterize this land, which is finally to be connected by railway to the world.¹³

Similarly, when the Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš (1884–1948) inaugurated the construction of a new railway line between the central Slovak towns of Banská Bystrica (Besztercebánya, Neusohl) and Diviaky (Turócdívék) while on an official tour of Slovakia in 1936, he described it as a “national pilgrimage, during which he is reminded of one of the great Slovak [national] awakeners at every step”.¹⁴ By loading the landscape with Czechoslovak national mythology, the texts rejected other national claims to the same land and thus implicitly attacked Hungarian revisionism. Such statements and documents firmly grounded Czechoslovak history in the country’s national space.

This was not just a matter of rhetoric. The naming of railway lines and buildings after Czech and Slovak politicians further cemented the nationalization of the landscape. The line between the Moravian towns of Vsetín (Wsetin) and Bylnice (Bilnitz), completed in October 1928, was christened the Masaryk Railway in honour of the president, who had been born in nearby Hodonín (Göding).¹⁵ The Púchov–Horní Lideč link bore the name of Milan Rastislav Štefánik and was dubbed the “railway of Czechoslovak reciprocity” (*dráha československého vzájemnosti*) by the press.¹⁶ A column in honour of Masaryk’s 80th birthday on 7 March 1930 was

¹³ Stavba jednokolejných hlavních drah Veselí n. Moravou–Myjava–Nové Mesto n. Váhom 11 (cf. fn. 8).

¹⁴ NA, MŽ I-TR, Karton 59, President republiky dr. Ed. Beneš skončil svou slovenskou cestu [The President of the Republic Dr Ed. Beneš Concluded His Slovak Journey]. In: Národní politika, 29 September 1936. – For a discussion of the reactions to Beneš’s journey, see Vašek, Richard: Cesta prezidenta Beneše na Slovensko v roce 1936 a její ohlas v českém a slovenském tisku [President Beneš’s Journey to Slovakia in 1936 and Its Reception in the Czech and Slovak Press]. In: Historický časopis 59 (2011) 4, 705–733.

¹⁵ Dráha presidenta Masaryka. Hlavní dráha Vsetín–Bylnice. Pamětní spis o stavbě dráhy, vydaný na oslavu prvního desetiletí republiky při zahájení provozu [The President Masaryk Railway: The Main Line Vsetín–Bylnice. Commemorative Volume on the Railway’s Construction, Published at the Opening to Celebrate the Republic’s Tenth Anniversary]. Praha 1928.

¹⁶ *Štěpán*: Přehledné dějiny 199 (cf. fn. 5). – See also e.g. NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 78, Prvá cesta po nové trati generála M. R. Štefánika [The First Journey on the New General M. R. Štefánik Line]. In: Slovenský deník, 4 May 1937.



Fig. 2: Memorial in honour of Tomáš G. Masaryk's 80th birthday at Sklené station.

erected at Sklené station on the Handlová–Horná Štubňa line. The memorial stood outside a tunnel named for Masaryk that was at that time, measuring 3,012 metres, the longest in the country.¹⁷ A few years later, in 1936, it was surpassed by a tunnel on the Banská Bystrica–Diviaky line that was named after Beneš. Indeed, Beneš himself symbolically drilled the first hole on 29 September 1936, declaring that “there are no mountains high enough to divide Czechs and Slovaks and prevent Czechoslovak unity!”¹⁸

This concisely sums up the rhetoric employed by the government to describe the aim of the new railway construction programme. Symbolic appropriation of landscape of this kind is often associated with urban space. Historians have studied the implications of renaming streets or erecting statues of national heroes on busy squares.¹⁹ The railways, however, contributed to the nationalization of the entire country, including the countryside. This ideologization had a great influence on the local population living near the Handlová–Horná Štubňa line, who, as I discuss below, had had little exposure to theories of nationalism. As an example, newspapers reported that the “*Slovak* and *German* population gathered by the memorial at Sklené station” and when a railway official proclaimed the glory of the president, “the crowd reciprocated euphorically”.²⁰ Accordingly, while in cities the national appropriation of landscape tended to be the domain of activists and, in some cases, the municipal authorities, in the countryside the ministry of railways assumed a leading role in this process.

Despite the celebratory Czechoslovakism it entailed, and in contrast to other overt measures of nationalization – such as the Czechization of the public sphere, the transfer of Czech public servants to non-Czech areas of the country, or the renaming of streets and squares – the construction of a national railway system in Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia caused little controversy among pro-autonomy Slovaks or the Hungarian minority. During Beneš’s visit to Slovakia, he was welcomed warmly by Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), the leader of the pro-autonomy Slovak People’s Party. Hlinka espoused the commonality between Czechs and Slovaks in his welcoming address: “Blessed be your arrival in our midst. May it mark a new era of fraternization between Czechs and Slovaks.”²¹ The coverage of Beneš’s ground-breaking ceremony in Hlinka’s party organ *Slovák* criticized the paternalism of the government’s Czechoslovakism. It alleged that the speeches of Czech dignit-

¹⁷ See e.g. NA MŽI-TR, Karton 9, Největší tunel v ČSR odevzdán dopravě [The Longest Tunnel in Czechoslovakia Inaugurated]. In: *Večer*, 21 December 1931, and numerous other articles.

¹⁸ Quoted widely, see e.g. NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 59, 14 tunelů na 47 km: Není hor, které by oddělily Čechy od Slováků [14 Tunnels in 47 km: There Are No Mountains High Enough to Divide Czechs and Slovaks]. In: *Večerní České Slovo*, 29 September 1936.

¹⁹ For the Bohemian case, see e.g. *Paces*, Cynthia: Prague Panoramas. National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century. Pittsburgh 2009. – *Wingfield*, Nancy M.: Flag Wars and Stone Saints. How the Bohemian Lands became Czech. Cambridge/Mass. 2007. – *Sayer*, Derek: The Language of Nationality and the Nationality of Language: Prague 1780–1920. In: *Past & Present* 153 (1996) 164–210.

²⁰ Největší tunel v ČSR odevzdán dopravě. Emphasis in the original (cf. fn. 17).

²¹ President republiky dr. Ed. Beneš skončil svou slovenskou cestu (cf. fn. 14).

aries "mislead the president and other guests" by "taking credit for all innovations in Slovakia and present them as mere graciousness for the little Slovaks [pre Slováci]". At the same time, it praised the significance of the railways for the unity of the state: "The improvement of the Slovak railway network [...] is a self-evident requirement also with respect to the needs of the state as a whole."²² The development of the railway network, it appears, was a goal that Czech and Slovak politicians of all political camps could subscribe to.

Even the Hungarian-language press in Czechoslovakia represented the railway policy in a generally favourable light. Not unlike *Slovák*, the daily *Magyar Újság* (Hungarian News) depicted the openings as celebrations of Slovakia's economic development, which would in turn benefit all inhabitants. Describing the opening of the line between Červená Skála (Vöröskő) and Margecany (Margitfalva, Margareten) in July 1936, the paper suggested that the region's population "without national differences" gave expression to their delight at the new means of transport.²³ The paper welcomed Beneš's visit to Slovakia in 1936 and wrote that even though the new railway passed through "territory inhabited by Slovaks, [...] the Hungarian minority can only rejoice in the fact that, as demonstrated by the president's visit, the government's investment programme in Slovakia is already showing positive results".²⁴ This uncritical coverage is relativized by the fact that the *Magyar Újság* was supported by the government and backed an activist role of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovak politics.²⁵

This discourse was also similar in other Hungarian-language periodicals. *Gömör*, a weekly newspaper from Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat, Großsteffelsdorf) in south-central Slovakia, also evaluated the opening of the Červená Skála-Margecany railway in positive terms: "This latest railway line [...] will meet a long-felt need. This makes understandable the joy of the local population that was demonstrated so refreshingly at the opening celebration." The article then praises justice minister Ivan Dérer's (1884-1973) promise, given at the opening, to grant economic and cultural equality to all nationalities of Czechoslovakia.²⁶ The notion that the expansion of the railway network would prove beneficial to Slovakia's economy and thus also to the Hungarian minority was, therefore, the overriding expectation in the Hungarian

²² NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 59, Započatie stavby B. Bystrica-Diviaky [Construction of B. Bystrica-Diviaky Begins]. In: *Slovák*, 30 September 1936.

²³ Új szlovenszkói vasutak építését jelenti be Bechyne minister [Minister Bechyne Announces the Construction of New Railways in Slovakia]. In: *Magyar Újság*, 28 July 1936, 5.

²⁴ *Lukovich*, József: Elnöki látogatás és kisebbségi magyarok [The Presidential Visit and the Hungarian Minority]. In: *Magyar Újság*, 1 October 1936, 1.

²⁵ On the Hungarian press in interwar Czechoslovakia, see *Szvatkó*, Pál: A sajtó [The Press]. In: *Borsody*, István: Magyarok Csehszlovákiában 1918-1938 [Hungarians in Czechoslovakia 1918-1938]. Somorja 2002 [first published in 1939] 130-139. – *Neszméri*, Csilla: A két világháború közötti szlovenszkói sajtó története [History of the Press in Slovakia between the Two World Wars]. In: *Pro minoritate* (Winter 2009) 37-54. Available online, URL: <http://www.prominoritate.hu/folyoiratok/2009/ProMino09-4-03-Neszméri.pdf> (last accessed 5 March 2015).

²⁶ *Márkus*, László: Egy miniszteri pohárköszöntő [A Ministerial Toast]. In: *Gömör*, 2 August 1936, 1.



Fig. 3: Horná Štubňa station during the opening ceremony of the line to Handlová, 20 December 1931.

press’s response to the Czechoslovak railway policy. This is illustrated by the coverage of the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* (Prague Hungarian Newspaper), the conservative mouthpiece of the Hungarian opposition, which is generally considered the leading Hungarian-language newspaper in interwar Czechoslovakia.²⁷ In contrast to its generally critical approach to governmental policies, it often reported on new railway lines – like the Czech press did – as technological marvels that would stimulate the economy.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, however, its coverage only rarely touched on the celebrations of Czechoslovakist ideology that characterized the events, and even if they did, reported on them without critical evaluation. Rather, it highlighted instances of Czechoslovak statesmen reaching out to the Hungarian minority. Thus, during Beneš’s visit to Slovakia in 1936, it ran a story that the president was learning Hungarian.²⁹ The coverage of the Hungarian press therefore shares features with that of the pro-autonomy Slovak press. Rather than criticizing the ideology evident in the discourse around the openings, it focused on the economic development it expected to follow in the railways’ wake. This suggests that even the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* did not support revisionist goals. The construction of a national railway network was not seen as a measure of Czechoslovakization or Czechization, but was expected to bring economic benefits to all nationalities. On a discursive level, then, one cannot but agree with the government rhetoric that the railway network acted as a tool of national unification.

“Mountain Men” on an “Iron Horse”:
The Line between Handlová and Horná Štubňa

Despite the general positive attitude, the *Slovák*’s critique of Prague paternalism towards Slovakia was not baseless. The celebratory Czechoslovakism employed in the Czech press can be contrasted with a tendency to depict Slovakia and Ruthenia as objects of a Czech civilizing mission. The country’s eastern half was portrayed as a romantic wilderness to be modernized by a railway system that was centred in Prague. Paradoxically, the rhetoric of unity was entrenched in hierarchical divisions between the two parts of the country that were to be overcome by the railway. The railway line between Handlová and Horná Štubňa exemplifies the Czech-centred paternalism of the discourse. Constructed between 1928 and 1931, it was designed to become an important link in the Central Slovak main line. However, it passed through mountainous and inhospitable terrain, which made the construction tech-

²⁷ *Szvatkó*: A sajtó (cf. fn. 25). – *Neszméri*: A szlovenszkói sajtó története (cf. fn. 25).

²⁸ A handlova–felsőstubnyai vasutvonal átadták a forgalomnak [The Handlova–Felsőstubnya Railway Line was Inaugurated]. In: *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* (hereafter PMH), 22 December 1931, 2. – Megnyitották a margitfalva-vöröskői vasutat [The Margitfalva–Vöröskő Railway Was Opened]. In: PMH, 28 July 1936, 4. – Hétfőn kezdik el a Fáttra-vasut építését [Works on the Fáttra Railway Begin Monday]. In: PMH, 26 September 1936, 3. – Átadták a forgalomnak a puhó-lédeci [sic] új vasutvonalat [The Puhó–Horní Lideč Railway was Inaugurated]. In: PMH, 4 May 1937, 5.

²⁹ Az elnök magyarul tanul ... [The President is Learning Hungarian ...]. In: PMH, 25 September 1936, 3.

nically demanding and costly. Although the linear distance between the two towns was less than 12 kilometres, the railway line measured some 18.6 kilometres as it snaked around the mountains to negotiate a 184-metre difference in altitude.³⁰ Tunnels comprised nearly 25 per cent of its length, with numerous bridges and viaducts also being necessary.³¹ Due to the technical demands of the project, it became the single largest construction in Czechoslovakia, employing daily 4,220 workers on average in 1930.³²

Before the First World War, the region traversed by the railway had been isolated from the transport routes through Upper Hungary and its predominantly German-speaking peasant population had become extremely impoverished. This was reflected in literature. Ján Kollár's 1824 epic poem "Slávy dcera" (The Daughter of Sláva), one of the key texts of the Czech national revival, features a cross-eyed Handlová German with a goitre who migrates to Kremnica (Körmöcbánya, Kremnitz) in search of servant work.³³ Furthermore, the geographical isolation of the region contributed to the development of an idiosyncratic German dialect that was the object of scholarly ridicule in the 19th century, which Kollár partakes in himself.³⁴ As Egbert K. Jahn notes, the terrain was also partly responsible for the fact that the local population had failed to develop a strong regional – much less national – sense of identification by 1918 and was divided into several historically distinct groups of villages.³⁵ This set it apart from most other German settlements in Hungary, where the government's aggressive Magyarization programme led to critical discussions of their identity as Hungarian Germans. The creation of Czechoslovakia resulted in the arrival of German nationalist teachers and scholars from Bohemia and Moravia in

³⁰ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 3, Stavba dráhy Handlová–Horná Štubňa [The Construction of the Handlová–Horná Štubňa Railway]. Ministerial memo, 1927, 2.

³¹ A detailed description of the line is in *Koněřza*, Josef: Stavba jednokolejné hlavní dráhy z Handlové do Horní Štubně. Pamětní spis o stavbě [The Construction of the Single-Track Main Railway Line from Handlová to Horní Štubňa. Commemorative Publication about the Construction]. Praha 1933, 29-35.

³² *Koněřza*: Stavba jednokolejné hlavní dráhy z Handlové do Horní Štubně 36 (cf. fn. 8).

³³ *Kollár*, Jan: Slávy dcera. Lyricko-epická báseň v pěti zpěvích [The Daughter of Sláva. Lyrical-Epic Poem in Five Cantos]. Praha 1868, fifth canto, sonnet 60 (316) 316.

³⁴ In his comments to "Slávy dcera", Kollár explains that the term "Handerburci" is the name given by Slovaks to "the Germans who have been living in counties of Turóc, Nyitra and parts of Bars since ancient times and speak a clumsy [nemotorné] dialect. [...] The name Handerburci or Krikehajci probably derives from their manner of speaking or shouting and jiggling the tongue [křikání a burcování jazykem]." *Kollár*, Jan: Výklad čili přimětky a vysvětlivky ku Slávy dceře [Commentary on, or Addenda and Explanations Regarding the Daughter of Sláva]. Praha 1875, 422. – The Hungarian scholar Johann von (János) Csaplovics wrote in 1829 about the "strange gibberish" spoken by the local Germans: "die Krikehajer [...] sprechen ein sonderbares Kauderwelsch, z. B. Grimpele ist ihnen ein Stückl, Miscapala ein Füllen, Fressbrettal ein Teller, Fresshölzal ein Löffel". *Csaplovics*, Johann von: Gemälde von Ungern. Mit einer ethnographischen Karte. Pest 1829, 206-207.

³⁵ *Jahn*, Egbert K.: Die Deutschen in der Slowakei in den Jahren 1918 bis 1929. Ein Beitrag zur Nationalitätenproblematik. München, Wien 1971 (Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 25) 20-21.



Fig. 4: Opening of the Tomáš G. Masaryk Tunnel in honour of the President's 80th birthday, 7 March 1930.

the late 1920s and especially the 1930s. Under their influence, the local population gradually developed a national consciousness.³⁶

It was in this time, as well, that German ethnographers popularized the toponym *Hauerland* for the region.³⁷ It is no coincidence that this ideological development coincided with the construction of a railway that made it more easily accessible. Simultaneously, the discovery of natural resources in the first decade of the 20th century spurred an economic boom that resulted in the arrival of many Slovak-speaking miners. In the eleven years from 1910 to 1921, the population doubled as the coal mines of Handlová required an ever-greater workforce. While according to the Hungarian census of 1910, 87 per cent of the town's 4,248 inhabitants were German speakers, in the 1921 Czechoslovak count, the ratio had dropped to 54 per cent of 9,796.³⁸ Handlová's industrialization continued apace throughout the interwar period. After the Second World War and the expulsion of the Germans, the town turned into one of the main industrial centres of central Slovakia and a pride of state socialist planning.³⁹ Despite the economic advantages of connecting the Handlová coal mines to the rest of the country, two preliminary studies expected the railway to Horná Štubňa to make a loss of three million crowns annually.⁴⁰ The fact that it was built despite its high cost and uncertain return illustrates the significance given to new railway lines in the nation-building process of interwar Czechoslovakia.

The industrialization and ethnolinguistic shifts experienced by the region shaped the discussions around the new railway. In their description of the construction, many commentators depict the "mountainous, forested region traversed by the railway" as being "inhabited by German colonists", while stressing that the "miners employed in the local mines are predominantly Slovaks".⁴¹ In addition to its ro-

³⁶ An introduction to the area's history is given in Švarc, Michal: Masová exekúcia v Sklenom 21. septembra 1944 v širšom dejinnom kontexte [The Mass Execution in Sklené on 21 September 1944 in its Broader Historical Context]. In: Pamät národa 3 (2007) 3, 4-13, here 4-5. – See also Zückert, Martin: Veda a „riadenie identity“: Sudetonemeckí etnografi a ich vzťah k Slovensku na príklade časopisu Karpathenland [Scholarship and "Identity Management": Sudeten German Ethnographers and Their Relationship to Slovakia in the Journal Karpathenland]. In: Historický časopis 56 (2008) 1, 147-160, here 157.

³⁷ Jahn: Die Deutschen in der Slowakei 20-21 (cf. fn. 35). The term *Hauerland* derives from the "hau" suffix common to many of the local German toponyms. Jahn suggests that the term was coined by Josef Hanika, a Bohemian-German ethnographer who made his name as a professor for German ethnography at Prague University during the Second World War.

³⁸ Jahn: Die Deutschen in der Slowakei 22 (cf. fn. 35).

³⁹ Brtek, Ján et al.: Handlová. Banská Bystrica 1966, 5.

⁴⁰ Konérza: Stavba jednokolejných hlavních dráh z Handlové do Horní Štubně 25 (cf. fn. 8). – Considering that the Great Depression hit the railways hard and the ČSD operated at a loss between 1932 and 1934, the Handlová–Horná Štubňa line was unlikely to be profitable in the interwar years. See Statistika čsl. drah za rok 1937 [Statistics of the Czechoslovak Railways for 1937]. Praha 1938, XLIV-XLVII.

⁴¹ See e.g. NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, Železnice Handlová–Horná Štubňa dokončena [Handlová–Horná Štubňa Railway Finished]. In: Národní politika, 20 December 1931. Considering the ubiquity of this formulation, it is likely that it was used in the press release published by the Ministry of Railways.

mantization of the wild Slovak countryside, this formulation reverses the historical settlement pattern, casting the Germans – whose settlements dated from the 14th century – as immigrants. Like the previous Slovak and Hungarian reactions to railway construction, there is no indication that the railway was received less positively among the German population than among the Slovak one. Karl Bitterer, the priest and mayor of the "large German village" of Sklené (Turócnémeti, Glaserhau) – the only stop on the line – received the delegation. "Dr Bitterer's speech", wrote the *Slovenský denník*, "was vivacious and bursting with loyalty and gratitude. He praised the president, the government and the creators of the railway." The memorial column to Masaryk was then unveiled at the entrance to the eponymous tunnel. After a speech by Josef Koněřza, who again evoked the glory of Masaryk, a laurel wreath adorned with ribbons in the national colours was laid and the national anthem played. Finally, "the guests got on the train – cheered on by shouts of "Živio" and "Hoch", in the local Slovak dialect as well as in German – and left Sklené for Horná Štubňa on the last leg of their journey.⁴² At least on the level of official celebrations, then, the *Hauerland* Germans acted as loyal Czechoslovaks. The provincial president Jozef Országh was satisfied with the event, remarking that "this celebration will strengthen Slovak loyalty to and love for the Czechoslovak Republic, its president and its government".⁴³ Despite the region's mixed ethnic composition, the Czechoslovakist rhetoric did not differ greatly from that of other railway openings. Provided they acted loyally, it presented the railways as a means of unification that included both the Slovaks and the Germans of the *Hauerland*.

The Slovaks, however, were the focus of the discourse's Czech-centred paternalism, for which the Handlová–Horná Štubňa railway became a prime example due to its perceived geographic remoteness. Bitterer's enthusiasm was shared by many Czech commentators, who expressed the hope that modern technology would lead to the development of this "distant, sleepy back of beyond". With apt pathos, Josef Otto Novotný commented in *Národní listy* (National Newspaper) on the opening day of the line that "today this unjustly forgotten and sinfully neglected corner of Slovakia celebrates its resurrection":

Today, 20 December 1931, marks the beginning of a new era for the region, which will supply it with the opportunity to exploit its natural wealth and will also lead to its economic development. Its Slovak and German villages will be animated by previously unknown bustle. In the summer, they will become crossroads for tourists, who arrive for their virginal character, which is expressed in the colourful and expensively decorated folk costumes, the original wooden buildings and a primitive life interspersed with ancient legends and the customs of faithfully preserved traditions.⁴⁴

Novotný's description is unabashedly exoticizing. He himself contributed to the development of the area into a tourist destination in 1937, when he published a

⁴² NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, Divy modernej techniky ve službách veřejnosti [Marvels of Modern Technology in the Service of the Public]. In: *Slovenský denník*, 22 December 1931.

⁴³ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, Největší tunel v ČSR odevzdán dopravě (cf. fn. 17).

⁴⁴ This and the quotations below are taken from NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, *Novotný, J. O.: Handlová–Horná Štubňa: Slovenská zahrádka* [Handlová–Horná Štubňa: The Garden of Slovakia]. In: *Národní listy*, 20 December 1931.

guidebook for Central Slovakia.⁴⁵ He regrets what he considers the likely loss of the distinctive quality of the region, which had made it into “a kind of authentic ethnographic reservation” before the incursion of modern technology. “But that is the result and underside of culture and there is nothing to be done but resign oneself to the inevitable and at least rescue what can be rescued for museums.” The article closes with a synopsis of what Czechoslovak nation-building in Slovakia had already achieved and what still remained to be done:

Today’s opening of the railway line from Handlová to Horná Štubňa has righted one of the many wrongs that the Hungarians committed with impunity on the Slovaks. But how much more remains to be set right until this veritable “land of the future” will deliver all its immeasurable riches.⁴⁶

Technology in the form of the railway was presented as a tool of modernization brought to Slovakia from the west that would unite the Czechoslovak nation and thus inevitably lead to the loss of Slovak distinctiveness. The railways were to turn the Slovaks into Czechs and thereby Czechoslovakist ideology into reality. By implication, the Prague government was portrayed as a force of civilization. This becomes even clearer in the descriptions of the railway’s construction, which is depicted as a battle between primeval nature and modern man. One commentator enthusiastically called the boring of the Masaryk Tunnel “a genuine manifestation of the victory of man over the giant rocks, which he pierced with a drill and thus created the longest tunnel of our republic”.⁴⁷ A long reportage in the Brno paper *Lidové noviny* (People’s Newspaper) is even more explicit in pitting the (anthropomorphized) Bral Mountain, which was traversed by the Masaryk Tunnel, against modern technology and civilization:

Far from the quiet of the woods there are the offices of the engineers. Bral did not know they were talking about him there. Then came people with various tools, levers, maps. They did not look at Bral. They took measurements, put up bolts, and filled the forest with unaccustomed bustle. Cars arrived on paths cut through the trees, houses were built, there was life from morning to night and Bral never had a quiet moment. A tarmac road took the place of the footpath through the forest, a track on the hillside, the grove disappeared under a mountain of stone. The workers’ settlement and school for their children stand above, the offices of the construction company Kruliš, Jáchymek and Schwarz below. Transformers, generators, drills, locomotives, a forge, engines, ventilators and compressors, stores, tracks, locomotives with hundreds of small carriages – civilization is having a great weekend here in the mountains and has been enjoying itself for three years already. [...] A clear, wild stream flows beneath the mountain of stone. [...] The people found it and use it for their needs. Bral doesn’t defend himself. He is unharmed at the top, by the sky, even though there’s a deep black wound by his heel. The enmity of the mountain towards the people remained within, at a length of three thousand metres, the frontline of the war between the people and the soil is deep underground. Man

⁴⁵ *Novotný*, Josef Otto: Střední Slovensko: kulturně-historické kapitoly. Díl 1 [Central Slovakia: Cultural-Historical Chapters. Volume I], Praha 1937.

⁴⁶ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, *Novotný*, J. O.: Handlová–Horná Štubňa: Slovenská zahrádka (cf. fn. 44).

⁴⁷ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 6, U Handlové byl proražen největší tunel v ČSR [The Largest Tunnel in Czechoslovakia was Bored near Handlová]. In: *Lid*, 15. July 1930.

needed a path, and if the path leads through a mountain, the mountain had to yield. The mountain yielded.⁴⁸

In this description, the mountain becomes a symbol for Slovakia, while the civilization stands for the Czechs. It is no coincidence that the building companies mentioned in the text clearly came from the Bohemian lands.⁴⁹ While the text is ambivalent about the value of the march of civilization across the countryside, its inevitability is not left in doubt. The author narrates the transformation of a landscape apparently untouched by civilization into a territory of the state. It casts the government as a civilizing agent in the wilderness of Slovakia, the loss of which is mourned as unavoidable. Subconsciously, if not consciously, then, Czech commentators tended to regard the modernization of Slovakia as a Czech civilizing mission. This paternalistic colonialism becomes blatant in a commentary published by the newspaper *Československá republika* (Czechoslovak Republic):

If the mountain men [...] could rise from their graves, they would be astonished at how the beautiful Slovak countryside of mountains and hills has been torn open by smoking iron horses that snake around ravines and valleys and ram through mountains and hills, only to briefly disappear like in a fairy tale from the sight of the stunned inhabitants of mountains and hills. And they would be even more astonished were they to find out that all this was created by people of flesh and bone like them, even of one and the same blood [krev jejich krve].⁵⁰

In this image, the Czechs created modernity for their Slovak brethren. The hierarchy in the relationship was also conveyed by the article's anachronistic language. The "iron horse" (*železný oř*) was a common metaphor for the locomotive in the 19th century. Its use in the 1930s, when railways had become an everyday means of transport for the vast majority of Europeans, is characteristic of Czech paternalism towards Slovakia.

Conclusion: Trains, Colonialism, and National Bodies

Such pseudo-colonial attitude has recently become a topic of discussion in scholarship on interwar Czechoslovakia. Considering the sources I have presented here, I agree with the historian Stanislav Holubec's assessment of Carpathian Ruthenia: "Almost all the binaries of Western orientalist discourse as they are defined in standard textbooks on post-colonialism can be found in the Czech imagining of Sub-Carpathian Rus and its inhabitants."⁵¹ The attitude towards Slovakia differed in

⁴⁸ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 6, Zeman, F. K.: Tunel pod Bralem [The Tunnel below Bral]. In: Lidové noviny, 20 July 1930.

⁴⁹ The firms of Kruliš and Schwarz were headquartered in Prague, and Jáchymek in Brno. See *Koněřza: Stavba dráhy z Handlové do Horní Štubně 27* (cf. fn. 8).

⁵⁰ NA MŽ I-TR, Karton 9, Pokrok na Slovensku [Progress in Slovakia]. In: *Československá republika*, 20 December 1931.

⁵¹ Holubec, Stanislav: "We Bring Order, Discipline, Western European Democracy, and Culture to This Land of Former Oriental Chaos and Disorder." Czech Perceptions of Sub-Carpathian Rus and Its Modernization in the 1920s. In: *Borodziej, Włodzimierz/Holubec, Stanislav/Puttkamer, Joachim von* (eds.): *Mastery and Lost Illusions. Space and Time in the Modernization of Eastern and Central Europe*. München 2014, 223–250, here 250. – See also

degree, not in substance. The government was clear about the role the railways were to play in this relationship. In 1919, the ministerial aide Jindřich Rybák wrote:

In Carpathian Ruthenia, blood is still flowing from our veins. It will be necessary to muster all our strength so the railways may bring the wealth of culture even to the farthest corners, increase wealth and contribute to the exploitation of natural resources.⁵²

Rybák imagined a colonialist constellation in which Ruthenia would be the recipient of Czech support and the passive supplier of raw materials.

But Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia were not a Czechoslovak India. Unlike in the large Western colonial empires, Czechoslovakia's eastern half was regarded as an intrinsic part of the national territory and the railways were used to reinforce the integrity of the national space. There is, hence, an ambivalence in the image of national space that is advanced in these texts. They combined a celebration of Czechoslovakia's unity with a spatial hierarchy that pitted the Bohemian lands against Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia, romanticized as a more authentic and natural, but also less civilized periphery. The notion of national space as a hierarchical but indivisible unit was a discursive balancing act that was expressed primarily through the identification of the nation and its territory with an organic body. Prague was often seen as the heart of the nation and the place where railway lines – its arteries and veins – met. Rybák called it the “head of the homeland” (*hlava vlasti*).⁵³ His reference to the bleeding wound in Carpathian Ruthenia illustrates this national hierarchy. A gash to the head would be fatal, but a wound in Ruthenia can be cured by strengthening the railway network. Despite the clear division between centre and periphery, Rybák's organic imagery unquestionably sees Czechoslovakia as a single body to be held together by the railway system.

The notion of Czechoslovak national space as corporeal was widespread in political rhetoric at the time. For instance, the new transversal main line was repeatedly described as the “transport backbone” (*dopravní páteř*) of the country.⁵⁴ Josef Koněřza conveyed a similar sentiment in his appeal to acknowledge the significance of the new railways in Slovakia for the state:

Our state can be compared to a bouquet of flowers in various sizes, shapes and colours. Slovakia is a banana leaf, which after the Hungarian era is not only frayed at the edges in terms of its railways, but has cracks at the centre, as well. The state railways administration has been

Haslinger, Peter: Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs 1880-1938. München 2010 (Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 117) esp. 319-323.

⁵² *Rybák*, Jindřich: Naše železnice v prvním roce státní samostatnosti [Our Railways in the First Year of Independence]. Praha 1919, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ For example, see the press release that accompanied the 1920 law. See Zasedání Národního shromáždění československého r. 1920. Tisk 2585. Zpráva I. výboru dopravního a II. výboru rozpočtového o vládním návrhu zákona č. t. 2526 [Sessions of the Czechoslovak National Assembly of 1920. Document 2585. Report of the I. Transport Committee and the II. Budget Committee on the Government Bill No. 2526]. In: Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna [Common Czecho-Slovak digital parliamentary library]. URL: http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1918ns/ps/tisky/T2585_01.htm (last accessed 5 March 2015).

striving from the very foundation of the state to connect this decorative leaf with new railways to the republic's bouquet, and as a secondary effort to connect isolated particles so they may grow together, so that the palm leaf that is Slovakia may one day shine whole and be capable of further internal strengthening.⁵⁵

This analogy again makes use of the motif of the railways connecting a peripheral Slovakia to an organic stem that represents the Bohemian lands; the designation of Slovakia as a decorative banana or palm leaf carries further connotations of underdevelopment and exoticism.

Hence, Slovakia and Ruthenia were represented as the extremities of the body politic, which needed to be connected to the rump by means of a backbone. The widespread use of organic imagery in the railway discourse asserted the existence of a single Czechoslovak nation, while nevertheless maintaining a clear hierarchy between its constituent parts. The railways were represented as a tool of national unification, but were loaded with a discourse that, in retrospect, illustrates the limits of such unity.

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⁵⁵ *Koněřza*: Stavba dráhy z Handlové do Horní Štubně 16 (cf. fn. 8).