

## **From Irredentism to Constructive Reconciliation?**

Ethnic German Minorities and Germany's Relationship  
with Poland and the Czech Republic since 1990

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Prepared for Delivery at the CISS/ISA Conference in Washington, DC  
August 28-29, 2000  
Panel "European Dilemmas"

## Introduction

Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany's relationship with her neighbours has been difficult at best and violent at its worst. Already the process that led to the country's first unification as a nation-state in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by wars – the Austro/Prussian-Danish war in 1864, the Austro-Prussian war in 1866 and the Franco-German war in 1870/71. What all three wars had in common were that, in one way or another, they were connected to disputed territories and the German-speaking populations living within them. These two issues, almost as a leitmotif, have characterised German and European history ever since and have been two of the corner stones of what has become known as the German Question – the incompatibility of Germany as a cultural nation with Germany as a territorial nation and the way in which the issues arising from this have been addressed at German, European, and international levels. Put differently, the core of the problem is that large groups of ethnic Germans lived outside the political boundaries of Germany and were vulnerable to discrimination in their host-states and to political instrumentalisation by their kin-state. Border changes in the Treaty of Versailles have not been able to address this issue successfully, nor have been the arrangements of the Potsdam Agreement, which also included massive forced population transfers of ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe to the Soviet, British, and American occupation zones.

Over the course of the forty years of the existence of two German states in Cold War Europe, this German question has been the object of much political rhetoric and some practical politics, most notably the treaties concluded by the Federal Republic of Germany with Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1970 and 1973. Yet, voices demanding the return of the former German territories in today's Poland and/or the return of the German expellees to their places of origin in Poland and Czechoslovakia persisted. Even the German-Polish border treaty of 1990 and subsequent friendly cooperation treaties with both Poland and Czechoslovakia have not been able to draw a line under these debates. The German Question, it seems, continues to be of relevance in East Central Europe.

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In this paper, I will trace the origins of the problems facing Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic today and analyse their impact on, and relevance for, the current and future relationship between the three countries and the situation of ethnic German minorities. In order to do this, I will begin with a short theoretical exploration of two core issues – ethnicity and territory – and then turn to give a brief overview of the history of German minority groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and of West German external minority policy during and after the Cold War. I will then examine Germany's relationship with each of its two neighbours in the post-1990 period, and in doing so pay specific attention to the role of the German expellee organisations in this process. I will conclude with some observations on the impact of all these developments on the situation of the two minority groups today.

### **Ethnicity and Territory as Factors in the Triangular Relationship between External Minority, Host-State, and Kin-State<sup>1</sup>**

In contemporary scholarship, definitions of ethnicity vary greatly. A basic distinction can be made between a primordial school, which holds that 'ethnicity is so deeply rooted in historical experience that it should properly be treated as a given in human relations', and an instrumentalist school, which argues that 'ethnicity is primarily a practical resource that individuals and groups deploy opportunistically to promote their more fundamental security and economic interests and that they may even discard when alternative affiliations promise a better return.' (Esman, 1994, p. 10f.) The tangible aspects of ethnicity, such as customs, traditions, language or religion, and their social and political implications that are emphasised by

instrumentalists are important components of an individual's or group's ethnic identity as they allow more easily to draw boundaries between in-group and out-group. Yet, they can not fully explain the phenomenon in relation to the intense emotions that 'ethnic issues' generate.

As a self-defined community, ethnic groups are distinguishable by a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, the association with a specific homeland, and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. (Smith, 1991, p. 21) This link between tangible and intangible aspects is key to understanding the political implications of ethnic identity and of the formation of conflict groups based on ethnicity. The tangible characteristics, however, are only important inasmuch as they 'contribute to this notion or sense of a group's self-identity and uniqueness.' (Connor, 1994, p. 104) As such, ethnic identity is an important resource in the struggle for the power necessary to enable an ethnic group to determine its own fate.

This desire of an ethnic group to gain political power is expressed in the concept of nationalism – 'an ideological movement aiming to attain or maintain autonomy, unity and identity for a social group which is deemed to constitute a nation.' (Smith, 1991, p. 51) Informed by the principle of self-determination, minorities that are organised into ethno-national movements make claims on behalf of people that can be territorial in nature – on one end of the spectrum, demands are raised for local or regional autonomy (internal self-determination), and on the other, secessionist movements become active or irredentist policies are pursued (external self-determination). Alternatively, minority ethno-national movements can also manifest themselves in demands for legal and political equality, cultural rights or access to educational resources.

Obviously, ethno-nationalism is not confined to minorities alone. Majorities, too, can embrace ethno-nationalism as a political ideology so that the relationship between external minority and host-state is often characterised by conflicting doctrines of ethno-nationalisms: external minority and host-nation share, and compete over, the same territory, but they are 'divided' by virtue of distinct ethnic identities. While there is, thus, potential for conflict, such conflict is not inevitable. Numerous examples exist of how multi-ethnic states have managed to accommodate diverse ethnic groups through a wide range of policies, including the provision of access to linguistic, educational, or religious facilities as well as to positions of power in the institutions of the state, possibly in combination with various degrees of territorial and personal autonomy at local, regional, and/or national level.

In contrast, the relationship between external minority and kin-state, as it is based on common ethnicity and a territorially and institutionally divided ethnic nation, is normally not one of ethnic conflict, but rather one of patronage resulting from either one or both of two aspects – national sentiment and national interest. Sentiment concerning the fate of members of the nation living in another state and the desire to unite the national territory and bring together in it all the members of the ethnic nation finds its expression in irredentist or pan-nationalism (Smith, 1991, p. 83). As national sentiment is not always expressed in irredentist nationalism, so is the relationship between external minority and kin-state not always about the secession of the territory inhabited by the kin-group and its subsequent unification with the kin-state. Informed by domestic and foreign national interests, territorial unification may not be desirable for either kin-state or external minority or it may not be possible given geo-political or regional interest and opportunity structures.<sup>2</sup> As the following two case studies will indicate, the relationship between external minority and kin-state can alternatively be one of 'repatriation' or of establishing conditions in the host-state conducive to the preservation, expression, and development of the ethnic identity of the external minority.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the form that the relationship between the external minority and its host- and kin-states takes, the very existence of an external minority also establishes a relationship between these two states, which shapes, and is in turn shaped by, the relationship each of them has with the external minority. However, this relationship is not so much determined by the concepts of

‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’, but rather it is, at least in a historical sense, founded on the notions of ‘territory’, which, for states, possesses certain values in and of itself,<sup>4</sup> and sovereignty, in particular in relation to the host-state’s domestic policy. With few exceptions, territorial challenges have been infrequent in Central and Eastern Europe over the past half-century. Challenges to sovereignty, especially over the treatment of ethnic minorities, have, rightly or wrongly, become more frequent and have been levelled by individual states and international organisations alike.

The case of the German minorities in Poland and Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic has been one central dimension of the relationship of the Federal Republic with each of its two neighbour states. Not only has their situation at a given time informed German policy, and vice versa, but the event of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from both countries in the aftermath of the Second World War has had a constant bearing on bilateral relations.

### **A Brief Territorial History of the Origins of German Minority Groups in Poland and the Czech Republic**

The history of ethnic Germans in Central and Eastern Europe reaches back to the early twelfth century, when the German expansion to the east began. It encompassed mostly the colonisation, but to some extent also the conquest, of areas in Central and Eastern Europe, including parts of today’s Baltic states, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia.

The German settlement of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia in today’s Czech Republic, also referred to as *Sudetenland* from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Tonkin, 2001), began in the middle of the twelfth century. ‘Culturally,’ it was the most successful of all early colonisations. The first German university was founded in Prague in 1348 and the use and codification of German in the Prague chancellery of Karl IV made an important contribution to the development of a standard dialect of the German language. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, Germans were in a majority in the Bohemian crown lands of the Habsburg Empire, but the annexation of large parts of Silesia to Prussia after the Seven Years War in 1763 saw them reduced to the strongest national group after the Czechs. The territorial settlement of St. Germain in 1919 established a new Czechoslovak state at the ruins of the Habsburg Empire with the *Sudetenland* and its overwhelmingly German population becoming part of it. The rise of Nazism in Germany, the increasingly aggressive use of German minorities as foreign policy objects, which had already begun in the era of the Weimar Republic, and the geopolitical interest structures of the Great Powers in Central Europe paved the way towards the Munich Agreement in 1938, in which France and Great Britain gave their consent to the annexation of the *Sudetenland* by Germany. Within six months of this settlement, Hitler had completely dismembered Czechoslovakia by occupying the remaining parts of the Czech part of the country (and incorporating it as protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia into the Third Reich) and by establishing a puppet regime in Slovakia after awarding significant territories to Hungary. After the Second World War, these territorial changes were reversed, and in an attempt to avoid a recurrence of a Munich-like situation, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union agreed to the expulsion of the vast majority of Sudeten Germans from the restored Czechoslovak Republic.

The German communities in Poland were of different origin. Initially under Polish rule, the German Order had partly acquired and partly conquered Prussia. Extensive colonisation throughout the thirteenth century brought many German merchants, artisans, and clerics to the region, who remained there even after the decline of the German Order. After a quarter of a century of Polish sovereignty over Prussia, the Duchy of Prussia became independent from Poland in 1660. Unification with Brandenburg in 1701, which itself consisted largely of areas colonised, acquired, and conquered from the thirteenth century onwards, made Prussia an integral, and later the dominant, part of the German Empire. As a result of the territorial

settlement in Versailles after World War One, Poland acquired a sizeable portion of German territory in Silesia and West Prussia (the Polish Corridor) and with it a German-speaking minority. The west-ward shift of Poland after 1945 had similar territorial implications, but it was accompanied by large-scale forced population transfers – the expulsion of Poles from what had become Ukraine and their resettlement in areas from which approximately nine million Germans had been expelled. Apart from western Poland, and primarily Upper Silesia, today's German minority groups in Poland also live in the south-western part of the former East Prussia, which was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1945.

Thus, territorial aspects have played a different, yet equally important part in the development of the relationship between the German minority groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia and their respective host-states and Germany on the one hand, and between these host-states and Germany on the other. As I will show in the following, this territorial dimension of minority politics – both internal as well as external – continues to influence these relationships. Yet, its impact on the situation of the German minority groups in Poland and the Czech Republic can only be fully understood after a more comprehensive examination of all the historical and contemporary factors that determine minority politics in this context.

### **The German Minority Groups in Czechoslovakia and Poland between 1945 and 1990**

In many ways, the situation of Germans in Czechoslovakia and Poland between 1945 and 1990 was very similar. Both groups suffered as ethnic minorities in states whose ideological premises placed notions of class above those of ethnic identification, and additionally they suffered as Germans as a consequence of the crimes committed by the Nazis during the Second World War against Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks.

In Czechoslovakia, of the approximately 3.2 million Germans living in the country in 1945, only around 250,000 remained after the end of the expulsions, about ten per cent of whom lived in the Slovak part of the country. These Germans were allowed to stay in the country for a variety of different reasons: marriage to a Czech or Slovak national, proven loyalty to the Czechoslovak state in the sense of the Beneš Decrees,<sup>5</sup> or the need to retain a certain amount of skilled labourers and specialists for the economic reconstruction of the country (Löffler, 1997, p. 94f.). The policy agenda of the Communist government towards the country's still sizeable German minority was simple: economic integration and cultural assimilation (Müller, 1993, p. 21). Economic integration was achieved with relative ease, as the vast majority of Germans who were allowed to stay had been hand-picked for their skills. Cultural assimilation was a lengthier process, but over time it was similarly successful: the so-called internal expulsion in the late 1940s and early 1950s destroyed the last remnants of the historical settlement structures of the German population, German schools and the teaching of German as a native language were banned, and the fear of discrimination by authorities and majority population initiated a trend towards 'voluntary' assimilation among the younger generations.

Initially, however, the government had recognised the value of the German language as a means to transmit its propaganda messages to the minority: from 1951 on, a German-language newspaper existed, after 1957, German cultural groups were allowed under the umbrella of the central trade union organisation, and a German theatre existed travelling the country and performing plays in German. At the beginning of the 1960s, this policy, however, was abandoned as it seemed to be counter-productive to the official efforts at total assimilation. (Müller, 1993, p. 22) Another policy change occurred when a more minority-friendly policy was introduced in the wake of the Prague Spring. The German minority was officially recognised in a constitutional law in 1968,<sup>6</sup> and members of the minority were allowed to create their own representative forum – the Cultural Association of Citizens of German Nationality. Although neither of these measures was officially reversed after the Warsaw Pact invasion, steps were taken to minimise their positive impact on the German minority, including the replacement of the leadership of the Cultural Association with loyal Communists. The official organ of the association, the *Prague People's Paper* could continue, but was turned into an

organ of communist propaganda, similar to the other two German-language publications, the *New Prague Press* and the *Czechoslovak Life* (Kotzian, 1998, p. 21). Thus, while the older generation had some limited opportunities to preserve its cultural heritage, including its language, traditions, and customs, the persistent absence of a public commitment to preserve a German cultural tradition across the generations meant that the assimilation pressure on the younger members of the minority continued unabated. (Löffler, 1997, p. 95) This and the increasing opportunities to emigrate to Germany resulted in an almost 80% decrease in the number of Germans in just four decades.<sup>7</sup> According to the first post-communist census, by 1991 only little more than 50,000 citizens in Czechoslovakia registered as German.

The major difference between the Czechoslovak and the Polish case is that in Poland two categories of Germans existed: those who had been citizens of the German Reich before the beginning of the Second World War, and ended up on Polish territory because of the westward shift of the country, and those who had been citizens of the pre-war Polish state. Similarly to the Czechoslovak case, not every German from either category was expelled from Poland. Skilled workers in the mining and metallurgical industries were often considered essential for the country's economic recovery and therefore allowed to stay, at least until the late 1950s when Poles were available in sufficient numbers to take over. In addition, those pre-war Polish citizens who had undergone 'rehabilitation' in forced labour camps and spoke Polish were offered their Polish citizenship back from the early to mid-1950s on.<sup>8</sup>

The distinction made by Polish officials, one of the few curious instances when Communists and the Catholic Church were united over an issue, was that between the autochthonous or 'Germanised' Poles primarily of Upper Silesia and the much smaller German population of Lower Silesia. The former group was treated as originally of Polish or Slavic origin but then exposed to centuries of Germanisation. Thus, a policy of re-Polonisation was pursued banning any use of German in public and in religious services. In contrast to this, the Germans of Lower Silesia were recognised as a national minority after 1951. They were granted a German-language weekly, the *Workers' Voice* (later renamed into *The week in Poland*), several German primary schools were established, and a number of libraries with German-language books existed in the area as well. In April 1957, a German Social-Cultural Association was founded in Wrocław, which had around 7,000 members. (Neubach, 1998, p. 26)

In either case, the overwhelming majority of Germans who became eligible to leave in the late 1950s, after Red Cross mediation between Poland and West Germany, decided to seize this opportunity. The fact that about 55,000 Germans from Lower Silesia left virtually destroyed the basis of the cultural life of the German-speaking population there. In addition to them, about 120,000 Germans from Upper Silesia emigrated as well. As a consequence, the assimilation pressure on the remaining Germans in both areas grew, again resulting in even more people emigrating, so that, as a result of several inter-governmental agreements between Poland and the Federal Republic, by 1990 about 1.1 million people of German descent had left Poland.<sup>9</sup>

With almost all of the 'recognised' Germans emigrating, Polish assimilation policy could 'comfortably' deny the existence of a German minority until 1989.<sup>10</sup> More practically, the policy of forced assimilation also included the decade-long ban of German in school curricula, the discrimination of members of the minority in public sector employment, as well as things as trivial as the prosecution of people who owned kitchen appliances with German labels on them. (Strobel, 1997, p. 29) On the political level, organisations of the German minority, which had gradually emerged since the early 1980s, were denied official recognition, and their members were subjected to various forms of discrimination. (Rogall, 1993, p. 33f.)

The failure of the re-Polonisation, however, became evident by the end of the 1980s. By 1990, dozens of German Friendship Circles had been founded in Upper Silesia whose overall membership grew to around 300,000 by 1998. (Paweltziki and Kirstein, 1998, p. 15)

## The Federal Republic's External Minority Policy before and after 1990: Some General Considerations

In contrast to the Weimar Republic, where the situation of ethnic German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe played a central part in foreign policy from the early days on, it only became more of an issue in the bilateral relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland and Czechoslovakia from the mid-1950s onwards. By then, Germany's integration into the western world had sufficiently progressed through membership in NATO and the forerunners of today's European Union. Partly as a result of public pressure and political lobbying by the various expellee organisations, the Federal Republic committed itself to a foreign policy vis-à-vis the communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe that included humanitarian efforts to improve the situation of ethnic Germans in these countries. The possibilities of direct involvement, however, were extremely limited throughout the Cold War period. The priority of promoting peaceful co-existence between east and west did not leave the Federal Republic much room in its external minority policy. Successive governments, therefore, focussed their efforts on facilitating the emigration of ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe to the Federal Republic, primarily from the Soviet Union, Romania, and Poland.<sup>11</sup>

The transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, which began in 1989/90, provided an entirely different structure of new and enlarged opportunities for Germany's external minority policy. On the one hand, democratisation meant the granting of such basic rights and liberties as the freedoms of speech, association, and political participation, allowing ethnic Germans in their host-countries to form their own parties, stand for election, and actively advocate the interests of their group. On the other hand, it also meant that there were no longer any restrictions on emigration, and given the experience of the past, many ethnic Germans, particularly in Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union and its successor states seized this opportunity and emigrated to Germany. Both developments required a measured and carefully considered policy response from Germany – domestically to cope with the enormous influx of ethnic German migrants, and internationally to assure the neighbouring states in Central and Eastern Europe of the inviolability of the post-war borders, while simultaneously supporting German minorities at qualitatively and quantitatively new levels and ensuring their protection as national minorities. All this had to happen within the framework of general German foreign policy premises, such as the support for the transition to democracy and a market economy, the creation of a new collective security order embracing all states in Europe, and respect for international law and human rights.

Given the ethno-political demography of the region with its many national minorities, latent border disputes, and inter-ethnic tensions, it was obvious that the role of minorities would be a crucial one in two ways. The ultimate test of successful democratisation would have to include an assessment of whether or not members of national minorities, individually and collectively, were entitled to full equality in their host-societies and had the right to preserve, express, and develop their distinct identities in their host-states. Furthermore, it would not be possible to operate a viable collective security system without settling existing ethnic and territorial conflicts and establishing frameworks within which future disputes could be resolved peacefully. Taking these assumptions as a starting point, the German government concluded that national minorities could play a crucial part in bringing about results in these two interrelated processes as they could bridge existing cultural gaps. (*Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/10845, and *BMI-Pressemitteilung* 18 May 1999 and *BMI-Pressemitteilung* 14 June 1999) The federal government sought to create partnerships with the Central and East European host-states and the German minorities living there that, on the basis of international treaties and bilateral agreements,<sup>12</sup> would promote the government's 'overall foreign policy concept of a European peace policy of reconciliation, understanding, and co-operation.' (*Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/3195) Cultural, social, and economic measures to support German minorities, although primarily 'aimed at an improvement of the living conditions of ethnic Germans in their host-countries,' would naturally benefit whole regions and their populations

independent of their ethnic origin and thus promote inter-ethnic harmony and economic prosperity while strengthening the emerging democratic political structures. (*Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/3428 and *Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/1116) Thus, by creating favourable conditions for the integration of ethnic Germans in the societies of their host-states, the German government hoped to provide an alternative to emigration. (*Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/3428)

### **Germany's Relationship with the Czech Republic after 1990: Reconciliation at Whose Expense?**

In Germany's relationship with Czechoslovakia, and after 1993 with the Czech Republic, territorial issues never played a part at inter-governmental level, because all West German governments after 1949 had accepted, at least implicitly, the formula of 'Germany in the borders of 1937' as the Allied Powers had determined it in the London Protocol of September 1944. (Kimminich, 1996, p. 33) More important were the channelling of humanitarian aid to support remaining ethnic Germans and above all to facilitate a comprehensive process of reconciliation. In particular because of the role of the German minority in the inter-war period and their subsequent expulsion from the *Sudetenland*, bilateral relations have never been completely free from strains, and have several times been affected negatively by the problems associated with the Sudeten German expellees in the Federal Republic.

After years of negotiations and crises, the German-Czech Declaration of 21 January 1997 (*Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/6787) was the smallest common denominator the two governments could find on the two most critical issues – the role of the Sudeten Germans in the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and their collective victimization and expulsion after the end of the Second World War. The German government accepted the responsibility of Germany in the developments leading up to the Munich Agreement and the destruction of Czechoslovakia, expressed its deep sorrow over the suffering of Czechs during the Nazi occupation of their country, and acknowledged that it was these two issues that prepared the ground for the post-war treatment and expulsion of members of the German minority in the country. The Czech government, on the other side, regretted the post-war policy vis-à-vis ethnic Germans, which resulted in the expulsion and expropriation of a large section of the German minority, including many innocent people. Both governments agreed that the remaining members of the German minority in the Czech Republic and the expellees and their descendants would play an important role in the future relationship of the two countries and that the support of the German minority in the Czech Republic was a matter of mutual interest. Thus, a joint German-Czech Future Fund, to which Germany contributed about 140 million Deutschmark and the Czech Republic about 25 million Deutschmark, was set up, part of which is to be spent on projects related to the support of the German minority in the Czech Republic.

Because of the sensitivity of the issues involved as well as the much smaller size of the German population in the Czech Republic, the German government has taken a very different approach in relation to financial and other support given to the German minority. In contrast to Poland, direct support for Germans in the Czech Republic is confined to so-called meeting centres, which play an important part in the minority's cultural life. However, through the activities of various expellee organisations in the Federal Republic, part of whose 'cross-border' work receives public funding, Germans in the Czech Republic benefit indirectly from the new approach to external minority policy that the federal government has gradually developed after 1989/90.

Ironically, the overriding concern for reconciliation with the Czech Republic has inadvertently been at the expense of the German minority, who has not only received far less support than its counterpart in Poland, but whose situation in the Czech Republic, as I will demonstrate below, has not improved in terms of their public status either.



### Germany's Relationship with Poland after 1990: The Great Success Story?

Historically, the problems between Germany and Poland have been much more complex in comparison to those between Germany and Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic. German oppression of Poles had been more fierce and had lasted longer than that of the Czechs, and the number of expellees from Poland exceeded those from the Sudetenland by far. In addition, the former *Eastern territories of the German Reich* had only been placed under provisional Polish administration in the Potsdam agreement, a permanent settlement of their status remaining subject to a peace treaty. Thus, the relationship with Poland had a somewhat higher priority on the German foreign policy agenda, especially in relation to German unification. Within Germany's policy vis-à-vis Poland, the German minority in this country always figured prominently in the formulation of policy objectives.

Today, the relations between Germany and Poland have their legal basis in a bilateral treaty of 1990, in which the Federal Republic explicitly guaranteed the Oder-Neiße line as the common border, and in the 1991 Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Co-operation.<sup>13</sup> To secure a legal framework for the development of the German minority in Poland was only one part of German foreign policy and has been complemented by substantial material aid in the areas of culture and education (the responsibility of the Foreign Office), economic reconstruction (the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior), and social and community work (the responsibility of the German Red Cross, before 1990 also through the Ministry of Inner-German Affairs). Material aid had been committed to the German minority before 1989, but in comparatively smaller proportions. The changes in Poland in 1989/90 allowed the allocation of larger funds, through different channels, and for new purposes. Geographically, material support has always been concentrated on the Upper Silesian region.

Funding in the education and cultural sector has included a variety of activities. The German government has provided staff support to improve the quality of German language teaching in Poland.<sup>14</sup> Since 1993, members of the German minority in Poland have had access to a special grant programme to study in Germany for a period of up to twelve months. The federal government also provides partial funding for TV and radio broadcasts and print media of the German minority and supplies German newspapers and magazines to the cultural organisations of the minority.

Financial aid channelled through the Ministry of the Interior was given to various associations of the minority. The annual amounts increased from 4.7 million Deutschmark in 1991 to 5.8 in 1992 and then dropped to 5.7 and to 5.4 million Deutschmark in 1993 and 1994, respectively. A far larger amount of money, however, has been spent on projects to support the economic recovery of the areas in which members of the German minority live, thus benefiting not only the minorities, but also these regions and their (other) population as a whole. Efforts here were concentrated on infrastructural improvements, e.g., water supply systems, and on promoting small businesses and private farms. Funding of such projects increased from 700,000 Deutschmark in 1991 to 8.7 million Deutschmark in 1994 and again to 14.8 million Deutschmark in 1996.

German Financial Support for ethnic Germans in Poland, 1987-1994<sup>15</sup>

	AA	BMI	DRK	BmfiB
1987	--	--	2.5	2.6
1988	--	--	2.4	3.7
1989	5.5	--	2.8	5.5
1990		6.8	3.3	5.3
1991		24.2	3.1	--
1992	3.5	26.5	1.4	--
1993	6.5	25.7	1.1	--
1994	6.5	25.3	1.4	--

All figures in millions of Deutschmark.

AA – Foreign Office, BMI – Ministry of the Interior, DRK – German Red Cross, BMfiB – Ministry of Inner-German Affairs

Source: *Bundestagsdrucksache* 13/1036

### The Influence of the Expellee Organisations: Waxing or Waning?

Ethnic Germans who had been expelled from their traditional homelands after 1945 and had come to the Western zones of occupation began to organise themselves more formally from 1946/47 onwards. With the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, they began to play an important part in German politics for about two decades. The advent of the new *Ostpolitik* of the SPD-led government under Willy Brandt after 1969 put an end to this, yet throughout the 1960s, the Association of Expellees (BdV) had already gradually lost its leverage over domestic and foreign policy-making. Through the next two decades, this led to a radicalisation of some sections of the expellees, while others became engaged in helping ethnic German migrants integrate in German society and gradually establishing links to their former homelands.

The collapse of communism in 1989/90 came as unexpected for the expellee organisations as it came for the German government. Yet, the perception of the opportunities arising from these dramatic events was rather different between the two, but also within the BdV. Government policy to achieve the unification of the two German states at the price of abandoning all territorial claims and formally guaranteeing the borders of East Germany as those of the united Germany was seen as unacceptable and treacherous by many in the leadership of the BdV. Instead, activists of the organization tried to stage a referendum in Poland under the motto 'Peace through Free Choice.' This raised completely unrealistic hopes among many members of the German minority in Poland, particularly in Upper Silesia where the response to the signature campaign in support of the referendum had been strong. Yet, these hopes were dashed when chancellor Kohl declared at an event celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Charter of the German Expellees in 1990 that the recognition of the Oder-Neisse line as Germany's eastern frontier was the price that had to be paid for the reunification of Germany.<sup>16</sup>

Even though, for historical reasons, a border question similar to that between Germany and Poland never existed in the relationship between the Federal Republic and Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic, the rhetoric of expellee activists has, if anything, been more aggressive on the Sudeten German issue, demanding 'unlimited sovereignty' for Sudeten Germans in their homeland (Hochfelder 1991: 58) and rejecting the 'belonging of the *Sudetenland* to any Czechoslovak state' (Schnürch 1991: 83).

Maximum demands of this kind were not popular with either the German or the Czech and Polish governments. Subsequently, there have also been more moderate voices and more reconciliatory approaches. As early as 1993, the leadership of the BdV acknowledged the positive steps taken by the Polish government to improve the situation of ethnic Germans in Poland. (Dobrosielski 1992: 144) Erika Steinbach (1999), the chairperson of the BdV since 1998, stated in a speech delivered to students at Charles University, Prague, that five decades after the end of the Second World War 'coming to terms with the past cannot be about guilt and retribution. ... We have to face the history of this century together in order to build a peaceful and prosperous future.' She even accepted the critique of the Czech ambassador to Germany

that it was painful for Czechs to hear her use the term ‘expulsion states’. She emphasized that today’s Czech Republic was a democracy that had not expelled any Germans; yet she insisted that the country, as much as Germany, had to accept the legacy of the past. More importantly for the particularly sensitive relationship with the Czech Republic, Steinbach reassured her listeners that although the expellees loved their ancestral homelands, ‘they respect the dignity of the people living there now. And they do not want ... that other people will ever be expelled.’ (Steinbach, 1999)

However, two issues, although not directly contradicting these statements, continue to effect German-Polish and German-Czech relations: restitution of property or adequate compensation, and the right for expellees to settle in their former homelands. Both of these premises have strong political implications. The demand for property restitution (or compensation) entered a new phase during the summer of 1999, when the Sudeten German Cultural Association decided to support the filing of a collective court case in the US against the Czech state, and when ethnic German resettlers from Poland who left the country between the 1950s and 1970s brought their case for restitution or compensation to the Polish Supreme Court.<sup>17</sup> The BdV and the Sudeten German Cultural Association also demanded on several occasions that accession to the EU be made dependant upon the restitution of property to expellees, or their adequate compensation. The German Chancellor Schröder made it clear in March 1999 that he would not support Sudeten German property claims and that his government did not intend to make any claims itself. (*BK Pressemitteilung*, 9 March 1999) Expellee organisations have nevertheless persisted in their demand to link EU accession to a satisfactory resolution of the property question, often pointing to the examples of Hungary and Estonia, who introduced legislation allowing for property restitution or compensation to expelled Germans. One side effect of this approach by the expellees is the fact that the remaining German minorities in Poland and the Czech Republic are being put in an increasingly awkward position in their host-countries. In this context, one of the leading activists of the German minority in Poland, Henryk Kroll, a member of the Polish Sejm, asked the BdV chairperson Erika Steinbach in October 1999 publicly to drop the demand to make restitution/compensation for the expellees a condition of EU accession.

The issue of a right for expellees to settle in their former homelands also regained prominence in the political debate about the accession of Poland and the Czech Republic to the European Union and the expected extension of EU principles, including the freedom of mobility, to the two countries, thus giving expellees and their children and grandchildren a legal right to return to their homelands, which has caused considerable unease in Poland and the Czech Republic. However, it is rather unlikely that large numbers of expellees or of their children and grandchildren would actually take up such an opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

At lower and less formal levels, relationships between expellees and both Poland and the Czech Republic have improved significantly. This has taken the form communal partnerships between towns in the Federal Republic and in the former homelands of expellees, especially in former East Prussia, Upper Silesia and the Czech Republic, in which expellees are often actively involved.<sup>19</sup> Increasingly, efforts have also been made by the various expellee organizations to foster the dialogue between them and their former host-states at various levels. Joint workshops have taken place in Germany and Poland and the Czech Republic bringing together officials and activists from both sides exploring the past and, even more importantly, ways of how to build the future. Similarly, information trips are organized to the former hometowns and villages of expellees in order to assess the specific needs of these regions and to initiate aid programs.<sup>20</sup> Even less formally, many expellees and their children and grandchildren have gotten involved individually in projects to facilitate reconstruction of their former homelands after decades of Communism, most of them without any intention of resettlement, border revisions, or the like.<sup>21</sup>

From this perspective, the work of the refugees, expellees, and their children has made a significant and positive contribution to Germany’s external minority policy after 1990 – it has

fostered reconciliation and has been a part of the efforts to improve the living conditions of German minorities in their host-countries.

### **Caught between the Big Players? Today's German Minority Groups in the Czech Republic and Poland**

The situation in which the German minority groups in the Czech Republic and Poland find themselves today is the result of many complex developments not only in these two countries, but also in Germany. It is also the result of geopolitical developments, most notably the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, and the new quality of the bilateral relationships between the two host-countries and Germany.

In general, the situation of both minority groups has significantly improved over the past ten years. This is particularly the case in relation to Poland. Several hundred thousand Germans still live there, the vast majority of them in Upper Silesia in the *voivodeships* (provinces) of Katowice, Czestochowa, and particularly in the Opole *voivodeship*. They have benefited from financial, material, and human resources made available to them by the German government that have enabled the minority, with the consent and support of Polish authorities,<sup>22</sup> to restore in part the German-language education system that had existed before 1945, to revive a rich cultural life for the minority members, and to participate actively in the economic reconstruction of their homeland.

Of equal importance has been that the relationships between ethnic Germans and Poles have improved at the local level. After a period of high ethnic tensions in the early 1990s, many of them connected to the activities of the German expellee organisations in Upper Silesia, inter-ethnic co-operation has prevailed since the middle of the decade. The German minority has become an important political force in Upper Silesia and engaged actively and co-operatively in solving problems at local and regional level. Ethnic Germans have become widely integrated in the political process in Upper Silesia and are now also a socially accepted part of the community, which has manifested itself, for example, in German candidates being put on lists of Polish parties in the Upper Silesian *voivodeship* and the success of a coalition between the German minority and a Polish party that has been running the Opole *voivodeship* since the 1998 local elections (Cordell, 2000).

Parallel to the improvement of relationships at the local level, the relationship between the minority and the Polish state became more constructive, too. A sincere effort has been made by Polish authorities to implement also those aspects of the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation that were aimed specifically at the German minority. This has included the already cited rapprochement with the expellee organisations from the mid-1990s on, the setting-up of a joint German-Polish educational text book commission to achieve consensus on the interpretation of disputed parts of the two countries' history, the enacting of regulations that make minority radio and TV broadcasts as well as the publication of minority print media possible, and the co-sponsorship of the scholarly Eichendorff journal. Despite the fact that a number of problems remain, such as the lack of sufficient numbers of well qualified teachers of German and of a curriculum for the teaching of German (Paweltziki and Kirstein, 1998, p. 16 and *Schlesische Nachrichten* 2/98, p. 5), improvements in the overall situation of the minority have been significant, which is also evident from the fact that emigration has declined considerably after 1992.<sup>23</sup>

While the numerical strength of the minority is still a disputed matter, the strength of its German identity is not. The Association of German Friendship Circles in Poland has had over 300,000 adult members as of 1998. Almost half of them live in the Opole *voivodeship*, and approximately another fifth in the Katowice *voivodeship*. Some other 100,000 members are scattered throughout the country, with larger concentrations only to be found in Lower Silesia, Masuria and Ermland. (Cordell 2000) Overall, the minority is relatively well organised at the

national level, even though the focus of its activities is on Upper Silesia. The German minority in Poland as a whole still has the will to preserve and develop its strong distinct ethno-cultural identity for generations to come.

In many respects, the situation of the remaining ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic is different. Despite the fact that the legislative framework in the Czech Republic is equally, if not more, permissive in relation to national minorities<sup>24</sup> as it is in Poland, the minority's small size<sup>25</sup> and the fact that it lives scattered throughout the eastern, northern, and western border regions of the country account in part for the fact that the situation for ethnic Germans is more difficult.

Although Germans in the Czech Republic are a recognised national minority and are represented in the Council for National Minorities of the Government of the Czech Republic, which advises the government on minority affairs, their small size gives them virtually no chance for political representation at any level.<sup>26</sup> However, part of the problem is also that ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic do not have a joint political platform, and even their cultural organisations are deeply split between the Association of Germans in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia (itself an umbrella organisation for various regional groups) and the various successor organisations of the Cultural Association of Citizens of German Nationality, the body that had already existed since the Prague Spring. (Kotzian, 1998, p. 26) By 1999, 39 civic organisations within the German minority existed in the Czech Republic. (*Report*, 1999)

More importantly, however, has been the fact that traditional anti-German attitudes still persist in the Czech Republic, and they do so both at popular as well as official level. This manifests itself, for example, in the law on property restitution which excludes Czech citizens from restitution of property, or compensation, if expropriations took place before 1948, i.e., before the communist takeover when the vast majority of expulsions from, and forced resettlements within, Czechoslovakia took place. Existing popular prejudice against Germans and Germany has forced successive Czech governments to take a tough stance on negotiations with Germany of the German-Czech Declaration and its implementation. A 1996 public opinion poll revealed that 86% of those Czechs surveyed would not vote for a party that supported an apology to the Sudeten Germans for the expulsions in the post-war period. Negative images about Germany as a neighbouring state were also uncovered in this survey with about half of all interviewees believing Germany to be an economic threat, 39% seeing it as a political threat, and 25% as a military threat.<sup>27</sup> While such views are understandable among those who actually experienced the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the subsequent German occupation and atrocities committed against the civilian population, they are rather surprising to exist among younger generation Czechs. One explanation of this phenomenon must certainly be seen in the fact that, despite a decade of democratisation, Czech schoolbooks still portray the nation's history as one of an ethnically Czech nation fighting for the preservation of its culture, for autonomy and for statehood against an oppressive German element (*Report*, 1999).<sup>28</sup> Czech media have also contributed to the persistence of anti-German feelings through their consistent and disproportionate coverage of hard-line activists of the Sudeten German expellees in the Federal Republic.<sup>29</sup>

However, despite these difficulties, considerable progress has been achieved as well since 1989. The Czech state budget is subsidising two weekly papers of the German minority with an average of four million Czech Crowns annually, and has not objected to financial aid from Germany channelled into the creation of, thus far, twelve meeting centres. Czech Radio has an independent German national minority department, alongside similar departments for the Polish, Slovak, and Romany minorities, and regularly broadcasts programmes aimed at the minority. More recently, the Association of Germans in Prague and Central Bohemia has opened a school in Prague that provides German-language education to its students who come primarily from the German minority but also include members of other ethnic groups. The state budget covers all operational costs of the school. Otherwise, a German-language educational system is rather undeveloped for two reasons. On the one hand, numbers of Germans are often

so small that German schools, or even German classes, can not be opened, and the Czech government does not promote the establishment of bilingual Czech-German schools. On the other hand, it must also be recognised that cultural and linguistic assimilation among the younger generation of members of the German minority has progressed so far that many families do not speak German even at home and do not register their children as German at school and are not particularly interested in professing German culture and traditions, partly also because of fears of disadvantages in society.

Thus, the German minority in the Czech Republic seems destined to go a different path than its counterpart in Poland. Given that the apparent assimilation of the minority is a consequence of a decades-long development and not the result of a deliberate policy of post-1989 governments in the Czech Republic, the gradual disappearance of the German minority might be seen as unfortunate by some and regrettable from the point of view of cultural diversity, but it should also be welcomed as a development that coincides with the apparent wishes of the younger generations of ethnic Germans and does not bear any dangers for ethnic peace in the Czech Republic.

The situation of German minorities in Poland and the Czech Republic has evolved in dramatically different ways after 1989. While the minority in Poland has been reconstituted and now plays an important part in regional political, social, and economic life, and thus has become a player in its own right, Germans in the Czech Republic and the prospects they have for the future have been heavily determined by events outside their control and not always to their advantage. From this perspective, the German minority in the Czech Republic has become caught between Germany, the Czech Republic, and the Sudeten German expellees. While an almost identical constellation has worked to the advantage of the minority in Poland, historical and current events have prevented ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic from achieving similar acceptance in society. For both groups, this difference once more illustrates a point made at the beginning of this analysis in relation to ethnic minorities, namely that they 'are doubly historical in the sense that not only are historical memories essential to their continuance but each such ethnic group is the product of specific historical forces and is therefore subject to historical change and dissolution.' (Smith, 1991, p. 20)

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<sup>1</sup> As an analytical category, this relationship pattern has been first developed systematically by Rogers Brubaker (1996) in his collection of essays *Nationalism Reframed*. Brubaker uses the term 'triadic nexus' to describe the 'interactive and interlocking' nationalisms of 'national minorities, the newly nationalizing states in which they live, and the external national homelands to which they belong.' (Brubaker, 1996, p. 4)

<sup>2</sup> Horowitz (1985 and 1991) has emphasised the variety of factors that make successful, or even desirable, irredentas very unlikely.

<sup>3</sup> However, if their respective political agendas are mutually incompatible, a conflictual relationship between external minority and kin-state is just as likely. This can either be the case if the irredentist nationalism in the kin-state, or at least by certain political groups in the kin-state, is not reciprocated by the external minority or considered harmful for its relationship with the host-state, or vice versa if the 'irredentism' of the external minority is not welcomed by the kin-state.

<sup>4</sup> These include natural resources, such as water, iron, coal, oil, or gas; they extend to the goods and services produced by the population living in this territory; and they can comprise military or strategic advantages in terms of natural boundaries, access to the open sea, and control over transport routes and waterways.

<sup>5</sup> On details of the Beneš Decrees cf. Blumenwitz, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> The 'Constitutional Law on the Status of National Minorities in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic' of 28 October 1968 entered into force on 1 January 1969. In Article 3, it granted citizens of Hungarian, German, Polish and Ukrainian (Rusin) nationality the right to education in their mother tongue, to cultural development, to communication with local authorities in their mother tongue, to their own social and cultural organizations, and to print media in their native language. Article 4 included a number of general non-discrimination clauses.

<sup>7</sup> In comparison with Poland, emigration from Czechoslovakia to Germany was much smaller in absolute figures: just over 100,000 ethnic Germans left the country for the Federal Republic between 1950 and 1990, with more than one-third of them leaving between 1967-1969. Since the second half of the 1990s, less than a hundred ethnic German from the Czech Republic have come to Germany on an annual basis. (*Infodienst*, 1997, pp. 2-5)

<sup>8</sup> According to one source, the number of those rehabilitated in Upper Silesia by the end of 1947 is estimated at around 850,000. (Cf. Cordell, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> Between 1950 and 1956, less than 60,000 ethnic Germans had been allowed to leave Poland, but in 1957, 98,290 could emigrate, and in 1958 even 117,550. During the following two decades until 1979, over 300,000 ethnic Germans left, and by 1990, another more than 800,000 came to Germany, almost two-thirds of them between 1988-1990. (*Infodienst*, 1997, pp. 2-5)

<sup>10</sup> The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki revoked this policy of denial officially only in a joint declaration in November 1989.

<sup>11</sup> The agreements between West Germany and some of the host-states on repatriation of ethnic Germans included financial arrangements setting 'per capita fees' to be paid by the federal government. Average figures of annual emigration of ethnic Germans after 1950 are as follows: 1955-59: 64,000; 1960-64: 18,000; 1965-69: 26,000; 1970-74: 25,000; 1975-79: 46,000; 1980-84: 49,000, 1985-86: 41,000; 1987: 78,000. (*Infodienst*, 1997, p. 2-5)

<sup>12</sup> The key international agreements in this context are the 1990 Copenhagen document of the CSCE and the Council of Europe's Framework Declaration on minority rights. Bilateral treaties exist between Germany and Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, Romania, and Russia. Major bilateral agreements were concluded with Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In detail, Heintze (2000).

<sup>13</sup> This treaty later on served as a 'role model' for other treaties Germany signed with states in Central and Eastern Europe. See note 12 above.

<sup>14</sup> The number of teachers sent to Poland has increased from just one in 1989 to one hundred and eleven in 1994. In addition, four federal government-sponsored experts on German language teaching have been working in Poland since 1994; the German Academic Exchange Service is funding twenty-six lecturers at Polish universities, and the Goethe Institute has supplied eight lecturers for the further training of Polish teachers of German.

<sup>15</sup> Since 1994, the combined annual average of all funds made available to the German minority in Poland has been around twenty-five million Deutschmark.

<sup>16</sup> Thereafter the BdV started two further initiatives. One was for the Europeanisation of the Oder-Neisse territories, the other to enable members of the German minority in Poland to vote in parliamentary elections in the Federal Republic. Both failed.

<sup>17</sup> While the legal situation of both groups of claimants is different, their action was, to some extent, triggered by a resolution of the US House of Representatives in 1998, urging 'countries which have not already done so to return wrongfully expropriated properties to their rightful owners or, when actual return is not possible, to pay prompt, just and effective compensation, in accordance with principles of justice and in a manner that is just, transparent and fair'. 105th CONGRESS, 2d Session, H. RES. 562 (HRES 562 IH)

<sup>18</sup> The interest of most expellees in their former homelands is mostly of a nostalgic sentiment – returning to the places of their (childhood) memory as tourists, rather than as permanent residents.

<sup>19</sup> One such example is the twinning arrangement between former Preußisch Holland/Paslek, the town of Hürth in Germany and the local association of expellees, many of whom originally came from Preußisch Holland/Paslek. The agreement covers a range of areas, including the preservation of cultural monuments, co-operation in historic research and in cultural matters, promotion of contacts in the fields of tourism and business, humanitarian aid, and support for exchange programs. Another noteworthy case is that of the town of Ratibor in Upper Silesia. Here expellees got actively involved in the construction of a waste water facility, and the chairman of the *Silesian Cultural Association in the Federal Republic*, Herbert Hupka, for years a target of Communist propaganda, was awarded the town's

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Honorary Medal for his efforts. Another example is that of the Kiel, Germany, based organisation Aid for You, which, since 1984, has supported ethnic Germans in former East Prussia, primarily with food and clothing.

<sup>20</sup> This, very often, takes very basic, yet all the more effective forms. The donation campaign 'Notopfer Königsberg' of the BdV state organisation Northrhine-Westphalia, for example, funded the provision of running water for one family, of winter food for the cow of another family, and the repair of roofs of several houses. Cf. BdV-Landesverband Nordrhein-Westfalen (1998).

<sup>21</sup> The sculptor Walter Grill, to name just one prominent case, has organised several exhibitions of his work and that of his colleagues in his former hometown of Karlsbad/Karlovy Vary. According to him, the human contact with people living in the former Sudetenland now has managed to overcome many prejudices and fears on both sides. Cf. Grill (2001).

<sup>22</sup> The ministerial decree on the right of the German minority to education in their mother tongue entered into force on 17 April 1992, less than a year after the 1991 German-Polish treaty had been ratified.

<sup>23</sup> After emigration had peaked between 1988-1990 with more than half a million ethnic Germans leaving in just three years, numbers went down to around 1,000 emigrants per year for the second half of the 1990s.

<sup>24</sup> The 1968 Constitutional Law on the Status of National Minorities was superseded in January 1991 by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms which, in December 1992, became part of the Czech constitution according to Article 3 of the Constitutional Law of the Czech National Council. Apart from general non-discrimination clauses in Articles 3 and 24, the Charter also details specific minority rights: development of their own culture, communication and reception of information in their own language, forming of ethnic associations, education in their mother tongue, use of their mother tongue in public, and participation in the handling of affairs concerning national and ethnic minorities.

<sup>25</sup> Less than 50,000 people registered either their national identity or mother tongue as German in the 1991 census. The respective figures were 48,556 (or 0.5% of the total population of the Czech Republic) and 40,907 (0.4%). Even at the local level, the situation is not much better: the largest concentrations of ethnic Germans can be found in the districts of Sokolov (6.1%) and Karlovy Vary (3.1%). Cf. *Report* (1999).

<sup>26</sup> The only exception to this pattern occurred when the deputy chairman of the Association of Germans, Walter Piverka, was elected as a candidate by the Prague Citizens Forum in the first post-communist elections in June 1990. Cf. Löffler, 1997, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Mlada Fronta Dnes*, 9 April 1996, as quoted in Stroehlein, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> The *Report* also notes that Czech history text books largely ignore the fact that the Czech lands for centuries had been jointly and peacefully inhabited by large populations of Czechs, Germans, and Jews, and that the economic, political, and cultural contributions of the latter two to the development of the area are widely disregarded.

<sup>29</sup> On the issue of the German-Czech Declaration and its public reception in the Czech Republic, cf. Stroehlein, 1997.