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Teachers in Power: Nation-Building and Loyalty in a Czechoslovak Periphery (1918–1947)

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After the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, Czech teachers and other civil servants came to the peripheral regions of the Slovak part of the state. Their task, apart from ensuring the functioning of the newly established state institutions, was to promote the Czechoslovak national project. Some of these officials remained in their positions for many years, overcoming major macro-political upheavals. This article analyses the role of individuals, their loyalties and networks in establishing and maintaining stability across historical ruptures in a remote, linguistically heterogeneous area of Czechoslovakia. Since these actors fostered the official state ideology and played a prominent role in the lifeworld of local communities for many decades, this article shows how these figures endured numerous ruptures, bound together the state and their localities and reinforced the state's presence on the ground. Using the case of a Czech school principal in the predominantly German- and Hungarian-speaking town of Nižný Medzev in eastern Slovakia, this article examines the role of individual actors in promoting and shaping the various forms of Czechoslovak nation-building policies on the local level.

Introduction

At the end of August 1945, a crowd gathered in the small town of Nižný Medzev (Unter-Metzenseifen/Alsó-Meczenzéf) in Eastern Czechoslovakia to celebrate the first anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising.¹ After a morning performance of the local brass band, a platoon of thirty partisans from the town and the surrounding area laid wreaths on the grave of a fallen Soviet soldier. A mass was then held in front of the local Roman Catholic Church, followed by a solemn procession with music, flags and allegorical floats. The ceremony itself began after the Czechoslovak and Soviet anthems had been played and the town's main representatives – two local schoolteachers – had made their ceremonial speeches. These two members of the local administration spoke in Slovak to a crowd of mainly German and Hungarian speakers. The whole celebration marked both the new ideological orientation of post-war Czechoslovakia and the power dynamics within the town, with the most

¹In the period 1918–60, Nižný Medzev had the official status of a village. However, prior to 1918, when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was considered a town (*város*) with the official Hungarian name of Alsó-Meczenzéf and its German version of Unter-Metzenseifen. In 1960 it regained the status of a town (*mesto*) by merging with neighbouring villages under the name of Medzev. Considering the fact that in the inter-war period, Nižný Medzev served as an important regional centre with a school, post office, gendarmerie, railway station, developed industry, bank, doctor, pharmacy and other services, I refer to Nižný Medzev as a small town in this article. See János Sziklay and Samu Borovszky, *Magyarország vármegyéi és városai: I. kötet: Abauj-Torna vármegye és Kassa* (Budapest: Apollo, 1896), 41, and *Nový adresár mesta Košíc a okolia 1929* (Košice: Gejza Jaschko, 1929), 372.

influential personalities of the local post-war community, particularly the two Slovak-speaking teachers, taking centre stage.² These figures decided on the future of the inhabitants of this linguistically heterogeneous area. They stood behind the post-war retribution, sentenced some of their neighbours to labour camps, restricted their citizenship and confiscated their property. Moreover, these actors spearheaded the process of the ‘cleansing’ of the Czechoslovak nation on the ground, mostly by following centrally issued visions of the state restoration.³ These Slovak-speaking teachers, however, were broadly embedded within the largely German- and Hungarian-speaking community. When they gave their speeches in August 1945, they were not unknown outsiders. One of them, Oldřich Taufer, originally Czech, came to the small town in the 1930s to promote Czechoslovak nation-building through his role as school principal. In order to win the support of the largely nationally ambivalent population for the Czechoslovak national project, he had organised various public celebrations and supported local national cultural associations during the inter-war period.⁴

The case of a civil servant sent from the centre to the linguistically mixed periphery to pursue national homogenisation is not exceptional.⁵ This article, however, challenges the widespread perception of civil servants as permanent outsiders coming to the periphery only to enforce policies from above or to advance their own interests. Instead, I focus on the agency of these actors within the local society, their interactions within the community and their ability to shape the nation-building policies on the ground. In order to grasp the positioning of an official pursuing national policies from above, this article draws on a large body of literature on nation-building in Central and Southeastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First, it considers studies that focus on nationalisation efforts in multilingual environments, emphasising the ambiguous reactions and resistance of natives to national activists, with Tara Zahra’s concept of ‘national indifference’ receiving particular prominence.⁶ Second, this article engages with the concept of loyalty, which has gained a pivotal role in the study of nationalism, overcoming the interpretations of nations as primordial groups as well as the idea that national identity is a stable concept.⁷ In their studies of the linguistically heterogeneous

²Program verejných osláv 1. výročia slovenského povstania bansko-bystrického v Nižnom Medzeve, 29 Aug. 1945, Štátny archív Košice (ŠA KE), fund (f.) ONV Moldava nad Bodvou 1945–1960, carton (c.) 56, No. 2156/1946.

³In early 1945, the Czechoslovak authorities launched a programme of ‘national cleansing’ (*národní očista*). The paper adopts the translation coined by Benjamin Frommer in *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2. For the usage of the terms ‘cleansing’ and ‘purge’ see also Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4–5.

⁴On the concept of Czechoslovakism, see most recently Adam Hudek, Michal Kopeček and Jan Mervart, eds., *Czechoslovakism* (New York: Routledge, 2022); for the inter-war period see Elisabeth Bakke, ‘Czechoslovakism in School Textbooks (1918–38)’, *Historický časopis* 47, no. 2 (1999): 233–53; Milada Polišínská, ‘Diplomacy and National Identity of Czechoslovakia in the Interwar Period: Appropriation, Thematization, Institutionalization and Sustainability’, in *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923*, ed. Tomasz Pudłocki and Kamil Ruzsala (New York: Routledge, 2021). Similarly on the inter-war education of public officials see Gábor Egry, ‘Unholy Alliances? Language Exams, Loyalty and Identification in Interwar Romania’, *Slavic Review* 76, no. 4 (Dec. 2017): 959–82.

⁵On nationalist activists in the Habsburg Empire before the First World War, see the seminal work of Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Chad Carl Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German–Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia, 1848–1960* (Cambridge: University Press, 2018).

⁷Martin Schulze Wessel, ed., *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918–1938: politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten* (München: Oldenbourg, 2004); Peter Haslinger and Joachim von Puttkamer, eds., *Staat, Loyalität und Minderheiten in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa, 1918–1941* (München: Oldenbourg, 2007); Hannes Grandits, Nathalie Clayer and Robert Pichler, eds., *Conflicting Loyalties in the Balkans: The Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire and Nation-Building* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Ulf Brunnbauer, *Umstrittene Identitäten: Ethnizität und Nationalität in Südosteuropa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton:

regions of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, historians have devoted their attention to the border regions of Upper Silesia, the Czech lands, Romania or Yugoslavia, but the similarly ambiguous regions on the borders between Czechoslovakia and Hungary have tended to be overlooked, despite the considerable peculiarities of local nationalisation policies.⁸ Building upon Leslie Waters' work on the Hungarian–Slovak borderlands and the shifting loyalties of the local inhabitants, this article focuses on negotiations within the nation-building processes in a largely German-speaking community in a peripheral border region of southeastern Slovakia.⁹

While following Brendan Karch's suggestion to 'think small' when trying to grasp the nationalisation process and the forging of loyalties, this article focuses on the school, which played a pivotal role in nation-building efforts.¹⁰ The school has traditionally served as not only an educational institution but also a tool for enforcing state policy and ideology, encompassing various aspects of individual life that the state sought to influence. As Tara Zahra noted, children were considered a form of 'national property', and it was primarily through schools that they were expected to be educated into citizens who were nationally and ideologically conscious, and aligned with the state authorities' ideals.¹¹ Although children were the main focus of educational initiatives, teachers, especially in remote areas, played a crucial role in the whole community and through organising public events, they spread these ideas to adults. Moreover, schools counted as one of the certainties in people's lives. Regardless of borders and political changes, children often continued to walk through the same school doors every morning. Despite political and social shifts, teachers, in many cases throughout Czechoslovakia, remained the same, adjusting their loyalties and adapting their teaching to the needs of the new state elites but also, at the same time, maintaining their own agency.

This article analyses how locally embedded actors contributed to maintaining stability in close-knit communities during the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. Small-town teachers, I argue, were not only key actors within top-down educational and nation-building efforts, but through their ability to negotiate and manoeuvre in fluid environments and networks, they also remained behind the change or, conversely, continuity on the ground. In this article, I propose a long-term perspective on local development that is often lacking in micro-historical studies. Using the school as a frontline of nation-building, I focus on three major episodes that have shaped the (geo-)political scene in Central Europe: the inter-war period, the Second World War and the post-war reconfigurations. I emphasise how these historical ruptures triggered change but also displayed the continuities of loyalties and belonging in the small community setting. To do so, I follow the story of Oldřich Taufer, a schoolteacher who came to the small town in the inter-war period to appropriate the locals

Princeton University Press, 2008); Jovo Miladinović, 'Shifting State Loyalty: The Case of an Officer Šerefeddin or Milan Milovanović', *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnography SANU* 68, no. 3 (2020): 705–24.

⁸James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁹Leslie Waters, *Borders on the Move: Territorial Change and Forced Migration in the Hungarian–Slovak Borderlands, 1938–1948* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020). See also Veronika Szeghy-Gayer, 'Former Hungarian Civil Servants on the Territory of Slovakia amid the First Years of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1919–24: A Case Study on the Status Regulation of Teachers and Postal Employees', *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 31, no. 5 (2024): 1–20; Ondrej Ficeri, 'The Traitorous National Periphery: The Legacy of Identity Politics of Imperial Hungary in a New Eastern Metropolis of Czechoslovakia – Košice/Kassa', *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 27, no. 6 (2020): 824–46; Patrícia Fogelová, 'Post-WWII Purge and the Changes in the City Administration in the Territory of Southern Slovakia: A Case Study of Košice', *The City and History* 12, no. 1 (2023): 84–104; Hana Kubátová and Monika Vrzgulová, 'Being "Local" in Eastern Slovakia: Belonging in a Multiethnic Periphery', *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 1 (2023): 249–71.

¹⁰Karch, *Nation and Loyalty*, 5, 154; Joachim von Puttkamer, *Schulalltag und nationale Integration in Ungarn: Slowaken, Rumänen und Siebenbürger Sachsen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der ungarischen Staatsidee 1867–1914* (München: Oldenbourg, 2003); Mikuláš Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf in Böhmen: Schulvereine als Akteure der nationalen Differenzierung (1880–1918)* (München: Oldenbourg, 2021).

¹¹Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 4.

for the Czechoslovak national project and who continued this struggle even during the period of ethnic cleansing after the Second World War. His loyalties repeatedly shifted between the states that he served and his neighbours. It was his alignment with the new regime and his perceived loyalty that enabled him to play an instrumental role in the post-war reprisals within this community. However, his own agency and long-term involvement in the town were crucial in shaping the regime's directives on the ground.

Czechoslovak Nation-Building Penetrating the 'Exposed Borderland' and the Struggle for the School

In early 1919, a regional German-language newspaper in Slovakia wondered about 'the future relationship with the Czechoslovak state, a parliamentary republic that had been established only a few months earlier. The authors reflected the long-standing influence of Hungarian elites and language in the region, which was located in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy until 1918. They emphasised that educational institutions in the predominantly German-populated areas had been 'a powerful protagonist of intellectual life in former Hungary for many decades' and believed that the new Czechoslovak authorities would support their agenda of enhancing German-language education.¹² Otherwise, the authors lamented, local 'Germans were gradually sinking into the surrounding Slavism', expressing their reticence towards the new state that was based on the idea of the unity of the Czechs and Slovaks. However, neither was the local Slovak population 'wholeheartedly attached to the Czechoslovak Republic' and instead showed resistance to its leading ideology, namely Czechoslovakism.¹³ Czechoslovakism was a grounding ideology of the First Czechoslovak Republic, centred upon the idea that the Czechoslovak nation consisted of both Czechs and Slovaks as a single ethnic nation. Apart from this basic notion, Czechoslovakism was merely a set of ideas about the Czechoslovak nation and its position vis-à-vis the competing German and Hungarian nation-building projects.¹⁴ Although the very idea of Czechoslovakism involved the exclusion of Germans and Hungarians from the concept of the new republic, the central authorities sought to build loyalty to the state among German and Hungarian speakers and to foster their integration into the new republic, in which education was to play a key role.¹⁵

One of the first endeavours of the new authorities in the field of education was the 'cleansing' of teachers, especially in the territory of Slovakia, where Hungarian had been the language of instruction before 1918.¹⁶ In order to keep their jobs, teachers had to publicly pledge their loyalty to the Czechoslovak state by taking an oath before school inspectors and declaring themselves 'members of the Czechoslovak Republic'.¹⁷ The pledge enshrined their commitment to the state-building idea of Czechoslovakism as teachers were to 'recognize the Czech nation as a fraternal nation', for which they were to have 'a dear duty of warm and sincere love'. The pupils were to be educated in the Slovak language and the 'Slovak spirit', although they ought to also 'loyally honour the members of our republic who speak other languages'.¹⁸ Teachers who did not know the Slovak language or who refused to take

¹²Die Zukunft unserer Schulen, *Karpathen-Post* 40, no. 6 (1919): 1.

¹³Arva und Zips, *Karpathen-Post* 40, no. 45 (1919): 1.

¹⁴See Michal Kopeček, 'Czechoslovakism: The Concept's Blurry History', in *Czechoslovakism*, ed. Adam Hudek, Michal Kopeček and Jan Mervart (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–34. On the disapproval of nation-building policies in Czechoslovakia after 1918 see also Jakub Beneš, 'The Colour of Hope: The Legacy of the "Green Cadres" and the Problem of Rural Unrest in the First Czechoslovak Republic', *Contemporary European History* 28, no. 3 (2019): 285–302.

¹⁵Pavol Matula, *Čechoslovakizmus na slovenských stredných školách 1918–1938* (Bratislava: Goringa, 2013), 7.

¹⁶Obsazování míst na Slovensku, 18 July 1920, Národní archiv (NA), f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2093, No. 51560/1920, 2.

¹⁷Soňa Gabzdilová, 'Preberanie škôl na Slovensku do správy Československej republiky v rokoch 1918–1919 a zavádzanie slovenčiny ako vyučovacieho jazyka', *Eruđitio – Educatio* 13, no. 2 (2018): 70.

¹⁸Šľub slovenského učiteľa, *Slovenská škola* 1, no. 2 (1919): 2.

the oath were dismissed, and officials in Bratislava reported to the central authorities on this process: 'This way we got rid of many elements unreliable for the republic'.¹⁹

The consequence of the dismissals was a significant teacher shortage in the territory of Slovakia, which was supposed to be dealt with by bringing in teachers from the Czech lands.²⁰ However, in the peripheral regions of Slovakia, the replacement of civil servants was a very slow process. In addition to the shortage of personnel, the newly established administration faced security challenges in the southern areas of Slovakia, especially because of the invasion of the region by the armed forces of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In mid-1919, a Czech-speaking official in Bratislava reported to Prague that Czech teachers already employed in towns throughout Slovakia had either fled or taken up arms.²¹ Thus, the young republic and the pioneers of its ideological foundations were endangered very soon after its establishment because of the widespread turmoil during the long end of the First World War.²² It was only after the middle of 1919 that the Czechoslovak administration gradually began to penetrate southeastern Slovakia, bringing along its accompanying ideas about the region's future. In this new context, the authorities, their representatives and locals would compete for a crucial social space that shaped the zone of their activities and communities. This space was the school, through which they all tried to define their loyalty and national belonging.

The fostering of education that promoted Czechoslovak ideology, which saw Czechs and Slovaks as a single, state-constituent nation, was crucial for the central authorities, but it involved a much wider range of actors. Especially in linguistically mixed areas, nationally focused associations played a crucial role in shaping state policy on the ground. One of the most important national organisations in Slovakia was the *Slovenská liga* (*Slovak League*), whose main aim was to promote education in the Slovak language, as well as fostering the general cultural and political development of the Slovak-speaking population of the state.²³ Slovak activists from *Slovenská liga* called for the establishment of Slovak-language schools 'from the pedagogical, national-state point of view and also because of the prestige of the state in the border areas of Slovakia'.²⁴ For the activists, the school represented a field through which they could foster Czechoslovak nation-building and compete with other nationalist projects. This was particularly evident in areas where Slovak speakers were in a large minority.

Such was the case in the small town of Nižný Medzev in southeastern Slovakia, where most of the nearly 2,700 residents spoke a local German dialect. According to the census of 1921, 1,945 inhabitants declared German nationality (*národnosť*), 600 inhabitants Hungarian nationality, 102 Czechoslovak nationality and the remainder other nationalities.²⁵ The predominantly poorer population employed in metalworking was overwhelmingly German-speaking.²⁶ Next to it, the wealthier

¹⁹Služební sľub učiteľstva na Slovensku, 5 May 1920, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2093, No. 2959/1920, 2.

²⁰Soňa Gabzdilová, *Školský systém na Slovensku v medzivojnovnej Československej republike (1918–1938)* (Košice: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika, 2014), 55–9; Matula, *Čechoslovakizmus*, 11. Blanket dismissals of teachers who did not master the new official state languages took place across the whole of Central Europe after 1918; see Gábor Egry et al., 'A Nationalizing Façades? Reflections on Education in Local Post-Imperial Settings – Schools and Cultural Politics', in *Momentous Times and Ordinary People: Life on the Ruins of Austria-Hungary*, ed. Gábor Egry et al. (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2023), 107.

²¹Obvyklé zprávy ze školského referátu z Bratislavy, 3 June 1919, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2089, No. 24730/1919.

²²Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Paths Out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (London: Oxford University Press, 2022); Katrin Bromber et al., eds., *The Long End of the First World War: Ruptures, Continuities and Memories* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2018).

²³The *Slovenská liga* was originally founded in 1907 by the Slovak community in the United States. In 1920, the *Slovenská liga* was established in Slovakia and remained closely linked to the organisation in the United States. The general aim of the association was to improve the political, social, economic and cultural life of the Slovak-speaking population. In the inter-war period it was one of several national and cultural organisations operating within the state. Another important Slovak national association was *Matica slovenská*. See Róbert Letz, *Dejiny Slovenskej ligy na Slovensku (1920–1948)* (Martin: Matica slovenská, 2000) and Peter Zmátlo, *Dejiny Slovenskej ligy na Spiši* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2007).

²⁴Moldava n/B, stavba štát. mešť. školy, 29 Oct. 1937, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2434, No. 68842/1938.

²⁵*Statistický lexikon obcí v republike Československej, III. Slovensko* (Praha: Státní úřad statistický, 1927), 139.

²⁶Given the large number of local workers employed in metalworking factories and hammer mills, support for the Communist Party was exceptional, one of the distinctive features of the small town in this otherwise largely agrarian region.

and better-educated inhabitants were largely multilingual and had been culturally and socially raised within the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy.²⁷ Consequently, the local elite often identified themselves as Hungarian, while their mother tongue was usually German.

According to state officials, the town belonged to the ‘exposed borderland’, where the ‘Czechoslovak element is at an early stage of development’ and could be ‘saved only by the cultural enhancement of the population.’²⁸ Because of these characteristics and the interest of the authorities, the small town became a battleground for both Slovak and German-speaking activists organised around their associations, the *Slovenská Liga* and the *Deutscher Kulturverband* (German Cultural Association).²⁹ However, their targets – local inhabitants and especially children – largely showed ambivalence to their activities. At the time, when the internal political situation in Czechoslovakia generally settled down at the beginning of the 1920s, locals rather strove for stability after a period of turmoil.³⁰

In the case of Nižný Medzev, one of the symbols of this stability was the local primary school (*Volkschule, ľudová škola*) principal, Edmund Wachdeutsch.³¹ He received his education at the turn of the twentieth century, during the period of accelerated Magyarisation efforts.³² Wachdeutsch had been employed in the education system since 1903, and he continued to teach even after the changes and blanket dismissals that followed the establishment of Czechoslovakia. In 1923, he received a nostrification certificate, which validated his teaching qualification, and became permanently employed as the principal at the school in Nižný Medzev. He was also a member of the local branch of the *Deutscher Kulturverband*.³³ The fact that he was granted a nostrification certificate indicated that the Czechoslovak authorities considered him to be loyal and trustworthy enough to continue in the permanent teaching position that was so important to the new administration. Wachdeutsch was scrutinised by a special committee set up to inspect teachers in the region, which had forced some of his colleagues from Nižný Medzev to retire. Although a detailed explanation for the committee’s positive assessment of Wachdeutsch is absent from the sources, Wachdeutsch apparently convinced the authorities of his loyalty. In the context of the general need for reliable personnel in Slovakia, Wachdeutsch, as a German-speaking teacher educated in a Hungarian milieu, was obviously able to

²⁷ See Bálint Varga, ‘Multilingualism in Urban Hungary, 1880–1910’, *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 6 (2014): 965–80.

²⁸ Moldava, sriadenie štátnej meštianskej školy s vyuč. jazykom čsl., 27 Aug. 1931, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2434, No. 122.342/1931, 1.

²⁹ Various Hungarian-language cultural associations were also active in the town, such as a local branch of the *Szlovenszkói Magyar Kultúr Egylet*. However, they were not involved in discussions about local education. There was no school in the town where Hungarian was the language of instruction. Conversely, in the district town of Moldava nad Bodvou, which had a majority Hungarian-speaking population, there were Hungarian-language schools. The *Slovenská Liga*, as in Nižný Medzev, submitted an application for state support to construct a local school with Czechoslovak-language instruction.

³⁰ See Karch, *Nation and Loyalty*, 159. On the late 1920s stabilisation in Central and Southeastern Europe see Jakub Beneš, ‘The Colour of Hope’, 285–302. Also compare with the broader calming down in the region in Rok Stergar, ‘“Yugoslavia Is Worthless ... You Can Get Neither Sugar nor Kerosene”: Food Supply and Political Legitimacy in the Slovene Part of Yugoslavia, 1918–1924’, *Austrian History Yearbook* 55 (2024): 1–12.

³¹ The educational structure in Czechoslovakia was largely a continuation of the system established in the Habsburg Empire. The first level of education was the primary school (*Volkschule, ľudová škola*), followed by the citizen schools (*Bürgerschule, meštianska škola*). Citizen schools in remote regions were considered very important for the local population as a means of access to higher education. See Catherine Horel, *Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire, 1880–1914: Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2023), 161–73; Gabzdilová, *Školský systém*, 24–46; Dana Nádvorníková, ‘The Idea of Czechoslovakism in Czech History Textbooks and Civic Education Textbooks Published between 1918–1938’, in *Czechoslovakism*, ed. Adam Hudec, Michal Kopeček and Jan Mervart (New York: Routledge, 2022), 274.

³² Magyarisation was a form of homogenisation policy enforced in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy after 1867. See Frank Henschel, *Das Fluidum Der Stadt.: Urbane Lebenswelten in Kassa/Kosice/Kaschau zwischen Sprachenvielfalt und Magyarisierung 1867–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017); von Puttkamer, *Schulalltag und nationale Integration in Ungarn*.

³³ For more on the process of status regulation see Szeghy-Gayer, ‘Former Hungarian Civil Servants’.

negotiate with the new officials, remaining a teacher and later even becoming a school principal in the town.³⁴

Since the majority of the town's population was German-speaking, the language of instruction at the primary school was German, as permitted by the Constitutional Charter of the Czechoslovak Republic of 1920. Although one of the priorities of the state authorities in Slovakia after 1918 was to introduce Slovak as the language of instruction in all primary schools as soon as possible, the state also allowed education in German, Hungarian or Ruthenian, including within higher education. As early as 1925, the inhabitants of Nižný Medzev submitted an application for a citizen school (*Bürgerschule*, *meštianska škola*), a type of middle school that offered extended primary education with a focus on practical skills. This was considered a 'vital issue' for not only the town's inhabitants but also the *Deutscher Kulturverband* and *Slovenská liga*.³⁵ The foundation of the citizen school soon generated a power struggle between the two associations at local, regional and national levels. *Slovenská liga* submitted a request to a regional school inspectorate to establish a citizen school in the town in Slovak, claiming it is 'urgently needed here since a similar school has already been assigned to the Germans'.³⁶ However, local authorities demanded a German language school and even mobilised more than 500 residents to sign their petition. They linked their demands for the citizen school to the economic crisis, stressing that the new generation would have to find jobs in other professions, cleverly using the new state's narrative of modernisation.³⁷ In the report of the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment, state officials also emphasised that establishing a local citizen school was vital for the 'economic as well as cultural development of the poor, nationally mixed area'.³⁸

After several rounds of heated debates, the participation of both German- and Slovak-speaking associations, the local administration as well as the inhabitants, the Ministry finally decided that the new citizen school would be opened starting with the school year 1932/1933.³⁹ The school was established with Slovak as the language of instruction with parallel classes in German, much to the delight of the *Slovenská liga* and the disappointment of the *Deutscher Kulturverband*.⁴⁰ In late 1932, *Slovenská liga* presented the work of their branch as highly successful based on the opening of the Slovak citizen school. They saw their struggle over the school as a 'legitimate and justified fight' backed by the numbers. Out of 215 pupils from the town and the region, 136 pupils enrolled in two German classes, and the remainder in the two parallel Slovak classes. The report on the school concluded that they 'won over a considerable part of the more reasonable German population to our idea'.⁴¹ Thus, the opening of the new school and the question of the language of instruction turned into a fierce dispute. Many actors were involved in the discussions and negotiations about the school, and in the end, it was the minister who decided to establish the school with Slovak as language of instruction, although most of the pupils were German-speaking. Indeed, the highest state authorities and the *Slovenská liga* saw spreading the knowledge of the state language in the areas where other languages were spoken as a top priority, one that was closely connected with the propagation of Czechoslovakism as the founding ideology of the state and the fostering of loyalty among its citizens. In the case of Nižný Medzev, which can be regarded as representative of other small towns, the state achieved this through not only the establishment of Slovak language classes with the help of the *Slovenská liga* but also the subjects taught

³⁴ Župa košická; Upravení poměru učitelských osob, 20 Sep. 1924, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2094 (17 Slovensko), No. 133279/1924, 2. Compare with Gábor Egry, 'Navigating the Straits: Changing Borders, Changing Rules and Practices of Ethnicity and Loyalty in Romania after 1918', *Hungarian Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (2013): 449–76.

³⁵ 'Deutscher Kulturverband: Unter-Metzenseifen', *Karpathen-Post* 48, no. 35 (1927): 3.

³⁶ 'Naše národné hnutie sa vzťahuje', *Slovenská liga* 9, no. 4 (1932): 86.

³⁷ 'Ansuchen der Gemeindevertretung und der Bürger aus Untermetzenseifen, 19 July 1932, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 92.492/1932.

³⁸ Nižný Medzev, 27 July 1932, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 92.036/1932, 2.

³⁹ Nižný Medzev, 7 Apr. 1938, NA, f. MŠ (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 53.641/1938, 2.

⁴⁰ Nižný Medzev, 27 July 1932, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 92.036/1932, 2.

⁴¹ 'Sbor v Nižnom Medzeve', *Slovenská liga* 9, no. 10 (1932): 306.

in the school. After all, the teachers employed in these institutions played a decisive role in enforcing and spreading the state's ideas among local children and their parents.

The Opening of the Citizen School

In late 1932, the inhabitants of Nižný Medzev witnessed the opening celebration of the newly established citizen school in the town. The event was launched by a speech of a newcomer, Oldřich Taufer, the recently appointed principal, who became one of the leading personalities of the town in the coming decades. Taufer was born in 1900 in a Moravian town situated within the Austrian part of the Habsburg monarchy. He himself asserted his origin as Czech, indicating that it was likely his mother tongue.⁴² Since 1924, Taufer had been employed as a teacher of mathematics and physics, and during the 1920s, he had worked in schools in linguistically diverse areas of Slovakia.⁴³ An East Slovak newspaper reported that in 1932, Taufer 'left a more advantageous position in Košice and took up the hard pioneering work in Nižný Medzev'.⁴⁴ Taufer was thus characterised as a 'pioneer' who arrived in the linguistically mixed and remote town as a member of the state-constituent nation. He was politically active as a member of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party (*Československá strana národně socialistická*), one of the most important political parties in inter-war Czechoslovakia, which promoted the concept of a united Czechoslovak nation. For example, the second Czechoslovak president, Edvard Beneš, acted as its vice-chairman between 1926 and 1935. Additionally, Taufer was affiliated with the Czechoslovak Church (*Církev československá*), which separated from the Roman Catholic Church and gained official recognition from the state in 1920.⁴⁵ As the Czechoslovak Church was closely associated with the Czechoslovak nationalist movement, it demonstrated Taufer's commitment to the idea of a Czechoslovak state.⁴⁶

In 1932, Taufer arrived in Nižný Medzev as the appointed principal of the newly opened citizen school. During the school opening ceremony, Taufer gave the welcome address in Slovak and German and local children also performed in both languages. Edmund Wachdeutsch, the long-time principal of the primary school, also attended the ceremony and personified continuity from the earlier period of Hungarian rule. As evidenced by their joint appearance at the opening ceremony, both Wachdeutsch and Taufer had to work closely together as principals in the small town. At the same time, the newcomer Taufer penetrated the rather closed local society and brought the locals together across linguistic lines through his participation in non-nationalist clubs. For example, he also became the first president of the Fishermen's Association.⁴⁷

From the very beginning of his stay in the town, Taufer took part in public celebrations, which were another important means of building loyalty to the new state.⁴⁸ In 1935, he became the chairman of

⁴²Osobný list Oldřich Taufer, 11 May 1945, SNA, f. PV-NV (1945–1948), c. 287, No. 25/1945. Although the reconstruction of Oldřich Taufer's life as an 'ordinary' principal is limited, it is possible to glean some information about him from various sources. One of these sources is this personal file filled in by Taufer himself in 1945, which is in itself a problematic source as it was drawn up shortly after the Second World War. Nevertheless, the data it contains can provide important additional context about the principal. Most of the primary sources cover only Taufer's professional life and further exploration of his personal life is unfortunately hampered by a lack of sources.

⁴³*Časopis pro pěstování matematiky a fysiky* 63, no. 2 (1934): 38.

⁴⁴Slávnostné otvorenie meštianskej školy v Medzeve, *Slovenský východ* 14, no. 281 (1932): 3.

⁴⁵Nižný Medzev, Náb. príslušnosť učiteľov, 15 Jun 1934, Archivum Archidiecesis Cassoviensis (AA Cass), f. Košický biskupský ordinariát (1883–1946), No. 2581/1934.

⁴⁶For the context of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Church in 1920, see Ludvik Nemeč, 'The Czechoslovak Heresy and Schism: The Emergence of a National Czechoslovak Church', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 65, no. 1 (1975): 1–78.

⁴⁷Viliam Gedeon, Valter Bistika et al., *Medzev: Changes of the Town from Its Origin until the Present Day* (Svidník: Tlačiareň svidnícka, 2013), 211.

⁴⁸Miroslav Michela, 'State Celebrations and the Construction of a Czechoslovak National Community during the First Republic', in *Czechoslovakism*, ed. Adam Hudek, Michal Kopeček and Jan Mervart (London: Routledge, 2021), 254; See also Dagmar Hájková et al., *Sláva republice!: oficiální svátky a oslavy v meziválečném Československu* (Praha: Academia, 2018).

the local branch of *Slovenská liga*, which played an essential role in organising cultural events in order to compete for public space with the *Deutscher Kulturverband*.⁴⁹ *Slovenská liga* usually tried to portray life in the town as a struggle between the Slovak minority and the German-speaking majority in its periodical, whereas the *Deutscher Kulturverband* tried to do the opposite and show how the two local associations actually tried to work together.⁵⁰ In a similar vein, the *Deutscher Kulturverband* organised various cultural festivities that did not necessarily have a national connotation, such as New Year's Eve celebrations. The German-language regional newspapers emphasised the participation of pedagogues from primary and citizen schools, especially Czech and Slovak teachers led by Taufer. They saw it as 'a nice gesture of appreciation for the activities of the *Deutscher Kulturverband* and also as a guarantee of the same loyal and correct behaviour on less pleasant occasions'.⁵¹

However, most people, rather than being drawn into the competition between the respective associations, were more concerned with earning a living, especially during the economic crisis of the first half of the 1930s. As one of the locals commented on the costs of 'banal nationalism' in a letter to a regional newspaper: 'The people of Nižný Medzev like to celebrate – in good times – but now a compulsion is bitterly felt. Most of the inhabitants often have no money for their daily bread and now they have to buy flags?'⁵² Even for Principal Taufer, the practical problems of everyday life were more pressing than public celebrations and national competition. He was mainly concerned with providing the citizen school with sufficient staff and teaching materials. Taufer submitted reports to the Ministry on the number of overtime hours worked by local teachers and asked for permission to hire additional school staff, who were generally in short supply throughout the state.⁵³ He wrote advertisements in Czech for teachers who could teach Slovak in practice. Complaining that his school did not have a single professional teacher, Taufer assured the Ministry that the school would be grateful and that 'many will enjoy it and stay here'.⁵⁴

At the same time, providing textbooks for pupils was a difficult task. While certain subjects continued to draw on material utilised prior to 1918, others – particularly those aimed at legitimising the new state and fostering loyalty among its citizens – demanded new textbooks, especially for 'civic education', geography, and history.⁵⁵ The new textbooks were generally in short supply, but in the case of Nižný Medzev, efforts to secure school textbooks became the pretext for an incident that nearly cost Taufer his position at the school. Taufer, as the school principal, had spent years purchasing Slovak and German textbooks from the state publishing house because they were not sold by any local merchants. In mid-1937, however, a merchant approached Taufer with an offer to order the textbooks. Taufer accepted the proposal and urged the students to buy the textbooks from the merchant. But this recommendation was strongly opposed by another merchant from the local German-speaking community, who accused the principal of favouritism.⁵⁶ This trivial dispute soon found its way into the regional newspapers, as well as to the highest state authorities. It reached the level of the Minister of Education and National Enlightenment, and the deputies of the nationalist Carpathian German Party (*Karpatendeutsche Partei*, KdP) demanded an explanation.⁵⁷ In the fall of 1937, the KdP deputies demanded from the Minister that Principal Taufer compensate the merchant,

⁴⁹Sbor v Nižnom Medzeve, *Slovenská liga* 12, no. 4–5 (1935): 124.

⁵⁰Sbor vo Vyšnom Medzeve, *Slovenská liga* 11, no. 6 (1934): 165.

⁵¹Sylvesterfeier der Ortsgruppe Unter-Metzenseifen des Deutschen Kulturverbandes, *Karpathen-Post* 55, no. 7 (1934): 6.

⁵²Korrespondenzen, *Karpathen-Post* 53, no. 43 (1932): 6. On the concept of 'banal nationalism', see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995).

⁵³Nižný Medzev, 8 June 1937, NA, f. MŠ (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 141.713/1937. See also Gabzdilová, *Školský systém*, 18.

⁵⁴Kolegové kandidáti profesury!, *Věstník československých profesorů* 42, no. 19–20 (1935): 336.

⁵⁵Bakke, 'Czechoslovakism', 233–53; Matula, *Čechoslovakizmus*, 57; Gabzdilová, *Školský systém*, 72–74.

⁵⁶Interpelace posl. inž. Karmasina ministrowi školství a národní osvěty o nadržování ředitelství státní měšťanské školy v Nižním Medzevu, 11 Jan. 1938, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 5.787/1938.

⁵⁷Since 1938, the successor to this party had been the Nazi *Deutsche Partei*, which functioned until 1945.

that ‘disciplinary proceedings be initiated [against him and that] he be severely punished’.⁵⁸ Taufer tried to defend himself by sending an article to a German-language newspaper in which he explained his procedure for purchasing school supplies and denied that his actions had caused any damage to the German-speaking merchant.⁵⁹ Finally, the Ministry had to investigate the local incident. After examining the matter, it concluded that the accusation was unfounded and that there was no reason to take action against Taufer.⁶⁰

This incident mirrored the radicalisation of Czechoslovak internal politics as well as the international situation in 1937–8. As manifested in this dispute within the micro-space of a small town, reports of coexistence and cooperation between linguistic groups disappeared from the regional press and were replaced by heated debates on injustice and intolerance between different communities. In the midst of these debates stood Taufer, who faced accusations and attempts at punishment from some local residents. It is questionable to what extent national competition played a role in the clash about school supplies, since the allegedly affected merchant belonged to the majority of the local community speaking the German dialect, while the accused principal of the local school was considered to be Czech. Perhaps more important than the mother tongue was the fact that the merchant was born in Nižný Medzev and had a local family background, while the principal and the supposedly favoured merchant were ‘outsiders’ who had arrived in the town in the inter-war period. It seems likely that during the escalating nationalist conflict in 1937 and 1938, some of the local German-speaking residents sought to get rid of those who they believed did not belong in the town. In the spring of 1938, Taufer managed to avoid the punishment that had been demanded by representatives of the KdP at the state level. However, his position became increasingly uncertain throughout the year in the context of domestic and international political turbulence.

Reconfiguration of the School During and After the Partition of Czechoslovakia

A few months after the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment finally closed the case concerning Taufer, Nižný Medzev faced another major macro-political change. Following the signing of the Munich Agreement in September 1938, Slovak politicians, led by the Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (*Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana*, HSLS), demanded autonomy of the Slovak part of the republic, which was one of their long-term goals. At the beginning of October 1938, representatives of HSLS and other political parties declared the autonomy of Slovakia, which was formalised in November 1938.⁶¹ However, even before the adoption of this law, the autonomous Slovak government was established and began to exercise its authority in Slovakia from the beginning of October 1938. The educational system in Slovakia also fell under the jurisdiction of the autonomous government. Very soon, the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment of the Slovak Land began to push for changes, primarily concerning the personnel restructuring. Only those who shared the HSLS’s national and ideological perspectives could work in the education system.⁶²

Growing nationalist sentiments among Slovak politicians led to demands for the removal of Czech civil servants from their positions within autonomous Slovakia. As early as October 1938, the first dismissals of Czech teachers and school principals took place, swiftly affecting even peripheral areas like Nižný Medzev. In late 1938, a Slovak newspaper listed the names of Czech teachers in Slovakia

⁵⁸ Interpelace poslance inž. Karmasina ministromi školství a národní osvěty, 2 Nov. 1937, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, 5.787/1938.

⁵⁹ Ullrich Taufer, ‘Richtigstellung’, *Deutsche Stimmen* 5, no. 1 (1938): 7.

⁶⁰ Interpelace posl. inž. Karmasina ministromi školství a národní osvěty o nadřování ředitelství státní měšťanské školy v Nižním Medzevu, 11 Jan. 1938, NA, f. MŠANO (1918–1949), c. 2418, No. 5.787/1938.

⁶¹ For HSLS during the years 1938 and 1939 see Jörg Konrad Hoensch, ed., *Die Slowakei und Hitlers Ostpolitik: Hlinkas Slowakische Volkspartei zwischen Autonomie und Separation 1938/1939* (Köln: Böhlau, 1965).

⁶² Soňa Gabzdilová, *Vzdelávanie na Slovensku v rokoch 1938–1953* (Košice: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, 2016), 10; Soňa Gabzdilová and Mária Ďurkovská, *V duchu autority a slovenskej štátnosti: školstvo a vzdelávanie na Slovensku v rokoch 1939–1945* (Košice: Centrum spoločenských a psychologických vied SAV, 2016), 32–52.

who had been 'put at the disposal of Prague', including the principal Taufer, and, similarly, a German-language newspaper also named him among the 'dismissed teachers'.⁶³ But despite local tensions and the fact that he was ousted from the school, Taufer continued to live in the town for some time. In the first half of 1939, he was still involved in the local branch of *Slovenská liga*. A report on the reorganisation of the local branch assessed the activities of the members in Nižný Medzev as very weak due to 'turbulent political conditions' and recommended that 'if the organisation is to carry out its national mission properly in a town with such a small Slovak minority, whose position is now all the more difficult because the town is so close to the border, it is necessary to breathe new life into the organisation'.⁶⁴ Taufer, however, was no longer one of those who would 'breathe new life' into the Slovak-speaking community in the town. He was imprisoned in a concentration camp for two months in 1939 due to his clear Czechoslovak stance, his fostering of intolerance towards the German and Hungarian populations and his national work in the linguistically mixed community, to quote Taufer's words written after 1945.⁶⁵ The reasons why Taufer, who had been a member of the HSLS since October 1938, was removed from his post in a small town are not verifiable from other sources. However, it is likely that local tensions and power struggles under the new regime played a significant role in his dismissal, as evidenced by the dispute over school supplies. Interestingly enough, during the war Taufer was employed in a school in a larger town in northeastern Slovakia and continued to work in the education system. In 1944 and early 1945, as the Red Army advanced through Slovak territory, Taufer and his family moved to a small town near Nižný Medzev, which was also inhabited mainly by German-speakers, including his wife's relatives.

By the time Taufer was forced to leave Nižný Medzev in 1939 in connection with his imprisonment, Czechoslovakia did not exist anymore and the idea of Czechoslovakism had been buried. On 14 March 1939, the Slovak Parliament declared the independence of Slovakia and Slovak nationalism became the guiding doctrine of the new state. One of the essential characteristics of the new regime was its attempt to exert total ideological control over all levels of society, which was particularly evident in the field of education. School instruction was to conform to the ideology of the emerging state, the cornerstones of which were Slovak nationalism and Catholicism.⁶⁶ This ideological orientation manifested itself in the introduction of compulsory religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, as well as the dismissal of non-religious teachers. A key feature of the new regime was the mobilisation of teachers and pupils into mass organisations modelled on those in Nazi Germany, such as the paramilitary organisation of the HSLS and its youth division, which controlled all extracurricular activities, including military training.⁶⁷ Although membership was not compulsory, teachers faced considerable ideological and social pressure to join. Participation in the mass youth organisation was also incentivised through opportunities for social advancement.

In Nižný Medzev, schools, local teachers and pupils also adapted to the new regime. Following the dismissal of Taufer, the vacant post was assumed by a new principal. Additionally, Wachdeutsch, the long-term German-speaking principal of the primary school, was also removed from his position, though the reasons for this dismissal remain ambiguous within the available sources.⁶⁸ Local

⁶³ '300 učiteľských síl k dispozícii Prahy', *Slovenský denník* 21, no. 274 (1938): 3; 'Enthobene Lehrkräfte', *Karpathen-Post* 59, no. 49 (1938): 6.

⁶⁴ 'Sbor Nižný Medzev', *Slovenská liga* 16, no. 5–6 (1939): 74.

⁶⁵ 'Osobný list Oldrich Taufer, 11 May 1945, SNA, f. PV-NV (1945–1948), c. 287, No. 25/1945.

⁶⁶ For more on the characteristics of the regime, see for example Miloslav Szabó, 'Hitler's Priests in Slovakia? On the Convergence of Catholicism and Fascism in Nazi "New Europe"', *Czech Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 3 (2022): 691–723.

⁶⁷ Gabzdilová and Ďurkovská, *V duchu authority*, 37–9, 46–9, 61–3.

⁶⁸ Josef Kauer, Johannes Schürger and Klement Wagner, *Metzenseifen-Stoß: Deutsche Orte im Bodwatal (Unterzips)* (Stuttgart: Hilfsbund Karpathendeutscher Katholiken e.V., 1986), 196. According to this book, which is largely based on the recollections of former residents of Nižný Medzev who were expelled from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, Wachdeutsch was a member of the *Deutsche Partei* and after the war was expelled to the Soviet occupation zone of Germany. This claim, however, cannot be verified by other sources.

schools suffered from a constant shortage and frequent turnover of teachers, due to the mobilisation of men for the armed forces, as well as dismissals for national and ideological reasons. The town was not directly affected by the conflict, but the relatively peaceful course of the war in Nižný Medzev was shattered by the evacuation of the local German-speaking population, which was organised by the military units of the *Deutsche Partei* in autumn 1944 in connection with the approach of the Red Army.⁶⁹ For many children, schooling was interrupted and their childhood was marked by the experience of forced movement. Nevertheless, the lives of the Nižný Medzev children were not in imminent danger, as was the case for millions of their peers throughout Central and Eastern Europe. In early 1945, the Red Army entered Nižný Medzev without a fight. Soon after the Soviet soldiers had captured the town, some locals broke into the closed town hall, ransacked it and destroyed all official documents. After the attack on the town hall, the local schools were the next victims of looting. A number of townspeople took German textbooks and notebooks from the school buildings and burned them in the schoolyard.⁷⁰ The burning of German textbooks was intended to halt German schooling in the town, where the majority of the population still mainly spoke German. With the gradual transfer of power to the new post-war Slovak authorities, German education in the town came to an end. A new era of cleansing Slovak society began, of not only the ideology of Slovak nationalism and its close links to Catholicism but also the German- and Hungarian-speaking population.

Teachers in Power after 1945

After the end of the Second World War, when the Czechoslovak Republic was re-established, Czechoslovakism and the idea of a united Czechoslovak nation vanished as a central concept of the republic. The revived state was to consist of Czechs and Slovaks as two separate nations.⁷¹ The key task of the post-war authorities was to purge the state of ‘war wrongdoers’ as well as Germans and Hungarians.⁷² This mission was encoded in the declarations of the highest authorities, especially in the programme of the new Czechoslovak government, which was adopted in Košice in April 1945. The so-called Košice Government Programme outlined the basic order of the re-established Czechoslovakia in all spheres of post-war life. This programme emphasised the need to punish Germans, Hungarians and ‘collaborators’ as a part of a widespread call for the post-war ‘cleansing’ of the society.⁷³ It called for the expulsion of non-Slavic minorities, especially Germans and Hungarians, from society. The punishment of Germans and Hungarians on the basis of their collective guilt for the outbreak of the war and the suffering of the Czechs and Slovaks, was, in the eyes of the post-war authorities, the culmination of Czechoslovak nation-building.

The cleansing of post-war society was closely intertwined with purges in the schools, which served as a tool for mass education of the younger generation. The Košice Government Programme articulated the fundamental ideas of education and its role in the (re)creation of post-war society together with the commitment to ‘school cleansing’. It stated that ‘it is not enough to remove, but to rebuild in the spirit of the new times and the new needs of the state.’⁷⁴ Along with the Košice Government Programme, the Slovak National Council’s legislation of September 1944 was in force on the territory of the Slovak Republic, which included basic regulations for the Slovak education system, such as the

⁶⁹ On the evacuation of the German speakers from Slovakia, see most recently Martin Zückert, Michal Schvarc and Martina Fiamová, eds., *Die Evakuierung der Deutschen aus der Slowakei 1944/45: Verlauf, Kontexte, Folgen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019).

⁷⁰ Gedeon, Bistika et al., *Medzev*, 79.

⁷¹ Kopeček, ‘Czechoslovakism’, 11.

⁷² See Frommer, *National Cleansing*, 2.

⁷³ Košický vládní program, 27 Mar. 1945, NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-KG, c. 172, No. 1532, available at <https://www.nacr.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/labyrint-1945-Kosicky-vladni-program.pdf> (accessed 26 Sept. 2024).

⁷⁴ In the original Czech language, the programme explicitly states: ‘Bude provedena očista škol’ (‘Cleansing of schools will be carried out’). See Košický vládní program, 27 Mar. 1945, NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-KG, c. 172, No. 1532, XV, 18–19.

nationalisation of schools at all levels and the transformation of school staff into state employees.⁷⁵ In their circulars, the Slovak authorities addressed the teachers with great emotion, stressing that they would be ‘rescued from the shameful position into which the reactionary fascist government has thrown them’ and that their importance would be ‘greater than ever in a people’s democratic society’.⁷⁶ One reason the appeal sought to absolve teachers of blame for the previous regime was simple pragmatism. There was a shortage of teachers in Slovakia, so it was impossible to dismiss all teachers who had been involved in the state organisations of independent Slovakia, which had intervened in all spheres of public life. Not only were teachers allowed to remain in their positions despite their participation in the previous regime, but due to the general shortage of staff, the new authorities simultaneously appointed more and more Czech- and Slovak-speaking teachers, even in German- and Hungarian-speaking regions.

In light of this, Taufer returned to Nižný Medzev as the principal of the citizen school. However, he also served in the new governing authority, the Local Administrative Committee (*Miestna správna komisia*, MSK). He was considered trustworthy by the post-war authorities at the higher levels, as his appointment was thoroughly vetted by all potential members of the local administration. Therefore in early 1945, Taufer came back to the place where he had worked during the inter-war period as a pioneer of modernisation, education and the spread of Czechoslovak nation-building in the periphery. However, after the Second World War Taufer did not promote the modified Czechoslovak national project only through school and cultural events, as he had done in the 1930s. He became an actor in the reshaping of the local largely German-speaking community through the important organs of power to which he was appointed.

On the ground, this post-war cleansing of society was to be carried out by local authorities who were deemed to be loyal by the state. This was even though they often shifted their loyalties to the changing state establishment, depending on the situation. In the case of Nižný Medzev, the five-member board, including Taufer, was composed of persons considered by the regional authorities to be Slovaks or Czechs, who were indispensable in a town they viewed as ‘predominantly German-Hungarian’.⁷⁷ However, all the board members were somehow woven into the fabric of the small town, having worked there in the past. Next to Taufer, the chairman was also a teacher whose wife came from the local German-speaking community, and others were civil servants who had served in the mass organisations of the former Slovak state regime.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, they were not considered ‘locals’, as evidenced by a report written by the town’s long-serving parish priest, who wrote that ‘the Local Administration Committee has five members who are outsiders, not from Nižný Medzev’.⁷⁹ Although the priest knew the members of the committee, particularly Taufer, as they were both among the most influential personalities of the inter-war period, he claimed that they were ‘strangers’. Negotiating who was local and who was foreign, as well as who was loyal or untrustworthy, was a constant and complicated process.

In the post-1945 period, the members of the Local Administrative Committee were repeatedly inspected by the higher authorities. A few days after the official end of the Second World War, members of the MSK had to fill out questionnaires in which they were asked about their personal data, as well as their national background and activities during the war. According to the questionnaire, the chairman of the committee had been a teacher during the war, a member of the HSLS and had

⁷⁵ Gabzdilová, *Vzdelávanie na Slovensku*, 60.

⁷⁶ Obežník č. 1 Povereníctva Slovenskej národnej rady pre školstvo a osvetu zo 7. marca 1945 – Výzva ku slovenským učiteľom a profesorom, *Školské zvesti* 1, no. 1–4 (1945): 42.

⁷⁷ MNV-MSK – spr. komisári v obciach okresu, 8 Apr. 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 1, No. 92prez/1945.

⁷⁸ Komisár správny v Nižnom Medzeve – sťažnosť, Oct. 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 3, No. 888prez/1945.

⁷⁹ Bohoslužobný jazyk, Nižný Medzev, 2 May 1945, AA Cass, f. Košická apoštolská administratúra v Prešove (1939–1946), No. 614/1945.

participated in the Slovak National Uprising. Taufer was also a member of the HSLS and active in the party's youth organisation. Nevertheless, both of them were considered by the district authorities to be the right people to take over the organs of power in the small town, mainly because they claimed to be Slovak or Czech, which was of the utmost importance for the higher authorities. In a report on the security situation in the district, the district commissioner explicitly stated that 'only through appointing Slovak teachers will suitable people be found for the appointment of administrative commissioners'. The commissioner thus underscored the role of teachers in the restoration of Czechoslovakia through the governing bodies, which he repeated several times throughout the document. He emphasised the importance of schooling in the region 'so that our lilting Slovak language may be heard again in our border towns and villages.'⁸⁰ The two principals and the commissioners in Nižný Medzev promptly responded to the commissioners' calls to 'hear the lilting Slovak language' and carried out a thorough cleansing of German-language education in the town, as is clear from Taufer's reports.

The citizen school in Nižný Medzev was subject to the process of abolition of German education, in accordance with the Košice Government Programme, which claimed that German teachers were 'one of the main pillars of Hitlerism' and declared that all German schools should be closed. First, teachers in Nižný Medzev who were perceived to be German were dismissed by order of the Slovak National Council, which led to an even greater shortage of school personnel because many of the teachers left at the end of the war and did not return.⁸¹ Next, German classes were abolished. In contrast to the pre-war period, when there were eleven classes in the school building, five Slovak and six German, Taufer planned to open only six classes in the school year 1945/1946. In his report on the citizen school in mid-1945, Taufer stated: 'But now there are no German classes.'⁸² Therefore, the German language quickly and suddenly disappeared from education, causing a great obstacle for German-speaking children and their parents. According to Taufer's report on the functioning of the citizen school in the school year 1945/1945, 225 pupils attended the school, out of which 108 the principal registered in the column of Slovak nationality, 103 German and fourteen Hungarian.⁸³ However, only a few children from the local German-speaking community could speak or even understand Slovak. Not only could German no longer be the language of instruction, but children were forbidden to speak German in school.

In addition to the abolition of German education, new subjects and languages were introduced that corresponded to the new post-war order. According to the Košice Government Programme, education was ideologically oriented towards the Soviet Union through the introduction of the Russian language and basic information about the history and geography of the Soviet Union. This soon became apparent even in Nižný Medzev, where one of the teachers began teaching Russian as early as the 1944/1945 school year.⁸⁴ In other subjects, such as the Slovak language, history and geography, the content had to be revised to eliminate anything related to the previous regime. According to the ideological directives, the school had to contribute to establishing the people's democratic Czechoslovak Republic, which was being built in close cooperation with the Soviet Union. Although the ideological directives emphasised the importance of the Czechoslovak Republic as the 'home of the equal Slovak and Czech nations', more important than the idea of a common state was the emphasis on the 'people's democratic' character of the state and its proximity to the Soviet Union, even before the communist coup in 1948.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Situačná zpráva o pomeroch v moldavskom okrese hlásenie za dobu od oslobodenia okresu ČA, 30 May 1945, SNA, f. PV-NV (1945–1948), c. 287, No. 225/1945.

⁸¹ Učiteľské osoby na nemeckých meštianských školách, 21 June 1945, SNA, PŠ (1945–1960), c. 237, No. 1371/1945.

⁸² Osvedčenie riaditeľstva školy, 15 July 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁸³ Ročný štatistický výkaz o stave škôl, 6 Dec. 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁸⁴ Osvedčenie riaditeľstva školy, 15 July 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁸⁵ Obežník č. 14–prez. Povereníctva SNR pre školstvo a osvetu zo dňa 19. marca 1945 o zmene učebného plánu a výchovy na ľudových školách, *Školské zvesti* 1, no. 1–4 (1945): 57–9.

The position of religious education in schools also changed rapidly. Religion was no longer a compulsory subject and teachers and students were no longer required to attend religious services. However, the Catholic Church and religious education remained highly respected, especially in rural areas. In line with this, Taufer proposed to allow Roman Catholic religion classes at the citizen school, which would be led by the local parish priest.⁸⁶ In this sense, the reopening of the school after the war, with its well-known principal and religious instruction by an established priest, was one of the signs of continuity in the small town despite the significant ruptures.

Taufer faced a number of difficulties in re-establishing the post-war school in the new setting of restored Czechoslovakia, such as repairing the school's damaged equipment or navigating power rivalries in the town. The ideological reorientation of the state, as well as the power structures of the new regime, manifested themselves in the public sphere, especially through public ceremonies organised primarily by the school authorities.⁸⁷ In Nižný Medzev, Taufer co-organised various public ceremonies in the second half of 1945, such as the celebration of the first anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising or the October anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia.⁸⁸

The two public events that took place in Nižný Medzev in mid-1945 mirrored both the ongoing power-sharing negotiations in the small town and the broader processes taking place throughout Slovakia: the transition from the former regime to a new society, the continued influence of the old elites, the continuation of old loyalties and the shift between old and new government structures.⁸⁹ They reflected the long-standing importance of teachers and the Catholic Church in the Slovak countryside and the growing influence of new actors, especially former partisans and the Communist Party. All these actors sought to participate in the struggle for power in the chaotic post-war period. In Nižný Medzev, the attempts of individuals to navigate this new political establishment were particularly reflected in the personality of Taufer. Although archival documents suggest how important Taufer's role was in local education, he repeatedly tried to secure his position among other power players in the town. Despite the fact that Taufer had been a member of the HSLS since 1938, after the Second World War he became chairman of the local branch of the Democratic Party (*Demokratická strana*), the most important political party in Slovakia except for the Communists, which shows his ability to adapt to changing political circumstances. In the post-war period, he continued to be a member of the associations promoting Slovak nation-building, *Slovenská liga* and *Matica slovenská*, as well as local branches of clubs that were not nationally orientated, such as the Fishermen's Association.⁹⁰ When Taufer returned to Nižný Medzev after the war, he kept participating in the most important educational, political and recreational activities of the town, just as he had done since his arrival in 1932. Moreover, Taufer tried to become involved in other organisations that gained influence after the war. In December 1945, he applied for membership in an organisation uniting resistance fighters or political prisoners in Slovakia.⁹¹ He based his application on the fact that he

⁸⁶Žiadosť o povolenie oddelení náboženstiev, 14 July 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁸⁷Zápisnica, 2 Oct. 1947, ŠA Košice, f. MNV Nižný Medzev (1945–1960), c. 1. See Elena Mannová, 'Jubilejné kampane a prekódovanie Slovenského národného povstanie', in Elena Mannová, *Minulosť ako supermarket?: Spôsoby reprezentácie a aktualizácie dejín Slovenska* (Bratislava: Historický ústav SAV, 2019), 172–203.

⁸⁸Program verejných osláv 1. výročia slovenského povstania bansko-bystrického v Nižnom Medzeve, 29 Aug. 1945, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou 1945–1960, c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁸⁹See also James Ramon Felak, 'Conflicts over the State Monopoly of Education in Slovakia, 1945–1948: Catholics, Communists and Democrats', *Contemporary European History* 17, no. 4 (2008): 505–22.

⁹⁰Mimoškolská činnosť učiteľského sboru, 28 June 1946, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 56, No. 2156/1946.

⁹¹Taufer applied for membership in the Union of Liberated Political Prisoners (*Zväz oslobodených politických väzňov*), which was one of the organisations uniting resistance fighters or political prisoners in Slovakia, along with the more important Union of Slovak Partisans (*Zväz slovenských partizánov*, ZSP) and the Union of Anti-Fascist Political Prisoners and Illegal Workers (*Zväz protifašistických politických väzňov a ilegálnych pracovníkov*, ZPROV). See Martin Vitko, 'Prví v boji – prví v práci!' *Zväz slovenských partizánov v rokoch 1945 – 1948* (PhD diss., Masarykova univerzita, 2021), 76.

had been imprisoned in a concentration camp during the war and was accepted into the organisation in December 1945.⁹² Membership in this organisation certainly bolstered Taufer's credibility in the repeated vetting he had to undergo as a school principal and a member of the Local Administrative Committee. Only two months after he joined the organisation of political prisoners, the district committee's report described him as 'originally Czech, but claiming to be Slovak at this time, but also in 1940'. The committee's evaluation is consistent with Taufer's self-assessment, namely that in various documents he asserted that he was of Czech origin but claimed Slovak nationality. Most likely, Taufer spoke Slovak in public, as the official documents he filled out as a local public figure were written in Slovak. On the basis of these claims that he was a Slovak, the district committee declared him to be 'completely reliable from the national, political and popular-democratic point of view'.⁹³

Taufer, therefore, was deemed to be one of the most influential personalities in the linguistically mixed small town. The new political circumstances offered him opportunities for advancement in which he was able to apply his skills and experience. This became evident in the spring of 1946 when Taufer also became the chairman of the Local People's Court. The Court in the town functioned for less than a month in the spring of 1946 and, as Taufer acknowledged, exposed leaders of the former regime left Nižný Medzev and did not return.⁹⁴ The court heard twenty-one cases, primarily against 'citizens of German nationality' and in one case against a 'citizen of Slovak nationality'. Interestingly, the court did not deal with any of those claiming Hungarian nationality, pointing out that Hungarian speakers did not represent wartime wrongdoers to local authorities in the same way as German speakers. Nižný Medzev was a regional exception, as in the predominantly Hungarian-speaking district, Hungarians were more likely to be the focus of post-war justice.⁹⁵ The Local People's Court in Nižný Medzev, which Taufer headed, sentenced defendants to up to ten months' imprisonment in labour units; the sentences indicated these were minor cases. It was, therefore, not the most important body deciding the fate of the locals in the heated post-war period, as the decisions of the district authorities carried far more weight. Similarly, Taufer was only one of the power players in the town. His positions and reliability were questioned, especially by another partisan organisation in the town, which had close ties to the Communist Party and was trying to gain influence in the town's power structures. Members of this partisan organisation attempted to smear Taufer before the district leadership of the organisation by claiming that he was 'very biased against the USSR and the Communists'. They added that it was not known what he had done during the war and that he was a member of the Democratic Party, which again should have damaged his credibility.⁹⁶

Despite these accusations from the partisan organisation, the higher authorities, who played a decisive role in the new post-war settings, continued to see Taufer as a loyal civil servant. However, they based their decisions on the assessments made by local authorities such as Taufer. He was one of those who enforced the ideology of the Czechoslovak state in this peripheral town, whether it was inter-war Czechoslovakism or the retribution and cleansing of Czechoslovak society after the Second World War through a wide range of measures. As a local authority, Taufer, well integrated into the local community and married to a German-speaking woman, witnessed the expulsion of dozens of his neighbours, including some of the teachers at his school, from the town and the country during 1946 and 1947. Yet, Taufer was not merely a bystander; he was an active participant in the decision-making processes. Despite the constant competition for power and influence within the small-town environment, he was part of the crucial bodies shaping the fate of the community.

⁹²Oldrich Taufer, Prihláška za člena, 15 Dec. 1945, ŠA KE, f. KV ZPB v Košiciach (1945–1960), c. 8, No. 189/1945.

⁹³Vyžiadanie návrhov na menovanie zástupcov NV, 13 July 1946, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 3, No. 53prez/1946.

⁹⁴MES v Nižnom Medzeve – ukončenie činnosti, 11 May 1946, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 26, No. 3528/1946.

⁹⁵See Waters, *Borders on the Move*.

⁹⁶SPROV, 19 May 1946, ŠA KE, f. KV ZPB v Košiciach (1945–1960), c. 8, No. 338/1946-a, 44.

In broader perspective, Taufer was neither a symbol, nor a protagonist of discontinuity. Indeed, he was involved in punishing the actual or alleged perpetrators of the previous regime and wartime misdeeds, especially from the ranks of the German-speaking population. But he also represented a great deal of continuity and stability for the inhabitants of the small town through his membership in the local governing body and his position as the school's long-time principal since the inter-war years. The accumulation of functions, the high level of responsibility and the involvement in the process of post-war reorganisation of power, however, cost the forty-six-year-old Taufer a great deal of strength. In his report to the District People's Court regarding the termination of the Local People's Court's activities in the spring of 1946, Taufer concluded by saying that he felt 'nervously exhausted' and would resign as president of the court if it resumed its activities. He emphasised that as principal, he had 'neglected the school agenda and [...] has much catching up to do to get the school service back on track'.⁹⁷ A few months later, in January 1947, he resigned as deputy chairman of the Local Administrative Committee, citing health, service and family reasons.⁹⁸ With this resignation, Taufer disappears from the archival record at the time of escalating internal political struggles in Czechoslovakia. Very soon, this struggle, which the Communists won, was reflected in the power structure of the small town. And the local school and the local government would once again become contested sites of power and ideology, but this time without Taufer.

Conclusion

The narrative of the possibilities and limits of the state's presence on the ground is profoundly complicated by a long-term perspective on actors and regions on the margins of state attention, which have remained largely absent from historical scholarship. The story of a single school principal, Oldřich Taufer, acting in the small town of Nižný Medzev in the 'exposed borderland' of eastern Slovakia, shows us the agency of individuals within the changing contexts of the first half of the twentieth century. By focusing on Taufer, who came to the linguistically mixed town from the Czech lands, questions regarding individual negotiations, loyalties and commitments come to the fore. Through his involvement in the school, local power structures and national associations, Taufer served as one of the advocates of the Czechoslovak national project on the periphery of the state. He was able to manoeuvre within the community to which he had been admitted as an 'outsider', and to survive various ruptures in official state ideologies. Taufer was not a model case, but neither was he an exception. Some of his colleagues, such as the other school principal, Edmund Wachdeutsch, were also willing to compromise – out of not only opportunism but also conviction and a desire to overcome rifts and periods of upheaval.

In this context, the school emerged as a social and political space of paramount importance for a diverse range of actors, from authorities at all levels to nationalist associations and local inhabitants. It served as a site through which these actors not only promoted official state ideologies but also asserted their own agency at the local level. Throughout several periods of rupture, teachers often transcended these macro-political upheavals because they were equipped with unique skills that were in demand by the powers that be. They adapted to different state ideologies and transmitted them to local communities. As members of various political and social organisations, teachers played a pivotal role in shaping community life and development. By focusing on the actions and motivations of those involved in the struggle over education, I argue that it was the capacity of individual actors that drove the shifts in the environment. Their ability to navigate changing circumstances ensured continuity on the ground, even amid the significant ruptures of the first half of the twentieth century.

⁹⁷ *MES v Nižnom Medzeve – ukončenie činnosti*, 11 May 1946, ŠA KE, f. ONV Moldava nad Bodvou (1945–1960), c. 26, No. 3528/1946.

⁹⁸ *Nižný Medzev – reorganizácia MSK*, 17 July 1947, SNA, f. PV-NV (1945–1948), c. 1054, No. 4295/1948.

The story of Taufer, in this sense, is one of many European narratives of ‘ordinary people’ who not only transmitted but also complicated the nation-building efforts of states.⁹⁹ It illustrates the widespread efforts of individuals to serve the state in which they lived, to adapt to official ideologies and even to promote them. At the same time, it highlights their ability to adjust their loyalties in response to regime changes. Despite the top-down efforts of states to build national communities, in practice, this task was carried out by individuals who – whether motivated by a deep belief in these ideas or by opportunistic behaviour – adapted and shaped the ideologies imposed from above to suit local circumstances.

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Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁹⁹See, for example, Ivan Jeličić, ‘Redefining Fiumians: Flag Usage and the Ambiguities of the Nation-Building Process in the Former Habsburg-Hungarian Corpus Separatum, 1914–1924’, *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 2 (2024): 685–704.

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