

CONSTRUCTING THE NATIONAL TERRITORY OF THE BOHEMIAN LANDS: SCHOOLS AS OUTPOSTS IN THE NATIONALIST STRUGGLE (1880–1938)

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Abstract

Between 1880 and 1938, schools in the Bohemian Lands became battlegrounds of nationhood and instruments of spatial control far beyond the classroom. This article explores how Czech and German nationalist associations turned education into a tool for asserting their cultural presence and redrawing territorial boundaries, particularly in linguistically mixed and contested regions. It traces the evolving role of the schoolhouse not only as a site of instruction but as a symbol of national sovereignty and a vehicle for geopolitical imagining. By examining the interplay between private activism, state policy, and cross-border networks, this study highlights how education contributed to the symbolic and material making of borders in East Central Europe.

Keywords: school politics; nationalism; border-making; Czech-German relations; minority question; Late Habsburg Monarchy; First Czechoslovak Republic

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1926/27 school year in Czechoslovakia, the German consulate in Košice reported to the Foreign Office in Berlin:

The school year that resumed in September has – just as in other parts of Czechoslovakia – sparked lively newspaper debates about the language and minority question in the eastern regions of the republic. This is hardly surprising, as the school system is the primary space where the national character of the population is most visibly expressed. After all, those who control the schools wield the power to shape future generations in line with their national-political agenda.”¹

Such reporting confirms the very close relationship between schooling, language, identity, and political power, which are central pillars of modern nation-building processes.² Many such reports concerning school closures, enrollment patterns, and the state’s approach towards educational policies³ underscore the importance of national schooling in its political and spatial dimensions.

Schooling played a decisive role in territorial disputes arising from the ethnic ascriptions that profoundly shaped understandings of the Bohemian Lands’ nationalisms between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Second World War.⁴ From 1867 onward, the question of national territory became a central concern in the “(multi)nationalizing” Habsburg Monarchy.⁵ Political instruments alone often proved inadequate for securing or extending the influence of the nationalities that were competing for power.⁶

¹ Political Archive of the Foreign Office Berlin (hereinafter PAAA), *Report of the German Consulate in Košice to the Foreign Office*, October 4, 1926.

² For the intersection of nationalism with intellectual and cultural dominance, as well as political power, see Miroslav Hroch, “Formování národa jako zápas o moc”, in *Nacionalismus, společnost a kultura ve střední Evropě 19. a 20. století: pocta Jiřímu Koňalkovi k 75. narozeninám*, ed. Jiří Pokorný, Luboš Velek, and Alice Velková (Praha: Karolinum, 2007), 29–33.

³ PAAA, Berlin, *Report of the German Consulate in Pilsen to the Foreign Office*, October 7, 1926.

⁴ Rex Rexhauser, “Das Schulwesen nationaler Minderheiten in Estland, Lettland, Polen und der Tschechoslowakei zwischen den Weltkriegen,” in *Ostmitteleuropa zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen (1918–1939)*, ed. Hans Lemberg (Marburg: Herder Institut, 1997), 283.

⁵ A term based on Rogers Brubaker and used by Scheer/Stergar to denote the last years before World War I. Tamara Scheer and Rok Stergar, “Ethnic Boxes: The Unintended Consequences of Habsburg Bureaucratic Classification,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal on Nationalism and Ethnicity* 46, no. 4 (2018): 576, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1448374>. See also Peter Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs* (München: Oldenbourg, 2010), 42.

⁶ Mikuláš Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf in Böhmen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 182–188, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110723397>.

While studies on nationalism in Central Europe have long emphasized the symbolic power of language and territory,⁷ the practical role of nationalist schooling in this process remains a subject of evolving interpretation. Pieter Judson has shown how national identities in the Habsburg Monarchy were often unstable and strategically negotiated, challenging notions of fixed ethnic boundaries.⁸ Tara Zahra, in particular, has highlighted the significance of schooling in shaping national loyalties, especially among children. She frames education as a contested site of identity formation and children as one component of nationalist capital.⁹ Other scholars, such as Gary B. Cohen and Jeremy King, have traced the complex interactions between civil society, local activism, and state institutions in Bohemia's multiethnic cities.¹⁰ Still, compared to memorials, street signs, and other visible markers of collectively claimed territory, the specific school activities tied to spatial ambitions and border imaginaries¹¹ remain to be explored in their complexity. This study links the growing body of nationalism studies with existing scholarship on schooling and education in the Bohemian Lands¹² and contributes to the debates on the role of schooling within the Habsburg state¹³

⁷ For a comprehensive overview see Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium*.

⁸ Pieter M. Judson, *The Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁹ Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801461910>.

¹⁰ Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, 2nd ed. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wq6hg>; Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346n6p>.

¹¹ See Rudolf Jaworski and Peter Stachel, eds., *Die Besetzung des öffentlichen Raumes: Politische Plätze, Denkmäler und Straßennamen im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2007). For the territorial dimension of nationalism, see mainly Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium*.

¹² Most notably Peter Urbanitsch, "... das Schulwesen ist und bleibt allzeit ein Politicum ..." *Aspekte zur cisleithanischen Bildungsgeschichte 1848–1918* (Wien: ÖAW, 2025); Mirek Němec, *Erziehung zum Staatsbürger?: Deutsche Sekundarschulen in der Tschechoslowakei 1918–1938* (Essen: Klartext, 2010); Mirek Němec, "Ein umkämpftes Gebiet? Deutschsprachiges Schulwesen in der Slowakei der Zwischenkriegszeit (1918–1938)," in *Auslandsdeutsches Schulwesen des 20. Jahrhunderts zwischen "Volkstumsarbeit" und Auswärtiger Kulturpolitik*, ed. Hans-Werner Retterath (Münster: Waxmann, 2021), 145–162; Karel Reháček, *Jméno národa a pro národ!: české školství v národnostně smíšených oblastech jihozápadu Čech v letech 1880–1945* (Praha: ViaCentrum, 2019); Johann Stefan Schatz, *Unterricht für die "Grenzlanddeutschen": das deutschsprachige Schulwesen im Reichsgau Sudetenland 1938–1945* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023). See also Machteld Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781789209679>.

¹³ Peter Urbanitsch, "Das Schulwesen in Cisleithanien – Element eines kooperativen Imperiums?," in *Kooperatives Imperium: politische Zusammenarbeit in der späten Habsburgermonarchie*, ed. Jana Osterkamp (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 95–115.

and its relationships with its postimperial states.¹⁴ It also examines the interplay between state and private interventions in the field of national schooling and traces related financial ties after 1918 – a field first conceptualized by Rudolf Jaworski and Ronald M. Smelser, whose work has not been convincingly surpassed to date.¹⁵

This article addresses the research question of how Czech and German nationalists mobilized emerging school infrastructure to redefine spatial sovereignty in the Bohemian Lands between 1880 and 1938. Drawing on an extensive corpus of primary sources, including state-generated materials as well as records from private associations, it argues that schools functioned as critical vehicles of nationalism and played a decisive role in the geopolitical expansion of nationalist ideologies. These processes were sustained by substantial public and private investment. Through a comparative analysis of the discursive and performative practices of major Czech and German school associations, the study examines the strategies employed to consolidate control over linguistically mixed territories, to construct “defensible” national frontiers, and to expand or safeguard imagined national spaces by schools as their “outposts.” Finally, it traces the internationalization of these strategies after 1918 and situates them within the broader political dynamics of border revisionism, the minority question, and mass mobilization in post-imperial Central Europe.

Secularization and School Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century

After the introduction of compulsory schooling in the Habsburg Empire in 1774, education became a political matter. Maria Theresa sought to cultivate loyalty to the crown by centralizing authority over education and extending access to broader social strata.¹⁶ However, ongoing liberalization and secularization

¹⁴ Pieter M. Judson, “Die Habsburgermonarchie – neue Interpretationen,” in *Kooperatives Imperium: politische Zusammenarbeit in der späten Habsburgermonarchie*, ed. Jana Osterkamp (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 320. For further context of the debates see Jana Osterkamp, *Vielfalt ordnen: das föderale Europa der Habsburgermonarchie (Vormärz bis 1918)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

¹⁵ Rudolf Jaworski, *Vorposten oder Minderheit?: Der sudetendeutsche Volkstumskampf in den Beziehungen zwischen der Weimarer Republik und der ČSR* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1977); Ronald M. Smelser, *Das Sudetenproblem und das Dritte Reich 1933–1938: Von der Volkstumspolitik zur nationalsozialistischen Außenpolitik* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1980). For a recent synthesis on this topic, see for example Miroslav Breitfelder, *Německá říše zasahuje: Úřady, spolky, instituce a čeští Němci: 1918–1938* (Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita, 2021).

¹⁶ Pieter M. Judson, *Habsburg: Geschichte eines Imperiums 1740–1918* (München: C.H.Beck, 2017), 62–63.

in the nineteenth century truly reshaped educational access and purpose. Key turning points – including the 1848 revolutions, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1867), and the Imperial School Act of 1869 – emphasized rationalism and civic virtue. The lifting of the forced use of language (*Sprachenzwang*) and official abandonment of bilingual instruction (*language utraquism*) reversed earlier assimilationist school policies.¹⁷ The legislature expanded a dense school network that was completed by 1890, according to Heinrich Rauchberg.¹⁸ As a result, local languages gained ground, aligning education with the Empire’s multiethnic reality and broadening participation – but also sparking fears among German elites of a decline in their cultural dominance.¹⁹

These processes fueled what Pieter Judson calls the nationalists’ “obsession with education and its physical embodiment – the schoolhouse.”²⁰ After 1867, schools became sites of ideological struggle. Their role was magnified as national movements appropriated secular education to disseminate nationalist visions, often with quasi-religious zeal.²¹ One German publication referred to the schoolhouse as the *Palladium des Volkstums*²² – a sacred stronghold of national identity. No longer neutral, schools were symbolic battlegrounds in a nationalist holy war. As one Prague observer wrote, “For today’s national parties, the school and its building represent what the church and its edifice represented for religious parties before the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War.”²³ The new schools’ mission came to center on cultivating the national spirit as a means of ensuring cultural survival.²⁴

The decline of German liberalism in the late 1870s, along with the rise of Eduard Taaffe’s conservative regime in Austria-Hungary, marked a retreat from formal political influence over the schools. In response to language ordinances favoring non-German languages,²⁵ German liberals turned to civil society

¹⁷ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 13, 21–25. On the assimilationist language policy of Josef II, see Judson, *Habsburg*, 111–113.

¹⁸ Heinrich Rauchberg, *Der nationale Besitzstand in Böhmen: Nach der Volkszählung von 1900 dargestellt* (Wien: Alfred Hölder, 1905), 398.

¹⁹ Cohen, *Politics of Ethnic Survival*, 15.

²⁰ Judson, *The Guardians of the Nation*, 23.

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 10.

²² Alfred Fischel, *Die Minoritätsschulen* (Brünn: Verlag des Deutschen Vereines, 1900), 1; cited in Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 15.

²³ Joseph Spindler, *Die deutsche Schutzvereinesschule von Werschowitz: Geschichte einer deutschen Schule im tschechischen Sprachgebiete nach den Acten erzählt* (Leipzig: G. H. Meyer, 1898), 24; cited in Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf in Böhmen*, 15.

²⁴ *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Schulvereins* 24 (1887): 1.

²⁵ Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium*, 122–124.

for protection. This effort materialized in the Deutscher Schulverein (DSV), founded in Vienna (1880), followed by regional organizations like the Deutscher Böhmerwaldbund (1884) and the Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen (1894). Other national movements in the Monarchy adopted similar strategies: the Ústřední matice školská (ÚMŠ) (1880) became a foundational institution of Czech national education, while Polish efforts in Austrian Silesia coalesced around Macierz Szkolna Księstwa Cieszyńskiego (1885).²⁶ With these changes, the nationalization of schooling extended far beyond state policy into the fabric of everyday life. Schools became political instruments and contested public spaces, where communities not only engaged in crossing but also in upholding existing language frontiers.²⁷

This mobilization of education took on a dramatic and even militant tone in the years leading up to World War I. One striking example of the discourse surrounded the founding of a small German school in the countryside, describing its establishment as follows: “The fortification of the southern gateway into the Schönhengstgau region has been further reinforced through the completion of our [school]house in Chrostau-Oelhütten.”²⁸ Military metaphors – such as “Benecko has been saved”²⁹ or “Illemnik has been lost”³⁰ – became common in the nationalist language and influenced everyday school life even in small villages. It often escalated into confrontation, including physical attacks on schoolhouses.³¹

By the eve of the war, German municipalities were sending desperate financial appeals to the DSV in Vienna to support the local schools, often couched in the language of alarm. Letters signed with phrases like *eine Bitte in der Stunde der Gefahr* [a plea in the hour of danger] reflect the prevailing sense of insecurity and the heightened stakes of the nationalist struggle for power, with schoolchildren held hostage in the conflict.³²

²⁶ *Macierz Szkolna wczoraj i dziś* (Czieski Czeszyn: Wydawnictwa Polskiego Związku Kulturalno-Oświatowego, 1992), 6.

²⁷ Mark Cornwall, “The Struggle on the Czech-German Language Border, 1880–1940,” *The English Historical Review* 109, no. 433 (1994): 914.

²⁸ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 6 (1914), 219.

²⁹ *Čas*, March 14, 1911, 5.

³⁰ Hubert Nerad, *Die Erinnerungen eines unpolitischen Wanderers*, ed. Hans-Hubert Nerad (München: n+p Werbeagentur, 2022), 76.

³¹ Judson, *The Guardians of the Nation*, 61. (Regarding the violent attack on the German school in Stickau.)

³² Österreichische Landsmannschaft Wien (hereinafter ÖLM Wien), carton Sprachinseln, fasc. Irschings, letter from the municipality of Irschings to the Deutscher Schulverein, March 25, 1913.

Private Schools Before World War I

The ultimate ambition of national school associations was the establishment of public educational institutions – primarily elementary schools and kindergartens – which would serve both pedagogical and symbolic functions in asserting national identity.³³ However, strategic nationalist aspirations often collided with legal and bureaucratic constraints, most notably §59 of the Imperial School Act (*Reichsvolksschulgesetz*) of 1869. This clause mandated construction of a public school only where more than forty school-aged children, averaged over five years, lived within an hour's walking distance and more than four kilometers away from an existing public school.³⁴ In many cases where attendance was weak, nationalist actors insisted on promoting it at all costs in order to maintain their influence. They financed all expenses ranging from the construction or rental of suitable school premises and the acquisition of teaching materials to the remuneration and pensioning of teaching staff. In some cases, even when enrollment was strong, conversion of schools from private to public could be denied due to spatial restrictions of the School Act. For instance, the German private school in Pilsen, founded by the DSV in 1884, rapidly grew to five classes and 275 pupils within three years, becoming one of the largest private national minority schools of its time.³⁵ Despite its success, the school was scaled back to three classes in 1899 because of the significant financial burden. In 1903, the Administrative Court in Vienna rejected the DSV's petition to convert the school into a public institution, citing the failure to meet legal criteria – specifically, the existence of another German school just 2 kilometers away.³⁶

The issue of transforming private into public schools became a flash point in the nationalist school struggle, providing legal avenues of contending for

³³ František Bělehrádek, "Školství menšinové a Ústřední matice školská," in *Česká politika. Díl pátý: Kulturní, zvláště školské úkoly české politiky*, ed. Jan Auerhahn (Praha: Jan Leichter, 1913), 416; Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachengerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995), 90.

³⁴ § 59 Reichsvolksschulgesetz 62/1869, May 14, 1869, *Reichsgesetzblatt für das Kaiserthum Österreich*, <https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?aid=rgb&datum=1869&page=311&size=45>.

³⁵ ÖLM Wien, carton Böhmen, fasc. Deutsche Schutzarbeit in Westböhmen, *Deutsche Zeitung – Morgenblatt*, September 16, 1886. Other notable examples of large private schools include the German schools in Prague. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (hereinafter OeStA/AVA), Unterricht, KB, Deutscher Schulverein, carton 12 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Prag-Lieben, Letter from the District School Board to the Deutscher Schulverein, May 25, 1912.

³⁶ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 1 (1903), 9.

influence.³⁷ Municipalities often aligned with nationalist associations, exploiting every legal – and also extralegal – means to obstruct such transformations. This included the submission of formal complaints and the exertion of political and economic pressure on the parents of minority schoolchildren, including evictions from their homes.³⁸ Financial concerns were often invoked as a pretext: municipalities frequently used the alleged burden on local budgets to justify their opposition to private minority schools, even when the underlying motives were undoubtedly of a political nature.

Thus, private schools were perceived as footholds for establishment of future public schools and were met with proactive hostility, which became particularly visible after mandates for bilingualism sparked the Badeni crisis. In Prague-Vršovice (Werschowitz), for example, municipal opposition to a German private school escalated into street violence and the demolition of a part of the school building in 1898.³⁹ On the other side of the divide, Czech activists and Social Democrats protested against deteriorating conditions in Czech public schools in the German municipalities of Northern Bohemia, culminating in a boycott in 1908.⁴⁰ These actions politicized school safety, making it a potent rhetorical weapon. Soon, similar criticisms were leveraged against private schools, which came to be portrayed as dangerous or substandard. At the outset of the 1908/09 school year, the Czech municipality of Markt Türnau (Městečko Trnávka) ordered the closure of a newly opened classroom in the local German private school on the grounds of an unsafe fireplace.⁴¹ This marked the beginning of a broad wave of closures across Cisleithania. In 1909, the municipality of Unter-Themenau (Poštorná) shut down a Czech private school run by the Komenský Association based in Lower Austria.⁴² This episode unfolded alongside the failure of the Lex Kolisko-Axmann, a legislative initiative by German parliamentarians seeking to mandate German as the sole language of instruction in Lower Austrian schools.⁴³ This legislative

³⁷ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 138.

³⁸ Míkuláš Zvánovec, “The Battle over National Schooling in Bohemia and the Czech and German National School Associations: A Comparison (1880–1914),” *Austrian History Yearbook* 51 (2020): 203–224, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237820000156>.

³⁹ Josef Spindler, *Die deutsche Schulvereinschule in Werschowitz*, 13–20.

⁴⁰ Národní archiv Praha (hereinafter NA Praha), Menšínové muzeum, carton 14, Provolání českému lidu o všeobecné stávce školské, December 1, 1908.

⁴¹ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, carton 11 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Markt Türnau, document titled “Die Sperrung der deutschen Schulvereinschule in Markt Türnau,” dated September 12, 1912.

⁴² *České slovo*, April 14, 1910, 1.

⁴³ Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachgerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867–1918* (Wien: Verlag der ÖAW, 1995), 167–168.

defeat, coupled with increasing local activism, precipitated a series of school closures in Vienna in 1911.⁴⁴ This was soon replicated in the Bohemian Lands. One of the central figures in disseminating these tactics was Karl Pochlatko, a travelling teacher (*Wanderlehrer*) employed by the DSV.⁴⁵ With his help, school resistance efforts spread, as illustrated for example in the German school chronicle of Botenwald (Butovice): “The persistent resistance of the municipality prevented the opening of the Czech private elementary school, which led all those Czech girls who had received home instruction in the previous school year to enroll in the local German schools.”⁴⁶ Between 1911 and 1913, Czech private schools were closed in multiple locations across Bohemia and Moravia. This included Ober-Johnsdorf (Horní Třešňovec), Friedrichsdorf (Bedřichov), Böhmisch Bernschlag (Peršlák), Prödlitz (Předlice),⁴⁷ or Mišlitz (Miroslav).⁴⁸ This process triggered a chain reaction. Following the closure of a Czech private school in Hohenelbe (Vrchlabí) in July 1913, retaliation ensued with the closure of the German private school in Benetzko, which in turn provoked efforts to shut down the Czech private school in Harrachsdorf (Harrachov).⁴⁹ In anticipation of potential opposition, Czech activists adopted covert tactics, including constructing private school buildings disguised as residential homes, often registered under straw owners to obscure their educational function. In Thurmplandles (Věžovatá Pláně), for instance, the 1908 opening of a covert Czech school disguised as a villa led to physical altercations and attacks on the building itself.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Czech private school in Prödlitz (Předlice), secretly constructed in 1912, was quickly shut down by municipal authorities in its first year.⁵¹ The DSV made efforts to monitor and suppress all initiatives undertaken by the Czech minority activists. As one of its internal reports lamented, “Every year, we have to spend considerable

⁴⁴ Vlasta Valeš, *Der Schulverein Komenský: 150 Jahre tschechisches Schulwesen in Wien = Školský spolek Komenský: 150 let českého školství ve Vídni* (Wien: Schulverein Komenský, 2020), 36.

⁴⁵ NA Praha, František Cajthaml-Liberté, carton 7, manuscript *Počátky českého školství v Podkrušnohoří*, [96–97].

⁴⁶ Zemský archiv Opava (hereinafter ZA Opava), *Kronika obecné školy Butovice – 1. díl* [online], <https://digi2.archives.cz/da/vysledekDetail?page=33&actualDetailTab=attachmentsImg,75> (accessed April 7, 2025).

⁴⁷ *Věstník Ústřední matice školské* (hereinafter *VÚMŠ*) 12 (1912): 180.

⁴⁸ *Čas*, October 3, 1913, 6.

⁴⁹ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 148; see also *Podkrkonošský kraj*, September 19, 1913.

⁵⁰ Státní okresní archiv Český Krumlov, *Základní devítiletá škola Věžovatá Pláně 1905–1955*, 4–11, <https://digi.ceskearchivy.cz/801/3>.

⁵¹ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, carton 12 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Prödlitz, letter by the local DSV group to the DSV headquarters in Vienna, June 21, 1912.

time and resources tracing the concealed paths by which Czech agitators make their way into German-populated towns and markets, intent on ‘blessing’ them with Czech schools.”⁵² This complaint reveals how private schools functioned as strategic instruments for advancing nationalist goals extending beyond formal legal frameworks. The schools emerged as the tip of a broader movement, and were often viewed with deep hostility by the opposing side.

Public Schooling Before World War I

The establishment of public schools did not lead private nationalist associations to relinquish their influence – particularly in linguistically contested regions where their position appeared increasingly precarious. In 1912, for example, the DSV received a letter from the teacher of the public German school in Julienhain (Hranice), expressing concern that declining enrollment could prompt the Czech district school board to close the school’s second classroom.⁵³ In response, the DSV intervened by relocating eight orphans from Vienna to the village, thereby ensuring the continued operation of the class. Controlling school enrollments became a key strategy for counteracting the erosion of national presence. As Tara Zahra has shown, such demographic concerns drove increasing nationalist involvement in social welfare projects, particularly orphanages.⁵⁴ The term *Kinderbesiedlung* (child colonization)⁵⁵ came to denote strategic resettlement measures aimed at preventing school closures, taken predominantly by German associations. The DSV itself recognized the political utility of these efforts: “There is no doubt that our settlement efforts now represent an instrument of power [*Machtmittel*] in national aspect – one that no other nation in Austria can claim to wield to the same degree. These efforts make it possible to safeguard the existence of every German minority school.”⁵⁶ By the outbreak of World War I, nearly 1,347 German-speaking orphans had been resettled under this scheme.⁵⁷ Although the strategy provoked resistance from Czech

⁵² *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 12 (1914), 219.

⁵³ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 11 (1913), 8.

⁵⁴ Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 68, 50.

⁵⁵ See also Judson’s findings regarding the Südmark associations. Judson, *The Guardians of the Nation*, 101.

⁵⁶ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 11 (1913), 8.

⁵⁷ The Czech associations also used this tool (e.g., in Prachatice), but the number of Czech orphans did not exceed 573. See Tara Zahra, “From Christmas Gifts to Orphan Pensions: How Nationalist Associations Created the Welfare State in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1918” in *Schutzvereine in Ostmitteleuropa*, ed. Peter Haslunger (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2009), 195.

municipalities, a 1902 ruling by the Administrative Court upheld the legality of enrolling resettled orphans into public schools.⁵⁸

Compared to Czech nationalist efforts, which were stronger in the private sector, the DSV devoted more attention and resources to public schools. By 1912, the Czech ÚMŠ was operating 152 private schools in the Bohemian Lands, while the DSV managed only 145 across all of Cisleithania.⁵⁹ This imbalance cannot be attributed solely to German resistance to Czech public schools. Indeed, Czech efforts often succeeded despite very determined opposition by the municipalities.⁶⁰ The disparity was largely a result of a shifting administrative landscape, with many municipalities coming under Czech political control.⁶¹ This transition compelled the DSV to offer both ideological and practical support in resisting the pressure on the local level. The dynamic elevated the stakes of local elections and censuses, which shaped the makeup of local school boards – positions that nationalist associations actively sought to occupy.⁶²

The relationship between school associations and municipal councils was often cemented through subsidies for public schools. In Irschings (Jířín), for example, the municipal council was unable to comply with the school board's order to rebuild the village schoolhouse after it had burned down. In 1913, a petition requesting 7,000 crowns in aid was submitted to the DSV, explicitly warning that, without such support, the municipality would be forced to “concede to Bohemian influence in local matters.”⁶³ Financial constraints thus became a convenient justification for resistance and legitimated external intervention. The idea of funding a minority school from the

⁵⁸ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 11 (1913), 8. The program was later incorporated into the wider agenda of economic nationalism promoted by the affiliated Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen. See Jitka Balcarová, “Jeden za všechny, všichni za jednoho!": Bund der Deutschen a jeho předchůdci v procesu utváření “sudetoněmecké identity” (Praha: Karolinum, 2010), 329.

⁵⁹ *VÚMŠ*, no. 9 (1912), 126. In absolute numbers, the difference in public schools supported was not that significant. For example, in 1906, the DSV supported 43 public schools in the Bohemian lands, while the ÚMŠ supported 30 public schools. See *VÚMŠ*, no. 4–5 (1907): 93. *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 5 (1907), 179–180.

⁶⁰ For example, in Seestadt (Ervěnice), Zwodau (Svatava), Bilín (Bílina), Dux (Duchcov), and Brůx (Most). See Jan Auerhahn et al., ed., *Česká politika. Díl pátý: Kulturní, zvláště školské úkoly české politiky* (Praha: Jan Laichter, 1913), 401.

⁶¹ For a recently researched example, Prostějov (Proßnitz), see Andrea Pokludová and Pavel Kladiwa, *The Czech-German Compromise in Moravia: The Cisleithanian Laboratory of the Ethnicization of Politics and Law* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023), 37–38.

⁶² Mikuláš Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 166.

⁶³ ÖLM Wien, carton Sprachinseln, fasc. Irschings, letter from the municipality of Irschings to the Deutscher Schulverein, March 25, 1913.

municipal budget, especially along the language frontier, was beyond the realm of political reality. In Unter-Leutensdorf (Dolní Litvínov), for instance, the ÚMŠ had established a Czech private school with over 100 enrolled children. The local Bund der Deutschen openly feared that the school would soon transition into a public institution – an agitation school (*Hetzschule*) – that would threaten the existing public (German) institutions. As one Bund member bitterly remarked: “It would be deeply painful for the local Germans if the rise of Czech minority schools were to spell the demise of the German kindergarten.”⁶⁴

In areas where Czech private schools diverted enrollment from public German schools, the DSV worked to reinforce the attractiveness of the public ones. It increasingly used financial leverage, offering interest-free loans to municipalities. For many villages on the language border, like Altbuch-Döbernei (Starobucké Debrné), a 3,000 crown loan was made on these terms: “As long as the German language remains the sole language of instruction at the school in Altbuch-Döbernei, the municipality (...) is under no obligation to pay interest on, nor to repay, the aforementioned loan.”⁶⁵ By 1914, at least 181 municipalities had entered into similar agreements, effectively making German-language instruction a condition of financial support.⁶⁶ Apart from this, the association provided direct support to both teachers and pupils of public schools. Schoolchildren in these regions received Christmas gifts, warm meals through *Suppenanstalten* (soup kitchens), and access to scholarships. For children from poor families, school fee subsidies ensured continued attendance. Additional aid included funding for student residences (*Studentenheime*), the reimbursement of travel costs and language courses. These initiatives reflected a comprehensive strategy to make the national identity accessible to the masses.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, carton 11 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Nieder-Leutensdorf, letter from the local chapter of the of Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen in Brüx to the Deutscher Volksrat in Böhmen in Trebnitz, January 14, 1910.

⁶⁵ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, carton 8 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Altbuch-Döbernei, agreement between the Altbuch-Döbernei municipality and the Deutscher Schulverein, dated August 2, 1905.

⁶⁶ OeStA/AVA, Deutscher Schulverein, Unterricht, KB, carton 12 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Prag-Korrespondenz mit dem Deutschen Kulturverband in Prag, a list of claims by the Deutscher Schulverein against municipalities and other legal entities in the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic, May 17, 1922.

⁶⁷ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 12 (1913), 223.

Capitalizing the Nation – Privatizing the People

The availability of capital was a crucial prerequisite for private actors to continue and expand their activities in the school sector, and the associations were, therefore, constantly seeking new financial sources. Financing was derived from membership fees, donations, legacies, and proceeds from public collections. The “invention of tradition” served the associations as a practical tool for routinizing or even ritualizing the act of giving through the introduction of entirely new or redefined celebrations, events, and other social practices.⁶⁸ In the first few years of its activity, up to 1884, the local chapters of the ÚMŠ organized 47 events, mainly in bigger towns, known as “national celebrations,” which were typically accompanied by a market. These events were regarded as highly effective in achieving “excellent results” in terms of fundraising.⁶⁹

The national idea was to be disseminated into the households not only as a cultural and political message but also as an identity-forming brand. This strategy gave rise to a diverse range of relevant merchandise and the sale of these goods established a tangible financial link between national school associations and industry. A closer analysis of the merchandise offered by the ÚMŠ demonstrates that the product range was deliberately tailored for mass consumption, aimed at addressing practical needs both in the workplace and at home. In 1909, it offered a wide variety of items – including soaps, matches, cloths, paper products, pencils, toothbrushes and toothpaste, buttons, as well as tea and coffee – which generated highly lucrative contracts for industrial giants operating in predominantly Czech territories, such as the Solo match factory in Sušice (Schüttenhofen) and the Pilnáček soap factory in Hradec Králové (Königgrätz).⁷⁰ The threads of industrial and national aspirations came together at the bank Živnostenská banka, a pivotal institution in the growth of Czech industry and a patron of national associations.⁷¹ For its part, the DSV offered an even broader range of products including pencils produced by the company Hardtmuth in České Budějovice (Budweis),⁷² books, jewelry, stamps,

⁶⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For forms the events and rituals took, see Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 64.

⁶⁹ *VÚMŠ*, no. 1 (1885): 5.

⁷⁰ *VÚMŠ*, no. 9–10 (1909): 308.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans: A Study of the Struggle in the Historic Provinces of Bohemia and Moravia* (London: Macmillan, 1938), 40.

⁷² Státní okresní archiv Opava (hereinafter SOKA Opava), Deutscher Kulturverband, okresní svaz Hlučín, DKV price list, [n.d.], 5.

postcards, knives, cigarette holders,⁷³ and firelighters.⁷⁴ This extensive assortment reflects the organization's strategic integration into the consumer sphere, wherein national identity was actively promoted by offering material goods to be embedded in various aspects of everyday life. The use of these products was also intended to visibly demarcate the national sphere of influence and reinforce a shared cultural and ideological affiliation.

In addition to strategies aimed at securing financial resources while at the same time making the national brand appealing to the masses, the associations also employed direct forms of economic pressure. As Pieter Judson has shown, long before 1914 they leveraged access to employment and housing, and even offered financial incentives as means of encouraging or preventing attendance at local schools.⁷⁵ Evictions became an especially powerful but secret instrument to prevent the opening of new minority schools. From 1903 onward, the association *Deutscher Volksrat für Böhmen* assumed a central role in orchestrating the expulsion of individuals identified as Czech agitators or as parents who had requested the establishment of public Czech-language schools, with consistent support from affiliated organizations such as the DSV.⁷⁶ To facilitate these evictions, as the example of *Ervěnice (Seestadt)* shows, the *Volksrat* offered financial incentives to landlords, aiming not only to remove the tenants themselves but also to suppress their school petition and diminish Czech school demands in the area. The *ÚMŠ*, which had organized the boycott of the local German public school, responded to the evictions by providing material support to the affected families and organizing alternative housing.⁷⁷ In doing so, it effectively made the *Volksrat's* strategy unsuccessful, as the local group of *Volksrat* complained:

Although the Czech agitators – who for decades had lived off German money and eaten German bread – were swiftly evicted by our side and no German property owner would accept Czech tenants any longer, the displaced families found refuge with a Czech builder and owner of nine properties, who took in all the expelled Czech tenant households.⁷⁸

⁷³ *Kalender des Deutschen Schulvereines für das Jahr 1910*, 182–183.

⁷⁴ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 8 (1910), 168.

⁷⁵ Judson, *The Guardians of the Nation*, 104.

⁷⁶ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, *Deutscher Schulverein*, carton 8 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Dux, letter from the Ortsrat Dux to the *Deutscher Schulverein*, October 16, 1913.

⁷⁷ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 155–157.

⁷⁸ Státní okresní archiv Chomutov se sídlem v Kadani (SOkA Chomutov), Archiv města *Ervěnice*, inv. no. 446, carton 87, appeal by the Ortsrat of *Seestadt* to the *Deutscher Volksrat für Böhmen*, April 1907.

Contrary to the expectations of the Volksrat, its eviction strategy contributed to the acquisition of the nine properties by the ÚMŠ and secured the positions of the Czech workers by the time so that the Czech public school opened in Ervěnice in 1909.⁷⁹

From the very beginning of the national associations' activities, the competencies of local municipalities were misused in the service of nationalist conflict, often with the associations operating behind the scenes. In Prachatice (Prachaticz), as early as 1884, the teacher of a private Czech school complained about the economic pressure exerted by the German municipal council and affiliated associations on poor Czech parents. He reported:

They (...) dispersed throughout the town, targeting the poor population. The poor were primarily threatened with being denied access to the forest for firewood, which is a matter of survival here. Secondly, they were threatened with dismissal from work, then with the withdrawal of supports, and in old age with exclusion from poorhouses or hospitals. Those from outside the town were threatened with forced expulsion, eviction, or being driven from their homes. The Germans are striving to recruit as many children as possible to prevent the public opening of a Czech school.⁸⁰

It was symptomatic of the political atmosphere that the associations' activities had to remain hidden from public scrutiny. They often came to light only in the press of the opposing national camp, where they were promptly dismissed as mere propaganda. The Czech nationalist press typically remained silent on the more questionable methods employed to establish Czech schools, including the recruitment of pupils and various forms of "corrupting" the people to encourage them to enroll their children in Czech schools. As one letter from a Czech teacher in Prachatice lamented: "We have to pay for flats, for wood, for books and equipment – if we don't do it, they threaten to go to the German school."⁸¹ Conversely, the German press made no acknowledgment of evictions, threats, or other forms of retaliatory actions taken by the municipality in Prachatice.⁸²

⁷⁹ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 157.

⁸⁰ Národní archiv Praha (hereinafter NA Praha), Ústřední Matice školská, carton 418, letter from a Czech teacher in Prachatice to the ÚMŠ, September 17, 1884.

⁸¹ NA Praha, Ústřední Matice školská, carton 418, letter from a Czech teacher in Prachatice to the ÚMŠ, January 12, 1888.

⁸² Regarding Prachatice, compare *Budivoj*, September 1, 1884, 2 and *Montagsrevue aus Böhmen*, September 15, 1884, 10.

The connection between the associations and the masses, rooted in financial distributions, grew even stronger during the First World War. Although German nationalists in Austria were initially pessimistic about the future,⁸³ the outbreak of the war offered them new hope. The DSV aligned itself fully with the war effort and – unlike the ÚMŠ – actively engaged in war propaganda.⁸⁴ In addition, the associations expanded into the area of youth welfare (*Jugendfürsorge*) and introduced a range of new social practices.⁸⁵ With the outbreak of the war, the products sold by the DSV became even more infused with narratives of the heroic German struggle against its enemies than before. The DSV actively promoted romanticism and national cults surrounding figures such as Bismarck, Schiller, and Goethe.⁸⁶ The war also increased the importance of the DSV's membership certificates. These were increasingly provided – for a fee – to parents of fallen German soldiers as a memorial for their deceased sons.⁸⁷ The certificates played a role of symbolic integration, linking individual life events to the broader narrative of German war sacrifice.

The wartime regime and the alliance between Berlin and Vienna brought a “fleeting moment of empowerment”⁸⁸ for German nationalists, enabling them to push back vigorously against the threats they had perceived for decades from other national movements. The traditional discourse of confrontation between Czechs and Germans quickly evolved into denunciation campaigns depicting the Czechs as traitors to the new wartime order.⁸⁹ The DSV participated willingly and actively in these campaigns. This development, in which long-opposed German pressure for assimilation was effectively incorporated into state doctrine, compelled prominent representatives of the ÚMŠ, including Přemysl Šámal and František Bělehrádek, to go underground. They immediately began to assist the national resistance and to coordinate with the Czech exile movement centered around T. G. Masaryk.⁹⁰ In 1917, after the new emperor, Charles I, abolished the military dictatorship,⁹¹ these circles contributed significantly to the re-mobilization of Czech civil

⁸³ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 7–8 (1907), 149.

⁸⁴ The Deutscher Schulverein magazine *Der Kampf ums Deutschtum* was renamed in *Der Große Krieg* in 1914 and served as a platform for war propaganda.

⁸⁵ Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 80–81.

⁸⁶ *Der Große Krieg*, no. 11 (1916), 23.

⁸⁷ *Wochenbericht des Deutschen Schulvereins*, September 19, 1918, 1.

⁸⁸ Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 104.

⁸⁹ Regarding denunciations of the Czechs during World War I, see Judson, *Habsburg*, 517–519.

⁹⁰ František Bělehrádek, “Z maffiánských a jiných válečných vzpomínek,” *Naše revoluce* 6, no. 1–2, 1.

⁹¹ Judson, *Habsburg*, 536.

society.⁹² Whereas in 1914 the DSV had surpassed the ÚMŠ for the first time since 1897 in terms of financial resources, the changes of 1917 brought the ÚMŠ back into contention. By that time, both organizations – each managing nearly 1.4 million crowns in assets⁹³ – had resumed their efforts to mobilize capital as a weapon in their ongoing struggle for dominance.

Despite its many restrictions, World War I in fact boosted the associations' activism, placing new and heavier demands on the organizations amid widespread uncertainty about the postwar future and the solution of the national question. At the beginning of 1918, the DSV proudly proclaimed that many of its local chapters had achieved their "greatest successes" precisely during the war years.⁹⁴ Both the DSV and the ÚMŠ forged a strong symbolic and material link between the military and the home front by involving front-line soldiers and officers in their fundraising campaigns.⁹⁵ The financial networks reveal the division of soldiers within the Austrian army into different national camps. The Czech opposition to the wartime regime, later mythologized after 1918⁹⁶ – was rooted in the Czechs' unwillingness to fight for German imperialism.⁹⁷ This opposition was based in a vibrant, bottom-up association network including teachers and the underground resistance circles surrounding figures like Karel Kramář and Alois Rašín (both convicted of treason), as well as representatives of "high" Czech exile politics.⁹⁸

On the other side, analysis of the discourse of the German nationalists does not necessarily confirm their loyalty to the Emperor; rather, they saw the war as a pivotal opportunity for advancing their vision of a distinctly German state defined by the war alliance.⁹⁹ Ultimately, the wartime experience not only exacerbated tensions among Austrian citizens serving within the same military structure, but also reinforced their social, financial, and ideological attachments to their national groups. The school associations grew into some of the most

⁹² See also Milada Paulová, *Dějiny Maffie, Díl 1: Ve znaku persekuce* (Praha: Čs. Grafická unie, 1937), 9.

⁹³ NA Praha, Ústřední matice školská, sign. 690, carton 60, Zápis z valné hromady spolku [1919], see also *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 1 (1918), 203.

⁹⁴ *Wochenbericht des Deutschen Schulvereins*, January 31, 1918, 1.

⁹⁵ Collections for the ÚMŠ, destined for the schools, were organized by the newspaper *Národní listy*. See *Wochenbericht des Deutschen Schulvereins*, July 4, 1918, 1; *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 6 (1918), 139.

⁹⁶ Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 85.

⁹⁷ Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans*, 70.

⁹⁸ Bělehrádek, "Z maffiánských a jiných válečných vzpomínek," 1.

⁹⁹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (ÖStA/HHStA), Nachlass Gustav Groß, carton 4, letter from Gustav Groß to members of the Deutscher Nationalverband, August 23, 1914.

powerful mass organizations in Austria-Hungary, consciously seeking near-total influence, not only over schoolchildren – who were in some cases regarded merely as instruments¹⁰⁰ – but also over the broad masses. The process of shaping public loyalty was bound to imagined national territorial claims and the realization of an anticipated nation-state.¹⁰¹

The Minority School Question as State Policy after 1918

Already at the beginning of 1918, Gustav Groß, the leader of the DSV, saw the end of the old order coming:

[We are still] facing a world of enemies who, under the sanctimonious and hypocritical pretense of fighting for justice, freedom, and civilization, pursue nothing less than the subjugation of the entire world to the Anglo-American money bag, the overthrow of the German Empire, and the annihilation and dismemberment of Austria-Hungary.¹⁰²

But the creation of Czechoslovakia as part of the Versailles system in 1918–19 may have exceeded even the worst fears of German nationalists, who now found themselves at the mercy of an adversary they had long tried to defeat.¹⁰³ In essence, the establishment of Czechoslovakia represented the one-sided realization of a long-contested border concept. The Allies endorsed Czech claims to their historical lands and their borders, disregarding any notion of German national sovereignty within the new state. Moreover, prominent figures in the ÚMŠ, such as Přemysl Šámal and Jindřich Metelka, played a decisive role in policy-making in the new state.¹⁰⁴ The vision of the ÚMŠ was fully incorporated into the new country's school legislation – most notably the Minority Schools Act of April 3, 1919 (also known as *Lex Metelka*).¹⁰⁵ The Act directly addressed ÚMŠ's negative experiences with pressure and resistance from German municipalities by stripping them of all their authority over minority schooling and transferring those

¹⁰⁰ ÖLM Wien, carton Mähren, fasc. Lodnitz, letter from the local chapter of the Deutscher Schulverein in Brünn to the main office in Vienna, March 25, 1918.

¹⁰¹ NA Praha, Ústřední Matice školská, carton 417, appeal titled “Čechové,” September 1918.

¹⁰² *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 16 (1918), 195.

¹⁰³ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 17 (1919), 107.

¹⁰⁴ Přemysl Šámal became Chancellor to the President of the Republic. Jindřich Metelka was appointed Chairman of the Provincial School Board.

¹⁰⁵ Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 167.

powers to the state, specifically the newly established Ministry of Education and National Culture. The new law was designed to guarantee the unhindered development of Czech schools, granting the (Czech) chairmen of the provincial school boards extensive authority to close or reduce the existing school network. Most importantly, section five of the Act permitted the construction of new schools regardless of whether all legal requirements had been formally met.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the shortage of facilities became a practical excuse for seizing German school buildings and displacing their teachers.¹⁰⁷ Such seizures were legitimized by the law of June 11, 1919, which authorized the confiscation of private property.¹⁰⁸ The so-called Small School Law of 1922 dealt a further blow to German schools by prohibiting the effective practice of child colonization.¹⁰⁹ The language frontier began to disintegrate as a traditional battlefield as the new political organs, the Czech municipal councils and associations, resumed school closures. This affected mainly the private DSV-schools, which were seen as German national outposts.

By the end of 1919, ten German private schools and 12 private kindergartens had been closed and repurposed.¹¹⁰ The private school in Oppahof (Dvořisko), which belonged to the DSV, was directly taken over by the ÚMŠ: “The National Committee handed over the first floor of the school building – including the classroom, teaching materials, and the administrative office – to the Czech school association, which used the premises to open a Czech private school.”¹¹¹ The process evoked violent confrontations, as frustrated local Germans targeted Czech schools, seen by them as symbols of national conquest, breaking windows and defacing Czech-language inscriptions.¹¹² Resistance was particularly strong

¹⁰⁶ Zákon č. 189/1919 Sb., o školách národních a soukromých ústavech vyučovacích [Law No. 189/1919 Coll., on National Schools and Private Educational Institutions].

¹⁰⁷ Státní okresní archiv Svitavy se sídlem v Litomyšli, chronicle of the Czech school in Chrastová Lhota, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Zákon č. 332/1919 Sb., o zabírání budov nebo jejich částí pro účely veřejné [Law No. 332/1919 Coll., Concerning the Requisition of Buildings or Their Parts for Public Purposes].

¹⁰⁹ Zákon č. 226/1922 Sb., o organizaci veřejné správy školské [Law No. 226/1922 Coll., on the Organization of Public School Administration], § 5, sub-para. 5, which stated that only pupils residing in the municipality were to be counted in school statistics. For the role of orphanages in the nationalist association activities, see Zahra, “From Christmas Gifts to Orphan Pensions,” 195; Balcarová, “*Jeden za všechny, všichni za jednoho!*”, 329; and Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 144–145.

¹¹⁰ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 17 (1919), 193.

¹¹¹ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, Deutscher Schulverein, carton 12 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Oppahof, letter from August Mohilla to the Deutscher Schulverein, June 14, 1919.

¹¹² Státní okresní archiv Domažlice (SOkA Domažlice), Chronicle of the Czech School Orlovice, 8, <https://www.portafortium.eu/chronicle/soap-do/00322-skola-orlovice-1921-1935>; Státní

in municipalities with German-dominated councils, where the establishment of Czech schools was perceived as a challenge to traditional local authority. In many cases, these councils refused to comply with state directives to provide space for Czech institutions.¹¹³ In Tachau (Tachov), the local mayor himself even participated in the physical destruction of temporary premises designated for the first Czech school.¹¹⁴ The escalating tensions surrounding the reduction of German schooling culminated in October 1920 with a two-day school boycott.¹¹⁵ At that point, the German association circles even contemplated demolishing some of their own properties in order to prevent their transfer to the Czech hands.¹¹⁶

The Minority School Act may have initially raised hopes that the state would support all minority schools, including those of the German minority. However, in most cases this proved infeasible, as local schoolchildren were redirected to newly established Czech schools, effectively dooming the German schools to closure. In Prapoříšřtř (Braunbusch), for example, the public German school, whose building was privately owned by the DSV, was forced to vacate the premises to make room for a new Czech school. The Czech district authorities made a conciliatory gesture by offering the displaced German school the opportunity to relocate to a smaller building nearby owned by the ŰMŠ.¹¹⁷ The DSV had no choice but to accept the offer, which it likely would have rejected prior to 1918; it was an arrangement that offered little promise for the continued existence of the German school. The enrollment of German-speaking pupils in the newly established Czech school, along with its plans to open a second classroom, only accelerated the decline in attendance at the German school, which ultimately had to be closed.¹¹⁸

okresní archiv řeskřé Budřějovice (hereinafter SOKA řeskřé Budřějovice), Chronicle of the Czech School Nřemeckřý Beneřov, 6, <https://digi.ceskearchivy.cz/381444/6/1902/1884/21/0> (both accessed February 28, 2025).

¹¹³ Střtnří okresnří archiv řeskřý Krumlov (hereinafter SOKA řeskřý Krumlov), Chronicle of the Czech School in Dolnř Dvořřřtř, <https://digi.ceskearchivy.cz/1214/7/1116/650/48/0> (accessed February 28, 2025).

¹¹⁴ Hana Markovř, "řeskřé a nřemeckřé řkolstvř na Tachovsku" (M.A. Thesis, University of West Bohemia, 2019), 31, 43.

¹¹⁵ SOKA řeskřý Krumlov, Chronicle of the German School in Ernstbrunn, 82, <https://digi.ceskearchivy.cz/306265/82/1347/2266/95/0> (accessed February 28, 2025).

¹¹⁶ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, Deutscher Schulverein, carton 14 Břhmen und Mähren, fasc. Selsen, letter from the headquarters of the Deutscher Kulturverband to the Deutscher Schulverein in Vienna, February 4, 1922. See also: List of the Real Property of the Deutscher Schulverein, May 17, 1922.

¹¹⁷ ŐLM Wien, carton Břhmen, fasc. Braunbusch, letter from the district government in Domařlice to the Deutscher Schulverein in Vienna, March 31, 1920.

¹¹⁸ Zřkladnř řkola Prapořřřtř, "Historie řkolnřch budov," <https://skolnibudovy.npmk.gov.cz/budova/619> (accessed February 28, 2025).

The erection of the new border following the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 had a profound impact on the DSV, which was forced to sever its ties with Vienna and was compelled to reorganize within the new state under its jurisdiction. As a result, a successor organization – the Deutscher Kulturverband (DKV) – was established on November 2, 1919 in Prague. It assumed responsibility for managing German minority schooling as well as the legal defense of the 87 properties owned by the DSV in the Czechoslovak Republic.¹¹⁹ Ludwig Krieg, a lawyer and the founder of the DKV, filed complaints with the Ministry of Education and the Administrative Court against the mandated school shutdowns.¹²⁰ His efforts bore fruit in 1922, when the Administrative Court issued a landmark ruling in the case of the closure of the German school in Selsen (Želivsko), which established the precedent that premises once designated for a German private school could no longer be requisitioned for other educational purposes. This principle was subsequently reaffirmed in several similar cases.¹²¹

Whereas in the early 1920s the DKV filed one complaint after another against school closures along with requests to establish private schools as replacements for the closed public institutions, the Czech school association assumed the role of a proactive servant of the Czechoslovak state. Together with other national organizations such as the *Národní jednota pošumavská*, it actively promoted the establishment of new Czechoslovak state schools in predominantly German-speaking municipalities. These efforts often extended far beyond the language border, using state-sponsored education as a tool to seize control in those areas and secure the borders of the new republic.¹²² New schools were established quite hastily and many of them were set up in unconventional spaces such as the taproom of a pub,¹²³ the waiting room of a railway station,¹²⁴ or even

¹¹⁹ OeStA/AVA, Unterrichts, KB, Deutscher Schulverein, carton 13 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Korrespondenz mit dem Deutschen Kulturverband Prag, list of all claims asserted by the Deutscher Schulverein in Vienna against municipalities and other legal entities in the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic, May 17, 1922.

¹²⁰ Biographical information on Ludwig Krieg (born February 26, 1861, Tachau, died January 20, 1933, Prague), in *Biographische Sammlung, Collegium Carolinum, Munich*; see also *Volksdienst*, February 1, 1933, 1.

¹²¹ *Tätigkeitsbericht über das Jahr 1929*, presented at the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Deutscher Kulturverband in Aussig, June 8, 1930, 9. (Mentions court cases on school closures in Benecko/Benetzko, Hlavnice/Glomnitz, Náhlov/Nahlau, Orlovice/Silberberg, Reřichy/Röscha, Tereřov/Tereschau, and Dolní Chrářtany/Unter-Groschum).

¹²² *Sborník vydáný k 45. výročí založení Národní jednoty pošumavské* (Praha: Národní jednota pošumavská, 1930), 42–43.

¹²³ SOKA České Budějovice, School Chronicle of the Czech School in Dolní Chrářtany, 5, <https://digi.cesearchivy.cz/306292/5/1784/2258/34/0> (accessed February 28, 2025).

¹²⁴ Marková, *České a německé školství na Tachovsku*, 50.

a forester's house.¹²⁵ The very first modern Czechoslovak state minority school building was opened on 9 September 1923 in Dolejší Těšov (Unter-Teschau), initiating a tradition of providing modern school buildings “for a mere handful of Czech children.”¹²⁶ These schools became a frequent target of criticism by the DKV and the German political parties, because such “school palaces”¹²⁷ were perceived as symbols of Prague's centralism and Czech nationalization efforts.

By the end of 1922, there were a total of 750 state elementary minority schools in the Bohemian lands located mostly in provisional premises, but only 18 of them used German as the language of instruction.¹²⁸ At the same time, an official complaint submitted by the Germans in Czechoslovakia to the League of Nations reported the closure of 144 German schools and 1,036 German classrooms.¹²⁹ The Czechoslovak state authorities typically justified the closures as a form of compensation for the obstruction of the expansion of Czech schools prior to World War I, arguing that “half-empty schools were maintained solely for the purpose of luring Czech children into them.”¹³⁰ This reactive line of reasoning was typical of the Czech parliamentary deputies¹³¹ and was clearly rooted in the logic of an ongoing nationalist struggle,¹³² which had not ended with the war but merely taken on new forms. A significant wave of construction of architecturally valuable school buildings by the ÚMŠ, carried out in the interest of the state, was triggered by the tenth anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic. This jubilee was celebrated, among other things, by the erection of imposing Czech state school

¹²⁵ SOKA České Budějovice, School Chronicle of the Czech School in Hrádek/Pěčín, <https://digi.ceskearchivy.cz/436618/5/1412/1684/51/0> (accessed February 28, 2025).

¹²⁶ Bývalá státní menšinová škola Dolejší Těšov, <https://skolnibudovy.npmk.gov.cz/budova/636> (accessed on October 9, 2025); Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans*, 209.

¹²⁷ *Reichenberger Zeitung*, January 8, 1925, 3.

¹²⁸ Archiv kanceláře prezidenta republiky (Archive of the President's Office), Prague, sign. T 2150/21, Ministerstvo školství a národní osvěty, no. I–II., carton 74. Exposé by the Minister of Education, March 8, 1923. The cited numbers revise upward the significantly lower numbers (40 schools until 1927) reported in recent historiography. Hildegard Schmoller, “Das zehnjährige Republikjubiläum in der Tschechoslowakei 1928,” in *Zusammenbruch, Trauma, Triumph: Das Epochenjahr 1918 und sein Nachleben in Zentral-, Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa*, ed. Steffen Höhne (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), 158.

¹²⁹ *Deutsche Parlamentarier an den Völkerbund: Eine Ergänzung der im Sommer 1922 dem Völkerbund überreichten Denkschrift deutscher Parlamentarier* (Prag: [n.p.], 1923), 80–81.

¹³⁰ NA Praha, Ministerstvo vyučování a národní osvěty, carton 1993, letter from the Presidium of the Moravian Provincial School Council to the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment, October 22, 1923, regarding complaints about the closure of German schools in Moravia.

¹³¹ Speech by Czech Agrarian deputy František Hnídek during the Session of the Chamber of Deputies, September 29, 1925, <https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1920ns/ps/stenprot/365schuz/s365005.htm>.

¹³² On reactivity as a strategic characteristic of the Czech school association Ústřední matice školská, see Zvánovec, *Der nationale Schulkampf*, 182.

buildings. In 1928, the ÚMŠ completed the construction of 16 new schoolhouses, while numerous additional schools were built by other associations as well.¹³³

The existence of only 18 (and until 1927 only 14)¹³⁴ German-minority state schools was seen by the DKV as an abuse of state power by the Czechs. For example, in Grätz-Podoli (Hradec nad Moravicí – Podolí), the German state minority school was established after the expropriation of the DKV's building.¹³⁵ In Kumpatitz (Humpolec u Sušice), the DKV regarded the establishment of the state German school as merely an administrative maneuver aimed at “destroying the German school in [nearby] Albrechtsried.”¹³⁶ The Albrechtsried school was considered more important because of its location on the language border. After 1919 it was replaced by a Czech school. Moreover, opening the German state school in Kumpatitz did not do justice to the concept of a minority school, as the new school was replaced from a linguistically mixed village to the hinterlands.¹³⁷

While conditions for minority schooling varied significantly across the republic, the Czechoslovak authorities were notably more permissive in Slovakia and, to a lesser extent, in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, where the Minority School Act did not apply and administrative barriers were fewer.¹³⁸ In contrast, the situation in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia proved far more restrictive, with repeated obstruction of efforts by the DKV to reconstruct the disintegrated German-minority school system. As a result, the issue often escalated to the parliamentary level. German deputies regularly intervened on behalf of the DKV, drawing attention to bureaucratic inconsistencies and delays¹³⁹ – most notably in the widely discussed case of the closure of the German school in Selsen (Želivsko), as can be seen on the following interpellation to the Ministry of Education:

On June 14, 1923, it was shown that the provincial school board in Selsen had returned the matter to the district school council of Mährisch-Trübau, requesting that it should

¹³³ Schmoller, “Das zehnjährige Republikjubiläum,” 158–159.

¹³⁴ *Československé školy v republice Československé ve školním roce 1927/28* (Praha: [n.p.], 1929), 199. For criticism of the situation, see *Deutsche Parlamentarier an den Völkerbund*, 75.

¹³⁵ SOKA Opava, Chronicle of the German School in Grätz-Podoli 1920–1938, [1–2].

¹³⁶ Tätigkeitsbericht über das Jahr 1929, presented at the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Deutscher Kulturverband in Aussig, June 8, 1930, 10.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ For the activities of the Deutscher Kulturverband in Slovakia, see G. Wilscher, *Das Schulwesen der karpathendeutschen Siedlungen im Gebiete der Tschechoslowakischen Republik* (Prag: [n.p.], 1928). See also Němec, “Ein umkämpftes Gebiet?”

¹³⁹ The inconsistencies and delays can be seen as reactions to perceived bureaucratic complications in the prewar era. NA Praha, Presidium ministerské rady (PMR), sign. 1910, carton 58, report from the Police Directorate to the Governor's Presidium, August 5, 1908.

submit a report. As of October 27, 1923, the file was still with the district council. During a meeting of the district council on October 31, 1923, one of its members raised the issue of the delay in the matter. The chairperson refused to respond. Due to this delay, home-based private instruction had to be introduced in Selsen, but it faced significant difficulties. Registration of the home-schooling proposal was not acknowledged because it had been submitted in German. The parents of the privately educated children were penalized on the grounds that their children were neglecting their compulsory schooling. On November 23, 1923, during an intervention, it was determined that the provincial school board had finally instructed the district council to resubmit the file. On February 6, 1925, it was reported in Brno that the file had finally arrived at the provincial school board and had been assigned to the provincial school inspector. The latter had supposedly passed it on to the presidium of the provincial school board, but the file could no longer be found. The DKV was advised to resubmit its application to open a new school along with the required documentation.¹⁴⁰

As this case illustrates, the difficulties with reopening German schools as private institutions led to the emergence of illegal home-schooling. In 1921, there were eleven locations where German teachers were conducting instruction for schoolchildren in private homes.¹⁴¹ The issue of home-schooling became particularly contentious in the Hlučín (Hultschin) Region (which had been part of Prussian Silesia until 1919). There, the Czechoslovak authorities blocked all efforts to establish new German schools and later even prohibited the parents from sending their children to German schools in Opava (Troppau).¹⁴² This policy led to the dismissal of German teachers, school strikes, and propagandistic activities from Germany.¹⁴³

Internationalization of Minority Schooling and State Revisionism

Perceiving Czechoslovakia and its *raison d'être* as hostile to German national interests in education from the very beginning, the DKV began to seek closer

¹⁴⁰ Interpellation of deputies Dr. Spina, Dr. Schollich, Dr. W. Feierfeil, Simm, Dr. Kafka, and others to the Minister of Education and National Enlightenment regarding the alleged obstruction by school authorities in Bohemia and Moravia of the founding of German private schools, May 13, 1925, https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1920ns/ps/tisky/t5133_03.htm.

¹⁴¹ *Volkskalender des Deutschen Kulturverbandes* 1922, 128.

¹⁴² Táňa Klapcová, "Problematika školství na Hlučínsku v letech 1920–1930 jako námět pro projektovou výuku," (M.A. thesis, Masaryk University, 2020), 14.

¹⁴³ Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí České republiky (hereinafter AMZV), Prague, II. sekce, carton 299, document titled "*Irredenta na Hlučínsku. Spolek R.V.H.H.*", 68–73.

ties with Berlin after its forced separation from Vienna. In fact, these connections already dated back to 1881, when the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (after 1908 the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, VDA) was established in Berlin to support the interests of the Viennese Schulverein. The VDA directly coordinated its agenda with public schools in the German Reich, which were made aware of the German national struggle in Austria and started to forward proceeds from public and school collections to Vienna.¹⁴⁴ When the school struggle resumed in 1917, efforts were made to strengthen the connections between Vienna and Berlin as much as possible in order to counter anticipated losses in educational opportunities. On November 1, 1917, for example, the VDA regional chapter in Breslau supported the construction of a new school building in Svinov (Schönbrunn) across the border in Austrian Silesia with a contribution of 3,100 crowns.¹⁴⁵ In this sense, not only financial ties, but also patronage over particular regions or schools, were in place long before World War I. For example, the VDA regional chapter in Saxony in Dresden regularly supported the German schools in Třebenice (Trebmitz) with more than 3,000 crowns a year.¹⁴⁶ World War I heightened the importance of minority schooling, as evidenced by the fact that, toward its end, Kaiser Wilhelm and Marshal Hindenburg assumed honorary chairmanships of the VDA.¹⁴⁷ Through this organization, the German emperor not only provided financial support to Germans living outside the German Reich, but also legitimized nationalist engagement in the eyes of the public, thereby enhancing its political and symbolic significance in the war effort. Machteld Venken says that once the state border line was drawn, decisions about the languages used in borderland primary schools became a prominent way of making the new border real.¹⁴⁸ Immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the VDA in the Weimar Republic aligned itself closely with the government. It took on the sensitive political agenda, while allowing the government institutions in Berlin to maintain official neutrality. In the VDA's budget plan for the 1919/20 school year, requests were submitted to the Foreign Office for the disbursement of funds to German schools in Czechoslovakia.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Schulvereins*, no. 3 (1882), 17.

¹⁴⁵ OeStA/AVA, Unterricht, KB, carton 13 Böhmen und Mähren, fasc. Schönbrunn, confirmation to the Deutscher Schulverein, November 1, 1917.

¹⁴⁶ ÖLM Wien, carton Böhmen, fasc. Trebnitz. Accounting Civil School Trebnitz 1914–1915, attachment to a letter from the DKV to the DSV, dated November 25, 1922.

¹⁴⁷ *Der getreue Eckart*, no. 16 (1918), 217.

¹⁴⁸ Machteld Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 86.

¹⁴⁹ PAAA Berlin, RZ 508 I, R 63580, funding list of the Association for Germans Abroad, January 12, 1920. (Including mentions of Loděnice near Opava [Lodnitz] and Královo Pole near Brno [Königsfeld]).

In this context, the DKV, as the largest German organization in the Czechoslovak Republic, became the primary recipient of subsidies provided by the German Foreign Office and the Reich Ministry of the Interior and distributed through the VDA. From 1925 at the latest, it received an annual subsidy amounting to 60,000 Reichsmarks.¹⁵⁰ By the mid-1920s, these subsidies accounted for at least ten percent of the DKV's total income.¹⁵¹ The VDA increasingly provided school funding to Czechoslovakia through new channels established after 1918 – mainly the German legation in Prague and German consulates throughout the Czechoslovak Republic. This included, for example, the aforementioned private instruction in the Hlučín (Hultschin) region, as well as several secondary schools that cooperated directly with Berlin, most notably the Volkshochschule in Brno and the Bauernvolkshochschule in Velké Losiny (Groß-Ullersdorf), founded in 1924.¹⁵²

It became increasingly evident that Berlin was gaining growing influence within the German civic nationalist framework in the successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy. A similar development was occurring in Austria at the same time, where by 1925 both major nationalist associations – the Schulverein and the Südmärk – had come under the control of the VDA.¹⁵³ In contrast to Austria, however, the channels between Czechoslovakia and Berlin had to remain strictly clandestine. Especially after the enactment of the Czechoslovak Law for the Protection of the Republic in 1923, the Prague headquarters of the DKV came under intensified police surveillance. Hanns Prohaska, secretary of the DKV, is said to have complained about the severity of this scrutiny during a visit to Prague by the head of the VDA, stating that “all mail addressed to them from the Reich was being opened by the Czechs, making correspondence between the Kulturverband and the Reich virtually impossible.”¹⁵⁴ To circumvent this surveillance, further correspondence from Berlin to the DKV regarding school support was

¹⁵⁰ PAAA Berlin, RZ 508 1, R 63582, application of the VDA for the fiscal year 1925, attachment to the letter dated February 14, 1925. The Deutscher Böhmerwaldbund received 2,000 Reichsmarks; the Bund der Deutschen received 13,000 Reichsmarks.

¹⁵¹ PAAA, Berlin, R 63583 Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland (VDA), memorandum to Reich Minister Stresemann, August 30, 1926; Tätigkeitsbericht des Deutschen Kulturverbandes für das Jahr 1929, 45–46.

¹⁵² Manfred Alexander, ed., *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag: Innenpolitik und Minderheitenprobleme in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), 126, 371.

¹⁵³ ÖLM Wien, carton Gustav Groß. Nachruf auf Gustav Groß [1935]; see also *Allgemeiner Tiroler Anzeiger*, June 3, 1925, 5.

¹⁵⁴ PAAA Berlin, R 62448, Deutsches Schulwesen in der Tschechoslowakei, letter from the VDA to the Foreign Office, June 25, 1926.

henceforth routed through the diplomatic courier service of the German Foreign Office and the German legation in Prague.¹⁵⁵

At secret Dresden meetings between the German associations in Czechoslovakia and the VDA, schooling was one of the central topics. During one such meeting, Josef Taschek, the head of the Deutscher Böhmerwaldbund and the last German mayor of Budweis (Budějovice) before 1918, remarked succinctly: “Czech schools are being built everywhere.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the ÚMŠ and its partner associations were making significant efforts at the time to be visibly present along the state border, establishing state schools in very small and remote German villages. In the small German village of Plöß (Pleš), the ÚMŠ established a Czech school and a kindergarten after 1929, which were to be filled mostly by local German-speaking children. In order to keep their parents sending them there, the ÚMŠ district chapter in Pilsen (Plzeň) organized financial and material support for the parents.¹⁵⁷ These processes were not really successful, as by 1933 most of the children had returned to the German school. The local Czech minority teacher condemned them in a private letter decisively:

You're probably glad to be gone from Pleš, that cursed nest – I fully understand it. I'm planning to get out of here myself as soon as possible, even if it means accepting a permanent position somewhere in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. (...) I hold very different views about the school in Pleš; in my opinion, it would be in the best interest of the state to shut it all down. It's nothing but a waste of money on the Germans – money that would be better spent on Czech children in the interior.¹⁵⁸

Unofficial financial support for children and parents linked to Czechoslovak state minority schools was enabled through channels organized by associations like the ÚMŠ. In extremely impoverished areas such as Hurkenthal (Hůrka) near Markt Eisenstein (Železná Ruda), this support was, notably, often the only form of aid available to many poor German families.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ PAAA Berlin, R 510 1, R 60328, Minutes of the Sudeten German Meeting in Dresden on November 22–23, 1930, 23–24. See also Jaworski, *Vorposten oder Minderheit*, 121–125.

¹⁵⁷ Státní oblastní archiv Plzeň (SOA Plzeň), Ústřední Matice školská (ÚMŠ), carton 6, fasc. Pleš, letter from the schoolteacher in Plöß to ÚMŠ Pilsen, August 6, 1933.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., private letter of the schoolteacher Josef Pešek to a colleague, October 10, 1933.

¹⁵⁹ Chronicle of the Czech State School in Hůrka, 22–23, https://www.portafontium.eu/iipimage/30460685/soap-kt_02086_skola-hurka-1918-1938_0140?x=92&y=471&w=494&h=238 (accessed April 9, 2025).

Both the government in Prague and the Czech associations on the one side and Berlin with its associational network on the other focused their activities already far beyond the language border, where the confrontation originally took place before World War I. Berlin also extended its influence primarily through economic means. For this purpose, the brokerage and trading company OSSA (OSSA Vermittlungs- und Handelsgesellschaft) was founded in 1926 – later operating under the name Vereinigte Finanzkontore. Although formally a private capital company, the OSSA functioned as a tool of economic influence in German-populated regions beyond the former borders of the Reich, establishing “internally sound central money institutions for German economic activity.”¹⁶⁰ The OSSA played a significant role by strategically acquiring key banks and thereby reinforcing the economic foundation of the German minority. By 1933, the OSSA had invested 13 million Reichsmarks in Czechoslovakia, making the region the second largest recipient of its funds after Poland.¹⁶¹ The OSSA intervened, for example, in the restructuring of the Kreditanstalt der Deutschen. The purpose of these capital flows was not only to safeguard the purchasing power of the German population abroad, but mainly to make it resistant to the economic pressure of the Czechoslovak state.¹⁶² Numerous other organizations from the Reich contributed to the growing dependence of German schooling in Czechoslovakia on Berlin. For example, the funding of homeschooling in the Hlučín (Hultschin) Region, including the teachers, as well as various propaganda activities, fell under the responsibility of the Reich German Deutsche Stiftung and the Reichsverband heimattreuer Hultschiner.¹⁶³ Contacts with these organizations, classified as irredentist under the Law for the Protection of the Republic of 1923, were frequently the subject of legal measures in Czechoslovakia, such as the refusal of visas to members of the irredentist organizations (1927),¹⁶⁴ the Jihlava Trial (1925), the Volkssport Trial (1932),¹⁶⁵ and the Patscheider Trial

¹⁶⁰ Undated record taken by Reichstag deputy von Lindeiner-Wildau, Minutes of a Discussion on German-Bohemian Banks, April 21, 1927, in *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945*, series 1925–1933 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 219.

¹⁶¹ PAAA, Berlin, RZ 214, R 100903, Volkstumsfragen, report on a review of the Vermittlungs und Handelsgesellschaft m.b.H., 57.

¹⁶² Ibid. See also Ronald M. Smelser, “The Betrayal of a Myth: National Socialism and the Financing of Middle-Class Socialism in the Sudetenland,” *Central European History* 5, no. 3 (1972): 259–264.

¹⁶³ ZA Opava, Pz Reinhold Weigel, inv. no. 30, carton 15, German Foundation to Reinhold Weigel, December 16, 1932.

¹⁶⁴ AMZV Praha, section II., carton 312, dispatch of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Presidents of the Provincial Political Authorities, April 26, 1927.

¹⁶⁵ Breitfelder, *Německá říše zasahuje*, 55–57.

(1936).¹⁶⁶ However, these trials failed to uncover the full extent of the operations and structures of the secret German operational networks.¹⁶⁷ Regarding the organization of homeschooling in the Hlučín (Hultschin) region, for example, the DKV's leader, Rudolf Funke, was reportedly the only person fully initiated into the inner workings of the entire system by the VDA.¹⁶⁸ The remarkable increase in the annual revenues of the DKV, which rose from 2.5 million crowns in 1920 to nearly 9 million crowns in 1937¹⁶⁹ – is linked to the intensively growing financial streams from Germany.

A decisive moment came in 1933, when Adolf Hitler seized power in Germany and the Sudetendeutsche Heimatfront (after 1935 the Sudetendeutsche Partei, SdP) was founded in Czechoslovakia. The new party increasingly eclipsed the role of the DKV and, following its success in the 1935 elections in Czechoslovakia, became Nazi Germany's principal instrument for advancing its revisionist and expansionist agenda – which was also aimed at the sphere of education.¹⁷⁰ The SdP intensified and expanded upon existing criticisms concerning the establishment of Czechoslovak state schools for German children, making it an effective tool of pressure on Prague. The SdP's criticisms were not difficult to substantiate, as some of the issues they raised were already acknowledged by the Czechoslovak authorities.¹⁷¹

The DKV started losing its prominent political influence in Berlin, but still pursued its school agenda, mainly the creation of private schools in places where former public schools were closed after 1919. As the largest German organization in Czechoslovakia, the DKV came under immense pressure after 1933 from the Bund der Deutschen and the SdP, both of which sought the unification of all Sudeten Germans within ČSR. At a time when most nationalist organizations had already fallen under the influence of Henlein's followers, the DKV's leader, August Gessner,¹⁷² remained committed to maintaining the

¹⁶⁶ BA Berlin, R 4902, 5714, fasc. Tschechoslowakei – Patscheiderprozess, März 1936.

¹⁶⁷ Jaworski, *Vorposten oder Minderheit?*, 137.

¹⁶⁸ ZA Opava, Pz Reinhold Weigel, inv. no. 20, carton 14. Letter to Reinhold Weigel, July 24, 1934.

¹⁶⁹ Tätigkeitsbericht des Deutschen Kulturverbandes über das Vereinsjahr 1937, 39.

¹⁷⁰ NA Praha, Sudetendeutsche Partei, carton 30, sign. 15 AA SF, correspondence of the Department for School Affairs of the Sudeten German Party, 1936–1937 (On the activities of the Schulabteilung der SdP).

¹⁷¹ Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR (hereinafter MÚA Praha), Edvard Beneš, carton 73, position of the Presidential Office on German School Demands, [1936], 1–6. Notable examples include Těchlovice [Tiechlowitz], Ošelín [Oschelin], Chodová Planá [Chodenplan], and Hůrka [Hurenthal]. See also Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans*, 209.

¹⁷² Biographical entry for August Gessner (January 17, 1880 – November 2, 1944, Konstantinovy Lázně), Professor at the German Technical University in Prague, in Biographische Sammlung,

organization's autonomy and its democratic foundation. This stance even led to a temporary rapprochement with government circles in Prague. In the tense political climate following 1935, President Edvard Beneš began to pay closer attention to the needs of the DKV. During an audience on June 24, 1936, the Czechoslovak head of state even expressed a willingness to intervene on behalf of the DKV in response to delays by the authorities regarding German school requests. These included applications in Markt Türnau (Městečko Trnávka) and Jaronin (Jaronín), which had already been submitted as early as 1922. An important concern was also the legalization of private instruction in the Hlučín (Hultschin) region. While Beneš considered these issues "minor trifles,"¹⁷³ his intervention prompted a review of the Ministry of Education's previous handling of the matter. From the perspective of the President's office, the Ministry of Education had, under the pretext of serving the public interest, "failed to meet even reasonably justified German demands, allowing itself to be guided far too much by the views of local Czech minorities at the expense of state interests." The ministry's arguments were finally declared incompatible with the state's interest, and the Minister of Education, Emil Franke, was compelled to make concessions.¹⁷⁴

Revisions to German minority schooling took place within the broader context of political negotiations with the German activist parties. In this phase, the government sought to secure their support against the SdP by conceding to several long-standing demands. The success of the February Treaty of 1937¹⁷⁵ was, however, very soon overshadowed by the forced *Gleichschaltung* of the DKV through manipulated internal elections. That same year, the DKV was transformed into a mouthpiece of the SdP,¹⁷⁶ and the SdP immediately presented its own demands, which already brought into question the territorial integrity of the Czechoslovak state.¹⁷⁷ In contrast, the ÚMŠ intensified its activities in defense of the Czechoslovak state, focusing particularly on the strategic expansion of Czech secondary education in predominantly German towns throughout the borderlands. By 1937, the ÚMŠ had established state-funded grammar schools in Český Krumlov (Krumau), Podbořany (Podersam), and Chomutov (Komotau), while others, such as those in Rumburk (Rumburg), Mikulov (Nikolsburg), and Cheb (Eger), were

Collegium Carolinum, Munich.

¹⁷³ MÚA Praha, Edvard Beneš, carton 73, Position of the Presidential Office on German School Demands, [1936], 1–6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ René Küpper, *Karl Hermann Frank (1898–1946): Politische Biographie eines sudetendeutschen Nationalsozialisten* (München: Oldenbourg, 2010), 90–91.

¹⁷⁶ Nerad, *Erinnerungen eines unpolitischen Wanderers*, 325.

¹⁷⁷ Küpper, *Karl Hermann Frank*, 91.

privately administered. The association also founded specialized institutions, including a business academy in Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) and a teacher training institute in Bílina (Bilin). In addition, 18 new elementary schools were established by the ÚMŠ in 1937 alone.¹⁷⁸ The example of a newly built Czech state school in Srní (Rehberg), which was also used as a machine gun post, serves as a significant symbol of the connection between the defense of the state and Czech state schooling.¹⁷⁹ In this context, the Munich Agreement of 1938 can be understood not only as the culmination of a deep-seated territorial obsession and colonizing nationalist fervor, but also as the outcome of long-term financial investments – amounting to millions – indirectly funneled by the German government into cultural and educational institutions across the Czechoslovak Republic.

Conclusion

From the late nineteenth century to the eve of World War II, schools in the Bohemian Lands became far more than spaces of instruction. They emerged as strategic instruments in the nationalist contest for territory, identity, and political power. For both Czech and German national politics, the schoolhouse was a fortified outpost on the linguistic frontier – its location, language of instruction, and very architecture was intended to materialize claims to the space and project an enduring national presence. This transformation was driven by a dynamic interplay between state policy and private activism. In the Habsburg era, nationalist associations compensated for legislative and administrative limitations by building and financing private schools, often in defiance of hostile municipalities. After 1918, the new Czechoslovak state absorbed Czech nationalist ambitions into law and administration, while German school activism was cut off from its traditional operational ties and pushed into new strategies – pursuing legal challenges and clandestine operations, and increasing its reliance on financial lifelines from abroad.

The struggle over schools was neither purely symbolic nor confined to official channels. It encompassed economic leverage, social coercion, and at times outright violence. Evictions, boycotts, the repurposing of buildings, and attacks on newly established schools became recurring features of local politics. Each

¹⁷⁸ *Padesátá výroční zpráva Ústřední Matice Školské v Praze za 57. správní rok od 1. ledna do 31. prosince 1937* (Praha: Ústřední matice školská, 1938) [Fiftieth Annual Report of the Ústřední matice školská in Prague for the 57th Administrative Year from January 1 to December 31, 1937], 16–17.

¹⁷⁹ Základní škola a Mateřská škola Srní, “Historie školních budov,” <https://skolnibudovy.npmk.gov.cz/budova/821> (accessed April 9, 2025).

confrontation reinforced the perception of schools as physical markers of victory or defeat in the broader nationalist struggle for power.

By the interwar period, the contest had become firmly internationalized and a key matter of state interest and security. The DKV's growing dependence on subsidies from the VDA and the German Foreign Office paralleled the Czech associations' coordination with state authorities in establishing Czechoslovak schools deep inside German-speaking areas. Both Prague and Berlin integrated school policy into their project of internal cohesion and territorial control, linking the classroom directly to their geopolitical agendas. Social needs as well as consumption also played a decisive role. Nationalist associations cultivated vast membership networks, commercialized "national brands," and turned everyday goods into vehicles for political identity. The fusion of cultural capital and economic power embedded the schoolhouse into the daily lives of the communities it was meant to influence. The analysis in this paper may provide a stimulus for further research into the crucial, but here only tangentially addressed, the everyday dimension of elementary school and the ways in which the curricula mirrored the nationalist influence over schools.

In the late 1930s, the contest over schooling helped fuel the Sudeten crisis, compelling the Czechoslovak government to make far-reaching concessions and revise its minority school practices. While this led to the establishment of several long-demanded German schools, it did not slow the intensive program of Czechoslovak school construction in German-speaking areas, which was increasingly tied to state defense objectives. In the end, political credit for advancing German minority schooling during the Czechoslovak era was seized by the SdP, which in 1937 brought the DKV into line through *Gleichschaltung* and turned it into a key instrument of its propaganda. Likewise, Adolf Hitler's expansionist policy did not emerge in a vacuum but drew legitimacy from a long-standing narrative of ethnic struggle cultivated for decades by nationalist rhetoric as well as concrete strategies and financial mechanisms.

Ultimately, the history of schooling in the Bohemian Lands reveals that education was not a peripheral cultural matter but a central mechanism of border-making in East Central Europe. Schools shaped both the imagined and the physical boundaries of the nation, and their control was pursued with persistence and investment – material, symbolic, and human – that matched any other front of nationalist mobilization. The schoolhouse, once a beacon of progress, became a watchtower of national vigilance, with the full potential to escalate into the persistent violence that scarred the contested landscapes of interwar Central Europe.