

Conference Report

The Bavarian-Czech Borderland as an Innovation Space in the “Long” Nineteenth Century, May 27, 2022, Prague

On May 27, 2022, the Bavarian Representation in Prague hosted a scientific conference entitled *Die bayerisch-tschechische Grenze als Innovationsraum im “langen” 19. Jahrhundert* (The Bavarian-Czech Borderland as an Innovation Space in the “Long” Nineteenth Century). The conference organizers started out from the perception that the Bavarian-Czech border region is a space of transnational and transregional innovation, which provides positive examples of regional cooperation. The conference not only highlighted the particular social practices and natural dynamics of border regions but also pointed out gaps in academic research on border areas.

The conference was organized by Universität Passau, represented by Professor Thomas Wunsch and Eliška Wöfl, and Charles University, represented by Professor František Stellner. Other partners of the conference were the Bavarian Representation in Prague, which provided organizational support, and the Bavarian-Czech Academic Agency (Bayerisch-Tschechische Hochschulagentur, BTHA) in Regensburg, which supported the event financially.

The conference aimed to summarize and evaluate research on Bavarian-Czech relations in the borderlands, part of the overall research complex of borderlands studies. Lively discussions of the various forms of contact, relationships, connections, and network structures in the Bavarian-Czech borderlands followed the lectures at the conference. The participants approached the subject matter from various theoretical and methodological points of view in historiography and related disciplines (economics, economic policy, and ethnology). They explored various approaches to doing research, identified gaps in the existing research, and suggested new possibilities for collaboration across disciplines.

The conference was opened by Hannes Lachmann (Prague), who evaluated the work done by the Bavarian representation in Prague to deepen relations between Bavaria and the Czech Republic. Thomas Wunsch then outlined the theoretical and conceptual framework of the conference. He described the transborder identity as a special form of collective identity and explained the concept of “transborderness,” which originated with Polish sociologists Zbigniew Kurcz and Andrzej Sakson. Transborderness is a spatial concept that has a processual character and a particular internal structure that emerges from the network of relations and cross-border activities in two neighboring states. The term captures a collective self-concept held by both local elites and broader segments of the population. Furthermore, it makes clear the distinction between the border region and the hinterlands of the two neighboring states. Spatially, it focuses on the territory on both sides of the border, which can be described as a “transborderland.” According to Wunsch, the social processes in this space of encounter and communication are prime examples of “transculturality” as it is defined by the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch.

During the conference, concrete examples were discussed against this theoretical background. It became clear that the German-Czech and Bavarian-Czech neighborhoods

are a worthy field of study. In his contribution, Wünsch answered the question of how to give real-life expression to theory and listed several categories of cross-border social action: exchange of goods and/or ideas, neighborly relations, temporary and permanent migration, transport, economic dependencies, and others.

The next paper, by František Stellner, was a comprehensive assessment of the research to date dealing with Bavarian-Czech relations at various levels. In that regard, he noted 2005 conference proceedings edited by Robert Luft and Ludwig Eiber¹ on confrontations and parallels between the Czech lands and Bavaria. He also highlighted other scholarly contributions in the following disciplines: political and military history, deportations and expulsions, memorial sites, collective memory and regional identity in the borderland (self-determination, mutual perception, tradition), local history and museum cooperation, memorials, Jewish history, ethnography, literary history, and linguistics. He also presented some new cross-border cooperation projects and the possibilities for funding them. Finally, Stellner discussed possible directions for future joint research projects in the fields of economics and education, including products manufactured in the Bavarian-Czech border region and leisure activities.

Eliška Wöfl concluded the introduction of the conference theme by presenting the most important hypotheses, questions, and theoretical frameworks related to it. In addition to the aforementioned notion of “transborderland,” she argued that the terms “transculturality” and “regionality” can be used to describe historical regional characteristics. The perception of the Bavarian-Czech borderlands as a space of transnational and transregional innovation is derived from the social practices and natural dynamics of the border region. According to Wöfl, the regional cooperation, relations and contacts she cited are examples of “networking,” and should be the starting point for determining the direction of future research.

The first part the conference was entitled “The Bavarian-Czech Border Region as a Cultural Space with Its Own Value.” It began with a look at the region’s historical geography. Under the title “Continuity or Caesura? The Region on Bavaria’s Eastern Border and the Epochal Year 1918,” Patrick Reitingger (Bamberg) presented his research project on the Bavarian-Czech border region, which primarily takes the Bavarian perspective. Using conceptual methods of historical geography and Bavarian regional history, he investigated the extent to which the Bavarian-Czech borderlands can be considered a common space of innovation in the “long” nineteenth century and how their spatial aspects have played a role in that. Furthermore, Reitingger considered the impetus the Bavarian-Czech border gave to innovation in the nineteenth century.

A contribution by Mikuláš Zvánovec (Prague) belongs to the second thematic area of the conference, titled “The History of Entrepreneurship and Technical Innovations in the Borderland.” His paper, “School Education and Identity Formation in Šumava Around

¹ Robert Luft and Ludwig Eiber, eds., *Bayern und Böhmen: Kontakt, Konflikt, Kultur: Vorträge der Tagung des Hauses der Bayerischen Geschichte und des Collegium Carolinum in Zwiesel vom 2. bis 4. Mai 2005*, 2nd ed. (München: Oldenbourg, 2007).

1900,” dealt with the border region of the Šumava – the Bavarian Forest at the turn of the twentieth century. Zvánovec focused on identity-forming mutual relationships and on the “intermediate identity” of the inhabitants of Šumava. It turns out that regional traditions and modernizing and nationalizing tendencies clashed particularly sharply in the border area. Entire villages, communities, churches, cultural heritages and, last but not least, the border areas’ inhabitants themselves, were confronted with new trends that had a centripetal nationalizing influence. A growing gap between regional customs and national policy objectives resulted in a pragmatism of everyday life. On the local level, national policies were interpreted and implemented in a way that better served the well-being of the people of the borderlands and, as far as possible, did not constrain them. Zvánovec also dealt with civic associations before 1918. He emphasized that while Czech associations were privately funded initiatives, German associations received support from the governments in Munich and Berlin. After Czechoslovakia’s independence in 1918, things changed. The Czech associations became full partners of political actors in setting the orientation of national education. The school system on the Czech side around 1900 was considered very advanced for its time, so much so that children from the German borderlands often attended schools on the Czech side.

Marek Vokoun’s (Ústí nad Labem) paper, “Innovation at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the Austro-Hungarian and German Context,” reviewed several studies on the patent system, including an explanation of ideal heuristic and statistical research methods. On the one hand, he pointed out how difficult it is to obtain reliable statistical data, while on the other hand, he illustrated the advantages of this methodological approach to researching innovation in the nineteenth century.

The last two lectures elaborated on the third thematic area of the conference, which was entitled “Comparative Regions – ‘Transborderness International.’” First, Radek Soběhart (Prague) presented the Czech-Saxon border region from a diachronic perspective. In his contribution “Borders and Possibilities for Czech-Saxon Cooperation,” he briefly discussed the common history of the Czech-Saxon region, and then focused on the present. It turned out that the Czech-Saxon region has always had its specificities, such as the legacy of heavy industry, its demographic structure, and the consequences of the departure of young educated graduates. According to Soběhart, populism arises easily in the region, not only because of cultural influences, but also because of a general lack of interest in innovation, the environment, sustainability, and digitalization in the region. Soběhart presented some positive examples of cross-border creative arts projects in the cultural center in Řehlovice, in the transformation of mining areas into lake landscapes with developed infrastructure, and in joint Czech-Saxon school projects and school partnerships. Overall, communication in certain areas along the Czech-Saxon border is deepening, especially in the private sphere, e.g., with “Saturdays for Neighbors.”

The last contribution to the conference was a lecture by Tobias Weger (Munich) on the topic of comparative regional history. Under the title “Between Empires, States, Ethnic Groups and Religions: Dobruďja as a Border Region in the nineteenth century,” the author addressed the social, political and economic factors that have played a role in the

development of the border region of Dobrudja (the historical region between the Danube Delta and the Black Sea, now divided between Romania and Bulgaria). He identified some trends in the development of the region. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dobrudja was a tolerant multi-ethnic, multicultural area. It was also an economically strong region whose exports included grain, wax, and honey. Thanks to the construction of strategically important bridges in the nineteenth century, Dobrudja became a transport hub and connecting point between Europe and the Orient. At the micro-level of social practice, a necessary “everyday pragmatism” developed in the region. This resulted in a natural multilingualism and interest in learning other languages, and a regional culture and cuisine based on diverse influences. The inhabitants tried to organize daily life for themselves and regulate the interactions associated with it. Both bottom-up and top-down processes played a role in creating the specific character of the region. Overall, Dobrudja can be described as a region in which periods of neglect and central-state efforts at development constantly alternated. Dobrudja may provide a general paradigm for the study of multilingual transcultural borderlands.

Following the presentations, a roundtable discussion was held to discuss unresolved issues and ideas for further research. In addition to the conference speakers, guests from Passau (Britta Kägler) and Prague (Tomáš Nigrin, Zdeněk Nebřenský) also participated in the roundtable, which proved beneficial for further defining and concretizing the Bavarian-Czech meeting space as an object for research. The conference showed that the interconnection of general history, Eastern (Central) European history, and Bavarian regional history, along with sociology, and economics, has the potential to explain a complex topic like the Bavarian-Czech neighborhood. That interconnection will provide a historical cross-section that can lead to new insights.

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