In the first weeks of 1941, Heinrich Toušek, a retired railway worker from Brno, sent a letter to the leading Nazi official in Prague asking for help. Beautifully written in green ink, and addressed to “Your Excellency Sir Reich Protector,” the letter was a simple request to allow Toušek and his wife to move from their home in Brno to their small house with a garden in Znojmo. The request had to be made because Znojmo lay in the Sudetengau, an administrative area integrated into the Reich after the Munich agreement, and Brno lay within the Protectorate, a separately administered area consisting of the “rest of the Czechlands” in which the Reich Protector had jurisdiction. Toušek gave financial reasons for wanting to move. It was expensive to live in Brno, he wrote, and part of his pension had been stripped. Writing in the third person, Toušek complained that “these people have saved every little Groschen so that they in their last days can have a home which they themselves have built, and now, blameless, thanks to the intrigues of the Czech government, must wander around without shelter.” Now he was appealing to a “German” government, and Toušek made sure to point out that both he and his wife spoke German at home; his wife did not even know Czech, he wrote.

Nazi bureaucrats in Prague promised to look into the matter and sent a letter to the local head administrator of the Brno region, Oberlandrat Westerkamp. Westerkamp complicated the picture painted by Toušek. Toušek, indeed, was of “German origin,” spoke German in his daily life, and had even lived in Znojmo until 1938. But he had been a member of a Czech club for construction workers and was a secretary for the Czech youth group. Worse, all three of his children had been raised as “Czechs.” After some prodding from the central office in Prague, Toušek later admitted that one daughter was married to a Czech bureaucrat in Brno and that a son had become a Czech teacher, who now lived in Jihlava.
Westerkamp suggested that the offer be declined, “although I in every respect greet the withdrawal of members of the Czech nation from the city of Brno,” he wrote. The central office declined Toušek’s request, and we can assume that this German (or Czech?) remained in Brno.¹

Toušek’s case serves as a reminder that many people of indeterminate nationality inhabited the Bohemian crownlands before 1947, and that individuals—called “amphibians” by Nazi anthropologists and nineteenth-century Bohemian citizens—often claimed to be one nationality or another according to situation.² Writers as disparate as post-war German expellees and the pre-war Social Democrat Emanuel Rádl noted that tens of thousands of supposed Germans began to identify themselves as Czechs after the establishment of Czechoslovakia.³ During the occupation, an estimated three hundred thousand so-called Czechs, about 2 percent of the Bohemian crownland’s supposed Czech population, registered as German citizens.⁴ These amphibians often lived in places where bilingualism was common—in towns along the ever-shifting Czech-German language border and in so-called German language islands surrounded by a sea of Czech-speakers.

Amphibians confused and frustrated Nazi officials in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a legal area carved from the former Czechoslovakia six months after the October 1938 Munich agreement.⁵ Seven million people, the majority of whom were Czechs, inhabited the Protectorate’s forty-nine thousand square kilometer territory, a remnant of the First Republic stripped of its mostly German-speaking areas and Slovakia.⁶ In the Protectorate, Nazi officials like Westerkamp faced a simple, yet befuddling, set of questions: What made, or could make, a person German, and who had the power to decide the matter? These questions became even more pressing, and complicated, once Protectorate leaders decided to make Bohemia and Moravia entirely German, which entailed expelling half the Czech population and “Germanizing” the rest. From here we might ask our own set of questions. How was nationality defined, expressed, and marked on the individual in Bohemia and Moravia before, during, and after the occupation? We find that nationality, once something acted out in public, had by 1941 become a label assigned by the state. The Nazi regime changed the rules of the game and transformed the character of face-to-face interactions, the individual’s relationship to the state, and the very meaning of “Czechness” or “Germanness.” Ultimately, Czechoslovak officials decided what made a German, sealing the fates of millions.

One way in which people expressed “Germanness” or “Czechness” in public before 1939 was by speaking, reading, and writing a certain language. For both Toušek and Westerkamp, language usage was key; even Westerkamp admitted Toušek’s language of everyday usage was
German, one reason why he might have had “German origins.” Language difference had separated German- and Czech-speakers since the former’s large-scale emigration to Bohemia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but it was in the early nineteenth century that Czech “national awakeners” associated language usage with membership in the nation. Early patriots wrote dictionaries and grammars that standardized the language; actors performed Czech plays and literary lights wrote in Czech. Lesser known patriots published Czech-language cookbooks, songbooks, calendars, and newspapers. Later in the century, marking a certain “language of everyday use” during census counts associated the individual with the Czech or German nation, as did reading certain newspapers and eventually seeing German- or Czech-language films. Sending one’s children to a Czech- or German-language school, or as in the case of Toušek’s son, working as a teacher in one of these schools, also constituted an expression of national loyalty. Language usage in the bureaucracy became one of the most heated political issues in the decades before the First World War; in times of heated nationalist rivalries, speaking a language on the street placed individuals in one of two mutually hostile camps.

Toušek’s story also hints at some of the structures and imagined spaces within which Czechs and Germans acted nationally before the occupation—clubs like the Czech club for construction workers and a Czech youth group. A civil society, which Valerie Bunce describes as a “legally protected freedom of associational life, with associations understood to be independent of the state and to exist in the space between the family and the state,” had begun to flower in the Bohemian crownlands in the 1860s. German and Czech patriots established gymnastics clubs, which counted 1.4 million members by 1936—more than one-tenth of Czechoslovakia’s interwar population. Other clubs worked to build schools, protect business interests, organize boycotts, lead patriotic marches, and erect public monuments and buildings. Local archives are filled with records of other seemingly apolitical, yet nationally organized, clubs—from the German Lovers of the Alps to Czech reading circles. By the mid-1890s in Bohemia and 1905 in Moravia, diverse Czech and German political parties had begun to form, and these new, locally influential political parties entered and transformed the field of civil society. As in most European countries, nearly all clubs, associations, and media in Bohemia and Moravia were somehow associated with a certain political camp. Yet while questions of nationality had become politicized, the Habsburg and Czechoslovak states, for the most part, set the rules of the game and played the role of referee. Nationality, legally speaking, was a choice. For many living in bilingual towns, where marches and economic pressures tended to pull fence-sitters to one side or another, nationality was a daily decision.
Remarkably, in the spring and summer months of 1939, Nazi authorities did little to prevent public displays of Czechness. Czech patriots would later recall the first months of occupation as a unique moment when co-nationals came together and “protected the nation.” Opera classics by Smetana and Dvořák played to packed halls during Prague’s “musical May” festival. In June, Nazi authorities had to issue a decree forbidding people from singing national songs in restaurants, wine bars, and other public spaces. Bookstores reprinted classic Czech texts, and for every Protectorate inhabitant, 1.3 books rolled off publishers’ presses in the first year of the occupation. Organizations like the Czech Aviation Club and the Czech National Auto Club continued to convene. Czech gymnastics clubs and members of the Catholic Church played a large role in organizing marches and gatherings. An estimated eighty thousand people met for a celebration of Czech mothers in Ostrava, and nearly ninety thousand people participated in a pilgrimage that ended near Terezín, the future site of the Protectorate’s only concentration camp. Members of underground organizations drew upon strategies learned during the nineteenth century to organize boycotts and publish illegally. Getting individuals to remember their ties to the nation and to “act nationally” was their primary goal. Only when the war began did they concentrate on gathering military intelligence for allies, sabotage, and armed violence.

Nazi citizenship laws in the Protectorate, too, provided many people with a choice among nationalities. To become a Reich German citizen, Protectorate inhabitants had to register with local state agencies, which approved the vast majority of applications. Only pre-1938 Sudeten German Party members automatically became Reich German citizens; Jews as defined by the Nuremberg laws were excluded from the German legal community.

By the end of 1940, Nazi officials had not only decided to change the rules, but also to dictate play. After Germany invaded Poland, the Gestapo immediately arrested thousands of intellectuals, priests, Communists, Social Democrats, and others. The arrests continued through the end of the year, netting public figures and key members of legal and underground organizations. By the end of 1942, nearly all resistance groups had been infiltrated, their members arrested, and their activities stopped. In 1939, Nazi leaders had either undone or harnessed for their own purposes associations that had been part of German civil and political society before the occupation. Czech universities were closed, and by the end of 1942, Nazi police had forcibly disbanded most Czech organizations and, in the case of the Czech Sokol gymnastics club, arrested their leaders. By 1943, their resistance movements devastated and shows of public opposition often leading directly to arrest and possible execution, Czechoslovak loyalists transmitting messages to their exiled leaders.
in London could only point to jokes, rumors, and language usage to assure the government-in-exile that national sentiment and patriotism still existed. In a way, the history of acting nationally had come full circle—language usage had once again become the primary, indeed the only, means by which individuals expressed their association with the Czech nation.

Meanwhile, as in Alsace, Lorraine, incorporated Poland, Luxemburg, and, later, parts of Slovenia, Protectorate leaders had decided to make the Protectorate lands and their people entirely “German.” Influenced by economic necessity, demographic realities, and ideological correctness, SS leaders and other Nazi officials in the Reich Protector’s office drew up plans to create a society of productive, efficient, and obedient Germans possessing the same racial composition and the same world view. Planners estimated that 3.5 million Czechs were to be expelled, while another 3.5 million were to become Germans. Hitler gave his approval to the plans in October 1940. Translating policy and vague dreams into reality would prove difficult, however. Various branches of the SS, the Nazi party, and administrative structures battled for the right to determine and mark current and potential Germans. And the question “What makes a German?” never received a definitive answer. In fact, as the occupation dragged on, definitions of Germanness became increasingly confused and contradictory.

“Race” would seem to have been the most logical marker, but it proved unreliable. In a report commissioned by Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in 1940, SS anthropologist Hans Joachim-Beyer found that local Czechs had, on average, more “German” racial characteristics than local Sudeten Germans. In fact, race was only one of many criteria upon which racial experts and others based their judgments. And when officials did measure so-called racial characteristics, they often looked at things other than physiognomy. As an SS official within the Reich Protector’s office wrote in November 1940, racially valueless Czechs could be seen by their “markedly disorderly and careless family life, demonstrating a complete lack of feeling for order, for personal and domestic cleanliness, and of any ambition to advance oneself.” Writing to Heydrich in January 1942, Oberlandrat von Watter of Prague claimed to see only “partial traces of German blood” among German citizens who failed to reproduce themselves, or among those who maintained contact with Czech friends. Many local Germans said that Czechs would never truly assimilate; “Germanness” came from a spiritual feeling of belonging that Czechs would never embrace. Others argued that the best potential Germans were the most fanatic Czech patriots—people who displayed the “fighting spirit,” health, vigor, leadership, and military characteristics lauded by SS leaders. Acting Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich stated
that Czech Minister of Justice Jaroslav Krejčí’s “beautiful blue eyes” betrayed a suppressed German background, despite the latter’s carefully patriotic speeches and subtle attempts at administrative sabotage.23

These inconsistencies and ambiguities aside, the marking of individuals had been gaining momentum by the spring of 1942. In March 1942, Berlin extended its law requiring Kennkarten (identity cards) to the Protectorate, Alsace, Lorraine, and Luxemburg. By the end of the month, a Protectorate decree demanded that all eight-year-olds apply for cards at local offices, where they would be subjected to racial screening.24 Plans were made to test all seventeen- to eighteen-year-old Czech males as they were called up for mandatory work duty. Also in May, experts from the Race and Settlement office spread out across the Protectorate with five X-ray machines.25 Heydrich’s assassination in 1942 slowed the process of testing, registering, and marking potential Germans. Wehrmacht defeats at Stalingrad and El Alamein ended them for good; thereafter, priority lay with winning the war. “Germanizable” young Czech men were still marked and sent to work duty in the Reich. The children of Lidice, a town wiped out in retribution for Heydrich’s assassination, were tested and placed in German homes. Still, relatively few gentle Czechs became victims of Nazi attempts to make the Protectorate German. (Many inhabitants of Poland, Slovenia, Alsace, Lorraine, and Luxemburg who counted among the 30 million Europeans transplanted from homes from 1939 to 1943 were less fortunate.)26 Yet in the Protectorate, the rules had changed. Now it was left to the post-war Czechoslovak government to answer the question “What is a German?”

At first, mobs, many of them led by Czechoslovak partisans and provoked by Soviet troops, marked, killed, or drove away thousands of so-called Germans in the “wild transfer” immediately following liberation in 1945.27 Later that summer, the Great Powers approved Czechoslovakia’s request to undertake an “organized transfer” of Germans from the country. Germans wore special armbands marked with an “N” for “Němec,” the Czech word for “German.” These individuals were rounded up, placed into camps, and eventually put on trains headed west. Using vague criteria designed by the Ministry of the Interior, court judges appointed by the country’s 162 newly established national committees looked at associational and party membership, census responses, language usage, Nazi citizenship, behavior during the occupation, and supposed heritage, among other things, to mark nationality on individuals whose nationality was still in question.28 The decisions were inconsistent, but they were permanent. When police forced the last of Czechoslovakia’s three million Germans onto trains to the west in 1947, the final round in an old game had been played out. The lands that now constitute the Czech Republic had become almost entirely “Czech.”29 Choice among
nationalities no longer existed; a rivalry that had infused energy into a
dynamic civil society ended. Nationality was no longer something ex-
pressed in public, but was now a label that the state affixed on the indi-
vidual. The meaning of what it meant to be Czech or German had been
changed forever.

Notes

1 Gruppe III 4 to Gruppe I 1, 12 Feb. 1941, Státní ústřední archiv, Prague (Hereafter SÚA), Úrad Ríšského Protektora (hereafter URP) sign. I-1b 2200, 1940–1944.
3 Bundesarchiv Bayreuth, Ost-Dok 20, Hans Kaiser, p. 5; Emanuel Rádl, Válka Čechů s Němci (Prague: Melantrich, 1993), 213.

6 Brandes, Tschechen I, 160.


10 Statistická příručka Československé Republiky (London: Československé ministerstvo zahraničních věcí, informační oddělení, 194–7), 156–7; on the largest of these clubs, the Czech Sokol gymnastics organization, see Claire Nolte, The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

12 “Círův,” “Poměry v Čechách a na Moravě od německé okupace do počátku června 1939,” 11 June 1939, Vojenský historický archiv, Prague (hereafter VHA), fond 37, 91/1, I. díl, 24; Mastny, 64; Jan Gebhart and Jan Kuklík, Dramatické i všední dny protitoráti (Prague: Themis, 1996), 13.


14 “Die politische Entwicklung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren seit 15 März 1939,” SD report 15 March 1940, 24–36; Brandes, 1, 82.


17 Inž. Šajnera, “Zpráva z domova,” 2 Sept. 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2; Albert Kaufmann, “Zpráva z domova,” 22 Apr. 1943, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/6, 1; [Anonymous informant], “Spojený nálet na Most a zprávy z domova,” 5 June 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2; Oskar Krejčí, Země území, 1939–1945 (Prague: Gustav Peter, 1945); Aleš Dubovský, Kroměříž ve štěnu hůřeho kříže (Kroměříž: Muzeum kroměřížská, 1995), 127.

18 For a pan-European view of Nazi racial politics and, specifically, the role of the Race and Resettlement Office’s racial experts, see Isabel Heinemann, “Rasse, Siedlung, Blut.” Das Rasse- & Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die Rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).


21 Mastny, 130.


23 Kárný and Milotová, 34.

24 Reichsgesetzblatt, Jahrgang 1942, Teil 1 (Berlin: Reichsverlagsamt [etc], 1943), 100; Verordnungsschluss des Reichsprotektors in Böhmen und Mähren 27 March 1942 (Prague: Böhmisch-Mährische Verlags- und Druckerei, 1943), 62.

25 Kárný and Milotová, doc. 79, 257, 252.


27 A Czech-German historical commission recently estimated that between 19,000 and 30,000 people died during the “wild transfers” of 1945. Approximately 6,000 died due to acts of violence and 5,000 committed suicide. Iva Weidenhofferová, ed., Konfliktne spolčen-

28 On the national committees and their role in the determination of nationality after the war, see Benjamin Frommer, “National Purification: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999).

29 According to census results from 1950, Czechs made up almost 94 percent of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia’s population. Statistická ročenka Republiky československé (Prague: Orbis, 1957), 42. Little has changed in the last fifty years. During the March 2001 census, 94 percent of the Czech Republic’s more than ten million citizens declared themselves to be “český” (which doubles as both “Czech” and “Bohemian” in the Czech language), Moravian, or Silesian. The next largest nationality group consisted of Slovaks, with 193,190 people. Less than 40,000 citizens counted themselves as Germans. See the Czech Statistical Office’s tables on nationality counts at http://www.czso.cz/cs/ediciplan.nsf/p/4114-03. For a description of the preliminary 2001 census results, which differed only slightly from those published on the Statistical Office’s website, see Radio Prague’s project report “Minorities in the Czech Republic” at www.radio.cz/en/article/26138.