



Natural Catastrophe as a Consequence of Forced Displacement: Reviewing the Handlová Landslide From a Cultural-Historical Perspective

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For centuries Germans shaped the cultural landscape of the Upper Nitra Basin in central Slovakia. The emerging ideology of National Socialism and World War Two ruptured German-Slovak relations. The majority of Germans from Slovakia were evacuated ahead of the advancing Soviet Red Army in late 1944 and early 1945. Collectively blamed for the Nazi atrocities during the war, those who remained were forced to leave their homes for German and Austrian territories in the aftermath of the War. Only a few Germans, such as members of mixed families or experts needed in local industries, were allowed to stay.¹ In their place, thousands of new settlers came to the region.² These were predominantly Slovaks from neighbouring regions and other European countries who had previously emigrated to seek work. The idea was that they would contribute to the creation of a nationally homogenous society in reestablished Czechoslovakia, as intended by the authorities.³

More than 15 years later, in 1960, the inhabitants of Handlová, a town that had been dominated by Germans before World War Two, realised one morning that they could not open their windows or doors. Cracks appeared in the walls of their houses. This was caused by some twenty million cubic metres of soil that had started and would continue to move for the next six months. While there were no fatalities, almost 1,000 people lost their homes and the town's critical infrastructure was badly damaged.⁴ (Figures 1 and 2) Based on previous research on the Handlová landslide and interviews with local narrators, the

1. Soňa Gabzilová-Olejníková and Milan Olejník, *Karpatskí Nemci na Slovensku od druhej svetovej vojny do roku 1953* (Bratislava: Spoločenskovedný Ústav SAV, Múzeum Kultúry Karpatských Nemcov, 2004), pp. 93–129; and Michal Schvarc, 'Majorita – minorita. Vzťah Nemcov a Slovákov v rokoch 1939–1945 na príklade obce Handlová', in *Historické špecifiká stredného Slovenska v rokoch 1938–1948* (Ústav vedy a výskumu UMB v Banskej Bystrici, 2009), pp. 65–90.
2. Michal Korhel, 'Povojnová migrácia na Slovensku: perspektíva osídlencov v Handlovej a ich detí', *Historický časopis*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
3. Helena Nosková, 'Migrace, národní stát a národnostní menšiny v poválečném Československu', in *Československo na rozhraní dvou epoch nesvobody* (Praha: Národní archiv a Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2005), pp. 227–28, here pp. 230–32.
4. Quido Záruba and Vojtěch Mencl, *Landslides and Their Control* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 83–84.

present article attempts to explain the link between a natural catastrophe such as a landslide and the forced displacement of thousands of people more than a decade earlier.



Figure 1. General view of the landslide, 1961. Photograph by Jan Bárta. Source: Fotoarchiv České geologické služby.



Figure 2. Destroyed houses near the road, 1961. Photograph by Jan Bárta. Source: Fotoarchiv České geologické služby.

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I simultaneously explore the entangled relations between humans and nonhumans, specifically between the new settlers and things left behind by forcibly resettled Germans in the context of post-World-War-Two Handlová. The focus of the analysis lies on the consequences of this relationship to the local environment. In this article, nonhuman entities are treated as agents co-existing with humans following the nonhuman turn and the critique of the anthropocentric view in the humanities.⁵ According to the relational perspective that understands things to be ‘arrangements or compositions stemming from the interaction of other entities, materials, and various forces’,⁶ the nature of those entities is dependent on relationships. In this regard it is also vital to recognise that entities involved in an event have their own history. This history and their past relationships affect the entities and, therefore, also the event they are involved in.⁷

‘On the southern edge of the town of Handlová in Slovakia, a large landslide of clayey rocks occurred in recent days as a result of continuous and excessive rains this year’, the Czechoslovak News Agency reported on the last day of 1960.⁸ According to the agency, it was the unusually high rainfall in the previous months that caused the landslide. The socialist and post-socialist research literature adds a few other causes of this natural catastrophe. Geologists and civil engineers alike determined the slope’s geological structure in combination with weather conditions as the main cause of the land movements.⁹

However, the research literature identifies two more factors responsible for the earthflow. First, the neglect of the old drainage system that used to carry away excess water from the slope; secondly, the change in use of the land. While originally parts of the slope had been pastures, in the years prior to the landslide it was used mainly as arable land. Ploughing had destroyed the firm grass surface. This enabled the rainwater to seep into the soil.¹⁰ Whereas the first two factors were of natural origin and could not be directly influenced, the latter two were caused by human intervention and soil cultivation. It is also the latter two factors that present the link between the landslide and the forced

5. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii.
6. Chris Fowler, *The Emergent Past: A Relational Realist Archaeology of Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 2.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Jozef Malgot and J. Otepka, ‘Gravitational slope deformations near Handlová’, *Bulletin of the International Association of Engineering Geology* **15** (1977): 6365, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02592649>; Jana Vojteková and Matej Vojtek, ‘Assessment of landslide susceptibility at a local spatial scale applying the multi-criteria analysis and GIS: A case study from Slovakia’, *Geomatics, Natural Hazards and Risk* **11** (1) (2020): 13148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475705.2020.1713233>; and Záruba and Mencl, *Landslides*, pp. 8687.
10. Ibid., p. 87. There are also other landslide conditioning factors such as slope angle, elevation, distance from rivers etc. See Vojteková and Vojtek, ‘Assessment of landslide susceptibility’, 138.

resettlement of the German population from Handlová. An interview with a former member of the local administration reveals that at least some of the town's authorities were aware of this link even by the time of the landslide.¹¹ However, the forced displacement of Germans being taboo in Czechoslovakia during state socialism, this could not be discussed publicly.¹²

Before exploring this link more thoroughly, it is necessary to depict the former German population's way of life as well as some of the changes that occurred after World War Two. Before the War, Handlová (German Krickerhau) was strongly characterised by agriculture.¹³ Moving into the stone houses previously owned by Germans, the new settlers treated them in various manners. Some were destroyed, others adjusted to the needs of the new owners. However, as one eyewitness remembers, some of those changes might have had negative consequences.¹⁴ Some settlers changed the original eternit (a fibre cement) roofs for tin roofs. While eternit enabled the snow to melt gradually, it often fell all at once from the tin roofs causing injuries. Others removed from around the houses stone canals that had carried away excess water, after which, allegedly, their cellars flooded after a stronger rainfall.¹⁵

Also, the way in which farmland was cultivated transformed. Before the War, the self-sufficient German farms included larger plots that were divided into various spaces such as pastures, forests, orchards and arable land.¹⁶ Even though the bigger estates were only about 100 metres wide, they could be up to three kilometres long. This peculiarity meant that Germans used to cultivate their fields perpendicular to the horizontal line.¹⁷ This changed in the years after World War Two when properties were confiscated and forced collectivisation ensued. The formerly German estates were aggregated as the new authorities created one unified farm. According to one source, these Czechoslovak state estates then tilled the land along the horizontal line.¹⁸ The cumulated earth was consequently positioned differently from in the decades prior, allegedly contributing to the landslide in 1960/1961.¹⁹ Similar changes apply to the treatment

11. Marián Kucman, 'Handlovský zosuv pôdy v roku 1960 pripravil tisíc ľudí o domy', *My Horná Nitra* 4 April 2014: <https://myhornanitra.sme.sk/c/7159850/handlovsky-zosuv-pody-v-roku-1960-pripravil-tisic-ludi-o-domy.html>
12. Claudia Kraft, 'Der Platz der Vertreibung der Deutschen im historischen Gedächtnis Polens und der Tschechoslowakei/Tschechiens', in *Diktatur – Krieg – Vertreibung. Erinnerungskulturen in Tschechien, der Slowakei und Deutschland seit 1945* (Essen: Klartext Verlag 2005), pp. 329–53, here p. 336.
13. Schvarc, 'Majorita – minorita', 74.
14. Interview 2 Dec. 2022.
15. Ibid.
16. Ruprecht Steinacker et al., *Krickerhau. Eine deutsche Siedlung in der Slowakei* (Voerde: Arbeitskreis der Krickerhauer, 1980), p. 78; and Interview 2 Aug. 2023.
17. Interview 2 Aug. 2023.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.



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of the drainage system. A former member of the local administration stated:

They [the Germans] had small fields and between them they created gutters that drained the water. After the war, state estates were created, the land was united, the ditches were ploughed and the water had no possibility to drain off.²⁰

This did not go unnoticed in the official reasoning for the landslide: the change in land usage as well as the neglected drainage works were among the factors state-sponsored research identified as causes for the landslide in 1960/1961. However, state socialist officials intentionally avoided the link between these two factors and the forced displacement of Germans.

One could argue that it was lack of knowledge about the local way of life – in other words, the impossibility of communication between humans (the new settlers) and nonhumans (the previous owners' know-how) – that led to the natural catastrophe. However, this would mean ignoring those Germans that were allowed to stay in Handlová. Moreover, physical traces of the old knowledge, such as the ditches in the field, were present when the new settlers arrived. Therefore, it was not the impossibility of human–nonhuman (or even human–human) communication, but the ignorance of previous knowledge that led to the earthflow.



Figure 3. General view of the area affected by the landslide, 2023. Photograph by Michal Korhel.

20. Kucman, 'Handlovský zosuv pôdy'.

Comparing the general views of the area affected by the landslide from 1961 (Figure 1) and 2023 (Figure 3), the changes to the local environment are noticeable. The soil movement has permanently divided the town of Handlová through a circa one-kilometre-wide gap. The fields that were covered by the landslide still cannot be cultivated to this day. The extent of measures put in place over the past fifty years to stop the land from moving further is immense. The whole area affected by the slide was afforested; and the Handlovka river was diverted through an underground pipeline.²¹ A stabilisation embankment was built in the 1980s.²²

One question lingers: would the landslide have happened had the German population not been displaced from Handlová? Based on development in Western Europe, one can assume that the agriculture in Czechoslovakia would have undergone modernisation processes (e.g. the creation of large arable fields) even without the forced displacement of Germans or the introduction of state socialism.²³ It is not clear how the cultivation of the fields and usage of drainage systems would have changed – whether the past relationships between the involved entities would have stayed constant, been adjusted or completely changed, as in Handlová post-War reality. At the same time, factors such as the slope's geological structure and the unusually high rainfall would possibly have led to a landslide regardless.

The landslide of Handlová was not just a natural catastrophe. The legacy of past relationships shaped the entities involved in this tragic event. The forced displacement of Germans from Handlová and the subsequent ignorance about their knowledge created conditions that contributed to a natural catastrophe that permanently re-shaped the local landscape.

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21. Záruba and Mencl, *Landslides*, p. 94.

22. Vojteková and Vojtek, 'Assessment of landslide susceptibility', p. 135 and 'Stabilizačný násyp je v dobrom stave', 20 Oct. 2022: <https://www.handlova.sk/novinka/37999/stabilizacny-nasyp-je-v-dobrom-stave>

23. Stefan Brakensiek, Rolf Kießling, and Werner Troßbach, *Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), pp. 25–27.

