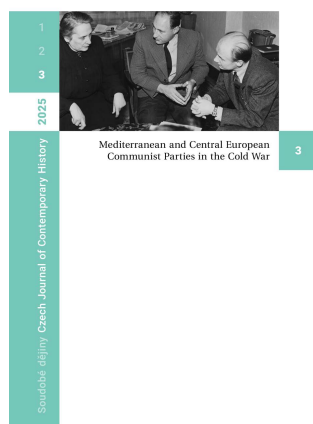


Zitierhinweis

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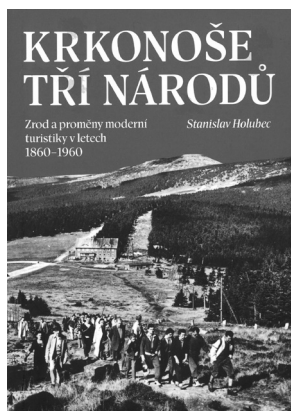
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The Czech/German/Polish Giant Mountains

The Rise of Modern Tourism amidst Contested Ethnic Coexistence

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HOLUBEC, Stanislav:

Krkonoše tří národů: Zrod a proměny moderní turistiky v letech 1860–1960.

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When *Krkonoše* [the Giant Mountains] are mentioned today, Czech residents likely think of the highest peak Sněžka, the beloved TV series *Krkonošské pohádky* [the Giant Mountains Fairy Tales], and perhaps the tragic story of cross-country skiers Bohumil Hanč and Václav Vrbata in 1913, which was recently adapted into a feature film.¹ From the Polish perspective, *Karkonosze* are perceived as a perhaps overly commercialized, yet highly popular recreational destination, symbolized by the meteorological station on the Polish side of Sněžka's summit, colloquially known as “flying saucers”. For many Germans, too, *die Riesengebirge* represent a traditional tourist destination, associated with a long history of German settlement. This region at the crossroads of three nations offers a vivid history of modern mountain tourism set against the backdrop of complex ethnic coexistence. It is this intricate past that Czech researcher Stanislav Holubec has chosen to unravel in his book.

¹ *Poslední závod* [The Last Race], 2022. Directed by Tomáš Hodan.

The author is affiliated with the Institute of History (*Historický ústav*) of the Czech Academy of Sciences, where he heads the Department of Modern Cultural and Social History. His long-term research focuses on the social history of twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, the history of cross-border regions, and historical sociology. He turned his attention to the Giant Mountains as part of the project “Central European Mountains Krkonoše 1890–1950: Modernity, Tourism, Nationalism”, funded by the Czech Science Foundation (*Grantová agentura České republiky*) in 2020–2023. Within this project, in addition to the present book, he has published several related studies.² Combining the approaches of borderland studies, environmental history, and the critical history of modernity, he guides the reader through a century of economic and infrastructural development, ethnic tension, and the beginnings of nature conservation. In this detailed synthesis, he shows how major historical events unfolded in a small geographical area along one of the oldest borders in Central Europe.³

² HOLUBEC, Stanislav: Between the Czech Krkonoše and German Riesengebirge: Nationalism and Tourism in the Giant Mountains 1880s–1940. In: *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2024), pp. 337–359; IDEM: České a polské Krkonoše 1945–1963: Mezi ochranou přírody a modernizací. In: *Český časopis historický*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (2022), pp. 777–833; IDEM: Náš Yellowstone park? Státní ochrana přírody a veřejnost v českých a slezských Krkonoších od konce 19. století do druhé světové války. In: *Střed: Časopis pro mezioborová studia střední Evropy 19. a 20. století*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2023), pp. 8–43.

³ In the context of Central European border regions, such a detailed analysis – both in its temporal span and thematic scope – is unique. For research on cross-border ties and conflicts in mountainous border regions, see the various studies on the *Šumava/Böhmerwald* or *Bayerischer Wald* area, such as: KAUCKÁ, Kristýna: Der transimperiale Käfer: Debatten über die grenzüberschreitende Zirkulation wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis am Beispiel des Böhmerwalds in den 1870er Jahren. In: HOLEC, Roman – ZÜCKERT, Martin (eds.): *Umweltgeschichte in mitteleuropäischen Kontexten*. Leipzig, Universität Leipzig 2024, pp. 307–330; ŠIMKOVÁ, Pavla: Die Teilung des Eisernen Vorhangs: Grenzüberschreitender Naturschutz im Bayerischen Wald und Šumava. In: HEURICH, Marco – MAUCH, Christoph (eds.): *Urwald der Bayern: Geschichte, Politik und Natur im Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2020, pp. 84–96. For the Polish-Slovak border region, see: HOENIG, Bianca: *Geteilte Berge: Eine Konfliktgeschichte der Naturnutzung in der Tatra*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2018; WIĘCKOWSKI, Marek: Nature Protection in the Polish-Slovakian Borderland during the Twentieth Century. In: *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 80 (2023), pp. 5–17. For the Carpathian Mountains, see: HOLEC, Roman: Der Ungarische Karpathenverein als Beispiel des mitteleuropäischen Transfers im Naturschutz. In: HOLEC, R. – ZÜCKERT, M. (eds.): *Umweltgeschichte in mitteleuropäischen Kontexten*, pp. 281–306; ZÜCKERT, Martin: Karpaten-Deutsche: Naturraum und Ethnizität im ethnopolitischen Diskurs in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. In: PIŇOSOŤ, Jana – HOSE, Susanne – LANGER, Marcel (eds.): *Minderheit – Macht – Natur: Verhandlungen im Zeitalter des Nationalstaats*. Bautzen, Domowina-Verlag 2022, pp. 205–225. For the Slovenian Alps, see: ROEDER, Carolin Firouzeh: Slovenia's Triglav National Park: From Imperial Borderland to National Ethnoscape. In: GISSIBL, Bernhard – HÖHLER,

Holubec opens the book *Krkonoše tří národů: Zrod a proměny moderní turistiky v letech 1860–1960* [The Giant Mountains of Three Nations: Birth and Transformation of Modern Tourism, 1860–1960] with a dense description of the transformation of an initially sparsely populated region, tracing its rise during the era of weaving-industry prosperity in the eighteenth century, showing how the mountainous environment shaped the craft's success, and its subsequent decline. This period was followed by the industrialization of the region, corresponding population growth, and the first stirrings of tourist interest in the cross-border mountain range. Throughout his narrative, the author interweaves economic and social statistics with vivid micro-histories, archival notes, and memoirs. This technique enlivens the complex account and makes for engaging reading.⁴ He maintains this approach throughout the book, using broad political, economic, and social developments as a backdrop for the microhistory of local associations, the life stories of prominent individuals, and the role of nature itself as an active agent in the historical narrative.

The book is chronologically divided into two major sections: the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, and the subsequent “age of extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm), marked by the profound transformations and challenges the region faced in connection with both world wars, the interwar economic crisis, and the postwar redrawing of borders and population shifts. Yet the central questions – concerning the development of tourism, the role of ethnic issues, and the mutual comparison, relations, and influences between both sides of the mountains – run throughout the whole period under study.

Regarding the dynamics of tourist modernity, Holubec argues that the development of tourism progressed continuously from the mid-nineteenth century onward, without any significant break. Initially, the more economically developed Silesian side of the mountains attracted the majority of visitors, with aristocratic travelers learning about the region through early travel guides. Accessibility played a crucial role, and the tourist discovery of the area was accelerated by the expansion of railways and roads. The activities of German mountain associations, founded in the 1880s, were also pivotal (p. 77). By contrast, the Jilemnice branch of the Czech Tourist Club (*Klub českých turistů*, KČT) played only a marginal role in the tourist exploration of the mountains, due to the minority status of the Czech population in the area. However, it was not absent from the national

Sabine – KUPPER, Patrick (eds.): *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*. New York – Oxford, Berghahn 2012, pp. 240–255.

⁴ Similarly, a recent book by Czech historian Jan Pezda explores the origins of modern tourism by drawing on the personal memories of travelers (PEZDA, Jan: *Slunce, voda, vzduch: Zrod moderního turismu*. Praha, Paseka 2025).

disputes of the era. Although national animosity in the Giant Mountains was less pronounced than in other German-speaking areas, the concept of nation figured prominently in the activities of Czech and German tourism promoters. These ethnic conflicts manifested in attempts to appropriate key mountain symbols (such as the folkloric figure of *Krakonoš/Rübezahl* and the source of the Elbe River), in the construction of competing monuments, and especially in linguistic demands. For instance, tourists insisted on guest books or the ability to order in their native language at mountain huts, and threatened boycotts of establishments that failed to comply (pp. 130–132).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, national animosity in the region began to escalate. The previous continuous and gradual development of tourism gave way to a period of extremes, during which tourism in the Giant Mountains at times nearly disappeared. During the First World War, the industry was curtailed primarily by travel restrictions and the food rationing system, which limited the ability of mountain huts to operate. In the interwar period, by contrast, a new tourism boom began in the mid-1920s, driven by renewed economic growth and the waning of postwar national radicalism. This era was even marked by cooperation between Czech and German tourist associations. As Holubec notes, “particularly in winter sports, trends emerged that transformed the Giant Mountains according to the demands of modern tourism” (p. 189). These included bobsled races characteristic of the Silesian Giant Mountains, ski jumping popular throughout the range, and the construction of the first cable car to Černá hora from Janské Lázně in 1926–1928.

However, the Great Depression and the growing threat posed by Nazi Germany once again suppressed tourism. Holubec recounts an illustrative wartime anecdote: “In a desperate attempt to procure metals for the war industry, the authorities even decided to dismantle the ten-kilometer Hirschberg–Obergiesdorf tram line and replace it with trolleybuses.” (p. 260) Although the Giant Mountains region was spared destruction during military operations, the postwar devastation of recreational facilities – and, particularly on the Czech side, episodes of ethnic violence – resulted in the virtual collapse of mountain tourism in this period.

In the author’s century-long periodization, the postwar years form the final phase, marked by ambitious plans for new tourist infrastructure, strengthened nature protection, and cross-border cooperation following the resettlement of the mountains by Czechs and Poles.⁵ However, the onset of the Cold War prevented

⁵ For the Polonization of the Silesian Giant Mountains after the Second World War and for East German tourism in this former German territory, see: HARTWICH, Mateusz J.: *Das schlesische Riesengebirge: Die Polonisierung einer Landschaft nach 1945*. Wien – Köln/R. – Weimar, Böhlau 2012; IDEM: „Turisté vystupují převážně jako uvědomělí občané našeho státu“: Východní Němci v Krkonoších v letech 1945–1970. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2010), pp. 349–368.

these initiatives from materializing. National priorities shifted towards economic development rather than tourism, and new travel restrictions were imposed. Only at the end of the 1950s did a new phase of mountain development begin, characterized by the long-awaited establishment of national parks, but also by the construction of ski lifts and the rise of mass automobile tourism.

From a thematic perspective, a significant contribution of the book lies in its examination of tourism beyond the aristocratic and elite circles of the earliest visitors. Holubec incorporates broader social strata, including women, youth, and workers. The figure of the female tourist, in particular, has recently become a prominent topic in historiography and literary studies.⁶ Holubec's work adds an important dimension to this discussion by demonstrating how the nationalism and conservatism of early tourist associations initially rejected women's active participation. He argues that their emancipation occurred largely in the inter-war period, especially through their involvement in skiing and entrepreneurial activities. Previously, women had often been portrayed as incapable or physically weak. Holubec traces this evolution in the perception of the mountains, their visitors, and tourism trends across local and national media. He illustrates the shift by noting that while pre-1914 drawings were dominated by caricatures of "plump ladies falling from sledges or being dragged in sedan chairs by exhausted porters", the later period witnessed the emergence of "cosmopolitan advertisements for ski fashion" (p. 213).

The author's ability to trace such detailed social and cultural shifts is grounded in the book's exceptionally broad research base. This includes the press of the period, archival sources (particularly the records of tourist associations and prominent regional figures), and hundreds of secondary works in the respective languages of the three nations connected with the Giant Mountains. Holubec does not merely rely on the press of the period; he also critically verifies and revises its often-nationalistic assertions, which tend to omit or deliberately conceal key facts.⁷ Furthermore, he demonstrates his experience in biographical research by skillfully weaving in the lives of important regional figures (such as the naturalist

⁶ In 2024, the Czech National Museum, in cooperation with the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, organized the conference "Women Travelers, Women on the Move / Ženy cestovatelky, ženy na cestách". In: *Národní muzeum* [online]. [Accessed 2025-11-20.] Available at: <https://www.nm.cz/naprstkovo-muzeum-asijskych-africkych-a-americkych-kultur/zeny-cestovatelky-zeny-na-cestach>.

⁷ The author demonstrates this, for example, through the story of the construction of the cable car to Černá hora, where the German press criticized the Czech project in a predominantly German town of Janské Lázně (*Johannisbad*) and lamented the exclusion of Germans from the ceremonial opening, yet failed to mention that a German speaker had in fact participated in the event (p. 199).

and conservationist Jindřich Ambrož),⁸ thereby creating a more vivid and multi-dimensional portrait of the Giant Mountains' history.

Holubec presents the existing literature in a chapter placed after the conclusion. Given that this section introduces historical authors who are frequently referenced throughout the text, placing this overview closer to the introduction might have enhanced clarity for the reader. This is, however, a minor structural point, as the author is otherwise meticulous. He clearly explains his terminology at the outset and, despite the changes in German and Polish place names, the reader never loses his or her way in the text.

Ultimately, however, the book's meticulous construction serves a larger purpose: to situate the story of the Giant Mountains within the broader sweep of Central European history. The author consistently embeds the development of local tourism within a broader Central European context, drawing comparisons and parallels with other border regions – particularly those with contested national identities – as well as other mountainous areas. He shows, for example, how local tourist associations were inspired by the older Alpine Club (the German-Austrian *Alpenverein*, founded in 1873), how technologies were adopted, and how ideas about nature conservation spread from Saxony and Prussia.

The result is an excellent work of Central European history, grounded in an extensive foundation of primary sources. It enriches not only the history of tourism but also regional and borderland history, the narrative of Czech-German coexistence, and environmental history. One can only hope that other Central European border regions will receive similarly detailed bilateral or trilateral historical syntheses that employ such a multi-layered combination of approaches.

Keywords:

Giant Mountains/Krkonoše/Riesengebirge; Czech lands; Czechoslovakia; Germany; Poland; tourism; nationalism; modernity; borderlands; mountain associations; Czech-German relations; environmental protection

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⁸ Jindřich Ambrož (1878–1955) was one of the most important promoters of nature conservation in the Czech part of the Giant Mountains. A member of the Czech Tourist Club, he published maps of the Czech side of the range and advocated for the establishment of a mountain rescue service. In the interwar period, he served as conservator for state nature protection and, after the creation of the Krkonoše National Park, he became the administrator of its western section.