The Czechoslovak Port in Hamburg in the Cold War.

A project presentation

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Departing Hamburg's Main Station towards Bremen, if you look to the right after crossing the Elbe's northern arm, you will briefly see a modernist, glass-walled building amid largely deserted surroundings. It belongs to the Czech (i.e. Czechoslovak until 1993) port in Hamburg that has remained in continuous operation since 1928. Today, when Hamburg-based media report on this facility – which is rarely – they regard it chiefly as a curious vestige of a bygone era. In fact, for most of its existence the port (also known as the Moldauhafen) has held great economic significance not only for Czechoslovak commerce but for the city of Hamburg as well. Moreover, scrutinizing this facility yields a nearly century-long cultural and social history of Central European interdependence that has survived the devastation of Hamburg during World War II and upheavals involving as many as six political systems (from the Czech perspective). Given its exposed location during the Cold War as a Socialist outpost and

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"showcase" to the West, the port also took on a fascinating role in trans-border East-West relations. My book will pay close attention to this specific situation at the political and economic levels, and especially that of everyday operations at the port.

The origins of the Czechoslovak port in Hamburg go back to the end of the First World War. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles entitled the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic – a fully landlocked state – to lease parcels of land in the German cities of Hamburg and Stettin for 99 years to enable "the direct transit of goods coming from or going to that State" (Treaty of Versailles, 1919, Sect. 2, Ch. 4, Art. 363). Following lengthy negotiations, the Czechoslovak port was founded in 1928 in Hamburg and – on a far smaller scale – in Stettin. During the 1930s the port on the Elbe rapidly developed into a key hub, through which a not-inconsiderable part of Czechoslovakia's foreign trade was shipped (Kubů/Jakubec 1992, 136), thereby making it a "gateway to the world" for the country. The facility was so successful that its structure remained untouched even after German troops marched into Czechoslovakia in 1939 and the proclamation of the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" (thereby cementing German

domination over the western part of Czechoslovakia). During World War II plans were even drawn up for its expansion.

In the European postwar order and the beginning of the Cold War, the port suddenly found itself in an eccentric situation. Located 60 kilometers outside the Iron Curtain, the facility suddenly became a Socialist outpost that – from the perspective of Czechoslovak authorities – had to be shielded against Western influence yet should simultaneously "showcase" the superiority of Socialism in the rivalry of ideologies.

During the full duration of the Cold War the port area in Hamburg remained a scene of conflict and negotiation between East and West. The Czechoslovak workers, sailors and administrators lived together with their families on-site. Many of them had regular and uncontrollable access to the "Western" world, prompting state authorities to keep a close eye on the exclave. Even the (re-)construction of the port under the flag of Socialism confronted authorities with a host of problems, however. For example, Hamburg as a location did not live up to the strived-for "primacy of the political." From the 1950s onward, therefore, politically motivated plans for moving the facility to East Germany or Poland were regularly aired. Such

talk raised concerns among Hamburg's political and commercial elite, who had a strong interest in closer cooperation with the Eastern Bloc states.

The "primacy of the political" also influenced the internal organization of the port. In the late 1940s a series of port workers were classified as politically unreliable and dismissed. This sudden loss of qualified personnel was worsened by changes in transit regulations for the remaining workers. The port's operator ČSPLO (Československá plavba labsko-oderská, i.e. Czechoslovak Elbe-Oder Shipping Line) therefore saw itself forced to additionally take on West German port workers. The consequence was both political and national conflict among staffers. This shines a light on one of the key traits of the Socialist port in Hamburg: As an ultimately open border zone with a staff that, besides Czechoslovaks, at times included hundreds of West German workers, this was a place where East and West were unusually closely enmeshed during the Cold War.

My book will discuss this eccentric situation in three steps. It will focus first on the living environments of the Czechoslovak shippers, workers and their loved ones. In the context of this micro-historical approach I will investigate everyday life between East and West, control and freedom, domination and

autonomy. Their proximity to the West – whether as border-crossers, smugglers, consumers or simply through contact with their West German coworkers – unmasks conflicts inherent in the system that had to be negotiated on a daily basis.

In a further step the study will then scrutinize the state's conduct toward the Czechoslovak port. In place of negotiation processes, here efforts of isolation were the norm. Since it was so exposed, the zone was particularly closely monitored by Czechoslovak domestic intelligence, the StB (Státní bezpečnost), which documented all border crossings in both directions. One remarkable aspect is the evolution of political interests and security priorities during the decades of confrontation. In the 1950s the possibility of hostile activities by the British, US and West German intelligence services was the dominant concern. Later, fears focused more on escape attempts by Czechoslovak workers as well as possible strike action by organized West German labor.

Below the state level, the study will also look at institutional actors who sought to influence relations across the Iron Curtain. These included ČSPLO – the facility's chief employer, which had to constantly balance

economic and ideological interests. Other players included the Hamburg merchants and municipal political leaders, who until the very end of the Cold War – and in part against official West German doctrine – single-mindedly conducted their own "foreign policy on the Elbe," calling for the expansion of economic ties with Eastern Europe and especially East Germany and Czechoslovakia (Strupp 2010). The port of Hamburg was both a "gateway to the world" for the Czechoslovaks and a "gateway to Eastern Europe" for Hamburg's elites.

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Literature:

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