

**Daniel Miller**

**Individual Advanced Research Opportunities 1998-1999  
Czech Republic**

**Research Report**

**1. Topic of Research**

My research was on the Czechoslovak land reform in general between the two world wars, and I intended to write a book on the topic. I also had the opportunity to collect nearly as much information for another book on one particular aspect of the reform known as colonization, the creation of new villages on large estates. I will most likely work on both topics at once over the next few years, but I intend to publish the general survey first.

**2. Relevance and Contribution to Field**

The land reform that took place between 1918 and 1938 in Czechoslovakia was successful in stabilizing democracy by giving land to small and middle-size holders who then supported the Republican party, which headed the reform, and the democratic political system in the country. As a result of the reform, those who supported radical solutions to the land question, including the communists' notions of state ownership of land, had few weapons at their disposal. The land reform took place without harming agricultural productivity, which was not the case with reforms in other states at the time. It served as the basis for future land reforms in Czech and Slovak history. Finally, the colonization process is important in examining ethnic issues and border questions.

**3. Summary of Approach and Research Methodology**

My approach was to gather as much material as possible, hand copy information in archives that restricted photocopies, and photocopy extensively in archives that had no restrictions. I worked at several different locations: State Central Archive in Prague (mostly at Chodovec, where copies are extremely limited). In Prague I also researched at the Archive of the Chancellery of the President of the Republic, the Archive of the Institute of T. G. Masaryk, and the Archive of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. In Bratislava, I worked at the State National Archive.

I used the National Library, the Library of the National Museum (particularly for journals), the Agricultural and Forestry Archive, and the Library of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. I also purchased a great deal of books on the land reform and related topics which I shipped to my office in the US using M-bags (fifteen kilo of books in three boxes of no more than five kilo each can be mailed using a M-bag for the same price as one five-kilo box).

#### **4. Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

I encountered few surprises because I was well informed about the land reform before beginning my research in Prague. I am impressed with the efficient and caring bureaucracy that tended to the land reform based on the discussions at closed meetings and the responses to letters from individual colonists and small land holders. I now have a better idea of the work the State Land Office accomplished and what was still before it when its activities were taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1935 and what remained to be done with regard to the land reform on the eve of the Munich Agreement in 1938. Much more, for example, remained to be done in redistributing forests. The Republican party ran the reform, but deputies and senators from other parties, especially the socialists, supervised the activities of the State Land Office, and I was impressed with the spirit of friendly cooperation all the politicians exhibited during meetings of the Administrative Committee of the State Land Office. Corruption was one of the means of appeasing all sorts of politicians, and I hoped to find specific trails in the archives, but I was unsuccessful.

I discovered that colonization was more than a simple means of curbing land hunger. It located re-immigrants and those from crowded areas on lesser-used land of the great estates. It also placed Czechs and Slovaks in areas with minorities—the Sudetenland (German minority), southern Slovakia (Hungarian minority), Ruthenia (Rusyn and Hungarian minorities). These colonists were then forced out in 1938-1939 until Czechoslovakia regained the areas after 1945. Colonization required much more than land and credit. Each colony needed the support of a transportation infrastructure, schools, churches, stores, and even libraries (bookmobile were established to help in this regard).

#### **5. Suggestions for Future Research Agendas in this Field**

There are plenty of opportunities for research the land reform. Individual estates (secular and clerical) and colonies could be examined. Only a few historians have considered the fate of the remainder estates—large portions of estates up to 150 ha. Another possibility for research includes the process of dividing small plots of land destined for distribution to small farmers. In all of these cases, researchers can easily apply the tools of micro-history to examine individual cases. Researchers other than historians should be interested in the Czechoslovak land reform, including sociologists, economic historians, agricultural specialists, political scientists (especially those who examine bureauccies), and those teaching education.

#### **6. Recommendations for the US Policy Community**

Wherever land tenure is grossly uneven, a well-planned land reform that is fair to those who lose land and new recipients is essential for strengthening democracy. The Czechoslovak reform had its faults, but it was overall successful in stemming radicalism and strengthening democracy without disrupting productivity. Where most of the land is in the hands of a few, and the state does not undertake a land reform, disaster can result, as it did in the first half of 2000 in Zimbabwe.