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# Mobility in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Political, Economic, and Socio-Societal Dimensions of Population Movements in Central Europe

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## Abstract

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This issue examines mobility as one of the key analytical frameworks of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Central European history. Encompassing not merely the physical movement of individuals and groups, “mobility” is understood in this space as a complex political, economic, social, cultural, and spatial process shaped by war, state transformation, border changes, forced migration, and social restructuring. The present issue explores how mobility influenced identities, social hierarchies, political loyalties, and collective memory. Particular attention is devoted to forced migration, refugee movements, and post-war population transfers, as well as professional and social mobility. Each contribution here employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining political, social, and cultural history, microhistory, historical geography, oral history, and memory studies. Based on archival sources, ego-documents, interviews, and statistical materials, the studies presented demonstrate mobility as a fundamental mechanism which shapes modern Central European societies as well as the relationship between individuals, states, and historical experience.

The subject of “mobility” has become one of the major analytical frameworks in fields of contemporary historiography concerned with modern history. In the context of Central Europe, mobility takes on particular significance due to the intensity of the political, social, economic, and cultural transformations that shaped the region throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, mobility does not refer merely to the physical movement of individuals or groups through space; rather, the term constitutes a complex historical phenomenon encompassing political decisions, economic strategies, social structures, cultural transfers, and the subjective experiences of historical actors. It is a process unfolding simultaneously on political, economic, social, cultural, geographical, and personal levels.

Research on the subject of mobility transcending the borders of states, regions, and cultures has developed recently in contemporary social sciences and historiography primarily within the structure of the so-called “mobility turn,” which since the 1990s has emphasized that mobility cannot be reduced to the mere physical relocation of populations. John Urry defined mobility as a fundamental principle

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of modern society, encompassing the movement of people, capital, information, objects, and symbolic meanings.<sup>1</sup> Mobility is therefore examined as a dynamic process that fundamentally shapes social identities, economic relations, the formation of borders, and collective memory. Contemporary interdisciplinary research brings history, sociology, geography, migration studies, anthropology, and memory studies together, enabling scholars to analyse not only movement itself, but also the mechanisms of its organization, regulation, and interpretation.

Mobility constitutes one of the key concepts of sociology and the historical social sciences. Social mobility is determined not only by individual abilities, but also by structural factors such as economic change, technological development, demographic conditions, family background, and the cultural norms of society. The socio-social dimension may be analysed through the concepts of horizontal and vertical mobility. Horizontal mobility refers to movement between environments or positions of roughly equal social status, whereas vertical mobility denotes social ascent or decline within the social hierarchy. A distinction is also made between intergenerational mobility, which examines the relationship between the social status of parents and children, and intra-generational mobility, which captures changes in an individual's status over the course of their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Structural mobility, triggered by political and economic transformations such as industrialization, urbanization, or changes in the labour market, is another important category. At the same time, modern mobility research covers the transfer of ideas, experiences, knowledge, cultural and social patterns, as well as the importance of mobility in the spread of languages, religions, political ideologies, and knowledge between regions and states.

According to historian Hartmut Kaelble, the development of social mobility in Europe does not represent a linear process of continuous growth in social openness. On the contrary, mobility has been conditioned by specific historical ruptures, economic transformations, and political regimes. Although industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of education in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries created new opportunities for social advancement, family background continued to exert a considerable influence on an individual's opportunities in life, even in modern societies. Kaelble criticized the separation between historical and sociological approaches to mobility research and emphasized the need to integrate historical and sociological perspectives in the interpretation of long-term social change.<sup>3</sup> Historian Josef Ehmer considered the very definition of the concept of mobility to be one of the principal methodological issues with mobility research. Historical sources often capture only long-term or administratively recorded movements, while short-term, repeated, or informal

1 URRY, John. *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London : Routledge, 2000.

2 Types of Social Mobility, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/types-social-mobility#bibliography>; KELLER, Jan. Mobilita sociální. In *Sociologická encyklopedie*, [https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/w/Mobilita\\_soci%C3%A1ln%C3%AD](https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/w/Mobilita_soci%C3%A1ln%C3%AD) [last viewed on 15 May 2026].

3 KAELEBLE, Hartmut. Eras of Social Mobility in 19th and 20th Century Europe. In *Journal of Social History*, 1984, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 489–504. [https://www.academia.edu/116857681/Eras\\_of\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_19th\\_and\\_20th\\_Century\\_Europe?sm=b&rhid=40012529013](https://www.academia.edu/116857681/Eras_of_Social_Mobility_in_19th_and_20th_Century_Europe?sm=b&rhid=40012529013) [last viewed on 15 May 2026].

forms of mobility remain invisible in statistical records. The fragmentary nature of sources and the difficulty of comparing data from different countries brings additional hurdles. Ehmer rightly stressed the necessity of combining quantitative methods with micro-historical and biographical approaches, since statistical data alone cannot adequately capture the social meaning of mobility or the individual strategies of migration.<sup>4</sup>

Central Europe exists as an exceptionally fertile area for mobility research, as throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the region repeatedly experienced profound geopolitical, economic, and social transformations. The collapse of Austria-Hungary after the First World War raised fundamental questions concerning borders, loyalty, citizenship, and national belonging. The emergence of successor states then created new frameworks for political participation and career mobility, while individuals were forced to adapt their approaches to the rapidly changing circumstances. The Second World War and its aftermath linked mobility even more closely to projects of ethnic homogenization and state violence. Forced migrations, deportations, population exchanges, and expulsions affected millions of people and fundamentally reshaped the social and ethnic map of the region. Mobility became an instrument of state policy, and at the same time, one of the principal mechanisms of the organized transformation of society, subject to intensive regulation and control. Under dictatorial regimes, mobility in the sense of crossing borders became a privilege, selectively granted and conditioned by political loyalty and administrative supervision.

An important component of mobility research is the study of refugees and forced migration. The direct consequence of wars, revolutions, genocides, and ethnic conflicts, refugee movements constitute one of the defining phenomena of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary scholarship increasingly focuses on the individual experience of displacement, loss of identity, adaptation, and integration within host societies. What administrative documents describe as resettlement, population exchange, or optation could be experienced in personal memory as expulsion, the loss of home, social decline, or alternatively as an opportunity for a new beginning. The economic dimension of mobility is also a critical part of this process, as population transfers were accompanied by the redistribution of property, occupational positions, and social roles. This dimension is particularly evident in the case of post-war population transfers, when new settlers entered spaces materially and symbolically marked by the former communities who had lived there, while displaced populations lost their social networks, homes, and economic foundations.

Mobility is simultaneously a question of inequality. Not all actors possessed the same capacity to make decisions regarding their movement, nor did they have equal resources for adaptation. Ethnic affiliation, language, family background, profession, age, gender, or political reliability all influenced whether mobility became a forced destiny, an administrative obligation, or a personal opportunity. The same historical process could be perceived by one group as catastrophic and by another as a chance for social advancement or

<sup>4</sup> EHMER, Josef. Quantifying mobility in early modern Europe: the challenge of concepts and data. In *Journal of Global History*, 2011, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 327–338.

stabilization. The study of mobility therefore reveals not only the dynamics of movement itself, but also the mechanisms of social classification that determined who could remain, who had to leave, who was allowed to travel, and who was excluded from movement altogether. The personal perception of mobility is equally important, that is, the manner in which individuals experienced, interpreted, and retrospectively incorporated these processes into their own personal narratives.

The geographical dimension of mobility further demonstrates that space does not merely constitute a passive backdrop to historical events. Borders, regions, towns, villages, workplaces, and transport hubs acquired new meanings depending on who left them, who arrived, and how they were politically and symbolically interpreted. The border regions of Central Europe became sites of memory in which new identities were formed upon the material traces of previous inhabitants. Mobility thus fundamentally influenced not only social relations, but also perceptions of space, home, and collective belonging.

The present thematic issue of *Forum Historiae* aims to demonstrate mobility as a process encompassing forced displacement, career mobility, the transfer of cultural patterns, and memory reconstructions of the past. The studies employ different chronological frameworks as well as diverse methodological approaches, with contributors drawing upon a broad spectrum of sources, ranging from archival documents, contemporary press, and statistical materials to memoirs, ego-documents, and oral history interviews. Combining perspectives from political, social, and cultural history, historical geography, microhistory, and memory studies, mobility emerges in this issue as one of the fundamental mechanisms of the modern history of Central Europe through which it is possible to analyse the relationship between the state and the individual, as well as between space, identity, and historical experience.

Ákos Bartha's work offers a biographical perspective on mobility through an analysis of Tibor Eckhardt's career during the First World War. The author demonstrates how an individual's career trajectory intersected with the macro-historical processes of imperial collapse and the transformation of political structures. Eckhardt's movement between administrative and political positions is interpreted as a response to the changing circumstances of the wartime and post-war periods. Bartha works with different layers of memory, showing how Eckhardt himself interpreted his participation in historical events differently over time, with later recollections strongly shaped by the anti-communist and counter-revolutionary framework of the interwar period. Eckhardt's career illustrates how social mobility connected with the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, and through this biographical probe, provides valuable insight into the interweaving of personal, administrative, and political mobility during a period of imperial collapse. The study emphasizes the significance of the biographical approach, which makes it possible to capture the concrete experience of an individual while simultaneously situating it within a broader historical context. The author points out that mobility is not merely a physical relocation, but also a process of social and political

formation, further contributing to our understanding of how political elites adapted to turbulent circumstances and how these experiences influenced their later activities.

In his contribution, Jaroslav Valent examines the ideological foundations of the territorial disputes over Orava and Spiš after the First World War and demonstrates that mobility may also include a symbolic dimension. His analysis of national discourses reveals how geographical spaces were reinterpreted in accordance with political objectives, going on to highlight the importance of linguistic, cultural, and historical arguments in the formation of national identities and showing that mobility cannot be understood solely as a matter of physical movement. The article broadens our understanding of mobility by incorporating the ideological dimension.

Ágnes Tóth's piece analyses the situation of Hungarian expellees and refugees from Czechoslovakia in 1945, representing an important contribution to the study of post-war mobility. Focusing on the administrative procedures of the Hungarian state, the author reconstructs the mechanisms applied to displaced persons as well as the complicated jurisdictional disputes connected with the provision of humanitarian assistance and the long-term integration of newcomers. At the same time, Tóth reflects critically upon the paradoxical position of the Hungarian government, which protested against the application of the principle of collective guilt toward the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia while simultaneously applying the same principle to the German population within Hungary itself, significantly weakening the effectiveness of its diplomatic interventions. She points to the ambiguity of the categories used to designate displaced persons and emphasizes the absence of a clear legal framework, demonstrating that concepts such as "refugee," "expellee," or "resettled person" were neither clearly defined nor consistently distinguished, but were instead employed flexibly according to political needs. The article also situates these developments within the broader context of post-war migration, in which different forms of population transfer intersected, placing the state in a crucial role as both regulator and actor. The author further draws attention to the insufficient treatment of this topic within historiography and suggests possibilities for future research.

Štefan Ižák's study dedicated to the optations of 1945–1947 investigates how this legal and political process is reflected in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Slovak-Ukrainian localities in Transcarpathia. Drawing upon field research and interviews with respondents, the author demonstrates that any knowledge of optation was often transmitted indirectly through family narratives. He also observes how the Soviet regime used the very existence of optation as a political argument to deny minority rights to the Slovak population that remained in Transcarpathia, thereby contributing to accelerated assimilation confirmed by demographic statistics from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study emphasizes the fragmentary nature of historical memory and aptly demonstrates that mobility has long-term social and cultural consequences. At the same time, the differences between official and unofficial

interpretations of the past are highlighted and the importance of collective memory in the formation of identity underscored.

Michal Korhel focuses on children's experiences in the context of post-war migration in Handlová, analysing their memories through the methodology of oral history. By comparing the recollections of displaced Germans and Slovak settlers, he highlights the interconnectedness of experiences of departure and arrival. The author demonstrates that mobility is not a one-directional process and that individual experiences connected with it cannot be analysed in isolation. A significant aspect of the study is an emphasis on space as an active factor in the formation of memory and identity, with Handlová viewed as a site of layered historical experiences. The work further shows that the perspective of children provides a unique understanding of migration that differs from official narratives. Korhel thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural consequences of post-war population transfers.

Lenka Krátká analyses the professional mobility of Czechoslovak sailors during the period of normalization and points to the ambivalent character of mobility under an authoritarian regime. The author shows how the possibility of travelling abroad was perceived as a privilege and a mechanism of social differentiation, while at the same time conditioned by strict control and political loyalty. Sailors occupied a paradoxical position: physically, they moved throughout the world and repeatedly crossed the Iron Curtain, yet simultaneously remained subject to political supervision by the company's personnel department and the State Security apparatus, which could terminate their professional freedom at any moment. Krátká distinguishes between the experience of the private sphere, connected with family and home, and that of the public sphere defined by the relationship to the ruling regime. The study enriches the Central European discussion on mobility by introducing the professional dimension of cross-border movement under communist control and demonstrates how the notions of home, border, and freedom were shaped within everyday life. The author also examines a specific economic dimension of mobility, since the opportunity to travel abroad was connected with access to scarce consumer goods and a higher standard of living. As such, the study offers an important perspective on everyday dealings in socialist Czechoslovakia.