

# ["Scientific Work Sanctions Everything": Czech Skull Hunters in Alaska]

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**[Abstract]** *This article describes how the racial worldview of Aleš Hrdlička (1869-1943) shaped his unethical treatment of Native Americans during his expeditions to Alaska between 1926 and 1937. One of the main aims of the trips was to dig up and steal Native American skeletons, by stealth if necessary. As a globally lauded anthropologist from one of America's premier scientific institutions, Hrdlička's devotion to scientific progress provided the motivation behind his behavior. In his scientific philosophy, humans (and their bones) were nothing more than material, and all individuals were best classified into races based on physical characteristics. For Hrdlička, science sanctioned everything.*

**[Keywords]** *Alaska; Aleš Hrdlička; anthropology; Czechs; human remains; Native Americans; race; science; Slavs*

*Since Charles Darwin convinced the world that man came into existence by descent from lower animals, zoological analogies are presented to us not as literature but as scientific fact. The augurs of imperial Rome advised on grave matters of state after inspecting the entrails of animals or marking the flight of birds. Modern philosophers explain and justify human conduct after a visit to the monkey-house at the Zoological Gardens, or from observations on the family life of rabbits (P. Chalmers Mitchel, *Evolution and the War*, 1915).*

Aleš Hrdlička (1869-1943), a once famous Czech American anthropologist, has recently become a controversial figure in American media.<sup>1</sup> In August 2023, the *Washington Post* published a series of investigative articles describing a grisly "racial brain collection" amassed by Hrdlička and stored at the Smithsonian, where he was the Curator of Physical Anthropology. Investigative reporters Nicole Dungca, Clair Healy and Andrew Ba Tran revealed how the Smithsonian Institution collected hundreds of human brains, taken mostly from deceased Black and Indigenous People ("Revealing"). Dungca and Healy also discussed Hrdlička's brain collection on the podcast "Democracy Now!" ("Inside").

The *Post* series focuses on the victims and is not specifically about Hrdlička, but one article describes his now unacceptable racial beliefs. With journalistic urgency for current affairs, the authors observe, "the racism behind Hrdlička's work" has today been "discredited," has "left a disturbing legacy," and "must be addressed" (Dunca, et al. "The Smithsonian's 'Bone Doctor'"). The *Post* authors also display some nuanced historical reflection by acknowledging that, *in his own time*, Hrdlička was not yet discredited, was still a "prominent anthropologist," and was, "widely viewed as an expert on race and human variation" (Dunca, et al. "The Smithsonian's 'Bone Doctor'"). Grappling with the reality that respected scientists once endorsed the kind of racism that today's analogous respected scientists denounce opens a complicated discussion about ethics, change, science and history. Why did bad ideas like race once seem smart to so many smart people, like Hrdlička?

In contrast to the journalist, it is the historian's task to compare current condemnation of Hrdlička as a "debunked" fraud against past assessments describing him as a vaunted scientific authority. Tellingly, the *Washington Post* in 2023 presents Hrdlička, correctly, as a racist whose ideas are "discredited"; yet, in 1939, the very same newspaper praised him, verbatim, as "one of the world's greatest anthropologists." The 1939 *Post* raved that scientists "all over the globe" savored "every published word" from Hrdlička ("Dr. Hrdlička Says"). Clearly, prestigious scientific and cultural institutions like the Smithsonian and the *Post* have, over time, expressed opposite sentiments about Hrdlička.

As Thomas Kuhn's work suggested, the unhistorical "ideology of scientific progression" urges the forgetting of embarrassing paradigms of the past, like "scientific racism," which credible scientists once believed but today consider untenable (138). Hrdlička's now despised style of race-thinking, uncomfortable as it is today, was once respectable; and Hrdlička, racist beliefs and all, used to be an elite member of the scientific establishment, not a discredited outcast.<sup>2</sup> Such cantankerous historical reflection might prompt a sober-minded person to wonder which contemporary ideas, currently espoused by today's esteemed Hrdlička-like authorities, might be invalidated "pseudo-science" in the future.

This paper tries to recreate Hrdlička's historical context by explaining what made his beliefs so convincing in his own time. Part of the explanation is that he saw himself, and others viewed him, as a forward-looking champion of a modern scientific world-

view. His religious devotion to a salvific philosophy of modern science produced his callous behavior toward living humans and human remains in Alaska. Specifically, two key assumptions of this scientific worldview molded the ethics of his actions. The first was that humans and their physical remains were primarily biological and nothing more than material to be measured and collected. The second presumption was that humans should be divided zoologically into racial categories according to their physical characteristics. This intellectual toolkit accompanied him to Alaska and shaped his ethics for the worse.

The point here is neither to criticize the *Washington Post*, which has done its job by informing the public about the Smithsonian's past misconduct, nor to justify Hrdlička's racial thinking, which did much harm to the world in the twentieth century. On the contrary, deeper analysis of Hrdlička's racial thinking only makes matters seem worse. It is soothing to stigmatize Hrdlička as a freakish scientist obsessed with collecting body parts to validate his universally despised racism. It is much more jarring to understand him as he once was; a globally lauded expert who imbued the terrible idea of race with credibility, not because he was a deranged misfit, but because he was a trusted authority from a respected institution.

In the historical profession, listening to the primary sources is the only way to credibly reconstruct past contexts. This paper draws both from Hrdlička's *Alaska Diary* (1943) and from firsthand study of his personal papers, which are archived at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The *Alaska Diary* is an edited version of journals from Hrdlička's first four trips to Alaska. These include a 1926 exploration of the western Alaskan coast and islands, a 1929 journey through the Yukon River valley, a 1930 trip along the Kuskokwim River, and finally, further travels in Southwestern Alaska in 1931. After the first four journeys described in *Alaska Diary*, Hrdlička later made four excursions to Kodiak Island (1932-1936), a trip to the Aleutian Islands (1937), a trek to the Commander Islands in the Soviet Union (1938), and an expedition to Siberia in 1939. The published *Alaska Diary* provides only a partial account of the early journeys, yet unpublished archival sources, mostly correspondence, help sharpen the picture of Hrdlička's bone hunting activities in Alaska.

Hrdlička's most important research aim in Alaska was to find evidence for his theory that Native Americans came to the Americas from Asia by crossing the Bering Strait. Believing that the skeletal remains of Native Americans in Alaska could help validate his hypothesis, he spent most of his time and energy looting their burial sites and digging up their bones. By the end of his journeys, he claimed to have procured around 4,000 Native American skulls and skeletons, which he shipped back to the Smithsonian for storage and analysis (*Alaska Diary* xiv). He also used his trips to measure the physical features and take photographs of Native Americans in the belief that their "physiognomies" – a word he liked to use – would help confirm his thesis. In comparison to these activities, he rarely stole brains.

In good journalistic style, the recent *Washington Post* articles expose the Smithsonian's past misdeeds as freshly discovered crimes, but they also overlook

some important recent history. The conversation about the ethics of stealing human remains from Indigenous People, and the process of atoning for this past bad behavior, is by no means new. Two decades ago, Orin Starn's very readable and thoughtful book, *Ishi's Brain* (2004), described the sad story of how Hrdlička obtained the brain of a Native American man called Ishi. The brain was repatriated by the Smithsonian and buried by Native Americans in 2000 (Starn 249-66).

There are also plenty of scholarly works, some of them more than twenty years old, that ponder the now hard-to-understand obsession that respected scientists once had for amassing osteological collections that were supposed to exhibit "racial" features (Fabian, Thomas, Redman). Hrdlička, who had the cultural and financial might of the Smithsonian standing behind him, was the king of skull hunting, but other individuals and institutions participated. Even Franz Boas, one of the few rebel anthropologists willing to question the racial paradigm, earned some extra money collecting and selling skulls (Redman 46-47).<sup>3</sup> To academics, this bizarre practice has been well known and much discussed for two decades.

The idea that these activities were unethical and should be redressed is also not new. In 1990 the US Congress signaled its official disapproval of grave plundering and its desire to make amends by passing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Since that time, institutions like the Smithsonian have been obligated to repatriate human remains that were illicitly removed from Native American burial sites. Whether or not the Smithsonian has complied earnestly enough is a question better left to investigative reporters and museum administrators, but it seems safe to say that the US government and the academic community, or at least most of it, have long disapproved of Hrdlička's grave robbing in Alaska, and elsewhere.

The primary sources clearly describe Hrdlička's grave robbing activities in Alaska. His published *Alaska Diary* leaves no doubt that digging up graves and hauling away skeletons was his primary fixation. In his correspondence with Czech-American Karel Breuer, he gave a summary of tasks that his Czech-speaking friend would be performing if he accompanied Hrdlička to Alaska as a volunteer. Breuer would primarily help with "the collection of all the skeletal material – which as a rule, due to the frozen ground, lies on the surface, such material would be collected in bags and packed into boxes." (Hrdlička to Breuer, 24 November 1926). *Alaska Diary* confirmed this stated agenda by publishing clear photos showing some of the excavation sites, along with the bags and boxes into which the skeletons were placed.

An arrogant posture toward Native Americans enabled Hrdlička's grave plundering exploits. His condescending attitude, on full display in print in *Alaska Diary*, is embarrassing to modern day scholars. He thought that Native Americans revered him. Because he was trained as a physician, he offered medical examinations and advice as a public service, but of course, these occasions also gave him opportunities to measure people and get information about burial sites. In print, he called his patients "big children," who "accept what I say without question" (306). A few years after Hrdlička's death, writer Viktor Palivec told curious Czech readers in 1947 that Native Americans

cherished Hrdlička as, "their lord, their big white medicine man, who can heal so skillfully" [*Jejich pán, jejich velký bílý medicinman, který tak dobře umí léčit*] (Palivec 23).<sup>4</sup>

Today's public might question Hrdlička's self-aggrandizing account of himself, and there is no reason to share his condescension toward Native Americans. If indeed they respected him as he claimed, they were no more childish than the world's best and brightest intellectual authorities. It is worth remembering that the *Washington Post* told its readers in the 1930s that Hrdlička was one of the best anthropologists in the world and that scientists far and wide meditated reverently on "every published word" emanating from him ("Dr. Hrdlička Says Russians Love All Things American"). Uncritical deference to scientific authority figures, always a fundamental logical fallacy, was certainly as present among White elites as it was alleged to have been among Indigenous Alaskans. At least the people Hrdlička imagined as "big children" were savvy enough to exact useful labor from him as a medical doctor.

Modern academics overwhelmingly agree that Hrdlička's grave pillaging was unethical, and even he, despite his exaggerated self-confidence, sometimes sensed that he might be misbehaving. His guilt feelings show through sporadically in *Alaska Diary*. He admitted that there were Native Alaskans who openly opposed his grave robbing, that this made him uncomfortable, and that sometimes he conducted the work clandestinely. In one passage, he fervently noted, "[it is] impossible to remove any remains now," because, "natives are watching from the tundra" (294). Elsewhere, he recounted how an old woman caught him exhuming human remains and was "evidently in disapproval of what we were doing," so he "put [the] skeleton back and cover[ed] it as well as possible," claiming he did not want, "to do anything against the native's wishes" (235). In another place he wrote, "send boy back on the quiet for boxes - an old native with his aged wife... have been watching us" (56).<sup>5</sup>

However, the response of Native Americans was not monolithic, and Hrdlička also claimed that some of them enthusiastically collected and sold bones for profit. For example, he related in his diary: "A young native woman... meets me far out on the beach. Saw her at first visit and told her to get me skulls - now she has... five good skulls... in excellent condition. Pay her gladly and generously for her trouble" (*Alaska Diary* 131). Elsewhere, he remembered, "pay old man with can of peaches. They must be glad to get rid of the old bones" (309). Hrdlička's private correspondence with his Czech friend Breuer suggests that buying artifacts from local Native Americans was standard practice, and "specimens can generally be bought for a little candy or sugar or small coins" (Hrdlička to Breuer, 24 November 1926).

Hrdlička openly described stealing and buying skeletons, but he also insisted that some Native Americans volunteered to help him because they shared his reverence for science. In one passage he recounted, "I explain everywhere what the bones are wanted for, and they quite understand" (*Alaska Diary* 235). After hearing a "frank explanation" of the scientific value of excavating, some Indigenous People apparently responded enthusiastically by helping him locate new sites and dig up bones, sometimes even delivering them to him (56).

Hrdlička frequently referred to the 1918-19 influenza epidemic, which facilitated his quest for human remains in Alaska in two ways. First, the disease killed such large numbers of people that it was difficult to dispose of the bodies, especially in the frozen ground. In one case, the Coast Guard came to gather and burn the bodies, but in other places many were left poorly buried (*Alaska Diary* 384). Secondly, the ravages of the epidemic meant that people living in some localities were not related to, and therefore not emotionally connected to, the bones of the flu victims. He described one village that had about 250 people in 1918, but "in 1919 most died of the flu, remnant scattered" (384). *Alaska Diary* suggests that the locals were less bothered when Hrdlička collected bones that were unconnected to the current occupants of the community. One elderly woman demanded that he put a skeleton back because it was her husband, but she then showed him another burial ground where he could dig up bones without protest from anyone (235).

Despite some dissonant moments of doubt, Hrdlička's faith in scientific progress always justified his behavior, at least to his own satisfaction. After describing the objections of some Native Americans in *Alaska Diary*, he defensively wrote, "strange how scientific work sanctions everything. Would never touch anything of this nature for any other purpose, but for study sake, and with the knowledge of how decently and properly everything gathered will be taken care of, there is a dispensation" (56-58). Taking stock after his 1929 trip, he reflected, "the scientific harvest of this year more than justified and paid for the journey and all it involved" (340). He told his Czech friend Breuer that by volunteering to excavate bones in Alaska he would contribute, "a substantial piece of work to science" (Hrdlička to Breuer 24 November 1926). What kind of belief system convinced Hrdlička that "science sanctions everything"?

The answer is that Hrdlička was a devout believer in the salvific power of modern science. He was committed to solving the world's problems through science instead of what he considered outdated traditions, "sentimentality" and religion. In 1936, Hrdlička expressed his religious devotion to scientific progress in a short essay he called "Human Welfare and Science." The essay posed the question, "can science save society, can science show the way?" In his answer, Hrdlička cast science as the world's only savior. Now that the old solutions offered by tradition and religion no longer seemed to work, argued Hrdlička, "it is science alone which can give humanity... the safest aid and guidance" ("Human Welfare and Science," 1936).

Hrdlička heralded Darwinism both as a description of biological evolution and as a prescription for human behavior (Brandon 177-83).<sup>6</sup> One of the newspaper clippings he proudly saved is a humorous cartoon, in which an incredulous ape reads a newspaper declaring: "Dr. Hrdlička says it is conclusively proven that man is descended from the ape" ("The Skeptic" 1925). The clipping comes from 1925, the same year as the famous "Scopes Monkey Trial" in Tennessee. Hrdlička, winner of the prestigious Huxley Memorial Medal in 1927, stood firmly on the side of Darwinist science against Christian fundamentalism. Like many of this time (and perhaps many today), philosophical extrapolations from "Darwinism" also supplied him with a moral code. According to



this ethical system, biological fitness determined the worth of human individuals, nations and races; humans were primarily "material" – a word he often used for people; and believing that human corpses bore sacral meaning was only silly superstition.

Before journeying to Alaska, Hrdlička had already worked out the materialistic philosophy that determined his treatment of human skeletal remains. In a 1919 textbook called *Physical Anthropology: Its Scope and Aims*, he framed the discussion about collecting human remains as a dichotomy between science and superstition. Hrdlička demanded that the collection of skeletal material was essential to the progress of science, but "religious beliefs, sentimentality... superstition," and "love" stood in the way by investing dead bodies with irrational "sacredness or awe." Old-fashioned religious valuations of human flesh, both living and dead, were only, "an impediment to the advance of... science" (*Physical Anthropology* 15). In Alaska, Hrdlička simply acted out these beliefs. He would, tragically, not be the last person in the twentieth century to express disdain for the immaterial value of the human individual, both in theory and practice.

Silly superstition about dead bodies, in his estimation, was, "common among the civilized and the savage alike" (*Physical Anthropology* 15). Sometimes, he felt, Native Americans were even freer from irrational sentimentalism than Whites. On his 1931 trip, he discovered that one of his White guides, named Butch, was, "evidently not much on bones, has some feelings in the matter. Some whites worse in this respect than the Eskimo" (*Alaska Diary* 92). In fact, in several passages he praised the Eskimo people for their lack of sentimentality toward bones, which he speculated was, "a marked ingrained psychological difference between the Eskimo and most Indians" (312). After describing how Eskimo people helped him locate and dig up a deceased "medicine man," he commented, "there is something astonishing in the attitude of the Eskimo... towards the skeletal remains – there is plainly no fear of them, as is common among the Indians, nor even any shyness in handling them" (65).

Hrdlička thought his lack of "sentimentality" was heroically scientific, but it produced an uncaring gruffness that modern observers find shocking. He praised an Eskimo, who was helping him excavate, for handling a skull, "just as he would a chunk of wood" (*Alaska Diary* 87). With similar irreverence, he recalled sleeping next to boxes of recently pilfered Native American skeletons to protect them from wind and rain. "Never bother," he flippantly joked in his *Alaska Diary*, "they are friendly" (217). In a letter to Josef Bartoň, a Czech-American student from Texas, he told the young man, who was planning to go with Hrdlička on an expedition, to buy a shovel and practice digging in preparation for the trip. It would be even better, advised Hrdlička, if Bartoň would find "some Indian site or mound" to practice digging up (Hrdlička to Josef Bartoň, 26 November 1934). Preoccupied with the mechanics of digging, Hrdlička never considered that someone may still regard the bones found in "some Indian mound" as the remains of ancestors reverentially interred in a sacred place.

A second premise of Hrdlička's scientific worldview was that humans should be sorted out zoologically into races according to their physical characteristics. Hrdlička's views on race and his use of the term were complicated and contradictory.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, they began with his self-identification as a Czech and a Slav and unfolded from there. At the broadest level, he described three main races, which he labeled White, Yellow-brown and Black. These racial categories, and his assumptions about their relative value, contoured his observations in Alaska.

It is important to state at the outset that Hrdlička believed that the Black race was inferior to the other two, and earlier depictions of him as a champion of racial equality are no longer tenable (Brandon 133–38). Hrdlička had plenty to say about Blacks in other contexts, but their presence in Alaska was negligible. In the notes from his second journey in 1929, he remarked, “the present Indians of the Yukon are largely admixed with whites and somewhat with the Eskimo but have escaped admixture with the Negro” (*Alaska Diary* 222). The term “escaped” implies good fortune, and this interpretation harmonizes with his belief, expressed elsewhere, that intermixture with the lowest (in his view) Black race would be a “drag” on the fitness of higher races, especially Whites (Brandon 146).

In the Alaskan setting, his conception of the “Yellow-brown” race is more important. Hrdlička thought the Yellow-brown race originated in Asia, but according to his theory, one branch had crossed the Bering Strait from Siberia to become the Native Americans.<sup>8</sup> Documenting this thesis by collecting skeletons and studying the physical features of Indigenous Alaskans was clearly the core aim of his journeys. At the end of *Alaska Diary*, he recapitulated, “constant attention throughout the journeys was paid to the problem of the original Asiatic-American migration” (404). Using the crude racial language of the time, he often made observations about the Alaskan population like, “Jap-like [sic] features here and there,” or, “have seen exactly the same [physiognomy] in Japan” (288). Elsewhere he noted, “Asiatic-like physiognomies occur now and then” (319). This is what he was hoping to see.

For his scientific pursuits, Hrdlička wanted to measure the physical features of what he presumed were “full bloods,” but he had no interest in those he judged to be “mixed” individuals. The many Native Americans who were mixed with Whites were, in his abrasive vocabulary, unsuitable “material” for anthropometric study. At one location, he wrote, “the Indians here somewhat disappointing – a good deal of white admixture of various grades... our supply of full bloods for measurement exhausted” (*Alaska Diary* 162). Elsewhere he complained, “the full blood human material is exhausted” (174). He described another population as “an aggregation of rather uninteresting related mixbloods – not much pleasure in seeing such” (312). On the other hand, at another location, he wrote, “the people hereabout show some interesting physiognomies” (319). Obsession with measuring only the purest specimens rendered his appraisal of living Native Americans as devoid of “sentimentality” as his treatment of their ancestors’ bones.

Although uninterested in measuring what he called “mixed-bloods,” Hrdlička was not opposed to the biological mixing of Whites and Native Americans (or “Yellow-Browns”). He believed in White racial superiority, but he also thought the Yellow-brown race was a close second, and that its members could mix with Whites. Testimony he



gave to the US Congress in 1922 about immigration provides the key to his thinking on this issue and is worth quoting in full:

My personal opinion is this: That just as the black people represent in mental potentiality, say, only 80 per cent of the average of white people, so the yellow-brown people represent, on the average, perhaps 95 per cent of such potentiality, and that 95 united with 100 will never give 100 again. But there are many individual men of the yellow-brown race who are... [interrupted by the committee chair]. Highly developed mentally and highly capable mentally." ("Testimony of Aleš Hrdlička" 8)

Though not flattering math for the Yellow-browns, at least they had a 15 percent advantage over Blacks in Hrdlička's judgment, and he concluded that in most cases they could mix successfully with Whites (Brandon 148).

Hrdlička predicted that over time mixing would, in certain parts of the globe, turn Yellow-browns into Whites. He insisted throughout his life that Russia, and later the Soviet Union, was at least 80 percent White, despite its vast Asian holdings. The Yellow-browns of Eurasia presented no biological barrier to the onslaught of Whiteness because they were "rapidly being diluted by White admixture" (Hrdlička, *Peoples* 2, Brandon 85-92). The *Alaska Diary* reasons similarly. Hrdlička prophesied a White future for "mixed" peoples. Some populations in Alaska, like Yellow-browns in the Soviet Union, would, "eventually dissolve in mixture. White blood once introduced will be, is already being, propagated manyfold among themselves" (319).

Hrdlička thought racial mixing of Whites and Yellow-browns generally produced good biological results. In terms of his scientific aims in Alaska, "mixed bloods" were a waste of his time, but from an aesthetic and eugenic perspective, he often praised them. In one region he was disappointed to see only "mixed-bloods," yet he found "a good strong family, sons one-fourth Russian" (*Alaska Diary* 318). He often made observations such as, "father white, mother three fourths Eskimo of exceptional white-like behavior and energy" (332). At one stop he dined with a White man named Hoffsted, whose wife was "a full-blood Eskimo." Utilizing his typical eugenic analysis, he described the Hoffsted household as, "a fine family of five children - none died, none sick, all handsome... Mother and children behave as only decent Whites could" (322). It is also true that in *Alaska Diary* Hrdlička claimed to encounter unhealthy "mixed" communities, but in his estimation the reasons were poverty and poor health care, not flawed biological inheritance. At one location, he thought the "slightly mixed children" he found, "would be fine... even lovely, were they fully healthy" (33).

Private correspondence confirms Hrdlička's benevolent view of mixing. In July 1938, a teacher claiming to work at the "St. Regis-Mohawk Indian [sic] School" in upstate New York wrote Hrdlička to ask whether a Native American mother and a White father would produce, "a lower grade of child." The teacher already thought this "low grade" result was "evident," and the general tone of her letter was insulting. While working at the school, she was also studying "family relations" at Syracuse University to learn how to better disseminate, "sex education among the Indians." Her verdict, which she

sanctimoniously shared with Hrdlička, was that "morality among the Indians is at a low level" (St. Denis to Hrdlička, 13 July 1938).

Hrdlička's cool response probably disappointed her, but it matched the views he had already expressed about Alaska and Eurasia. Directly addressing the question about Native American and White pairings, he resolved, "the results of such matings are not disadvantageous. There is plenty of evidence to support this conclusion." Rebuffing the teacher's preachy morality with cold science, Hrdlička lectured her, "in all your dealing with Indians as well as Whites in these matters, use not so much dogma or rule, but a trained good common sense, supported with such direct medical help as may be available to you" (Hrdlička to St. Denis, 30 August 1938).

Hrdlička obviously believed in White supremacy, but his version of it featured the Slavs as the most eugenically fit breed, not the "Nordics." Even before the Nazi Party came to power in Germany, he was already an outspoken enemy of Nazi-style Nordic racism in the United States. He told a newspaper reporter in 1928 that the aging Nordics would soon have to pass "the torch" of leadership to the younger and fitter Slavs, who were destined to be the new vanguard of the White race ("Famous Scientist"). He especially considered the Russians, and later the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, as eugenically fit survivors forged from Darwinist struggle (Brandon 92-96). Presuming Czechoslovakia's destiny was tied to the Slavic world, he once told a Prague audience in the 1920s that the Slavs were, "the last great biological reserve of the White race" (*O původu* 77).

Being Czech was an important part of Hrdlička's own sense of racial identity, although modern American assessments of him either ignore or entirely fail to comprehend this aspect of his life.<sup>9</sup> During World War I, he eagerly participated in a propaganda campaign advocating, on racial grounds, the liquidation of the historic state of Austria-Hungary and the creation of an unprecedented Czechoslovakian state (Brandon 33-60). After World War I, he contributed heavily, both financially and personally, to establishing anthropology as an academic discipline in the first Czechoslovakian Republic (Brandon 61-83, Kostrhun). He often discussed Czechs, Czechoslovaks, Slavs, and Germans in racial language. For example, in a 1917 article for *National Geographic*, he described the history of the Czech nation to the American public as a "1,500-year-long life-and-death struggle with the race who surround it" (Hrdlička, "Bohemia and the Czechs" 163, Brandon 9-31).

In solidarity with both the "homeland" and the "diaspora," Hrdlička liked to include Czech speakers in his skull hunting activities, and at least three participated, or planned to, in his Alaskan expeditions. The first was Karel Breuer, a Czech-American doctor from Nebraska, who wrote to Hrdlička in Czech in July 1926 and asked if he could join an expedition to Alaska. In his letter, Breuer reminisced about a visit he had made to Washington during World War I, when he attended a meeting at Hrdlička's house with several other American Czechs and discussed "plans to liberate Czechoslovakia" (Breuer to Hrdlička, 13 July 1926,). Hrdlička and Breuer corresponded several times, and their letters reveal interesting information about the nature of Hrdlička's trips. It is, however, still unknown if Breuer ever went to Alaska.

The second case was a Czech-American college student from Texas named Josef Bartoň. In 1934, in the depths of the Great Depression, Bartoň showed off his language skills by writing to Hrdlička in Czech. Appealing to their shared "Czechness," he asked if Hrdlička would, "like to have a Czech-American student come along on an expedition to Alaska" (Bartoň to Hrdlička, 23 Oct. 1934). Hrdlička replied, "I should be very glad to have a man of your bringing up" (Hrdlička to Bartoň, 29 Oct. 1934). Bartoň spent the summer with Hrdlička, hitchhiked home afterwards, and in his own words, "came back to Texas without a cent in my pocket" (Bartoň to Hrdlička, 17 Sept. 1935). He apologized because he could not even pay his board in Alaska, but Hrdlička picked up the tab for the young college student.

Finally, the most famous Czech to accompany Hrdlička was Jiří Malý, a well-known scientist who became the director of the Anthropology Institute in Prague and the Museum of Man (today the Hrdlička Museum of Man). Later, another Czech anthropologist named Vojtěch Fetter claimed that the summer spent excavating with the revered Hrdlička provided a crucial boost for Malý's reputation in Prague scientific circles. According to Fetter, Hrdlička liked Malý very much (15).

Recent research of Hrdlička's private, Czech-language correspondence has revealed that Fetter was entirely wrong. Hrdlička disliked Malý very much. Hrdlička complained most strongly about Malý in letters to Czech anthropologist Jindřich Matiegka, but he even took the time to write to the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Education to oppose Malý's selection as Director of the Anthropology Institute, which he viewed as unfair "protection" (Brandon 65-67). In the published *Alaska Diary*, Hrdlička muted his critique of Malý, but his dislike nevertheless bled through to the final draft. Throughout the text, Hrdlička complained that Malý snored loudly every night. He also grumbled that Malý tired quickly (164) and did not like waking up in the mornings (223). Other people had to chop firewood because, "M. does not know how to and not eager to learn" (217). These public jabs are mild compared to what he wrote about Malý in private.

Given his own racial priorities, Hrdlička especially noticed Slavic "mixing," both cultural and biological, in Alaska. In *Alaska Diary* he often remarked on the influence of Russian Orthodox Christianity in the region. Many burial sites were decorated in Orthodox fashion. In the town of Egigik, Alaska, he attended an Orthodox church with an exclusively Indigenous congregation of about 20 adults, "all reading still in Russian, from old Russian books, and pronunciation still remarkably good" (*Alaska Diary* 384). At another village on the Tikchik River he found a Russian church, an Orthodox burial site, and a chief named Gregori with a son called Vasili, but it is unclear if they were able to communicate in Russian, and no one there spoke English (361).

He sometimes found his knowledge of Russian useful in communicating with Indigenous People when they could not speak English. He was very proud of his ability to speak and read Russian, and back home in Washington, the Soviet Embassy regularly supplied him with newspapers to read in the original language (Brandon 97). As a skilled linguist, he could also communicate with Native Americans in Spanish (he was also fluent in German and French), but after English, Russian was the most use-

ful in Alaska. For example, at a place called Moose Creek, he met a man named Sergei Andreiev, "a very interesting half-breed, who still speaks some Russian" (326).

Hrdlička praised the "Slavic blood" he imagined flowing in Indigenous Alaskans. After all, he thought Whites and Yellow-browns could mix, so why not mix with the Slavs, the best Whites of all? In one region he commented, "the Russians on this river must have been large men, and intelligent - every one of the mixbreeds [sic] who carries their blood shows it. A great leaven..." (*Alaska Diary* 89). He thought he spotted this fortuitous mix everywhere in Alaskan "physiognomies" and constantly made comments like, "old man seems to have some Russian blood" (359), or "a trace of Russian or other white blood suspected in the occasional more heavily bearded men" (87).

He even met a few Czech people surviving in the Alaskan cold, and he usually considered them, like other Slavs, as some of the "the best material" (*Alaska Diary* 169). He met, for example, "a trader, of Czech Jewish descent, helpful and kindly, [who] has a nice little ethnographic museum of his own" (40). Hrdlička did not hold anti-Semitic beliefs, considered Jews a branch of the White race, and advocated intermarriage, even in his own family (Brandon 121-25).<sup>10</sup> In Ruby, Alaska, he met another Czech man named Dlouhy [sic], with whom he spent an evening singing Czech songs. He described his new-found Czech friend in Alaska as, "a trapper, an old 'Sokol'," and, of course, as a specimen with a "fine physique" (*Alaska Diary* 183). Apparently, the only Czech in Alaska whom Hrdlička did not consider good "material" was his lethargic and snoring travel partner, Jiří Malý, who could not chop wood but had the right "connections" in Prague.

Hrdlička believed that science sanctioned everything. His creed of science produced two assumptions that had dire ethical consequences. First, Hrdlička valued human individuals primarily as physical "material" for study, and little more. Second, he assumed that humans should be divided into race categories based on physical characteristics. Of these racial categories, the Blacks were the worst, the Yellow-browns were much better, the Whites were the best; and, among the Whites, the Slavs, like the Czech Hrdlička himself, were the fittest breed of all. Hrdlička assumed that his perception of the world needed little justification because it merely reflected the "facts of nature," but he was wrong; it was a moral choice for which he was personally responsible.

At the conclusion of this essay, the reader may be more appalled, or at least more thoughtfully appalled, at Hrdlička's racism than at the beginning. The aim of this piece was not to rehabilitate him. It is accurate to call him a racist. But hopefully the abstract label of racist, now enriched by the examination of primary sources, carries more specificity than it did at the start. Hrdlička was not a caricature, and the details of his race beliefs are often unexpected and peculiar to him.

On the other hand, he adhered to broader philosophical principles, which were, unfortunately, widely spread among the educated classes in America and Europe in the years leading up to World War II. The evidence for this is that, as loathsome as his ideas seem today, in his own time, they did not make him an outcast; instead, he was a celebrated scientist and academic. As uncomfortable as it may be to admit, he believed some things that could be described as modern, scientific, and progressive, and these were the

"hook" that made his racism credible. The possibility that awful ideas can be so alluringly adorned in the priestly garments of scientific authority should encourage humble uncertainty about human knowledge and those experts charged with "certifying" it.

## [Notes]

- 1 Until 2023, there was no single book-length monograph dedicated to Hrdlička, other than a dissertation written in 1979. My book, *The Perils of Race-Thinking: A Portrait of Aleš Hrdlička* (2023) is therefore *sui generis*, and I have cited from its original research frequently (this paper also uses new and previously unexamined – probably by anyone but me – archival sources). Frank Spencer's 1979 dissertation, "Aleš Hrdlička, M.D., 1869 – 1943" is still an excellent starting place for Hrdlička's early professional years, but, like all American portrayals, it displays little understanding of his fervent identification with Czech nationalism. Two very brief but informative biographies, both obituaries written in English in 1944, came from his fellow scientists Ashley Montagu and Adolph Schultz. There are three short biographies, written in Czech and very old, which are, obviously, more preoccupied than English-language publications with Hrdlička's "Czechness." These were written by anthropologists Jindřich Matiegka (1929 – in English and Czech) and Vojtěch Fetter (1954); and by a Czech fan named Viktor Palivec (1947). Full citations are in the bibliography.
- 2 I have argued that indeed there was something "phony" about Hrdlička's anthropological practices, especially when it came to sorting living individuals into abstract racial categories, so I do not object to criticizing his, or anyone's, scientific work (Brandon 107-31). However, the public, and mostly the educated public, including courts of law, looked to him, and without a lot of skepticism, as an authoritative arbiter of racial questions. So, at that time, he was not a "quack," but an established scientific authority entrusted with representing what most people imagine as "real" science. Ironically from today's perspective, he explicitly used the term "pseudoscience," which is now sometimes directed at him, to discredit the racist thinking of Madison Grant and his imitators. He also labeled Nazi racial ideas as "pseudoscience."
- 3 Though only article length, a useful biographical account of Fanz Boas is Whitfield's "Franz Boas: The Anthropologist as Public Intellectual" from 2010. Boas' 1911 *Mind of Primitive Man* remains the classic empirical critique of the concept of race and is still worth reading. There were many older but excellent and very readable books written in this anthropological tradition, including, to list a few, Ashley Montagu's 1945 *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*; Gould's, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996); and Marks' *Human Biodiversity* (1995) and *What it Means to be 98 % Chimpanzee* (2002).
- 4 I have already published my argument against the myth, perpetuated both by Czech and American authors, that Hrdlička endorsed racial equality (Brandon, 133–38). One of the reviewers of this article has proffered the intriguing and plausible thesis that intellectuals in Communist Czechoslovakia invented and coopted this egalitarian



mythology for their propaganda. Exactly this kind of Communist "narrative" and "anti-racist" vocabulary can be seen in Vojtěch Fetter's *Dr. Aleš Hrdlička světový badatel ...* from 1954. I would be very interested to read a fresh revisionist interpretation of Hrdlička's legacy in Communist Czechoslovakia.

- 5 A reviewer has suggested that Hrdlička's excavations of skeletal material should not be called "theft" because this activity was both legal and morally acceptable at that time. However, there are passages in *Alaska Diary* where Hrdlička explicitly described himself taking bones clandestinely from graves against the wishes of the locals and then deceptively concealing the loot. I think this behavior, which he described in his own words, can safely be termed "stealing," "looting," and "pillaging." Still, the reviewer's point is important because Hrdlička did not always "steal" the bones. In this paper, I have attempted to capture the complexity of his relationship with Native Americans as I found it in the primary sources.
- 6 An excellent critique of the modern obsession with distilling morality from "Darwinism" is Chalmers, *Evolution and the War*, written in 1915. Another, from 1941, was by Carlton J. H. Hayes and titled *A Generation of Materialism* (especially 123-41), which was later cited by Hannah Arendt (159), whose chapter on "Race-Thinking Before Racism" in her 1951 classic, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, made similar observations. Another "great book" that I think fits in this category is Karl Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), especially its criticism of "biological naturalism" (I. 70-75). The ideas in the above works are of universal significance and by no means "outdated," but there are also a few more recent works that criticize the ethical principles supposedly deduced from "Darwinism." One is a very stimulating article by Richard Weikart called "Darwinism and Death" from 2002, and another is Johann Chapoutot's 2018 study of the Nazi worldview, *Law of Blood*.
- 7 As it turns out, explaining exactly what Hrdlička meant by "race" required a whole book. See Brandon, *Perils of Race-Thinking* to find out the real "logic" of Hrdlička's racial geography.
- 8 Although some in the public imagine the Bering Strait thesis to be a "fact," it has been a hotly contested hypothesis. See Charles Mann, 1491 (164-96).
- 9 The single exception is Robert Oppenheim, an anthropologist specializing in Korean studies, who noticed and commented on the extensive but neglected Czech language material in the Hrdlička Papers, and who was innovative enough to see that it could be connected to Hrdlička's racial thought ("Revisiting Hrdlička and Boas" 2010).
- 10 There is some complexity behind my assessment that Hrdlička was not anti-Semitic. In 1896, while traveling in the Czech Kingdom, he told his wife in a letter that he hated "the Jews and the Germans" (Brandon 121). While he continued to make disparaging comments about Germans for the rest of his life, his ensuing statements about Jews, both public and private, were positive and deliberately aimed against rising anti-Semitism. In the 1940s, when his niece decided to marry a Jewish man and asked for Hrdlička's opinion, he told her, "The fact that you are marrying a man

of Jewish religion means nothing at all, if otherwise he is the right man. Two of my best friends in life were Jews" (qtd. in Brandon 124). A hardier argument drawn from the primary sources can be found in *Perils of Race-Thinking* (121–25).

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