

“It was an occupation, right?” Suggesting one of many answers/ “Byla to okupace, není-liž pravda?” Předložení jedné z hypotéz

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Abstract

Based on material gathered by Czech historians and personal testimonies given by eyewitnesses during oral history interviews recorded by the author himself, this article focuses on the significantly different interpretations of the Soviet military presence in Czechoslovakia after August 1968, as they appear in Czech or (post) Soviet sources. Defining this event either as an “occupation”, or avoiding, and even refusing to use this term, remains a fundamental dividing line. The author attempts to understand the interpretation of these events as evidence of the differences in the wider meaning Czechs and Russians give to their own recent history.

Abstrakt

Na základě materiálů českých historiků a očitých svědků, včetně orálně-historických rozhovorů, natočených autorem, zvažuje autor významné zřetelné odlišné hodnocení pobytu sovětské armády v Československu po srpnu 1968, které se objevilo v pamětech Čechů a Rusů. Hlavní rozdíl spočívá v konfrontaci pojmů “okupace” vs. “ne-okupace”. Autor se pokouší interpretovat tento jev vlivem rozdílů v kolektivní historické paměti respondentů.

Key words: August 1968; Czechoslovakia; history of everyday life; historical memory; occupation; oral history.

Klíčová slova: Srpen 1968; Československo; každodenní historie; historická paměť; okupace; orální historie.

Introduction

Under the communist regime the Past was constantly rewritten in order to satisfy ideological orthodoxy, and History in particular was a tool for state propaganda.¹ This paradoxically led society to believe it could correctly interpret significant historical events by systematically opposing truth to official discourse: what was described as “black” in communist propaganda could only be in reality “white”. However, this led us to consider the wider problem of interpretation above all in terms of state ideology and believed it would disappear when the regime itself would fall. That however was not the case. Different perspectives often give way to opinions which contradict one another, independently from state-sponsored ideology, and this is particularly relevant for places of memory, memorials, historical figures, or events. Defining the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia from either a Czech or Russian/(post) Soviet point of view is a particularly relevant example. My oral history research in 2017-2019 showed the tendency for Russian/(post) Soviet narrators to avoid defining these events in terms of “occupation”, clearly in opposition to the dominant point of view generally expressed by Czech narrators.²

The word invasion (“invaze” in Czech, “вторжение, ввод войск” in Russian), or rather the expression “invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact”³,

¹ Though it may seem obvious to us today, this issue has been covered for instance in: BRANDENBERGER, David. *Propaganda state in crisis: Soviet ideology, indoctrination, and terror under Stalin, 1927-1941*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012. ISBN 9780300155372. PAPACOSTEA, Serban. Captive Clio: Romanian Historiography under Communist Rule. *European History Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, April 1996, pp. 181-208. SHERLOCK, Thomas. *Historical narratives in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia: destroying the settled past, creating an uncertain future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. ISBN 9781349535163. SHLAPENTOKH, Vladimir. *A normal totalitarian society: how the Soviet Union functioned and how it collapsed*. London, New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN 9781563244728. YILMAZ, Harun. History writing as agitation and propaganda: the Kazakh history book of 1943. *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 31 no. 4, December 2012, pp. 409-423. YURCHAK, Alexei. *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. ISBN 0691121168. We will also look in this article at the role played in communist propaganda by the Soviet “documentary”.

² ZAVOROTCHENKO, Igor. *Czech Society and the Soviet Army 1968-1991. Some issues seen from a Soviet perspective*. Praha, 2019. Diplomová práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta humanitních studií, Pracoviště Orální historie – soudobých dějin. Available online: <<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11956/109990>> [Cit. 2020-05-07]

³ For example, in this selection of publications from different countries and periods of time: BLSCHOF, Günter; KARNER, Stefan; RUGGENTHALER, Peter (ed.). *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*. Lanham, Plymouth: Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield), 2010. ISBN 9780739143049. CZERWIŃSKI, Edward Joseph; PIEKALKIEWICZ, Jaroslaw. *The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia: its effects on Eastern Europe*. Praeger Publishers, 1972. ISBN 9780275282707. KRAMER, Mark. New sources on the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 1992, vol. 2 no. 1, 1992, pp.

is often used in publications dealing with the events of August of 1968. In both Czech and foreign academic literature, emphasis is generally put on the collective nature of the so-called *Danube operation* rather than on the leading role of the Soviet Union itself. Moreover, the term “occupation” tends to be avoided, but on the other hand is commonly used in everyday life in Czech society as a whole – and usually phrased as “the Soviet occupation”. As Dr. Marie Černá from the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences wrote, “... *the August invasion carries a strong emotional charge, and this ranks it with other national tragedies, such as the German annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938, and the subsequent German occupation of the Czech Lands in 1939. The term ‘occupation’ seems to be the most appropriate also for what transpired in August 1968, with the difference that in this case the foreign power was the Soviet Union.*”⁴ She goes on explaining that “*the political meaning of ‘occupation’ is clear, generally understood, and undeniable. Today, the word is commonly used in relation to the two decades the Soviet Army was present in Czechoslovakia following the invasion.*”⁵

However, years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the use of terms such as “occupation”, or “occupier(s)”, is to this day met with unequivocal objection by former Soviet military personnel, when discussing these events and the subsequent period of Soviet military presence on Czechoslovak territory. Not one of them considers himself in any way an occupier. What could possibly explain this position and what wider meaning does it eventually have for us?

1.

During socialism everything was evidently easier. A particularly relevant example of the official rhetoric on this issue is a documentary produced by the Soviet state film studio⁶. It emphasizes the fact that it was precisely the Soviet

4-13. KRAMER, Mark. The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine. In: TISMANEANU, Vladimir (ed.). *Promises of 1968: crisis, illusion and utopia*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011. ISBN 9786155053047. OROBATOR, Stanley E. The Nigerian Civil War and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia. *African Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 327, April 1983. STANCHEV, Krassen. Prague summer: 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia in a historical detail. *Public Policy*, vol. 10, no. 2, March 2019, pp. 109-113. STOLARIK, M. Mark (ed.). *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: forty years later*. Mundelein: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010. ISBN 9780865167513.

⁴ ČERNÁ, Marie. Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation. The Soviet Army, 1968–1991, in the Memory of the Czech People. *Czech Journal Of Contemporary History*, vol. IV, no. 4, 2016, pp. 80-101, see p. 80.

⁵ ČERNÁ, Marie. Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation, p. 80-81.

⁶ Friendship forever. *Newsreel “Soviet Army”*, no. 55, 1982 (originally in Russian: Дружба на

army that liberated Czechoslovakia from *German* occupation. The Soviet and Czechoslovak military are referred to as “brothers in class”, “brothers in arms”, the children or grandchildren “of those who liberated Czechoslovakia”. There is here an obvious attempt to assimilate the events of 1968 to those of 1945 in the mind of the viewer. As a result, it should be obvious for him that those who liberated the country during the Second world war in no way could have been *occupiers* themselves 20 years later. Any suggestion of the latter would be absurd.

The documentary shows changing units between the Soviet Army and the Czechoslovak People’s Army, mutual training in combat, a common tour of the Škoda plant or the Lenin Museum in Prague. Soviet and Czechoslovak soldiers and officers are preparing to fight together against a foreign enemy (i.e. the armies of NATO). The idea is clear and simple: not only are we not enemies, but most of all we must not forget we have a common enemy as well. With such a discourse it was probably difficult for viewers to challenge the idea that Soviet and Czechoslovak soldiers were truly brothers in arms. How could the armies of an aggressor and a country victim of this alleged aggression possibly be brothers? Though not asked explicitly in the documentary, this question calls for a single, obvious answer. One should evidently not take seriously the various arguments expressed at the time by official propaganda, as they were never intended anyway to help the viewers understand the situation or encourage them to make any kind of independent conclusions on the subject.

Even so, after 1989 this type of rhetoric should have logically disappeared. Witnesses with a (post) Soviet perspective nevertheless still absolutely refuse to use the term “occupation”.

One possible interpretation for this is that every individual understands in all good faith occupation as a subjectively defined phenomenon. Collective memory, as well as the parallels and analogies made with one’s own national history, have a deep, determining influence on the meaning of this notion. Different groups will define “occupation” according to what they have themselves experienced collectively, even when it concerns events which occurred elsewhere, but especially if the wider group they belong to was itself involved, only this time allegedly as an “occupier”. In other words, what particular history and collective memory determines what the term “occupation” means for the Czech population on the one hand, and for the people of the former Soviet Union on the other?

вечные времена. Киножурнал “Советская армия” №55, 1982.) Available on-line: <<https://www.net-film.ru/film-13975/>> [Cit. 2020-05-07]

One of my Czech interviewees clearly expressed⁷ what could undoubtedly be considered the dominant Czech perspective: “...*I do not make any difference between the German occupation and the 1968 invasion. For me they are the same.*” Or as another narrator said⁸ about the so-called *normalisation* period: “*It was against the Communists again, like it was during the war, against Hitler...*” Thus, from a Czech perspective, the period of the German Protectorate is used as a commonly recognised referent to better define the normalisation period, with a clear and recurrent analogy repeatedly made between the beginning of the German occupation in 1938-1939 and the Soviet occupation in 1968.⁹ A diametrically opposed perspective was given by one of my Russian interviewees¹⁰: “... *It was necessary to show to the Czech public that the presence of the Soviet troops was not occupational in nature. And even despite the fact that over time I changed my views, and I now believe that our troops coming here was a mistake, I have no reason to believe that the Soviet army behaved here as an occupational one. This claim ‘does not fit in any gate’, it simply ‘does not fit into any gate’.*”¹¹

When a Czech is called upon to think about what occupation means, (s)he generally refers to a commonly-defined historical example, in fact a model, and in many ways a national trauma, i.e. the period of the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The border areas with Austria and Germany were annexed by Hitler and incorporated into the Third Reich; a puppet “independent” Slovak state was created on Slovak territory, and the remaining part of the historical lands of Bohemia and Moravia turned into a pseudo-state under German control, subordinated to a so-called “Protector of the Reich” (*Reichsprotektor*). That is, into a kind of colony governed from Berlin. This historical event became with time a specific nation-building Czech experience, well imprinted in collective memory. Any situation which eventually reminds of this traumatic collective experience, and the occupation “pattern” it symbolizes, will thus also be considered an occupation.

⁷ Interview I. Zavorotchenko with RB recorded 04. 02. 2018 in Prague. The audio record is part of the personal archives of I. Zavorotchenko.

⁸ Interview I. Zavorotchenko with IM recorded 16. 02. 2018 in Prague. The audio record is part of the personal archives of I. Zavorotchenko.

⁹ PECKA, Jindřich. *Spontánní projevy Pražského jara 1968-1969*. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR v nakl. Doplněk, 1993. ISBN 9788085270198.

¹⁰ Interview I. Zavorotchenko with AF recorded 20. 09. 2017 in Prague. The audio record is part of the personal archives of I. Zavorotchenko.

¹¹ Russian phrase meaning “it’s absolute nonsense”.

But for anyone identifying even remotely with the shared past of the Soviet Union, this model, or pattern, will be the years of occupation of Soviet territory by German troops during the Second world war. In this sense, it is fair to say that Russians in particular cannot honestly see the slightest analogy between the behavior of the Soviet troops in 1968-1989 in Czechoslovakia on the one hand, and of the German occupiers in 1941-1944 on their own soil on the other. Former Soviet citizens today all remain deeply aware that during the Nazi occupation, people weren't concerned about losing their independence or state sovereignty so much as they feared losing their life. They were subjected on a daily basis to a climate of arbitrary terror, fueled by the deliberate, cruel violence and programmatic barbarity of the occupant. This terror was not aimed simply at partisan fighters or other types of dissidents, but everybody and anybody. From a Soviet perspective, the situation in Czechoslovakia in the 1970 s and 1980 s cannot possibly stand this comparison they themselves implicitly, but honestly make with the war-time occupation by Germany on their own soil. The very idea of putting them, even indirectly (i.e. through their country's armed forces), on a par with the horror of Nazism, which their own (grand)parents were direct witnesses as well as victims of, admittedly causes quite an understandable indignation. Using the term "occupation" implies the possibility of such a comparison and is thus categorically rejected.

2.

Evidently, today few Czechs and Russians could refer to events which occurred in the 1930 s or 1940 s based on their own individual experience and recollections. We should instead focus on the concept of "collective memory". This concept is largely attributed to Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who wrote extensively in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) about commemorative rituals, as well as to his student, Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who published a landmark study on *The Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925. Halbwachs accepted Durkheim's sociological critique of philosophy. Focusing on collective memory, according to both Durkheim and Halbwachs, was not a matter of reflecting on the properties of the subjective mind; rather, memory is a matter of how individual minds work together in society, how their actions are structured by social arrangements: "*It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and situate their memories*"¹². Halbwachs thus argued that it is impossible for individuals to deal with the past in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of the wider context

¹² HALBWACHS, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. ISBN 022611594, p. 38.

of their group. A sense of belonging to a group provides the material for memory, and orients the individual into recalling particular events, as well as forgetting others. In this sense groups “produce” in the individual mind a memory of events that these same individuals never experienced directly.

A “collective psychology” approach to cultural history was subsequently developed in the field of the history of mentalities, where images of the past were considered as part of “*the whole complex of ideas, aspirations, and feelings which links together the members of a social group.*”¹³ As Jan Assmann wrote in his book *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, “*history proper ... is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered.*”¹⁴

It is quite reasonable to assume that any individual assessment of the past is somehow influenced by collective memory. As (s)he belongs to a certain social group with its own specific collective memory, an individual’s personal opinion about historical events and long-term developments are determined by specific features of this group’s collective memory. This kind of methodological approach allows us to better interpret individual ideas and reactions regarding the events of 1968 by those who share the (post) Soviet perspective.

The influence of collective memory does not merely concern the past, but also directly affects the perception by members of a social group of the present they share. It determines furthermore to some extent their ideas about the future. Contemporary French historian François Hartog argues¹⁵ that memory has become a new paradigm of social sciences, and that we are living in a mode of historicity dominated by the effects of memory. His heuristic tool “regimes of historicity” is designed to study the relation to time, and the way in which human communities articulate the present, past, and future. According to Hartog, memory has today become a pillar for identity-building in any given social group, or individual composing it. In his view, the events of the late 20th century, in particular the fall of the Communist regimes and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, put a definitive end to a period of great expectations for the future, and deeply challenged the acceptance of the present *status quo* as the main time

¹³ GOLDMANN, Lucien. *The Hidden God: Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Ra*. Trans. Philip Thody. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and New York: Routledge, 1964. ISBN 9780415822367, p. 17.

¹⁴ ASSMANN, Jan. *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. ISBN 9780674587397, p. 9.

¹⁵ HARTOG, François. *Régimes d’historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Le Seuil, 2003. ISBN 9782020593281.

horizon. Under these circumstances, the importance of memory, which protects and preserves “our world”, is increasingly important and thus contributes to the construction of the identity of the group or individual.¹⁶

Another important topic, discussed by Jeffrey C. Alexander¹⁷ or Bernhard Giesen¹⁸ for example, is the phenomenon of cultural trauma. The purpose of History, according to these authors, is today much less about simply narrating great heroic deeds of the past, their heroes, and famous battles. On the contrary, collective memory today is concerned rather by the suffering of hundreds of thousands, or millions of human victims, which for contemporaries becomes a source of persistent trauma and at the same time a *memento* for the future. The question of contradictory interpretations on the meaning of history is also dealt with by the American sociologist Jeffrey K. Olick¹⁹, particularly in regard to the tragic events of the 20th century.²⁰

This methodological approach helps us to have at the very least a general idea about the reasons triggering the emergence of certain specific features in the collective memory of the social (ethnic, cultural) group we are studying. There are sufficient reasons to believe that the Second World War, more than any other clearly distinguishable “event”, was a source of deep trauma for the population of the former Soviet Union during the remaining part of the so-called “short” 20th century (i.e. till the downfall of the Soviet Union). The imprint of these events on this group’s collective memory need to be properly sought in order for us to understand the subsequent forms of its manifestation.

We can in fact formulate the following, and admittedly consistent pattern. Specific historical traumas affecting a particular socio-cultural group lead to the establishment of evaluation standards and models in its historical collective memory, which are different from those developed by other groups. In turn, collective memories, each with his own set of evaluation standards, produce differences

¹⁶ MASLOWSKI, Nicolas ŠUBRT, Jiří a kol. *Kolektivní Paměť. K Teoretickým Otázkám*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2015. ISBN 9788024626895, p. 31.

¹⁷ ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma. In: ALEXANDER, J. C., EYERMAN, R. – GIESEN, B. – SMELSER, N. – SZTOMPKA, P. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. ISBN 9780520235953.

¹⁸ GIESEN, Bernhard. *Triumph and Trauma*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004. ISBN 9781594510380.

¹⁹ OLICK, Jeffrey C. “Collective memory”: A memoir and prospect. *Memory Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 2008, pp. 23-29. OLICK, Jeffrey C. *Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge, 2013. ISBN 9781135909819.

²⁰ MASLOWSKI, Nicolas, ŠUBRT, Jiří a kol. *Kolektivní paměť. K teoretickým otázkám*, p. 33.

in the perception and evaluation in the way distinct socio-cultural groups may have of the same, and sometimes eventually shared historical event or long-term change. We need indeed to understand collective memory as a set of beliefs, feelings, moral judgments, and knowledge of the past, which are deeply rooted in society²¹ and affect it not only at a rational level, but also emotional and affective. It would perhaps be appropriate here to at least simply mention the model developed by the historian Miroslav Hroch²², which focuses from a methodological point of view on clarifying the source of the patterns and historical parallels under consideration: i.e. collective memory or historical consciousness, according to his terminology. Unfortunately, we cannot go further in this particular type of analysis here in this article.

For many Czechs, undoubtedly, everything that happened in 1968 corresponded perfectly at the time to what had already been collectively defined as a foreign occupation. In fact, it's quite probable that even the most active zealots of the Husák regime often did not honestly believe the propaganda they were supposed to relay. As Czechs themselves, they couldn't deny that the term "occupation" used by their fellow countrymen made some sense from a national Czech perspective – even if they obviously couldn't afford to admit it publicly. But the (post) Soviet observer, or historical narrator, even as ideological censorship disappeared with the fall of the Soviet Union, to this day has to contend with another type of collective pressure. This collective pressure is quite different from any attempt to defend for example the "honor" of one's country with a (self) deceitful double-language. It runs much deeper in society than any state-sponsored ideology. It is precisely collective *memory*, and the scars of one's *own* collective past, so to speak. It makes any admittance that the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia correspond in any way to an "occupation" at the very least much more difficult, even intolerable.

²¹ SCHWARTZ, Barry. *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. ISBN 9780226741888, p. 11.

²² HROCH, Miroslav. Paměť a historické vědomí očima historika. In: MASLOWSKI, Nicolas ŠUBRT, Jiří a kol. *Kolektivní paměť. K teoretickým otázkám*, pp. 46-65. ŠUBRT, Jiří – PFEIFEROVÁ, Štěpánka. Kolektivní paměť jako předmět historicko-sociologického bádání. In ŠUBRT, Jiří (ed.). *Historické vědomí jako předmět badatelského zájmu: Teorie a výzkum*. Kolín: Nezávislé centrum pro studium politiky, 2010, ISBN 9788086879253, s. 9–30. HROCH, Miroslav. Historické vědomí a potíže s jeho výzkumem dříve i nyní. In: ŠUBRT, Jiří (ed.). *Historické vědomí jako předmět badatelského zájmu: Teorie a výzkum*. Kolín: Nezávislé centrum pro studium politiky, 2010, ISBN 9788086879253, s. 31–46. HROCH, Miroslav (ed.). *Literární a publicistické zdroje historického vědomí v 19. a 20. století*. Praha: Karolinum, 1988. OLŠÁKOVÁ, Doubravka. K diskusi o paměti v českém kontextu "druhého života". *Dějiny – teorie – kritika*, no. 2, 2004, pp. 269–280.

3.

We are dealing here with the issue of collective cultural identity at a national level, but where the national, transcending social categories and specific ethnic communities, is nevertheless defined from an ethno-symbolic perspective, and in the spirit of Anthony Smith. Smith defines a nation as a named and self-defining human community, whose members cultivate shared memory, symbols, myths, traditions and values, while maintaining links to the historical territory, or homeland, they inhabit, creating and disseminating a specific common culture, and maintaining shared customs and standardized laws. Nations consist of shared memory, values, myths, symbols, and traditions, not to mention actions performed by designated cultural, political, or other “representatives” of the nation, in accordance with these values. Moreover, reproducing these diverse cultural elements over a long period of time creates social relations. It structures a certain type of cultural heritage and framework for socializing the new generations.²³

These considerations are crucial to us, at a methodological level. It allows us to assume as a principle that in two given groups that significantly differ in linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic terms, we can objectively observe differences in a number of social phenomena: in particular, differences in collective memory. On the other hand, this also allows us to recognize the pertinence of a certain generalization regarding the existence of a certain common Russian, Soviet, or post-Soviet perspective. This issue *per se* seems rather complicated and deserves a deeper study, which goes beyond the scope of this article.

For the same reason, the author of this article intentionally refrained from clarifying the definition one could make on the self-identification of this particular group and chose rather to use the wider term of “Russian/(post) Soviet”. This affects neither the topic considered nor the conclusions of this study, and I believe it remains at the very least acceptable.

As we discuss the perception and understanding of key historical events by Russians and Czechs, and more particularly consider the difference between these views, we might also see an obvious connection with the concept of symbolic centres of national history, referring to the ideas laid out by professor Miloš Havelka²⁴ from Charles University in Prague, and the ensuing debate discussing

²³ SMITH, Anthony D. *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism. A cultural approach*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009. ISBN 978041549754, p. 29-30.

²⁴ HAVELKA, Miloš. *Dějiny a smysl: obsah, akcenty a posuny "české otázky" 1895-1989*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001. ISBN 9788071064244, p. 7-18.

these ideas, in the works of professor Jan Horský from the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University for example, amongst others.²⁵

Horský indeed pointed out that: “*Miloš Havelka offers the concept of ‘symbolic centre’ (...) In connection with this term, he speaks of ‘several relatively stable, historically argued images of Czech identity, several ever-recurring groups of ideas, or perhaps simplifying perspectives for interpreting the political and cultural history of the nation’ ... These symbolic centres allow ‘in a special way to structure an understanding of the past and present events’ ... They have a ‘meta-historical’ character, and ‘therefore, are traceable and explainable, and can be applied as a trans-disciplinary tool to other disciplines, such as the history of ideas, or the sociology of knowledge, rather than purely historiographical in nature’ ... They act in different situations of varying intensity and can be differently accentuated... These are, for example, the highly relevant imagery of emblematic defeats and victories during the Hussite wars, or the battle of the White Mountain, and their incorporation as such into a certain conception of Czech history.*”²⁶

I believe this conception of symbolic centres in national history to be perfectly applicable, not only for Czech, but for any national history, as a pertinent tool for analysis and interpretation. In our case we could see both the Protectorate and the Soviet military presence, or “occupation”, as significant symbolic centres in Czech national history²⁷, while at the same time understanding that the symbolic centres in Soviet national history are substantially distinct from their Czech counterpart. My hypothesis is precisely that the Second World War (or “Great Patriotic War” in the Soviet and post-Soviet historiographical tradition) is by far the most important and powerful symbolic centre in post-Soviet historical consciousness. It became a founding myth as well as an essential, unifying historical narrative, even in post-Soviet society, however deep and disruptive were the reforms of the 1980 s, or the radical changes of the early 1990 s. As opposed to this, the Prague Spring, and its brutal interruption by foreign invasion in 1968 do not belong in any way to these Russian and post-Soviet national history symbolic centres.

²⁵ HOLUBEC, Stanislav. *Ještě nejsme za vodou: obrazy druhých a historická paměť v období postkomunistické transformace*. Praha: Scriptorium, 2015. ISBN 9788088013075.

²⁶ HORSKÝ, Jan. „Smysl dějin“ – „národ“ – a priori. Možná past diskurzivních a myšlenkových stereotypů? Několik úvah a poznámek u příležitosti vydání druhého dílu Havelkovy edice „Spor o smysl českých dějin“. *DĚJINY – TEORIE – KRITIKA*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 75–94.

²⁷ ŠUBRT, Jiří, VINOPAL, Jiří a kolektiv. *Historické vědomí obyvatel České republiky perspektivou sociologického výzkumu*. Praha: Karolinum Press, 2013. ISBN 9788024627250, pp. 63-64, 102, 103, 104, 137, 167, 169.

That's why this dilemma between opposite, mutually exclusive assessments of a recent and objectively shared historical past arise. And as I believe to have correctly understood the roots of this dilemma, these contradictions cannot be eliminated in the foreseeable future. It might be possible for the situation to change, but it would require at least an evolution over several generations and the natural shift of these events under discussion into a more distant (and therefore more neutral) historical perspective. In the meantime, we see that even today the majority of the population in Russia is either simply not aware of, or at best, has an extremely superficial and approximate idea on the events of 1968.

4.

The interesting work²⁸ of Zdeněk Horák is in many ways related to the problem discussed here. He directly compares two situations: the period concerning the presence of Soviet garrisons as part of the Central Force Group on Czechoslovak territory, and the period of the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The comparison is set from the point of view of the Crimes and Offences commission, which would be the reasons to bring certain representatives of the occupying forces to a form of legal liability in Czech jurisdiction for crimes they committed. Zdeněk Horák eventually concludes that the situation in both cases is in fact significantly different. But choosing the period of the Protectorate as a model for comparison with the presence of Soviet troops in the 1970 s and 1980 s, remains once again perfectly acceptable and logical from the perspective of this Czech historian.

It should be noted that, of course, the perception of the Soviet troops' presence in Czechoslovakia and the assessment of these events by the Czech population are not totally unanimous, as it should be assumed. Dr. Marie Černá for example sees several significant lines of differences that can be observed. The picture changes depending on the period of occupation under discussion,²⁹ and furthermore, the attitude towards various types of representatives of the Soviet troops is also different. *“The local inhabitants also made clear distinctions between officers and the general soldiery... Soviet rank-and-file soldiers were often viewed as powerless and pitiful victims of an oppressive system who suffered much more under it than Czechs did. Stories of the cruel ways officers treated ordinary soldiers became legends which circulated among the people. These stories*

²⁸ HORÁK, Zdeněk. *Sovětská posádka ve Vysokém Mýtě 1968–1990*. Diplomová práce. Univerzita Hradec Králové, Filozofická fakulta, 2016.

²⁹ ČERNÁ, Marie. *Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation*, p. 82.

*on the one hand reinforced the solidarity felt towards the victimised and this sympathy was void of moral judgement regarding possible collaboration. However, this further complicated the perception of the Soviet Army as an occupying force, which was already somewhat ambiguous.”*³⁰ Apparently, the differences in assessment were even deeper in nature, considering the different personal experiences Czech contemporary witnesses had of these events.³¹

And yet, I believe that the generalization and universalization of the problematic laid forward here, i.e. the assessments of historical events in this case by the Czech and Russian/(post) Soviet population respectively, remain perfectly relevant as an analytical technique. Particularly due to the fact that we are not talking about any particular memory of isolated individuals, but about collective memory as a social phenomenon. Undoubtedly, this remains at this level a relatively open question, also pointed out by Marie Černá. *“The ‘normalisation’ policy promoted several official meanings of the Soviet Army’s stay. People themselves sought other meanings, related to their personal situations, possibilities, ambitions, and ideas, and they established their own criteria for what was and what was not morally acceptable. Was the presence of Soviet soldiers in the state still an occupation? And if so, what forms did this take and what were the consequences? Should the Soviet military be seen as the personification of Soviet policy? Were rank-and-file soldiers also occupiers? What position should one have taken regarding them? These were the questions that Czechoslovaks could ask themselves and (still) find different replies. The variety of responses still persists in our memory, while in the media, diverse answers pile up side-by-side. This is nothing unusual. What is rather surprising, however, is that these coexist peacefully as if we have admitted that all of them can be true.”*³²

Regarding the methodology applied to empirical research, the hypotheses expressed in this article are based on autobiographical and/or semi-structured interviews, recorded according to the techniques common in oral history research. These techniques concord with the subsequent analysis and interpretation presented here. The role of the oral history method, and its connection with the issue of collective memory, is briefly mentioned by Dr. Jiří Hlaváček: *“The use of the oral history method in examining collective memory seems to be all the more appropriate in this case, because it is not primarily an accurate reconstruction of a historical event, but rather its reflection or presentation in the discourse of*

³⁰ ČERNÁ, Marie. Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation, p. 90.

³¹ ČERNÁ, Marie. Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation, p. 89.

³² ČERNÁ, Marie. Occupation, Friendly Assistance, Devastation, pp. 100-101.

*a given group or society. Thus, the focus of our interest is primarily narration, i.e. the story that is told, not the factual and historically relevant information contained in it.”*³³

Conclusion

And as we go back to the beginning of our discussion, focusing on narration rather than attempting to objectively define and explain the events of 1968 helps us to better grasp the difference in the way two distinct nations evaluate these same events. And we have enough reasons to suppose these differences were not based simply on state-sponsored ideology but a different collective memory. Could the revolutionary changes of 1989 (or 1991 in the case of the Soviet Union) also lead to changes in the evaluation of these historical events? My answer is in the negative, because I believe I’ve demonstrated that these political revolutions and the subsequent regime change did not modify at a deeper level the symbolic centres of national histories.

These symbolic centres lead to fundamental, even mutually exclusive interpretations on a number of events of the 20th century from different points of view, both Czech and Russian. And this dissonance is quite apparent when one tries to define the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the subsequent presence of Soviet troops on Czechoslovak territory for two decades, as an occupation. It becomes clear that the parties do not understand, and perhaps *cannot* even try to understand one another.

As the French historian Marc Ferro points out: *“In most cases, a story is interpreted from the point of view of those interpreting it, who live within it and nurture some kind of memory about it. Any desire to eradicate distortions and myths, and to establish a common agreement on describing the past remains illusory. (...) various interpretations, legends and conflicts will appear one way or another next to it. Nevertheless, identifying these distortions, myths, taboos, or even an erroneous understanding of the past remains a fundamental task for the historian. It is sometimes said that in pursuing good diplomatic relations with other nations in the future, it would be necessary ‘to nullify’ the past and allow some kind of clean slate for everyone. But despite the pragmatic virtue of such wishful thinking, it clearly cannot be done. And relations between nations are constantly changing and evolving...”*³⁴. These thoughts are consonant to those

³³ HLAVÁČEK, Jiří. Kolektivní paměť a orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin. *Časopis MEMO*, no. 2, 2012, pp.6-16. See p. 13.

³⁴ FERRO, Marc. *Comment on raconte l'Histoire aux enfants à travers le monde entier*. Paris : Payot, 2004. ISBN 9782228898676. // ФЕРРО, Марк. *Как рассказывают историю детям*

of his compatriot Georges Mink: “Many politicians invite us to build a great unifying narrative which would have Europe as its miraculous recipient... But rather than create a new myth, would it not be preferable to accept the plurality of historical recounts as they are, subjective as they are, together with the plurality of traumatic memories, and have them dialogue with one another?”³⁵ Thus, considering the events of the past as part of our common history, and understanding how recollecting and interpreting them differs according to the memory of various nations (as well as of smaller ethnic, social, religious, or gender groups), we might seize an opportunity to understand each other better and consolidate relations in the future. Of course, understanding is not always a step forward towards friendship, but it will surely always be a step away from enmity.³⁶

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³⁵ MINK, Georges. Between Reconciliation and the Reactivation of Past Conflicts in Europe: Rethinking Social Memory Paradigms. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2008, pp. 469–490, see p. 488.

³⁶ I would like to thank doc. PhDr. Pavel Mücke, Ph.D. for the fruitful discussion which helped me shape the ideas and structure of this article, as well as Christopher Montel, M.A., for his invaluable help and advice in finalizing its English version.

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