Commemorating War in Public Space: The Case of the Ostrava Battlefield[1]

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Introduction

The so-called Ostrava Offensive or Moravian-Ostrava Offensive, lasting from 10 March to 5 May 1945, was one of the hardest combat operations in the territory of the present Czech Republic. The course of military operations had been thoroughly studied and described elsewhere.[2] Significantly less scholarly attention has been paid, however, to the forms of commemoration and remembrance, as well as to the role of the dramatic war events for creating and maintaining local identity and collective memory in the heavily industrialised and ethnically mixed region of the Czech-Polish borderland, in the area of the historical provinces of Silesia and Northern Moravia.[3]

For the purposes of this paper, some forms of remembrance (such as historiography or both fiction and non-fiction books and films) are neglected.[4] My aim is to describe and analyse the commemorative practise in public space, represented mainly by war monuments and memorials, museum exhibitions and toponymical terms. These symbols are understood in the context of development of the political and demographic situation, propaganda, and collective identity in the examined region. For comparison and for understanding

[1] This study is a result of research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR P410 22–05263S "Transformation of Silesia 1945–1948".

[2] See Jaroslav Hrbek, ed., *Draze zaplacená svoboda: osvobození Československa 1944–1945. Vol. 2* [The High Cost of Freedom: The Liberation of Czechoslovakia 1944–1945] (Prague: Paseka, 2009); Ondřej Kolář, *Boj o Ostravsko 1945* [Battle of the Ostrava Region 1945] (Ostrava: Magistrát města Ostravy, 2021); Břetislav Tvarůžek, *Operační cíl Ostrava* [Target Ostrava] (Ostrava: Profil, 1973); Emil Vávrovský, *Svoboda šla Ostravskem: kronika osvobození* [Freedom Came to Ostrava: A Chronicle of Liberation] (Ostrava: Krajské nakladatelství, 1965).

[3] For further reading about ethnic structure and identities in Silesia, see Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia 1848–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Johana Musálková, "Silesian Identity: the Interplay of Memory, History and Borders" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2018); Timothy Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4] These aspects were briefly depicted by Ondřej Kolář, "Different Stories of One Battle: The Moravian-Ostrava Offensive in Historiography and Collective Memory," *Pogranicze Polish Borderlands Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 61–79.

the wider circumstances, I use both case studies on similar topics, as well as theoretical studies about war remembrance.[5] Although the main object of the research is the memory of the Ostrava Offensive, for understanding the context, it is necessary to briefly depict some of the broader aspects of war remembrance and collective identity in the region.

The Battle of Ostrava

In order to understand the subsequent forms of commemoration and narratives of the offensive, it is essential to briefly depict the course of the combat operations. Around 155 thousand troops were involved on the Soviet side, including the Czechoslovak tank crews and airmen. The offensive was originally carried out by two armies of the 4th Ukrainian Front. In later stages of the operation during April and May, the attacking forces were also supported by the 60th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front. Their opponents were some 250 thousand German and Hungarian soldiers of the Wehrmacht and SS, supported by Volkssturm and other irregular armed formations. During the first stage of the operation, the Axis forces were commanded by the legendary mastermind of defensive strategy Gotthard Heinrici. The German defence used parts of the pre-war Czechoslovak fortification line from the 1930s. The troops also often created heavily fortified strongholds in towns and villages, which led to many civilian victims and heavy damage in built-up areas.

One of the main goals of the offensive was to retain the German Amy Group 'Mitte' under the infamous Ferdinand Schörner in Czech territory and prevent this force from becoming involved in the defence of the German capital. The Soviet primary goal was to take Berlin as soon as possible and thus Moscow deployed most of its manpower and material to attain this objective.[6] As a result, the troops of the 4th Ukrainian front in the Ostrava region lacked the necessary superiority in manpower, fuel and weapons for a successful offensive. The attack was also supposed to relieve the Soviet units in Austria and Eastern Moravia from the pressure of the enemy and, if possible, conquer and preserve the industrial area and railway junction around Ostrava. The Soviet

[5] See Peter Donaldson, *Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014); Jay Winter, *Remembering War: the Great War between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6] Peter Antill, *Berlin 1945: End of the Thousand Year Reich* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005); Tomáš Jakl, *Květen 1945 v českých zemích: pozemní operace vojsk Osy a Spojenců* [May 1945 in the Czech Lands: Land Operations of Axis and Allied Forces] (Prague: Miroslav Bílý, 2004).

advance was then supposed to continue to the city of Olomouc to meet the troops, proceeding from Eastern Moravia.

On 10 March, two armies of the 4th Ukrainian Front attacked from the North-East in the Strumień area in nowadays Poland and tried to reach the Ostrava coal mining district through a flat area around Těšín and Karviná. The offensive soon stuck due to muddy terrain, lack of superiority in gunpower and Heinrici's well-prepared defence. The commander of the 4th Ukrainian Front, General Ivan Petrov, decided to join the 60th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front, which performed an effective offensive on the western flank of his 38th Army. At the end of March, the Soviets managed to cross the Odra River and advanced to the pre-war Czechoslovak-German border. Petrov's new plan was to take Ostrava by encirclement from the North-West. During this operation, Petrov was replaced by Andrei Jeremenko (Yeryomenko) at the end of March. The new commander continued in the efforts of his predecessor.

In mid-April, Jeremenko reached the pre-war Czechoslovak border and divided his forces into two groups. The first one was supposed to conquer heavily fortified Opava to prevent German troops in western Silesia from attacking the Soviet army proceeding eastwards to Ostrava. The second group advanced directly to Ostrava. Both groups of Jeremenko's forces experienced heavy fighting, including house-to-house combat in towns and villages. On 22 April, the Soviets pushed the remains of the German elite mountain division from Opava.[7] Ostrava was conquered during the last day of the month. At that moment, most of the Axis forces were already retreating to avoid enclosing. Over the following days, Jeremenko advanced through the mountainous terrain of Northern Moravia to take Olomouc. The goal was reached during the very last days of the war on the European continent. The final operations of the 4th Ukrainian Front in Olomouc area were part, however, of the Prague Offensive, while the Ostrava offensive was officially ended on 5 May.[8]

[7] František Švábenický, ed., *Troppau 1945: Opava* v *roce nula* [Troppau 1945: Opava in Year Zero] (Opava: Statutární město Opava, 2017).

[8] Jakl, *Květen 1945*; Ondřej Kolář, "K vnímání 'nepřítele' a 'osvoboditele' v bojích jara 1945 v paměti českého obyvatelstva Slezska a Ostravska" [On the Reception of "the Enemy" and "the Liberator" in the Memory of Civilians in Silesia and Ostrava], *Historica: Revue pro historii a příbuzné vědy* 8, no. 2 (2017): 183–96.

Phases of Commemoration

Throughout the offensive, most of the fighting took place on the territory of what is now Poland. Despite this fact, the combat operations of 1945 were never viewed as an important topic in regional Polish historiography and identity, as it has been in the Czech case. The area of fighting in today's Poland lied alongside the pre-war Polish-German border and the Western part of the territory was mainly German-inhabited. After the forced displacement of the vast majority of the German population, the region was repopulated by new settlers who came predominantly from nowadays Ukraine. The new-settlers did not directly witness the Ostrava Offensive and consequently it did not become part of their family or regional memory. The events of 1945 were seen just as a prelude to the 'Polonisation' of the territory or as a significant step on the 'path to socialism'. For the memory and identity of the Eastern part of the region, which was inhabited mainly by the Polish population during the war, the previous experience of Nazi terror and anti-Nazi resistance during the era of the occupation became more significant than the events of 1945.[9]

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Polish historians as well as most of the public denied the concept of 'liberation' by the Red Army (which is in contrast still influential in the Czech milieu) and often stressed the negative impacts of the Soviet presence in the region (mainly the cases of mass rape, political and ethnic purges, deportations of the local population to Siberia, Soviet support for the newly established Communist regime, etc.). For the Polish minority in the eastern part of Czech Silesia, which was not significantly affected by the Ostrava Offensive, the memory of home resistance during the Nazi occupation became more important.[10]

The remembrance of the last weeks of the war became crucial, however, for the Czechs. Even before the fighting was over, the very first memorials were erected. Unlike the commemoration of the Great War in the examined region,[11] the commemorative practise after 1945 was not based primarily on

[9] Kazimierz Popiołek, *Silesia in German Eyes 1939–1945* (Katowice: Śląsk, 1964).

[10] Mečislav Borák, *Na příkaz gestapa: nacistické válečné zločiny na Těšínsku* [By Order of the Gestapo: Nazi War Crimes in the Těšín region] (Ostrava: Profil, 1990); Fanciszek Hawranek, ed., *Wypisy do Dziejów Raciborskiego* [Notes on the History of Ratibor] (Opole: Instytut Śląski w Opolu, 1975); Kazimierz Popiołek, *Polskie dzieje Śląska* [The Polish History of Silesia] (Opole: Instytut Śląski w Opolu, 1986).

[11] Ondřej Kolář, "K typologii, symbolice a identitotvorné roli pomníků a památníků obětí první světové války v českém Slezsku 1918–1938" [On the Typology, Symbolism and Identity-making Role of War Memorials in Czech Silesia 1918–1938], *Marginalia Historica:* Časopis *pro dějiny vzdělanosti a kultury* 9, no. 2 (2018): 53–74.

remembering 'own' victims. Locals, murdered in Nazi camps or killed during air raids, were not of course supposed to be forgotten, but the crucial aim of the commemorative effort was to celebrate and immortalise the Allied and Soviet soldiers, the 'liberators, who died for our country'. While the names of civilian victims (including locals murdered during the Holocaust) were often simply 'added' onto the lists of fallen compatriots on communal Great War memorials or commemorated by simple plaques, local and regional officials through all the political parties worked to create highly presentable monuments dedicated to Soviet soldiers. In Opava, a statue of a Soviet soldier was erected already in 1945, financed by the district administration.[12] During the 1940s and early 1950s, notable sculptors were often involved, such as Vincenc Havel, the author of the sculptural group of 'liberators' in the provincial town of Bílovec, erected in 1952.

Another significant difference between the forms of remembrance of the two world wars can be seen – while local communities were crucial for the commemorative practise after the Great War, after 1945 the remembrance in the public space was 'monopolized' by official bodies, mainly district and regional administration and Communist party organisations, as well as organisations of ex-servicemen. Grass-root memorials erected by individuals or through public collections became very rare. Compared to the remembrance of the previous Great War, the victims of 1945 were often anonymous. Apart from a few distinguished heroes, the Red Army was most often remembered as a 'collective entity', partly due to lack of information about the thousands of individual soldiers, partly due to the collectivist narrative of Communist propaganda.

In general, the commemorative practise can be divided into several phases. The first one started already in the last weeks of the war and the practise did not significantly change after the Communist putsch in February 1948. An important transformation, however, came in the late 1950s. This initial stage of Ostrava Offensive's commemoration symbolically ended with the new Czechoslovak 'socialist' Constitution of 1960, which provoked more liberal policies in society. The first phase was characterised by spontaneity and some level of improvisation, but mainly by uncritical lionization of the Soviet soldiers. It also stressed the symbolical continuity of 'liberation' and the following era of 'building a socialist country', as well as the idea of 'Slavic mutuality'. During the first years, attempts were made by local administrations to commemorate concrete Soviet soldiers, although the majority of memorials and

[12] Státní okresní archiv Opava [State District Archives in Opava], Okresní národní výbor Opava-venkov [District National Comittee Opava], cart. 244.

monuments remained anonymous, dedicated simply to 'liberators', 'heroes' or 'Slavic brothers'.

In the 1960s, the second phase of commemoration of the Offensive emerged. At the time, the impact of partial liberation and 'westernization' became evident in Czechoslovakia. Another significant factor was the 'generation gap'. The traditional narrative of Slavic and German antagonism and 'liberation from Nazism as the first step on the path to socialism' was not sufficient any longer for young people, who did not themselves experience the war and the enthusiasm of the first post-war years. Although the previous narrative was not entirely disclaimed, it was heavily scrutinised, especially face to face debates about the collaboration or cowardice of a part of the Czechoslovak population, as well as mistakes or excesses by Soviet soldiers. Such debates did not directly influence the commemoration through memorials, monuments, and wrath-lying ceremonies, but the reflection in historiography, media, films and mainly books of fiction[13] significantly changed the way the general public was *thinking* about the war.[14] Although the commemorative practise did not modify its ideas or ideologies, it adopted new visual forms and technologies, including modern art styles.

The occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 commenced another, neo-Stalinist, phase of commemoration, although using modern means of museum presentation. During this third phase, the authorities attempted to revive the concept of the 1950s and eliminate any debates about controversies of 1945. This 'conservation of memory' lasted until the fall of the regime in 1989.

The fourth, post-communist phase, did not lead to denial of the narrative of 'liberation' and the role of the Red Army in defeating Nazism remained appreciated. The decentralization of public life after the fall of Communism enabled, however, a great number of institutions, groups, and individuals to become involved in the commemorative practise. The 'non-Soviet' war experience of Czechoslovak and German soldiers and civilians began to attract more attention.

During the last decade, a tendency to reject the concept of 'liberation' became prominent within part of Czech society, describing the Soviet presence in Czechoslovakia in 1945 as 'an occupation'. This idea has been mainly motivated

[13] Mainly semi-autobiographic novels *Zbabělci* [Cowards] by Josef Škvorecký and *Smrt si říká Engelchen* [Death is Called Engelchen] by Ladislav Mňačko became extremely influential.

[14] See Jan Randák and Petr Koura, eds., *Hrdinství a zbabělost v české politické kultuře 19. a 20. století* [Heroism and Cowardice in Czech Political Culture of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries] (Prague: Dokořán, 2008).

by current relations with Russia, rather than by historical research.[15] At the moment it is hard to say whether this is the beginning of a next phase of commemoration. Despite, however, the nation-wide debates of the last years, the overwhelming viewpoint of the Ostrava population seems to be unchanged. Thus, the importance of the war memory for local identity has proved to be stronger than in many other Czech regions, which did not experience such heavy fighting in 1945.

In recent years, commemorative activities have been restrained due to anti-pandemic measures in 2020 and 2021 and due to the spontaneous reaction to the war in Ukraine in 2022. It is too early, however, to comprehensively analyse the potential impact of this recent development.

Tombstones and Memorials

The tombs and memorials of dead soldiers are naturally the most 'visible' means of commemoration. The first monuments appeared in the area of the hardest fighting between Opava and Ostrava. A significant part of this territory lied in the Hlučín district, inhabited mainly by a Czech speaking population, but with traditionally strong pro-German sentiments. The region was part of Prussia and Germany in 1742–1920 and 1938–1945, therefore local men served in the Axis armed forces during World War II.[16] Unlike in surrounding Czech areas, the official narrative of 'liberation' was seen as controversial in the Hlučín district, although it could not be openly questioned in the early post-war years.

Immediately after the fighting was over, fallen soldiers and civilians had to be buried. While the German tombs usually lacked any inscriptions, provisional wooden memorials were built for the dead Soviets by the Red Army or by locals. The first burial places were often in front of town halls or other public buildings. Unlike the victims of the Great War a generation ago, the Soviets were usually not buried in local Catholic cemeteries, partly due to the disapproval of burying Orthodox and Muslim soldiers within an overwhelm-

[15] Jakub Huška, "Anketa revue KROK: První a druhá světová válka – proměny a konstanty historické paměti" [Revue KROK Survey: The First and Second World War – Changes and Invariables of Historical Memory], *Krok: Kulturní revue Olomouckého kraje* 12, no. 2 (2015): 3–6.

[16] Nina Pavelčíková, "Postoje obyvatel Hlučínska v letech politických zvratů (1930–1945)" [Attitudes of Hlučín Region Inhabitants in an Era of Political Twists, 1930–1945], *Slezský sborník* 88, no. 4 (1990): 280–95; Vilém Plaček, *Prajzáci aneb k osudům Hlučínska 1742–1960* [Prussians or on the Fate of the Hlučín Region 1742–1960] (Háj ve Slezsku: František Maj, 2007).

ingly Catholic population, partly as a symptom of continuing secularisation of the war remembrance.[17]

In 1946, central cemeteries of Soviet soldiers were founded in Opava, Ostrava and Hlučín due to the efforts of the Moravian-Silesian National Committee.[18] In Ostrava, the urns of Czech and Soviet victims were buried together in a mausoleum to highlight 'Slavic mutuality'. The memorial in Opava cemetery deserves attention due to the inscription, celebrating the role of the Red Army as a 'liberator of Slavic nations'. The nationalist rhetoric, neglecting the international character of Communist ideology and multiethnicity of the Red Army, was typical for Czechoslovak Communist propaganda at the time. The symbolic importance of this aspect also needs to be understood in the context of post-war 'czechisation' of overwhelmingly German-populated Opava.[19]

A specific form of commemoration occurred soon after the war, when wrecks of military vehicles began to be used as provisional memorials. Damaged and abandoned tanks or guns served as a symbol of the heroism of Czechoslovak and Soviet troops. The most significant case appeared in Ostrava, where a vehicle of the Czechoslovak Tank Brigade was spontaneously placed in front of the town hall. Later, at the end of the 1950s and afterwards till the mid-1970s, this form of commemorative practise re-appeared and military vehicles and airplanes became an integral part of some monuments, such as the memorial of airmen in Ostrava or monuments of tank crews in the villages of Sudice and Smolkov. While in 1945, this practise was seen as only a provisional measure before dignified memorials could be erected, during the second phase this form of commemoration was motivated by the effort to make war remembrance more attractive visually for young generation. Displayed vehicles or airplanes, often constructed after the war, were supposed to symbolise the continuity of wartime and post-war Czechoslovak armed forces and encourage young men to become soldiers in the socialist army.

An extraordinary case could be witnessed in the Hlučín region, where several cemeteries of fallen German soldiers were constructed already in 1945 by locals, who shared the 'German' experience of the war. Naturally, state authorities tried to suppress such tendencies. Over the following decades, commemorative plaques of local 'German' war victims were placed in several

[17] See Kolář, "K typologii".

[18] Zemský archiv v Opavě [Provincial Archive in Opava], Moravskoslezský Zemský národní výbor – expozitura v Ostravě [Moravian-Silesian National Committee – Branch Ostrava], cart. 744, sign. 693.

[19] Ondřej Kolář, ed., *Slezsko znovuzrozené: k 70. výročí návštěvy prezidenta ČSR dr. Edvarda Beneše v Hrabyni* [Silesia Reborn: On the 70th Anniversary of the Visit of the Czechoslovak President Dr. Edvard Beneš in Hrabyně] (Hrabyně: Obec Hrabyně, 2016); Švábenický, *Troppau*.

churches. Since the buildings were owned by the Catholic Church, officials and police could not remove or destroy such sites of memory. The special case of 'German' commemorative practise in early post-war Hlučín area was the burial of Adolf Theuer in April 1947.[20] A former SS guard from the Auschwitz concentration camp, Theuer was convicted and executed as a war criminal and his family decided to bury him in his native village of Bolatice. The ceremony was interrupted by police officers, who took the body and buried it in an unmarked tomb in Opava. Although the planned burial in Bolatice did not take place, the readiness of locals (including clergymen) to attend the ceremony demonstrated that Theuer's wartime service was not seen as a controversy in his birthplace. Although the burial itself could not be understood as an act of war remembrance, it illustrated the widespread viewpoint of Hlučín region inhabitants, opposing the 'official' narrative.

During the 1950s and mainly the 1960s many simple war memorials in towns and villages were built by local administrations or local branches of the Communist party. Only in larger towns and cities, usually centres of administrative districts, more elaborate sculptures appeared, often depicting Soviet soldiers, sometimes together with civilians celebrating the liberation, symbolizing 'Slavic friendship'.

Many more monuments and memorials were erected during the celebrations of anniversaries of liberation in 1970, 1975 and 1980, which most often materialised in a very simple form without any sophisticated symbolism. During the first two post-war decades, memorials were erected mostly in Ostrava, Opava and the Hlučín regions; in areas, where the people inflicted by the events of 1945 still lived. In the case of the Hlučín territory, the war monuments were also projected as a symbol of the Czech character of the former part of Prussia.[21] In this area, one can witness a unique case in the nation-wide context of commemorative practise. Several memorials in the region, usually dated to the 1960s, are lacking Czech inscriptions, the whole text is in Russian. This was in all probability decided by the district administration and intended as a symbol of 'the superiority' of the ruling regime over the local population with a 'different' experience and a 'German' identity.

Another new aspect of the 1960s was a shift of interest from an anonymous mass of heroic soldiers to individual personalities. This tendency can be best illustrated by the case of Miloš Sýkora, a young Communist resistance

[20] Ondřej Kolář and Hana Dostálová, "Obyvatelé Hlučínska před Mimořádným lidovým soudem v Opavě 1945–1948" [Inhabitants of the Hlučín Region Prosecuted by the Extraordinary People's Court in Opava 1945–1948], *Historica Olomucensia* 52 (2017): 163–88.

[21] Plaček, *Prajzáci*.

fighter, killed on the 30 April 1945. Soon after the war, Sýkora was labelled as the probable saviour of a bridge in the centre of Ostrava, which without him would had been blown up by the Germans. Despite some doubts about his role,[22] Sýkora belonged to the most popular and important symbols of the liberation of Ostrava. In 1965, a statue of Sýkora, created by a respected sculptor Konrád Babraj, was erected at the place of his death. The statue was obviously inspired by works by the British artist Henry Moore and it is significant for depicting Sýkora not in a heroic pose but lying wounded on the ground. The adoption of a modern Western art style was typical for the decade, but was not destined to last for long.

Together with Sýkora, the fallen Czechoslovak soldier Jan Kubinec belonged to significant symbols. While Sýkora personalised the home resistance, Kubinec belonged to the most celebrated heroes of the Czechoslovak army in the Ostrava Offensive. Unlike Sýkora, however, Kubinec was worshipped not due to a heroic deed, but due to a martyr death (allegedly captured and tortured by German soldiers in Štítina). His grave in Štítina served as an important site of memory for decades. The cult of Kubinec was partly misused by the Communist regime to suppress the popularity of General Heliodor Píka, who was born in Štítina and executed by the Communists in 1949.[23]

Later during the 1970s and 1980s, new memorials also came about in former German villages of the former battlefield of the Ostrava Offensive (mainly in the North-Western part of the Opava region and in the Nový Jičín district). Sometimes older Great War memorials were adapted for the purpose or just simple commemorative plaques were created. This common practice indicates quite the low level of need for these memory sites amongst the local population (consisting mainly of new settlers, who came after 1945), unlike in the territories closer to Ostrava, where the war experience played a significant role in the shared memory. Those later erected sculptures and plaques usually did not appear as a response to actual social demand, but rather served as a means of ongoing 'normalisation' after 1968 and a means of redefining Soviet ideology in 1970s, when the traditional narrative of 'progress to socialism' proved to be untenable and was gradually replaced by a historical narrative, stressing the 'previous victories' of the Soviet Union.[24]

[22] Pavel Hamza, "30. duben 1945 u Říšského mostu v centru Ostravy aneb Opravdu Miloš Sýkora?" [30 April 1945 at the Imperial Bridge in Ostrava or Actually Miloš Sýkora?], *Ostrava: příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska* 22 (2005): 250–71.

[23] Zdeněk Vališ, *Divizní generál Heliodor Píka* [Division General Heliodor Píka] (Prague: Vojenský historický archiv, 1991).

[24] Timothy Snyder, *Cesta k nesvobodě* [The Road to Unfreedom], trans. Martin Pokorný (Prague: Paseka – Prostor, 2019).

Most of the memorials were funded by municipalities or associations of veterans. Nevertheless, a significant exception deserves to be mentioned. In the late 1960s, the North Moravian Regional Council of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia decided to create a central memorial of the Ostrava Offensive. The village of Hrabyně was chosen as a site of memory. There were several reasons for this decision. The village was an important, but not the only, symbol of the combat operations of 1945. Its location on a hill half-way between Opava and Ostrava, with a good view of the Hlučín region, made Hrabyně universal, a 'shared', and accessible symbol. The location did not favour or neglect any part of the 'wider Ostrava region', as the territory was informally called.

Hrabyně was also a significant site of another, non-communist, memory that was supposed to be destroyed and replaced. The local pilgrimage church built by the legendary Czech patriotic priest of the nineteenth Century Jan Böhm, as well as the hill of Ostrá Hůrka a few kilometres from Hrabyně, were iconic places of Czech struggle for ethnic and cultural self-determination during the Habsburg and interwar periods.[25] In 1969, a commemorative meeting at Ostrá Hůrka turned into a massive protest demonstration against the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies that took place a year before. Regional Communist authorities hoped to undermine the symbolic role of the place by constructing a new site of memory, which presented and celebrated Czech-Soviet cooperation against both fascism and 'imperialism'.[26] The authors of the concept also followed other aims in a wider national context. The regional Communist leader Miroslav Mamula wanted to stress the importance of the Ostrava Offensive and put in on the same level in the remembrance practise as the military operations in Dukla Pass in 1944, which were celebrated as an official feastholiday of the Czechoslovak Army.

The realisation of the project in Hrabyně slowed down due to a series of administrative and technical problems. Finally, the memorial was opened for public in April 1980, 35 years after the liberation of Ostrava. The concrete building, called Ostrava Offensive Memorial (*Památník ostravské operace*), consisted of two parts, symbolising the two allied armies (Soviet and Czechoslovak). To make the message even more obvious, a sculptural group of a Czech and Soviet soldier was erected in front of the building. The memorial was used for temporary exhibitions, as well as ceremonial oaths of soldiers

[25] Jáchym Blechta, *Ostrá hůrka: zpěv slezské svobody* [Ostrá hůrka: Song of Silesian Freedom] (Hrabyně, 1933); Petr Jordán, ed., *Hrabyně* (Hrabyně: Obec Hrabyně, 2007).

[26] Petr Berger and Alfons Březina, *Památník Ostravské operace* [Ostrava Offensive Memorial] (Ostrava: Profil, 1985); Slezské zemské muzeum, Opava [Silesian Museum, Opava], Novodobé dějiny [Contemporary History], sign. IV B 670–673.

and 'Pioneers' (a Communist youth organisation inspired by the Boy Scouts) or meetings of war veterans. A symbolic cemetery of war victims from the region was also part of the area.

The impact of the Hrabyně memorial on collective memory could be described as partly contra-productive. Locals were forced to make contributions to the construction of the monument or to participate as 'volunteer' workers during weekends. This was why the building soon became quite unpopular with the regional population, commonly nicknamed CUC, standing for *"Cypovina u cesty"* (*"Nonsense by the Roadway"*). The unique architecture of the place, symbolising the unity of the Czechoslovak and Soviet armies, was highly prized, however, by architects. The younger generation of visitors, in particular, also appreciated another remarkable aspect of the memorial – a cinema hall, where a short documentary about Ostrava during WWII was projected on a special three-dimensional screen.[27]

Although the fall of Communism in 1989 opened the debate about formerly tabooed topics, such as the role of the non-communist anti-Nazi resistance and the fate of Czechoslovak citizens from Hlučín and other regions serving in the German forces, the commemorative practise did not change distinctively. Most of the memorials and street names were preserved with several exceptions. The memorial of airmen in Ostrava from 1960 was removed as a 'symbol of Communism' in the euphoric era of the early 1990s. Some memorial plaques in urban areas were destroyed by metal thieves. Very few new monuments appeared, some of them dedicated to fallen soldiers, whose stories were newly documented by researchers. The rise of interest in Holocaust victims can be also witnessed after 1989.

The post-communist era also re-opened the question of war victims on the Axis side. A cemetery of German soldiers in Opava came about through reconstruction. Many skeletal remains were transferred to the central cemetery in Cheb, Western Bohemia, operated by the German association Volksbundes Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge (National Union for Care of Military Graves). Some municipalities of the Hlučín region refused, however, to allow the relocation of bodies. This fact documents the lasting pro-German sentiment and the role of the 'German' war experience in the territory.[28]

The most important post-1989 change, in all probability, was the 'revival' of a traditional site of memory at Ostrá Hůrka. The hill had become a well-

[27] The remarks on reception of the memorial were collected from my interviews with visitors of the sight during my working experience as a guide and custodian in Hrabyně in 2012–2015.

[28] Anežka Brožová, "Pomníky padlým na Hlučínsku" [War Memorials in the Hlučín Region,] in *Hlučínsko 1920–2020*, ed. Jiří Neminář (Hlučín: Muzeum Hlučínska, 2020), 106–15.

known meeting place of Czech patriots already in the nineteenth century. In 1929, a sculpture was erected here to commemorate the self-determination of the Czechs after the Great War. This original monument did not survive the Nazi occupation and the post-war attempts to renew it were stopped by the new Communist regime. In the 1960s, a simple column dedicated to "the Czech people of Silesia" replaced the old monument. After 1989, a memorial plaque was added, commemorating the leaders of the local home resistance, executed by the Nazis in April 1943. Although the site of memory at Ostrá Hůrka was not directly associated to the Ostrava Offensive, the commemorative ceremonies in April were usually connected to wreath-lying in nearby Hrabyně, so the victims of the home resistance and the fallen 'liberators' of 1945 were remembered and celebrated together, as integral symbols of the 'shared' narrative of anti-Nazi struggle and liberation.

Local Names

Another form of commemoration was the usage of local names. This included particular personalities, as well as more abstract names. Naming a street or square was usually based on a decision of a local or district administration, while other institutions and associations had very little chance to influence the procedure.

General Petrov, despite his undisputable credit in planning the offensive, was almost forgotten; at least he was not formally commemorated. His successor Jeremenko became, however, an important symbol for the local collective memory and identity. A street and a coal mine in Ostrava were named after him. The mine name was changed to "Marshal Jeremenko" in 1970, during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Ostrava. The old Marshal himself took part in the celebration.

The case of Jeremenko street in Ostrava was quite peculiar. This not particularly important street in the centre of the industrial Vítkovice district seemed too 'ordinary' to bear the name of an iconic war hero. It also had no significant wartime history, which could be associated with the 'Liberator of Ostrava'. Before the war, the street bore the name of Jerome of Prague (Jeroným in Czech), the fifteenth century religious reformer.[29] While the street names that related to German history and traditions were often changed in the post-war years, there was no obvious reason for removing Jeroným, whose legacy was still relatively respected by the Czech population, from the public space.

[29] František Šmahel, *Jeroným Pražský* [Hieronymus of Prague] (Prague: Svobodné slovo, 1966).

One of motives for renaming the street might have been related to the effort to weaken the traditional 'German' character of Vítkovice district. (Before 1945, a strong German minority lived in the area and local architecture was also significantly influenced by the German style).[30] Even the resemblance of the names Jeroným and Jeremenko may have played some role. Another reason lies in the proximity of Jeremenko street and Ruská ('Russian') street (former Hermann Göring street), which was significant due to the symbolism of the 'Slavic' name itself, but also as one of the access routes, used by Soviet and Czechoslovak troops to invade the centre of Ostrava in April 1945. Later in 1960, a small group of workers' houses close to Jeremenko Coal Mine was also named after the Marshal.

Several attempts were later made to remove the name of Andrei Jeremenko. In 1968, the local administration considered naming 'his' street in Vítkovice after the Communist reformist Čestmír Císař.[31] In the early 1990s, names such as "Church Street" or "Market Street" were suggested by several city councillors, inspired by the surrounding localities. Despite the above-mentioned initiatives, Jeremenko's name remained.

Other streets bore the names of Czechoslovak soldiers killed during combat operations. While Josef Gregor, shot dead by a German sniper, was commemorated already in 1945, his comrade Ivan Ahepjuk gained his 'own' street as late as 1970. The difference seems surprising because Ahepjuk and Gregor were the only two members of the Czechoslovak exile army killed in the city of Ostrava itself.

This differing commemorative practise in both cases might be partly explained by some uncertainty about the circumstances of Ahepjuk's death and the fact that Ahepjuk was 'only' a driver compared to Gregor as a non-commissioned officer and a distinguished tank commander with four confirmed 'kills' of enemy vehicles. The primary reason was, however, in all probability related to the dissimilar approach of Czechoslovak politics and propaganda to two categories of (ex-)servicemen soon after the war. Gregor belonged to Czechs from Volhynia in current-day Ukraine. The Czech community settled in the region during the nineteenth century and kept their language and traditions. Many Volhynian Czechs served in the Czechoslovak exile army during the war. When Czechoslovakia was renewed in 1945, many Volhynian Czechs were

[30] Karel Jiřík, "Vítkovice – nejvíce germanizovaná obec v Předlitavsku" [Vítkovice – The Most Germanised Village in Cisleithania], *Ostrava: příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska* 21 (2003): 162–96.

[31] Čestmír Císař, *Paměti: nejen o zákulisí Pražského jara* [Memoirs: Not Just About the Background of the Prague Spring] (Prague: SinCon, 2005).

welcomed to settle in the borderland in order to replace the expelled Germans. Propaganda depicted 'Volhynians' as patriots, who distinguished themselves in the combat against Nazism and who 'came back to their homeland to build up a new socialist country'. (In fact, for many Czechs the real motivation for remigration from Volynhia was the endeavour to escape Soviet oppression). The name Gregor, as a Volynhian Czech and meritorious soldier, represented a perfect hero for the official ideology of the first post-war years.

Ahepjuk was, in contrast, probably not viewed as a 'suitable' subject of commemoration for the authorities because of his Carpathian Ruthenian origin. After Stalin annexed the territory in 1945, Czechoslovak officials kept trying to preserve a good relationship with Moscow, thus the fate of Ruthenians, including distinguished anti-Nazi fighters, became a taboo subject.[32] In 1970, when the old ties between most of Czechoslovak society and Carpathian Ruthenia were already broken, there were no obstacles to naming a street after Ahepjuk. In the context of post-1968 'normalisation', a Czechoslovak soldier, born in 'Soviet' territory looked like a convenient symbol of declared 'Slavic friendship' between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Together with the visit of Marshal Jeremenko to Ostrava and laying the cornerstone of the Ostrava Offensive Memorial in Hrabyně the naming of a street after Ahepjuk accompanied the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the liberation. Simultaneously, the commemoration of a 'common' Czechoslovak soldier could serve as a counterbalance to the lionization of the anonymous 'Soviet army' and its commanders, which was supposed 'to humanize' the remembrance of the war.

War-related street names also appeared in other towns and villages of the examined regions, but usually in very impersonal and collective forms. The places were dedicated to 'the Red Army', 'Liberators', 'the Resistance' or 'Freedom'. These names were often used to replace old 'German' or 'Anti-socialist' toponymic terms, such as the names of pre-war politicians, or to name newly built streets in industrial towns of the Ostrava coal-mining district.

The "Red Army Streets" in many towns and villages were characterised by a linguistic oddity which had to be explained. After the Communist putsch of 1948, the wartime Red Army was often referred to as the 'Soviet Army' with a 'capital S', which, in Czech, suggested the term as an official name. In fact, the term 'Soviet Army' was formally introduced in 1946 to replace the official title of Red Army, thus relating it to the war events was ahistorical. Nevertheless, the ruling regime preferred the new name 'Soviet Army' to strengthen the rhetoric of Czech-Soviet friendship and emphasise the gratefulness for libera-

[32] Bohdan Zilynskyj, *Ukrajinci v* českých *zemích v letech 1945–1948* [Ukrainians in the Czech Lands 1945–1948] (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2000).

tion to the Soviet Union. This rhetoric was typical mainly for street names and war memorials, erected in the 1970s. Occasionally the name Red Army was used for streets and squares in untranslated Russian form ('Krasnoarmějců' instead of 'Rudoarmějců') to emphasise 'Slavic mutuality'.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many places were named or re-named after the Czechoslovak General Ludvík Svoboda, the wartime military commander and Defence Minister. Although Svoboda was not personally involved in the fighting in the Ostrava region, he was highly respected by both ex-servicemen and the public and he occasionally attended commemorative acts in Ostrava. The cult of Svoboda (whose name meant 'Liberty' in Czech) appeared soon after the war. In the case of Ostrava, the cult was underlined by the General's repeated visits in the region in 1945–1948.[33] In the 1950s, the war hero was removed from public life and even imprisoned. Over the following decade, Svoboda experienced a fascinating comeback, which led to his success in the presidential election in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Although the ageing President was continuously losing real power in favour of the conservative wing of 'normalisators' in the Communist party, his reputation prevented his adversaries from any direct action against him. Even if some post-1989 historians questioned Svoboda's merits and moral integrity,34 no measures were ever taken to remove his name from the public space by post-communist authorities. In Ostrava and many other towns and villages, we can still find many streets and squares named after Svoboda.

The role of the home resistance in the Ostrava Offensive was neglected for a long time. As late as 1980, a street in Ostrava was given a name Josef Brabec, a worker killed when trying to prevent the Germans from blowing up a railway bridge. Up until the present, the mausoleum in Ostrava, where Soviet and Czech combatants are buried together, is referred to as "the Red Army Memorial" in official documents and tourist guides.

Quite surprisingly, local names related to the Ostrava Offensive did not become common outside the city of Ostrava. In the surrounding towns and villages, the names of Czechoslovak and Soviet commanders and war heroes were not widespread. Paradoxically, names inspired by other wartime military operations of the Czechoslovak army, such as the battles of Dukla and Jasło occurred more often. In some villages, streets bore names after the days of the liberation of the place, such as "Street of 27 April" in Háj ve Slezsku or "Street of 30 April" in Ostrava.

[33] Lukáš Bártl et al., *Viktor Kolář st. 1898–1971* (Brno: Books and Pipes, 2022), 35, 64–65.

[34] Jan Irving et al., "Československí vojáci a konec války 1945" [Czechoslovak Soldiers and the End of the War 1945], *Historie a vojenství* 44, no. 2 (1995): 118–48.

Remarkably, the names of 'newly discovered' non-communist war heroes after 1989 were used to name streets and squares only in a few cases, usually not connected to the battle of Ostrava. This fact can be partly explained by the declining interest of society due to increasing intervals from the war events, partly by social demand to also commemorate the heroes and veterans from other battlefields, previously neglected by Communist historiography and propaganda, although many of those people had no pre-war and wartime connection to the region. A significant example was naming a school in Ostrava after the former Royal Air Force fighter pilot Zdeněk Škarvada in 2013. The remembrance of the Ostrava Offensive was therefore partly replaced by the remembrance of the Czechoslovak anti-Nazi resistance.

Museums and Exhibitions

In the first post-war decade, museums in the Ostrava region (and all Czechoslovakia) went through many significant changes. At first, custodians and other staff had to deal with the destruction, vandalism, and cases of robbery, caused by the turbulent political and military situation. Even before things could be consolidated, a series of structural reforms begun in order to centralise the network of museums after the Communist putsch in 1948. This complicated period ended with new legislation in the late 1950s.[35] Unlike in the interwar era, the new 'Communist' museums were supposed to pay much more attention to contemporary history. Thus, the documentation of war events was strongly supported.

In 1963, the Museum of Revolutionary Combats (Muzeum revolučních bojů, MRB) was founded in Ostrava as a detached part of the Silesian Museum in Opava.[36] It followed the effort of the Documentary Commission of the Communist Party Regional Council, which had collected testimonies about 'the revolutionary traditions' of the region since the 1950s. The employees of MRB carried out hundreds of interviews with veterans of home resistance and the exile army, often held as group sessions. The museum also collected militaria, written and printed documents and photographs. In 1980, the museum was transformed into an independent body under the new name Museum of Revolutionary Combats and Liberation (Muzeum revolučních bojů

[35] Pavel Šopák, *Město muzeí: Opava 1814–1989* [City of Museums: Opava 1814–1989] (Opava: Slezské zemské muzeum, 2016).

[36] Alfons Březina, *Muzeum ostravské operace Kravaře* [Museum of the Ostrava Offensive in Kravaře] (Ostrava: Profil, 1976).

a osvobození, MRBO). The museum ran a long-term exhibition dedicated to the Ostrava Offensive in the château in Kravaře and organised smaller short-term exhibitions in Ostrava and Hrabyně. The main problem of MRB/MRBO was a lack of systematic usage of collected materials, which served mainly for temporary exhibitions and were not utilised for systematic research.

Despite the general easing in Czechoslovak society during the 1960s, the second Berlin Crisis and the threat of a nuclear war led to the renewal of escalated anti-German rhetoric, based on the concept of so-called 'German revanchism'. The official propaganda argued that Western Germany was *de facto* ruled by former Nazis seeking revenge. The idea of revanchism did not find expression in commemorative ceremonies, which were already well-established and ritualised, but it became an important topic for museums. MRB intensively collected – and subsequently presented to the public – hundreds of photographs and documents, related to meetings and other activities of German war veterans and expelled Czechoslovak Germans in Western Germany, which were supposed 'prove' the conspiracy of ex-Nazis plotting against socialist countries.[37] This propagandistic effort even included a fabricated story about *Operation Teutonic Sword* (*Unternehmen Teutonenschwert*), suggesting that the assassination of the French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou and the Yugoslav King Alexander in 1934 was orchestrated by German intelligence. The intention was to blame Hans Speidel, then dispatched in Paris and later Supreme Commander of NATO in 1957–1963, for the attack. The efforts of MRBO were therefore focused mainly on 'anti-Western' propaganda, than on regional research and museum presentation of local history. Over the following decades, the propagandistic role of MRB partly weakened. The museum adopted a more professional approach and focused mainly on the history of Czech Silesia and Northern Moravia in the twentieth century.

I have already mentioned the usage of military equipment as parts of memorials. In the 1970s and 1980s, discarded military vehicles and planes also began to be used for open-air exhibitions. The first initiatives were carried out by enthusiasts, who sought for support of institutions. MRB recognised the educational and promotional potential of the idea and co-funded several such events. The co-operation of local enthusiasts and an official museum institution also led to attempts to make some fortification objects accessible to public. The 1930s Czechoslovak fortification line naturally attracted the attention of military history enthusiasts, but the exploration and utilisation of the bunkers was strictly limited for several reasons. Most of the pillboxes

[37] Heinz Sander, *Přesídlenecký revanšismus v západním Německu* [Revanchism of Displaced Persons in Western Germany] (Prague: Svoboda, 1972).

and forts, although unused, were still owned by the army, which still considered plans to use them in case of war.[38] From the ideological viewpoint, the fortifications were associated with the memory of the 'bourgeois' interwar Czechoslovak regime. People who were interested in the bunkers were therefore seen as potential 'enemies of the working class'. Moreover, many of the first amateur researchers focusing on the fortification line in the 1960s and 1970s were members of the so-called 'tramping' movement – an informal group of young people dedicated to the outdoors and inspired by the American Wild West. Their interest in pre-war Czechoslovak army could be partly explained as a form of 'mental resistance' against the communist regime.

Later during the 1980s, research and commemoration related to the 1930s army became tolerated by the ruling Communist party due to increasing social demand caused by the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Munich agreement, as well as the idea of 'Perestroika', declared by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Due to these circumstances, several objects of the fortification line were adopted for museum purposes near Hlučín, thanks to the complicated alliance of MRB (as an official pro-regime body) and local enthusiasts, including former interwar Czechoslovak army officers, such as the engineer and architect Jindřich Czeniek, who was also the author of several war memorials.[39] People like Czeniek and the journalist Jan Polášek acted as mediators between MRB and the young generation of 'tramps', some of whom became involved in the project. The new fortification museum, which opened in 1984, was supposed to remember not just the era of the 1930s, but also the role of the fortifications during combat operations in 1945.

Speaking about the 'museologisation' of the war before 1989, it is important to reflect on the 'geography of memory'. The MRBO exhibition in Kravaře, as well as the exhibition of Czechoslovak fortifications, created by MRBO in the 1980s, were in the Hlučín area. Unfortunately, MRBO papers are still not accessible for researchers. It therefore remained unclear, whether the localisation of exhibitions could be understood as part of the efforts to 'import' the official Slavic and socialist narrative of 'liberation' to a region with a different identity and memory, or whether the exhibition buildings were selected just due to technical and administrative reasons.

The fall of the Communist regime led to higher diversity in the activities of museums. The memorial in Hrabyně became part of the Silesian Museum

[38] Josef Durčák and Oldřich Gregar, *Pohraniční opevnění na Opavsku a Bruntálsku* [Border Fortifications in the Opava and Bruntál Regions] (Opava: AVE, 1998).

[39] Oldřich Hrachovec, "Architekt Jindřich Czeniek devadesátiletý" [The Architect Jindřich Czniek Celebrates 90], *Vlastivědné listy Slezska a Severní Moravy* 27, no. 1 (2001): 43.

in the early 1990s and was later reconstructed and reconceptualised as the National World War II Memorial. It became an exhibition venue, commemorating the war as whole, with no primary connection to the Ostrava Offensive. Over the last decade, the municipal museum in Hlučín created a new long-term exhibition focusing on 'the other story' of the local population. For the first time, the war participation of Czechoslovak citizens from the region in WW II Axis forces became a subject of museum presentation. In 2016, the museum was awarded "the Museum of the Year" of the Czech Republic. This example provides evidence of the partial 'rehabilitation' of pre-1945 regional identity, which can also be witnessed in some parts of Polish Silesia.[40] Furthermore, several private military museums have appeared in the region since 1990s, but none of them systematically focus on the Ostrava Offensive. Amongst them, the museum in Chuchelná, focusing primarily on the German armed forces, gained some level of popularity. Consequently, the case of the Hlučín area and their commemorative practice represents the only significant counterbalance to the traditional narrative of 'liberation'.

Attempts at Revision

After the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, the commemorative practice in the Ostrava region did not change distinctively. Simple wreath-laying ceremonies were still held in towns and villages and attended by representatives of the administration and military. Re-enactment appeared as a new 'pop-cultural' and overwhelmingly apolitical form of remembrance.

The narrative of 'liberation' by the Red Army remained highly respected and the fallen Soviet soldiers were still celebrated as heroes, although the 'language of remembrance' was partly 'purified' of socialist rhetoric and the idea of 'hereditary Czech-Soviet friendship' was repudiated. Any social demand to reconsider the concept of 'liberation' did not fundamentally appear, however, until recent years. The 70th anniversary of Victory Day in 2015 opened a debate within Czech society. The events in Ukraine a year before led to a radical anti-Russian attitude, widespread mainly amongst the young and middle generations. An understandable concern after the annexation of Crimea caused a tendency to search for simplified and often ahistorical parallels between the

[40] See Rafał Riedel, "Silesia – Oblivion: Territory and its Past in Contemporary Lower Silesians' Identity Constructions," *Slezský sborník* 116, no. 2 (2018): 97–112.

events of 1945 and 2014 and comparing contemporary Russia to the Soviet Union.[41]

The debate was renewed yet again in 2019 after repeated demands of right-winged municipal politicians and their supporters to remove the statue of Soviet Marshal Konev in Prague. The proponents stressed the fact that Konev's army reached the Czech capital hours after the capitulation of German forces, so the Soviet did not actually 'liberate' Prague. Konev's role in the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was also often stressed. The conflict escalated in the autumn of 2019 through several cases of vandalism. One of the damaged war memorials was the mausoleum in Ostrava, built in 1946 for both Czech and Soviet fallen soldiers. A radical nationalist group justified the vandalism of the monument as an act of spontaneous commemoration of the victims of 1956. The deed was strongly criticised by almost all political groups in the country. Municipal and regional authorities, together with historians, also pointed out the difference between Konev as a significant military and political leader, and common soldiers buried in Ostrava, who had had no responsibility for political decisions, as well as at the ahistoricity of connecting people killed in 1945 to the events of 1956.

It is important to note that, while the statue of Marshal Konev in Prague was removed in 2020, no attempts were made to re-name streets named after other Soviet military commanders, such as Jeremenko, who remained well respected in the Ostrava region. Even after Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, occasional attempts to remove remaining 'Soviet' or 'Communist' street names were not backed up by any political party or important local association. Compared to the general tendencies in Czech society, the Ostrava region still demonstrates a high level of continuity in commemorative practises and memory of the war. The difference becomes obvious mainly in comparison with the 'revisionist' tendencies in Prague or the lower level of interest in war remembrance in South and Central Moravia or Eastern Bohemia as well as other regions, also significantly affected by the operations of the Red Army. A strong regional-patriotic narrative of 'liberation', that is similar to the one of the Ostrava Offensive, can be found in the territories of Western Bohemia, which were liberated by the US Army. In this case, of course, the regional narrative opposes the traditional pre-1989 pro-Soviet interpretation, which dominates in the Ostrava region.

[41] Ondřej Kolář, "Neslavná bilance neoslaveného výročí: 75 let od konce druhé světové války v Evropě a 'repolitizace' kolektivní paměti" [Inglorious Evaluation of a Not-Celebrated Anniversary: 75 Years After the End of Second World War in Europe and 'the Re-Politicization' of Collective Memory], *Časopis Slezského zemského muzea: série B – vědy historické* 69, no. 1 (2020): 73–75.

This attitude of the Ostrava population can be partly explained by the traditionally strong position of left-wing parties in the industrial region. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to understand the continuity of the 'liberation narrative' just as a form of pro-communist sentiment. Even regional civic associations or re-enactment groups, which are based on the ideas and heritage of interwar Czechoslovak democracy, often oppose the – allegedly 'Prague-based' – anti-Russian narrative of recent years.

To highlight the main reasons for this fact, several aspects should be pointed out. First of all, there are family stories (and also urban legends) about the events of 1945. Despite all the undisputable controversies, the defeat of Nazism was always remembered in a positive way – if not as a 'victory' or 'liberation', at least as a 'lesser evil'. Frustrating or tragic experiences with Soviet soldiers were often not told to family members and so it did not become part of the shared memory.[42] It is important to note that cases of 'misbehaviour' of Soviets, resulting in violence committed on civilians, are very poorly documented in written sources, so it cannot be described and presented by historians in detail. Many representatives of the older and middle generations, regardless to their political preferences, never felt any need to reconsider the simple and understandable narrative, they had learnt in school or by visiting MRBO exhibitions in their youth. Simultaneously, the story of heavy fighting in the industrial region in 1945 perfectly fits into the 'regional-patriotic working-class narrative', stressing the importance of Ostrava as the 'industrial heart' of the country.[43]

Conclusion

In general, after the initial and spontaneous stage of commemorative acts that took place immediately after the war, the late 1940s and 1950s were strongly affected by existing political and administrative problems, as well as the rhetoric of 'the building of socialism', which left little space for looking back in the past. The 'golden age' of war remembrance came in the 1960s, due to loosening of political and ideological pressure, which led to nation-wide debates about the legacy of the war, as well as to institutional support for re-

[42] Kolář, "K vnímání".

[43] Oľga Šrajerová, *Historické a aktuálne otázky vývoja národnostných vzťahov, kultúr a identít v národnostne zmiešanej oblasti Sliezska a severnej Moravy* [Historical and Current Problems of Inter-Ethnic Relations and Identities in the Culturally-Mixed Area of Silesia and Northern Moravia] (Opava: Slezské zemské muzeum, 2015).

search and the adoption of modern art styles. The era of 'normalisation' after 1968 was characterised by attempts to petrify the narrative of liberation by the Soviet army and eliminate all dissenting narratives. This situation began to change as late as the second half of the 1980s and mainly in the following decades, after the fall of the Communist regime.

The restoration of democracy did not lead, however, to a significant shift in the view of the war. The Soviet role in defeating Nazism remained highly respected, despite some problematization and well as minor displays of radical anti-Soviet and anti-Russian attitudes. The above-mentioned tendency re-appeared after 2014 as a reaction to the conflict in Ukraine, but did not influence the commemorative practice in public space in any significant way.

The post-1989 situation enabled the detabooisation of previously neglected controversies. In recent years, the 'alternative story' of the Hlučín region inhabitants, who had fought on the Axis side, was presented by a successful museum exhibition. Nevertheless, the traditional narrative of 'liberation' remains strong in the area of the former battlefield, especially in comparison with other regions of the Czech Republic affected by the military operations of 1945.

Abstract

Combat operations of 1945 in the Ostrava region ranked among the largest and most important military encounters of World War II in the Czech Lands. Immediately after the war, the first sites of memory appeared spontaneously. During the 1950s and 1960s, 'institutionalisation of memory' can be witnessed, based on the narrative of 'liberation' and 'Slavic brotherhood' of the Czech and Soviet population. The discussion of historians and writers about wartime controversies, which started in the era of 'destalinisation', had no important impact on the commemorative practise. After the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968, authorities attempted to use the narrative of 'liberation' t the o improve the public opinion of the Soviet Union. Museums were expected to play a leading role in this process. After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, attempts to reconsider the narrative of 'liberation' appeared. A strong counter-narrative developed amongst the population of the Hlučín region, whose ancestors served in German armed forces. Nevertheless, the traditional post-communist narrative of 'liberation' remains quite strong in the region.

Keywords: Moravian-Ostrava Offensive; Narrative; Liberation; Collective Memory; Commemoration

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