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[Prague]



**”An Offer Not to Be Refused”:
Ideology and Communist Party Membership
before 1968 in the Narratives
of the Czechoslovak Officer Corps**

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The army as the state’s armed forces was undoubtedly a crucial part of communist ideology and can be viewed as one of the most important instruments of the socialist society’s power.² In addition to the domestic and foreign political situation, the significant influence of the historical development of the military cannot be omitted from an analysis of the relationship between politics, ideology and the military profession in 1960s Czechoslovakia. Few institutions have undergone as many changes as the army in the last hundred years. The army has virtually accompanied humankind for centuries, regardless of changes in the political regime. War is firmly anchored within the cultural framework and soldiers are one of the oldest (occupational) population groups financed from public funds. In analysing the situation in the Czechoslovak People’s Army (CPA) before 1968, it would be a mistake to evaluate its members without taking into account the historical context; i.e., analysing it merely based

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on the supposed stereotypes, according to the former and current majority of society, which they allegedly conform to – the Officers' Corps being viewed as a group of people comprised exclusively of devout communists, always willing to put down civil unrest on behalf of the regime in power.³

I focus on one ideological topic in the following pages: the relationships of the narrators (members of the CPA Officers' Corps) to the communist regime; namely their compulsory/voluntary joining/not joining of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). My aim is to expound the topic by analysing and interpreting eighty-five narrative and semi-structured interviews with fifty former full-time professional soldiers. The interviews were carried out in accordance with methodological and ethical oral history procedures.⁴ Although the only tightly drawn criterion for the selection of the research participants was their service as full-time professional soldiers sometime between 1948 and 1968, the obtained research sample is approximately balanced: in principle, it covers all the main branches of the CPA armed forces⁵ (including some specialised army units), and, most importantly, it reflects a “distinct,” but in some respects also identical experience with the Prague Spring and the advent of normalization in the army.⁶

One can divide the interviewees (or narrators) into several groups in accordance with commonly used sampling criteria; i.e., depending on age (years of birth range between 1925 and 1948), gender (forty-eight men and

³ “The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia has secured full supremacy over the army, which has become one of the backbones of the totalitarian system. [...] The officer corps was made up of people fully committed to the regime. [...] The army’s task was not only military training and ideological education, but also a possible deployment to suppress the unrest in the state.” See e.g. popular-education portal Totalita.cz [Http://totalita.cz/vysvetlivky/armada.php](http://totalita.cz/vysvetlivky/armada.php). (accessed 23.05.2019).

⁴ Most audio recordings with transcripts and additional documentation are in the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences’ collections; the rest of the interviews are in my personal archive. Oral history methodology according to guideline M. Vaněk, P. Mücke, *Třetí strana trojúhelníku: teorie a praxe orální historie*, Prague 2015.

⁵ There are twenty-one members of the Land Force, twenty-two members of the Air Force, and seven members of the Air Defence Force.

⁶ The research sample includes twenty-seven rehabilitated narrators who had to leave the army after 1968 (mostly for political reasons) and, after 1989, were re-legalized and twenty-three non-rehabilitated former (i.e. “normalization”) soldiers who remained in the military after 1968 (often after 1989).

two women), education (eleven secondary, eleven higher, twenty-four university, four post-graduate), the units in which they served for most of the time in the army and the ranks or their specialisations⁷. Although the focus of the research is mainly on the CPA, Czechs or "federal" Slovaks who, in the research period, served or (also often lived) in the area of the present-day Czech Republic for a long time, form most of the narrators. In this regard, the military profession is viewed solely from the "Czech" point of view in this research.

The theory of this research is based on a "cultural model of military history" by American military historian, John A. Lynn, who has created a coherent theoretical tool for the examination of various topics in the area of military history, using anthropological approaches. Lynn distinguishes between an ideological discourse on war and military service on one side and its practice on the other side. While the first level deals with dominant approaches, values and ideals that together create some ideal-typical normative (social) idea of the army and military service, the second empirical level addresses their successful or unsuccessful implementation through the actors' reflections.⁸ In this case, I am basing myself on the social constructionism paradigm and the psychological presumption that a story carries an (often subconscious) interpretation.⁹ Human memory that enables the subject's awareness of continuity and identity is crucial in this process.¹⁰ The individual constructs in personal narrative unites the past events and actions to manifest a certain identity and way of life.¹¹ Memory and narration influence one another, and the result of the mutual influence is the

⁷ Participants can be divided into two roughly similar groups: the first group comprises junior officers (starting as second lieutenants in the 1960s and becoming captains or majors at the end of the decade); the second group comprises senior officers (captains or majors at the beginning of the research period and lieutenant-colonels or colonels at the end of it).

⁸ J.A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, New York 2003, pp. 367–369.

⁹ P. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York 1966.

¹⁰ In this context, an identity is understood as a consciously constructed, structured in terms of time, and flexible identification of self (as a group member, a social role holder, and a unique person), which is a part of the non-reflective, biological and psychological, "I"; see: P. Burke, J. Stets, *Identity Theory*, Oxford 2009, pp. 9–10.

¹¹ K. Ranke, *Die Welt der einfachen Formen: Studien zur Motiv-, Wort- und Quellenkunde*, Berlin 1978.

subject's identity. This subject's identity is not some fixed determinateness but, on the contrary, a multi-layered and dynamic process, which reflects "the important others" (i.e. individuals or groups with whom one shares a sense of togetherness).¹² I am thus inclined to the individualistic approach to collective memory, whereby the (individual and group) memory is mainly a social phenomenon and in which language plays the central role.¹³

That is why I use the method of narrative analysis¹⁴ for untangling the intricate web of actors' strategies and narratives. In addition, I draw inspiration from the concept of referential frameworks; i.e., the meanings and influences of socio-historical, spatial, situational and individual context on the former actors' actions (including present-day contexts that narrators retrospectively project on to their narratives and that can influence the present method of personal or episodic narrative construction).¹⁵ Having said this, the text has absolutely no intention to paint an "objective" picture of how the Communist Party operated in the 1960s' CPA, but aims to offer some excursion into the subjective and collectively shared (constructed and reconstructed) ideas of former soldiers (members of a distinctive profession) and the mechanisms of their memories.

Army and Ideology

The military profession (similarly to the idea of conscription) has been occupying a unique place in contemporary Czechoslovakian history since the First World War, when the Czechs for the first time in modern history got an army under their own command.¹⁶ Thanks to this, the idea of the state and national existence has been firmly rooted in the Czechoslovakian Army since the First Czechoslovak Republic. This element of the Constitution is closely linked to the concept of homeland defence. It was sufficient for the succeeding communist garniture merely to adopt the patriotism built up

¹² R. Brubaker, F. Cooper, *Beyond Identity*, "Theory and Society", vol. 29, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–47.

¹³ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago 1992.

¹⁴ Namely, I use the autobiographical and episodic narrative analysis, particularly referring to Fritz Schütze's hermeneutic conception; see: F. Schütze, *Das narrative Interview in Interaktionsfeldstudien: Erzähltheoretische Grundlagen*, Hagen 1987.

¹⁵ H. Welzer, S. Neitzel, *Vojáci: protokoly o boji, zabíjení a umírání*, Prague 2010, pp. 20–21.

¹⁶ M. Koldínská, I. Šedivý, *Válka a armáda v českých dějinách*, Prague 2008, p. 103.

for three decades and to implant it within its own Marxist-Leninist framework. The communists substituted Masaryk's slogan of "de-Austrianization" with "political cleansing" and the conforming public awareness with political indoctrination¹⁷. The communist ideology, which refuses the notion of the Army as an above-class and apolitical organisation, demanded from it that it functions according to the Soviet model as a reliable instrument of the working class and the Communist Party's power.¹⁸ The high level of politicisation before 1989 is to be understood through the prism of the society-wide changes that took place after February 1948.¹⁹

If one accepts the proposition that army reflects society, then the communist regime did it to perfection. The consolidated People's Army was intended to act not only as a guarantor of the new social order, but also to educate most of the male population on socialist citizenship (in good and the bad) during compulsory military service. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia relied on the high ratio of party members (i.e., politically reliable individuals) to achieve the goals set. In addition, for this reason it created political ranks at various army levels that were responsible for the political education of the Officers' Corps, compulsory soldiers and civilian employees.

The narrators spontaneously mix up the old (before 1948) and new (after 1948) orders in their narratives which, among other things, shows that

¹⁷ Paradoxically, the phenomenon such as the army perception of the matter of the political regime, an emphasis on the educational role of the army and a strong connection to the French model in Czechoslovakia between 1918–1938 made it easier for the communists after 1945 to infiltrate the army and later to gain control over it. The French model was replaced by the Soviet one; Z. Kříž, *Civilní řízení a demokratická kontrola armády v České republice: peripetie transformace vojensko-civilních vztahů po roce 1989*, Brno 2004, p. 51.

¹⁸ Ideologically, the Soviets prefer people's, workers' armed forces to a professional army. Professional armies were regarded as anachronistic and a potential danger in socialist society, while a workers' army was intended to represent the new social system; C. Riceová, *Nejisté spojenectví: Sovětský svaz a československá armáda 1948–1983*, Prague 2005, p. 14.

¹⁹ There is not much literature in English for basic orientation in the problems of the Czechoslovak army after 1948 (with the exception of important events such as the Prague Spring or the Velvet Revolution). It is possible to refer only to the dissertation thesis Condoleezza Rice, a former National Security Advisor of the US President. However, this book contains a number of factual inaccuracies. See C. Rice, *Uncertain Allegiance: The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Army*, Princeton 1984.

the contents of the military profession changed very little after 1948. There were just minimal changes, such as the replacement of the “nation” by the concept of the “people.” The soldiers’ mission remained the same, despite the fact that one of the characteristics of totalitarian armies is that they gain legitimacy not from nationalist incentives, but from political ideology with international overlapping.²⁰ The members of the CPA connected possible combat with the idea of homeland defence, in compliance with the military oath and principles of the aforementioned military professionalism:

They always told us [military school students] and I always told them [compulsory soldiers]: “Remember, you must have a tingly feeling, when one says ‘homeland’! It must bring tears to your eyes when the flag is raised on the flagpole! It is symbolic to us!” This is clear, it is a national symbol, the family is behind it, our beautiful country, our village. Everything – and you must understand it this way.²¹

One should bear in mind the above-mentioned distinction between the world-view (political) and functionalist (professional) ideologies, the entire time while working with oral-historical sources. The greater emphasis on functionalist elements might be the reason for the why the narratives are often contradictory (even in the case of the same narrators).²² On one hand, most narrators cannot imagine the army without “some” ideological basis (the hypothetical combat readiness depends precisely on the beliefs, after all); on the other hand, at the same time participants remain true to a truly apolitical narration about “common” soldiers who are merely “doing their jobs” irrespective of the present political situation, and fully in line with Clausewitz’s concept of the disciplined army. First and foremost, the concrete actor’s perspective is distinguished, based on what the narrators in question accentuate in their narration (retrospectively), either political ethos or the framework of political opinions of the period.

²⁰ J. Doorn, *The Soldier and Social Change*, London 1975, p. 98.

²¹ Interview with J.K. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 5 February 2009, the author’s personal archive.

²² According to the functionalist concept, ideology is not supposed to serve as a tool for disclosing the truth about the world, but to emotionally motivate human behaviour (i.e., to strengthen integrity and solidarity of human groups). See e.g. H. Maříková, M. Petrušek, A. Vodáková (ed.), *Velký sociologický slovník*, Prague 1996, p. 415.

The ongoing Cold War might serve as an example *par excellence*: no matter how much some narrators could be internally convinced of the absurdity of an armed combat between the two social systems (socialist and capitalist), they internally (with reference to *esprit de corps*) never accepted the possibility that they would not obey the command to fight:

I didn't see it that way [the possibility of war]. I just didn't think about it, whether or not it would be. I'm a soldier once, so I'm ready for it, sometimes good, sometimes worse, but I'm here to do it. That was my job. Some threat of nuclear war was a political matter. [...] There have always been wars in the world.²³

One other fact is essential for the understanding of such behaviour. All narrators believed, with respect to the referential framework of the period, that the ruling regime in Czechoslovakia (in whatever form) was legitimate (i.e. fairly chosen in elections), and that the defence of the Czechoslovakian population was a duty arising from the military oath. Carrying out a command is a priority for a soldier and its legitimacy is usually not doubted. Soldiers assume that their superiors (i.e. the government or president) have a legitimacy and issue commands of such capital importance (such as declaring war) after thorough consideration of all the possibilities. Shifting responsibility to higher places and emphasising a sense of powerlessness is typical of many narratives but is still indisputable proof of military professionalism in the sense of submission to civil authorities.²⁴

There is an anticipated professional ethos that requires a command to be obeyed at all costs, and, contrary to it, there are the present actions of the actors (soldiers in a peacetime army without any real combat experience), face-to-face with a crisis. Thus the obeying of a command is one more issue that clearly manifests the erosion between an official discourse and its practice. In fact, narrators often distinguish between "relevant" and "irrelevant" commands in everyday life (if we accept the assumption that

²³ Interview with A.T. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 14 March 2013, Oral History Center, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences (later OHC).

²⁴ In this case, soldiers follow on from the tautological statement that professional troops are obedient to the civil authority, and the troops that are not obedient, are then not professional; P.D. Feaver, *The civil-military problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the question of civilian control*, "Armed Forces and Society", vol. 23, nr. 1, 1996, p. 160.

the narratives do not reflect some purpose-built form of collective stylisation, which is influenced by the knowledge of subsequent developments). If they could afford it in their position, they enjoy discussing the irrelevant commands and try to question them. Their discussions and questioning were partly enabled by the politicisation of the army. Even though they sometimes interpreted a command in their own way and carried it out in their own way (according to them, efficiently), they always carried out the command without exception, no matter what, because such behaviour was expected of them in their “silent consensus-based” profession.

According to the propaganda of the period, the power of the socialist army did not depend on the quality of the training or the quantity of operational military technology, but on the “moral spirit,” formed as “the sum of political and moral ideas, which were expressing the true interests of the homeland and people, of social and political regime, and State politics”.²⁵ The political apparatus was supposed to look after the army’s moral spirit at the official discourse level, using educative and later political workers for this activity. The Main Political Department (MPD), as the central institution at the department level of the CPC, had been authorised to manage the development of this apparatus since 1950. Its task was to connect the party and professional lines in the whole, and thus to intensify the overall control and status of the CPC in the army.²⁶

The system of the political apparatus had an extended framework in the 1960s that penetrated the whole army organism from the highest officers to compulsory soldiers. The political work was done by the Political Departments at Military District (or since 1958, army) level; by the Political Departments with a chef, and groups of a party-organisational and agitation-propagational works at the Division. There was a political group established in army units and led by the deputy commander for political issues whose members were also chairpersons of the army unit CPC organisation and the Regiment Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth. Moreover, the political groups functioned in individual battalions.²⁷ The political bodies at all levels were closely linked

²⁵ M. Chajda (ed.), *Příručka pro důstojníka v záloze*, Prague 1962, p. 77.

²⁶ The privileged position of the KPC is directly incorporated in the KPC Statutes. party organisations were intended to guarantee, by their daily work, the fulfilment of Party politics in the armed forces and to unite party members.

²⁷ J. Bílek, J. Láník, P. Minařík, D. Povolný, J. Šach, *Československá lidová armáda v koaličních vazbách Varšavské smlouvy: květen 1955 – srpen 1968*, Prague 2008, p. 29.

to party and youth organisations in the army. The army unit organisations were the main support for the communists in the CPA. They were established at almost all levels; i.e., at regiments, battalions, and companies (in justified cases, even with the troops on standby). Their own party organisations also included the Military District (Army), Air Force, Air Defence Force, Division headquarters, military schools, academies, companies, institutions and territorial military administration.²⁸ Their task was to carry out daily political-educational and organisational work with communist and non-party members, that would lead to the fulfilment of short- and long-term party decisions.²⁹ The Whole Army Unit CPC Committees operated as interlinks between the army units' organisations and political departments.

The narrators do not show much interest in the army units' organisations. It seems that the question of Communist Party membership is crucial for them from the current point of view, but they do not care much about daily or occasional duties that resulted from party membership. The regular party meetings are the only exception, but the narrators do not say much about their operations or power relations either.

An Offer Not to Be Refused

The new Constitution (or, rather, its 4th Article) officially guaranteed the leadership of the CPC from 1960. It symbolically completed the gradual process of ultimate subjection of all public spheres to communist ideology. If the CPC was really intended to be a voluntary combat union of the most active and conscientious citizens among workers, farmers and the intelligentsia,³⁰ then it was evident that career soldiers had to be part of it as well. After all, Lenin himself was convinced if the Communist Party were to be truly functional and operational, it had to have disciplined members with a soldier mentality who were able to change tactics flexibly.³¹ Where party membership is concerned, in the research period the army set an example. Approximately three-quarters of all members of the Officers' Corps were members of the CPC for the whole period of the 1960s.³²

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

²⁹ J. Černý, *Příručka pro brance*, Prague 1963, p. 49.

³⁰ Law No. 100/1960 Sb., Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Article 4.

³¹ V.I. Lenin, *Krok vpřed, dva kroky vzad*, Prague 1949, p. 70.

³² The Officers' Corps consisted of 75 per cent of KCP members by 1 January 1966, and 60 per cent of them were of workers' origin; J. Bilek, J. Láník, P. Minařík, D. Povolný, J. Šach, *Československá lidová armáda...*, p. 149.

Starting with company or battery commanders and higher up [...] all commanders were Communist Party members, too. It was much sterner and stricter in the army than anywhere else, because it was taken for granted that such a person truly identifies with the politics, firmly believes in socialism and in the ideas of communism.³³

Political membership was not the explicit legal requirement or the official condition for serving in the CPA. It was, however, a significant criterion for career soldiers' evaluation. Thus, it influences the further course of their service.³⁴ For narrators, the question of party membership was logically a burning issue, one that was generally not spontaneously brought up in the interviews.³⁵ If the narrators raised the issue, they (especially sixty-eighters, who, due to their attitudes against occupation, had to leave the armies during normalization purges) wanted to explain in detail to the interviewer their decision of that period. What were the reasons for participants to (in)voluntarily join the Communist Party? And what were their personal stances towards socialism? Again, the answer to this question is to a large extent influenced by the referential frameworks.

The older generation of narrators (born before 1935) usually joined the CPC at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s; the younger generation approximately a decade later, i.e. in the first half of the 1960s. Members of both groups received their membership cards quite early in their lives, usually when aged between eighteen and twenty-five years. A close analysis discovered two dimensions of how the place and role of membership in the lives of the narrators could be viewed. The first is the value-existential level, where politics relates to a certain form of worldview or belief. Membership of political organisations at the second (materially-existential) level serves

³³ Interview with K.J. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 22 March 2012, the author's personal archive.

³⁴ The requirement of political involvement was incorporated in Law No. 76/1959 Sb. till 1991. It was stated in Provision § 23 as one of the conditions of the service relationship's establishment; in Provision § 5 par. 2 as one of the conditions for assigning higher ranks; and in Provision § 10 par. 1 as one of the conditions for appointing soldiers in their positions.

³⁵ There were a total forty-five party members and five non-party members in the research sample. Most narrators joined the Communist Party in 1948–1956 (14) and in 1962–1967 (12).

as a tool for securing ordinary or above-standard existential conditions.³⁶ Nonetheless, idealism and pragmatism often interpenetrate and the priorities of the two levels could change in the course of time, as well their positive or negative connotations.

Retrospectively, the narrators evaluate their relationship to communist ideology from the moral point of view mostly in a positive way at value-existential level, because it relates to their coming of age (1940–1950) – the time, which was seen as favourable for the identification with groups that symbolised something new, promising, future-oriented and requiring courage.³⁷ In this context, the narrators place principal importance on the generational experience or the euphoria connected with the end the Second World War and liberation by the Red Army, with which is linked some commitment to the Soviet Union.³⁸ Retrospectively, some narrators interpret their joining of the party as youthful imprudence. This decision is usually justified by simple succumbing to the atmosphere of the period, or ideological propaganda.³⁹ This interpretative pattern is significant for narrators who joined the CPC between 1945 and 1950 (or in the first half of 1968). But again, the narratives usually contain some justifying passages:

In 1945, sometime in June after the liberation, I joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with colleagues from work. I did not know anything about the problems in this party or its recent history. I had probably succumbed to propaganda; it was everywhere at that time. This means that it was not adequately explained

³⁶ Similarly see e.g. J. Alan, *Rodinné vztahy a členství v KSČ*, in Z. Konopásek (ed.), *Otevřená minulost: autobiografická sociologie státního socialismu*, Prague 2009, p. 156.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

³⁸ The strength of the period of pro-Soviet partiality after the end of the War is also shown by the fact that “socialising social democracy” turned a blind eye on the excesses of the Soviet soldier-liberators and on the illegal rampage of Soviet security organs in the area of Czechoslovakia; M. Koldínská, I. Šedivý, *Válka a armáda v českých dějinách*, p. 341.

³⁹ “Our generation of enthusiastic, maybe even naive people didn’t do anything for benefit [in February 1948]; we did everything because we were interested in the thing! And we did it because the results of WW2 proved that progress should go this way;” Interview with K.J. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 29 March 2012, the author’s personal archive.

what the Communist Party was and what their teaching was like in practice in the Soviet Union. So, this is how we got bogged down in the party in a bigger group.⁴⁰

Party membership is sometimes perceived as a certain form of remuneration. The CPC membership offer for some narrators had the hallmark of certain privilege. In their view, party membership was offered only to the best (for example, star pupils in military academies or specialised soldiers) at certain times (i.e., before 1968). However, they still stressed that they, as CPC members, took a passive attitude in the Party.⁴¹

The feeling of initial intoxication and enthusiasm for communist ideology vanished in the narrative structures together with the end of the 1950s. The narrators mention some recollections of collectivisation, political processes (personified by names such as Rudolf Slánský and Milada Horáková) and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. While reflecting on these events, narrators often feel an urge to inform the interviewer that they knew nothing about the practices of the communist regime, because they were working hard to prepare for their future jobs, or they were already in the army and had other things on their minds. The main argument was that the army as a specific social milieu was too independent and separate to be able to receive outside information:

We didn't know about many things. We didn't know, for example, what it was like for the political prisoners in the 1950s. I had been separated from most information since 1949 and I began to perceive it fully as an officer and then, of course, the most in the spring of 1968. My brain was completely wiped out by then. I believed the things they had shoved down my throat for fifteen years, because if you cannot get information, you can't size things up. You don't have issues to think about.⁴²

⁴⁰ Interview with J.NO. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 9 November 2012, the author's personal archive.

⁴¹ "I joined the KPC at Apprentice School. I enjoyed the school and had good results in technical subjects. And they [political workers] came and said – 'you are good!' I was assigned higher ranks during my studies. And they offered it [KPC membership] to me and I didn't refuse, so I was in the Party all the time [...], but I never had any higher positions in the Party or Committee". OHC, Interview with J.F. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 28 February 2013.

⁴² Interview with F.T. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 26 November 2012, the author's personal archive.

The repetitive narratives of some awakening, often connected with visits either of narrators or their close friends or family to the Soviet Union during the 1950s, are an important element in this context. Interviewees describe their moments of realisation (provoked by these visits) when they finally learned how pernicious communist ideology was and how mendacious the propaganda was (encounters with the realities of Soviet rural areas). However, despite this experience, they found it inconceivable to resign their membership from the Communist Party because of their professions. Some of them took comfort in the idea of Czechoslovakia going its own specific way to socialism from then on (with the conclusions of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union).

Therefore, it is logical that joining the Communist Party after 1956 is interpreted more ambiguously in retrospect by some narrators (except the short period in the first half of 1968). Here, the involuntariness of this action is accentuated. This is a consciously negative decision in light of the events of the period, taken because of coercion or the fear of repression. Even though some narrators succeeded in avoiding membership, it was usually on a temporary basis. Thus, the typical narrative pattern is based on the principle of a random offer that could not be refused.⁴³

[Our commander] called me and said: "Sit down. So, I found out that you are the only one who is not a party member." I said: "No, I am not, Comrade Colonel. There is no need for it. I graduated from academy with excellent marks; it is written on my certificate; it hasn't caused me any problems." And he said: "So look, let us be clear, either you sign it, or it is over!" I said: "OK, but I have to think it out, you cannot..." He opened his drawer and took out the application. Was he serious or making fun of me? I was a first lieutenant, a half-year before my graduation. Upon graduation, I gained exceptional promotion to captain.⁴⁴

The (calculating or otherwise) motive of coercion is very often present in the narratives. This relates to the emphasis on the biologically deter-

⁴³ One of the narrators summarised the whole problematic in an even more significant way: "If they hadn't come, nobody would even have thought about joining the party, but when you were asked, you were trapped"; OHC, Interview with Z.Z. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 19 August 2013.

⁴⁴ Interview with Z.Č. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 7 November 2012, the author's personal archive.

mined situations in which the narrators found themselves. The strategy of legitimisation in this case is based on the assertion that the narrators in many cases were at the beginning of their careers, their professions were fulfilling, and they were often starting families; i.e., they made decisions concerning not only themselves but other people as well. All these factors, including conformity as a feature of the military profession, need to be considered when we evaluate the willingness or unwillingness of the interviewees to refuse the offer of Communist Party membership:

Nobody told me directly, but I believe if I didn't do it [join the Communist Party], they really would have sacked me. I would have left, but I had the planes and I loved them more than anything! They were my family; I simply lived for them. You know, one sacrifices a lot in order to participate and to avoid sinking into irrelevance. I joined the party in the [airborne] workshops, and it cannot be done differently there. If I hadn't joined, of course, they would have said 'Thank you' and I would have left. I wouldn't have worked with machinery for sure [...]. All technical officers' positions were dependent on membership because political trust must exist there.⁴⁵

The most common reasons for joining the Communist Party after 1956 were materially-existential reasons (at least, according to the narrators). These reasons are linked to career possibilities; i.e., promotions or better jobs. In this respect, there were no fundamental differences between the army and the rest of society. As in all systems based on the rule by a single political party, Communist Party membership was reduced to a formality which was intended to facilitate the social and professional lives of its members, but membership was not a way of consenting to socialist principles and doctrine.⁴⁶ Once again, the factor of randomness is stressed here, when narrators were confronted with the necessity to make an immediate decision:

The engineer of the regiment for airborne armaments was leaving and then the engineer of the regiment [...] came to me and he said: "Look, there are two candidates,

⁴⁵ Interview with J.B. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 31 March 2009, the author's personal archive.

⁴⁶ F. Mayerová, *Češi a jejich komunismus: paměť a politická identita*, Prague 2009, p. 83.

[...] one member of the party and you, an engineer, but not a party member. Who do you think will get the job? Here is your application!"⁴⁷

Pragmatism was not necessarily only always connected with a career. Party membership was also the unwritten assurance of peace and quiet, as well as of a supportive environment for the everyday performance of the military profession. When one became a real 'comrade,' at the same time one enjoyed a certain level of "protection" not previously enjoyed. One gained a non-negligible means of power and symbolic capital, because party membership was one of the most effective strategies for solving problems that enabled bypassing, if required, the otherwise rigid military organisation. In fact, the ideological discourse of "democratic centralism" (i.e., submission to the decision of the party authorities) in the specific army milieu did not only provide space for power acts downwards (from superior to subordinate), but also in the opposite direction (from lower ranks to higher officers).⁴⁸ The relatively widespread topos about the "evil" Communist Party and "good" communists, which is based on the difference between the group (the CPC) perceived mostly in a negative light, and positively viewed individual members of the party, follows this interpretation:

The [Communist] Party was a great mass of people. As light seems to be white at first sight, but it is part of the whole spectrum according to the wavelength, so it was the same with the party. [...] There were huge differences among party members. "One plus one equals two" is a luxury that only maths as a quantitative and not qualitative science can afford. The difference between two ones and one two is immense, so that "equals" is generally not valid. [...] Thus, it is not important at all how strong the Communist Party was or that it had more than one million members, because it consisted of individuals. So yes, there was a strength of one and a half million people, but what is important is who this was and who that was, what they wanted and what their beliefs were. We cannot forget that.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Interview with V.S. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 23 November 2012, the author's personal archive.

⁴⁸ The practice differed from the official discourse in this respect because the official sources of the period naturally did not allow such a possibility: "The distinction of party work in the army is that criticism of the commanders' and superiors' commands is not allowed;" J. Černý, *Příručka pro brance*, p. 48.

⁴⁹ Interview with B.B. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 8 March 2012, the author's personal archive.

The above-presented division and examples are, of course, by definition considerably generalising. As indicated, there were, in fact, many more subjective motives and individual incentives. A totally specific target might be a reason for opportunism in rare cases, illustrated by the following (almost laughable) example, when the narrator's simple wish to go to the seaside was the impetus for joining the Communist Party:

Then [1958], they organised the first tour of the Czechoslovakian Union of Youth to the Soviet Union, to see the Black Sea. We were chosen in our army units and the commander said: "Oh, my boy, you could go, you have enough money for it, but you must be a party member, or they won't take you there". So, I filled in an application and I was on the boat called 'Peter the Great' in June and cruised the Black Sea, Batumi, Sukhumi, Sochi, Odesa. We visited everything, a grand tour of the Czechoslovakian Union of Youth!⁵⁰

Whatever the circumstances of their joining the Communist Party, almost all of them, as they said, in their youth were supporters of the political left and the idea of a strong state. Most of them hold the same beliefs today.

An Apolitical Stance as an Act of Heroism

Apart from the communists, non-members of the Communist Party served in the Officers' Corps throughout the 1960s as well.⁵¹ The total number of them was not negligible; they constituted one-quarter of all career officers. These soldiers were usually not assigned to higher ranks than captain or major (with a few exceptions), because the army units' personnel were kept under total surveillance of the party nomenclature.⁵² The narrators who were party members ascribe the tolerance

⁵⁰ Interview with F.N. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 20 November 2012, the author's personal archive.

⁵¹ This fact was enabled by the process of destalinisation, when the old "political solutions" in 1954 were declared to be "leftist" or "rightest–opportunistic" deviations. In his speech at the meeting of the KPC Central Committee, President Antonín Zápotocký said at the beginning of September 1953 that intelligentsia origin or non-membership is not an automatic obstacle to military professional performance; see M. Koldínská, I. Šedivý, *Válka a armáda v českých dějinách*, p. 173.

⁵² In the first half of 1960, the KPC tried to enforce collective leadership to the exclusion of the principle of the entire commanders' authority. Commanders and chiefs

of the communist regime towards non-Party members to practical reasons. Non-members' presence enabled the communist regime to create (not only in the Army but also in public) the picture of the socialist armed forces which gave equal opportunities to everyone, regardless of their political affiliation:

So, we were the country of socialism, the country of wide-ranging opportunities. The Soviet Union – our role model, [...] and the nation as such lived this. So, we, the soldiers lived this as well [...] and had to support these politics. The people who didn't support them, had no chance to fly. Ninety-eight percent of the pilots were communists, including me, of course, because if you were not a communist, there was no possibility of promotion, advancement, simply nothing. There were a few non-members, it is true, but it was just to keep the critics quiet. So, shut up and keep the pace with the others. Toe the policy line, that was the basis⁵³.

The depiction of non-members is very ambivalent in the narratives. One can create three groups according to the prevailing opinions on non-party members in the CPA. The first, quite large group of narrators views the non-members in a rather positive way, as a group of people who were able to stand up to pressure by superiors and political workers, i.e. they did not exchange moral convictions for the prospect of some career move. The second group sees the non-members as too young, incompetent or otherwise problematic (in the period language, "untrustworthy") soldiers who, according to them, had never been considered as potential party members. The third group regards them in a completely opposite way; i.e., as individuals who had an above-standard working performance or were indispensable to the army because of their position, education or expertise. Thus, they were not asked to become party members or, if they were, had the possibility to decline such an offer (owing to their privileged position). Military doctors were such a case. There was a shortage of them in the CPA in the 1960s, so they were usually not forced to join the Communist Party. However, membership for them, as for all other soldiers, was a prerequisite for any career moves and other benefits, as the following interview shows:

were obliged to submit all their propositions concerning personnel issues to the political organs at the relevant level to obtain approval; J. Bílek, J. Láník, P. Minařík, D. Povolný, J. Šach, *Československá lidová armáda...*, p. 146.

⁵³ OHC, Interview with O.P. recorded by Filip Procházka, Prague, 12 January 2012.

I was at the frontline regiment and was not a party member. Nobody came to me to persuade me, nothing like that. Then I came to the division, I had already been serving extra time and I wanted to return to Hradec because my parents were ill and I needed to look after them. I made three or four requests. [...] There was a position there, but they made excuses that there were no flats available, but it was not true at all because there was a new housing development. But then I found out that the problem was something else. A chief from the Ministry came and said: "So, my boy, it is a party job in Hradec, so you can't ever get there". So, he went to the army unit's CPC organisation and said: "He works dutifully, take him in the party". So, I joined the party in 1967 and suddenly a job and flat were available to me.⁵⁴

It is interesting that the above-mentioned depictions are equally represented across the research sample, regardless of the narrators' political affinities or individual destinies after 1968. The non-members themselves did not tackle the problem of their political involvement. However, certain narrative features can be depicted in their narratives, too. Theirs is not the strategy of legitimisation, but they express penitence for serving in the socialist army. The non-members often emphasise in interviews that they realise in what army and for which goals they served and that they retrospectively regret it. The urge to explain these issues is relatively surprising, and, again, it most probably originates in the current public opinion of the socialist armed forces:

You know, if I recollect it, I am ashamed of serving in the communist regime even though I was never a member of the [Communist] Party! There must be discipline in the army, everything is under the command. I guess I would probably have obeyed a command without further ado before the occupation [1968]; we had been trained to do so.⁵⁵

Party Membership as Present-day Stigma

To summarise, it should be remembered that most of the narrators view their joining the Communist Party (apart from 1968) as a social stigma, while the refusal to join is retrospectively seen as an act of heroism. Most

⁵⁴ OHC, Interview with J.Z. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 9 July 2013.

⁵⁵ Interview with R.A. recorded by Jiří Hlaváček, Prague, 27 April 2009, the author's personal archive.

party members cannot deny the facts; therefore, they try to understate their significance. The ideal-typical narrative could appear like this: narrators were only members of the Communist Party but were never very interested in politics. What they really wanted was to do their jobs well. Unfortunately, the jobs they chose indirectly required political engagement. Almost everybody was in the Communist Party and those who were not were just lucky or incompetent. This interpretative framework is based on generalisation and trivialisation, and the narrators themselves do not see their behaviour as opportunistic, but as purely pragmatic and utilitarian from the point of view of everydayness – i.e., the membership card was for them then (i.e., before knowing the developments after 1989) one of the basic conditions for a successful career and an effective means for securing “peace and quiet for work”.⁵⁶

Moreover, this approach is also often interpreted by the narrators as the natural and logical result of the (long-term) observation and of one’s own negative experience of the disadvantageous role of a non-party member in the CPC, who (once or many times) experienced their apolitical stance as an obstacle to further career moves. The narrators were often virtually forced to join the Communist Party by external influences, because not becoming a member would mean not only potential vocational problems, but, above all, freeing the position for someone else (from their viewpoint – for the often professionally and humanly incompetent party members).⁵⁷ The above argumentation undoubtedly has a narrative logic in many cases (considering actors’ biographies); i.e., it provides the interviewer with a causal link and possible determinants for the understanding of the intentional behaviour. The problem begins when there is an overuse of topoi or when topoi are combined with each other. This can cause an erosion of the narrative

⁵⁶ The everydayness is in this case understood in traditional opposition to the “big or political history” because people usually in their everyday lives view the world around them in the perspective of incorporation in the existing hierarchies of power and the continuity of events, but also pragmatically; i.e., in the mode of the practical fulfilment of existential needs.

⁵⁷ One can find the use of a similar strategy in other narratives. In this way, narrators justify their remaining in the army after 1968, despite the fact that they disagreed with the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies.

framework. The autobiography of Lieutenant-General Mojmír Zachariáš can serve as a typical example.⁵⁸

Even though the text might appear to the reader as the ideal type of complex interpretative pattern (it contains an indicative part, a storyline and an evaluating conclusion), we can determine on closer analysis that the narrative framework has gradually broken down as a result of the overuse of clichés.

After few days in my new job [deputy sergeant], the master sergeant came to me and started to speak without any hesitation: “You’ve successfully completed the first year of Apprentice School and are one of the best in the troop. Do you want to join the Communist Party?”

I must admit I was astonished by his offer. Firstly, I did not know that he was a party member. Secondly, I had not thought about something like that at all. I read only the sports pages in the newspaper, and I didn’t even remotely care about politics. I know that my parents were members of the Social Democratic Party, and then, they joined the CPC in 1948 with most of the former Social Democrats. We didn’t discuss politics at home at all, and I knew nothing about the repressions of the 1950s. There was a taboo at home about this topic; I learned about it some 30 years later.

Thus I honestly told the master sergeant that I hadn’t thought about something like that, and that I didn’t know what to do then. The master sergeant began to ask me about my previous life, and so we got on to my white-collar origin. His reaction was that it was a small problem which could be solved because my stepfather was a worker. Sometime later, he said to me that I could submit the application. I let him persuade me. I submitted the application and started looking for two “guarantors.” [...] I didn’t

⁵⁸ Lieutenant-General Mojmír Zachariáš (born 1939), a graduate from the Apprentice School in Lipník nad Bečvou (1956–1959), Military Academy in Brno (1967–1970), and the Academy of Military Headquarters in Moscow (1974–1976); he did various jobs in the Cavalry and CPA Army Tank Units; between 1987 and 1990, he was Commander of the West Military District (Tábor); 1990–1991 he worked at the Military Headquarters of the Warsaw Pact United Armed Forces in Moscow; 1991–1993 the Institute for Strategic Studies at the Federal Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of The Czechoslovakian Federative Republic; in 1993–1995 The Military Headquarters of the Army of Czech Republic.

benefit from the membership, besides the meetings' attendance and payment of the membership fees. [...].⁵⁹

I didn't know the reason for the Communist Party to long for me, and I didn't know either what membership meant for me. I didn't think about it at all and I didn't link membership of the Communist Party to my future career. I know of course today I wouldn't have had any career without Communist Party membership, that I couldn't have even become regiment commander [...].

In the end, I was in the party for the whole 32 years, but I didn't benefit personally from membership at all. I got the positions in the same way as my contemporaries did. Later, the only advantage was that I could clarify and urge unpopular or very serious and difficult commanders' measures at party meetings. It was a way of engaging subordinate party members in fulfilling their obligations.

After many years, when I was retiring [1995], I finally got hold of my personnel file in which I learned that my white-collar origin "changed" to workers' origin in the time of the apprentice school. The Party needed me to have a workers' origin – so it happened.⁶⁰

The text shows that the offer of Communist Party membership came unexpectedly, in the second half of the 1950s as a reward for previous above-average educational results. Just in case, Zachariáš adds that he has never been interested in politics (perhaps to make it clear that he never supported the communist movement). This is backed up by the mention of his family background. Though his parents were communists, they joined the party involuntarily as late as June 1948 because of the incorporation of the Czech Social Democratic Party in the Communist Party. To make his stance even more persuasive, he asserts that he did not know about the communist repressions until 1989. After putting up a sturdy defence of his actions based on generalisation and supplemented with biographical notes, there is an unsolved problem in his narrative – the absence of any motivation for his subsequent behaviour.⁶¹

⁵⁹ M. Zachariáš, *Příběh vojáka: pohled na čtyřicetiletou službu vojáka z povolání, od poručíka po generálporučíka, od 50. let až po listopadovou revoluci 1989 a krátce po ní*, Prague 2012, p. 25.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁶¹ The importance of the author's mention of his blue-collar origin is not evident to the reader at first sight. It can indirectly refer to the potential threat during his later career moves and to its subsequent "effacing" by the Master Sergeant. However, it is

Young Zachariáš does not think about Communist Party membership, and he does not understand what his benefit would be if he joined. Nevertheless, he is easily convinced to apply (without any evident pressure). He seeks two guarantors, pays the membership fees; sits around at party meetings; and waits for another two years as a candidate until he becomes a proper member. What prompted him to make such a decision? He claims he did not have any relationship to politics before, he did not expect anything from the membership, and then he spent more than thirty years in the party without gaining any personal benefit (according to him). He adds, with a hint of irony, that he lost more than he gained due the unpopular measures. Here, the author's argumentation definitively disintegrates permanently under the weight of trivialisation. Zachariáš claims that he got his positions in the same way as his contemporaries. By claiming this, he tries to deny any form of protection or nepotism. At the same time, he forgets to add that his argumentation is valid only for party members, because (as he himself states) he retrospectively knows very well that without party membership, he would not have had any career in the Army at all, as if... the possibility to hold higher posts in the army (the rank of lieutenant-colone upwards) was not alone sufficient benefit of party membership. The author publishes his text almost a quarter of a century after 1989, and, surely understands that, regarding today's public discourse and his career in the CPC, he cannot leave out the question of his joining the Communist Party. At the same time, this is a topic he does not much care about in his biography. Instead, he pays much attention to the professional success he achieved while exercising his commanding duties. He deems it necessary with respect to his military honours and morals to mention his party membership but finds it marginal and in no need of any closer attention being paid to it.⁶²

much more likely that it is just an insertion when the author prepares for the anecdotal ending about the KPC manipulation of his dossier. This can give the impression that he was just a small part of the huge (historical or communist) mechanism, and that he had no influence on its running.

⁶² Zachariáš's narrative is in many ways like the narratives of Army General Miroslav Vacek (born 1935). Vacek's military career was much more successful (1987–1989 Chief of CPA Headquarters, 1989–1990 Minister of National Defence, 1996–1998 Member of Parliament). Vacek does not avoid the issue of Party membership in his narrative (in view of the fact that he was a post-1989 Communist Party member). He thinks of the offer of membership as a "reward for his work." He understands his shift towards communist ideology as accidental in a way, but also natural. However, the emphasis on professional successes and the rehabilitation of the socialist army

Conclusion

In analysing and interpreting the interviews, one may state that for the narrators, politics and ideology were inevitable components of the military profession after 1948 and were perceived critically and in a negative way. All in all, the issue was rather marginalised in the long term or reduced only to "high" politics at the level of the CPC Central Committee. These "high" politics are understood by the narrators as principally bad (the constant pressure to ideologize the military profession) as well as unattainable. Furthermore, what is typical of the communist ideology as well, is its (direct or indirect) reduction by the narrators in the interviews, to some formal language practice that is conditioned by the time of its existence, or to some authoritative discourse, through which it is necessary to contextualise everything in order to achieve something in the system.

Similarly, the performance of the party positions at the level of the army unit, regiment, or the army is retrospectively trivialised by the narrators – holders of these positions. They emphasise that this was a necessity that was conditioned by the time of its existence. On the contrary, the narrators – ordinary party members – view the performance of such party positions in a critical way and regard them as convincing evidence of "collaboration" with the ruling regime (something worse than "mere" passive membership). Also, the narrators usually distinguish between a communist regime as a system installed from outside (by the Soviet Union) and the system of participating individuals. To what extent this is truly a reflection of the narrators' period considerations, and to what extent these are the narrators' defence mechanisms in order to maintain personal integrity, adopted by the narrators to come to terms with their communist past, remain the questions.

In this context, it is interesting to discover the strong influence of the post-1989 media, anti-communist discourse in the individual narratives that swelled to a "communist hunt" after 2000. In this context, the narrators try almost obsessively to convince the interviewer or the readers (intentionally or not) that their signing up to the army in the past was "in no case" politically or ideologically motivated. Moreover, they enter the conversation with the expectation that the interviewer or readers (i.e. representatives of the younger generation) will enter the mutual discussion with this "presupposition."

in the eyes of the public dominate his narration; M. Vacek, *Na rovinu: bez studu a bez příkras*, Prague 1994, p. 28.

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This study focuses on the reflection of the relationship between the army and ideology in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. The main attention is paid to the issue of membership of Czechoslovak People's Army officers in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia before 1968. Through the analysis of oral-historical interviews, the author follows the narrative and legitimizing strategies of rejecting or accepting party membership, which was one of the conditions of career growth in the military during the period under review. An important factor in (re) constructing narrators' memories in this case is the current media image of the communist regime in Czech society.

Keywords: army, ideology, oral history, Czechoslovakia, communist regime, party membership, 1960s

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"Offer not to be refused". Ideology and Communist Party Membership before 1968 in the Narratives of Czechoslovak Officer Corps