



Mezi pakárnou a službou vlasti. Základní vojenská služba (1968–2004) v aktérské reflexi, Jiří Hlaváček (ed.)
(The army as a tool of socialisation. A picture of the phenomenon of compulsory military service in the Czech lands (1968–2024)), Praha 2021, pp. 447

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Within the practice of oral history, there are (not always fully acknowledged) national research traditions – established approaches to how research projects “should be done,” who should be interviewed, and what should be discussed. A distinctive feature of Czech oral history is the strong institutionalisation of the discipline, with a particular focus on the study of entire groups or social categories. The book under review, which focuses on the experience of Czechs’ compulsory military service between 1968 and the point it was abolished at the beginning of the 21st century, can also be situated within this trend. Furthermore, it serves as an exemplary illustration of the utilisation of new methodologies in military history, which, when integrated with cultural and social history and oral history, have culminated in an intriguing, revealing, and pioneering work.

The book is the result of a research project entitled “Armáda jako nástroj socializace: reflexe fenoménu základní vojenské služby v českých zemích (1968–2004)” (“The army as a tool of socialisation. A picture of the phenomenon of compulsory military service in the Czech lands (1968–2004)”) and was carried out between 2019 and 2021 at two units of the Czech Academy of Sciences: Institute of Contemporary History and Institute of Ethnology. The project primarily entailed the recording of approximately one hundred interviews with individuals who had served as conscripts prior to 2004. These were combined with an archival search, primarily of military materials and various legal acts, and of relevant literature, as a source base for the book. The book was authored by a team of six individuals, comprising oral historians, military historians, and an ethnologist. The principal authors of the work were Jiří Hlaváček, editor of the entire publication and member of the staff of the Institute of Contemporary History and the Department of Oral History at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, and Petr Wohlmuth from the same department. The individual parts were also written by Prokop Tomek, Karel Altman, Pavel Mücke, and Lenka Krátká. For two of these – Tomek and Altman – compulsory service in the Czechoslovak People’s Army was not only a research topic but also a personal experience. The other authors were fortunate to be born too late for that.

The keyword of the title and the entire book, *pakárna*, is difficult to translate literally. The term originates from the colloquial register of the Czech language and can be defined as a burdensome and meaningless or stupid task or situation. The term *pakárna* represents one of the extremes along a spectrum of experiences endured by soldiers in Czechoslovakia; the other is “service to the fatherland,” as referenced in the title. However, the content of the book challenges the literal interpretation of the title, suggesting that the notion of “service to the fatherland” was rather an ideological construct, a myth, while the common, everyday reality of military service for conscripted soldiers was *pakárna*. The picture revealed

by the interviews and archival materials is characterised by a range of challenging experiences, including instances of violence and harassment perpetrated by older soldiers against their younger counterparts but also by feelings of boredom and a longing for a return to a normal life.

The book is comprised of six comprehensive sections, or chapters, along with a methodological introduction and conclusion authored by Jiří Hlaváček. In addition to a bibliography, a detailed factual index, and a list of abbreviations, the book also includes a compilation of information about the interviewees. All the interviews have been anonymised; only the initials are provided. However, the table includes information about the time and place of service, the type of troops, and the rank and function of the individual narrators. Thus, both ethical and documentary standards were upheld.

The opening chapter, authored by Prokop Tomek, a staff member at the Military History Institute in Prague, provides a comprehensive account of the legal and institutional framework, as well as the conditions for compulsory military service in Czechoslovakia following 1948. It is the sole chapter in the entire book that does not refer to interviews. As a result, it can be regarded as a comprehensive introduction to the subject matter of the entire volume, albeit lacking in detail. However, it is essential for an understanding of the primary research problems. In practice, the two-year service obligation was fulfilled by the majority of young men, resulting in a relatively large Czechoslovak army, with an average of approximately 200,000 soldiers and up to 300,000 in the first half of the 1950s. In contrast to the People's Republic of Poland, there was no possibility until 1990 of fulfilling the "duty to defend the fatherland" in the form of substitute military service (*civilná služba*). The only privileged group in this regard were university graduates, who served one year in the army (after previously successfully completing a year's military study at the university), starting immediately as non-commissioned officers and ending with the rank of officer.

The second chapter, authored by Karel Altman, an ethnologist at the Brno branch of the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jiří Hlaváček, and Peter Wohlmuth, addresses the subject of the daily life of conscripted soldiers, with a particular focus on the intricate system of rituals that accompany its course. This section of the book is arguably the most engaging. The text combines an analysis of social history with an ethnographic sensitivity to the symbols and ritualisation of everyday life. The analysis demonstrates that the position of a conscript soldier was primarily determined by the duration of his service, establishing a hierarchy that superseded the order of military ranks and official regulations. Furthermore, many of the behaviours described here – the elaborate informal soldier's dictionary, the wearing of a tailor's tape-measure and cutting off one piece every day, the loosening of a trouser belt or suspenders, the various forms of "locksocking" of young recruits by the "old army," the ritual

of the transition from “tyro” to “old sweats” (*mazák*) – are reminiscent of the situation known from the Polish People’s Army and other conscription-based armies. In some respects, the similarity is so striking (even in detail) that it implies the question of its cause.

Another chapter by Pavel Mücke of the Institute of Contemporary History addresses the experience of the aforementioned students’ military service. As one can easily assume, critical memories are predominant, told either in a comedically ironic spirit or more seriously – in the spirit of the “fight for survival.” The one-year military service is often associated with boredom and poor-quality food, as well as an extension of the student-dormitory experience: another year of living away from home, without family, but in a peer group. In this sense, for many of the graduates, military service was not as significant a biographical rite of passage as it was for other recruits. Additionally, this chapter presents specific case studies of individuals who deliberately utilised military service as a means of acquiring skills and experiences that would prove beneficial in their subsequent careers. One such example is the pursuit of a career as a military historian.

The fourth section, authored by Lenka Krátka from the Institute of Contemporary History and the Charles University’s Department of Oral History, addresses the representation of masculinity among conscripted soldiers in the memories of the interviewees and in feature films. Incorporating these additional sources provided an intriguing comparative context for the interviewees’ narratives. However, it also dominated the chapter’s content, which regrettably resulted in the marginalisation of oral history itself. An analysis of the portrayal of masculinity narratives reveals interesting conclusions. While the narratives align with the conventional understanding of hegemonic masculinity, as conceptualised by Raewyn W. Connell, the interviews demonstrate a notable divergence. Unlike the author’s perspective, the interviews exhibit for me a multifaceted portrayal of masculinity, encompassing both traditional stereotypes and portrayals of emotional vulnerability.

The majority of the book under review (approximately 200 pages) consists of the final two sections. The first of these sections, authored by Petr Wohlmuth, examines the regulations governing social conduct (*disciplinační řád*, literally: “order of discipline”) within the Czechoslovak army. The second text, authored by Jiří Hlaváček, is entitled *Lost time that will make a man out of you?!* and addresses the discrepancy between the meanings ascribed to military service in official discourse and the experiences of the interviewees. The two texts serve as exemplary instances of integrating the emerging field of the history of warfare, situating it at the nexus of cultural history and oral history. The authors not only successfully capture the informal system of meanings and rules (which is a strength of oral history) associated with basic military service but also reflect on how their interviewees evaluate and perceive it. In this context, the most intriguing thesis

advanced in *Mezi pakárnou...*, and arguably the most challenging to substantiate, is the one that links the particularly brutal nature of the Czechoslovak *mazácka vojna*, according to the authors, more ruthless than the Polish *fala* or the Soviet *djedovszcina*, to the trauma of 1968.¹

The sense of uselessness and failure meant that the army did not receive public respect, and a lot of its principles and objectives remained fictional, including many elements of actual combat preparation, as both ordinary conscripts and professional soldiers knew. The discrepancy between ideological principles and the elaborate and informal order of army life resulted not only in the widespread presence of violence but also in a *de facto* weakening of what could be called the army's combat value and social prestige. Contrary to the ritually repeated words about the prestige and "man-creating" role of the army, what emerges from the interviews is a picture of a useless total institution and widespread social dislike (and at times contempt) for the conscript army, and service in it as an unpleasant life necessity that one must somehow survive. This, in turn, slightly changes the view of discourses on the military and masculinity – the authors interpret them rather as a form of "mental hygiene," a way of searching for meaning and fitting memories from the period of military service into the available framework of discourse on masculinity and uniform.

As can be seen, despite the individual authors' varied assessments and perspectives, they have created a valuable and reasonably coherent picture of the experience of military service among Czechs after 1968. This was largely due to the extensive and diverse source base, comprising hundreds of suitably diverse recordings, and the consistent use of a cultural history perspective to interpret them.² The disclaimer in the book's subtitle, which is repeated several times in the text, states that this is a picture of military service "from the perspective of the participants" (*v aktérské rexlexi*), rather than a definitive history of military service. This serves to emphasise the subjectivist and constructivist approach of the authors to historical reality. On occasion, however, it appears to be a somewhat superfluous form of defence against the potential accusation that this is not a history of military service as such but rather a subjective representation of it – a set of a variety of military discourses (to use John Lynn's concept, as cited by the authors). The picture that emerges from the book by Hlaváček and his team is decidedly intersubjective, with recurring situations observed from different perspectives. As is often the case with oral history research, it is not always possible to accurately capture the dynamics of change, nor can the spheres of personal experience and collective perceptions be entirely separated (this is particularly

1 The term 'trauma' is not developed in the book; it is used here for the sake of brevity.

2 It is worth noting that the authors' use of the category of "post-positivist oral history," which includes Portelli, Passerini, and Thompson, may not be entirely coherent.

evident when interpreting the memories of someone other than the storyteller themselves – recognisable by expressions such as “one colleague” or “he was in our ward,” etc.). However, this is partially achieved in the book by confronting other types of sources.

While reading *Mezi pakárnou...*, I was struck by the following observation: the portrayal of conscript military service as seen through the eyes of the participants is, in methodological terms, a reflection of historical reality. It seems that other readers also shared this impression. As the book was published at the end of 2021, the discussion about it – unfortunately relatively modest³ – was mainly for the time after 24 February 2022⁴ when, in the wake of Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, voices in the Czech Republic (and beyond) emerged advocating for the reinstatement of conscription. The conclusions of the book under review have, therefore, taken on new significance as a compelling argument against such a solution.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the aforementioned contemporary context, I also consider the reviewed book to be an excellent illustration of how oral history can facilitate the exploration of hitherto unknown dimensions of reality, the formulation of novel research questions, and the subsequent elucidation of their answers. It is my hope that this will serve as an inspiration for further research in this field, including in Poland and the history of the Polish military, as well as in other post-communist countries. This is because, apart from the individual research explorations of Dariusz Jarosz or Jarosław Kilias, the history of conscript military service in the People’s Republic of Poland remains a largely unexplored research area, except for a few detailed accounts of the military service of members of the clergy. It may, therefore, be worthwhile to consider the possibility of adopting the approach to large-scale research projects on selected social groups and categories that has been successfully employed in Czech oral history in other countries.

3 To date, only one relatively brief review of this book has been published in a scholarly journal, authored by Vojtěch Čurda, *Recenze: Jiří Hlaváček (ed.), Mezi pakárnou a službou vlasti*, „Marginalia historica: časopis pro dějiny vzdělanosti a kultury”, vol. 12, no. 2 (2021), pp. 63–65.

4 See: P. Zídek, *Když vojna nebyla kojná: Mezi pakárnou a službou vlasti* conducted on 18 August 2022, on a prominent digital platform: Novinky.cz, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/kultura-kdyz-vojna-nebyla-kojna-mezi-pakarnou-a-sluzbou-vlasti-40405462> [accessed: 26.07.2024].