

Hlaváček, Jiří (ed.): Mezi pakárnou a službou vlasti. Základní vojenská služba (1968-2004) v aktérské reflexi [Between a Nuthouse and Service to the Country. Basic Military Service (1968-2004) in the Reflections of the Actors].

Academia, Praha 2021, 448 pp. ISBN 978-80-200-3332-1.

This important volume covers the experiences of military service in the Czechoslovak People's Army from 1968 to 1989, in the post-communist Czechoslovak Army from 1989 to 1992, and then in the Czech Army from 1993 to 2004, when mandatory service ended and the Czech military turned fully professional. To some extent, this work fills a gap, since the post-1968 military had previously not seen a lot of scholarly attention in academic circles – perhaps because the People's Army under Soviet occupation and during the Normalization era seemed almost “impotent” and hence irrelevant for any ambitious study in social and political history. The Czech Army, soon a NATO member, with its short history was likely more a study object for anthropologists than for historians and may have appeared inaccessible to

traditional research based on public records. Most institutional histories on the Czechoslovak military end in 1968 or, for Slovakia, in 1992. Little was written even about this early period apart from memoirs or books on specific aspects of military history. The social life in the army remained, to some extent, a closed box.

Yet mandatory military service was a social reality experienced by millions of young Czechoslovaks throughout the 20th century, generally for a period of two years. The topic is therefore crucial to understanding how militarized socialism functioned at the peak of the Cold War, as well as how serving in the army evolved after the demise of communism – even more so because historians and social scientists have often considered conscription to be a laboratory of modernity for both empires and nation-states, and as a tool not only for national defense but also (and sometimes primarily) for the domestic policing of society. In this vein, the volume editor underlines how ambivalent the Czechoslovak society was towards the military service, which was perceived as both oppressive and necessary for the ritual transition from youth to adulthood in a complex game of avoidance and assertions of masculinity.

The collective of authors faced a methodological challenge: Archival documents are available for only a segment of the scrutinized period and strongly biased, as all official records are, by their context of production (for post-Prague Spring communist Czechoslovakia) or not yet fully accessible (for the democratic Czech Republic). Consequently, the contributors relied on interviews, testimonies, and cultural products such as movies to investigate the phenomenon. The research team secured a grant, and the study was conducted from 2019 to 2021 under the aegis of the Czech Academy of Sciences (its Institute of Contemporary History and Institute of Ethnology) and the leadership of Jiří Hlaváček, at the crossroads of anthropology and history. The mentioned inclination for oral history – about 90 interviews conducted by more than 15 investigators – echoes the academic specialization of several of the authors including Hlaváček himself. To complement the contemporary witnesses' narratives, published sources (laws, orders, regulations, etc.) as well as articles and books from the period under scrutiny, a few published memoirs, various movies and TV series, and online resources were used. The volume gathers a team of specialists from several disciplines: historian Prokop Tomek, whose expertise in Czechoslovak military history has long been acknowledged, oral historian Pavel Mücke, ethnologist Karel Altmann, historical anthropologist Petr Wohlmuth, and social historian Lenka Krátká. Despite these differences in background, all of the authors are committed to lending space to the actors' voices and agency, following new military history perspectives.

Without going into too much detail, it is worth underlining the topics put forth by this volume. Most of the contextual, legal, and quantitative background on military service from 1948 onward is provided by Prokop Tomek. It is a very useful synthesis on this institution, especially as an introduction for young researchers looking for reliable data and facts. Several authors focus on the bottom-up perspective, trying to outline and follow the usual trajectory of a conscript in the Czechoslovak Army. Pavel Mücke contributes a specific section on university students, who were often fraught with a certain insecurity concerning the dangers, precarity, absurdity,

and comical aspects of both the military and their studies years before they could achieve a position of (professional, affective, geographical) stability. Lenka Krátká deals mostly with a gender perspective on the topic, discussing how (patriarchal-traditional-dominant-violent) masculinity and (real and ideal) relationships to women remained key to the social experience of military service under communism and are remembered accordingly. She emphasizes that, like in a carceral environment, men were deprived of rights and assigned to subaltern tasks labeled as “feminine” – and as a result they felt a need to reaffirm their masculine strength and identity, notably by reifying (passive) women and expecting them to value their masculine-military (new) identity. Other contributions address discipline and violence as well as rituals, ideology, indifference, and humor as a form of mental hygiene (*psychohygiena*, p. 405) and a tool for survival. In the army, domination was not just a vertical phenomenon from leadership to subalterns; it also included a more complex interplay between new (*ptáci, bažanti*) and veteran (*mazáci*) conscripts, in which violence (hazing) was also present. A social contract of sorts allowed for the perpetuation of hierarchy, limited transgressions, and forms of (micro)solidarity.

One aspect which appears to remain in the background is the role played by the Soviet Army and its soldiers-occupiers in post-1968 Czechoslovakia (until the early 1990s). Their presence alone, even without any geographical proximity forcing young Czechoslovak men to interact with them, was a significant limitation to national sovereignty and challenged the very meaning of “defending one’s own country” – not to mention the infringement of the hegemonic masculinity of local soldiers entailed by the occupation. More archival research would likely complement the excellent work of collecting interviews achieved by the contributors.

Finally, one limitation – openly acknowledged by the authors on p. 154 – is the distinctly Czecho-Czech perimeter of the study. It might be rewarding to expand the discussion to other Czechoslovak actors and regions, as well as to foreign territories where mandatory military service was challenged by subaltern actors not just for ideological reasons but – like in Central Europe – because of the constraints, recurrent violence, and deprivation of individual freedom young soldiers dreaded. The works of Odile Roynette for France (“Bons pour le service”. *L’expérience de la caserne en France à la fin du XIXe siècle*, 2000) and Richard Vinen for Great Britain (*National Service: A Generation in Uniform 1945–1963*, 2014), for instance, would resonate vividly with the Czech experiences described in the book.

The volume editor Jiří Hlaváček notably concludes that reinstating mandatory military service – as has been debated in most European countries, even more so after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – would likely lead to opposition because of the dominant subjectivity regarding such service: For most “veterans,” it has meant a loss of time and a deprivation of their freedom. Whatever may remain of the memory of the communist-era draft during the coming years or decades in former Soviet-dominated Europe, the security situation has changed – but consent to mandatory military service does not seem to be increasing in proportion to the growing threats for Europe.