

Different Stories of One Battle: The Moravian-Ostrava Offensive in Historiography and Collective Memory¹

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the historiography and remembrance of a significant battle, fought between the Red Army and German forces in the last week of World War II in Europe on the present Czech-Polish border. In the opening part of the paper, the historical surveys are depicted and analysed. The text also examines “official” forms of remembrance, such as museums and memorials, as well as popular narratives, myths and common tales surrounding the military operation, which are seen in the context of a specific collective identity of the population of the borderland. The article seeks correlations between professional research, political rhetoric and other aspects that created the “popular image” of the offensive. The question of regional memory is understood in the context of nation-wide debates about contemporary history.

Keywords:

Moravian-Ostrava offensive, Narrative, Liberation, Collective memory, Historiography

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Introduction

On April 3, 2020, a statue of Soviet Marshall Konev in Prague was removed due to a decision of the city council. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the act renewed and intensified a long-lasting nation-wide dispute about the role of the Red Army in 1945. The recent events again confirmed the complexity of the highly politicized controversy, related to various narratives of “liberation”, dating back to post-war years.

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The changing and competing narratives can be illustrated on the example of the so-called “Moravian-Ostrava offensive”³ (*Moravsko-Ostravskaja nastupatel'naja operacija* in Russian, *Moravsko-ostravská operace* in Czech) or simply “Moravian offensive”, which took place between the 10th of March and the 5th of May 1945 in Silesia and Northern Moravia alongside today’s Czech-Polish border. This event belonged to the biggest and most important battles of World War II in Czechoslovakia. Various interpretations, common tales and myths started to appear soon after the war and remain quite important for identity of local population and for collective memory till recent days. In a specific milieu of the border region, the narrative often differs from “official” or predominating viewpoints, as seen from a nationwide perspective.

This article focuses on the narrative and reception of the combat operations in both regional and national historiography as well as in political and media debates in the Czech case. In particular, the article analyses the relations between the above-mentioned aspects. How did the regional interpretation correlate with the national or international perspective? What similarities or differences occurred? Can we see any tendencies to either underestimate or overestimate the importance of the offensive? The paper also attempts to examine the impact of historical research on the popular and political image of the events of 1945. Did the statements of historians and other experts influence the rhetoric of politicians and media? And – vice versa – did the historians distort or change their points of view in accordance to changing political situation? Are the “professional” and “popular” narratives correlating or competing? What were (and are) the motivations to re-consider the existing narratives and interpretations in both nationwide and local perspectives?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to use various sources. No sociological survey, focused on war-related memory in the region, exists. For a wider context, secondary publications about the collective identity of inhabitants of the Czech-Polish borderland proves as helpful (Riedel 2018). The “professional” interpretation of war events can be reconstructed and analysed quite easily through published historical books and articles. Press and media help us to understand the “political” narrative. The most complicated task is to comprehend the “popular” narrative, which is constructed and maintained mainly in non-written forms. The analysis is contingent on disparate references on Internet social networks, or short newspapers texts, such as feuilletons and memoirs.

3 Named after the then name of the city Moravská Ostrava (German: Mährisch Ostrau).

Course of military operations

In order to describe and understand the later reception and narratives of the offensive, it is necessary to briefly depict the course of the combat operations. Around 155 thousand troops were involved on the Soviet side, including the 1st Czechoslovak Independent Tank Brigade and the 1st Czechoslovak Combined Air Force Division. The offensive was carried out by the 4th Ukrainian Front, namely by the 1st Guard and 38th armies together with the 8th Air Force Army. 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 supported by Volkssturm and other irregular armed formations, including Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe personnel who had been evacuated from regional hospitals and then quickly equipped for infantry operations. During the first stage of the operation, the experienced 1st Tank Army commanded by legendary mastermind of defensive strategy, Gotthard Heinrici, was the leading the Axis forces in the area. German defence used parts of the pre-war Czechoslovak fortification line from 1930s. The troops often fortified in towns and villages, which led to civilian victims and heavy damage in built-up areas.

One of the main goals of the offensive was to retain the army group „Mitte“ under infamous Ferdinand Schörner in the Czech territory and prevent the force from engaging in the defence of German capital. Stalin's primary goal was to take Berlin as soon as possible and thus he deployed most of manpower and material to reach this objective (Antill 2005). 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 action. The attack in Silesia was intended to also relieve the Soviet units in Austria and Eastern Moravia from the pressure of the enemy and, if possible, to conquer and preserve the industrial area and railway junction around Ostrava.

On March 10, two armies of the 4th Ukrainian Front attacked from the north-east in the Strumieň area and tried to reach Ostrava coal mining district through 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. Commander of the 4th Ukrainian Front, general Petrov, decided to join the 60th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front, which performed effective offensive action in the Ratibor area. At the end of March, Soviets managed to cross the Odra river and proceeded to the pre-war Czech-German border. Petrov's plan was to take Ostrava by encirclement from the north-west. During this operation, Petrov was replaced

by Adrei Jeremenko. Nevertheless, the new commander continued in the effort of his predecessor.

In mid-April, Jeremenko divided his forces into two groups. The first group was supposed to conquer heavily fortified Opava to prevent German troops in western Silesia from attacking the Soviet army proceeding to Ostrava. The second group advanced to Ostrava. Both groups of Jeremenko's forces experienced heavy fighting, including house-to-house combat in towns and villages. On April 22, the Soviets pushed the remains of the German elite mountain division from Opava. Ostrava was conquered during the last day of the month. In the following days, Jeremenko advanced through mountainous terrain through Northern Moravia to take Olomouc. The goal was reached during the very last days of the war on the European continent.

Identity, Ideology and Historiography

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 seen to be as an important topic of regional Polish historiography, as it has been in the Czech case. During the military operations, most of the fighting area in today's Poland 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 present-day Ukraine. The new-settlers had not directly witnessed the Ostrava offensive and, consequently, it did not become part of their family or regional memory. Due to this fact, Polish authors described the events of March and April 1945 sporadically, usually as one of many parts of regional history, or as a significant step on the „way to socialism“ (Hawranek 1975). After 1989, the Polish historians denied the concept of „liberation“ by the Red Army, which is still influential in Czech milieu, and often stressed the negative impacts of Soviet presence in the region (e.g. sex crimes, political and ethnic purges, Soviet support for the newly established communist regime etc.). In comparison, it was mainly the Polish home resistance groups' activities in the area that attracted more attention (Hanczuch, Mrowiec & Sput 2007; Therr & Siljak 2001).

In the Czech context, it is important to understand the ethnic and cultural structure of the region of fighting. Most of the combat operations were fought in mainly Czech-inhabited territory. The Poles lived in the Těšín region in the eastern part of the battlefield which was, to a lesser degree, affected to by combat operations. The area was taken quickly by the Red Army without heavy fighting in the first days of May, so the military actions did not become a significant part of

local collective memory. The local narrative of war is mainly associated with the previous experience of Nazi persecution and home resistance within the Polish minority in the region (Borák 1990). The lack of remembrance amongst local Poles is partly caused by traditional anti-Russian (or anti-Soviet) narrative of the story of Polish ethnic and political self-determination.

In the north-western part of the fighting region and in bigger cities (Opava, Ostrava) German communities lived, most of them were expelled soon after the war. A specific area was the Hlučín region, the former part of Prussia and German Empire, which was seized by Czechoslovakia in 1920, later annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, and returned to Czechoslovakia after the war. The population was mainly Czech speaking and Roman Catholic, but significantly influenced by German culture (Pavelčíková 1990). Unlike the majority of the German population, the inhabitants of the Hlučín region were not relocated after 1945. In general, most of the witnesses of 1945 combats and their descendants stayed in the region and created strong and lasting collective memory⁴.

Soon after the war, the offensive was numerously mythologised. Most of the Czech authors explained the north-western encirclement of Ostrava as a systematic plan to prevent the Germans from destroying the important industrial city. In fact, the main aim of the operation was to break through the German defence to the Olomouc region in Northern Moravia and meet the troops of the 2nd Ukrainian Front proceeding from the south via Budapest, Vienna and Brno. After reaching the meeting point, both Soviet fronts were supposed to attack Central Bohemia and reach Prague from the east. The original plan did not calculate an attack against Ostrava from the north-west. In fact, it was a consequence of failure of the first offensive attempt in Strumień area. Strictly speaking, since the start of the offensive, Germans had 50 days to destroy the industrial facilities, had they desired to do so.

Even though it certainly would have been beneficial for the Soviets and Czechoslovaks to preserve the coal mines, factories and railways, there was not a systematic plan in place to achieve it. The fact that the industrial wealth was luckily saved was later misinterpreted as evidence of the Soviet tendency to protect Czechoslovak property compared to the allegedly „useless“ British and American air raids on industrial facilities in occupied Bohemia and Moravia (Matýsek 1995; Plavec 2012). Despite the evidence given by modern historians, the myth was often stressed in media debates related to the anniversary of the offensive in 2015.

4 The last sociological surveys of memory and identity in Czech Silesia neglected the role of war events in collective memory (See Kubátová 2016; Šrajeroová 2015).

Another symbol of the liberation of Ostrava is the legend of Miloš Sýkora, a young local man killed on the 30th of April. He allegedly died when under enemy fire he courageously removed explosives from the so-called Imperial Bridge on the Ostravica river near the town centre and thus prevented the Germans from blowing up the bridge. Despite the fact that Sýkora's role remains unclear; the importance of the bridge was – and still is – often overestimated. According to popular interpretations, the saved bridge was decisive for the liberation of the city. In fact, at the moment Soviet troops were already operating on both banks of the river and the Germans were retreating, so the destruction of the bridge would probably not have had any important impact (Hamza 2005). The bridge was also not the only preserved crossing of the river, as Sýkora's legend suggested, a railway bridge just a kilometre away was also saved by a local resistance group (Przybylová 2015).

Another common tale said that Czechoslovak soldiers, fighting alongside the Red Army, had to conquer the pre-war fortifications they had built in 1930s. In fact, only one of the Czechoslovaks involved in the offensive had served in the region before the war (Kopecký 2001).

Most of the myths were created spontaneously by the locals, and later on these myths were selectively misused by the communist regime. The communist officials often highlighted the alleged failure of pre-war political elites, who had not allowed the army to defend the fortified border during the Munich crisis in 1938 and celebrated the Soviet role in preserving Ostrava in 1945.

While this politicized common interpretation was quite simple, the written history of the offensive was much more complicated. In the first phase after the war, the combat operations were depicted mainly in local newspapers, as well as chronicles of towns, schools, gendarmerie posts and other institutions. The newspapers and magazines reflected on the topic immediately after the liberation and then mainly on anniversaries in 1946 and 1947. The articles often consisted of personal stories and small local episodes of the fighting, which made them very valuable for description of “everyday life” and mentalities. Political parties and fractions who published the papers and journals, competed for the merit in their role in the home resistance (Štěpán 2002). In general however, all newspapers wrote with respect for the Soviet soldiers and Czechoslovak exile army.

During the 1950s, the research conditions were not good due to a complicated political situation and faction struggles inside the ruling communist party. Another challenge for the first historians of the events of 1945 was simply technical – most of the relevant sources could be found in Soviet and German archives, which were not accessible to Czechoslovak researchers at the time.

One of the first authors trying to systematically describe the military operations was Emil Vávrovský, a teacher and former participant of anti-Nazi resistance. His books were based on regional research, and it naturally neglected German and Soviet sources to which the author had no access. Vávrovský mainly used oral history and municipal chronicles, but he also partly censored parts about resistance of middle and upper classes or religious life during and after the war in order to support the ruling communist ideology (Vávrovský 1965; Kolář 2017).

In the mid 1950s, when Vávrovský started his research on chronicles, Václav Širc, an ex-serviceman, interviewed former soldiers of the Czechoslovak tank brigade, who had fought in the Moravian-Ostrava offensive. Unfortunately, the testimonies he collected were often anonymous. Širc focused on combat operations, but some of the collected documents also depicted everyday life, including mistreatment of Czechoslovak soldiers by Soviet officers. Some testimonies underestimated war efforts on the western theatre of war and the role of Czechoslovak troops fighting in France in order to exaggerate the Soviet role in the war. The research by Širc on Moravian-Ostrava offensive was never published in a comprehensive form. The author was mainly interested in the history of the Czech minority in Volhynia (where many soldiers fighting in Ostrava came from) and wrote several books about military operations in Dukla pass in 1944⁵, unfortunately his interest in the Moravian-Ostrava offensive was not systematic. Documents collected by Širc in 1950s are now archived in the Silesian Museum in Opava.

The political and social stabilisation in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s created good conditions for systematic research. Vávrovský published most of his previous findings comprehensively in the mid-60s. Within the same period of time, Karel Jiřík, director of the Ostrava municipal archive, focused on military operations in Ostrava, and he also published several papers about home resistance, mainly in a descriptive form, based on both official sources and oral history (Suldovský 1974). After 1968, Jiřík was forbidden from publishing due to his attitude to the regime, some of his papers were published under names of his colleagues.

It is important to point out that the first historians of the Moravian-Ostrava offensive had no affiliation to academic or other scientific institutions. Their effort was primarily motivated by their personal interest. Official research institutions of the region, like the Silesian Institute of Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Slezský ústav Československé akademie věd*), founded in 1958, focused

5 In 1970s and 1980s he co-edited journal *Dukla věčně živá* (Dukla forever alive), based on memoirs and recollections of war veterans.

mainly on the economic history of the Nazi era, not on the military operations (Ficek 1969). Another popular war-related topic of the 1960s and 1970s was the question of partisan resistance groups, reflected by both local enthusiasts (including Vávrovský) and academic professionals, such as Josef Bartoš from Palacký University in Olomouc.

The events of 1968, leading to occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact armies, undermined the respect of Czechoslovak population to Soviet policy. Stressing the efforts of the Red Army in 1945 was one of methods used by communist authorities to improve the image of the Soviet Union. These circumstances also enabled research in Soviet archives. Historian Břetislav Tvarůžek, supported by official authorities, used Soviet sources for the first time in his classic piece of operational history in 1973. He also managed to describe the military operations in a complex way (Tvarůžek 1973). Three years later, Czechoslovak readers were given the opportunity to study newly translated memoirs of Soviet general Kirill Moskalenko, who had commanded the 38th Army assaulting Ostrava in 1945 (Moskalenko 1976).

While Vávrovský and Tvarůžek dealt with the Ostrava offensive as a whole (despite the limited sources, mainly in the case of Vávrovský), other authors focused on particular problems or biographies. Jaromír Matýšek, historian of Museum of Revolutionary Combats (Muzeum revolučních bojů, see below), published several smaller studies about air warfare in Ostrava region in 1944 and 1945. His articles focused mainly on American operations; the research continued after 1989. Matýšek worked with limited local sources and secondary literature; he had no access to American, Soviet or German archives (Matýšek 1995).

Jan Rohel, a former colleague of Vávrovský, a teacher, member of home resistance and non-professional historian and ethnographer (Kolář 2019), wrote a few biographies of participants of the fighting of 1945, including Rudolf Peška, officer of the Czechoslovak exile army and later director of Vítkovice ironworks (Březina & Rohel 1984). According to Rohel and other sources from the 1970s and 1980s, Peška was in contact with resistance fighters from Ostrava who provided information about the German troops in the city at the end of April. While the communication between the Red Army and various bodies of the Czechoslovak resistance seemed probable (Březina & Rohel 1984), the role of Peška was often overestimated in media and popular disputes and debates. Some statements suggested the decisive impacts of Peška's actions for liberating Ostrava and preventing Germans from destroying the crucial industrial objects. In fact, during the days before the capture of Ostrava, Czechoslovak troops were deployed in other sectors far away from Ostrava (Kopecký 2001).

In general, the historiography of the communist era focused on operational and oral history. The local population was seen either as participants of resistance, or victims of Nazi oppression. The specific ethnic and cultural structure of population was not perceived as a significant topic. Books and articles by Vávrovský, Tvarůžek, Jiřík, or Rohel created an “universal” Slavic and socialist narrative of liberation.

Historiography without Ideology?

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 brought attention to other topics of contemporary history. The last decade of the 20th Century witnessed stagnation of the research related to Moravian-Ostrava offensive. The few post-1989 publications were based mainly on oral history and memoirs, including personal stories of former Czechoslovak officers Josef Buršík and Mikuláš Končický (Buršík 1992). Despite the subjectivity, the books give a colourful picture of combat experience and the everyday life of Czechoslovak soldiers. The books depict many issues tabooed by pre-1989 authors.

Furthermore, the documentary movie *Tankisté* (Tank Crews) from 2003, created by Czech Television and group of regional historians, was based on oral history. The film broke some taboos including sexual crimes committed by soldiers. It also disputed the traditional description of events on the Imperial Bridge and role of Miloš Šýkora. In some parts, the testimonies of veterans are lacking wider contextualisation and explanation of strategic and political situation of the depicted era.

A collection of personal memoirs of Czechoslovak war veterans was published for the 65th anniversary of the end of the war and reprinted several years later by a collective of editors from Ostrava University (‘Ostravsko’ 2010). The text consisted mostly of random personal stories lacking wider context and confirmation through other sources. The text’s main contribution is the eyewitness description of combat experience. Few historians attempted to revisit some myths and alleged stories. Mainly the research of Pavel Hamza, examining the role of Miloš Šýkora, deserves attention (Hamza 2005). Another former taboo, opened in the post-communist era, was the question of people from the Hlučín region, many of whom – as German citizens – served in the armed forces of the Third Reich during wartime (Emmert 2005; Plaček 2007).

Most of the above-mentioned publications stressed the combat operations in and around the city of Ostrava and the participation of Czechoslovak troops. In 2017, a collective of authors led by František Švábenický published an

edited volume, which deserved attention for several reasons (Švábenický 2017), the most prominent of which is the shift of interest to Opava. Authors focused on the operational history in the context of Nazi plans and administration in the region. The book uses Soviet and German sources and focuses also on-air warfare and deployment of the Volkssturm and irregular combat troops. The book was followed by partial papers focusing on everyday life during the war and the experiences of the civilian population in recent years (Kolář 2017).

An important and interesting view “from the other side” was presented by German historian Josef Ossadnik in 2003. His detailed edited volume combined official reports of German military troops and personal stories of war veterans (Ossadnik 2003).

In 2019, a documentary named *Bitva o Ostravsko* (Battle of Ostrava Region) was filmed by regional television studio Polar. The film focused on operational history, authors used materials from foreign archives. The film also reflected wider diplomatic and strategic circumstances and strictly avoided political or moral interpretations. Mainly historians of the younger generation from various institutions and military professionals were involved in the filming.

Social development of the post-communist era also led to growing interest in specific attributes of Hlučín region and its wartime history (Emmert 2005; Neminář 2018). The “German” memory of the population could be publicly discussed and presented again.

It should be stressed that most of the post-1989 historians of Moravian-Ostrava offensive were not academic professionals (despite the fact that two universities in Opava and Ostrava arose in 1990s), but either employers of local museums, or freelancers. In recent days, new research in German military archives has been carried out by Aleš Binar from the University of Defence (*Univerzita Obrany*) in Brno.

Generally, the main interest of post-communist historians was still focused on research of combat operations, while the partial shift to “new military history” (see Hughes & Pilpott 2006) can be witnessed. The authors still overwhelmingly respected the narrative of “liberation” by the Red Army, although the debate about negative aspects of Soviet actions was opened.

Sites of Memory: Museums and Monuments

The history of the Moravian-Ostrava offensive was presented and analysed not just in books and documentaries, but also in museum exhibitions

and on many various commemorative actions. The above-mentioned *Muzeum revolučních bojů* (MRB) was founded in 1963 as a detached part of Silesian Museum (Březina 1976; Šopák 2016). It followed up the effort of Documentary Commission of the Communist Party Regional Council, which had documented „revolutionary traditions“ of the region since 1950s. The employees of the MRB carried out hundreds of interviews with veterans of home resistance and exile army, often held as group sessions. The museum also collected militaria, written and printed documents and photographs. In 1980, the museum was transformed to an independent body under the new name of Museum of Revolutionary Combats and Liberation (*Muzeum revolučních bojů a osvobození*, MRBO). The museum had a long-term exhibition dedicated to Ostrava offensive in the *chateau* in Kravaře and organized smaller short-term exhibitions in Ostrava.

The main problem of the MRB/MRBO was lack of systematic usage of collected materials. The memoirs and other sources were not cross-checked or supplemented by further research in archives. No influential syntheses or case studies were published as a result. The MRB aimed on education and propaganda, executed through exhibitions, lectures and talks with veterans. Research ambitions were complicated due to fluctuation of employers. During the 1980s, some of historians from the MRB published important papers on the Polish home resistance in the Těšín territory during the era of Nazi occupation. The director of the museum Alfons Březina wrote several minor compilations about the combat actions of 1945, often co-authored by other historians (Březina & Schwarz 1980).

Another one of museums aims in the last decade of communist rule was to renovate some parts of the pre-war Czechoslovak fortification line for exhibition purposes. Despite its propagandistic character, in the last years of its existence, the museum contributed to the first efforts to rehabilitate the Czechoslovak non-communist resistance in Great Britain. But the MRBO did not contribute to the study and interpretation of Moravian-Ostrava offensive in any significant way. Nevertheless, its collections represent one of the important sources for further research, used in several smaller case studies in recent years (Falhauer & Rybenský 2019; Kolář 2015).

The attempts to commemorate and interpret the Ostrava offensive were also present in the public space. 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. 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 on local Catholic cemeteries, probably partially due to the approach of the

Catholic Church as it was some to some extent a symptom of the continuing secularisation of the war remembrance (see Donaldson 2014; Winter 2008; Kolář 2018).

In 1946, central cemeteries of Soviet soldiers were established in Opava, Ostrava and Hlučín. In Ostrava, the urns of Czech and Soviet victims were buried together in a mausoleum. The memorial in the 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 symbolical importance of this aspect needs to be understood in the context of post-war „Czechisation“ of overwhelmingly German-populated Opava (Kolář 2016; Švábenický 2017).

During 1950s in Czechoslovakia, the new communist regime had to deal with a plenty of serious problems during that time. After 1960, when the new „socialist“ constitution was adopted, there was a new space for a public debate about the recent past. The Berlin crisis of the early 1960s led political leaders and opinion-makers to new attempts to examine and analyse the history of Czech-German relations, described and understood as a history of conflict. The story of the Nazi era served as a useful means to strengthen the antipathy of the Czech population against Western Germany (Cesar & Černý 1962; Sander 1972).

During the 1960s, many simple war memorials in towns and villages were built. But many more of those occurred during the celebrations of the anniversaries of liberation in 1970, 1975 and 1980. In the first phase, memorials were erected in Opava and the Hlučín regions; in areas, where the people inflicted by the events of 1945 still lived. In the case of Hlučín territory, the war monuments were also projected as a symbol of the Czech character of the former part of Prussia (Plaček 2007). Later during 1970s the memorials occurred also in former German villages of Western Silesia. Sometimes former Great War memorials were adapted for the purpose or just simple commemorative plaques were created. This common practice indicates quite a low level of need for these memorial 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.

While the mausoleum in Ostrava built in 1946 and located near to the city centre was sufficient, Opava during the “normalisation” after 1968 needed new ways to commemorate the liberation. Unlike the Hlučín region or Ostrava, Opava was conquered by the Red Army without any participation of Czechoslovak troops. The unpopularity of the Soviets after 1968 led to the decision to associate the war remembrance with a Czechoslovak hero. Two new memorial plaques

were dedicated to Štěpán Vajda, a tank commander killed in action by German sniper in Tworków in present-day Poland. Despite the fact that Vajda did not participate in liberation of Opava (he was already dead for three weeks) as the only Czechoslovak soldier, decorated (posthumously) by the Golden Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union for his efforts during the Ostrava offensive, he proved to be a suitable symbol (Galatik & Zona 2017).

In the late 1960s, the North Moravian Regional Council of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia decided to create a grant memorial of the Moravian-Ostrava offensive. The planners chose the village of Hrabyně as a site of memory. More reasons existed for this decision. The village was an important, but not the only symbol of the combat operations of 1945. But its location on a hill, half-way between Opava and Ostrava with a good view on the Hlučín region made Hrabyně a universal, „shared“ and accessible symbol. The location did not favour or neglect any part of the region. Nevertheless, Hrabyně was also a significant site of another, non-communist memory, that had to be destroyed. A local pilgrimage church built by the legendary Czech patriotic priest of the 19th Century Jan Böhm, as well as Ostrá hůrka a few kilometres from Hrabyně, were iconic places of the Czech struggle for ethnic and cultural self-determination during the Habsburg and interwar periods (Blechta 1933; Jordán 2007). In 1969, a commemorative meeting at Ostrá hůrka turned into a massive protest demonstration against the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies an year ago. Regional communist authorities hoped to undermine the symbolical role of the place by construction of a new site of memory, which presented Czech-Soviet cooperation against both fascism and „imperialism“ (Berger & Březina 1985). The authors of the concept also followed higher aims in a wider national context. Regional communist leader Miroslav Mamula (1930–1986) wanted to stress the importance of the Moravian-Ostrava offensive and put it in on the same level as the military operations in Dukla pass in 1944, which were celebrated as an official feast of Czechoslovak armed forces.

The realisation of the project slowed down due to a series of administrative and technical problems. Finally, the memorial was opened to the public in April 1980, 35 years after the liberation of Ostrava. The building, owned by MRBO, served as a place of memory and mourning. Occasionally, temporary exhibitions took place there (Horáková & Poláková 2011).

After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the commemorative practice did not change distinctively. Simple wreath-laying ceremonies were still held in towns and villages. Re-enactment appeared as a new form of remembrance. During 1990s new term „Ostrava – Opava offensive“ (*Ostravsko-opavská operace*

in Czech) started to be used, mainly due to efforts of the Opava city council and civic associations to stress the importance of the battle of Opava. Although disputed by some historians, the term became widespread and commonly used, which was quite a unique case in contemporary military-historical terminology. The memorial in Hrabyně became part of Silesian Museum in the 1990s and later reconstructed as National World War II Memorial. It became an exhibition venue, commemorating the war as whole, with no straight connection to the Moravian-Ostrava offensive.

Speaking about the “memoralisation” of 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 located in the Hlučín area. This aspect can be understood as a part of the efforts to “import” the official Slavic and socialist narrative of liberation to the region with a different identity and memory.

This approach significantly changed after the fall of communism. During the last decade, the municipal museum in Hlučín created a new long-term exhibition focusing on “the other story” of local population. For the first time, the war participation of Czechoslovak citizens from the region in World War II Axis forces became a subject of museum presentation. In 2016, the museum was awarded as the “Museum of the Year”. This example gives evidence of partial “rehabilitation” of pre-1945 regional identity, which can also be witnessed in some parts of Polish Silesia (Riedel 2018).

To summarize, the efforts to commemorate the offensive by “museologisation” and monuments culminated in the 1970s. After the fall of communist regime, the museum presentation of the topic was scattered to several smaller institutions but enriched with local and regional viewpoints.

Liberation Revisited?

While in Silesia and Northern Moravia the offensive of 1945 is still seen as a very important event, from the nation-wide viewpoint of historians and journalists alike, the Ostrava offensive is outshined by battles of Berlin and Prague. The official history of the Czechoslovak army from 1987 just briefly mentioned the events in the Ostrava region (Procházka 1988). After the fall of communism, the Moravian-Ostrava offensive was shortly depicted in several works of operational history, focusing either on the history of military troops (Kopecký 2001) or the process of liberation of the Czech lands (Jakl 2004). The last ambitious attempt to write an academic history of liberation was complicated by premature death of

editor-in-chief Jaroslav Hrbek in 2009. While the edited volume focused mainly on political circumstances and home resistance, the operations of the Red Army on the Czechoslovak territory were described just in a concise way (Hrbek 2009).

Attempts for new interpretation of the events of 1945 were present in public discussions since the 1990s, but the mainstream viewpoints of both researchers and public remained quite traditional. Nation-wide disputes on this topic appeared around 2015, partly due to political relations with Russia after the Crimean crisis, and partly due to the 70th anniversary of the end of the war. Some historians and journalists questioned the term “liberation” as irrelevant because of the negative impacts of Soviet presence, in both immediate (crimes on civilian population and prisoners of war) and long-term (Soviet role in the installation of communist dictatorship in the country) periods.

The debate also focused on the case of German-inhabited territories of the Czech lands. Were the regions liberated, or conquered? Did the population want to be “liberated” from the Nazi rule? The opponents pointed out that the arrival of the Red Army, regardless of the negative effects, ended Nazi dictatorship and led to, at least, a “lesser evil” for the Czech population, as well as prisoners and forced labour workers of many nationalities, held in the Ostrava region. Nevertheless, even some of the advocates of the concept of “liberation” agreed that the collective memory and social image of the historical reality was still strongly influenced by simplified and ideologized interpretation, created before 1989. Unfortunately, the discussion in the media was not utilised in a form of research paper or conference⁶.

The debate was renewed – and also vulgarised – in 2019 after repeated demands of different individuals and associations to remove the statue of Soviet Marshall Konev in Prague. The proponents stressed the fact, that Konev’s army reached the capital hours after the capitulation of German forces, so the Soviets did not „liberate“ Prague. Konev’s role in the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was also often stressed. In Autumn 2019, the conflict escalated through several cases of vandalism. One of the damaged war memorials was the mausoleum in Ostrava, built in 1946 for both Czech and Soviet dead. A radical nationalist group claimed to disfigure the monument to commemorate the victims of 1956. The deed was strongly criticised by almost all political groups in the country through newspapers and television. Local and municipal authorities also pointed at the difference between Konev as a military and political leader and the common soldiers buried in Ostrava, as well as at the ahistoricity of connecting people killed in 1945 to events of 1956.

6 The dispute was briefly summarized by Huška, J. (2015). The last attempt to organize a conference about politicization of war remembrance in 2020 in Ostrava had to be postponed due to COVID-19 crisis.

The 75th anniversary of the offensive started a new wave of debates, overwhelmingly repeating the arguments stated five years ago. The analysis of the renewed disputations will be a task for future research.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Moravian-Ostrava offensive was overshadowed by the battle of Berlin and other combat operations, but it played an important strategic role in keeping Schörner's troops deployed in the Czech lands.

The professional historical research of the offensive culminated in 1960s–1970s and then again in the last decade and focused overwhelmingly on operational and oral history. During recent years, we can witness a partial shift of interest from, still prevailing, description of military actions to the questions of everyday lives in war, mentalities, memory and remembrance. The remembrance is still focused mainly on the “Czech” experience of Czechoslovak troops and local inhabitants, often neglecting both the combat on Polish soil and the experience of Soviet and German soldiers. So, the story of “liberation” remains a “Czech” story. For the Polish minority in the region, remembrance of previous experience of Nazi occupation and resistance shows to be more significant.

In recent years, the “alternative story” of the Hlučín region inhabitants, who fought on the Axis side, was presented by historians and museums. In public debates, the popular viewpoint has been continuously influenced mainly by development of Czech-Russian and partly also Czech-German relations. The fall of communism led to a temporary decline of public interest in the 1990s. Later, the Crimean crisis of 2014 intensified the attempts to revisit the traditional concept of “liberation”, which led to no consensus and which were partly refused by part of professional historians.

The collective memory remains strong in the area of the former battlefield. The traditional myths, created soon after the war and partly maintained by communist propaganda before 1989, are still commonly accepted and believed, despite the results of historical surveys.

While the Moravian-Ostrava offensive was overshadowed by other combat operations in the national and international perspective, the collective memory remains strong in the area of the former battlefield. Many traditional interpretations and common tales, created or maintained by communist propaganda before 1989, are still commonly known and believed, despite both findings of historians, and attempts of politicians and journalists to revisit the narrative of

“liberation”. The professional historical research of the offensive culminated within the 1960s–1970s and then again in in the last decade, when we can see a significant shift from operational and oral history to the research of everyday life in war, collective identities, mentalities and remembrance.

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