

COMMUNIZING MEMORY

THE MANIPULATION OF CZECH HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

April 15, 2018

Application for History Honors Program

Mirek is as much a rewriter of history as the Communist Party, all political parties, all nations, all men. People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. 1

So wrote Czech writer Milan Kundera in 1979 in his short story exploration of the nature of memory, history, and how it can be controlled, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. This work, like many others of Czechoslovakia's communist era, demonstrates the way the communist regime purposefully altered Czech historical memory in order to create a culture more receptive to the new system the penetrated all aspects of life. Historical memory, sometimes expressed as "collective memory", is a concept used to describe the intersection between a nation's history and its sense of identity. A nation builds an identity through its shared history and the way the population collectively interprets it in relation to their identity, which creates a shared, nationalist memory of the nation's past. French historian Pierre Nora coined the term *lieu de mémoire* (realm of memory) to describe the "symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community", i.e. the manifestations of historical memory within a culture. They can be intangible, such as a tradition, or tangible, such as a monument. By altering this historical

memory and *lieux de mémoire*, a government such as the newly established communist regime of

Czechoslovakia could hypothetically alter a nation's identity to include its own political goals.

Because there were aspects of the Czech identity that did not align with the communist identity,

1Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981) 22. Mirek is the main character of this work. 2 Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993). 3Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) xvii.

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altering Czech historical memory was a way to control the Czech population, as Kundera explained. The communist regime attempted to implement communist tones into non-communist Czech principles such as religious associations with Czech history, devotion to the non

Soviet-occupied Czechoslovak state in the Interwar period, and nationalism-based historic traditions. Because the communist regime's manipulation of historical memory shows the power

of controlling a nation's historical memory and explains the connections between communist political agendas and Czech historical memory, it will serve as the primary focus of my honors thesis.

Although the communist government was ultimately unsuccessful in implementing communist values into the Czech identity, shown by recurring dissidence, the work to control Czech national memory is worth examining because it exemplifies the connections between a new government attempting to control a population and the population's sense of identity through its history and memory. With this theme in mind, I will ask, how did the communist regime of Czechoslovakia alter Czech historical memory to in accordance to its political agenda? Additionally, what aspects of Czech historical memory were targeted in order to accomplish this goal? These primary research questions lead to several important secondary questions that will further guide my research: how does the communist manipulation of national memory fit into the larger context of Czech history and culture? How were the communist government's actions received by the Czech population? How has the shift in historical memory during the communist era influenced current Czech historical memory? I will also ask questions on a larger scale to

4 Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004) 89-103, 118-138, 234-252.

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contextualize the issue, such as, how does national memory manifest in physical ways and cultural traditions? And how can national memory be used as a political tool?

In order to answer these questions, I intend to structure my research between the theory of historical memory, historical memory in the context of Czech culture and history, case studies of symbols of Czech historical memory that the communist regime altered (or lieux de mémoire), and conclude with an analyzation of the larger political implications, including the current state of historical memory in Czechia. Prominent theorists who have specialized in memory theory such as Pierre Nora, Patrick H. Hutton, and Maurice Halbwachs will serve as my main source base for providing a background in historical memory. I will also examine works on the construction of a national identity to connect it to historical memory. I will place these ideas in the Czech context using secondary sources on Czech history and writings such as *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. I will analyze primary sources from both the communist era and pre-communist historical memory to examine manifestations of Czech historical memory and explore how the communist regime changed their significance to implement different values.

The three case studies of the communist regime manipulating historical memory that I will use are the alteration of national celebrations, the erection of monuments, and the shift in discourse on iconic historical figures. To understand the significance of national celebrations, I will compare the way Czechoslovak Independence Day was celebrated in comparison to International Workers Day, more commonly referred to as May Day, during the communist era. By doing so, I will demonstrate how patriotic feelings for Czechoslovakia were manipulated by making May Day the more prominent holiday. Primary sources that will help me in this interrogation are daily radio reports and newspapers from both holidays that describe the

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celebrations (or lack thereof). The Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a CIA organization that monitored foreign radio stations, has English translations of Czech Radio reports, which are available online. The Czech communist newspaper, Rudé Právo, is available on microform; I have not found any English translations, but I can read basic Czech and summaries of articles on May Day and Czechoslovak Independence Day are available in secondary sources. Examining whether the holiday has been included in the news at all, and the length of the article is very telling; pictures of the celebrations in Rudé Právo will also be a useful source. 7

Monuments I intend to examine, at this point in my research, are the now-removed Stalin monument on Letná Hill and the Žižka Monument (also known as The Monument of National Liberation) on Vitkov Hill. The history of the Stalin monument is an example of how the communist regime attempted to implement reverence for communism by building a massive monument of an iconic figure in communist leadership on one of the highest points in the city. However, in an ironic twist, shortly after the statue's completion, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin and the communist party needed to control the more recent past by removing the monument, an arduous process. This monument contains significance in both its construction - 8 memorializing a communist figure, and its removal - reacting to the denouncement of said figure and altering the historic memory by removing a statue intended to invoke reverence. The Žižka Monument demonstrates the how a monument of a non-communist national hero can be

5 Central Intelligence Agency Daily Report, Foreign Radio Broadcasts (Washington: Foreign Broadcast Information Services, 1961-1972). 6 Elisabeth Anna Hobl, "Changing the interpretation of monuments for the purpose of influencing the Czechoslovak collective identity through Rudé Právo and presidential speeches (1948-1957)," (master's thesis, Charles University, 2015) 51-73. 7 Komunistická Strana Československa. Rudé Právo. Prague: Komunistická Strana Československa Ústřední Výbor, 1952-1989. 8 Hana Píčov, The Case of the Missing Statue: A Historical and Literary Study of the Stalin Monument in Prague (Řevnice: Arbor Vitae, 2014) 16-18.

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re-interpreted to promote communism through the construction of a monument. Jan Žižka was a famed Czech warrior in the early fifteenth century who fought in the Hussite Wars against the

Catholic Church in defense of the pre-Protestant Hussite religion. The creation of a museum 9
with an equestrian statue of Žižka was proposed in the Interwar Period, but due to the second
World War, the statue was not completed until 1950, which was celebrated with what historian
Cynthia Paces describes as “an elaborate Communist Party ritual.” In later years, the embalmed
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body of Czechoslovakia’s first communist president was placed in the museum under the statue,
further emphasizing the constructed communist connections to the work. The primary sources I
use for this section will mainly be photographs of the monuments, which are readily available
online and in my secondary sources. I will analyze the monuments place them in the context of
the era. In secondary source *The Case of the Missing Statue*, the author has included interviews
she conducted with Czechs about their memories of the statue, which could also be a useful
primary source. 11

The story of how Jan Žižka was re-framed as a communist figure leads into my third case
study: the re-interpretation of Czech historical icons. Similarly to Žižka, the biographies of many
Czech historical figures were twisted to make them communist heroes, regardless of their
original historical significance in Czech memory. In this paper, I will examine two significant
figures from two different, defining eras in Czech history: Jan Hus, a religious symbol in Czech
memory, and Tomáš G. Masaryk, a symbol of the First Republic. Jan Hus, the creator of the 12
9 Norman Housley, *Religious warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 124-126. 10
Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh:
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009) 179-180. 11 Hana Píchová, *The Case of the Missing Statue: A Historical and
Literary Study of the Stalin Monument in Prague* (Řevnice: Arbor Vitae, 2014). 12 “The First Republic” is a name
for Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1938, after it became a nation but before it was invaded by Nazi Germany.

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Hussite religion that Žižka fought for, was a key player in the Bohemian Reformation, a
movement to reform the Catholic Church that led to the Hussite Wars. However, during the
communist era, his actions were re-examined and he was discussed as a social advocate over a
religious icon. Hus was portrayed as a revolutionary who fought against the Church and the
aristocrats more than one who fought for a new religion. One primary source for this study is a
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collection of translated letters from Jan Hus, both personal and “to the people of Prague”, which
will show Hus’s religious and social advocacy at the time. My primary source that will
demonstrate the communist way of approaching Hus’s impact on Czech culture in attempt to
alter national memory will be writings by R. R. Betts, a Czech communist writer and philosopher
who examined history through a Marxist lens. The second figure, Tomáš Masaryk, was the first
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president of Czechoslovakia after it became an independent state in 1918; he is often considered

a personification of the Interwar Period, a prosperous era for Czechoslovakia. Masaryk was a complex figure in the communist regime's process of altering Czech historical memory because the regime wanted to both denounce the First Republic and "claim Masaryk's legacy by portraying him as a forerunner of their socialist ideas, despite his sometimes biting criticisms of Marx", to quote Central European Studies scholar, Bradley Abrams. This contradiction led the

15 regime to frame the First Republic as led by bourgeoisie too weak maintain the nation's independence, but still recognize Masaryk as a hero in historical memory and claim his ideas as
13 Peter Morée, "Not Preaching from the Pulpit, but Marching in the Streets: The communist use of Jan Hus." *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice* 6, Papers from the Sixth International Symposium on The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice sponsored by the Philosophical Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. Praha: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (2007): 294-295. 14 R. R. Betts, "The Social Revolution in Bohemia and Moravia in the Later Middle Ages," *Past & Present*, no. 2 (1952): 24-31. 15 Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004) 118-119.

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communist. The primary sources I will use for this final example will be translated versions of *Humanistic Ideas and The Social Question*, writings by Masaryk that criticize and denounce communism. I will then use another R.R. Betts writing from 1947 that argues Masaryk did in 16 fact use Marxist rhetoric to again contrast the original work with an interpretation from a communist perspective.

This work will bring into focus a larger picture of the politics of memory, history, and national identity. The communist era is a potent example of altering historic memory because communism was introduced rapidly and with the intention of penetrating all aspects of Czech society; the regime thus had strong motivation to control Czech national memory in order to successfully implement the new system. However, the shifting nature of historical memory is relevant in all cultures and political systems. To alter it is to control national identity. Bringing to light the question of how a political system can alter a nation's historical memory and identity will complicate and dismantle how we think of historical memory as a product of the past, not the present.

16 Tomáš G. Masaryk, *Humanistic Ideals* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1971).

Tomáš G. Masaryk, "The Social Question." in *The Meaning of Czech History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974).

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PROPOSED TIMELINE:

May 2018: Continue to build source base, focusing on primary sources. Finalize which documents from Foreign Radio Broadcasts will be used.

June 2018: Continue research and confirm that case studies are appropriate for research question.

July 2018: Develop definitive outline.

August 2018: Write section on historical memory and lieux de mémoire.

Fall Semester 2018: Write section on monuments as lieux de mémoire and their role in communist Czechoslovakia through HIST 490 (capstone); Write section on historical memory in the context of communist Czechoslovakia

December 2018: Write section about Czechoslovak Independence Day versus May Day

January 2019: Add section on discussion of historical figures to capstone analysis of monuments;

February 2019: Assemble all sections; Write introduction and conclusion

March: Edit and submit to advisor by spring break; Edit according to advisor's suggestions

Early April 2019: Continue to refine finished work; Defend thesis

Late April 2019: Make revisions according to defense; submit final product

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