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May 1, 2019

COMMUNIZING MEMORY:

THE MANIPULATION OF CZECH HISTORY AND IDENTITY

History Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that historical memory plays a crucial role in the politics of nation-building and cultural control, using the context of Czechoslovakia under communism. Combining theoretical approaches drawn from the study of nationalism and memory politics, this thesis examines the power dynamics of glorifying or erasing certain moments in a nation's past and considers the extent to which history, or a memory of it, defines the national identity. By analyzing the changes in commemoration as Czechoslovakia transitioned into a communist system, the malleability of the past becomes clear, as does the impact of the past upon the present and future. Rhetoric and commemoration of different formative moments of the Czech past demonstrate how the Czechoslovak communist government used historical memory as a political tool to build and rebuild the Czech national identity.

KEY WORDS: Czechoslovakia, historical memory, nationalism, monuments, communism

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INTRODUCTION

It is no secret of history that communist regimes across the Eastern Bloc were masters in controlling their realities. They held the art, the literature, the very culture of their home nations as tightly regulated as the economies or government institutions. National history and memory naturally fell under these politics of control; these governments forcefully abandoned histories that did not align with the communist version of reality and created others. Politicians and officials molded and manipulated the past, commemorating or forgetting history to shape an alternate narrative that aligned with communist ideology and values.

An anecdote of two unfinished monuments occupying the same square in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in the 1950s exemplifies the complex relationship between history and political control under Eastern European communism.¹ As recorded by a Radio Free Europe report, both were only pedestals, one dedicated to first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and the other, much bigger and more elaborate, to the victories of the Soviet Army during the Second World War.² Still in the initial stages of

¹ The name of the region now known as Czechia and Slovakia has changed over time and the term will thus reflect the historical context. Prior to 1918, it was not an official state, and known as the Czech or Bohemian Lands. From 1918 to 1993, the country's title was Czechoslovakia. In 1993, the nation split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia; in 2016, the Czech Republic made Czechia its official name.

² Radio Free Europe is a U.S.-sponsored radio station created in 1940 to broadcast both domestic and international news to Eastern Bloc states, on the premise that news in Soviet-controlled states was pure propaganda. It should be noted that RFE, as an anti-communist organization run by the U.S. government with Eastern European emigrants as their main source informants, had its own Western bias. However, in dealing with the politics of historical memory, bias is just as important as objective information, provided it is acknowledged. Using RFE reports, specifically those created in collaboration with Czech emigrants, can provide a different side to the systems of rewriting history and reality, one performed by the West and Czech citizens instead of the communist government. See Melissa Feinberg, "Fantastic Truths, Compelling Lies: Radio Free Europe and the Response to the Slánský Trial in Czechoslovakia," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (2013): 107-25.

implementing communism on a cultural level, the Czech Communist Party, or the KSČ, rejected the Masaryk pedestal as a symbol of popular sovereignty and communist opposition, while the citizens of Brno mocked the communist pedestal for its un-Czech values.³ “A wonderful drama had begun to evolve around the two unfinished statues, the big one and the little one, each in its way symbolic of the two opposing camps,” the report stated.⁴ On state-mandated holidays, the regime decorated the communist pedestal with red flags; on Czechoslovak Independence Day and on Masaryk’s birthday, the Czech public assembled around the Masaryk pedestal, leaving flowers and anti-communist posters.⁵ The KSČ took action, ordering street cars not to stop in the square on those days, making arrests, and even spraying the crowd with fire hoses. When this proved ineffective, the KSČ planted a flower bed around the Masaryk pedestal, preventing the crowd from paying its respects, but honoring Masaryk in the process. In some ways, this was a hypocritical act of surrender, in others it was an act to regain power over memory. The Czechoslovak nation was not to forget Masaryk, but his commemoration was to be on the communist government’s terms.

In Czechoslovakia, the communist government built an altered version of history upon a framework of memory and symbols that Czech society and governments had developed in the past. When the communist party rose to power in 1948, they utilized the

³ The full Czech name of the Communist Party is *Komunistická strana Československa* (KSČ).

⁴ "The Story of Two Monuments: Brno Opts for Masaryk, Snubs Red Army." 23 March 1953. HU OSA 300-1-2-32400; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Electronic Record.

⁵ As will be explained in Chapter III, during the communist era, Independence Day was celebrated on 5 May in honor of the end of World War II, but the Independence Day recognized in this story is October twenty eighth, the date Czechoslovakia was first established as a nation after World War I. 28 October was Independence Day prior to the communist era, as will be discussed in Chapter III. Celebrating 28 October was a sign of resistance because it referenced an era of popular sovereignty that contradicted the communist political agenda.

pre-existing historical memory and mythology for political gain. As the government's political agendas and levels of oppression changed over time, they approached cultural control differently. However, de-emphasizing non-communist values while still using the power of formative moments in Czech history as a way to legitimize politics was a theme throughout the era. They took existing myths of iconic Czech national figures or events and blended them with newer communist ideals to demonstrate their validity as leaders. The fixation on rewriting history demonstrates the power of the past in the Czech national identity, particularly during periods of nation-building. Historical memory and how it evolved, specifically in Czechoslovakia's early stages of communism, demonstrates not only its importance in forming a national identity, but its role when a government seeks to control the national identity.

Certain moments have been more formative in Czech history and are consequently more powerful in the historical memory and national identity. These moments are visible in pre-communist era commemorations, but more importantly, were targeted by the KSČ when they attempted to control the Czech population through their treatment of history. This thesis will address three of most discussed and visibly commemorated moments in Czech history. Chapter I discusses the Bohemian Reformation, a medieval religious and military movement in the early fifteenth century, during which Czech religious dissidents rose up against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Czech population has repeatedly commemorated the Bohemian Reformation and its key actors, proving its significance in their historical memory. In recognition of this significance, the KSČ reworked the era's symbols and philosophy as

communist in their own discourse and remembrance as a way to build support and legitimacy. Chapter II examines political remembrance and erasure of another formative moment in Czech memory: the First Czechoslovak Republic, from the end of World War I to the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. The First Republic is unique in that it was the first time that the Czech lands became a self-governing nation, at least in the contemporary sense of the term. Because of this, the era helped define “Czechness” and built a foundation of the Czech national identity. The First Czechoslovak Republic was in fact charged with ideals that came to challenge the communist government at its height of oppression, so the KSČ often approached it with historical erasure, rather than attempts at commemoration. Chapter III analyzes the communist era itself as a final moment in Czech history that the communist government targeted through the politics of memory and commemoration. Political instability characterized the communist era in Czechoslovakia, and one way the KSČ addressed this issue was through erasure or re-remembrance of events, despite the fact that they were still a part of living memory.

By analyzing state-sponsored commemorations and imaginings of these three eras, this thesis builds upon the theory of historical memory and nation-building and examines how they function in a communist historical context. Czechoslovakia under communism experienced what theorist John Hutchinson calls a “mythic overlaying,” or a renovation and recreation of previously existing mythic structures, for the purpose of legitimizing a new system to the collective.⁶ The KSČ’s control of the Czech past is an

⁶ John Hutchinson, “Nations and Culture,” in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2001), 82.

example of the power of historical memory within a national identity, as well as its role in oppressive power structures.

The inconsistencies between historical reality and the narrative told by the KSČ are an obvious and acknowledged theme in Eastern European history. This is not what this thesis intends to address. Instead, I argue the KSČ's decision to either appropriate or erase certain Czech historical memories was a way to legitimize their often-oppressive politics, demonstrating how historical memory plays a key role in shaping a national identity. Historical memory and symbols can be political tools, with the potential to undermine or support an institution. In the case of communist Czechoslovakia, the KSČ manipulated systems of memory in attempt to "communize" the Czech identity, affirming the significance of the past in controlling the present. By examining how the government re-remembered and erased history, the relationship between historical memory, national identity, and political power structures becomes clear.

The Politics of Historical Memory and Nation-Building

Maurice Halbwachs, the foundational scholar in the theory of collective memory, once described history as "a crowded cemetery, where room must constantly be made for new tombstones."⁷ In this "crowded cemetery," every society, culture, or nation must make the conscious or unconscious decision which metaphorical tombstones will remain, and which they will allow to disintegrate, beginning the process of collective forgetting. Within the collective forgetting or remembering lies the concept of historical memory: the subjective changeability of memory applied to the fixed construction of history. It is

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 52.

neither a precise historical record nor an individual memory, but the two interacting within a group consciousness.⁸ In the context of nation-building, such as during Czechoslovakia's First Republic, memory becomes a vital part of creating a national identity. In other situations, such as during Czechoslovakia's communist era, it becomes a method of controlling the group. Due to its collective nature, historical memory builds a sense of unified identity, making it a powerful aspect of cultural and political history.

Halbwachs contended that historical memory strengthens remembrance for each individual within the group, writing, "I can still feel the group's influence and recognize in myself many ideas and ways of thinking that could not have originated with me and that keep me in contact with it."⁹ This group construction simultaneously comes from above and below: individuals in power have control over establishing an official memory, while popular cultural narratives arise from the common population. This basic phenomenon goes beyond the shared experience; a group's collective memory, particularly in the context of a nation, can contain memories that were experienced by generations earlier but remain an essential part of the group's identity.¹⁰ When a historical event is so influential to the group's sense of identity, it will become embedded in the collective memory, thus "remembered" even by those who did not directly experience it or were not even alive at the time. The memory has become stored and

⁸ The theory surrounding historical memory grew from an early twentieth century combination of sociology and history examining the relationship between bonded groups of individuals and the past. Similar terms include "collective memory" or "social memory," depending on the scholar. Maurice Halbwachs is widely acknowledged as the founder of the topic, but other influential scholars in the discipline include James E. Young, Jan Assman, Jeffrey Andrew Barash, James W. Pennebaker, and Pierre Nora, who will be another key theorist in this thesis. These scholars use a variety of approaches to the discipline of Memory Studies, from sociology to psychology to history, which influence their analysis of the theory.

⁹ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 25.

¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2008): 50.

interpreted by the group as an institution. For instance, many Czechs “remember” the 1989 Velvet Revolution, during which power was transferred from the KSČ to a parliamentary republic. Even for Czechs born after the fact or those too young to remember, it has become a part of nation’s historical memory passed down to the younger generation as a symbol of freedom and resistance.¹¹

Historical memory is especially potent on a national level.¹² It is a key part of forming national identity by defining the group’s sense of self. Drawing upon shared history and interpretations builds a group identity; thus, harnessing historical memory is a powerful way to create or strengthen a national identity. As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, creating nations is “the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.”¹³ Anderson discusses how history, in the context of nation-building and nationalism, becomes a flexible force that is embedded in the culture and politics of the developing state.¹⁴

¹¹ For more information on the Velvet Revolution, see James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹² The terms “nation,” “state,” and “nation-state” are often used differently and occasionally interchangeably depending on the theorist. Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as, “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” is appropriate for this thesis. The idea of Czechoslovakia was a political construction that changed throughout the twentieth century but remained “limited and sovereign” in terms of borders and having its own domestic government - even when the Soviet Union influenced said government. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

¹³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

¹⁴ Over the past century, nationalism has become an area of study in its own right. Some of the most influential theorists, particularly who pertain to this thesis, are Benedict Anderson, Ernest Renan, John

It is difficult to discuss nation-building without considering nationalism; and nationalism, as an instrument for unifying a nation, is closely aligned with historical memory. Anthony Smith defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining identity, unity, and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential nation.”¹⁵ In the context of memory theory, one should consider the role of the past in “attaining and maintaining identity.” According to Halbwachs, memory bonds a group of people with a shared history; historical memory thus acts as a component of the “ideological movement” that constructs a nation. Nationalism, like historical memory, creates a “mythic overlaying” to unify the collective; history and memory act as a key part of this national mythology.¹⁶

Historical memory, particularly within the nation, is visible through a group’s system of tradition and commemoration, as described by French historian Pierre Nora’s idea of *lieux de mémoire*, or “realms of memory,” which are the “symbolic element[s] of the memorial heritage of any community.”¹⁷ As Nora explains, “*Lieux de mémoire* are complex things. At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are *lieux*—places, sites, causes—in three senses: material, symbolic, and functional.”¹⁸ Whether physical or more abstract, *lieux de mémoire* emerge as a result of a group’s collective historical remembrance; “natural” because historical memory is in

Hutchinson, Anthony Smith, Rogers Brubaker, Steve Stern, John Armstrong, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Aviel Roshwald.

¹⁵ Anthony Smith, “Ethno-Symbolism and the Study of Nationalism,” in *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader* eds. Philip Spencer, Howard Wollman (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 30.

¹⁶ Hutchinson, “Nations and Culture,” 82.

¹⁷ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, vol. 1*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii. *Lieux de mémoire* translates to “sites of memory” or “realms of memory,” but Nora explains that the English translation neglects “historical, intellectual, emotional, and largely unconscious” connotations.

¹⁸ Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, vol. 1*, 14.

many ways an inevitable phenomenon and “artificial” because a society constructs its memory based on an altered, mythological version of history. Nora, with French collective memory as his case study, uses monuments, museums, flags, and more intangible symbols such as a beloved national figure, or a holiday as examples of *lieux de mémoire*. To build a monument, for instance, is to put not only visibility, but permanence and physicality to a historical symbol. A figure memorialized in granite or an annual parade signals its importance to the creators and rememberers and even the unaware viewer knows that the figure is an important part of history (or at least perceived as such). Regardless of what the figure actually accomplished, he or she has been designated a symbol of the culture, creating a *lieu de mémoire*.

Combining the theory of historical memory, nation-building, and *lieux de mémoire* reveals the extent to which a nation’s past is wrapped in the politics of identity and control. This relationship is clear in communist Czechoslovakia, and any governments. Drawing upon shared history and interpretations can ignite a sense of national unity; thus, harnessing historical memory and *lieux de mémoire* is a powerful way to strengthen and define a national identity. However, it can be difficult to reconcile the idea of a nation or nationalism in the context of a communist society. Communism and nationalism are two concepts that have a complex and contradiction-laden relationship.¹⁹ One reason for the difficulties in analyzing the connection between

¹⁹ According to Marx and Engels, communism is a political and economic ideal where capitalism should be overthrown to create a classless, property-less, society. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” *Marx/Engels Selected Works* 1 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969), 98-137; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 2015). Marx and Engels’s theories were re-interpreted many times and manifested differently in socialist and communist systems across the globe.

communism and the nation is simply that Marx and Engels often left gaps in their theory when it came to the role of the nation. However, Marx once wrote that,

The unity of the nation was not to be destroyed, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the communal constitution. The unity of the nation was to become a reality by means of the destruction of the state power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity but wanted to be independent of, and superior to, the nation. In fact this state power was only a parasitic excrescence on the body of the nation.²⁰

Marx was therefore not opposed to the idea of a nation, so much as the capitalist state power that controlled it. Yet, communism as an international movement was a vital part of the manifesto.²¹ Theorist Régis Debray called the nation, “the atomic nucleus in a general conflagration of Marxism as a theory and socialism as a practice,” pointing out the power of the nation and nationalism, as well as its potential for transforming or dismantling the communist system.²² However, Marx’s original thoughts on nationalism became somewhat irrelevant once put into practice, as was the case with many aspects of the communist ideology.

Smith wrote that, “Nationalism signifies the awakening of the nation and its members to its true collective ‘self’, so that it, and they, obey only the ‘inner voice’ of the purified community.”²³ This idea of authenticity, particularly through national symbols, is where nationalism and communism intersect. When communist regimes rose to power in Eastern and Central Europe, using nationalist symbolism to gain legitimacy was one way to more smoothly implement the new political, economic, and cultural systems. In

²⁰ Karl Marx, quoted in V.I. Lenin, *The State and the Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1992), 46.

²¹ Walter Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1999), 26.

²² Régis Debray, “Marxism and the National Question,” *New Left Review* 105 (September-October, 1977): 30.

²³ Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 77.

this way, communist governments and politicians could portray themselves “as the heirs to the great traditions of the nation, and the genuine nation culture which reflected the authentic national community and its shared experience,” in the words of Walter Kemp.²⁴ The communist nation uses history as a way to create an image of a legitimate and natural construction.

Nation-building is thus inherently tied to historical memory, especially in conjunction with communist governments. The theory behind historical memory, nation-building, and communism creates a foundation upon which to understand how and why the KSČ used historical symbols as a way to control the Czech identity. I will use these three concepts, and their relationships to one another, to explain the shifts in commemoration and political approaches towards Czech history over the twentieth century. Erasing and memorializing history is inherently tied with the national identity; a fact of which the KSČ was well aware and would utilize in their political rhetoric and physical commemoration of key moments in Czech historical memory.

The Bohemian Reformation as a Historical Symbol

Different historical memories were politicized by Czech governments in their quests to build or alter the national identity—it is this politicization that reveals which eras hold the strongest symbolic power in historical memory. Based on the framework of State-sponsored memory and commemorations that the KSČ, as well as previous and following governments, developed, the Bohemian Reformation is one of the most prominent symbols in Czech historical memory. Different political generations have interpreted it

²⁴ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?*, 13.

differently, demonstrating the flexibility of historical memory. The communist government in particular reimagined it to legitimize their politics within the Czech cultural context, making it an important part of the relationship between Czech communism and Czech historical memory. The Bohemian Reformation, known in some texts as the Czech or Hussite Reformation, began with the teachings of Czech preacher and scholar Jan Hus (1369-1415). Hus became the face of the Bohemian Reformation when he began preaching against the Roman Catholic Church, which was a controlling political and religious force in Europe at the time. He was committed to traditional Catholic teachings, and his most controversial point was his demand that religious leaders be punished for sin through public legal outlets.²⁵ This rhetoric was threatening to the politicized Church officials, who burned Hus at the stake on July 6, 1415.²⁶ Hus's loyal followers in Prague militarized the issue, calling themselves Hussites and continuing Hus's teachings against the force of the Roman Catholic crusaders.²⁷

As Jan Žižka, Hus's militant successor, led battles against the Roman Catholic crusaders, the Hussite religion developed into its own distinct church and community.²⁸ The most radical Hussites established a town called Tábor, where they lived austere and strictly according to Hus's principles. Facing attacks by allied crusader forces of the Holy Roman Empire, the various branches of Hussites engaged in battle until 1439, when nearly all Hussite forces were obliterated. Two centuries later, in 1620, the Hapsburg

²⁵Christopher M. Bellitto, *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 134.

²⁶ Bellitto, *Reassessing Reform*, 107.

²⁷ Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33-35.

²⁸ Michael Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics: Five Centuries of Religious Dissent* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2008), 185-198.

Empire banned all non-Catholic services, placing the Hussites into the past once and for all.²⁹

Lieux de mémoire of the Bohemian Reformation mark the Czech Republic today, from street names to statues. It has symbolized Czech resistance and freedom in the face of an oppressor since the Reformation itself; however, as the Czech national identity grew more defined, these symbols gained power in historical memory. In the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Bohemian Reformation was an important part of defining liberty and strength in the newly-created definition of Czechness. Communist politicians later took advantage of this power by working to implement the Reformation, Hus, Žižka, and Tábor into their rhetoric and systems of commemoration.

Frameworks of Memory in the First Republic

Although Czechs had existed as a cultural group for centuries, the First Czechoslovak Republic was their first instance of formal nationhood.³⁰ Thus began a surge of nationalism as the new state redefined its identity in terms of formal sovereignty and “Czechness.” During the First Republic, the Czech population remembered historical moments of pride, which established a nationalistic attitude within the changing Czech identity. Prominent Czechs throughout history were glorified, forming a framework of memory that would hold cultural power through the upcoming century. Liberty, both personal and national, as well as democracy and popularly sovereignty were ruling ideals,

²⁹ After World War I, The Czechoslovak Hussite Church separated from the Catholic Church as a small sect describing itself as “neo-Hussite.” There is significant enough historical distance between the establishment of this church and the original Hussites that for the purpose of this thesis, I consider the Czechoslovak Hussite Church inspired by, but not the same as Jan Hus’s original reformers.

³⁰ The territory that became Czechoslovakia was known as the “Czech Lands,” prior to 1918. The Czech lands were divided into three regions based on ethnic group: Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia.

and became historically associated with the era. In the communist era, specifically when the regime enacted political violence and cultural oppression, the communist party would view these ideals and the era they were attached to as threats to their version of the Czech nation, and delegitimize or erase them.

Prior to 1918, Czechoslovakia had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—a branch of the Habsburg monarchy, an empire that ruled much of Central and South Eastern Europe, including the Czech lands, for centuries. With the end of World War I, however, Austria-Hungary broke into several independent states, including Czechoslovakia.³¹ The period between Czechoslovakia’s establishment and the Nazi occupation, in 1938, came to be known as the First Czechoslovak Republic. The First Republic was a functioning democracy, with a president, prime minister, and parliament. The first president, and widely acknowledged founder, of the nation was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who played an instrumental role in gaining Czechoslovakia’s statehood through negotiations with the Western Allies during World War I. Masaryk became a historical icon due to his role in creating the internationally-recognized nation. As the First Republic progressed, Czech nationalism bloomed; the need for a formal identity in the new nation facilitated a sense of Czech pride and exceptionalism. Czech nationalists used history, or at least a version of it, as a tool to create a unifying national mythology.³² This set up a framework of national identity and memory that would define what it means to be Czech for a century to come.

³¹ Hugh LeCaine Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 2004), 166-172.

³² Nancy Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2007), 12.

It is important when discussing the Czech nation and nationalism to clarify the difference between Czech, Slovak, and Czechoslovak. The Slovaks are an ethnic group with many historical ties to the Czechs, but are a culturally, linguistically, and geographically distinct group. Cultural matters such as historical memory are therefore specific to the Czechs or the Slovaks. When Czechoslovakia became a nation in 1918, Czech and Slovak leaders (against the wishes of some Slovak nationalists) agreed to combine the two groups into a single nation. Masaryk had long viewed Czechs and Slovaks as “branches of a single nation” and, furthermore, including the Slovaks into the new state would make them, rather than Germans, the largest ethnic group after the Czechs.³³ Combining the two groups did not go particularly smoothly; the Slovaks would secede with the help of Nazi Germany and form an independent state between 1939 and 1945.³⁴ Czechoslovakia was thus a political construction, built from two groups with separate cultural identities. “Czech” nationalism and historical memory refer to one (cultural) side of the Czechoslovak state.

The historical memory that came out of the First Czechoslovak Republic, which glorified Czech heroes from centuries prior, as well as more recent leaders, would soon be reinterpreted and manipulated by the KSČ. Thus, the historical memory of the First Republic, as well as the phenomena of nation-building and nationalism, is vital to understand when analyzing the relationship between the communist regime and historical

³³ Nadya Nedelsky, *Defining the Sovereign Community: The Czech and Slovak Republics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 67-68. Ethnic Germans made up a large component of the population, particularly near the Czech-German border, until they were forcibly removed after World War II; another minority in the area is the Roma, a migrant population that has been historically persecuted, but still occupies the space with their own distinct culture and memory.

³⁴ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 216-218.

narratives. The KSC's system of commemoration and forgetting was built on a framework of memory created during the First Czechoslovak Republic.

The ČSSR and Mythic Overlaying

The Czechoslovak communist era, or ČSSR, was the height of rewriting Czech historical memory.³⁵ Communist politicians utilized the system of memory and historical symbols that had largely developed in the First Czechoslovak Republic, commemorating or erasing historical memories in accordance to their political agendas. The memory politics of the ČSSR are an excellent example of mythic overlaying, taking a national identity, historical memory included, and using it to legitimize a new identity. This drove the KSC's politics of remembrance, layering nationalist and communist symbols upon one another in attempt to control the Czech population.

The ČSSR was established in 1948, when the Czech communist party staged a coup d'état, with the support of the Soviet Union, and seized control of the government.³⁶ The KSC had been gaining power in elections since the end of the Second World War, and became the largest party in the parliament by 1946. However, as the communist party gained popularity, Soviet Union upped its involvement in Czech politics, making the KSC an increasingly controlling force. Power in the parliament was not enough, and the coup d'état eliminated the multi-party system along with many individual freedoms. Other political parties were either destroyed or forcibly merged with the KSC, ultimately producing a government with full control over the Czech political sphere. The early years of Czech communism were closely tied to Soviet Stalinism; the Soviet Union was heavily

³⁵ ČSSR is the acronym for Československá socialistická republika.

³⁶ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 234-238.

involved in Czech political affairs and the harsh policy was reminiscent of Stalin's reforms in the Soviet Union. These oppressive measures quickly diminished communism's earlier popularity among many Czech citizens. When Stalin died in 1953, communist parties across the Eastern Bloc moved away from Stalinist-style governing, but Czechoslovakia maintained one of the harsher and more traditional systems. In 1968, reform-minded Alexander Dubček was elected General Secretary of the ČSSR, and his liberal policy initiated a period called "The Prague Spring." However, the Soviet Union recognized this increase in popular sovereignty as a threat and, on 20 August, invaded Prague. From 1968 onwards, "normalization," i.e. a return to the pre-Prague Spring communist values, was the status quo. It was not until 1989 that revolutions spread across Central Europe, overthrowing the communist system.³⁷

The early 1950s, in particular, were some of the harshest years of cultural control in Czechoslovakia. Stalinism, the ideology that ruled the Eastern Bloc at the time, is a form of communism based on a totalitarian government and the centralization of economic and political activity. This resulted in brutal policy that often led to shortages and political violence. Stalinism in Czechoslovakia reached its height with the show trials, beginning in 1952: fabricated accusations intended to eliminate political opponents and intimidate the population. Over 250 people were executed by 1954.³⁸ In this political climate, less than a decade after the KSČ staged the coup d'état, increasingly authoritarian Czech communist politicians feared historical symbols of personal liberty or

³⁷ For more information on the second half of the communist period, see Gil Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

³⁸ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 234-242.

popular sovereignty, which could undermine their oppressive policy and facilitate resistance. In the early 1950s, Czech historical memory and how to approach it had high political stakes.

Communism in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989 cannot be categorized as a homogenous system. It went through multiple shifts in political and social structures, changing over time. One driving theme behind communist political rhetoric, however, was the manipulation of Czech identity and history. The 1953 Czech minister of culture, Václav Kopecký, stated that, “We do not want merely to imitate someone else’s culture. Our task is to create our own, Czech and Czechoslovak culture, and create it as the culture of a new Czechoslovakia. [...] Our new culture, the culture of Czechoslovakia, should be national in form.”³⁹ Kopecký’s speech attempted to address the relationship between Czech communism and nationalism. He referenced creating a new, but still Czech, culture, which means drawing upon national history in conjunction with communist innovation. More importantly this new (i.e. communist) culture was to be *national*: defined by Czechness, as had the culture of the First Republic.

Understanding historical memory and national identity during a relatively oppressive and unstable era requires an examination of both cultural and political artifacts. I have thus utilized a variety of sources expanding beyond traditional historical documents in order to reveal a more complete picture of the cultural side of memory and nation-building under communism. Historical memory can manifest physically, in the

³⁹ Václav Kopecký, “Výsledky kulturního budování republiky,” in Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 94.

form of *lieux de mémoire*, so architecture and statues are an important source base in this thesis. Political speeches and writings reveal the communist government's interpretation of Czech history; thus, they provide information on the state-sponsored narrative, including parts of the past that the politicians left out or altered. Finally, Czech literature reflecting on the events of the communist era, such as the works of novelists Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal during the 1960s and 70s, are citizen accounts of the Czech identity during the communist era. In contrast to communist government accounts, which contain an official narrative that does not necessarily align with the lived experience of the Czech population, literature provides a cultural perspective separate from the communist government's construct of reality. While researching an era driven by single-party bureaucracy, it can be difficult to determine the success of cultural control policy. In some cases, the measures seem more a performance than anything else. However, placing sources produced by Czech citizens, such as novels or Radio Free Europe interviews, in discussion with government statements shows the interaction between political agendas, physical manifestations of Czech identity and memory, and the reaction of the Czech public.

The history of how Czech communism interacted with historical memory and national identity presents many contradictions. In the KSČ's quest for legitimacy amongst the Czech population, they attempted to twist the past to fit its own values, or even erase it altogether. State-sponsored erasure and re-remembrance during this era often disregarded the significance of historical symbols to the Czech population, and when altering culturally valuable sites of memory, sometimes ignited resistance from the

Czech population. The memory politics of the ČSSR thus demonstrated the extent to which memory and cultural identity are intertwined.

CHAPTER I

(RE)REMEMBERING THE BOHEMIAN REFORMATION: Cultural Control and Appropriating Historical Narratives

In 1897, Czech-German Marxist Karl Kautsky wrote that,

It was in Bohemia that the earliest successful movement of the Reformation occurred; it was there that heretical communism found the first opportunity of clearly differentiating itself from the other heretical sects. The Bohemian movement was of great importance to the German communism of the Reformation as it was the forerunner of the latter. Hence our attention must be first directed to the Hussites.⁴⁰

Kautsky, like many communist historians, drew attention to the Bohemian Reformation as an example of communism in its earliest form. By tracing the history of class division and analyzing the Roman Catholic Church as a political and economic entity, Kautsky framed religious dissidence as dissidence against class and political oppression. Hus and his followers were communists in their rejection of the class inequality of the era, according to Kautsky. Religious history was reconfigured as political and economic history. He examined the Hussites through the theoretical lens of Marxist theory, arguing that their departure from the Catholic Church and the community they established, Tábor, were in fact signs that they followed communist principles centuries before Marx and Engels defined the term.

Kautsky's nineteenth-century musings were repeated by Czech politicians of the communist era. This viewpoint was a far cry from the First Czechoslovak Republic's

⁴⁰ Karl Kautsky, "Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation" (London: Fisher and Unwin, 1897).

view of the Bohemian Reformation as a symbol of “Czechness” during the interwar period. In both eras, in fact thematically through Czech history, the Bohemian Reformation has been glorified and commemorated in different ways according to shifting political agendas. In the early fifteenth century, it was a Protestant narrative of resistance toward the predominant Roman Catholic power and carried significantly religious overtones. Centuries later, as the Czechoslovak state gained independence in the early 1900s and struggled to define “Czechness,” it took on the meaning of Czech strength in the face of an oppressing empire. Resistance and personal liberty, as the Hussites symbolized, were some of the key characteristics of First Republic historical memory. However, when the Czech communist party came to power, they discussed the Bohemian Reformation on quite different terms; instead of Czech liberation or even the Protestant religion, communist politicians and intellectuals framed it as a signifier of communist values.⁴¹

In the system of historical symbols that makes up historical memory, the Bohemian Reformation has repeatedly appeared in the discourse and physical commemoration of Czech history, representing different values according to the political and social circumstances. The constantly changing historical significance of the Bohemian Reformation demonstrates the malleability of historical memory, particularly for political purpose. Furthermore, analyzing the religious nature of the Bohemian Reformation within the communist ideological context reveals a strange paradox regarding the relationship between religion and communism. Although communism is a

⁴¹ Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 198.

secular system—Marx’s famous declaration that “religion is the opium of the masses” solidified that aspect—that did not deter the communist party from appropriating the Bohemian Reformation as a powerful historical symbol.⁴²

Although it occurred centuries prior to the First Czechoslovak Republic and the ČSSR, mythologized visions of the Bohemian Reformation and its figures remain very alive in historical memory. In order to appropriate the power of the Bohemian Reformation as a historical symbol, the communist government worked to create an alternative historical memory. This would also serve to prevent the Bohemian Reformation’s historical metaphor of resistance from being used as a site of dissidence against the regime. While the Czech population had framed the Austria-Hungary as an oppressor comparable to the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation in their commemorative politics, the communist government could avoid this resistance by embracing the Bohemian Reformation. The communist version of the Bohemian Reformation framed the icons not as religious figures or Czech national heroes, but as heroes of the proletariat and symbols of communist values. Discussing the religious movement as a social movement and focusing on the Hussite relationship to private property, for example, built a vision of the communist Bohemian Reformation. Adopting symbolism of the Bohemian Reformation, a familiar cultural narrative, could hypothetically help rally support for the communist system, especially during times of economic or political crisis. Ignoring blatant contradictions to communism, such as the reformation’s creation of a Protestant religion, the regime twisted the narrative to support

⁴² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 1.

its political identity. Through political rhetoric as well as physical *lieux de mémoire* such as Bethlehem Chapel and the National Monument of Vítkov, the KSČ not only analyzed the Bohemian Reformation through a communist lens, but actively worked to use their political power over Czech historical memory as a method of cultural control. Controlling the official narratives, even if this control did not extend to the private sphere, would provide a measure of control over the public reaction to the new communist structures.

The Bohemian Reformation and Hussite Religion

As the symbols and values of the Bohemian Reformation shifted for Czechs as time went by, the meaning and memory became further and further removed from the original events. The actual reformation was a religious, military, and cultural movement that established the Hussite religion and several religious communities across the Czech lands. The movement began when Jan Hus's religious teachings began challenging those of the Roman Catholic Church, which was a controlling political and religious force in Europe at the time.⁴³ Both because his sermons were accessible to the Czech public and because the Roman Catholic Church was a ruling force over the Czech lands, Hus's theology quickly became popular; the preacher became the face of the Bohemian Reformation and remains so to the present day.⁴⁴

Hus's theological approach focused on austerity and morality, which was particularly relevant in an era during which the Church was a massive political entity, and

⁴³ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 185-198.

⁴⁴ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 22.

often corrupt.⁴⁵ He was committed to traditional Catholic teachings, developing what became known as the Four Articles:

- (1) That the most divine sacrament of the body and blood should be administered by the ministers of the church to the faithful.
- (2) That civil dominion, like a deadly poison, should be taken away from the clergy.
- (3) That the Word of God should be freely, publicly, and truthfully preached by those whose concern it is to preach.
- (4) That public and more notable sins should be suppressed through lawful power by the faithful people.⁴⁶

This rhetoric, particularly Hus's demand that simony to be published through legal outlets, threatened the Church officials, who burned Hus at the stake on 6 July 1415.⁴⁷ The execution made Hus a martyr in the eyes of his followers, who began calling themselves the Hussites, and his teachings became more popular than ever. As the Hussite religion developed in Hus's absence, the issue became increasingly militarized. The Roman Catholic Church sent crusaders to stamp out the dissident religion, and the Hussites formed troops to fight back. Jan Žižka became a leader of the reformation after Hus's death, and led battles against the Roman Catholic crusaders. Off of the battlefield, the Hussites spread into different religious branches, the Taborites being the most radical.⁴⁸ In 1420, they established Tábor, in Southern Bohemia, where they lived a minimalist life, strictly according to Hus's principles. The Taborites differed from other branches of Hussites in their abolition of private property; during the communist era,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Bellitto, *Reassessing Reform*, 134.

⁴⁷ Bellitto, *Reassessing Reform*, 107.

⁴⁸ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 185-198.

politicians would cite this as proof of the communist nature of the Bohemian Reformation.

Changing Rhetoric

In communist discourse surrounding shifting symbols and narratives, it is clear the Bohemian Reformation holds power as a moment of resistance and change in Czech history. During both the First Republic and the communist era, political leaders continuously framed the Bohemian Reformation as a symbol of what it historically means to be Czech.⁴⁹ This being said, changes in political atmosphere heavily affected how the Bohemian Reformation was remembered and represented by different Czech governments. Changing political rhetoric is one example of these transitions. The government of the ČSSR, with its distinct political agenda, represented the Bohemian Reformation differently than the First Republic, in attempt to manipulate cultural perceptions of Czech history. Particularly during the ČSSR, politicians saw historical memory of the Bohemian Reformation as a potential site of rebuilding the Czech identity. When Pierre Nora stated that, “there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents,” he pointed out that creating history is active.⁵⁰ Political speeches and documents regarding the Bohemian Reformation are a part of actively creating history by purposefully developing one cultural narrative over another.

After the 1918 dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Bohemian Reformation gained power in Czech

⁴⁹ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 115-38.

⁵⁰ Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, 14.

historical memory. It played a role in the nation-building of this era, becoming part of the national identity that was so necessary with the establishment of a new nation. Czech nationalists found, or created, similarities between themselves and the Hussites. The Hussites had led a period of resistance against a Catholic oppressor that was not so different than the heavily Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire, at least in the eyes of Czech nationalists. The Bohemian Reformation thus came to represent liberty and resistance, and the movement and its figures become important symbols in the new Czechoslovakia. Hus and Žižka in particular were iconized as representations of Czechs who fought for independence.⁵¹ Politicians and nationalists began creating *lieux de mémoire* commemorating the era during the First Republic: for example, the Jan Hus memorial in Staroměstské náměstí (Prague's Old Town Square), the "Jan Hus Jubilee" planned near the end of World War I, and a massive monument to Jan Žižka that would ultimately take decades to complete.⁵²

The leaders of the First Republic contributed to the national narrative of the Bohemian Reformation through their political rhetoric. Politicians such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of the First Republic, framed the Bohemian Reformation as a moment in Czech history that defined the Czech culture, which was important to the government's goal of creating a unified Czech identity. Masaryk discussed the significance of the Bohemian Reformation during the First Republic in a 1910 speech: "We see in the Czech Reformation a deeper manifestation of the Czech soul

⁵¹ Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*, 183-4.

⁵² Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 74-5, 77-82, 170-2.

and of our national character.”⁵³ Masaryk spoke of the Bohemian Reformation as not only an important part of Czech history, but as a part of Czech national identity. Historical memory was used as a tool to build the nation.

After the KSČ came to power, communist politicians created discourse that attempted to alter and recreate the Bohemian Reformation as part of a communist historical memory—not the historical memory of the First Republic. In recognition of the power of this era within Czech memory, the Czech communist government worked to appropriate its symbols and philosophy and incorporate them into its own rhetoric and remembrance. Additionally, as an oppressive government, the KSČ wanted to avoid the Bohemian Reformation becoming a symbol for Czech resistance against the regime, as had happened to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was a politically-shrewd move to embrace the Bohemian Reformation, with all its symbolism of national resistance, as a symbol of the new, communist, nation.

One main point of argument that politicians used to “communize” the Bohemian Reformation was that it was a social revolution, instead of a religious reformation. De-emphasizing the religious aspect of the reformation would serve the incredibly secular political system.⁵⁴ The minister of education, science and art, Zdeněk Nejedlý, was one of the leading figures in political rhetoric that reframed historical memory, both in his speeches and writings. In his 1946 work, *The Communists – Inheritors of the Great*

⁵³Tomáš G. Masaryk, *The Meaning of Czech History*, trans. Peter Kussi (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 10.

⁵⁴ Peter Morée, “Not Preaching from the Pulpit, but Marching in the Streets: The Communist use of Jan Hus,” *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice*, Praha: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (2007): 293.

Traditions of the Czech Nation (Komunisté dědici velikých tradic českého národa),

Nejedlý wrote:

Without doubt it is anachronistic to think that today Hus would be a priest as he was then. Today Hus would be a leader of a political party and his platform would not be the pulpit, but the Prague Lucerna Hall or Wenceslas Square. And his party would be very close to us Communists—about that we can be convinced.⁵⁵

Nejedlý's work demonstrates one of the largest contradictions within communist rhetoric surrounding the Bohemian Reformation: religion. Attempting to embrace the revolutionary spirit of Hus's actions, Nejedlý took the enthusiastic Czech memory for the Bohemian Reformation—the Czech soul, if Masaryk is to be believed—and “communized” it, placing it in his political sphere. In order to do so, he faced the task of appropriating a religious movement for the highly secular communist order. Nejedlý, who later described the Bohemian Reformation as “the first people's democratic revolution,” addressed this paradox by focusing on Hus and his followers as social revolutionaries above religious figures.⁵⁶ He imagined the reformation in its medieval context, where the Catholic church was a political platform, to argue that Hus's attacks on the Church's shortcomings were equivalent to contemporary political critiques.⁵⁷

After de-emphasizing the religious aspect of the Bohemian Reformation, the next task was to establish the era as a part of communist history and identity. While politicians and intellectuals of the First Republic celebrated the Bohemian Reformation as a symbol of Czech national liberation and resistance in the face oppression, the KSČ took a

⁵⁵ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Komunisté dědici velikých tradic českého národa*, 1946 in Abrams, 101.

⁵⁶ Zdeněk Nejedlý, “Hus a naše doba,” *Rudé Právo*, 1947 in Abrams, 100.

⁵⁷ Thomas A. Fudge, “Neither Mine nor Thine’: Communist Experiments in Hussite Bohemia,” *Canadian Journal of History* 33, no. 1 (1998): 26.

different route by associating the movement with the language of communism, instead of Czechness. KSĊ politicians worked to first connect the Hussites' legacy to the communist party and ideology, and second, to create *lieux de mémoire* framing the Bohemian Reformation and the Hussites as part of communist history. These actions had the potential to legitimize the communist government as inheritors of Czech history.

When Nejedlý wrote that Hus's hypothetical political party "would be very close to us Communists," he argued that there were connections between Hussite and communist values.⁵⁸ Beyond negating Hus's religious convictions, Nejedlý identified with Hus as a fellow revolutionary. As a social movement, the Bohemian Reformation apparently contained social implications more comparable to the Russian Revolution than the development of Protestantism.⁵⁹ A radical branch of Hus's successors, the Taborites, were often cited as further proof of the ideological relationship between Hussitism and communism.⁶⁰ The Taborites isolated themselves to form a town (Tábor) that rejected all existing political and social systems, creating an attempted utopia ruled by Hus's Four Articles.⁶¹ Hus's philosophy largely called for "*vita apostolica* and the primitive church as the model for reform," as religious historian Christopher Bellitto described, and the Taborites rejected the practices of prayers for the dead, monasticism, confessions, indulgences and the accumulation of clerical wealth by tithes or any civil dominion.⁶² Communist politicians and intellectuals interpreted this dramatically ideological lifestyle

⁵⁸ Nejedlý, *Komunisté dědici velikých tradic českého národa*.

⁵⁹ The Russian Revolution was a 1917 revolution that destroyed the tsarist political system in Russia and led to the Soviet communist system. For a comprehensive history, see Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

⁶⁰ Morée, "Not Preaching from the Pulpit, But Marching in the Streets," 285.

⁶¹ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 45.

⁶² Bellitto, *Reassessing Reform*, 140.

as similar to the ideological lifestyle that communist theory ascribed. The work towards a utopia, as well as a communal pooling of resources, were particularly emphasized in communist analyses of the Táboriges. Communist theorists noted their collectivist policy towards property in particular; in Táborig, there was no rent, as land was managed by administrators, and possessions were made communal.⁶³ Nejedlý wrote that, “private property was abolished in [Táborig], and property communism—admittedly utopian, but still communism—was introduced.”⁶⁴ His analysis echoed Kautsky’s claim decades before that, “these communists [the Táboriges] were the vanguard of the democratic movement.”⁶⁵ Again, the religious aspect of Táborig was erased from historical discourse. In order to create an image of communist Táboriges, centuries before Marx critiqued nineteenth century class struggle, only half of the story of Táborig was remembered.

Zdeněk Nejedlý’s rhetoric functioned just as powerfully as a physical monument to politicize historical memory. As the minister of education, science and art, Nejedlý held a certain amount of power over the cultural atmosphere in the ČSSR. Cultural control included a certain “revision” of the Czech identity, no small part of which was the historical memory.⁶⁶ The success of cultural control is questionable—critics at the time argued that Nejedlý and other communist politicians had “simplified history” and that they were arguing that “only communists, in the past and in the present, fight against the oppressors.”⁶⁷ However, communist politicians created their own remembrance of a

⁶³ Thomas A. Fudge, “Neither Mine nor Thine,” 30.

⁶⁴ Nejedlý, *Komunisté dědici velikých tradic českého národa*.

⁶⁵ Karl Kautsky, “Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation.”

⁶⁶ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 103.

⁶⁷ František Loubal, “Dědici národních tradic?” (Inheritors of National Tradition) *Svobodný zítřek* 2, no. 17 (1947): 5, in Abrams, 102.

prominent era of history by forgetting the religious aspect of the Bohemian Reformation and commemorating the aspects that aligned with the communist ideology. KSČ political discourse built an alternative Czech history in attempt to place them as inheritors to the legacy of the Bohemian Reformation, which would ultimately legitimize their place of power in Czechoslovakia.

Rhetoric, though not a physical mark of historical memory like a statue or building, is a powerful tool in rewriting a nation's memory. The political speeches and documents of Czechoslovakia's communist era reveal the connections between the Czech past and the communist-created present. Commemorations of the Bohemian Reformation, such as Bethlehem Chapel and the National Monument of Vítkov, are simply physical manifestations of the narratives that communist leaders built in their political rhetoric.

Bethlehem Chapel

Equally important to political rhetoric in reshaping historical memory are *lieux de mémoire*. Although a building or statue may not be as explicit as a speech or writing, they were part of the Czech communist government's program to reshape Czech national memory. One example is the 1954 renovation of Bethlehem Chapel, a church in Prague used by Jan Hus himself between the years 1402 and 1413. Like Hus's status as a religious figure, which Nejedlý's political discourse attempted to secularize, a religious space would need to be secularized to be placed in communist history. Bethlehem Chapel was a natural site of memory of Hus and the Bohemian Reformation, making it a powerful reminder of the Czech past and a desirable space for the KSČ to commemorate their version of history.

The Bethlehem Chapel was founded in 1391 by Prague shopkeeper Jan Kříž and Hanuš of Mühlheim, a courtier, with the intention that all sermons in the space would be held in the Czech language. It quickly became associated with Prague University, and became a place for public debate amongst the more radical church community.⁶⁸ Hus, at the time a scholar at the university, began preaching at the chapel in 1402 and remained a popular priest there until his arrest.⁶⁹ During the Hapsburg era, the chapel continued to be associated with Czech universities, but slowly fell into disrepair. By 1948, the space was uninhabitable, but still remembered as a “symbolic center of the early church reform movements in Bohemia.”⁷⁰ At this point, the KSČ, newly in power, saw a symbolic opportunity to make the Bohemian Reformation a part of the communist narrative.

When the idea to rebuild the chapel was launched at a state cabinet meeting in July of 1948, only five months had passed since the Czechoslovak coup d'etat, during which the KSČ forcibly folded the second most powerful political party, the Social Democrats, in the Communist Party, and replaced leadership of any remaining non-Communist parties with communist puppets.⁷¹ At this time, there were multiple pressures on the state to adopt Czech symbols as a way to more smoothly implement a political system that had been fairly violently seized. As one Czech-German emigrant reported to Radio Free Europe in 1955, “many old buildings and monuments were restored,” and “all churches were put in good order so that visitors would be impressed by the care that the

⁶⁸ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 192.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 193.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 192.

⁷¹ John O. Crane and Sylvia Crane, *Czechoslovakia: The Anvil of the Cold War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 308-318.

State gives to churches.”⁷² Renovating influential spaces, even religious spaces, would act as a show of goodwill on a cultural level. *Lieux de mémoire*, including Bethlehem Chapel, were part of the system that balanced a power-hungry new regime with a nod to important moments in Czech historical memory—or a communist interpretation of them.

In the years between the decision to renovate the chapel in 1948 and the 1954 opening ceremony, the government committee, led by Zdeněk Nejedlý, faced roadblocks with renovation approval, property permissions, and finding an architect.⁷³ Alois Kubiček, an architect who had conducted research on the chapel during the First Republic, was ultimately chosen for the job. Kubiček focused on the “authenticity” of recreating the chapel as it had been, using medieval techniques for the ceramic tiles the roof’s timberwork.⁷⁴ Recreating the frescoes on the wall was a specific challenge, as there were no surviving records that described them. Nejedlý recruited artists and art historians to create medieval-style frescoes of Hus, as well as quotes from Hussite songs and the Hussite-era Czech bible (Figure 1).⁷⁵ The main fresco features Hus burning at the stake surrounded by his followers and Catholics; between the composition and his peaceful expression as he dies for his beliefs, the Christ-like imagery is obvious.

⁷² "Restoration of Old Prague Buildings and Monuments", 29 August 1955. HU OSA 300-1-2-61440; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

⁷³ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 201-203.

⁷⁴ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 203.

⁷⁵ Wolfgang Sauber, “Bethlehem chapel (Prague). Interior,” Photograph. Wikimedia Commons, 5 June 2010.



Figure 1

Because Bethlehem Chapel was rebuilt with a focus on authenticity, it continued to visually resemble a religious space. The choice to include biblical quotes and a heavily Christian fresco may seem an unusual choice for a communist State-sponsored renovation. However, the commitment to historical accuracy was accompanied by the same rhetoric that Party politicians had used to reframe the history of the Bohemian Reformation on a more general level. Hus, despite being painted as a Christ-like martyr on the rear wall, was continually discussed as a political revolutionary in an era during which the reformation was “not theological or religious, but a struggle against the church as the highest financial power of the middle ages,” as Nejedlý continued to argue in a speech about the chapel.⁷⁶ The religious connotations of the space were juxtaposed with a vehement insistence that Bethlehem Chapel was a representation of secular revolution.

⁷⁶ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Husův Betlem a náš dnešek*. (Hus’s Bethlehem and Our Present) in *Paces*, 207.

On 5 July 1954, members of the government and the public, along with Soviet representatives, gathered to celebrate the newly repaired, and newly charged, building. According to one newspaper report, old Czech Protestant hymns alternated with Czechoslovak and Soviet anthems, as the crowd gathered.⁷⁷ Zdeněk Nejedlý was once again at the head of reinterpreting historical memory as he gave a speech from the pulpit where Jan Hus had once preached. Like in his book, *The Communists – Inheritors of the Great Traditions of the Czech Nation*, Nejedlý emphasized Hus's actions in a social justice context, discussing how, in this very building, he had stood up to authority, enabled the common people by preaching in Czech, and offered communion wine to the congregation, not drawing lines among social groups.⁷⁸ In his speech, Nejedlý claimed,

Bethlehem was absolutely not what usually one thinks of when one hears 'chapel.' A chapel is thought to be something small, tiny . . . but here one can fit three thousand people, more than a large church, and so this chapel is something more... It was not a church or a chapel.⁷⁹

Despite this claim, the official capacity of Bethlehem Chapel today is four hundred people.⁸⁰ Nejedlý rewrote reality to align with his politics. Similarly to the way he described Hus as a revolutionary, he talked about Bethlehem Chapel as a gathering place, a site for public discourse, a site of revolution: anything other than a church. There was a contradiction between the fixation on exactly replicating Bethlehem Chapel as it historically had been and changing its symbolic status in historical memory.

⁷⁷ "Betlémská kaple slavnostně předána našemu lidu," *Rudé právo*, July 6, 1954 in Paces, 205.

⁷⁸ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 205.

⁷⁹ Nejedlý, *Husův Betlem a náš dnešek*.

⁸⁰ "Bethlehem Chapel (Betlémská kaple)," Prague City Tourism, 2019.

<https://www.prague.eu/en/object/places/40/bethlehem-chapel-betlemska-kaple>.

Bethlehem Chapel is one of the more paradoxical sites of memory in Prague. For hundreds of years, it represented more than a building, even as it began crumbling to the ground. The Czech population recognized it as a birthplace of a powerful era in historical memory; in this way, the chapel adopted the meaning of the reformation itself. When cultural officials such as Nejedlý made the decision to rebuild Bethlehem Chapel, they were not only renovating a physical space, but the memory of Hus and the Bohemian Reformation. Kubiček's focus on accurately reconstructing a religious structure, down to the fresco of Hus's execution, would seem to imply that the chapel would be revived as a religious space, to continue the theological aspect of the reformation. However, politicians like Nejedlý felt differently. Even though the chapel was by definition a religious *lieu de mémoire*, they used it as a platform to further secularize the Bohemian Reformation.

Jan Žižka and the National Monument

Following the pattern of twisting rhetoric and image to fit communist theory are commemorations of Jan Žižka during the communist era. After Hus's death, Žižka, as a follower and contemporary of the preacher, led the radical Hussites into battle to defend their Protestant religion. The one-eyed warrior became known for his innovative military techniques, as he quickly trained peasant Hussites to fight trained Roman Catholic crusaders, and actually won several battles.⁸¹ Žižka represented military heroism and the power of the Czech nation long before the ČSSR. As arguably the most famous Czech warrior in historical memory, Žižka's legacy was a platform to recreate memory and

⁸¹ Thomas Fudge, "Žižka's Drum: The Political Uses of Popular Religion," *Central European History* 36 (2003): 551.

legitimize communism in Czech culture. The communist government used commemoration to shift what Žižka signified in Czech history to something that would support its agenda.



Figure 2

One of the most visible commemorations of the KSC's fight for "the soul of the Czech nation" is a monument called National Monument of Vítkov, featuring a statue of Jan Žižka, whose construction spanned from the 1920 to 1950. Watching over Prague's historically working class Žižkov neighborhood, the thirty foot tall equestrian statue of the famed Hussite warrior caps a concrete building (Figure 2).⁸² Rapidly changing political circumstance caused massive delays between the laying of the foundation

stone, which occurred in the First Republic, and the actual construction, which was not completed until in the early communist era. The massive statue of Žižka serves to remind the Czech public of both Žižka's importance in history and in the present. The commemorative space's symbolic meaning changed alongside the shift from the First

⁸² Royston Rascals, "Jan Zizka statue and National Monument, Vitkov Hill, Prague," Photograph. Flickr, 7 July 2012.

The building underneath the statue houses a museum, which will be discussed in Chapter II.

Republic to the ČSSR. Like political discourse or commemorations of Hus, Žižka's legacy was appropriated by the KSČ to make Czech national identity more inherently communist.

The National Monument was planned, though not completed, during the First Republic, at which point the Bohemian Reformation and Jan Žižka stood for independence and resisting a controlling external power. The monument at its conception thus commemorated a version of the Bohemian Reformation that was specifically tailored for First Republic political goals. Žižka was to be a symbol of a fight for independence, which was particularly appropriate for Czechoslovakia directly after World War I. However, the memory politics surrounding Žižka would quickly change alongside the Czechoslovak government.

The choice of site for the National Monument of Vítkov, Vítkov Hill, had just as much importance as the subject himself. Vítkov Hill became a place of victory after Žižka and his army of Hussite peasants unexpectedly defeated the imperial army of crusaders in a battle on the hill in 1420.⁸³ Like Žižka, the hill became an icon for resisting external oppression and protecting the Czech identity in battle. The physical location thus enhanced the power of the monument: the statue was connected to the geographic landscape in addition to Žižka as a Czech hero. Its location in Prague also held connections to the Bohemian Reformation in Czech historical memory. Members of the working class, who often lived in the Žižkov neighborhood, tended towards strong

⁸³ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 171.

feelings of nationalism during the First Republic.⁸⁴ The monument was a symbol of Czech nationalism as the newly formed state created a national identity.

Construction on the monument was halted with the 1938 Nazi occupation of the Second World War. The building was mostly finished by the end of the First Republic, but the equestrian statue remained uncompleted. During the war, German occupiers used the structure to store weapons and ammunition.⁸⁵ This can be seen as another symbolic change; the *lieu de mémoire* had been desecrated, transformed from a space to honor Czech resistance and identity to a meaningless storage facility for an invading force. In halting the construction of a cultural monument and making the space utilitarian, the German forces took a symbolic as well as physical stance against resistance and independence in the Czechoslovak nation.

After the Nazi occupation, construction on the equestrian statue resumed on Vítkov Hill. Žižka, the ultimate Czech warrior, stood as a powerful and aggressive symbol after an occupation that Czechs had been unable to fight. In the post-World War II era, the Czech population either felt a sense of weakness from the Nazi occupation, or survivors' guilt from having fared relatively well in comparison to the Jewish population or their Polish neighbors. The KSC connected Žižka to “a more masculine characterization of Czech history [... which] would commemorate a Czech victory and boost the self-esteem of a nation that lacked military heroics.”⁸⁶ Žižka became more

⁸⁴ Ibid, 171.

⁸⁵ Andrea Kocsis, “Iconography and Nationalism: The Comparison of the First World War Memorials in Budapest and Prague” (Master’s thesis, Charles University Faculty of Arts, 2016), 39.

⁸⁶ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 182.

relevant than ever, even though the government that promoted his image often acted as an oppressive force.

At the monument's unveiling celebration in 1950, minister of national defense Alexej Čepička made a speech, stating, "Today, after the overthrow of the government of oppressors,... our people's democratic army proclaims Žižka's legacy."⁸⁷ Čepička, while discussing Czechoslovakia's liberation from Nazi occupation (aided by the Soviets) connected the new communist State to the Hussite legacy of resistance and glory, using rhetoric that the Soviet army liberated Prague from the Nazi invaders, so they must stand on similar ground to the Hussite warriors. In contrast to Masaryk's claim that the Bohemian Reformation is "a deeper manifestation the Czech soul and of our national character," Čepička was significantly more focused on the militant aspect. While Masaryk emphasized the Czech national identity—appropriately so in the era of nation-building—Čepička connected Žižka's military legacy to the monument. By discussing an "overthrow" of an oppressive government," he commemorated the end of the Second World War, with all of its communist implications, in addition to the Bohemian Reformation.

Few moments in history experienced the same longevity in Czech memory as the Bohemian Reformation. The Bohemian Reformation and its key actors left a legacy that was so powerful it became a political tool centuries after the event. It was pursued as a historical symbol worth re-imagining in order to better integrate communist values into the Czech identity. The KSČ's discourse and commemoration of the Bohemian

⁸⁷ Alexej Čepička in Paces, 181.

Reformation is an example of how a government can use the past to legitimize its politics, even if the past needs to be re-interpreted to do so. The changing narratives of the Bohemian Reformation, told both verbally and through commemorative spaces, demonstrate the malleability of historical memory, especially in a political context. While some moments in history are lost, or even intentionally forgotten, different Czech governments commemorated different versions of the story of the Bohemian Reformation to define what it means to be Czech.

CHAPTER II

REPLACING THE FIRST REPUBLIC: *Delegitimizing Popular Sovereignty Through Historical Erasure*

In 1955, the secretary of the KSČ Regional Committee in Ostrava, Miloš Svoboda, wrote,

We have to deal a lot with social-democratism in many factories and villages. In its present state, social-democratism can also be seen in the endeavour to weaken the union of the workers and the working small and medium farmers. With the help of propaganda lectures, the regional organisation managed to deal with the remnants of the Masaryk lie-democracy and the lie-humanity, so much praised by the Traitor abroad, which still find an echo in some of our citizens, as well as with the opinion that it was not Masaryk's fault that the working people lived in poverty, hunger, and unemployment during the capitalist regime...⁸⁸

Svoboda expressed the perspective that the legacy of the First Czechoslovak Republic (in this case, in the form of first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk) was an active mythology amongst Czech citizens. He also pointed out that support or nostalgia for the First Republic was potentially damaging to the communist state. Svoboda's language, such as calling the First Republic a "lie-democracy" or "capitalist regime," and Masaryk a "Traitor," while admittedly dramatic, is an example of the communist government's work to delegitimize the First Republic and all that it stood for.

The First Czechoslovak Republic was an era that formed the framework of Czech national identity in the twentieth century. Beginning at the 1918 establishment of Czechoslovakia as formal state and ending with the 1938 Nazi occupation of the area, it was during the First Republic that Czechs developed a unified sense of "Czechness," as

⁸⁸ "Social Democratism and the "Remnants of the Masaryk Lie-Democracy"", 19 September 1955. HU OSA 300-1-2-62203; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Ostrava is a city in north-east Czechia.

well as a more defined mythology of their history. Czech nationalists and politicians formed a “creation myth” centered around the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of the main reasons Czechoslovakia was able to become a state, and glorified the actors involved—from the Czech soldiers of World War I to the first president.⁸⁹

The First Republic left behind a system of political norms that often contradicted the political agendas of the ČSSR. There is no doubt that the First Republic was a formative era for the Czech culture, producing notions of independence and popular sovereignty. These norms could not evaporate with a change in government; even as the national identity is constantly changing, it is difficult to remove or alter a tradition that is embedded in national rituals and consciousness, which can consequently become sites of resistance.⁹⁰ However, the communist party severely criticized the First Republic and what it stood for, which influenced how they remembered and commemorated the era during the ČSSR. They argued that it was inherently corrupt due to its capitalist structure and its relationship with Western capitalist powers. In short, it was a “sham” of a democracy, as Czech historian Bradley Abrams describes.⁹¹ Furthermore, the First Republic, as a representation of popular sovereignty and functional democracy, threatened the communist system. Both the political structures and what the First Republic symbolized in historical memory contradicted the KSČ’s ideological and political values.

⁸⁹ Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*, 186.

⁹⁰ Hutchinson, “Nations and Culture,” 80.

⁹¹ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 119.

These aversions to the history of the First Republic manifested in erasure and delegitimization of several First Republic symbols. For example, the Czechoslovak Legionnaires, who were a group of World War I Czech soldiers, were heavily glorified and commemorated by Czech nationalists during the First Republic but were wiped from history by the communist government. The Legionnaires had fought against the Austro-Hungarian military after being captured by the Russian White army.⁹² Because they battled the colonizing force, the Legionnaires became symbols of Czech military prowess, liberty, and resistance.⁹³ In response to these powerful associations, which potentially disagreed with the political agenda, the KSČ de-emphasized commemorations of the Legionnaires. Instead, they memorialized the actions of Soviet soldiers during the Second World War to legitimize a communist symbol in Czech history. As World War II came to a close in 1945, it was the Soviet Red Army that arrived in Nazi-occupied Prague, killing or capturing any remaining Nazi troops.⁹⁴ The acts of shifting commemoration from First Republic values to communist values reflects the KSČ's use of memory politics to redefine Czechoslovakia's military identity. The KSČ also addressed the legacy of Masaryk, one of the most iconic Czech names of the twentieth century, in their remembrance and erasure. As a "Founding Father" figure, Masaryk represented democracy and popular sovereignty in the Czech imagination. His influence on the Czech identity was so difficult to erase that communist politicians originally attempted to claim his legacy as their own. However, his memory proved too entangled

⁹² Nancy M. Wingfield, "The Battle of Zborov and the Politics of Commemoration in Czechoslovakia." *East European Politics and Societies* 17, no. 4 (November 2003): 657.

⁹³ Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84-85.

⁹⁴ Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 207.

with the capitalist and democratic aspects of the First Republic that the KSČ had rejected, and they ultimately abandoned glorifying his narrative in favor of more communist figures.⁹⁵

While the state commemorated some moments in Czech history in attempt to reconcile Czech culture with communism, they often delegitimized and even erased the First Republic. First Republic symbols that embodied ideas of multi-party democracy and personal liberty were potential sites of resistance against the single-party, and often oppressive, communist government. These symbols, including the Czechoslovak Legionnaires and eventually Masaryk, were worth erasing in order to legitimize the communist system as it transitioned from the First Republic democracy. Unlike the Bohemian Reformation, which was twisted to fit neatly into the vocabulary of communist history, historical memory of the First Republic during the ČSSR demonstrated erasure of certain events and key figures. Ernest Renan suggested that, “forgetting, even historical error,” is the foundation of building a nation; the KSČ’s approach to Czech memories of the First Republic shows the power of forgetting in constructing new national narratives.⁹⁶ As a way to legitimize the oppressive politics of the communist era, the KSČ “forgot,” or erased, historical symbols of the First Republic in order to delegitimize Czech notions of popular sovereignty.

⁹⁵ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?*, 116.

⁹⁶ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” in Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* trans. Ethan Rundell (Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992), 3.

Communist Criticisms of the First Republic

The legitimacy of Czechoslovak democracy, specifically First Republic democracy, was under attack by Czech communists from 1918 to the ČSSR, at which point became only a memory. Contrary to many communist analyses, the First Czechoslovak Republic was in fact “the most prosperous, progressive, and democratic state of East Central Europe,” according to historian Joseph Rothschild.⁹⁷ It was incredibly stable due to nineteenth century industrialization, which continued into the early 1900s.⁹⁸ The relative success of this era was irrelevant to Party members; they formed arguments against the morality and success of the First Republic’s democracy. Communist politicians and intellectuals defined morality as being centered around Marx’s ideas of class equality and overthrowing capitalism. As communism rose post-World War II, communists declared the capitalist First Republic government a bourgeoisie construction, designed to oppress the proletariat as the new nation took shape: therefore, inherently immoral. Any economic success was in fact proof that the state was dependent on foreign capitalist powers to maintain its wealth, making it a cog in the machine of global capitalism. These notions of the First Republic as inherently immoral created a foundation for rejecting its historical symbols.

The idea of sacrificing morality for the sake of stability on an international level was eloquently expressed in 1946 by Jiří Hájek, who would later become a diplomat for the KSČ: “For the securing of our geographic foundation against German and Hungarian

⁹⁷ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the two World Wars* (University of Washington Press: 1977), 134.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

revisionist pressure, our democracy had to pay by participation in securing the society against revolutionary pressures.”⁹⁹ Hájek was not wrong; Masaryk and his colleagues had formed Czechoslovakia through diplomatic negotiations with the Allies at the close of World War I, making a commitment to the desires of more powerful Western European nations. The late Austro-Hungarian Empire had been a major player in Europe’s international economic and social structures, and Western Powers had no desire to reconfigure that landscape as new Central European nations were forming.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, part of the Czechoslovak political and economic systems included maintaining the profit structures from prewar Europe in order to exist as the sovereign state that Czech nationalists so enthusiastically embraced—even though it meant “securing the society against revolutionary pressure,” or not re-inventing economic and political structures to be more equal. Although the First Republic was the most “progressive” of the newly formed Central European nations during the interwar period, with high levels of literacy, unemployment insurance, an eight hour workday, and a large pool of skilled labor, it was decidedly capitalist.¹⁰¹ The type of revolution that would implement a completely new political or economic system (such as had happened in Russia) was out of the question in order to maintain positive relations with the Western powers that had helped create, and could easily crush, Czechoslovakia. Communist critics looked beyond the relative success of the First Republic to argue that it was a democracy built upon perpetuating a capitalist, and inherently class-oppressive, international system.

⁹⁹ Jiří Hájek, “Kroky k Mnichovu, které udělala první republika” (trans: “Approaches to Munich, which created the First Republic”), 1946 in Abrams, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 120.

¹⁰¹ Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the two World Wars*, 134.

Communist politicians further emphasized the immorality and inferiority of the First Republic by comparing it to the morality of a communist society. In defining morality by on class relations, they created a mythology of the First Republic as an oppressive, cruel moment in Czech history. KSČ central committee member, Jiří Hendrych, wrote that “from the viewpoint of the new morality, what is moral is which aids in the definitive defeat of the old world, the world of oppression and poverty, and helps build the new world that is rushing toward socialism.”¹⁰² Hendrych, among other politicians, defined the morality of the First Republic as the antithesis of the morality of the ČSSR. He framed the dichotomy of historical Czech capitalism and current Czech communism as a dichotomy of the immoral and the moral, or an era of the bourgeoisie oppressing the working class and a more progressive world working towards Marx’s utopia. By using the term “new morality,” Hendrych emphasized the communist era as a new social order with new values; but he is perfectly clear that the new morality is superior than the any morals from the old “world of oppression and poverty,” as he titles the First Republic.

Communist politicians drew from the end of the First Republic as further proof of its systemic inadequacy. The First Republic ended in 1938, with the Munich Agreement. The Munich Agreement was a settlement between Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, that allowed Germany to annex part of western Czechoslovakia. They did not consult the Czechoslovak government. From there, the First Republic quickly unraveled

¹⁰² Jiří Hendrych, “Morálka naší doby,” (trans: “The Moral of Our Times”), 1946 in Abrams, 121.

as Slovakia seceded and the Nazis occupied the Czech Republic.¹⁰³ Related to the line of rhetoric that the First Republic was too aligned with foreign capitalists, communist politicians pointed out that Czechoslovak government had been unable to maintain political independence, in part because it was too economically controlled by other foreign powers.¹⁰⁴ While a myriad of factors had led to Germany's annexation of western Czechoslovakia, international relations with capitalist powers were the easiest for communist politicians to use as evidence of the First Republic's political and economic weakness.

Criticisms of political or economic circumstances aside, one of the primary reasons that the KSC worked to delegitimize symbols of the First Republic was the era's association with popular sovereignty and individual liberty. During the communist era, the government limited many of the Czech citizens' rights to make decisions, on political, economic, and social levels. The government attempted to legitimize this oppression by delegitimizing Czech notions of popular sovereignty, particularly in terms of the First Republic. The KSC erased historical symbols from their sites of commemoration in order to maintain communist mythology, often replacing them with symbols that perpetuated a communist historical narrative.

Erasing and Replacing the Legionnaires

The Czechoslovak Legionnaires, the most mythologized Czechoslovak troops of the First World War, play a vital role in the story of building and destroying historical memory in

¹⁰³ John O. Crane and Sylvia Crane's *Czechoslovakia: The Anvil of the Cold War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991) provides a comprehensive description of the events in Czechoslovakia leading up to World War II.

¹⁰⁴ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 120.

Czechoslovakia. While the Czech nationalists of the First Republic commemorated the Legionnaires as a way to build and define the Czech identity, communist politicians replaced commemorations of the Legionnaires with the Soviet army, which not only symbolically removed them from Czech national memory, but also attempted to frame the Soviet troops as a part of Czech culture and history. Replacing First Republic military heroes with Soviets would also replace the idea of Czechoslovakia as a powerful and proud nation with the idea that it was dependent upon and in debt to the Soviet Union. The Czechoslovak Legionnaires, and how they were commemorated and erased, exemplifies one way the KSČ used historical “forgetting” to deal with the anti-communist historical memory of the First Republic.

It is common for military symbols to hold power in a nation’s historical memory. Wars and their aftermath are often defining moments in a national history, igniting political, economic, and social change. Military commemorations reflect the impact of wars in the collective memory. Not only are they extremely common, from memorials to Veterans Day to “tombs of the unknown soldier,” but they carry more weight than commemorating the death of an individual soldier. Rather, military symbols in national memory commemorate the larger concepts of defending the nation and the ways a war has shaped the nation’s development.¹⁰⁵ The impact that military symbols have on national identity is reflected in the shift in military commemorations from the First

¹⁰⁵ Military pride is an oft-repeated theme in scholarly works on nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Aviel Roshwald’s *The Endurance of Nationalism* in particular provide comprehensive analyses of the relationship between national militaries, commemoration, and national identity.

Republic to the ČSSR, as well as how the KSČ attempted to erase the remnants of First Republic historical memory.

As the KSČ built a new national identity, it created a network of military symbolism commemorating the recent Second World War. In doing so, it also erased the military symbolism built around World War I that had been so important to the First Republic Czech identity. The Czechoslovak Legionnaires, as one of the most prominent national military symbols of the First Republic, were a vital part of this memory building and dismantling. Because they fought for the White Army, the opposing force to the communist Red Army during the Russian Civil War, the Legionnaires were not remembered kindly by the KSČ. However, the First Republic discourse surrounding them remembers them as heroically initiating Czechoslovakia's freedom from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, rather than associating them with the act of surrendering or the trauma of a Russian prison camp. This glorification reflects the attempt to build a narrative of pride for Czechoslovakia's recent liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁰⁶ There were even connections between the Legionnaires and the Bohemian Reformation; two of their units were named for Jan Hus and Jan Žižka, showing deep associations between Czech soldiers in the twentieth century and the medieval movement that was embedded in the national consciousness.¹⁰⁷ The Legionnaires thus became representations of the Czechoslovak military spirit and victory over colonialism.

Although Czechs of the First Republic commemorated the Legionnaires in a myriad of forms, one of the most visible, and most attacked by the KSČ, was the National

¹⁰⁶ Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁷ Wingfield, "The Battle of Zborov and the Politics of Commemoration in Czechoslovakia," 658.

Monument of Vítkov. The National Monument, in addition to the enormous statue of Jan Žižka, includes a commemorative space originally dedicated to the First Republic. The monument's architects added the massive concrete building to the plan as



Figure 3

commemoration grew increasingly popular during the First Republic (Figure 3).¹⁰⁸ Unlike the statue, the structure served as a memorial space for the far more recent World War I, rather than the Bohemian Reformation. The building

was completed before the statue, in 1947—one year before the communist party seized control of the Czechoslovak government.¹⁰⁹ Both at its inception and during the communist era, it served as a commemorative space, with artwork, room for ceremonies, and even mausoleums. Both the exterior statue of Žižka and the interior commemorations represented connections to the nation's memory and found different ways to physically display it. In the initial stages of planning during the First Republic, before the KSČ appropriated the site of remembrance in 1950, the memorial building was intended to display the newly established symbols of Czech liberty and nationhood. Since the end of

¹⁰⁸ Royston Rascals, "Jan Zizka statue and National Monument, Vitkov Hill, Prague," Photograph. Flickr, 7 July 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 173.

the First World War, Czech nationalists had been spreading commemorative symbols of the Legionnaires across Czechoslovakia.¹¹⁰ These commemorations made the Legionnaires into symbols of the military side of the recent liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire: an appropriate match to the external statue of Žižka, the main military hero of the Bohemian Reformation. As Czech historian Cynthia Paces describes, “Originally planned simply as a monument to Žižka, the site took on broader dimensions after the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia, when nationalists proclaimed the need for a memorial in Prague of national liberation.”¹¹¹ Commemorating the Legionnaires and other symbols of the First Republic in a building attached to a larger-than-life statue of Jan Žižka would form powerful associations between the First Republic heroes and the Bohemian Reformation.

However, members of the KSČ ministry of culture reimagined the original building, like other sites of memory all over Czechoslovakia. Similarly to the renovation of Bethlehem Chapel, the National Monument was a structure that had acted as a sign for Czech values in the First Republic which the government altered on a symbolic level for political gain. Unlike the communist commemoration of the Bohemian Reformation, this shift in memory was a case of historical erasure. While KSČ politicians argued that Hus and Žižka were in fact communists, and thus worthy of commemoration, they deemed the Legionnaires so incompatible with communist ideology that their legacy must be painted over. In the First Republic, the Legionnaires had represented overthrowing a controlling force—the Austro-Hungarian Empire—which made their symbolic legacy a threat to the

¹¹⁰ Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*, 171.

¹¹¹ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 171.

communist regime. Furthermore, they were a “foundation stone” in creating the First Republic national identity, meaning they played a role in creating the so-called oppressive, bourgeoisie democracy.¹¹² Historical memory of the Legionnaires was so intertwined with the political norms of the First Republic that it inherently contradicted the KSČ’s agenda. The commemorations of the Legionnaires in the National Monument of Vítkov, and more importantly how the KSČ eradicated them, demonstrate the politics of forgetting when forging a new historical memory for a new political system.

The contrast between the original intentions of the First Republic government and the communist revisions is clear when analyzing the artistic changes in the monument. The National Monument is architecturally structured in the form of a Gothic cathedral, with a large main space and several smaller “side chapels.” The side chapels were designed to serve as specific sites of commemoration, while the main space is a ceremonial hall. In yet another ideological battle, the KSČ faced Christian implications embedded into the very floor plan of the building. While government officials could hardly alter the building’s structure, they did make alterations to the displays and artwork of the interior. One side chapel, literally titled “the Legionnaires’ Chapel,” was one of the most significant commemorations to the Legionnaires in Prague. In the center of the chapel, there was an edifice built to hold the cremated remains of the Legionnaires upon their deaths. The room featured elaborate mosaics of the World War I soldiers surrounded by allegorical figures, full of Christian symbolism.¹¹³ Although the mosaics’ creator,

¹¹² Robert B. Pynsent, “Literary Representation of the Czechoslovak ‘Legions’ in Russia,” in *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe 1918-1948*, eds. Mark Cornwall and R.J.W. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65.

¹¹³ Paces, *Prague Panoramas*, 175-6.

Max Švabinský, continued to be a highly regarded artist throughout the communist era, the KSČ objected to the mosaics because of the way they glorified the Legionnaires. To amend this First Republic space in favor of communist symbols, the state changed the name of the Legionnaires' Chapel to the "Hall of the Fallen Soldiers" and filled it with signs and poetry celebrating the Red Army.¹¹⁴

Changing the names of sites of memory was an important component of the KSČ's program to alter historical memory. Czech theorist Vladimír Macura wrote, "In Czechoslovakia, renaming became all too common due to the political and historical upheavals of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, the new names reflected not only the latest ideological reality but also the inherent need for continuation and custom."¹¹⁵ The newly titled Hall of the Fallen Soldiers built upon a tradition of military commemoration, which was clearly valued in Czech historical memory, but subverted it to celebrate communism. Retitling the chapel as the Hall of the Fallen Soldiers secularized the space by using the word "hall" instead of "chapel," but, more significantly, erased the specific symbolism of the Legionnaires to encompass a wider memory of military history. "Fallen Soldiers," as a term, does not specifically denote Czechness. In the context of post-World War II military commemoration, it could easily include Soviet soldiers, adding communist symbolism to the physical site of memory. The new narrative was further perpetuated by the signs and poetry devoted to the Red Army. While the Legionnaires were a case of the Czechs defending their own land, commemorating the Red Army in

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 176.

¹¹⁵ Vladimír Macura, *The Mystifications of a Nation: "The Potato Bug" and Other Essays on Czech Culture*, trans. Hana Píchová, Craig Cravens, Caryl Emerson, et. al (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 104.

Czechoslovakia painted a picture of external rescuers of a helpless and occupied Prague. There is a stark contradiction between the place the Legionnaires occupied in Czech national memory (serving to build nationalism during the creation of a new state) and the new overlay of non-Czech figures. Replacing the Legionnaires, essentially removing them from historical memory, delegitimized the mythology of powerful Czech military resistance and created new notions that Czechoslovakia was dependent on the Soviet Union.

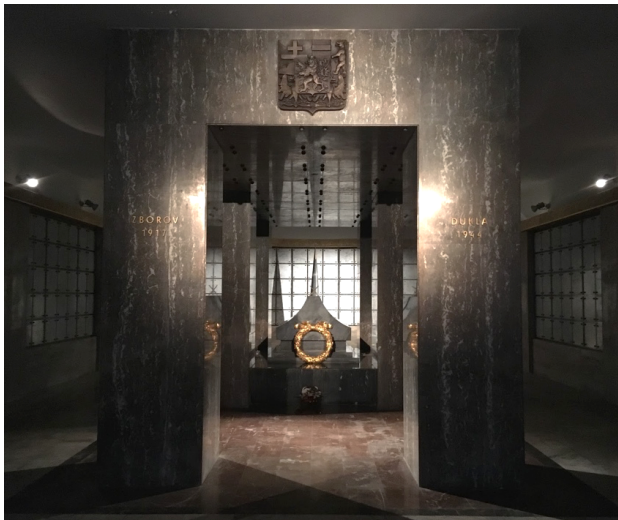


Figure 4

Another side chapel, the “Hall of the Red Army”, further emphasized way the KSČ built connections between the Soviet Union and Czech historical memory, this time through the use of a “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” (Figure 4).¹¹⁶ Scholar of nationalism, Aviel Roshwald, wrote that Tombs of the Unknown Soldier

have “become a widespread nationalist tradition whose power lies not only in the anonymity of the individual remains lying within it, but also the nonspecificity of the time it refers to.”¹¹⁷ In a monument with a statue of a Hussite warrior atop a building commemorating more recent memory, this quote becomes especially relevant. The

¹¹⁶ Tomáš Jelen, “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the National Monument of Vítkov,” Photograph. 2018.

¹¹⁷ Aviel Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 64.

symbolic tomb was originally conceptualized as a “Tomb of the Unknown Legionary.”¹¹⁸ In this way, it connected the history of the Hussite Wars to the nationalism-based symbols of the Legionnaires in the First Republic. The communist re-interpretation then commemorated the Red Army rather than the Legionnaires. With this, it became a tomb of an unknown Soviet soldier, not a Czech one. Thus continued the tradition of nonspecificity in both individual and time frame: a tomb supposedly commemorating the Red Army’s sacrifices in the 1940s existed in a monument that commemorated the Bohemian Reformation of the 1400s as well as the First Republic in the 1920s and 30s. The importance of commemorating the past, particularly the military past, was utilized by the communist regime when they appropriated the Tomb of the Unknown Legionnaire and, while keeping the sacredness of a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, instead commemorated a symbol of communism.

Mirroring the dramatic change in political values and goals, military commemorations underwent a massive transition between the First Republic and the ČSSR. The shift from commemorating the Legionnaires to the Red Army reveals the power of both entities in Czech historical memory. The Legionnaires clearly held power in the First Republic through glorification and commemoration. During the ČSSR, their cultural significance was acknowledged in a very different way, when the government attempted to delegitimize notions of Czech resistance and liberty by removing physical commemorations. This symbolic forgetting is as much a political maneuver as

¹¹⁸ Kocsis, *Iconography and Nationalism*, 41.

commemorating a moment in history; the KSČ legitimized their present by removing threatening remnants of the past, such as the Legionnaires.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, The President-Liberator

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk is so prominent in Czech historical memory that communist politicians faced an even more difficult task in dealing with his legacy than that of the Czechoslovak Legionnaires. Erasing symbols of Masaryk, as a beloved “Founding Father” figure in Czech mythology, had the potential to cause unrest or dissidence. The communist party initially tried to appropriate his popularity and re-interpret his works as communist. However, Masaryk’s legacy was so tied up in the anti-communist aspects of the First Republic that any communist support rang as hollow.¹¹⁹ As the government became increasingly controlling during the Stalinist years, Masaryk’s legacy as a symbol of popular sovereignty and Czech liberty became threatening to the KSČ, and a potential site of resistance. Eventually, the KSČ halted attempts to reclaim his memory and began the process of delegitimizing Masaryk, as a way to legitimize their opposing political actions. The shifts in how the Czech Communist Party commemorated Masaryk as a symbol of the First Republic reveal the complexities of appropriating national symbols that misalign with the predominant ideology.

Masaryk fits into the mythology of the “Founding Fathers,” a term often used to describe the creators of the U.S. constitution, but that has a richer meaning in the context of historical memory and national mythology. “Founding Fathers” are part of national creation myths, stories used to connect a national identity to the nation’s inception.

¹¹⁹ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?*, 116.

Masaryk, as the first president and a key figure in creating Czechoslovakia, was thus part of the Czechoslovak creation myth and the foundation of First Republic identity. The term “Founding Father” implies that the individual was both a creator and shaper of the nation—playing a role in how it became a political entity and in defining the nation. From Masaryk’s presidency onwards, he was conceptualized as a “father” of the Czechoslovak nation and national identity, which would be crucial in the KSČ’s decisions on how to commemorate him.¹²⁰

Masaryk rose to fame and adoration when he became one of the primary advocates for Czech statehood, especially at the close of World War I.¹²¹ This political reputation led to his presidency, but also his placement within the Czech “pantheon” of historical figures: Hus, Žižka, Saint Wenceslas, and more. In 1945, one Czech theologian went so far as to call the First Republic “The Era of Masaryk.”¹²² The president was more than a recognizable symbol of Czech independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire; he was also a defining symbol of the time period during which Czechoslovakia became a nation. Czech citizens often credited the successful aspects of First Republic democracy, from economic prosperity to citizen representation in government, to Masaryk, making him a historical symbol of popular sovereignty and liberty.

¹²⁰ Scholarship surrounding Founding Fathers and how they function in building a nation is relatively recent trend and largely centers on United States history. Some of the more prominent works on this subject include: Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Knopf, 2000).; Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).; David Waldstreicher. "Founders Chic As Culture War." *Radical History Review* 84 (2002): 185-194.

¹²¹ Tomáš Tatínek, "Statecraft and Leadership in Europe: The Case of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk," *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 8 (2 September 2014): 65-69.

¹²² J. L. Hromádka, “Naše orientační postava,” (English Translation: “Our Guiding Figure”) 1945 in Abrams, 125.

What made Masaryk and all he stood for so appealing to the Czechs of the First Republic was also what made him threatening to the communist regime. His informal title, the “President-Liberator” (“Prezident Osvoboditel” in Czech), reflects his place in historical memory on a most basic level: Czechs saw Masaryk as a politically powerful individual who could bring independence from a controlling external force. In the First Republic, this force was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the 1948 coup d’état, however, memories of a President-Liberator could be applied against the KSČ or the Soviet Union with dangerous ease. In an era of a singular controlling political party, Masaryk, as a symbol, needed to be delegitimized. Everything that communist politicians had criticized about the First Republic—its “sham” of a democracy, its dependence on global capitalism—had been founded by Masaryk along with the First Republic itself. Masaryk was simultaneously too powerful a figure to ignore and a representation of anti-communism in First Republic historical memory.

Communist politicians therefore faced the difficult task of taking a figure who had explicitly criticized Marxism and communism (in writing) and forming a coherent argument that the ČSSR was part of his legacy.¹²³ One way KSČ politicians attempted to communize Masaryk’s memory, remembering it on their own terms whilst stripping it of the anti-communist First Republic connotations, was by examining his pre-World War I scholarship. Masaryk’s most controversial moves had occurred before his career in politics, when he defended a Jew accused of murder in the “Hilsner Affair,” and the “Manuscript Controversy” during which he (correctly) declared that ancient documents

¹²³ Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Humanistic Ideals* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1971).

regarding Czech lands were forgeries.¹²⁴ The Manuscript Controversy in particular challenged Czech identity during the Austro-Hungarian Empire because it challenged prior conceptions of Czech-German borders. Communists latched onto both of these controversies as proof that Masaryk had fought against the bourgeoisie establishment. In reality, Masaryk often critiqued the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but not along lines of class inequality; he wanted to dismantle the empire and create a (non-communist) Czechoslovak nation.

By the early 1950s, the KSČ's treatment of Masaryk's legacy had gone more the way of Czechoslovak Legionnaires. Politicians stopped attempting to claim his ideas as communist and went the route of undermining his memory and replacing it with more explicitly communist symbols.¹²⁵ Miloš Svoboda's claim that the First Republic was "the Masaryk lie-democracy and the lie-humanity," and that it was "Masaryk's fault that the working people lived in poverty, hunger, and unemployment during the capitalist regime" was only the beginning of the attacks on the former president's memory.¹²⁶ There are two possible explanations for this shift in commemorative politics, according to the historical context. By 1950, Soviet-style communism had taken hold of Czechoslovakia, and communist leaders had to answer to Soviet president Joseph Stalin for major political decisions. By 1952, most institutions had been collectivized as part of the Five Year Plan,

¹²⁴ Ian M. Randall, "Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937): European Politician and Christian Philosopher," *Political Theology* 7, no. 4 (October 2006): 454-5.

¹²⁵ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* 116.

¹²⁶ "Social Democratism and the "Remnants of the Masaryk Lie-Democracy"", 19 September 1955. HU OSA 300-1-2-62203; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

resulting in economic destruction. The first of the show trials occurred the same year.¹²⁷ The political climate was brutal and oppressive when the KSČ began their erasure and delegitimization scheme for upon memory of Masaryk. Perhaps, the leaders felt secure enough in their power and control that they no longer saw the need to use Masaryk as a symbol to legitimize their claim to governing Czechoslovakia. What seems more likely, especially considering their increasingly authoritarian nature, is a fear of the notions of democracy and popular sovereignty that inevitably accompanied commemorating Masaryk.¹²⁸ These notions could facilitate a potential site of resistance. Attacking and delegitimizing Masaryk's place in Czech historical memory was easier than attempting to twist the pro-democracy President-Liberator into a communist symbol, especially in an era such of harsh policy.

There is ample record of the KSČ renaming streets that had been named after Masaryk (Masarykova třída) throughout Czechoslovakia.¹²⁹ They tore down monuments and memorials to the former leader in Prague, Brno, Plzen, Bratislava, Kroměříž, Jiřikov, Kladno, and other cities.¹³⁰ One of the more morbid symbolic gestures intended to erase

¹²⁷ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 234-242.

¹²⁸ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* 116.

¹²⁹ "Masaryk Street Renamed at Kladno", 26 November 1951. HU OSA 300-1-2-11529; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹³⁰ "Removal of Masaryk Monument in Kromeriz", 4 September 1953. HU OSA 300-1-2-38335; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.; "The Demolition of the T.G. Masaryk Monument at Lovesice near Prerov", 31 July 1954. HU OSA 300-1-2-48888; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.; "Jirikov's Masaryk Statue Overthrown Dragged Away by Reds", 8 August 1953. HU OSA 300-1-2-37547; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.; "Removal of Stefanik and Masaryk Memorials in Bratislava", 7 November 1953. HU OSA 300-1-2-40655; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society

Masaryk and implement a more communist legacy occurred in a mausoleum in the National Monument of Vítkov. The mausoleum had originally been built to house Masaryk's body upon his death. Although Masaryk ultimately declined this offer and was buried in the small town of Lány in 1937, the mausoleum's construction was part of the "cult of death" that surrounded commemorations of famous figures during the turn of the century. The space was to preserve Masaryk's political significance, and Masaryk's remains would reciprocally make the space a sacred symbol of the era.

The original intention behind the mausoleum was lost in 1953 with the death of the first General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Klement Gottwald. Following in the footsteps of Lenin and Stalin, Party leaders decided to embalm Gottwald's body and exhibit the remains at Vítkov Hill. He was dressed in a military uniform—displayed as a soldier in the fight for communism.¹³¹ Gottwald's physical body became part of the monument and a symbol of the communist memory, intended to overwhelm the legacy of Masaryk and the First Republic in general. The National Monument on Vítkov already had a memorial to Red soldiers, erasing the military heroes of the First Republic. Now, a Czech communist leader had found his final resting place in the monument, where Masaryk's body had been intended to go, no less. The National Monument was fully "communized." By 1956, Gottwald's body began to decay due to improper embalming; eventually, no amount of prosthetics could hide the fact and the corpse was removed. However, the monument retained its nature throughout the

Archives at Central European University, Budapest.; "Masaryk Statue at Pecky Removed?", 12 November 1951. HU OSA 300-1-2-10779; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹³¹ Paces, *Prague Panoramas* 185.

communist era as a *lieu de mémoire* of communist history, reminding the public of the Red Army, of the Soviet liberation of Prague, of Gottwald's leadership, and, as the KSČ hoped, of everything but the First Republic.

The KSČ erased, delegitimized, and replaced historical symbols with the intention to legitimize their own politics. In theory, removing physical symbols of a threatening historical figure or event would de-emphasize them in historical memory. The reality was not so simple. In the town of Prostějov, rioting and injury were reported after the removal of a statue of Masaryk in 1953.¹³² Police had to guard Masaryk's grave in Lány to prevent undue commemoration every day until 1956.¹³³ The mythology of the First Republic was too strong to be replaced with Soviet mythology amongst the Czech public, and their response to commemorative actions proved their loyalty to First Republic narratives. Forgetting the Legionnaires and Masaryk did not legitimize the KSČ, it only perpetuated the cycle of political deception and dishonesty that characterized the communist era. Erasing evidence of First Republic heroes removed them from the physical, but not the memory, landscape.

¹³² "Removal of Masaryk Monument Causes Incident", 31 December 1953. HU OSA 300-1-2-42200; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹³³ "Police Guard Removed from Masaryk's Grave", 31 October 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-76176; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

CHAPTER III:

REWRITING LIVING MEMORY: Concealing Political Instability in the ČSSR

“The Regimes of captive nations are embarrassed and confused and resort to childish excuses to carry forward the iconoclastic campaign.”

- Radio Free Europe Report, 1954¹³⁴

By the mid 1950s, it had become quite clear to the Czech population that communism was a flawed and unstable system. The communist system had eliminated many personal liberties, and any remnants of democracy were more performance than anything else. Klement Gottwald, the first president of the ČSSR, worked under Joseph Stalin’s direction to impose the Soviet model of communism upon Czechoslovakia, resulting in political purges, land collectivization, and the violent show trials.¹³⁵ These events were destructive not only for Czechoslovakia’s political and economic situation, but also harmed the Czech sense of self. Instead of building national pride, they created distrust for the government and associations of poverty and political violence with the Czechoslovak state.

The KSČ naturally did not want these negative impressions amongst their own people, or on an international level. Thus, they continued manipulating historical memory, but in a slightly different setting: instead of targeting symbols that had already been established as components of the Czech national identity, they addressed the recent,

¹³⁴“The Collapse of the Stalin Myth”, 28 April 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-69416; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹³⁵ Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, 234-43.

communist past. In many cases, the KSČ was attempting to rewrite living memory. Although living memory functions differently than centuries-old events in the theory of historical memory, it is still part of a group's interpretation of the past. Czech memories of the show trials that had executed hundreds of innocent "enemies of the state" only a few years prior, for example, were not surrounded in a mythology that had developed over centuries. However, the tragic events of the early 1950s were powerful enough that they were embedded and emotionally charged within a group memory, making them part of historical memory.

When the KSČ crafted alternative narratives surrounding recent events of the communist era, they participated in a type of nation-building, though not as literally as during the First Republic. Czechoslovakia already existed as a nation, culturally and politically. The KSČ's goals were to alter the national identity, i.e. build an ideal communist identity. They enacted what John Hutchinson calls *cultural nationalism*, focusing on a "moral regeneration of the historical 'community' and attempting an inner renovation of the ethnic base."¹³⁶ While this concept can apply to the KSČ's more general treatment of historical memory, it is especially relevant in examining the regime's recrafting of its own narrative. The reality of communist history in Czechoslovakia—and around the Eastern Bloc—was often tragic, inconsistent, and destructive. Regenerating and renovating the Czech historical memory surrounding these events can be viewed as an attempt to change the Czech identity to be more inherently communist, even in an era where communism was a politically unstable institution.

¹³⁶ Hutchinson, "Nations and Culture," 78.

The KSČ's attempt to alter such recently formed historical memories was somewhat absurd. Even if Czech remembrance of the recent past was not objective, the population was not so forgetful that they accepted the KSČ's justifications. Re-remembering or ignoring certain events when they had occurred within living memory was somewhat of a doomed project. The Czech public's skepticism towards the communist government's acts of commemoration, or forgetting, was apparent in small acts of dissidence, such as spreading negative rumors or refusing to attend state-sponsored events. An examination of Czech literature of the era, such as the works of prominent novelist Milan Kundera, further reveals the tension between the Czech public's memory and the KSČ's attempts to forget. Although the KSČ's re-remembrance of its recent mistakes was performed with similar methodology to the alterations of older Czech history, it utterly failed to penetrate the Czech consciousness on a cultural level.

Two attempts to rewrite the history of the ČSSR during the ČSSR are the construction and demolition of Stalin monument in Prague and the celebration of International Workers Day. Monuments and holidays are both examples of *lieux de mémoire*, and the communist government intended these particular *lieux* to implement communist values into the Czech national identity. The Stalin statue is a particularly valuable example because its construction and its destruction are two different types of altering historical memory. In attempt to build support for the communist celebration, International Workers Day, on 1 May, communist politicians associated the date with several other significant dates in the Czech past, making it a conglomeration of Czech history in order to legitimize an unpopular holiday. Both of these cultural control tactics

relied on building a system of historical symbols, as had been the case for the Bohemian Reformation and the First Republic; however, this set of symbols had not previously been a source of nationalism and “Czechness.” Using symbols that were not pillars of Czech national identity meant that they were far less powerful to the Czech population. However, the manipulation of historical memory formed in this era is vital to understand because it shows the continuation of nation-building through historical memory beyond the traditional appropriation of pre-ČSSR symbols. Attempting to alter recent, even living, memory was proof of the political and cultural instability of the era, as communist politicians scrambled to craft a positive narrative of the ČSSR.

The Kundera Paradigm and the Struggle Against Forgetting

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”
- Milan Kundera, 1979¹³⁷

The works of Czech-born novelist Milan Kundera have become somewhat archetypal representations of what it means to forget or remember during Czechoslovakia’s communist regime. His 1979 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is particularly valuable in providing both an analysis of memory politics in the ČSSR and insight into how the Czech population viewed the communist regime’s attempts to control their identity by controlling their historical memory. Kundera’s fictional narratives interact with Czech history and memory theory to create a story, sometimes symbolic, sometimes literal, of what it meant to have one’s historical memory erased under communism. Through his literary exploration of memory under communism, he revealed the instability

¹³⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981), 3.

and inconsistencies of the communist regime, as well as a cultural fixation on remembering the past in a nation that seems determined to forget or misremember.

Milan Kundera was born in 1929 and lived in Czechoslovakia through the German occupation and the first half of communist regime.¹³⁸ He experienced the early years of implementing communism, Stalinism, the 1968 Soviet invasion, and the early stages of normalization—all of which appear in his writing. Kundera’s writing is highly referential to the Czech history he experienced: particularly the history that the KSČ tried to erase. In 1975, he went into voluntary exile in France, and became a naturalized French citizen in 1981. This decision made him a controversial figure in Czech culture, triggering a sense of abandonment or surrender during the peak of normalization. Even if Kundera did abandon his nation, however, his novels are a non State-dictated representation of Czech identity and memory during the ČSSR.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting was originally published in France in 1979. It is composed seven separate narratives, united thematically, but not by characters or storyline. The book contains components of the magical realism genre, meaning it portrays the contemporary world, with some mystical components.¹³⁹ The themes within *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* embody what Richard Esbenshade calls “the Kundera paradigm”: the “characterization of the relationship in Eastern Europe between the state that erases and the memory that resists.”¹⁴⁰ The Kundera paradigm consists of

¹³⁸ Harold Segel, *The Columbia Guide to the Literatures of Eastern Europe Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 318-19.

¹³⁹ For more information on the literary genre magical realism, Ignacio López-Calvo, *Magical Realism (Critical Insights)* (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁰ Richard S. Esbenshade, “Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe,” *Representations* 49, (Winter 1995): 75.

two parts, which can be more generally applied to the communist politicization of historical memory. First, there is state-sponsored forgetting of pieces of history that undermine or contradict the communist political agenda. Then, there is the Czech population's acts of remembering as a site of cultural pushback. In the KSČ's many instances of altering historical memory, the Kundera paradigm most applies to the government's treatment of recent memory. The KSČ constantly either reframed or erased recent political events that revealed the regime's political instability; the Czech population's remembering of such events was "memory-as-resistance," as Esbenshade phrases it. A tension between the institutionalized amnesia and the civilian acts of remembrance thus developed.

Kundera's opening to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* immediately establishes the lengths the KSČ went to alter less favorable aspects of their past. He describes a 1948 photograph of Klement Gottwald on a balcony overlooking Old Town Square, accompanied by Vladimír Clementis, the foreign minister at the time. Gottwald is wearing a fur hat that Clementis had reportedly taken off his own head and generously given to him. According to Kundera, the photo was copied hundreds of thousands of times for propaganda, memorializing the moment across Czechoslovakia. Only four years later, however, Clementis was tried during the show trials and executed. The propaganda committee "immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the

cap of Gottwald's head."¹⁴¹ This introductory anecdote reveals not only how the KSC attempted total erasure of events that were very much alive in Czech memory, but also its failure; Clementis's hat lives on in the photograph as a signifier of who was truly on the balcony. Theorist Svetlana Boym calls these "seams and erasures in the official history" countermemory, pointing out how the disappearing fur hat signifies the larger inconsistencies between the actual past and how people reconstruct and remember.¹⁴²

Kundera often uses stories of individual forgetting, intentional and unintentional, as a metaphor for the government's institutional countermemory. In his chapter, *Lost Letters*, the protagonist, Tamina, is obsessed with obtaining eleven diaries she left behind when she illegally emigrated Czechoslovakia in 1969. Like the vast majority of Kundera's female characters, Tamina is a trope, often defined by her body and captured through the male gaze.¹⁴³ However, her story also relies on the politics of forgetting and remembering under communism. "She is aware, of course, that there are many unpleasant things in the notebooks—days of dissatisfaction, quarrels, even boredom," Kundera wrote. "But that is not what counts. She has no desire to turn the past into poetry, she wants to give the past back its lost body."¹⁴⁴ Tamina, losing connection with her memory, wants historical reality over "poetry." In a metaphorical sense, *Lost Letters* discusses the desire for realistic portrayals of history, even if they are unpleasant; considering the

¹⁴¹ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 3.

¹⁴² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 61.

¹⁴³ The works of Milan Kundera infamously objectify women, and Kundera's female characters are nearly always characterized by their sexuality. Although this does not diminish his analysis of memory and communism in Czechoslovakia, it is a massive shortcoming in his literature. For more information on Kundera and sexism, see John O'Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁴ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 86.

context, this can be read as a statement on the KSC's insistence on rewriting parts of the past that were inconsistent with their desired reality.

Perhaps the most iconic quote from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* addresses the political implications of forgetting. It is situated in the story of Mirek, a man attempting to erase his memories of a past lover:

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. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories re-written.¹⁴⁵

Kundera clearly addresses the relationship between power and memory in this statement. With far greater implications than Mirek's love story, Kundera points out that real political control lies in controlling the past. Like his claim from the same text, that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," Kundera focuses on the universalism of historical memory and political power.¹⁴⁶ However, in Czechoslovakia, the entanglement of the two is especially apparent. From the sheer amount of memory manipulation, through political rhetoric, monuments, and tradition, to the constant discussion about it in works such as Kundera's own, memory politics are constant in Czech history and culture. Although forgetting worked neither for Mirek nor on an institutional level in the ČSSR, the Kundera paradigm helps describe the connection between rewriting history and political agendas during the communist era.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 3.

Demolishing the Cult of Stalin

In 1955, the KSČ built the largest monument to Joseph Stalin in the world, looking out over Prague as though the dictator himself was surveying his land. Seven years later, it was demolished, detonated until it was if it had never existed.¹⁴⁷ The KSČ's response to the cult of Stalin through a monument demonstrated the rapid glorification then erasure of a period of communist history that was still remembered by living generations. Questions of how to implement adoration for an oppressive Soviet leader were faced by the KSČ at the monument's creation; the even bigger challenge, however, was how to remove Stalin's glorified place in constructed historical memory once the later Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev denounced the former icon for crimes against humanity. Communist politicians faced a crisis in memory politics as they struggled to recover from building a monument only two years before its subject changed from a hero in the communist identity to a criminal.

The cult of Stalin stemmed from Stalin's attempts to appropriate Lenin's popularity after his own began to plummet in the era of collectivization and other failed programs. Methods such as re-aligning communist philosophy with his own goals (and persecuting theorists who interpreted Marxist philosophy differently) and commissioning glorifying art to promote his image contributed to his program of self-aggrandization.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Hana Píchová, "The Lineup for Meat: The Stalin Statue in Prague," *PMLA* 123, no. 3, (2008): 615.

¹⁴⁸ Robert C. Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult." *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (1979): 347-66.

The cult extended beyond the Soviet Union to satellite states such as Czechoslovakia—hence Prague’s monument of Stalin, which was a gift for his seventieth birthday.¹⁴⁹

The proposed location of the monument, Letná Hill, was significant in its own right. Geologists argued the hill could not support it and some architects argued it would clash with the baroque skyline, though no one dared argue against its political meaning.¹⁵⁰ Others, such as Vlasta Štursová, one of the monument’s architects, appreciated the ideological significance of the location over aesthetic issues. “The political significance that government of the Czechoslovak Republic attributed to the Stalin Memorial was already expressed by the chosen site,” she wrote. “The monument is a pronounced architectural dominant, which marks out Letná from both close and distant vantage points (from Vítkov, from Vinohrady), and is a sovereign element in the panoramic pictures of the city.”¹⁵¹ Štursová’s statement reflected how, as historian Derek Sayer phrased it, the monument was intended to occupy a space “squarely within the emotional landscape of Czech history.”¹⁵² Not only did the monument make Stalin’s political presence impossible to escape from virtually any point in Prague, but it implemented a narrative of adoration for Stalin and the Soviet Union that did not truly exist in Czech historical memory. The most massive monument of Stalin in the world sent a message that contradicted Czechoslovakia’s ideals of the First Republic; even when the KSČ was elected by the Czech population, the support for communism lacked

¹⁴⁹ “Satellite states” refers to the nations that were officially independent, but under control of the Soviet Union post World War II: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and East Germany.

¹⁵⁰ Píchová, “The Lineup for Meat: The Stalin Statue in Prague,” 617.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 273. Vítkov and Vinohrady are neighborhoods in Prague.

¹⁵² Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History*, 272-3.

the connection to the Soviet Union that the cult of Stalin demanded. The construction of the statue demanded a change in Czech attitudes, beginning with commemoration on the institutional level.

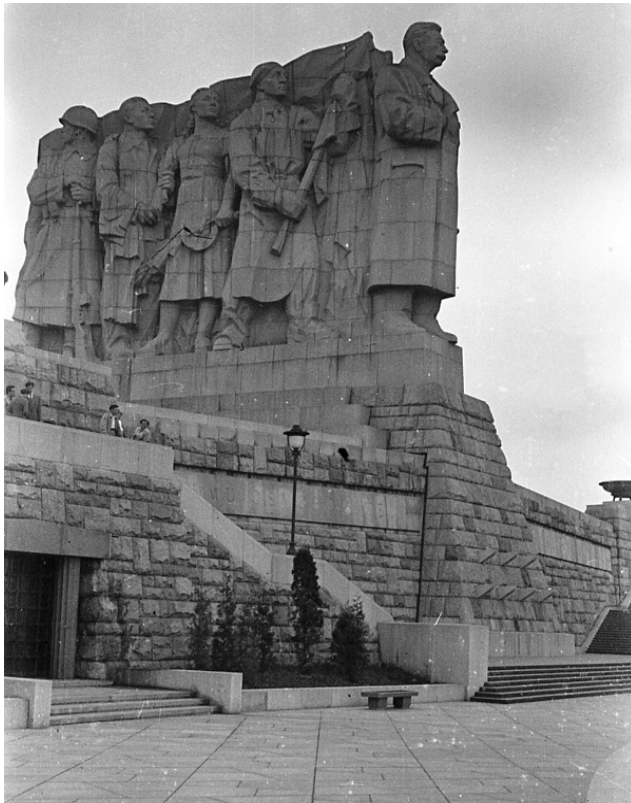


Figure 5

The monument was colossal, and so many delays occurred that the final unveiling occurred after both Stalin's and Gottwald's deaths. It was exorbitantly expensive; historians estimate the final cost was 280 million Czechoslovak crowns, the equivalent of 4.5 million U.S. dollars today. The final structure featured Stalin with a book in his left hand—presumably a work of Marx and Engels—and his right hand tucked into his coat in the

quintessential “leader” position, as popularized by Napoleon monuments (Figure 5).¹⁵³ Behind him, two rows with three smaller figures represented Soviet people on the East side and Czechoslovak on the West.¹⁵⁴ All the figures except the back two looked forward into the utopian future. The back two figures, a Czech and a Soviet soldier, gazed

¹⁵³ HZ, “Stalin's Monument in Prague, Czechoslovakia,” Photograph. Wikimedia Commons, circa 1960.

¹⁵⁴ Macura, *The Mystifications of a Nation*, 108.

backwards in a defensive stance, ready to protect the Czech nation and the communist ideology.

The inscription read, on the front “To our liberator, from the Czechoslovak people,” and was followed by “Now the age-old battle that the Czechoslovak nation waged for its national existence, for its national independence, can be considered complete” on the rear side.¹⁵⁵ This inscription references the Soviet army’s liberation of Prague at the end of the Second World War, though it disregards the shortly following seizure of power. The monument is framed as Czech gratitude towards Stalin, but actually embodies the intimidation and fear politics that were a reality in the statue’s sheer size and the premise of its construction. The inscription built a narrative connecting the sovereign Czech nation—a concept that had been so valued during the First Republic—to the Soviet Union. This portrayal of the Czech-Soviet relationship was never a symbol within Czech historical memory, but that did not stop the creators of the statue from attempting to implement it through a *lieu de mémoire*.

The Czech population retained a sense of skepticism and even humor towards the monument—the opposite of a shift in attitude towards the Soviet Union and their shared history the KSČ had worked to build. According to a report about whisper campaigns from the office of the minister of culture, Czechs joked that the streetcar station nearest to Letná hill was actually called “Cult Station,” referencing how the monument blatantly catered to the cult of Stalin.¹⁵⁶ The line of figures in the monument even became

¹⁵⁵ Píchová, “The Lineup for Meat: The Stalin Statue in Prague,” 619.

¹⁵⁶ “Jokes about Stalin Monument Attributed to RFE Inspiration.” 5 July 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-72097; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open

commonly known as “fronta na maso,” or “the lineup for meat,” a dark reference to the long lines for food and other goods due to shortages from Stalin’s failed economic programs.¹⁵⁷ Between Western media, Czech citizens, and their discourse through media such as Radio Free Europe, a different type of mythology grew around the statue: one of humor, rumor, and disdain. The attempt to implement reverence for not only Stalin, but the Soviet Union’s role in Czech history fell flat; although the monument watched over the Czech public, their historical memory of Czech-Soviet relations remained unaltered.

In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev halted any remnants of the cult of Stalin with his “secret speech,” denouncing the deceased leader for his crimes and abuse of power.¹⁵⁸ The Eastern Bloc was suddenly littered with monuments of a violent dictator instead of a revered icon—and Prague had the largest of them all. The monument had never spread reverence for Stalin and the Soviet Union on the cultural level that the KSČ had hoped, and the institutional decision to commemorate Stalin reflected badly on the Party. The statue had to come down.

Of course, the true reasons for the Stalin monument’s destruction were too embarrassing for KSČ to publicize. As an unnamed Polish emigrant reported to Radio Free Europe,

The authorities claim that the work is being done because pedestal of the statue was beginning to give way and the statue would fall if it were not dismantled. No one in Prague believes this tale. The people laugh and say that it is not the statue which is in danger of collapsing but the faith of the Communists who have been hoodwinked and confused by the very people

Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. This document is not a RFE report, but an intercepted document by assistant to the minister of culture.

¹⁵⁷ Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 272.

¹⁵⁸ For more information, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*. New York: Norton, 2003.

who in the past licked the feet of the “Great Father of the People,” knowing very well that he was an ordinary criminal and who now unquestioningly obey the orders to spit on his tomb.¹⁵⁹

There was a clear contradiction between the official attitudes towards the monument and that of the Czech population, much like the initial reaction to the statue. Czechs were quick to point out the hypocrisy of the KSČ, which remained composed of hardliners, but still bowed to pressure of erasing Prague’s physical mark of devotion to Stalin.¹⁶⁰ The obvious lies were characteristic for Communist Parties of the Eastern Bloc, which were infamous for their contradictions between statement and reality. Czech rumor and speculation grew from the monument’s demolition as the KSČ insisted on an official story that was clearly a reaction to the embarrassing dismantlement of the cult of Stalin a few short years after the monument’s completion.

The statue’s demolition impacted the Czech culture, becoming a recognizable reference. In 1965, Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal published a short story titled *The Betrayal of Mirrors (Zrada Zrcadel)* dedicated to the complex feelings of hope, skepticism, and confusion that accompanied the removal of Stalin’s watchful eye. Hrabal captured the first moment of the Stalin statue’s demolition: “the statue now stood exposed, apparently stronger, more massive than ever, but tilted forward as though it were about to crashing down on the city below.”¹⁶¹ The monument was revealed as both a powerful part of Prague’s memory landscape, but also ephemeral, able to fall at any

¹⁵⁹ "The Collapse of the Stalin Myth", 28 April 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-69416; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹⁶⁰ “Hardliners” were traditional and strict communist politicians who were less willing to move away from Stalinist policy.

¹⁶¹ Bohumil Hrabal, “The Betrayal of Mirrors,” in *Mr. Kafka and Other Tales from the Time of the Cult*. trans. Paul Wilson (New York: New Directions Books, 2015), 97.

moment. Hrabal described the contrast of power and delicacy that the Stalin myth embodied in the Czech landscape as the cult of Stalin was finally dissolved on an institutional level, even though the cultural attitudes remained firmly separate from the political intentions.

The monument of Stalin only existed for seven years, meaning any attempts to erase it from historical memory involved denying memories of a living generation. Unlike reframing the Bohemian Reformation, the KSČ's implementation of the cult of Stalin had no historical distance to be reframed or rewritten. The only solution was to cover it— what one Czech citizen reported in 1956 as a “clumsy bluff”—and move on to the next phase of communist history.¹⁶² It is of course not so simple for an entire nation to forget about fourteen thousand tons of granite representing a traumatic period of its history. Letná remained, and remains, a *lieu de mémoire* of the Stalinist period. Even today, many Czechs call the park at the top of the hill “Stalin,” or “U Stalina.” The narratives that the KSČ tried to build were rejected from the Czech historical memory: first, of the Soviet Union, particular Stalin, as the bringer of Czech nationhood, then the complete denial of support for Stalin. These narratives were not drawn from the historical foundation of Czech national identity, as was the case with Hus's philosophy or Masaryk's legacy. The KSČ's attempt to implement communism into the Czech identity through the Stalin monument demonstrates not only the instability of the communist

¹⁶² "Jokes about Stalin Monument Attributed to RFE Inspiration." 5 July 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-72097; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

narrative, but the failure to alter Czech national identity by building a historical memory based on recent history.

Celebrating Communism and Czechness Every May

In the ČSSR, and communist states across the globe, the first of May was an important, if contentious, tradition. Known as International Workers Day, or more informally May Day, 1 May was the high point in the communist calendar, and celebrated the international socialist movement as well as historical communist intellectuals and leaders. State-sponsored (and often mandatory) parades with speeches by prominent communist politicians marked the occasion. More specifically to the ČSSR, International Workers Day was an opportunity to place Czechoslovakia on the international communist stage, binding it with the domineering Soviet Union. However, International Workers Day, with its focus on global communism, ties with the Soviet Union, and a lack of Czech historical tradition, was not easily integrated into the systems of celebratory commemoration. In attempt to legitimize International Workers Day in Czech historical memory and identity, the KSČ created associations between International Workers Day and several other Czech historical events in May: Czechoslovak Independence Day and the anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Prague after World War II.

International Workers Day, Czechoslovak Independence Day, and “Liberation Day” were inherently tied during the ČSSR, not only by chronological vicinity, but also politically. Czechoslovak Independence Day, at the time, was on 5 May and Liberation Day on the ninth. The influx of state-sponsored celebrations and national holidays was evidence of the KSČ’s intent to implement communist values into the Czech national

identity. Holidays, as a way to unify a group by remembering the significance of a certain day, are a crucial part of historical memory, and were adjusted accordingly by communist regime. The way the KSČ celebrated the three holidays at the beginning of May demonstrates their fixation on controlling the Czech cultural identity by commemorating both the historic and recent past.

Like monuments, holidays serve to remind the public of some formative event or concept. In the politics of controlling historical memory, a holiday can be a way to show the public what should be remembered and celebrated. Similarly, preventing people from celebrating a holiday is an attempt to erase parts of their history and memory. Celebrations in the ČSSR embodied both practices, remembering and forgetting. Czechoslovak Independence Day was originally on 28 October, established during the First Republic in honor of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁶³ During the communist era, 5 May became the official holiday to celebrate Czechoslovak nationhood, leaving 28 October, and memories of the First Republic, in the past. 5 May had more recent historical significance for the Czechs; on that date in 1945, while Prague was still occupied by German forces, Czech citizens rose up and formed a semi-successful rebellion known as the Prague Uprising.¹⁶⁴ More a wave of insurrections than an organized revolt, the Prague Uprising blended into the Soviet army's liberation of the city. The uprising was, and is, a proud moment in Czech history; the younger generation who did not experience the First Republic particularly appreciated it over 28 October.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*, 174-177.

¹⁶⁴ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 145.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 143.

The communist government, on the other hand, appreciated 5 May because it connected Czech national pride to Soviet history, and was conveniently located four days after International Workers Day. The transition from celebrating Czechoslovak Independence Day on 28 October to 5 May fulfilled several communist political goals. First, it helped create a new sense of national identity. The oppressor figure shifted from the Austro-Hungarian Empire—a superpower that could be compared to the Soviet Union—to the Nazis, who had been defeated by the Soviets in World War II. The enemy figures in the creation myth shifted. Along those lines, when celebrating Czechoslovak Independence on 5 May, the Soviets made a sudden appearance as positive figures. While the Czechs themselves enacted the Prague Uprising, it was the Soviet Army who took the final steps to liberate the city. In that historical moments, not only were Czechs and Soviets on the same side, but the Soviets went down in history as the heroes. As one 1958 Czech radio report stated,

Czechs and Slovaks will celebrate their national day tomorrow, the 13th anniversary of the day when units of the Soviet Army, enthusiastically welcomed by the population, completed the liberation of the territory of Czechoslovakia. The new People's Democratic Czechoslovakia, whose peoples suffered so long under the German fascist occupation, has since then celebrated this day as a national holiday.¹⁶⁶

This report emphasizes the positive relationship between the Czechs and Soviets—hence the “enthusiastic” welcome—and the idea of Germans as a common enemy. It also contrasts life under German fascism with life under communism, reminding Czech

¹⁶⁶ “Differences No Deterrent to Czech Ties,” *Daily report, Foreign radio broadcasts*. 8 May, 1958: MM16.
Czechoslovakia was declared a “People’s Democracy” until 1960.

listeners not only of their liberation, but also the harshness of German occupation in order to make 5 May (and the Soviets) seem as positive as possible.

Communist officials further connected the Soviet Union to Czech commemorative holidays with Liberation Day, on 9 May. As much as the KSČ emphasized the role of Soviets on Czechoslovak Independence Day, there was an entire holiday only four days later dedicated to their role in the Second World War. Liberation Day served to reinforce the narrative of the Soviet Union as a powerful but benevolent military and political force, ignoring the oppressive power-dynamics that existed between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia at the time of celebration. Liberation Day also demonstrated the shift from nationalism to internationalism. While Czechoslovak Independence Day was devoted to commemorating the inception of the nation, and thus building a national identity, Liberation Day celebrated the impact of the Soviet Union on Czechoslovakia, attempting to solidify it in historical memory as a positive and beneficial relationship.

International Workers Day embodied the themes that drove Czechoslovak Independence Day and Liberation Day. During the International Workers Day celebrations of 1958, Czech communist president Antonín Novotný declared, “Our May Day rallies today are an expression of the firm resolve of the people of Czechoslovakia to win final victory for socialism in our country in firm alliance with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.”¹⁶⁷ Novotný glorified the Czechoslovak identity with his statement of the people’s resolve and support, whether it was true or not, and then

¹⁶⁷ “Novotný Speech,” *Daily report, Foreign radio broadcasts*. 1 May 1958: HH3.

connected them to the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, emphasizing the international aspect of communism. He went on to draw from historical emotions, stating “This year we shall be commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Munich dictate which ushered in an era of the worst humiliation and suffering for the Czech and Slovak nations [...] Prior to these events, also, Germany was a member of the League of Nations and at that time, too, she was receiving help from Western capitalist powers. The upshot of this policy was fascism and war.” He concluded that, “The people of our republic have learned their lesson from this bitter experience and forever safeguard their freedom and national and political independence by means of their brotherly friendship, close alliance, and mutual cooperation with the Soviet Union.”¹⁶⁸ Similarly to the communist approach to Czechoslovak Independence Day, Novotný discussed recent Czech history in terms of Czech suffering and Soviet heroism. Czech history and how it was remembered was thus used as a tool to garner support for the largely communist International Workers Day.

Despite the best attempts of politicians like Novotný, much of the Czech population did not support the spirit of International Workers Day. In 1956, Radio Free Europe produced on particularly memorable report titled “Prague Citizens Boo May Day Fireworks”: “The public was indignant at the luxurious food offered to the ‘heroes of work’ in Prague when they were decorated on May 1, 1956. The Prague population showed its dislike of the fireworks by whistling.”¹⁶⁹ Clearly, the rhetoric that tied International Workers Day to the Czech past of liberation was poorly received. The KSČ

¹⁶⁸ “Novotný Speech,” *Daily report, Foreign radio broadcasts*. 1 May 1958: HH4.

¹⁶⁹ “Prague Citizens Boo May Day Fireworks”, 6 July 1956. HU OSA 300-1-2-72758; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

continued to take more dramatic measures than speeches and fireworks to make International Workers Day part of the Czech system of *lieux de mémoire*. In 1952, according to another Radio Free Europe Report, the government fined 307 Czech textile workers for not attending May Day celebrations “despite oral and written orders they had received.”¹⁷⁰ Unlike other forms of commemoration that the KSČ had employed, they could not enforce cultural participation in remembering the Soviet Army on 1 May.

In the words of Milan Kundera,

“There are all kinds of ghosts prowling these confused streets. They are the ghosts of monuments demolished – demolished by the Czech Reformation, demolished by the Austrian Counterreformation, demolished by the Czechoslovak Republic, demolished by the Communists. Even statues to Stalin have been torn down.”¹⁷¹

The “ghosts” of monuments, and even more so the political power dynamics they represent, carry just as much weight as the monuments that were left standing. When the KSČ removed the Stalin statue, the empty space where it had once towered over Prague was just as meaningful as when the statue itself was there. Refusing to celebrate Independence Day on 28 October says just as much as celebrating does. Kundera’s ghosts are moments of the past that the KSČ, or any government, tried to forget, but could not erase.

¹⁷⁰ “Workers Fined for Being Absent May Day Celebration”, 22 May 1952. HU OSA 300-1-2-20049; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹⁷¹ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 158.

EPILOGUE

In 1991, artist Vratislav Karel Novak erected a post-communist monument on Letná Hill, on the site of the Stalin statue's construction and demolition over thirty years prior. The monument, titled the *Pendulum of Time*, is a massive metronome, a black metal triangle with a slender red arm rhythmically moving back and forth, aided by an internal mechanism (Figure 6).¹⁷² The Metronome expresses no direction towards the past



Figure 6

or future, or even a specificity of time in the present. It is, as Svetlana Boym describes, “as if the Metronome paces the time of creativity, freed from any ideological or didactic narratives.”¹⁷³ Letná Park sat unoccupied for several decades after the KSČ destroyed the Stalin statue, and the trauma of Stalinism was present even in an empty space as the people of Prague struggled with how to fill it.¹⁷⁴ The Metronome is to be a solution to the memory-laden site; a monument to both time and timelessness,

¹⁷² Dennis Jarvis, “Metronome,” Photograph. Wikimedia Commons, 30 September 2016.

¹⁷³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 231.

¹⁷⁴ Píchová, “The Lineup for Meat: The Stalin Statue in Prague,” 628.

a device that marks the cadence of time without referencing history or the future. On a hill that once held a statue intended to glorify a dictator that enacted destructive and cruel policy within the Czechoslovakia, the twenty-five-meter-tall metronome only acknowledges the past through bypassing it, as well as notions of memory and trauma altogether.

The postcommunist era in Eastern and Central Europe presents new challenges and questions regarding how to remember the past and how these memories create an identity for the new, democratic era. When communism fell in Czechoslovakia, in the 1989 Velvet Revolution, the new government had high hopes for a fresh start with a Czech identity based in democracy, liberty, and a unified people. Unfortunately, change came slowly on a societal level. As Vaclav Havel, the first president of the new democratic Czechoslovakia, remarked on the one-year anniversary of the Velvet Revolution: “The social changes which seemed to us even a few months ago to be within reach are taking place slowly and with difficulty. Disquiet, dissatisfaction, intolerance and disappointment, accompanied by increasing spitefulness, are growing among the people.”¹⁷⁵ Ignoring the communist past, whether through a monument or a refusal to discuss, did not allow for social progression. While the KSC̣ faced a historical memory that often contradicted and had the potential to delegitimize its political agenda, the contemporary Czech government faces the need to reconcile the communist past with the new democratic political system and identity. Addressing national past trauma, recent or ancient, can be difficult on an institutional level, and polarizing to the population.

¹⁷⁵ Vaclav Havel, "Independence Day Address to the Nation," speech, trans. Hugh Agnew (Czechoslovakia, October 28, 1990) Czech Republic Presidential Website.

Although the dramatic and oppressive methods of cultural control in the ČSSR did not exist in Post-Revolution Czechoslovakia, historical memory was and is still a political issue.

Examining the role of historical memory in the mid twentieth century informs the broader significance of historical memory in Czech culture. In the First Republic, memory served as a tool in the politics of nation-building as Czechoslovakia developed an identity as a formal nation. During the ČSSR, communist politicians attempted to control historical memory, through commemorations or erasure, to create a more communist Czech culture. In the postcommunist era, questions of the role of memory in politics and national identity continue to arise. How should the post-Velvet Revolution government approach the remnants of communist commemorations or monuments? What parts of Czech history, communist and otherwise, should be commemorated in the new era? Finally, how should the communist era be remembered and commemorated in order to address the trauma, but continue to build a democratic national identity?

These questions remain unanswered in many ways, as Czechia is still experiencing the ramifications of the communist era. On one hand, present commemorations of the communist era are relatively subtle, both physically and symbolically. The Metronome does not interact with Letná Park's history with the Stalin statue; it addresses the concept of time in the present, but not past trauma. Another potential *lieu de memoire*, The Museum of Communism, is the only museum in Prague devoted to the region's communist past. It was opened not by Czechs, but by an

American immigrant, and is primarily marketed as a tourist attraction.¹⁷⁶ This site of memory, though a record of the communist past, commodifies it from a non-Czech perspective, removing any significance as a product of Czech national identity. The *Memorial to Victims of Communism*, a series of sculptures intended to commemorate the lives lost and affected during the communist era, is located on a walking path at the base of Petřín Hill, a popular path for tourists, but outside of the city center. This location means that the majority of those who see it are non-Czechs and passersby, for whom the commemoration holds less power.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, the place cards at the memorial are in Czech, meaning many of the viewers are unable to tell even what the monument commemorates. All of these sites of memory are connected to historical memory of the communist past, but fail to directly address it.

Even as many commemorations seem to reject remembrance of the communist past, this is not the only type of postcommunist remembrance in the region. Seemingly contradictory, but still powerful, is nostalgia for the communist era (often called *ostalgie* in the context of East Germany). It is an attempt to deal with the communist past, like the commemorations and sites of memory above, but instead of avoiding direct remembrance, nostalgia reconstructs the era more favorably. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, communist-era material and media artifacts began appearing in Czech popular cultural. Re-screening old films or television shows, selling memorabilia, and wearing fashion styles from the era are all examples of this nostalgia. Nostalgia for the communist

¹⁷⁶ Sara Jean Tomczuk, "Contention, Consensus, and Memories of Communism: Comparing Czech and Slovak Memory Politics in Public Spaces, 1993–2012," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 57, no. 3 (June 2016): 120.

¹⁷⁷ Joshua Reeves, "Suspended Identification: Atopos and the Work of Public Memory," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46, no. 3 (2013): 319.

era is not precisely a desire to reinstate communism; it is what theorist Irena Reifová calls a desire for continuity.¹⁷⁸ As political, economic, and social circumstances shifted post Velvet Revolution, sometimes in disappointing directions, a wish for stability created an imagined version of the communist past, which manifested in cultural symbols. Nostalgia is no more an accurate picture of history than the version the KSČ crafted; 1990s and twenty first century nostalgia for the communist past is just as much a symptom of the tension between the trauma of the communist era and the new democratic era as failures to commemorate it.

Milan Kundera calls Prague “a city without memory.”¹⁷⁹ Prague does not actually lack memory; it simply cannot face it. Throughout Czech history, a major part of the Czech identity is based in the past, in cycles of remembering victory and glory while forgetting defeat. The communists could not face the undermining reality of the First Republic, so they rewrote it. The postcommunist government does not know how to commemorate the communist era without challenging the new democracy, so they neglect it. Contradictions are abundant in the politics of commemorating and forgetting moments of the past as the Czech population has built a national identity around a malleable, changing historical memory.

¹⁷⁸ Irena Reifová, “The Pleasure of Continuity: Re-Reading Post-Socialist Nostalgia.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 6 (November 2018): 592.

¹⁷⁹ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* 157.

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