

Artículo de investigación

## Josef Svejik in historical memory: images and interpretations (1920-1930s)

Josef Svejik en la memoria histórica: imágenes e interpretaciones (1920-1930)

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### Abstract

The topicality of the investigated problem is determined by the fact that nowadays historical researches use interdisciplinary methods. The one way of interdisciplinarity is using the materials of fiction in historical researches. In this case historian can be involved in the investigation at different point and solve various problems: reconstruct the history of fiction creation, consider history of fiction publication, clear up the historical basis of the book, study the history of perception of different texts by society, analyze the practices of fiction usage in ideological campaigns, etc. The novel "The Good Soldier Svejk" by Jaroslav Hasek has certain historical basis devoted to historical events and difficult history of perceptions and interpretations. The purpose of the article is to examine the perception history of the novel by Jaroslav Hasek and its main character in 1920-30-s in Czechoslovakia and USSR.

The article shows how the perception of Svejk was changing depending on historical period and certain conditions. The materials of the article can be helpful for historians who study the problems of historical memory, Russian-Czech relations and also for literary and cultural studies scholars.

**Keywords:** history, historical memory, Jaroslav Hasek, Josef Svejk, "svejkism", Czechoslovak Legion, internationalists.

### Resumen

La actualidad del problema investigado está determinada por el hecho de que hoy en día las investigaciones históricas usan métodos interdisciplinarios. La única forma de interdisciplinaria es usar materiales de ficción en investigaciones históricas. En este caso, el historiador puede involucrarse en la investigación en diferentes puntos y resolver varios problemas: reconstruir la historia de la creación de ficción, considerar la publicación de historia de ficción, aclarar la base histórica del libro, estudiar la historia de la percepción de diferentes textos por la sociedad, analizar las prácticas de uso de la ficción en campañas ideológicas, etc. La novela "El buen soldado Svejk" de Jaroslav Hasek tiene cierta base histórica dedicada a los acontecimientos históricos y la difícil historia de las percepciones e interpretaciones. El propósito del artículo es examinar la historia de percepción de la novela de Jaroslav Hasek y su personaje principal en 1920-30-s en Checoslovaquia y la URSS.

El artículo muestra cómo la percepción de Svejk estaba cambiando según el período histórico y ciertas condiciones. Los materiales del artículo pueden ser útiles para los historiadores que estudian los problemas de la memoria histórica, las relaciones ruso-checas y también para los estudiosos de la literatura y la cultura.

**Palabras clave:** historia, memoria histórica, Jaroslav Hasek, Josef Svejk, "svejkism", Legión checoslovaca, internacionalistas.

## Resumo

A atualidade do problema investigado é determinada pelo fato de que atualmente a pesquisa histórica utiliza métodos interdisciplinares. O único caminho para a interdisciplinaridade é usar materiais de ficção na pesquisa histórica. Neste caso, o historiador pode se envolver em pesquisa em diferentes pontos e resolver vários problemas: reconstruir a história da criação de ficção, considere história de ficção publicação, esclarecer a base histórica do livro, estudar a história da percepção diferentes textos da sociedade, analisar as práticas de uso da ficção em campanhas ideológicas, etc. O romance "O Bom Soldado Svejk", de Jaroslav Hasek, tem uma base histórica dedicada a eventos históricos e à difícil história de percepções e interpretações. O objetivo deste artigo é examinar a história da percepção do romance de Jaroslav Hasek e seu principal personagem em 1920-1930-s na Checoslováquia e da URSS.

O artigo mostra como a percepção de Svejk estava mudando de acordo com o período histórico e certas condições. Os materiais do artigo podem ser úteis para os historiadores que estudam os problemas da memória histórica, as relações russo-checas e também para os estudantes da literatura e da cultura.

**Palavras-chave:** história, memória histórica, Jaroslav Hasek, Josef Svejk, "svejkism", Legião da Checoslováquia, internacionalistas.

## Introduction

In March, 1921 there were the first publications of "The Good Soldier Svejk". This publication had received mixed reviews in Czechoslovakia. It was mainly explained by historical past of Jaroslav Hasek who during the Russian Civil War was internationalist and had served with Red Army, i.e. hadn't supported Czechoslovak legionnaires and Czechoslovak Legion. The Czechoslovak historiography of this period (in other words "legionary historiography") thinks that the actions of Czechoslovak Legion (first of all in Russia) caused the creation of Czechoslovak independency. This thesis was the part of so-called "legend about getting freedom". Moreover, the activity of Czechoslovak nationalists while fighting for national statehood was estimated negatively. The second reason of mixed reviews was the content of the novel, specifically the question how Josef Svejk was "typical Czech". The attitude to Svejk and "svejkism" was contradictory even in communist Czechoslovakia: "Gustáv Husák, the General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party who replaced Prague Spring reformer Alexander Dubček in 1968, told the people in the late Seventies to "stop Svejking!"(Chilton, 2016).

The novel by Jaroslav Hasek in 1920-s overcame national boundaries: «The quality of the work was widely discovered in the second half of the 1920s when German translation and scenic adaptation paved the way for the book's

international career" (Gorny, 2012). In USSR fictional Svejk appeared in 1926: at the first time the book by Jaroslav Hasek was published by Leningrad publishing house named "Priboj" (Khlebina, 2015). In USSR the novel about Svejk was read with great interest, the popularity of the character was mentioned by A. Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education (Khlebina, 2015). The contemporary researcher N.L. Glazkova points out that "soon after the appearing of the novel Svejk started to live independently as if entering other books and other types of art" (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). Since then the book by Jaroslav Hasek is a matter of debates, discussions and many interpretations. It seems that this matter became less sharp (at the least in Czechoslovakia) only in the late 1980-s: "Since 1989 this tradition has been largely missing, giving way to a variety of interpretations and a vital tourist industry" (Khlebina, 2015).

The similar tendencies can be noticed in Russia too. Svejk seems to turn from "ideological manifesto" to "touristic symbol": there are some monuments to Svejk, some regional routes are elaborated for tourists (e.g. "Svejk in Ural")

Despite the fact that there were a lot of different opinions in the past nowadays Jaroslav Hasek "is probably the most internationally esteemed Czech writer. This is almost solely due to his post-war epic novel "Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války" ("The Good Soldier Svejk")" (M. Gorny, 2012). As to the book: "Thankfully the book remains in print and there is a whole group of academics and enthusiasts,

called Švejkologists, who continue to study his remarkable work” (Chilton, 2016).

## Methods

The leading method of the investigation is general scientific method of analysis and synthesis.

The method of content- analysis allowed analyzing the perceptions, essays, sketches, poems, stories, texts devoted to Josef Svejek, specifically further interpretations of his image. The historiographical method gave the opportunity to consider the works on the topic of the investigation and determine some main researchers' tendencies and approaches.

## Results

From the beginning the novel by Jaroslav Hasek had double interpretation. On the one hand, «it has primarily been interpreted as a powerful manifesto of pacifism» (M. Gorny, 2012). On the other hand, «almost simultaneously, another direction in the novel's interpretation was taken by communist literary critics keen at reading the book as a radical left manifesto. This tradition, based on autobiographic reading of the novel, continued in the literary history of post-1945 Czechoslovakia and the rest of the Soviet bloc until 1989» (Gorny, 2012).

We were able to find contrary estimations of Jaroslav Hasek and Josef Svejek. On the one hand, these estimations were negative. It was necessary to remember that Jaroslav Hasek was internationalist not accidentally, that “deemed (rightly) a traitor to the national cause and a Bolshevik, he died as a marginal figure” (M. Gorny, 2012). His main work had the similar Fate: “it was removed from Czechoslovak army libraries in 1925” (Chilton, 2016).

It was likely the reason of it was that “Hasek's antiheroic narrative did not conform to the Czechoslovak self-image petrified in the “legionary literature” (i.e. depicting the struggle of Czech and Slovak military units on the side of the Entente) by authors like Rudolf Medek (1890-1940), František Langer (1888-1965) or Josef Kopta (1894-1962)” (M. Gorny, 2012). One more important problem was that “the novel's main figure seemed to confirm wartime, and mostly unfair, accusations against Czech nationals as especially prone to desertion. This unfavorable association petrified into the notion

švejkovština, denoting subversion and unethical pragmatism allegedly characteristic of the Czechs” (M. Gorny, 2012).

At the same time there were some proves that the novel by Jaroslav Hasek was popular and loved in Czechoslovakia of the considered period. The translator Josef Hostovsky wrote about the fact that all people in Czechoslovakia loved “*The Good Soldier Svejk*” by Jaroslav Hasek, and in 1930-s in Prague there was the performance “*The Good Soldier Svejk*”.

The book by Jaroslav Hasek was quite popular in USSR. On February 4, 1929 there was a premier of the performance “*The Good Soldier Svejk during the World War*” on the stage of Young Theater in Leningrad (director – Sergej Radlov, the author – Elena Tavrid) (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). In general this performance was seen by “about half a million audiences” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). Later, in 1930-s, “the usage of the image of Svejk started having mass character” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). According to A.V. Denshchikova, “in Russian culture of the Soviet period the good soldier Svejk started to live independently: some literary works, performances, films appeared where there was reintegration of this image determined by new historical circumstances and another national and socio-cultural surroundings” (Khlebina, 2015).

Even the first publishing of the book by Jaroslav Hasek in USSR received wide acclaim. Firstly, critics estimated this book not only as fiction but also from historical point of view. “*The Good Soldier Svejk*” was perceived as “the historical document of the high class” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). In USSR, there were two possible ways while interpreting of the character of Svejk: 1) “anti-military” – “a satire on Austrian military-bureaucratic and military society”; 2) “the topic “human” about Czech clever Ivan the Fool Svejk” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). The first way dominated. In USSR the novel by Jaroslav Hasek was perceived first of all as “ruthless indignant satire, uncovering with the help of deathless images the basis of militarism, targeted outside the described place and formal time” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015), as “six-volume antimilitary epic” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015), “the spirit of Czech liberation movement during the war was seen in Svejk” (Khlebina, 2015).

It was typical that the image of Svejk was used not only to criticize the past (Austro-Hungarian Empire) but also the modernity. It was thought that Jaroslav Hasek “uncrowned the sugary patriotic image of “national hero”, the Czech

legionnaire. The army of Svejk aimed a blow at authority and basis of state system prosaically – by sabotages, mass stealing, not by well-known feats of brave legionnaires who besides played ornamental, not active role in demise of Austrian Empire” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). Critic and translator M.N. Skachkov called Svejk “a fly in the ointment” in Siberian epopee of legionnaires: “The image of Svejk by Jaroslav Hasek made embarrassing the glorification of legionary movement, puzzled the bourgeoisie machinery that was responsible for enlightenment in the sphere of politics. The question arises: “Is Josef Svejk more truthful type of Czech soldier during Civil and World Wars, legionnaire, Czech citizen than the type described officially and created to support the interests of bourgeoisie?” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015). Theatric critic N.Y. Verhovsliy designated as disadvantages of the “*The Good Soldier Svejk*” which was performed on the stage of Young Theater “very easier – from the social point of view – performance’s character” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015).

The second way was less expressed. The writer and journalist E.G. Kriger estimating the performance by the Rybinsk theater of the Proletkult (proletarian culture) shifted focuses and suggested to change the characteristic of Svejk: “if he is not Mephistopheles but the good wideboy the performance will be what it must be: funny not-sapient satire” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015).

It is necessary to stress that there were another estimates and characteristics of “*The Good Soldier Svejk*” and its main character. Marina Tsvetaeva who lived in Czechia in 1922-1925 wrote in her letter to translator A. Teskova (August 7, 1929) pointed out the following: “This book is charming and repellent at the same time. Czech Ivan the Fool is only Russian officer’s servant. The pages with pure ideology are ungifted; there is going too far of priesthood. But in general, there is the gifted man and there is only the thing” (A.E. Khlebina, 2015).

### Discussion

There were written especially a lot about Jaroslav Hasek and his character in USSR. These questions arose in works by N.P. Elanskij, S. Vostokov, I. Bernshtejn, G. Shubin. The given fact was explained by popularity of the novel itself and by that during Civil War Jaroslav Hasek had served with Red Army. It is necessary to

emphasize two works among the published after 1991 and devoted to Josef Svejk. S.V. Nikolsky dedicated his research to examination of the history of the image of Svejk. The great attention was paid to the question about real Josef Svejk who was a prototype of famous fictional character (S.V. Nikolsky, 1997). The book by S. Soloukh was written in the genre of comment to Russian translation of the novel “*The Good Soldier Svejk*” by Jaroslav Hasek. This book “made readers come back to epoch and cultural surroundings whose part the Czech original was” (S. Soloukh, 2015).

For contemporary historians, Svejk is a type of generalized character: “Remember the good soldier Svejk. Svejks-witnesses were telling to their children and grandchildren about the war for a long time” (A.S. Khodnev, 2014). “The material of the novel by Jaroslav Hasek is a means of uncover national character and lifestyle, and the Shejk’s speech is an assembler of national values” (V.S. Khoroltseva, 2013).

The researchers think that this novel “can be used during recreating the events of I World War which were happening on the territory of dying Austro-Hungarian Empire” (M.N. Kubanova, M.H. Laypanova, 2017). Some historians transfer the Svejk’s manner of action to real historical events. “It was similar to Svejk how legionnaires finished servicing to sovereign ruler. When Admiral had become a bore for them, they peacefully handed Kolchak to Bolsheviks in turn receiving a pass to come back home” (Yu.L. Tsingovatov, 2011). This topic caused the interest not only in national historiography but also in foreign one. It was written about Svejk in Czechoslovakian historiography (R. Pytlík, 1983) as in English-speaking one (C. Parrott, 1982; J. Gatt-Rutter, 1991) and moreover in British press (M. Chilton, 2016). He is regarded as cultural phenomena (R. Burton, 2003). Shejk is mentioned in the context of literature development in Central and Eastern Europe (K. Hanshew, 2009). It is interesting that the image of Svejk attracts not only historians but sociologists. They actualize and propel the concept of “shvejkism” to the next level: «the concept of “švejkism”, after the character in Jaroslav Hašek’s novel, *The Good Soldier, Švejk*. Švejkism is presented as an example of a modality of employee opposition that may have been missed in earlier evaluations of new work forms. We discuss the practice of švejkism and the implications it has for contemporary

workplace politics» (P. Fleming, G. Sewel, 2002).

### Summary

The investigation of the problem of perception of Josef Svejik in Czechoslovakia and USSR in 1920-30-s allows understanding this character deeper. However, the study of the question was important to understand not only the text but also people who interpreted the text and the epoch when interpretation took place. The following widening of investigation's boundaries (in chronological as geographical view) is perspective area of the research.

### Conclusions

The image of Svejik in 1920-30-s in Czechoslovakia and USSR was estimated quite inconsistently and dubiously. He was associated with different sometimes even opposite roles: from "the embodiment of national spirit" to "caricature of Czechs", from the "conductor of pacifism ideas" to "radical left manifesto", from "political figure" to usual comical character, from fighter for high ideals to "pragmatist". While conducting the research it became clear that the main character of the fiction can overcome the context where he was put by an author but only to become the part of another context, prepared for him by reader, critic, editor, actor, and another people who interpret it.

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