

# Making Sense of the Violent Past: War Veterans' Organizations in Post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia

Natali Stegmann

University of Regensburg, [natali.stegmann@geschichte.uni-regensburg.de](mailto:natali.stegmann@geschichte.uni-regensburg.de)

In the late 1950s, the urban landscape of Prague was characterized by two impressive monuments: the Žižkov monument on Vítkov Hill and the Stalin monument on Letná Hill, both of which were erected with notable delays. The Žižkov monument was part of the independence memorial *Památník osvobození* celebrating the founding of the Czechoslovak nation at the end of the First World War. It commemorated the victory of the Hussite army over the forces of the Holy Roman Empire under the command of Jan Žižka in 1420 as well as the fight of the Legionnaires for an independent Czechoslovak nation during World War I. Planned since 1920, the monument was erected from 1928 to 1938 but was unable to serve its purpose because Czechoslovakia then went on to lose its independence in March 1939. After 1948 the communist regime appropriated Žižka (but not the Legionnaires) as a (pre-)communist hero.<sup>1</sup> When the Stalin monument, the biggest statue of its kind at this time, was completed in 1955, Stalin was already dead and only one year later his successor Nikita Khrushchev would denounce “the cult of personality,” of which the monument was an impressive example. It took until 1962 for the statue to be destroyed by order of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz). Prague’s Stalin disappeared much later than its equivalents in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, both monuments had little in common; however, just as the *Památník osvobození* told a story about the liberation of Czechoslovakia during WWI, the Stalin monument also placed a strong emphasis on the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> The visual axis between both monuments marks the interconnection between the participation of Czechoslovak combatants in the First and Second World Wars as well as between those wars and the political framing of war remembrance. In terms of associations, Czechoslovak veterans’ organizations, which are the focus of this article, are located at the same axis. Czechoslovak war veterans had sought national liberation during the First and Second World Wars; within their organizations, Czechoslovak participation in the theatres of wars was made sense of, in accordance with the changing political conditions.

1. Zdeněk Hojda and Jiří Pokorný, *Pomníky a zapomníky*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Prague, 1997), 150–63.

2. Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–89: A Political and Social History* (New York, 2015), 92–93.

3. Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca, 2019), 86.

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In the following, in order to explain the premises of my research, I will first concentrate on the conditions of de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia, highlighting also some (still) controversial research debates. Next, I will draw on references to the well-researched topics of show trials, the history of Stalinism, Sovietization, as well as questions of de-Stalinization. By analyzing the existing interpretations of experiences of violence, this subsection highlights the national implications of dealing with the Stalinist past in Czechoslovakia, interpreting Stalinist methods of politics as alien to Czechoslovak traditions, distancing therewith the (reform) socialist regime from the violent past and also establishing a new truth. This national frame of interpretation also proved decisive for the conceptions of war experiences by the *Svaz protifašistických bojovníků* (association of antifascist fighters, SPB).

The subsequent sections then offer a case study of this prominent organization, showing insights into processes of Stalinization and into the SPB's immense troubles with de-Stalinization. Hereby, I emphasize the shifting interpretation of the World Wars as well as attempts towards rehabilitation and also the societal position of the organized veterans within this process. The article follows up on how the SPB faced and co-created a double shift in conceptions of the war experiences as well as in how participation in the World Wars was socially recognized: the first shift happened 1948, with the implementation of a Soviet-type communist regime ("Sovietization"), and the second after 1956 with a distancing from the same (de-Stalinization). It shows how interpretations of war experiences had a direct impact first on expulsions of members who had come across as suspicious during Stalinism and later on their rehabilitation, which in the given context was the most crucial element of de-Stalinization. Additionally, it looks at how those shifting regimes of recognition had a direct impact on the wellbeing of war veterans, as the given conceptions determined their claims for related pensions.

The war veterans' organization dealt with an ambiguous tradition of Czechoslovak involvement in the First and Second World Wars. As a result, the history of that association mirrors the various ideological conflicts about the handling of the Stalinist past, the correct attitude toward communism, arrangements of the socialist order, and, not least, the value of national traditions. As a result of the suppression of the Prague Spring by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, these ongoing processes of rehabilitation and reconditioning were not completed; de-Stalinization stagnated. Therefore, no completed process of rehabilitation can be found within the SPB. In the final section of the article, I link my findings back to the more general national interpretations of the violent past in Czechoslovakia. With the prominent example of Ludvík Svoboda, a defendant in the show trials who became rehabilitated in the course of de-Stalinization, I underline both the conditions and limits of rehabilitation in reform socialist and post-Prague Spring Czechoslovakia, that is under the so-called "Normalization" regime.

## **De-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia**

The aforementioned visual axis between *Památník osvobození* and the Prague Stalin monument describes the intersection between interpretations of war

experiences and dealing with the Stalinist past. This also marks the locus of the SPB within the process of de-Stalinization. As the massive figure of Stalin disappeared in Prague years after such dismantling had happened in other socialist capitals, it raised questions about the implications of de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovakia had a relatively long and violent history of Stalinist rule. While older research, especially that of dissident and exile authors, stressed this factor, some recent research relativized it. In this way, the generally common place interpretation was, for example, questioned by Muriel Blaive, who argued that the idea of extraordinary Czechoslovakian Stalinist terror was propagated by exiled authors after the repression of the Prague Spring in the context of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> Melissa Feinberg equally underlines the mechanics of Cold War rhetoric and how blaming socialist rule was a part of the western (including American) regime of fear. Here she highlights the parallels between western and eastern propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Kevin McDermott eventually comes to the conclusion that “Czechoslovakia, particularly its elite, did not suffer disproportionately from Stalinist political violence” (which, to be sure, does not neglect the rule of violence).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the show trials had a specific dimension of accusations (Titoism and Zionism), as well as of propagandist effort. Thus, some, like Blaive and Feinberg, underline the participation of ordinary people and their belief in Stalinism in the tradition of revisionism of totalitarianism.<sup>7</sup> Others focus on the fact that the end of Stalinist politics was not easily accepted by higher as well as by lower party ranks. In this sense, Pavel Kolář, Jan Mervart, and Jiří Růžička focus on ideological debates. Kolář shows how especially lower party ranks and collectives of workers coped with the uncertainties resulting from Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s so-called secret speech.<sup>8</sup> Mervart and Růžička examine the internal differentiation within the Party intelligentsia, associated with these events.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on violence in my article, I find it nevertheless hard to estimate the nature of people’s belief in Stalin and his vision of communism. What was the impact of violence on the relationship between the people and the dictator? For a deeper investigation into this question, I would also like to draw attention to two further aspects that might be particularly helpful in

4. Muriel Blaive, *Promarněná příležitost: Československo a rok 1956*, Prague, 2001), 187–204; Muriel Blaive, “The Danger of Over-Interpreting Dissident Writing in the West: Communist Terror in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1968,” in Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, eds., *Samizdat, Tamizdat & Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* (New York, 2013), 137–55.

5. Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies: The Battle over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (New York, 2017), ix–xxii.

6. Kevin McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia: Origins, Processes, Responses,” in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression* (Manchester, 2010): 100.

7. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Soviet History,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007): 77–91.

8. Pavel Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus: Ideologie und Utopie einer Epoche* (Cologne, 2016), 41–51.

9. Jan Mervart and Jiří Růžička, “Rehabilitovat Marxe!”: *Československá stranická inteligence a myšlení poststalinické modernity* (Prague, 2020), 9–42.

explaining the positioning of war veterans. Firstly, it is worthwhile to look at Stalinist terror not only in a synchronic, but also in a diachronic comparison. There is good reason to analyze Stalinist power, Stalinist violence, and Stalinist world views in the region as a continuum as well as a reflection of events and interpretations of WWII.<sup>10</sup> Especially in this perspective, the Czechoslovak situation differs clearly from the one in the Soviet Union: (most) Czechoslovak soldiers had fought for their liberal democratic national state on the side of the western allies, and not with the Soviets. Stalinism was a system implemented there only after WWII. Whereas the Soviet Union did not support the existence of a Soviet veterans' organization until 1955, the Czechoslovak one survived—however brought in line with—Stalinism.<sup>11</sup> Even though Czechoslovakia continued to be a socialist state, it nevertheless distanced itself from Soviet Stalinism during the 1960s, interpreting politics (and experiences of war) in national terms. This is what the term de-Stalinization describes, and this is what my article examines.

Secondly, the whole issue must be understood within the framework of a broader debate about victimization and social recognition. Dealing with the heritage of violence was not only the issue of post-war, post-fascist, post-Stalinist, post-socialist, and other (supposed) successor regimes, but also of those who revealed themselves publicly as (surviving) victims of the different kinds of violence, formulating their experiences, reframing them within the “new” circumstances, hereby most often acting as a group or a social movement.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the investigation into the SPB offers new insights into reflections on the state and its legitimate violence.

### Stalinism, Experiences of Violence and Their (National) Interpretations

Czechoslovak society became deeply enmeshed in a brutal conflict during the late 1940s and 1950s within the Stalinist state and party apparatus.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1950s, when the Czechoslovak Stalinists replaced their comrades who

10. McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 100–5; for the Soviet perspective see: Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of the Second World War: The Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2001); for east central Europe, see: Timothy Snyder, “Diktaturen in Osteuropa: Regionalgeschichte oder europäisches Erbe?” in Thomas Großbölting and Dirk Hofmann, eds., *Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart: vom Umgang mit Diktaturerfahrungen in Ost- und Westeuropa* (Göttingen, Germany, 2008), 33–42.

11. Nikita Khrushchev was the one who supported the founding of a war veterans' organization in the Soviet Union, building on a Soviet Ukrainian predecessor, which had been dissolved in 1950. See: Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society 1941–1991* (Oxford, 2008), 161–62.

12. Svenja Goltermann, *Opfer: Die Wahrnehmung von Krieg und Gewalt in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 2020), 171–233; Axel Honneth, “Umverteilung als Anerkennung: Eine Antwort auf Nancy Fraser,” in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, eds., *Umverteilung oder Anerkennung?: Eine politisch-philosophische Kontroverse* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 129–224.

13. Balázs Trencsényi, Maciej Janowski, Mónika Baár, Maria Falina, and Michal Kopeček, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, vol. 2: *Negotiating Modernity in the “Short Twentieth Century” and Beyond*, part 2, 1968–2018 (Oxford, 2018), 419–24; Applebaum, *Empire of Friends*, 152–55; Jiří Pelikán, ed., *Pervertierte Justiz: Bericht*

had emigrated to the west during WWII (defined as “enemies within,” as for example Otto Šling, Rudolf Slánský, Artur London and others; see below), they not surprisingly hesitated to distance themselves from Stalinist methods.<sup>14</sup> In order to dominate the state apparatus, they copied many of the political practices of the Soviet system, such as purges and show trials.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s, the Czechoslovak state and party institutions applied instruments of terror, usually associated with the 1930s in the Soviet Union, to a much larger extent than other Soviet satellites, such as Hungary or Poland.<sup>16</sup> It has been established that between 1948 and 1953, 40,000 to 45,000 citizens of this relatively small country were sentenced in political trials to imprisonment for, on average, ten years. Death sentences handed down reached 232, of which 178 were actually carried out. In addition, local courts issued sentences for shorter imprisonments.<sup>17</sup>

The newly established Czechoslovak Stalinist party elite used show trials not only for members of the Communist Party but also for former participants in the National Front government (1945–48). The biggest show trial took place in 1950. Several members of different non-communist parties, including Milada Horáková (a member of the Czechoslovak National Social Party), were the leading defendants.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the show trials focused primarily on party members, especially former fighters in the Spanish Civil War and persons in exile in London during WWII. Most of these persons were accused of cosmopolitanism, espionage, Trotskyism, or Titoism. The trials often had a strong antisemitic component. This was especially true for the Slánský trial of 1952, which concluded with eleven death sentences and three life imprisonment sentences for members of the communist government.<sup>19</sup>

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*der Kommission des ZK der KPTsch über die politischen Morde und Verbrechen in der Tschechoslowakei 1949–1963* (Munich, 1972).

14. McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 103.

15. Among a wide range of literature for show trials, see: Balázs Szalontai, “Show Trials” in Ruud van Dijk et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Cold War* (London, 2008), 783–86; for Stalinism and Sovietization, see: McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia*, 21–120; Stefan Kreuzberger and Manfred Görtemaker, eds., *Gleichschaltung unter Stalin?: Die Entwicklung der Parteien im östlichen Europa 1944–1949* (Paderborn, Germany, 2002); Jörg Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror: Die Geschichte des Stalinismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Stalin and Hitler* (New York, 2010); for de-Stalinization, see: Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus*; Jan Mervart and Jiří Růžička, “Czechoslovak Post-Stalinism: A Distinct Field of Socialist Visions,” *East Central Europe*, 48, nos. 2-3 (November 2021): 220–49, 231; for veterans’ organizations, see: Mark Edele, “The Soviet Culture of Victory,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (October 2019): 780–98.

16. Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 1–30; McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 105–8.

17. Karel Kaplan, “‘Massenungesetzlichkeit’ und politische Prozesse in der Tschechoslowakei 1948 bis 1953,” in Wolfgang Maderthaler, Hans Schafranek, and Berthold Unfried, eds., *‘Ich habe den Tod verdient’: Schauprozesse und politische Verfolgung in Mittel- und Osteuropa, 1945–1956* (Vienna, 1991), 50–51; for the discussion of those figures and further information in numbers of persecution see: McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 100.

18. Kaplan, “‘Massenungesetzlichkeit,’” 129–35; Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 22–24.

19. Pelikán, ed., *Pervertierte Justiz*, 121; Eugen Löbl, and Dušan Pokorný, *Die Revolution rehabilitiert ihre Kinder: Hinter den Kulissen des Slánský-Prozesses* (Vienna, 1968); McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 103–5.

Stalinism, however, was not only a system implemented at the top of the political order; it also framed the interaction between interest groups and the state, as will be shown through the example of the SPB. In Czechoslovakia, the acceptance of communist ideas was widespread, and the question was seldom whether people were communists, but in many cases the extent to which national orientations and personal characteristics could be incorporated into a socialist, Soviet-oriented framework. De-Stalinization, consequently, was a process of reintegrating nationalism into the socialist order. The deeper investigation into the same shows how—in the light of shifting references towards national liberation—the violent heritage of Stalinist rule in Czechoslovakia was re-interpreted as an import from Soviet Russia.

De-Stalinization and rehabilitation happened in Czechoslovakia later than elsewhere for several reasons. According to one view, apart from the strategies of the party elite, a relatively good social and economic climate contributed to this specific development. Another explanation looks at cultural preconditions, given that many people, especially the lower party ranks, identified with Stalinist party rule.<sup>20</sup> The deep involvement of the populace with Stalinist rule must certainly be emphasized. The show trials reveal that Czechoslovak Stalinism reflected a violent struggle for the “right” rule, and was accompanied by suspicions of espionage, infiltration, and counterrevolution.<sup>21</sup>

The Prague Spring and its effort to achieve “socialism with a human face” represented an attempt to come to terms with this heritage of violence. State violence under Stalinism meant first and foremost the brutal and inhumane treatment of bodies and minds; however, the ways of interpreting bodily and mental pain differed within the eastern bloc.<sup>22</sup> Because Stalinist rule in the Soviet Union was strongly associated with an eruption of physical violence, rehabilitation of the formerly accused became the most important part of the reform socialist debates in the Czechoslovak context, in the effort to distance the country from Soviet dominance and from its own heritage of violence. The persecution of “our good communist comrades” was the focus of public attention.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the Soviet-oriented regime had demonized even Czechoslovaks who were loyal to communism to the point of self-sacrifice was viewed as deeply shocking.

It was the formerly accused and their family members, mostly their wives, who first found a way to reinterpret the processes of condemnation. In this respect, the central idea is expressed by the title of Marian Šlingová’s report about her husband’s condemnation: *Truth Will Prevail*. In 1952, Otto Šling, a stalwart communist, veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and member of the London exile group, was sentenced to death in the Slánský trial and executed.

20. Pavel Kolář, “Kommunistische Identitäten im Streit: Politisierung und Herrschaftslegitimation in den kommunistischen Parteien in Ostmitteleuropa nach dem Stalinismus,” *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 60, no. 2 (2011): 244–46; Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus*, 11; McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia*, 91–120.

21. McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 108–12.

22. Philipp Sarasin, “Mapping the body: Körpergeschichte zwischen Konstruktivismus, Politik und ‘Erfahrung,’” *Historische Anthropologie* 7, no. 3 (1999): 437–51.

23. Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror*; Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

More than a decade later, Šlingová reported that some months after she had been arrested on the same day as her husband, her interrogator passed her a handwritten message from Šling, stating that he had “admitted everything” and that he was sure she would “tell the comrades all you know.”<sup>24</sup> She was confused, and while she received, as she later learned, better treatment than the other political prisoners—perhaps partly because of her British citizenship—she valued her trust in the party and her belief in communism more than the resistance experiences she shared with her husband. She recalled her thoughts, saying, “. . . I ultimately came to believe that he must be guilty. I convinced myself that it was my duty as a communist to put personal feelings aside, to face things as a steely revolutionary.”

At that moment, the Stalinist rationale was also her truth. The truth that prevailed, however, was that all this had been a cynical play. This truth was itself painful, and it was accompanied by the agonizing question, how could this have happened?<sup>25</sup> Most communists had believed in Stalin, had believed in the leading role and the glory of the Soviet Union, and had even believed the theatre of the show trials. They had been ready to forget their personal feelings and their former experiences because they had been part of the play.<sup>26</sup> With this deep belief in mind, de-Stalinization became a process of distancing from former truths and of formulating new ones, too.<sup>27</sup>

The sentiment of deep involvement with Stalinism was often described by other defendants of Stalinist show trials as well. The former undersecretary for foreign affairs of Czechoslovakia, Artur London (1915–1986), reported that his wife, a communist like him but of French origin, requested a divorce after she heard his broadcast confession and failed to receive any message from him. She did not know then that the secret police had not passed it on.<sup>28</sup> Like many others, he thought back to the 1930s, when he had been shocked by the confessions made by Soviet comrades and had believed them.<sup>29</sup> Large sections of his more than 400-page book are devoted to an explanation of how Stalinism had functioned and had made him ready for his confession. An often-quoted statement of his hints at how striking it was that people who had survived Nazi torture without revealing anything broke down under torture by their comrades because they could not deal with the fact that the evil arose within their own party.<sup>30</sup>

It took a long time for the public to accept that the confessions were the result of torture and extortion, and that they, as well as all the statements of the court, were written and memorized in advance.<sup>31</sup> To make all this

24. Marian Šlingova, *Truth Will Prevail* (London, 1968), 55, 57.

25. Mervart and Růžička, “Czechoslovak Post-Stalinism,” 230.

26. Kaplan, “Massenungesetzlichkeit,” 37–38; for being part of the play see: Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 3–5.

27. For the belief in Stalinism see: Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 20–21; for new truths see: Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus*, 30–41.

28. Artur London, *Ich gestehe: Der Prozeß um Rudolf Slansky* (Berlin, 1970, first published in 1968 as *L'aveu, dans l'engrenage du Procès de Prague* Paris), 340.

29. London, *Ich gestehe*, 270–74.

30. “Zachovat jednotu odboje, *Hlas revoluce*, May 17, 1968, 1; Pelikán, ed., *Pervvertierte Justiz*, 21.

31. Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 20; McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia,” 106.

credible, it was necessary to label these practices as Soviet and to distance the Czechoslovak state apparatus from them. Viewed from this standpoint, de-Stalinization was a process of deep transformation, a process of changing the perspective from that of someone personally involved to that of a witness, and also a process of distancing from the experience of violence and from a period that, after Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, was referred to as "the time of the cult of personality" (*obdoba kultu osobnosti*).<sup>32</sup> It was this speech by Stalin's successor that inaugurated a discussion of what had happened. In the Czechoslovak context, one of the first attempts to make sense of the onerous Stalinist heritage was the "delayed reportages" (*Oneskorené reportáže*) of the Slovak writer and former partisan Ladislav Mňačko. These accounts were published in the magazine of the Union of Slovak Writers, *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life), in 1963. The title indicates that past events had to be reported after a certain interval of time, be it due to personal difficulties in dealing with the subject or for political reasons.

Yet, this distinction between personal and political is in fact rather artificial. After people had learned about the common use of false accusations and false confessions, for those who had witnessed it, Stalinism came to be viewed as a sort of illness or madness (and de-Stalinization, thus, as a kind of healing and survival method). Jiří Pelikán had been a prominent communist and member of the rehabilitation commission established by the CPCz in 1963 following the example of the Soviet Union and other satellite states. After the repression of the Prague Spring, he migrated to Italy, and when he published the reports of the commission in 1972 in German, he referred to the trials as a "cancer."<sup>33</sup> In Mňačko's fictional work, a man who was officially declared mad described the atmosphere of Stalinism as one in which everyone suffered from fear. A "psychosis of fear" (*psychóze strachu*) was, according to this character, the most obvious outcome of communist rule.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the good fortune of making it to another time was a prerequisite for making sense of the violent past. Obviously, everyone knew about the show trials. The accused had been prominent people, with high positions in the party and in the government; they were people who somehow embodied both communist history and national history.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, show trials were literally staged for public audiences.<sup>36</sup>

Redefining the accusations and confessions in the reform socialist era thus also entailed a communist reappropriation of national history. The communist Czechoslovak body was now being defended against Soviet Stalinist violation. De-Stalinization in 1968 was also a process of the re-pluralization of Czechoslovak society, starting in the higher ranks of socialist society and

32. "Rehabilitace protifašistických tradic", *Hlas revoluce*, June 20, 1963, 1; Ondřej Pavlík, "Kult osobnosti, a mravnost" (Cult of personality and morality), *Kulturní život* 18 (1963): no. 32, 1.

33. Pelikán, ed., *Pervertierte Justiz*, 8.

34. Ladislav Mňačko, "Nočný rozhovor" *Kulturní život* 18 (1963): no. 23, 3.

35. Melissa Feinberg, "Fantastic Truths, Compelling Lies: Radio Free Europe and the Response to the Slánský Trial in Czechoslovakia," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (February 2013): 107–25.

36. Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 4.



reaching the lower ones.<sup>37</sup> This was the point when the Soviet leadership, fearing a loss of control over the Czechoslovak satellite, invaded.

### **Stalinization in Veterans' Organizations, and the Mirror of National History**

After the coup of February 1948, several veterans' associations had merged together under the umbrella of the SPB, as was the usual practice in the process of Stalinization. The SPB had been established as the united front of "freedom fighters" of the First and Second World Wars.<sup>38</sup> It united various groups, including veterans of the Czechoslovak Legionnaires, volunteers fighting against the Habsburg troops, veterans of WWI, political prisoners from the German occupation period, other types of "victims of fascism," as well as partisans, their widows and orphans. In keeping with Stalinist rhetoric, this union was consistent with the rationale of a heroic communist fight against fascism, side by side with the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup>

The Legionnaires of WWI were traditionally perceived as pioneers of the struggle for national liberation. Whereas most of the Czech and Slovak soldiers had fought during WWI in units of the Habsburg Empire, the Legionnaires had founded special Czech units within the Imperial Russian Army and later also within the Triple Entente. The Czechoslovak Legion was recognized as a national Czechoslovak army in 1917. After the October Revolution, the Czech, and some Slovak, soldiers were evacuated to the west via Siberia; only a small number of them joined the Red Army or even the Whites.<sup>40</sup> In the interwar period, the Legionnaires were therefore perceived as fighters for national liberation. Those veterans who had fought in the Habsburg troops and survived had been on the "wrong" side but could nonetheless be embraced by the national community due to their purported role in the Habsburg army as saboteurs and deserters and through defining a new democratic community to include everyone who shared the new ideals.<sup>41</sup>

During WWII, the notion that the Legionnaires' struggle was being repeated led to the concepts of a First and a Second Resistance as an ongoing struggle against foreign domination. Under such a nationalist interpretation, those who fought as soldiers of the London exile government, the so-called Legionnaires of WWII, the communist and the bourgeois resistance fighters, and those who were persecuted by the Nazi regime for political reasons were

37. David W. Paul, "The Repluralization of Czechoslovak Politics in the 1960s," *Slavic Review* 33, no. 4 (December 1974): 726.

38. The organization still exists, now under the name *Český svaz bojovníků za svobodu* (Czech Association of Freedom Fighters).

39. "K ustavujícímu sjezdu Svazu bojovníků za svobodu" *Lidová demokracie*, May 8, 1948, 1.

40. Martin Zückert, "Memory of War and National State Integration: Czech and German Veterans in Czechoslovakia after 1918," *Central Europe* 4, no. 2 (2006): 111–21; Jonathan D. Smele, *Civil War in Siberia: The Anti-Bolshevik Government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918–1929* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 572; Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London, 1996), 142–43.

41. Natali Stegmann, *Kriegsdeutungen—Staatsgründungen—Sozialpolitik: Der Helden- und Opferdiskurs in der Tschechoslowakei, 1918–1948* (Munich, 2010), 63–80, 98–118.

considered to have fought on the “right side.”<sup>42</sup> Under the later communist, anti-fascist interpretation, however, the national independence struggle came to be viewed with suspicion, and this suspicion targeted the Legionnaires of both the First and the Second World Wars, bourgeois resistance fighters, members of the London exile government, and all communists who had survived in the west. This re-interpretation occurred because, as mentioned, the Soviet leadership had used the Moscow exile for the “Sovietization” of Czechoslovakia in 1948.<sup>43</sup>

As during the interwar period, veterans’ associations were among the most important social groups immediately after WWII. The unification of the formerly separate veteran organizations of Legionnaires, soldiers of the Habsburg troops during WWI, and various associations of fighters from WWII resulted, all in all, in an adjustment from the nationalist to the new, communist framing. Because the Legionnaires were already on the defensive, their representatives claimed to be associated with other “resistance organization[s]. . . without any reservation.”<sup>44</sup> The fusion was concluded with a statement about being a part of a great unification in the name of the people. It was accompanied by an increasing adoption of the rhetoric of the Communist Party within the association, based on the concepts of unity and faithfulness.

How did this adoption work? The mobilization of fear was crucial for the functioning of Stalinist rule.<sup>45</sup> The Stalinist (as well as the fascist) system created social bonds resting on inclusion and exclusion; this underpinned practices of “self-renewal” and a willingness to perpetrate violence.<sup>46</sup> In practice, people were sworn in and intimidated at the same time. A good example of this is the speech given by President Klement Gottwald in 1948 on the fourth anniversary of the Slovak Uprising of August 1944, which separated the Slovak people from their former German ally. At the time, it was viewed as a fundamental part of the antifascist struggle.<sup>47</sup> In his welcoming address to the war veterans in 1948, Gottwald, described the uprising as a “victory over the fascist reaction,” but warned in the same breath of a “new reaction . . . still trying to disturb the construction of our home country, to dissolve the nation, and to

42. *Ibid.*, 237–49.

43. Jiří Kocian, “Vom Kaschauer Programm zum Prager Putsch: Die Entwicklung der politischen Parteien in der Tschechoslowakei in den Jahren 1944–1948,” in Creuzberger and Görtemaker, eds., *Gleichschaltung unter Stalin?*, 301–17.

44. “Legionáři vždy pro jednotu . . .” (Legionnaires always for unity), *Národní osvobození*, May 9, 1948, 7.

45. Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, ix–xviii.

46. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke, “Energizing the Everyday” On the Breaking and Making of Social Bonds in Nazism and Stalinism,” in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 266–67.

47. Mária Dobříková, “Miesto Slovenského národného povstania v slovenských dejinách,” in Historický ústav SAV, ed., *Slovensko v rokoch druhej svetovej vojny (Materiály z vedeckého sympózia. 6.-7. novembra 1990)*, Bratislava, 1991), 155–57; Ivan Kamenec, “Dvojsečnosť mýtov o Slovenskom národnom povstaní,” in Eduard Krekovičová, Eva Krekovič, and Elena Mannová, eds., *Mýty naše slovenské*, Bratislava, 2005). 199–206.

regain its former position.”<sup>48</sup> He thus excluded the bourgeois resistance from the liberation narrative and even identified a threat arising from their very existence. On this occasion, the Slovak veterans’ organizations were similarly merged to create the *Sváz ľudových protifašistických bojovníkov* (Association of National Antifascist Fighters).<sup>49</sup>

Beginning in 1949, the work of the Czech and Slovak associations was standardized; the Slovak branch lost its autonomy to the Czech head office.<sup>50</sup> With the unification, the new associations also established their respective press organs, the magazines *Hlas revoluce* (The Voice of the Revolution, published in Prague) and *Bojovník* (The Fighter, published in Bratislava). *Bojovník* appeared for only a short while and was later re-established in 1969. Until 1990 (since 1990, the association’s organ is *Národní osvobzení* [National Liberation]), *Hlas revoluce* was published twice a month; in 1961 it reached a circulation of 28,000 copies.<sup>51</sup> During the Stalinist period, these periodicals made no attempt to represent any specific viewpoints of veterans. On the contrary, they echoed the official ideological phrases, using extremely distorted language.

Within these confines, it was not possible to claim a special status. The liberation and the resistance efforts of the First and Second World War were now interpreted as steps in a progressive evolution toward the “February Revolution,” and as a precondition for socialism as contemplated by historical materialism. On Independence Day (28 October 1949), *Hlas revoluce* featured an article titled “1917–1918–1945–1949.” It claimed that the starting point for the development of the Czechoslovak nation had been the (Russian) October Revolution. In a skillful misinterpretation of the historical facts, it went even further, stating that the Legions could only have emerged “from the middle of the Russian nation.” It ended with a blessing for the Czechoslovak fighters and for Stalin.<sup>52</sup> The model of the Soviet Union was in fact relied upon for each statement about the Czechoslovak fight for freedom and independence. So said a 1948 editorial in *Bojovník* about the Slovak Uprising of 1944:

Who led and organized the Slovak nation in the most glorious epoch of its history? . . . There is only a single reply to this question: it was the Communist Party, the only organized moral force opposing fascist brutality. . . and it was the idea and the model of the heroic Soviet people. . . . Any other reply is untrue and ridiculous.<sup>53</sup>

The readers of this doctrinaire text learned at once that what had been deemed correct some months earlier no longer counted because a new time had come, bringing its own truths. It seemed as if the veterans’ group was no longer

48. “Odkaz slovenského povstání žije,” *Svobodné slovo*, August 29, 1948, 1.

49. “Po línii povstania k socializmu” *Bojovník*, September 5, 1948, 3.

50. “Společný postup českých a slovenských odbojářů,” *Hlas revoluce*, March 30, 1949, 1.

51. Národní archiv, Praha [hereafter NA], fond (f.) 1063: Svaz protifašistických bojovníků—ústřední výbor, Praha [SPB UV], svazek (sv.) 161: Zpráva administrace Hlasu revoluce o rozšířování časopisu H R.

52. “1917–1918–1945–1949,” *Hlas revoluce*, October 26, 1949, 1.

53. “Duch slovenského národného povstania” *Bojovník*, August 29, 1948, 3.

an interest group communicating with the state and the public, but rather a group of functionaries who were dictating new truths to be memorized, or even warning the members of the organization. Nation and state turned out to be units threatened from within and without. Stalinist paranoia dictated that the only “heroes” were members of the Red Army. Czech and Slovak resistance fighters were mere supporters. The personal interests of Czechoslovak veterans were articulated, if at all, in terms of social policy.

Policies regarding war veterans had already changed in 1946, according to the principles of the National Front, in keeping with a redefinition of the term “victim.” In addition to the fighters from WWI, who still received their benefits, at least in theory, the new law established an entire array of victims of the antifascist struggle, specifically: (1) persons who were wounded in the Czechoslovak army or an allied army during WWII, in the partisan units, while fighting in the Slovak Uprising or the Prague Uprising (an attempt in May 1945 to liberate the city from German occupation), or in other antifascist actions, in POW camps, during abduction and forced labor, and in concentration camps; (2) persons imprisoned due to their participation in the so-called antifascist task; and (3) widows and orphans of all those persons. Victims were thus those who had made a sacrifice during the antifascist struggle.

In this new definition of victim, the martyrdom of Jews and other groups that had been persecuted for nonpolitical reasons was ignored. Compared to the interwar period, in which all people who had made a sacrifice on the various fronts of WWI were defined as war victims, this definition was expanded after WWII. But the expansion had its drawbacks: the exclusion of those who did not belong was much more conclusive. According to the presidential decrees of June 19, 1945 and January 24, 1946, this exclusion also applied to fascist traitors who had been found guilty in a court, volunteers in the armies fighting against the allies, persons who had been found guilty of actions against the state, deserters from the Czechoslovak army, persons who had voluntarily worked in an enemy state, and widows and orphans of all these groups.<sup>54</sup> Social benefits were thus only available to those who had fought on the “right” side.

Because social policies were under the exclusive control of the state during the Stalinist period, they were considered a political tool of great importance. In this sense, the guidelines of the SPB, too, were a valuable political instrument.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, the regime offered members of the organization acceptance into the community of antifascist fighter, on the other, both the regime and the organization had to deal with the fact that some members were excluded from both this community and the organization.

War veterans were in fact generally treated with suspicion under Stalinism as they had mostly fought in the “wrong” armies and for the wrong purposes, in the Habsburg troops or with the Whites during WWI, in western exile or in the bourgeois resistance during WWII. Many of them were persecuted in the 1950s. It is striking that the show trials and the terror, which were also

54. *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení Republiky československé 1946*, 1099–1122.

55. “Program sociální práce SBS a způsob jejího provádění,” *Hlas revoluce*, January 12, 1949, 6.

directed against former Legionnaires and other suspect veterans, were not reported on at all in the organ of the SPB. At the peak of the trials in 1950, *Hlas revoluce* explained the principle of “revolutionary vigilance.” Readers were assured that all they had fought for was now at stake. With the mention that the association had to fulfil extraordinary duties, purges were indirectly announced. It was emphasized that the bourgeois resistance fighters in the SPB might be agents of capitalism, spies, or other fundamental threats to the republic.<sup>56</sup> Some weeks later, members were asked to apply for new membership cards.<sup>57</sup> It seems obvious that these were not handed out to everyone. It is also likely that not all members followed this order and thus ceased to be members.

In addition, calls for self-criticism (a key element of identifying oneself with Stalinist power) increased in the following years. According to the functionaries, there was also a problem with the failure of many members to join demonstrations or attend assemblies. The chairman of the SPB, Jan Vodička, a Czechoslovak Red Army member in WWI, described how this “mistake” could be avoided: “Of course it is not sufficient to love the Soviet Union. One has to learn from her, and to extend the experiences gained to our everyday work and activity for our nation and our republic.”<sup>58</sup> A passive attitude was no longer possible in the face of threats and purges; yet the only way to be active was to imitate the Soviet model. To follow this model meant that there was no way back; national interpretations of history had hardly any place in the new order. The same was true for the members of the bourgeois resistance, Legionnaires of WWI, and Jewish victims of the Nazi regime.<sup>59</sup>

In 1953, the SPB established a Disciplinary and Control Commission. In March of that year, the head of the commission, Josef Janouš, gave a very long talk about its work at an assembly of the Central Committee of the SPB. Here he explained and defended the purges and spoke explicitly about some cases. He used the same language the party employed when speaking about cosmopolitanism and Zionism in the ranks of the association as a concrete danger for the new socialist and antifascist order. Beyond this, the attitude toward the Legionnaires was the focus of attention. In the assembly, members of the audience repeatedly asserted that there was a need to distinguish between the different kinds of participation in the army by volunteers during WWI, namely between those who had been bourgeois fighters and those who had sympathized with the Russian Revolution. Janouš called for a rejection of the “legends about the liberation” during and after WWI. He also pointed to the fact that there were 15,000 “so-called incorrect cases” of SPB members waiting for a “solution.”<sup>60</sup> Even though there is no clarification of this statement, one can assume that a large number of members were excluded.

56. “Nesmiřitelně proti nepříteli—i proti vlastním nedostatkům,” *Hlas revoluce*, March 29, 1950, 6–7.

57. “Nové legitimace SBS členům,” *Hlas revoluce*, May 31, 1950, 1.

58. “Bratstvo v boji—bratstvo v budování,” *Hlas revoluce*, January 10, 1952, 1, 3.

59. See, for example, the article about a peace demonstration in Auschwitz: “Mírová manifestace v Osvětimě,” *Hlas revoluce*, February 7, 1952, 1.

60. NA, f. SPB UV, sv. 153: Zasedání Ústředního výboru Svazu protifašistických bojovníků. Druhý den zasedání, neděle, 1. března 1953; 1/2–1/5, 2/1–2/4, 3/3.

The aforementioned review of membership cards in 1955 obviously served the same purpose: the local committees had to redo their membership rolls. After the members' cards had been verified, each card received the stamp of the FIR, the *Fédération Internationale des Résistants*, because the SPB had joined this international association.<sup>61</sup> In this way, the Central Committee identified those it regarded as true resistance fighters and excluded those it presumed to have been bourgeois collaborators with the Nazi regime.

### De-Stalinization in the Veterans' Organization: Towards Rehabilitation and Reconditioning

As the repression of the Prague Spring hindered the process of rehabilitation and reconditioning, it is hard to identify any concrete outcomes of such processes within the SPB. The Prague Spring was also an indicator of a crisis of Soviet legitimation within the eastern bloc, leading to a *déjà-vu* of Soviet power politics towards their satellites.<sup>62</sup> The hindering of free disputes about Stalinism in Czechoslovakia thus had consequences also for the Soviet 1970s Union and its other satellites. In Czechoslovakia, de-Stalinization became a topic again in the dissident discourse of the 1970s, when the issue of "the truth" was still at the core of intellectual debates.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the "normalization regime" sought to influence the population, not so much through violence but rather through a particular combination of consumerism and limited freedom (and new truths). A lasting effect of de-Stalinization was that mindless, brutal brainwashing was no longer deemed useful.<sup>64</sup> In the 1960s, the investigation of cases of injustice provided the framework for discussing the heritage of the 1950s. The efforts at rehabilitation were often accompanied by a fixation on certain personalities, as I will show with the example of Ludvík Svoboda.

61. NA, f. SPB UV, sv. 207: kontrola prukazů. The association was founded 1951 in Vienna; see: Maximilian Becker, "Tales of Antifascism. International Survivors' Organizations during the Cold War," *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 9, no. 1-2 (2020): 244-71, 248-9.

62. Amir Weiner, "Déjà Vu All Over Again: Prague Spring, Romanian Summer and Soviet Autumn on the Soviet Western Frontier," *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (2006): 159-94.

63. Michael Simmons, "Passive Resistance Proclamation by Czech Intellectuals," *Financial Times*, August 3, 1969; Václav Havel, "Der Prozess," *L* 76, no. 4 (1977): 85-90; Václav Havel, *Versuch, in der Wahrheit zu leben: Von der Macht der Ohnmächtigen* (Czech samizdat version from 1978, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1980); Václav Havel, "Dear Dr. Husák," in Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Prose*, trans. Paul R. Wilson (London, 1991), 50-83; see also: Michal Pullmann, "Občanské iniciativy a reformy socialismu", in Marek Hrubec, and Miloš Bárta, eds., *Dějiny československého sociálnědemokratického hnutí* (Prague, 2006), 150-57; Annabelle Lutz, *Dissidenten und Bürgerbewegung: Ein Vergleich zwischen DDR und Tschechoslowakei* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 85-98; Chad Bryant, "Whose Nation? Czech Dissidents and History Writing from a Post-1989 Perspective," *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2000): 36-37.

64. Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus*, 11; Paulina Bren "Looking West: Popular Culture and the Generation Gap in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1969-1989," in Luisa Passerini, ed., *Across the Atlantic: Cultural Exchanges between Europe and the United States* (Brussels, 2000), 295-321.

The SPB treated the entire set of issues very cautiously. In 1961, Vodička died; his successor as chair of the association was Josef Hušek. In the same year, the association increased its propaganda efforts. Although the Central Committee of the SPB still avoided speaking about the 1950s, it emphasized the ongoing threat of fascism and the high importance of an international antifascist struggle. As former Nazi and SS perpetrators were discovered in different places in the world and the Cold War escalated, the SPB extended its international contacts in both the east and the west. International contacts helped to highlight the association's relevance in internal discussions. The thought of a meaningful international engagement against fascism distracted from unpleasant questions about recent historical developments in one's own country. In fact, however, it was precisely these international contacts that brought these questions back onto the agenda. The association's records suggest that western comrades exerted pressure to deal with the fate of Czechoslovak socialists who had survived the Nazi occupation in the west. Although there is no further information on the subject, it is known that in 1961 the SPB drew up a plan for an amnesty for Czechoslovak combatants in the Spanish Civil War and émigrés.<sup>65</sup> Even though this plan was a first step toward de-Stalinization, it was mentioned in only a few words in a record of proceedings and not made public in *Hlas revoluce* or in any other way.

The first open discussion of the rehabilitation issue took place at a plenary session of the Central Committee of the SPB in January 1964. The new chairman, Josef Hušek, mentioned in his speech that the association had received several requests for rehabilitation of "those who were unjustly harmed under the influence of the cult of personality," obviously as a result of CPCz attempts in that regard. Hušek explained that generally the party was responsible for rehabilitation, whereas the SPB had already taken part in the rehabilitation of the "members of the international brigades in Spain, members of the Czechoslovak partisan units in Yugoslavia, and participants in other liberation units, who had been unjustly accused and decimated," a matter that was of "great moral and political significance." But he also stressed the need to examine each case individually because rehabilitation of people whose past was still considered suspicious had to be avoided.<sup>66</sup>

Comrades from western exile as well as members of the western liberation fight were the first to be rehabilitated. The focus was still on the antifascist struggle, but the circles of individuals who had contributed to this effort were expanded. The SPB had thus begun a "rehabilitation of antifascist traditions," that is, the traditions of the bourgeois resistance. One can also note a shift in language. Instead of distorted messages, a seemingly serious shift toward national traditions was now being articulated. An article from 1963 opened the discussion with the statement that the "time of the cult of personality" had been not revolutionary, but conservative. This was now considered the reason for the oppression of the true antifascist Czechoslovak heritage. In

65. NA, f. SPB UV, sv. 161, in particular, Plán akcí SPB za udělení amnestie španělským politickým vězňům a emigrantům.

66. NA, f. SPB UV, sv. 145: Referát předsedy ÚV SPB Josefa Huška, přednesený na plenárním zasedání ÚV SPB 11. ledna 1964, 6, 7 and 8.

stark contrast to the previous Soviet domination, *Hlas revoluce* now interpreted “the history of our national liberation fight” as a history of “human progress, freedom, higher—due to more human and more concrete—humanism, . . . social justice, . . . a wider mental horizon of the modern human being of the twentieth century, manifested by the idea of socialism.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, even at this early stage of de-Stalinization, the concept of the communist past, present, and future had already fundamentally changed.<sup>68</sup> During the 1960s, *Hlas revoluce* reported widely about the national liberation fight, with a strong emphasis also on founding myths from the interwar period. This change in perspective affected the perception of the participation of Czech soldiers on all fronts of WWI,<sup>69</sup> as well as on the western front in WWII.<sup>70</sup>

In 1968, the SPB members elected a new board by secret ballot. The election led back to more autonomous action by the Slovak branch, and it was accompanied by an open discussion.<sup>71</sup> Rehabilitation was now perceived as part of a democratization process, although social welfare and international cooperation remained central values.<sup>72</sup> On March 30, 1968 in Brno, an assembly of veterans of the First and Second World Wars and former political prisoners demanded proper political representation and a new constitution that would, in harmony with the “historical significance” of the national resistance, guarantee “human rights” to “citizens.”<sup>73</sup> Both terms, “human rights” and “citizens,” had previously been understood as bourgeois, and the use of them illustrates an ongoing shift in the use of language. Redefinitions obviously succeeded because they used well-known and easily understandable ideals that could show the way to a more comfortable socialist future. In the long term, these redefinitions changed people’s thinking, and they outlasted the suppression of the Prague Spring.<sup>74</sup>

In the context of the Prague Spring, *Hlas revoluce* particularly emphasized that people of different social origins and political orientations had participated in the national fight for independence.<sup>75</sup> The periodical thus argued, in 1969, that the rehabilitation of SPB’s members must be understood to be the rehabilitation of the national liberation struggle and democratic traditions.<sup>76</sup> The fact that this article could be published after the suppression of the Prague Spring indicates that censorship was not re-established immediately after August 1968 and that the process of rehabilitation continued beyond that date.<sup>77</sup>

67. “Mírová manifestace v Osvětimě”, *Hlas revoluce*, December 5, 1963, 1.

68. Kolař, *Der Poststalinismus*, 30–41.

69. Český voják v první světové válce”, *Hlas revoluce*, July 30, 1964, 1.

70. “Tradice bojů na západní frontě”, *Hlas revoluce*, October 24, 1963, 1.

71. “Práce na zásadách soudní rehabilitace”, *Hlas revoluce*, May 17, 1968, 1.

72. NA, f. SPB UV, sv. 159: Zpáva o plenárním zasedání Ústřed, 1ního výboru SPB z 3. května 1968.

73. “V jednotné frontě”, *Hlas revoluce*, April 19, 1968, 1.

74. Adolf Müller, “Zehn Jahre nach dem Prager 21. August,” *Osteuropa* 8 (1978): 668.

75. “Výzva k diskusi na aktuální téma: Co s minulostí a jak do budoucna?,” *Hlas revoluce*, April 5, 1968, 5.

76. “Jak pokračují rehabilitace?” *Hlas revoluce*, January 17, 1969, 1, 4.

77. Hans Renner, *A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945* (London, 1989), 60.



De-Stalinization in Czechoslovak politics thus took place alongside a similar process in the SPB. Understood in a broader sense of distancing from the Stalinist heritage, rehabilitation had a specific meaning for war veterans and victims of fascism because it affected the social recognition of their deeds and the corresponding potential for social benefits. When I stated previously that veterans of WWI theoretically still received their disability pensions pursuant to the law of 1946, I wanted to emphasize that regardless of inclusion in the group of war victims defined by law, those war victims who after 1948 were found guilty of belonging to the reaction and those who fell victim to purges and terror no longer belonged to antifascist communist society, nor did they receive social benefits.

In general, social policies were never the primary concern of Stalinist politics.<sup>78</sup> Stalinism related to a time when socialist citizens had to sacrifice all they could for the communist future.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, victims' pensions increased in Czechoslovakia in 1946. The increase must be understood as a sign of departure from the previous role of the inter-war government and that of the Nazi government in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>80</sup> It was also presented as an act to emphasize the antifascist heritage. As shown, however, the benefits were not for all the needy, but solely for those who belonged to the newly defined community. Recognition as a full member of the community went hand in hand with recognition of social demands, and meeting social demands meant in no small measure serving the nation. This close interrelation between social recognition and social demands was, of course, of special importance for persons who were in need of rehabilitation after Stalinism had passed, especially those who had survived Stalinism in social isolation or even in prison and who had to prove once more their veteran or war-victim status. Because the process of rehabilitation was not only an ideological issue but also a matter of social policy, the granting of war victims' pensions returned to the agenda immediately after the process of rehabilitation began.<sup>81</sup>

Post-Stalinist socialism thus enlarged its national framework. It reincorporated former suspects into the community of those who received social benefits. When the veterans of WWI were reinstated as honorable members of the SPB in 1964, pensions were increased at the same time. A law regarding social insurance made clear that the social security of the working class was an achievement of socialism. Thus, as was typical for the process of

78. Beate Fieseler, "The Soviet Union's 'Great Patriotic War' Invalids: The Poverty of a New Status Group," in Katrin Boeckh, ed., *Veterans and War Victims in Eastern Europe during the 20th Century: A Comparison* (Leipzig, 2011), 34–50.

79. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979); Stefan Plaggenborg, "Über das Zeitverständnis im real existierenden Sozialismus," in Martin Schulze Wessel and Christiane Brenner, eds., *Zukunftsvorstellungen und Staatliche Planung im Sozialismus: Die Tschechoslowakei im ostmitteleuropäischen Kontext 1945–1989* (Munich, 2010), 19–31; Pavel Kolař, "Strana jako utopie. Komunistická identita po pádu stalinismu", *Soudobé dějiny* 2 (2012): 237.

80. Stegmann, *Kriegsdeutungen*, 250–58; Weiner, *Making Sense*, 32–38.

81. "Demokratickou cestou k jednotě svazu," *Hlas revoluce*, July 12, 1968, 1, 5.

de-Stalinization, the regime increased its efforts to make life more comfortable, because this was the government's new promise. Within this framework, war victims were embraced in the general social reform.<sup>82</sup> Of great significance for them was that the difference between higher and lower pensions decreased and the years of service "in the Czechoslovak military forces" and period of imprisonment for "political, national, or racial reasons" (*z politických, národnostních nebo rasových důvodů*) were taken into account when it came to determining the pensions.<sup>83</sup> This approach corresponded to the general drive toward a more egalitarian treatment, both ideologically and socially. Like the higher and lower party ranks, the functionaries of the SPB had a problem with an immediate condemnation of Stalin's rule. The need to rehabilitate many ordinary members of the SPB was not discussed in the association's press organ until early 1968, with the aim to "widen our family," meaning to bring in the formerly excluded brothers and, fewer, sisters.<sup>84</sup> The discussion was directly correlated to the rehabilitation law passed in the National Assembly on March 23, 1968.<sup>85</sup> It was repeatedly emphasized that rehabilitation was very crucial for the future.<sup>86</sup> However, while actual rehabilitations were not withdrawn after the Prague Spring, the possibility of discussing Stalinist practice in general and within the association remained rather limited. The leading actors of the reform socialist experiment of the Prague Spring, as well the so-called dissidents of the 1970s were again persecuted.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the situation of most members of the First and the Second Resistance, at least in terms of social benefits, improved steadily.<sup>88</sup>

### The Case of Ludvík Svoboda

One very important figure for the topic discussed here was Ludvík Svoboda, one of the prominent defendants in the show trials. Since the SPB remained silent about the persecution of its members, it is very difficult to identify less prominent cases; therefore, I focus on Svoboda. As a Legionnaire of WWI, he became the commander of the so-called Svoboda Army in WWII. This army consisted of Czechoslovak units that had been established in early 1942 and fought since 1943 at the side of the Red Army against the Germans. In the National Front government, Svoboda was minister of national defense. Later he was also the vice prime minister, until he withdrew from his position in 1950. In 1952, he was arrested and kept in custody for some weeks; the Soviet military leadership found him suspicious because he continued to maintain

82. *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení Republiky československé 1964*, 554.

83. *Ibid.*

84. "Aby se naša rodina stále rozšiřovala," *Hlas revoluce*, September 20, 1968, 1.

85. "Zásady soudní rehabilitace," *Hlas revoluce*, May 3, 1968, 1; *Sbírka zákonů, Československé socialistické republiky 1968*, 230–36.

86. "Naši největší silou je rozum a čest," *Hlas revoluce*, September 20, 1968, 1; December 29, 1968, 1–2.

87. Michal Kopeček, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce: Zrod a počátky marxistického revisionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960* (Prague, 2009), 114–19.

88. "Důchodové zabezpečení účastníků odboje," *Hlas revoluce*, December 29, 1968, 3.

contact with Legionnaires.<sup>89</sup> From March 1968 to 1975 he was the President of Czechoslovakia.<sup>90</sup> His rehabilitation had great significance for the SPB, as he was perhaps the most eminent figure in this association.<sup>91</sup>

In 1963, Svoboda was made the chairman of the Historical Documentary Commission of the SPB Central Committee. On this occasion, he wrote an editorial about the new worldwide interest in the history of the resistance in WWII and the important role that former resistance fighters could play in the revision of the distorted accounts that had previously been offered.<sup>92</sup> Svoboda nevertheless argued in a rather compromising way. He was of course dealing at the top of the political hierarchy with his former persecutors, and his words thus seem to reflect a careful search for new dealings and new meanings. Svoboda was one of those who could help leading party members when they introduced a post-Stalinist order, and he obviously wished to do so. He was very useful in this venture, as he was the perfect embodiment of both nationalist and communist heritage. Upon turning 70 in 1965, he received the title of Hero of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and of the Soviet Union.<sup>93</sup> The message was clear: Svoboda was an autonomous Czechoslovak hero, one who was a friend of the Soviet Union but did not blindly follow its role model. As such—as I interpret the subtext—he was persecuted under Stalinism and ceremonially made a hero afterward. President Antonín Novotný, largely responsible for the former degradation of Svoboda, awarded him the title in “appreciation of his duty in the fight against fascism for the liberation of Czechoslovakia.”<sup>94</sup> The significance of the event became especially clear in 1968, when Svoboda gave testimony about the battle at Sokolovo, which had been the first combat action of the Czechoslovak independent field battalion in the USSR in March 1943. Here we see him side by side with the Red Army as an autonomous Czechoslovak, in the position of a brave and victorious person.<sup>95</sup> The higher his political position, the more he was treated as the embodiment of the nation. Moreover, strikingly, we do not learn anything about his suffering or that of others at the hand of executors of politically motivated violence.

As the example of Svoboda, but not only, shows, Stalinist terror assumed not least a psychological form. De-Stalinization, conversely, was thus a process of restoring personal and national autonomy, honor, and, within certain limits, sovereignty of interpretation. It was a process of careful emancipation from the dominance of the Soviet Union and the distortion of national history. It involved the reinstallation of Czechoslovak role models and the enlargement

89. Karel Kaplan, *Die politischen Prozesse in der Tschechoslowakei, 1948–1954* (Munich, 1986); Kolař, “Strana jako utopie,” 118–19.

90. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Ludvík Svoboda,” last modified November 22, 2022, at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ludvik-Svoboda> (accessed October 14, 2022).

91. Ludvík Svoboda, “Dejme se všichni do práce v našem Svazu protifašistických bojovníků,” *Hlas revoluce*, May 31, 1968, 1.

92. “Živé svědectví,” *Hlas revoluce*, June 20, 1963, 1.

93. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Ludvík Svoboda.”

94. “Generál Ludvík Svoboda Hrdina ČSSR,” *Hlas revoluce*, November 26, 1965, 1.

95. “Sokolovo,” *Hlas revoluce*, March 8, 1968, 1, 5; “Když generálové nebyli ještě generály...” *Hlas revoluce*, September 20, 1968, 3.

of social benefits, an undertaking that was formally ended by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops and the declaration of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which made clear that the Soviet Union would (continue to) oversee the proper socialist development of its satellites.<sup>96</sup>

This article has shown how the specifically Czechoslovak way of facing the country's violent heritage was a nationalist one. The national body was rehabilitated, and the use of violence became a problem of the Soviet occupying power. I have further illustrated how the Stalinist show trials and the work of the prominent organization SPB were (re)interpreted, hinting thereby on the corresponding discursive shifts. Answering for the functioning of those shifts, I could demonstrate how the experiences of Stalinist violence on the one hand and war experiences as well as social recognition on the other became basic topics of veterans' politics.

Instead of investigating personal pain and suffering, those who escaped the experience of Stalinism depicted it as an experience of national degradation. In this way, they could make sense of the tortures they had endured, and this was the interpretation that preceded the Prague Spring and lasted beyond its suppression. The SPB's interpretation of war involvement therefore reflected Stalinist, as well as post-Stalinist, socialist as well as nationalist interpretations, without drawing conclusions of its own from the war experience of its members. For the war veterans' organization, de-Stalinization went hand-in-hand with a carefully initiated rehabilitation of former members, with increased access to pensions and an expanded group of beneficiaries (and hence with social recognition) as well as with increased international participation. Being a part of the post-Stalinist national community proved a precondition for social demands. Being a part of the international antifascist community lent additional legitimacy to its own issues, but also strengthened the demand for amnesty for the so-called western resistance fighters of Czechoslovakia.

NATALI STEGMANN holds a PhD in East European History and a habilitation from the University of Tübingen. Since 2009 she has held the position of an academic researcher as the chair for South East and East European History at the University of Regensburg. Her research interests include the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of east central Europe, gender history, war experiences, social policy and the culture of late socialist societies.

96. Leonid Brezhnev, "The Brezhnev Doctrine," in Gale Stokes, ed., *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York, 1991), 132–34; Mark Kramer, "The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine" in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest, 2010), 299–307.