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At the End of the End of History: Czech Historiography and the Ukrainian-Russian War

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Historiography has been defined by war essentially since its beginnings. As far back as Thucydides, war has traditionally been ascribed a major history-making role by historians, and classical historiography had war as one of its central points of interest until the twentieth century. However, the pluralization of historiography that began with the period of prolonged peace of arms in Europe after World War II led to the retreat of classical military history, which consisted in analyzing specific war operations. The proclaimed end of history after 1990 seemed to almost completely erase war as a relevant object of historical analysis. The various strands of historical research, even in the post-communist part of Europe, have focused on different topics in political, cultural or social history, but when local historiography has investigated the periods of modern military conflicts, it has mainly focused on the political history of national resistance or the history of occupation, where the war as such constitutes general context rather than the object of historical analysis.[1] It is only in the last decade that Czech historical research has seen a surge of interest in the history of both World War I and World War II, spurred in particular by their respective round anniversaries and the relatively generous government spending intended to commemorate them.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 destroyed any remaining certainties of the post–1989 order. War has once again returned to the European stage as a fundamental history-making moment. Although the current Russia-Ukraine conflict is of course not the only war to have occurred on the old continent since 1990, its impact on Europe and on the much wider global security makes it an absolutely central landmark which is already structuring our thinking into "before" and "after" categories. As Adam Tooze notes, the Russian incursion into Ukraine raises the fundamental question of whether we are witnessing "the end of the end of history," that is, whether the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war is taking us back to the times of political and social turmoil we witnessed during the twentieth century.[2] He argues that this question can only be answered on the basis of the war's ultimate outcome, which consists of a plethora of possibilities ranging from a devastating global nuclear conflict to the overwhelming defeat of Russia, the collapse of Putinism, and, in essence, the confirmation of Francis Fukuyama's now seemingly outdated thesis of the global superiority of liberal democracy.

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1 For an overview of Czech history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after 1989, see, for example, Michal Kopeček, Pavel Kolář: A Difficult Quest for New Paradigms: Czech Historiography after 1989, in: Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi et al. (eds.): Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe, Budapest 2007, pp. 173–248; Dana Musilová, Jana Machačová, Jiří Matějček: Die Sozialgeschichte der Böhmischen Länder 1918–1948 in der Fachliteratur aus den Jahren 1990–2007: Ein Forschungsüberblick, in: Prager Wirtschafts- und Sozialhistorische Mitteilungen 8 (2008), pp. 223–243.

2 Adam Tooze: War at the End of History: Will Putin's Invasion of Ukraine Lead to a New World Order, or an Era of Grinding Compromise?, in: The New Statesman from 2022-04-06, https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/04/war-at-the-end-of-history (2022-10-11).

In the Czech context, however, the Russo-Ukrainian war has contributed to what could be described, with slight exaggeration, as a continuation of the "end of the end of historiography." For the roots of this contribution, it is necessary to look not to February 2022 but to the spring of 2020. The first impact of the Covid pandemic resulted in an upheaval of everyday life with similarities to the upheaval the ongoing war is causing on the level of international relations. The rapid spread of a contagious virus before the discovery of an effective vaccine resulted in the complete upending of all everyday certainties. There was hardly a week when the unthinkable did not become real. The state's enormous encroachment on the personal freedoms of citizens in the form of curfews and association bans, the implementation of previously unimaginable social surveillance and control, the closing of schools, and the suppression of virtually all aspects of everyday life plunged (not only) Czech society into a state in which all previous landmarks ceased to apply. In the context of the loss of even basic orientation in current events, the rediscovery of history's role as a significant aid in explaining the present gained ground. As many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities at first lacked the analytical apparatus for the situation, the public and media increasingly turned their attention to historical scholarship as a field capable of providing at least basic orientation in an unexpected and all-encompassing crisis.

While before 2020 the presence of historians in the Czech public space was almost exclusively linked to the commemoration of specific historical events, during the pandemic, their statements had a much more obvious function related to the present. In particular, the parallels offered with the Spanish flu epidemic at the turn of World War I and during the first years of interwar Czechoslovakia, as well as some of the findings from smaller epidemics which occurred after 1945, served as one of the few points of support for explaining the immediate present. Some books on the Spanish flu were swiftly translated or republished,[3] and historians of medicine were frequent guests on high-profile discussion programs and the authors of numerous commentaries in the press.

The year 2020 and the Covid pandemic in the Czech Republic thus began to bring specific historical knowledge into the public space as being relevant to orientation in the present. February 2022 further strengthened this trend. The shock of the Russian invasion involved the loss of all previous certainties from the international arena, a loss that was similar to that caused by the 2020 pandemic in everyday domestic life. Even more so than in 2020, in 2022 the ability of other, usually more contemporary-oriented disciplines to explain a completely new and unexpected situation is limited, and public attention is once again focused on historiography as a field that can help to navigate the new situation. At the same time, Czech historiography in the field of Ukrainian and

3 The Czech translation of Harald Salffelner's original German work *Die Spanische Grippe* received the most attention. HARALD SALFELLNER: Die Spanische Grippe: Eine Geschichte der Pandemie, Haselbach 2018; Czech version: Španělská chřipka: Příběh pandemie z roku 1918, Praha 2021.

Eastern European history in general can offer the results of a long tradition of original research with its roots back in the interwar period.

The most recent comprehensive history of Ukraine was published in 2015, so at the time of the Russian invasion, it was a relatively up-to-date synthetic summary that could be republished without major changes.[4] Similarly, university and non-university departments long devoted to Russian history suddenly find themselves in the midst of hitherto unsuspected public interest in the results of their work. The Czech research on Russian and Soviet history has been traditionally marked out by distance and distrust, only rarely compartmentalizing Russian space as a single unit of analysis. Instead, the influences of Russian and Soviet imperialism on the center of Europe received wide attention, which made it easy to cast Ukraine as just one more victim of Moscow's traditional disrespect for the basic norms of international law and to place the current invasion into a longer frame of the Russian tradition of violent expansionism.

Although the Czech Republic stood rather on the periphery during the migration crisis of 2015, and the history of migration was therefore not accorded a great deal of importance, in 2022 it has become one of the largest recipients of war refugees in proportion to its population size, far ahead of the countries of Western Europe. Hence, the hitherto rather confined research on the history of refugees in the twentieth century in Central Europe, historically not only the source of refugee waves but also their recipient, has become highly socially relevant. In particular, the experience of the refugee waves connected with the two World Wars has been updated, pointing to both the tradition of a culture of help and helpfulness, and the roots of ethnic xenophobia.[5] The so-called Czechoslovak "Russian relief action" (Československá pomocná akce) has also received special media attention. The targeted program launched by the Czechoslovak government in 1921 provided protection and the opportunity to continue working or studying to several thousands of mainly university students and intellectual and technical Russian elites fleeing the Bolshevik revolution, and is well documented in Czech historiography. This moment in interwar history has also entered abundantly into the public debate on the current treatment of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian war refugees.[6]

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4 JAN RYCHLÍK, BOHDAN ZYLINSKYJ, PAUL R. MAGOCSI: Dějiny Ukrajiny [History of Ukraine], Praha 2015, 2022.

5 See, for example, MICHAL FRANKL: Refugees and Citizens: New Nation States as Places of Asylum, 1914–1941. Introduction, in: S:I.M.O.N.—Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation 5 (2018), 2, pp. 72–77.

6 See, for example, HANUŠ NYKL (ed.): Instituce a osobnosti ruské meziválečné emigrace v Československu [Institutions and Personalities of the Russian Interwar Emigration in Czechoslovakia], Praha 2021; PETR HLAVÁČEK, MICHAJLO FESENKO: Rusové v Praze: Ruští intelektuálové v meziválečném Československu [Russians in Prague: Russian Intellectuals in Interwar Czechoslovakia], Praha 2017; VÁCLAV VEBER (ed.): Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945 [Russia and the Ukrainian Emigration into the ČSR in the Years 1918–1945], vol. I–IV, Praha 1993–1996.

However, classical military, diplomatic and economic history have made an even more significant comeback. The specific style of warfare and the locations of military operations invite analysis predominantly through comparisons with the operations of World War II. The massive and unprecedented economic sanctions swiftly imposed on the Russian economy by the Western world in turn open the door for all sorts of excursions into the economic history of the two World Wars. The overwhelming mobilization behind the lines and the rapid silencing of an already decimated critical public in Russia in turn provide a fertile ground for finding parallels with the cultural history of modern war mobilization. The international context of the war, in turn, forms an opportunity, particularly for Cold War historians, who anchor the parallel between Western aid to Ukraine and the Soviet-Afghan conflict quite firmly in the Czech public sphere. The unprecedented violence unleashed by the Russian occupation forces on the Ukrainian population has also become the subject of analysis for historians of both World Wars.

Czech historiography could, as in the case of the history of the Eastern European area, draw on its own results as well as on a number of translations of some key works of recent foreign research. Although Czech historical scholarship connected to the two World Wars became more widely known in connection with the official and often generous commemorations in 2014 (World War I), 2015 (World War II) and 2018 (the formation of Czechoslovakia, the Munich crisis and the Prague Spring), the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict has provided these works and their authors with another opportunity to influence public discourse, which, however, is newly focused not on explaining the past, but the present.

This new relevance of Czech historiography triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war also largely overshadows the most significant historiographical controversy that has hitherto affected the broader public sphere: the dispute over the nature of the socialist dictatorship. The need to explain the ongoing international crisis has exposed the limited relevance of debates about the degree of social control and repression of the socialist regime and the possibilities and limits of the concept of totalitarianism in Czech historiography, all of which constituted the focal point of public perception of historiography before 2020.[7] These debates, still largely reflecting the social situation of the first decade after 1990, turn out to have little to offer for those seeking to understand the current crises.

Although a number of historical parallels and attempts to illuminate contemporary developments by updating historical knowledge are of course problematic and critically debated even among domestic historians, the number of similar historical excursions into the public space has brought a noticeable increase

7 For more recent contributions to this debate, see, for example, PAVEL KOLÁŘ, MICHAL PULLMANN: Co byla normalizace? Studie o pozdním socialismu [What Was Normalization? Studies on Late Socialism], Praha 2016; LADISLAV KUDRNA (ed.): Co byla normalizace: Fakta a lži o komunismu [What Was Normalization: Facts and Lies about Communism], Praha 2022.

in the presence of historically based arguments in the public debate. Hand in hand with the increased presence of such arguments, then, goes a redirection of attention within historiography itself. Thus, in recent months, a number of research institutions in the Czech Republic have stretched their financial resources towards both material assistance to Ukrainian scholars fleeing the war and to support for certain projects on the history and culture of the Eastern European region. The research institutes traditionally devoted exclusively to this area, which were rather on the margins before the war, continue to receive increased attention, and demand for the results of their work is growing. Similarly, the influx of Ukrainian colleagues displaced by the war is bound to further strengthen the research agenda related to the history and culture of Ukraine itself. However, the opposite seems to be case concerning the scholarship on Russia. The current rupture in all possible contacts with Russia, including archival research and scholarly contacts, can in the mid-term lead to the subsiding of the relevant research.

Consequently, we can expect in the future a greater inclination towards the history of international relations and classical military history, which in recent years have been pushed almost to the periphery of both historical research and university education. To what extent this shift within Czech historiography will continue to be accompanied by an increased interest in its results will be largely influenced by the course of the current war as well as the nature of other ruptures that we will encounter in the coming years. Both the Covid crisis and the current international crisis have shown that if, as Adam Tooze has also said, we are indeed in the phase of a "reboot of history," historiography may be a more socially relevant discipline than it might have seemed even in 2019.

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