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SUBMISSION OF THE COMMUNIST ARMY TO THE NEW DEMOCRATIC REGIME IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Prokop TOMEK (Czech Republic)

Abstract

At the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Czechoslovak peoples Army was one of the main pillars of communist power in Czechoslovakia. It was a relatively heavily equipped army of two hundred thousand servicemen. It could easily pacify any civil resistance in the country. The opposition had no supporters in the army's officer corps. Indeed, the army command was preparing itself even for the possibility of an active defence of the Communist Party regime. In the key moment the army capitulated without firing a shot. The lesson of 1989 may also provide answers to the general question of the optimal transitional way of the army of an originally authoritarian regime in time of a democratic change.

Keywords: Communist régime, transition, totalitarian army, opposition.

Czechoslovakia in 1989 may be a good example of the transition of the army of a totalitarian communist state to the new conditions of democracy. At the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Czechoslovak peoples Army was apparently one of the main pillars of communist power in Czechoslovakia. It was a relatively heavily equipped army of two hundred thousand servicemen. It could easily pacify any civil resistance in the country.

The opposition had no supporters in the army's officer corps. Indeed, the army command was preparing itself even for the possibility of an active defence of the Communist Party regime. In the key moment the army capitulated without firing a shot. What was the reality in the army? What did the soldiers expect from the new order? How politically active was the army commanding corps really? How did the revolutionary power of the Civic Forum led by Václav Havel pacify this unknown and inscrutable force? The lesson of 1989 may also provide answers to the general question of the optimal transitional way of the army of an originally authoritarian regime in time of a democratic change.

The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic maintained the third largest ground army of the Warsaw Pact in 1989. There were two hundreds of thousands men in arms at peace. This represented about 1.3% of the total state population. After Greece and Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia was thus the third most militarized state in the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Alliance in terms of population.⁽¹⁾

After the crushing of the well known reform attempt in 1968, the Communist government systematically disciplined and vetted the army. The army was considered as the important pillar of the communist power. By its nature, it was a closed complex. Therefore, no one from the opposition had any ties to the army.

The involuntary inactivity of the czechoslovak army during the Warsaw Pact military intervention in August 1968 was a great strike to the morale of the army. The army was then a similarly mentally and morally hollowed-out entity as other parts of the state and society.⁽²⁾

The official image presented by the communist propaganda was, of course, very positive. The soldiers were to be highly conscious defenders of the socialist homeland and the international community of Warsaw Pact states.

A far more factual view is provided by the long-term observations of NATO military attaches operating in Czechoslovakia. In 1982, a British defence aide wrote: „Discipline appears lax by Western Army standards and not, I. suspect, just for egalitarian reasons. Troops shamle rather than march, officers and soldiers exchange salutes casually and apologetically and officers and soldiers smoke in uniforms in public, the later on sentry duty at that. Uniforms (possibly the scuffiest in the Warsaw Pact) are frequently crumpled and shoes unpolished and down at heel. Many older officers need harcourts. The Czechsolovak Peoples Army officers and soldiers do not present a martial apperance, at least in the areas of garrison towns and villages.”⁽³⁾

1. Prokop Tomek, *Československá armáda v čase Sametové revoluce. Proměny ozbrojených sil na přelomu osmdesátých a devadesátých let.* (Svět křidel, Cheb 2019), 10–16.

2. Prokop Tomek, Decline of Moral and Discipline in the Czechoslovak People's Army as a Sign of a Discrepancy between the Ideal of the socialist Soldier and Reality in the last Two Decades of socialis tCzechoslovakia. In: *Przegląd Historyczno-Wojskowy*, no 4 (2022), 216–243.

3. The National Archives London, FCO, 28/5459, Annual report for 1982 by the Defence and Air Attaches, Prague, 17

The armed forces were draining more financial and human resources than the country could afford. This overstretch, by the way, has contributed handsomely to accelerating the overall crisis of the state system in the long term.⁽⁴⁾ The army did not know how to manage its finances. Paradoxically, the lives of basic service soldiers were permanently underfunded. The poor working and living conditions of overstretched professional soldiers also caused indifference and resistance to service. The internal crisis was dampened mainly by fear of the consequences. The army balks at an organization based on rigid discipline. Obedience was enforced by severe sanctions. It should also be stressed that the command staff had no idea of possible change.

The army officers did not welcome a so-called Velvet Revolution at the end of 1989. Official attitudes can be described as extremely conservative. There was a fear from radical change. During the week after 17th November, when a peaceful student demonstration was brutally suppressed, the Minister of National Defence, army general Milan Václavík, organised an assembly of the top commanders. At this meeting, the commanders approved a pre-prepared statement in favor of the existing regime and political leadership. Minister actively activated the army system for potential intervention against the demonstrators: lists of selected soldiers were updated, equipment was checked, orders were given for use. This was real power support. But when the Minister Václavík reported on the army's readiness at a key meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee, no one responded to his proposals to defend socialism. The political leadership of the state was completely paralyzed. The Minister did not even find support in the circle of senior commanders. That was the end of the army initiative.⁽⁵⁾

The ranks and rifles and also partly the warrant officers and the young officers, had a much greater understanding for profound social change. The conscripts and former university graduates played in the army a similar important role in the movement as the striking university graduates in the cities. Through strict isolation, information leaked into the military bases. The ranks and rifles expressed their support for social change through petitions and letters. This grassroots movement showed that the army as a whole was not united. So the army would probably not have been able to take a repressive action against the opposition.

During the transitional period of the Velvet Revolution, some officers spoke out in support of the Minister Václavík and the ending regime. However, none of them openly supported a violent solution. Officers at military units and military schools intimidated the ranks and rifles. They predicted bad changes in the army. Above all, they threatened that an incompetent, literally, civilian in a sweater would become a new minister. Václav

February 1983, p. 6, part: Discipline.

4. Prokop Tomek, Snahy o snížení vojenských výdajů v Československu koncem osmdesátých let. *Historie a vojenství* no. 4 (2020), 4-29.

5. Prokop Tomek, Akce ZÁSAH. Československá lidová armáda v listopadu 1989. *Historie a vojenství*, no. 4 (2015), 77-91.

Havel was the epitome of evil for them. Soon they had to accept the fact that Havel, as president, had formally become commander-in-chief of the army.⁽⁶⁾

In one of the few contemporary historical assessments of the army's behaviour in November 1989, Czech historian Jiří Suk wrote that it was a combination of determination and waiting. He respectfully assessed the professional ability of the army to intervene if necessary. However, in the growing social situation and international political developments, the army's action would only temporarily postpone an irreversible social movement and would irreversibly distance the army from society.⁽⁷⁾ The possibility of using the army to resolve the political situation in November 1989 theoretically existed. However, the application of the procedures prepared in the conditions of the Communist Party's control of society encountered a real situation, influenced by a number of foreign and domestic political factors. However, there was undoubtedly above-average political and organisational activity in the command section of the army in order to maintain the existing order. There is no evidence that conscripted soldiers initially welcomed the possibility of fundamental changes in the army and society. Rather, they probably feared them as something unknown and risky. The independent civilian opposition was a completely unfamiliar world for them.

The situation developed very quickly. During the ten days of protests, the opposition managed to organise a general strike in the whole country. The majority of the population supported the opposition by going on strike. The army outwardly "capitulated". Sixteen days after the start of protests, the Minister Vaclavik had to resign. However, he was replaced by his deputy, General Miroslav Vacek. This long time communist general met with Václav Havel. In return for the promise of the army's neutrality in political events, Havel and the Civic Forum supported General Vacek.

The army was not a key problem compared to the civilian security apparatus. The Czechoslovak Army passed into a completely new stage of state development seemingly intact. It was essentially run by the original command and the organisational structure of the army remained unchanged.

In the early months of the year 1990, Vacek succeeded in eliminating the efforts of other political forces to have an influence in the army. However, he was a dilettante in relation to the new political world outside the army. Minister Vacek believed that the new political power would let him continue to run the army as before. For example Relations with the Soviet army on Czechoslovak territory were still just as friendly. Communist generals left the army with all the benefits attainable. Vacek renamed the communist Main Political Administration and its politruks as the Administration of Education and Culture.

6. Ibid.

7. Jiří SUK, Zlom mezi „totalitou“ a „demokracií“. Československý rok 1989 v alternativách. *Soudobé dějiny*, no. 4 (2009), 577–582.

Vacek hoped to preserve the existing structure, scope, and social benefits in exchange for external adjustments.

However, Vacek did not take into account the changes of the time. First and foremost, the weakening, disintegration and dissolution of the Warsaw Pact was underway, followed by the rapid withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia.⁽⁸⁾ Successful international negotiations were underway to reduce conventional forces in Europe, with the inevitable reduction of troops and military equipment. He did not take into account the end of the Cold War and the new political orientation of the state. It was unimaginable to Vacek and his generation that the military would be completely different from what they knew it to be.

When Vacek helped to cross the critical gap, he became the target of increasingly strong criticism of the society and new and active parliament. Substantial changes in the military were slow or nonexistent in the 1990 year. Vacek was replaced in his position after ten months by a civilian and dissident, Luboš Dobrovský.

A total of 2 202 professional soldiers (950 officers and 1 252 warrant officers) did not sign the new oath to the Czech and Slovak democratic state. The army thus lost 2.22% of its military professionals.⁽⁹⁾ Some did not sign because they really genuinely disagreed with the political changes. Other soldiers apparently took the opportunity to simply leave the army. The officers were afraid of the fundamental changes in the army and society. Soldiers feared an unknown and risky future. The independent civilian opposition represented a completely unknown world.

Conclusion

The possibility of using the army to violently resolve the political crisis in November 1989 theoretically existed. However, the application of old procedures prepared originally in the conditions of a firmly controlled society could not be used in a different situation. In the growing social crisis in the state and in the rapid international political developments, the violent intervention against the Velvet Revolution would only temporarily postpone the inevitable social movement. But violence would have dangerously distanced the army from nation.

After twenty years of stagnation, the army leadership was not prepared for the possibility of widespread social change. Commanders could only imagine a limited illegal opposition that would not be difficult to crush and silence. The army was also dependent on political assignments. When a political decision did not come, the army had to remain passive.

8. Svetozár Nadovič and Hartmut Foertsch and Imre Karácsony and Zdislaw Ostrowski, *The Great Withdrawal*. (Ministry of Defence of The Slovak Republic, 2005).

9. Prokop Tomek, *Československá armáda v čase Sametové revoluce. Proměny ozbrojených sil na přelomu osmdesátých a devadesátých let*, (Svět křídel Cheb, 2019), 136.

If we compare the situation in Czechoslovakia with other Warsaw Pact countries, all armies more or less copied a similar development.⁽¹⁰⁾ The exception was the German Democratic Republic, where the National People's Army merged with the Bundeswehr during the autumn of 1990.⁽¹¹⁾

The reason for the army's passivity at the end of 1989 in Czechoslovakia can be seen first and foremost in a breakdown of the Communists Party leadership. We can only estimate what would have happened if the communist leadership had ordered a higher level of alert with the involvement of the army. The neutral position of Moscow also had a considerable impact on the army's behaviour. Another factor was undoubtedly the ongoing political disintegration of the systems of the other Warsaw Pact countries.⁽¹²⁾

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