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EYES ON THE WEST! THE TRANSFORMATION IN THE CZECHOSLOVAK MILITARY'S FOREIGN ORIENTATION IN 1989-1992

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Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive presentation of the results of the author's years of research on the transformation of the military's foreign orientation in the period shortly before and after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. During the period under discussion, Czechoslovakia was beginning to step away from its military, diplomatic and mental ties to the USSR and turn more to the West. This change did not manifest only in bilateral relations with Western countries and NATO, but also in the country's approach to the disarmament process and participation in Western operations. Czechoslovakia was active in all these aspects. What contribution did the Czechoslovak military make? How difficult was it for the top ranks to accept the new political reality? In the early 1990s the international scene was one of cooperation accompanied by the collapse of the Warsaw Agreement. Czechoslovakia and other post-Communist countries were naturally looking for a new safe harbor in which to find security, a highly complicated process that involved the Czechoslovak military as well. At first it seemed that the future lay in continuing and expanding on the Helsinki process. In the end, however, the best option proved to be drawing nearer to NATO. The Czechoslovak military and its officers whose careers began before the Velvet Revolution had no choice but to take part in working with NATO.

Keywords: Cold War; transformation; Czechoslovak military; NATO; Warsaw Pact; disarmament;

Introduction

In recent years I have focused my research on the foreign policy context of the transformation in the Czechoslovak/Czech military after 1989. I have a book being published on the subject in Czech in the near future with the same title as this paper: *Eyes on the West!*⁽¹⁾ At this point I would like to give a brief summary, interpreting and putting into context the results of my years of research, which I have published and presented at conferences in parts over the years.⁽²⁾ In other words, this paper represents a synthesis of my previous research.

The key question I asked was as follows: What did the country's new orientation toward the West mean for the Czechoslovak military? I found that the return to the countries of Europe with democratic governments, which included Czechoslovakia between the two world wars, was not an uncomplicated process, and that this made itself felt on several levels. Unsurprisingly, the most fundamental was the geopolitical change, and that is where I would like to start. Changes also occurred on a practical level in the form of sending soldiers on foreign deployment, as well as on an institutional level, a subjective personal level, and, no less importantly, an ideological level.

Geopolitical change – new contacts and relationships

The few years between 1989 and 1992 brought dramatic changes to Europe and to Czechoslovakia. This applied especially for the Czechoslovak People's Army (CSLA) as a whole. The first shock came with the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which meant a certain geopolitical shift. Gorbachev was not a politician who sought out conflict; in fact, he aimed to avoid war. This meant re-opening negotiations with the West on a number of treaties on disarmament or arms control, which ultimately became a source of long-term stability after a wave of political changes in Central and Eastern Europe. The Helsinki Process, in which Czechoslovakia took active part prior to the Velvet Revolution, also contributed to this stability.⁽³⁾

1. Petr Janoušek, *Na Západ hledí: Proměna zahraničního směřování československé armády 1989–1992*. The book has been accepted for publication at a publishing house in the Czech Republic. It is scheduled for release in 2025. The plan is to also find a publisher in English.

2. Petr Janoušek, *Od Gorbačova ke „Gorbymu“*. Správa zahraničních vztahů Generálního štábu ČSLA/ČSA v letech 1989–1992. " *Historie a vojenství* 70, no. 2 (2021): 50–69; Petr Janoušek, "Fear as a Basis for Military Propaganda in Czechoslovakia at the End of the Cold War," in *PfP Consortium Euro-Atlantic Conflict Studies Working Group 22nd Annual Conference. Shaping nations for conflict and war. Propaganda, disinformation and strategic communication. Implications for policy-makers* (Sibiu, Romania, 22.–26. 5. 2023); Petr Janoušek, "ČSLA/ČSA a západní země 1989–1992," in *Ozbrojené síly a československý stát III*, ed. Stanislav Polnar, Tomáš Řepa, et al., (Univerzita obrany: Brno, 2022), 209–217; Petr Janoušek, "Československá armáda a NATO v letech 1989–1992," *Historie a vojenství* 72, no. 1 (2023): 4–27; Petr Janoušek, "Chemici s Havlem proti agresorovi. K vojenským i politickým aspektům působení Československého samostatného protichemického praporu v Perském zálivu v letech 1990–1991," *Historie a vojenství* 67, no. 2 (2018): 4–21.

3. On this topic comp. Daniel C. Thomas, *Helsinský efekt: mezinárodní zásady, lidská práva a zánik komunismu*, (Praha: Academia, 2007).

However, not even Gorbachev could rid the Eastern bloc of its deep-rooted fear of the West, which continued to be one of its key characteristics and remained the basis for contemporary propaganda aimed at military and security issues. Even Gorbachev's reforms and political steps could not change that reality. He did not recognize and thus could not change the basic cause of the insecurity in the Eastern bloc, which consisted of faith in their own ideologically modified reality.

Despite these limitations, Gorbachev introduced major change in a number of areas. The Czechoslovak military attempted to respond to Moscow's new direction with an active, though still cautious, focus on building new relationships with Western militaries. They made the most progress in the relationship with the neutral Austria, although Communist Czechoslovakia still considered it an enemy in a potential conflict with the West.⁽⁴⁾ Czechoslovak military representatives also took active steps before the Velvet Revolution with regard to the military of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Bundeswehr. After the political climate changed the Bundeswehr was the Czechoslovak military's main partner until 1992, primarily due to their shared border. Over time this position was taken over by the armed forces of the United States of America. The shift in focus towards the West also made itself felt in the conversations Czechoslovak representatives held with their counterparts. Talks with the Bundeswehr covered the concept of internal leadership, in which the Czechoslovak military was looking for a recipe for democratizing their armed forces.⁽⁵⁾

Relations with NATO structures represented an important chapter in Czechoslovakia's re-orientation to the West. Prior to 1989 such relations were non-existent, of course, if we disregard one single visit from a delegation of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. The relationship started growing after the Velvet Revolution. Under the new conditions Czechoslovakia had the freedom to develop its own security policies independently of the dictates of Moscow. Contacts at the highest political level proved to be critical for changing the country's relationship with NATO – in relation to President Václav Havel, Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier, or later Defense Minister Luboš Dobrovský. Those contacts represented a true breakthrough. After this phase relationships could begin to grow at lower bureaucratic levels between the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defense, or the General Staff, and NATO headquarters. Staff conversations between Czechoslovak military representatives and NATO representatives became an important next step.

During his numerous visits to other countries, President Havel attempted to demonstrate the new political direction. Under Havel's leadership, Czechoslovakia first made efforts to work with NATO and later, after the Warsaw Pact ended, made

4. Central Military Archive – Military History Archive (VÚA–VHA), collection MNO/KM 1988, carton 7, Ref. No. 051002, Předložení podkladových materiálů k cestě do Rakouska, 9. 4. 1988, on ref. no. 06030/14–19, Informační materiál pro cestu ministra národní obrany ČSSR do Rakouské republiky, 2.2. Charakteristika vojenské politiky.

5. On this topic comp. Martin Rink, *Die Bundeswehr 1950/55-1989*, (Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015), 86–90.

somewhat timid overtures to integrate into NATO, although these did not meet with much enthusiasm with NATO member states or with the organization as a whole. Václav Havel was the main instigator behind Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic) drawing closer to NATO.⁽⁶⁾

As a whole, the Czechoslovak military (the Administration of Foreign Relations at the General Staff and other parts thereof) did not take an active role in developing relations with NATO; instead, it tended to accept instructions coming from higher up in the Ministry or from the government. However, it did do its job. At the same time, military members themselves (with exceptions at the General Staff) did not particularly register what was happening or that it was a change of historic proportions. That only changed once Western partners began taking regular part in joint exercises under the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which commenced in early 1994. Fear of NATO, rooted in unfamiliarity within the military (and society), began to disperse after the Velvet Revolution. NATO became more and more associated in the 1990s with hopes for a safe and lasting defensive position of the country. President Havel, Defense Minister Dobrovský, and other military representatives were dependent on how NATO viewed contact with Czechoslovakia and other post-Communist countries in the region. Gradually and relatively slowly, NATO looked for new solutions for the security architecture in Europe.⁽⁷⁾

At summits from London to Rome, statements were made indicating that NATO did not wish to give up its role of strongly protecting its member states. Over the next several years, it became clear that the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) and later OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) could not replace NATO, but only supplement it. The new security structure in Europe could not survive without NATO. While NATO was looking for new reasons for its existence, until the end of 1992 it was not willing to consider accepting new members, instead keeping its distance from the new democracies in Europe. It only gradually began to reassess its position under pressure from Czechoslovakia and the other two Central European countries. As an aside, based on my study of the documents of Czechoslovak origin so far I am of the opinion that no formal or informal promise ever came from the West to Moscow stating that no enlargement of NATO would take place. The activity on the part of the post-Communist countries played a key role in the NATO enlargement. In the end President Havel's role in leading Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic toward NATO was absolutely critical. NATO ultimately took on a broader role in guaranteeing

6. On this topic comp. Michael Žantovský, *Havel, (Praha: Argo, 2014)*.

7. NATO Archives Online/www.nato.int/archives, Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council ("The London Declaration"). 05 Jul. 1990–06 Jul. 1990. Last updated: 12 Jul. 2010 10:40, [accessed 18 November 2022], https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23693.htm.

security in Europe than originally intended. Its engagement in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia reflected that broader role.

Between the Velvet Revolution and the end of 1992, no single word quite captured the relationship between Czechoslovakia and NATO. It was no longer an enemy or opponent, yet it was not yet a true partner – some of its member states were only just beginning to become that. NATO became a partner for the successor state, the Czech Republic, and its soldiers through the Partnership for Peace program in 1994.

Practical steps – deploying soldiers and dissolving the Warsaw Pact

In the period I studied, the Czechoslovak military was focusing on finding a new identity (myth) and freely examining its own past. The participation of Czechoslovak and later Czech soldiers in operations abroad gradually took on a key role – along with a renewed interest in the Czechoslovak legions from WWI and those fighting on the Western front in WWII. The soldiers engaging in foreign operations in the 1990s were from the younger generation, gradually re-assessing their relationship to the past and building their careers in the new, free conditions. One example is General Petr Pavel, former Chief of the General Staff and Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, now President of the Czech Republic. These soldiers accepted working with their counterparts in NATO militaries and taking part in NATO operations as a matter of course and may not have even been aware how much they were supporting the Czech Republic in building relations with NATO.

The Czechoslovak soldiers' participation in the international coalition to liberate Kuwait and the first peacekeeping operations, especially UNPROFOR, highlighted the country's growing affiliation with the West. Czechoslovak soldiers got their work done in the Gulf and in the Balkans despite certain systemic hiccups due to the transformation period.

The Czechoslovak anti-chemical unit's engagement in the Gulf stands as one of the most striking proofs of how the newly democratic state was coming into its own on the international scene. President Havel and the country's diplomatic corps were setting the country's pro-Western policies including defending freedom around the world. In that sense, for Czechoslovak top politicians Saddam Hussein represented an evil that had to be confronted. The anti-chemical unit, especially its top command, did all it could in the Persian Gulf to meet those political expectations.⁽⁸⁾ Obstructions from the General Staff proved difficult for the unit during their preparations and once in the field. Although unintentional and caused through incompetence, poorly conceived systems, chaos, and ongoing outdated thinking within the military as a whole, they made it more difficult for the unit to become a dignified representative of the country's new direction.

8. Collection at the Military History Institute in Prague, Varia (VHÚ), Informační tok mezi Čs. jednotkou dislokovanou v KSA a velením ČSA v ČSFR, undated.

The Czechoslovak unit was meant to represent the new state and its pro-Western stance on the international scene, and so the political representation did its best to move away from connections to its old allies. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia was completed by the end of June 1991, and the Warsaw Pact was officially dissolved as of July 1, 1991 in Prague. (The military structures had already been dissolved before that time.) As it happened, President Havel signed the protocol dissolving the Warsaw Pact with a pen borrowed from Minister Dienstbier, which the minister had brought from a meeting at Alliance headquarters in Brussels. The English version said: NATO.⁽⁹⁾

The Czechoslovak unit also contributed to the army's transformation and pro-Western stance in the UNPROFOR mission. Partly as a result of the work done by Czechoslovak anti-chemical specialists and other troops on international missions, over the coming years the path began to open up for the Czech Republic to join NATO, which it did in 1999. Perhaps the most visible evidence of the new direction and cooperation in foreign missions was the rescue of French troops on the UNPROFOR mission, led by then-Major Petr Pavel.⁽¹⁰⁾

The institutional level – Foreign Relations Administration of the General Staff

On an institutional level I focused on the Foreign Relations Administration of the General Staff. The Administration was formed at the beginning of 1989 and ended its operations in 1992 when the Ministry of Defense took over its responsibilities. This brought to an end the founding era of soldiers engaging in international diplomacy and introduced civilian experts to the scene. The end of the Foreign Relations Administration of the General Staff thus also represents the end of an era: military out, diplomats in. In looking for a suitable structure in my research I decided to use the Foreign Relations Administration, its purview, and the influences acting on it. I also focused on selected representatives within the Administration, exploring their internal world and coexistence with the new political framework headed up by Václav Havel. Notably, during the Velvet Revolution itself in November 1989 the Administration (like the rest of the army) remained in a sort of hibernation, waiting to see what the changes would bring. In the end the change cut so deep that removing pictures of Communist President Gustáv Husák and replacing them with the newly elected dissident Václav Havel was not enough.

For that reason I also wished to explore how Havel's political ideas bore out in the actions of the Administration and deploying the first troops to foreign operations. I found that Havel's influence was absolutely fundamental and the army took it on step by step. The Administration loyally changed its approach, and members stayed in line with the post-Communist political representation, talking about how times had changed

9. Jiří Dienstbier, *Od snění k realitě: vzpomínky z let 1989–1999*, (Praha: NLN, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1999), 210.

10. Vladimír Mertlík, *V první linii: armádní generál Petr Pavel*, (Praha: Academia, 2019), 118, 119, 124–130.

and how it would be necessary to find a new security position, as well as (for instance) how a reunification of Germany would bring stability to the continent.

Subjective, personal level – the story of Jiří Diviš

My research also extended to individual experiences within the transformation period. The person I followed most closely in this regard was Jiří Diviš from the Foreign Relations Administration of the General Staff – a military man with exceptional abilities (language and otherwise) for his time.⁽¹¹⁾ On the one hand, this was a person who served for decades in the army of a totalitarian state and remained with the army even after 1968; on the other hand, after the Velvet Revolution Diviš was able to continue working and took part in drawing closer to the West as commissioned chief of the Foreign Relations Administration. A pragmatic man, Diviš suffered from no internal dilemma and simply performed the tasks he was assigned. He was also able to comprehend the exact nature of the changes in the security organization of Europe, which he demonstrated in staff talks with NATO representatives.

Many soldiers saw themselves primarily as specialists and did not feel like ordinary cogs in the machine of the totalitarian army. They set themselves apart from politruks and accepted membership in the Czechoslovak Communist Party as a simple fact. They had no moral problem with it as such. This attitude allowed them to redeem themselves to a certain extent before the Velvet Revolution, as well as to continue in the military afterwards without a hitch. At its core the totalitarian regime taught its rank and file to excuse their own behavior, claiming that they had no other choice if they wanted to work in their industry, in this case the military. Soldiers often simply and bureaucratically followed orders. Historians often distinguish between voluntary and involuntary collaboration.⁽¹²⁾ In my research I studied the results of the work of those who did not see and could not imagine any other option than being part of the system. These soldiers later felt the change for themselves as the military went from a closed to a more open institution after the Velvet Revolution. All of a sudden they had to do press conferences. Additionally, after a closed phase (autarky) in its history, all of Czechoslovakia was opening up.

I structured my research to incorporate the personal (and by definition subjective) viewpoint of soldiers (especially Jiří Diviš) into the bigger story of history. This highlighted how different segments of society can see the same key events in a vastly different

11. In my research on Jiří Diviš I drew on documents held at the Security Services Archive in Prague: the archival collections of the Intelligence Department of the General Headquarters of the Czechoslovak Army (ZS GŠ) and Military Counterintelligence Headquarters of the National Security Corps – III. Headquarters. I also conducted a number of oral history interviews with Jiří Diviš. Comp. e.g. the Security Services Archive (ABS), Osobní svazek operativního orgána, Základní (osobní) karta typu – adresy (krycí adresa)/ ZS GŠ (Diviš Jiří), undated.

12. Anne Applebaum, "History Will Judge the Complicit," *The Atlantic*. 2020, [accessed 29 October 2021], <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/07/trumps-collaborators/612250/>.

way. For Czechoslovak soldiers serving in the CSLA before the Velvet Revolution, in a certain sense Gorbachev was a bigger paradigm shift than the Velvet Revolution itself. For them, the political changes after November 1989 did not represent a time of openness, joy and new opportunities, but a period of uncertainty. Even the fact that many in the top leadership of the CSLA maintained that the pre-1989 army was a great army represented a basic difference in perceiving the same thing. Luboš Dobrovský and the post-Communist political representatives naturally held the opposite opinion, considering the army a bloated and ineffective tool of totalitarianism. It was like two worlds colliding.

In my research I proceeded based on the idea that an individual does not act entirely on their own, but as part of a group with certain encoded elements. This was not only due to their affiliation with the army (a hierarchical organization operating in a totalitarian regime), but also a certain generational dimension. The often highly conformist and pragmatic engagement in the army of a totalitarian state shaped each member of the generation born in the 1930s and 1940s similarly, or perhaps drew people with similar value systems to the army.

Theoretical and ideological level – three phenomena

As for the theoretical and ideological aspect, I attempted to reconcile three basic historical phenomena influencing the given period: totalitarian ideology, revolution and nationalism (or, more precisely, the transformation in collective identification). While these are three diverse phenomena with different meanings, they all overlapped and transformed during the time period under study.

As I indicated above, the totalitarian ideology inoculated the Czechoslovak army with fear of the West and of NATO. The Velvet Revolution represented a time of significant uncertainty for the entire army, when soldiers (regardless of rank) did not know how to orient themselves in a quickly changing situation. The younger generation of military members in particular found a certain outlet in clinging to feelings of patriotism (national sentiment) and the military as a profession (professionalism). Most soldiers displayed a range of feelings toward their country: patriotism, nationalism, and jingoism. Only a few of the “defeated” felt so ideologically connected with the pre-1989 army that they refused to serve in the new era. Of course, many also did not pass security checks.

The old structures (mainly from the older generations) lived in a bipolar world and for many of them the process of lowering tension was understandable if it took place on a bipolar level. However, this group began to splinter when it became clear that the Helsinki process based on bipolarity had run its course and things were beginning to head toward gradual integration of (now) the Czech Republic and the other Central European states into NATO. This was also a generational clash, as the old structures saw the USA primarily as a hegemon and mainly saw its power (economic and military

position) and the new generation in diplomacy and eventually the army also saw the values in American policies – even the fact that American security policy included efforts to reflect on the many mistakes made in the past.⁽¹³⁾

Conclusion

The clash between Havel's post-revolution political representation and the Czechoslovak People's Army highlights a different way of thinking or different values, even though the two camps were able to unite at least partially after the Velvet Revolution and work together to orient Czechoslovakia toward the West – as far as possible away from Moscow. Unlike Havel's way of seeing things, however, they often viewed the Velvet Revolution as simply a result of Gorbachev's policies, not as a singular event bringing a chapter in history to a close – a sort of "happy ending" for history.

For some members of the army or the public, overcoming the deeply ingrained stereotypes was no easy matter. President Václav Havel was well aware of the need for a new value foundation for the armed forces, as he talked about how there was no equivalence between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. While the first organization was a tool for the USSR to enforce its will, the second represented a defense of the shared values of freedom and democracy. Many soldiers serving in the pre-1989 CSLA were not aware of that, however, and therefore would not have hesitated to go to battle against democratic states with the flimsy justification that "they would defend this country against anybody."

Fear of NATO, the armed forces of its member states, and the West in general began to dissipate in Czechoslovakia only after the Velvet Revolution. (The same could certainly be said of other post-Communist countries as well.) At the same time, NATO as the main Western security organization became more and more associated with hopes for a safe and lasting defensive position of the country in the democratic world. The now-independent Czech Republic in fact joined NATO in 1999.

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Author's short CV

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Dr. Janoušek studied history at the Charles University in Prague. He also spent one semester of his studies at the George Washington University and one semester at the RWTH Aachen University (Erasmus Programme).

He is currently a researcher with the Military History Institute in Prague, Czech Republic. He has been focusing long-term on researching international relations in the 20th century, especially from German, U.S. and French point of view, but in the last years his interest is directed mostly on modern military history with a particular focus on Czechoslovak/Czech Army operations and missions abroad.

Dr. Janoušek is part of the department that has been tasked with monitoring the Czechoslovak and Czech Army foreign operations and missions since 1989 and tracking the transformation of the army as well as the country's national security policy as a whole.

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