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Sites of Memory in Czechoslovak Silesia 1945–1948

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Abstract

The paper aims to describe and analyze the changes in public sites of memory in the multi-ethnic border region of Czechoslovak Silesia during the period of restoration of Czechoslovak sovereignty, between the fall of Nazism in May 1945 and the communist putsch in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. This research focuses on transformations and (dis)continuity of cults and symbols during that period, and on specifics and differences within the examined region with regard to ethnic and social structure of local population. Research is based primarily on the recorded agendas of state and district administrations, but preserved memorials and photographs or descriptions of vanished sites of memory also serve as important sources.

After the expulsion of German population, the western part of the region was repopulated by settlers from various regions of East-Central Europe. Most of local German sites of memory vanished, with the partial exception of religious symbols and a few "apolitical" memorials. New monuments and memorials were dedicated mainly to personalities of Czech history in an effort to inculcate the "official" identity amongst the new-settlers.

In the Ostrava coal basin, the new regime invoked the pre-war tradition of working-class identity and showed tolerance towards the sites of memory of the local Polish minority, except memorials related to the former Czech-Polish border conflicts. In the Hlučín region specifically, a strong pro-German narrative survived despite the "Czechization" efforts of state authorities.

In general, the state-supported memory policy aimed to create the narrative of a "Slavic" and "socialist" Silesia, suppress the German past of the region, and weaken frictions between Czechs and Poles.

Keywords

Sites of Memory; Silesia; Ostrava; Communism; War Remembrance; Memory Policy

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Introduction

On March 19, 1945, Soviet troops crossed the pre-war border of the Czech Lands near the provincial Silesian town of Osoblaha (Hotznenplotz in German) for the first time (Binar 2020). After three days of heavy fighting, Osoblaha was in Soviet hands, giving it the reputation of being the first "liberated" Czech municipality (see Jakl 2004, Kolář 2021, Ossadnik 2015, Švábenický et. al. 2017). However, the myth of "liberation" was quite debatable, as the vast majority of local population was German.[1] Built-up areas of the town also suffered heavy damage, leading to an almost complete reconstruction after the war.

The events in Osoblaha foreshadowed the horrors that were to come in the weeks ahead. In late April and early May 1945, the Red Army broke through German defensive positions between the cities of Opava (Troppau) and Ostrava (Ostrau), some 60 kilometers east of Osoblaha. They strategically took the industrial agglomeration of Ostrava and marched southwards to Northern Moravia. The three weeks of military operations were some of the most challenging battles taking place on Czech territory, causing enormous damage to civilian buildings and infrastructure. In some towns and villages, over 90% of the houses suffered some level of harm (Bajgar 2015, 6-9, Notes of Adolf Vašek, 1946, SÚ 1112, Silesian Institute Collection, Silesian Museum, Opava CZ). Agriculture and forestry were tragically affected by the amount of ammunition left in the countryside by fighting armies. Detonation of abandoned bombs and grenades led to grievous accidents even many years after the war.[2]

Nevertheless, the disaster of spring 1945 was also seen as an opportunity for a "new beginning." The fall of Nazism was accompanied by euphoria among the Czech and Slovak populations. The rhetoric of administrative bodies and political parties stressed the need to build up a strong "Slavic" and "socially just" society, "purged" of the social and ethnic tensions of the interwar period. In practice, this mainly meant the expulsion of the German minority from Czechoslovakia and the nationalization of key industries (Kocích 1967, 325-328; Kolář et al. 2016, 6-11; Mařádek 1947, 12-15). In following years, Czechoslovak Silesia underwent a complex transformation that led to vast demographic and economic changes as it dealt with the damage caused by the war (Hlavienka & Kolář 2022, 13–26; Janák et al. 2021, 43-49).

1 The German minority in pre-war territory of Czechoslovakia numbered over 3 million.

2 The last lethal incident occurred in Ostrava in 2002, when a construction worker was killed by an explosion of a WWII bomb.

The "Czechization" of the multi-ethnic border region was accompanied by the "reconstruction" of public spaces. Many monuments and memorials vanished or were left unmaintained, while new sites of memory appeared that sought to demonstrate the "new and better" identity of the region and the nation as whole. Names of streets, squares and even municipalities also needed to be "purified."

While the demographic, economic and social aspects of the post-war "reconstruction" have been described elsewhere (Kocích 1967; Jirásek & Krempl 2015; Janák, Hlavienka & Kolář 2021, 17-22), aspects of memory and identity have often been neglected (Musálková 2018, 250-255; Šrajerová 2015, 136-140). This study aims to document and analyze the changes in public sites of memory during the period between restoration of Czechoslovak sovereignty in the region in May 1945 and the communist putsch in the country in February 1948. The research focuses on the modification of cults and symbols during the period, as well as the changing "topography of memory" in the newly re-settled territories. Another purpose of the article is the analysis of specific regional differences within the examined region with regard to the ethnic and social structures of the local populations. Broader aspects of the post-war identity-making processes are described in several passages, as is necessary for understanding the context.

Research is based primarily on the recorded agendas of state and district administrations, as well as newspapers. However, preserved memorials and photographs or descriptions of vanished sites of memory serve as important sources on their own.

For the purposes of this paper, a site of memory is not just as a monument, memorial or sculpture commemorating certain person or event; it is seen as an object or place accessible to the public that plays a role in constituting a collective identity and memory, either national or regional. This category includes gravestones, buildings, and names of streets or other institutions.

The Situation in Czechoslovak Silesia

To fully understand the changes that took place in practices of memory, it is necessary to briefly depict the conditions in the region during the period in question.

Historically, Silesia had belonged to the Czech Lands since the Middle Ages. In 1742, the territory was divided between the Czech Kingdom, which was part of the Habsburg monarchy, and Prussia. Prior to the Great War, the area was inhabited by Czechs, Germans, Poles and Jews, many of whom were multilingual and anational (Karch 2018, 59-70; Kladiwa 2015, 22-24).

Territorial conflicts after 1918 led to the rise of ethnic nationalism, which was accompanied by violent border clashes, and subsequently to the division of Silesia between Czechoslovakia, Germany and Poland (Długajczyk 2005; Kolářová & Kolář 2022; Wilson 2010).

Complicated development led to creation of specific regional identities competing with "classic" nationalism. In this viewpoint, Silesia could be compared to Tyrol, Istria, Burgenland and other border territories, which became subjects of territorial disputes following the Great War (Cole & Wolf 1999; Wyss 2023). Similarly to the downfall of "traditional" empires following the Great War, parallels could be seen with escalation of violence in border territories after disintegration of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in 1990s (Agier 2017; Brambilla & Jones 2020; Wilson 2010). The previous experience of ethnic violence during interwar and wartime period fundamentally prefigured the development in Silesia after 1945.

Soon after the World War II, the territory of Czechoslovak Silesia, together with the surrounding Moravian district, was put under the administrative control of newly created Provincial National Committee, Branch Ostrava (*Zemský národní výbor, expozitura Ostrava*, ZNVEO).[3] Members or supporters of the Communist Party were predominant amongst the ZNVEO officials, but they were also divided into "centralist" and "local-patriotic" groups. The "centralists," who had closer connections to leading politicians in Prague, took control over the Ostrava city administration. On the other side, "local patriots" managed to keep significant influence within the ZNEVO headquarters. Their fraction was linked to traditional regional cultural and educational associations, and unlike the "centralists," they paid more attention to issues of local identity. Simultaneously, ZNVEO, as a new administrative body, faced opposition from many personalities of pre-war public life, who saw the city of Opava as a traditional center of Czechoslovak Silesia and disagreed with the accumulation of power and institutions in Ostrava (Kocích 1967; Kolář 2020, 23-27; Knapík 2004, 55-60).

The long-lasting differences between the two cities were much deeper. During the interwar period, Opava lost not only its formal position of being the administrative center of Czechoslovak Silesia (in 1928), but was also gradually replaced by Ostrava as the natural traffic, economic and cultural center of Czechoslovak Silesia and North Moravia (Kolář et al. 2018, 6-7). The industrial agglomeration of Ostrava was quite cosmopolitan, while the Czech population of the Opava district maintained a traditional "pre-

3 For the purposes of this paper, the whole territory of ZNVEO is examined, including Moravian regions adjacent to Silesia.

industrial" and Catholic identity. During the Nazi era, the Opava region was incorporated into the so-called Reichsgau Sudetenland, despite the majority of the population being Czech-speaking (Bartoš 2000, 58-60; Pavlíček 2003, 6-12). The wartime experiences of Opavian Czechs therefore differed in many ways from the experiences of Czechs in Ostrava, which lay in the "quasi-autonomous" Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia (Nenička 2010, 340-345).

Two other specific parts of Czechoslovak Silesia were incorporated into the German Provinz Oberschlesien (Province of Upper Silesia) during the war. In multi-ethnic and industrial Těšín (Teschen in German, Cieszyn in Polish) region, the Czech and Polish population faced strong Germanisation, and people were often forced to declare a German nationality (Borák 2010). Inhabitants of the Hlučín (Hultschin) region were mainly Czech-speaking, but came to develop significant pro-German sentiment because the territory belonged to Prussia, and later the German Empire, before the Great War. Men from the Těšín and Hlučín regions served in German armed forces during WWII, although their motivations were often divergent (Emmert 2018, 8-11). In both cases, the renewed Czechoslovak state administration in 1945 considered the possibility of the expulsion of "unreliable" inhabitants of the two specific territories. However, the more conciliatory approach prevailed and much of the population, including thousands of German ex-servicemen, were allowed to stay (Janák et. al. 2021, 92-95).

In the traditionalist and agricultural Hlučín area, "German" identity remained strong after the war (Musálková 2018, 205-209). On the other side, development of the more industrial Těšín region was affected by a vast labor immigration to the Ostrava-Karviná Coal Basin that began shortly after 1945. Aside from Czech miners and workers from inland, Slovaks were the dominant group amongst these newcomers. Immigrants also included Hungarians, Italians and others. State-supported recruitment of labor for heavy industry changed considerably the demographic structure of the Ostrava and Těšín regions. The Polish minority in the Těšín area was regarded as a "problematic" but "tolerated" entity (Janák et. al. 2021, 78-80).

Simultaneously, the West Silesian districts were repopulated by new settlers, who came to replace expelled or forcibly relocated Germans (Spurný 2011, 337-340). Except for the pre-war Czechoslovak citizens, the newcomers included re-emigrants of Czech and Slovak origin from Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, and other countries (Wiedemann 2016, 33-38). The most numerous communities arrived from the Volhynia territory alongside pre-war Polish-Soviet frontier. Many of the "Volhynians" had served in the Czechoslovak Army in exile during the war, and their reputation of distinguished anti-

Nazi combatants guaranteed them a privileged position. However, many of settlers from Volhynia later faced conflicts with the ruling regime due to their widespread anti-communist attitudes, caused by their wartime experiences in the USSR (Hlavienka & Kolář 2022, 94-95).

Demographic changes were accompanied by distinctive changes in the traffic and industrial infrastructure, as well as in town planning and public spaces. Although many changes came spontaneously and chaotically, administrative and cultural institutions attempted to regulate or at least document the changes of public space. In February 1946, the Silesian Research Institute was created. At the same time, the Mining College was moved from the Bohemian provincial town of Příbram to Ostrava. The task of these two research institutions was to provide scientific support for quickly-developing industry. However, the researchers were also supposed to map the remains of traditional "pre-industrial" lifestyle of local Czech and Polish population (Knapík 2004, 20-23, 55-57). The interest in German traditions and identity was limited only to the documentation of German libraries (Kolář 2020, 19-21).

The post-war "transformation" of Czechoslovak Silesia also included "imperial" ambitions. Silesian patriots, including the ZNVEO leadership, dreamed of the annexation of vast territories previously belonging to Germany (Sobotík et al. 1946). Such attempts collided with the territorial claims of the Polish communist government, supported by Moscow. Frictions along the Czechoslovak-Polish border also deepened due to disputes about border delimitation in the Těšín region (Friedl 2012, 21-32). Although relations with Poland started to improve after 1947, the frontier remained strictly guarded. Villages in border areas were forcibly depopulated due to security measures.

These complex ethnic, social and cultural changes in the region were accompanied by an effort to "rebuild" the memory policy of Silesia.

Remembering War

The "mental reconstruction" of symbols and values in post-war Czech society was a complex and long-term process, but the rituals of war remembrance developed quickly and spontaneously. Institutional interventions in the "memory practice" only developed later, from 1946 onwards.

Immediately after the fighting ended, fallen soldiers and civilians needed to be buried. While the German tombs usually lacked any inscriptions, provisional wooden memorials for the Soviet combatants were built by the Red Army or by locals. These first burial places were often located in front of town halls or other public buildings. Unlike the victims of the Great War a generation

ago, the Soviets were only rarely buried in local Catholic cemeteries, partly due to the disapproval of burying Orthodox or Muslim soldiers amongst an overwhelmingly Catholic population, and partly as a symptom of the continuing secularization of war remembrance in European society (Winter 2008, 54-58, 112-117).

The first memorials also appeared around the same time as the tombstones. Initially, abandoned Soviet military vehicles were displayed in public places and used for wreath-laying ceremonies, public speeches, and victory parades (SZM). A tank in front of Ostrava City Hall became the most notorious example. Such provisional monuments were soon replaced by more permanent ones. As early as 1945, a statue of a Red Army soldier was erected in Opava, financed by the district administration (Funding the Red Army Memorial in Opava, 1945, 536, box 244, folder 297, District National Committee in Opava, State District Archive in Opava, Opava CZ). Other municipalities soon followed, mainly in the Czech-populated areas around Opava and Ostrava that were affected by the heavy fighting of April 1945.

Meanwhile, the previously "German" territories in the West of Silesia dealt with complex social and security problems, which left very little room for such commemorative activities. The Czech-speaking but "pro-German" population of Hlučín region showed a distanced approach to the "monumentomania" of the era. Even those Hlučín inhabitants who deserted German forces and later fought against Nazism serving mainly with Czechoslovak troops in Great Britain saw the commemoration of their sacrifice side-lined; meanwhile, both Czechoslovak and Soviet combatants from the USSR who had taken part in liberation of the region were lionized (Brožová 2020, 113-115).

In 1946, the central cemeteries for Soviet soldiers were founded in Opava, Ostrava and Hlučín through the efforts of ZNVEO. In Ostrava, the urns of Czech and Soviet victims were buried together in a mausoleum, built by renowned regional sculptors Konrád Babraj and Karel Vávra, to highlight the "Slavic mutuality" of both nations. The remains of Czechoslovak officer and "tank ace" Stěpan Vajda, killed on Polish territory in April 1945, were transported and buried in the mausoleum. The mentioned memorial in the Opava cemetery deserves special attention due to its inscription, which celebrates the role of the Red Army as a "liberator of Slavic nations." The nationalist rhetoric, neglecting the international character of communist ideology and multi-ethnicity of the Red Army, was typical for Czechoslovak propaganda at the time. The symbolic importance of this aspect also must be understood in the context of post-war "Czechization" of Opava, which had previously been overwhelmingly German-populated (Kolář 2020a, 70-

71). Similarly, the presence of the Soviet cemetery in Hlučín was intended to demonstrate "Slavic" dominance in the formerly German town.

Aside from monuments, street names also served to memorialize the heroes and victims of the war. Already in 1945, one of streets in Ostrava-Vítkovice was renamed after the commander of Soviet "liberating" forces, Andrei I. Jeremenko (Yeryomenko). This not-very-important street might seem too "ordinary" to bear the name of an iconic war hero. It also had no significant wartime history, which would explain its renaming. However, before the war, the street bore the name of Jerome of Prague (Jeroným in Czech), the 15th-century religious reformer. While the street names that were related to German history and traditions were often changed in post-war years, there was no obvious reason for removing Jerome, whose legacy was still relatively well-respected by the Czech population, from this public space.

One of the motives for renaming the street might be related to efforts to weaken the traditional "German" character of the Vítkovice district. (Before 1945, a strong German minority lived in the area, and local architecture was also significantly influenced by the German style.) Even the resemblance between the names Jeroným and Jeremenko may have played some role. Another possible reason lies in the proximity of Jeremenko Street and Ruská ("Russian") street (formerly Hermann Göring street), which was significant due to the symbolism of its "Slavic" name, and because it was one of the access routes used by Soviet and Czechoslovak troops to invade the center of Ostrava in April 1945.

As early as 1945, a street close to Ostrava City Hall was named after Josef Gregor, one of two members of a Czechoslovak tank brigade that had been killed in action during the fighting in the city. His fellow combatant, Ivan Ahepjuk, was honored with a street named after him, but not until 1970. The strikingly disproportionate memorialization of the two victims of same battle can be partly explained by the higher social status of Gregor as a non-commissioned officer and tank commander, compared to Ahepjuk, who was a tank driver. However, the wider political context played significant role due to Ahepjuk's Ruthenian origins. After the Soviet annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia in 1945, Czechoslovak authorities tried to preserve good relations with USSR and to avoid any controversies regarding the Ruthenian question. The commemoration of Ahepjuk could have been interpreted as an expression of Czechoslovak pro-Ruthenian sentiment (Zilynskyj 1995, 66-68).

Together with the fallen combatants of the Red Army, local Czechoslovak and Polish victims were also remembered. This category included resistance fighters, members of the exile army and victims of Nazi political and racial

persecution. While the commemoration of Soviet soldiers was state-supported and based on a shared nationwide euphoria, commemorative practices focusing on local victims had a much more "private" character, tied to regional or communal identity and specifics. In this aspect, these practices resembled the "traditional" methods used after the Great War, but with much more limited sources (Kolář 2020a, 70-73). While after 1918, local communities endeavored to create representative memorials of fallen compatriots, after 1945 such effort was directed primarily at commemorating Soviet soldiers. Monuments of local victims were thus usually simple, often taking the form of marble or metal commemorative plaques. Sometimes the names of the fallen were simply "added" at already existing Great War memorials (Ostravské sochy 2023).

Local communities developed various cults around their martyrs, based on the regional origin, profession, or political affiliation of the person. Educator František Hoza, executed in 1941, was acknowledged posthumously through several sites of memory (plaques and street names) in Opava and Ostrava. Amongst other teachers murdered during the war, Hoza was probably chosen due to his ties to the communist resistance. Similarly, communist activist and teacher Antonín Vaculík gained a reputation as a regional martyr in the Frýdek region. The Association of Boy Scouts memorialized those among their members who were murdered by the Gestapo in Těšín in April 1945. Collectives of workers, railwaymen or policemen commemorated their own martyrs with ceremonies (Testimonies about Liberation, 1955, III V 1147, Modern History Collections, Silesian Museum, Opava CZ).

Meanwhile, dead German soldiers and civilians were supposed to be forgotten. Many of them were buried in unmarked graves at local cemeteries or even in the countryside, close to the places of their deaths. In case of Ostrava, the police commander refused all attempts to create any register of German bodies (Svoboda 2017).[4] In villages in the Opava and Hlučín districts that were strongly damaged by military actions, the overburdened authorities needed to bury the Germans as soon as possible, primarily for hygienic purposes. Creating lists of bodies was not a priority.

However, in several municipalities of the Hlučín region, locals spontaneously started to take interest in German graves (Brožová 2020, 112-114). Inhabitants shared the wartime experience of German citizens, and many

4 Historians and journalists often refer to the statement of police commander Vladimír Sedlář, "bodies will be simply removed," in connection to murders of German civilians in the Hanke internment camp in May - June 1945. However, the statement had actually originally referred to corpses of Germans killed during combat operations.

people in the area had friends and relatives who had served in German troops and were killed in action or interned as prisoners of war. Therefore, some level of sympathy for German soldiers existed in the region. In the Hlučín area, very few memorials were erected to commemorate locals who died in the exile army, as their service in the Allied forces was seen as controversial by the "pro-German" part of population. Most Hlučín soldiers fought on the Western Front, so local authorities, who were predominantly communist, were not interested in honoring their memory either (Neminář 2018, 93-95).

A unique case was documented in the Western Silesian district capital of Jeseník (Freiwaldau), where local administration proposed naming a city park after Josef Mašín, a military officer executed in 1942. Mašín was highly respected as an icon of anti-Nazi resistance in Bohemia, but had no connection to Silesia. Moreover, he was known for anti-communist attitudes, and his widow was active in Czechoslovak National-Socialist Party in the first years following the war. The impulse for naming the park probably came from Mašín's brother-in-law, who served as a security officer and city counsellor in the Jeseník district (Němeček 1998, 200-212). After the communist putsch in 1948, the idea was abandoned.

Renaming the town of Jeseník itself after Czechoslovak wartime military commander (and future President) Ludvík Svoboda was even considered. The proposal had a special symbolism, as it intended to celebrate the war hero while also having a figurative dimension, as the word "Svoboda" means "Liberty" in Czech (Kolář 2022, 25).

The Polish minority in the Těšín region did not develop any significant commemorative subculture. Czech and Polish war victims were usually listed together in alphabetic order on local memorials. Memorials for mass executions of Polish workers and intelligentsia from the first months of Nazi occupation, however, were often only given inscriptions in Polish. The most significant symbol of anti-Nazi resistance appeared in the village of Životice, where 36 men were murdered in 1944 as revenge for a partisan attack against Gestapo crewmembers. Places where the victims were shot were marked by simple wooden crosses soon after the war. In 1949, a more presentable memorial was erected (Borák 1999, 126-136).

Similarly to the Hlučín case, Těšín had to deal with problem of locals killed in German military, who were supposed not to be commemorated publicly. Such people could be memorialized only through inscriptions on the "private" gravestones of their families, usually without any information about the circumstances of their deaths.

National Traditions

In territories that had a Czech majority prior to the war, many symbols of Czech or Czechoslovak history and traditions were removed from public spaces during Nazi era. In Ostrava and the surrounding areas, which belonged to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Nazi authorities showed more tolerance for "apolitical" symbols, such as street names or sculptures commemorating Czech medieval rulers or 19th-century writers, poets and composers. Such symbols were not seen as possible threats by the regime. The Nazis also supported the cult of Saint Wenceslas, the 10th-century Czech prince, who was described in a simplified way as a supporter of Czech-German friendship (Šebek 2010, 437-440).

On the other hand, in territories incorporated directly into the Reich, such as the Hlučín, Těšín and Opava districts, all Czech or Polish statues and street names were supposed to vanish. Only the Great War memorials in Czech villages surrounding Opava were spared; monuments and symbols of interwar Czechoslovakia, however, had to be disposed of (Kolář 2017, 59-60).

After the war, many of previously forbidden local names and monuments were simply restored to Czech-speaking areas. Conversely, in formerly German-inhabited territories of Western Silesia, the "mainstream" Czech identity had to be imported – not only to demonstrate the Czech "victory" and the appurtenance of the borderland to Czechoslovakia, but also to strengthen the "Czech" identity of new settlers, many of whom in fact had only superficial knowledge of Czech history and traditions. Many newcomers from Eastern Slovakia, Carpathian Ruthenia or Hungary were illiterate or poorly educated, and therefore the symbols in public space played an important role in demonstrating the "official" identity of the nation (Janák et al. 2021, 46-49).

While traditionally Czech-speaking areas could build local identities based on regional specifics and the cults of regional personalities, the "iconography" of the Western Silesian borderland had to be related using "universal" or "central" symbols. Two main types could be observed among these cults. The first one was based on the commemoration of the Hussite movement, which was a 15th-century religious initiative. In the Czech nationalist narrative dating back to late 19th century, the religious aspect of the movement was sidelined, and the Hussite uprising was primarily seen as a social and ethnic struggle of Czechs against "German" Catholic oppressors. Despite its ahistoricity, the narrative was later adopted in communist propaganda. Hussite military victories in battles against "German" enemies (many of whom were in fact Czech-speaking Catholic landlords) became one of keystones of tradition and identity in the Czechoslovak army (Randák 2015, 275-282).

Military personalities became enormously popular, overshadowing the importance of Hussite religious leaders in the post-1945 interpretation. This can be illustrated by the aforementioned case of Jerome of Prague, a follower of Huss, whose name disappeared from public spaces in Ostrava.

Many streets and squares were named after the blinded, but never defeated, Hussite field commander Jan Žižka. In some cases, the cult of Žižka served to "undermine" the traditional symbolism of a significant place. For example, in the Western Silesian town of Bruntál (Freudenthal), a square surrounding a Catholic church was named after Žižka, clearly in order to challenge the religious affiliation of the location. Before 1945, Bruntál belonged to the centers of the Teutonic Order in Czechoslovakia, and therefore the "German" and "Catholic" tradition of the town might have been seen as undesirable by Czechoslovak authorities.

The second group of symbols was associated with the era of Czech "national rebirth" in the 19th century, and included mainly the cults of intellectuals and artists, such as female writer Božena Němcová, historian František Palacký, and composers Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. Such uncontroversial figures had gained popularity among the Czech population long before the war. Following 1945, these symbols were simply imported to the borderland.

On the other hand, the names of Czech nationalist politicians of Habsburg and interwar era were much less popular, because the new Czechoslovak regime saw the pre-war period as controversial, and the original interwar concept of a multi-ethnic state relying on diplomatic alliance with Western powers was deemed a failure (Lukeš 2014, 16-22). The "new" Czechoslovakia was expected to be a quasi-socialist and Slavic state. Therefore, although monuments of the first Czechoslovak President T. G. Masaryk, destroyed during Nazi rule, were often renewed, and contemporary President E. Beneš was celebrated, most of the pre-1938 cults of other important personalities were weakened or vanished entirely (Blažejová 2017, 100-102). This trend can be illustrated by the case of a square in front of Ostrava City Hall, which before the war bore name of former social-democratic mayor of the city and member of Parliament Jan Prokeš. In 1945, authorities decided not to follow the tradition and to rename the place after J. V. Stalin. Similarly, reminders of other popular interwar public figures disappeared, including agrarian politician Antonín Švehla, who was quite popular amongst Czech farmers in Opava region prior to 1938.

Institutionalized commemoration of Polish national traditions in public space by the Polish-speaking population of Těšín was not allowed and probably even not intended by Polish corporations in the area. The Těšín Poles

aimed their effort primarily at "monumentizing" regional personalities and traditions. Some of pre-war sites of memory seemed to be controversial for both the Czechoslovak and the Polish (proto)communist regimes, such as the memorial plaque of Polish political and military leader Józef Piłsudski in Jablunkov, which was originally erected in 1934 and not renewed after 1945 (Kolář 2018, 65-68).

(Dis)continuity of Regional Symbols

The above-mentioned case of Jan Prokeš exemplifies the issue of the transformation of regional symbols. In German-inhabited areas, very little of traditional sites of memory remained. Some of toponymic terms "survived" in unofficial forms and were used as informal local names, such as the so-called "Brown House" in Opava, which was the former NSDAP headquarters (the name refers to color of Nazi uniforms).[5] Other colloquial expressions referred to previous owners or inhabitants of certain buildings, such as department store "Breda" in Opava, still informally named for its founder (Šopák 1998, 9-14.) Due to such unofficial monikers, certain places became sites of "unspoken" and "unwanted" memory, reminders of the "German" history of the region.

Partial continuity in the regional identity of previously German-populated areas was, mostly unintentionally, reflected in the new Czech names of towns and villages. Before the war, official Czech names of municipalities in Western Silesia were often based on simplified transcriptions of German names, such as Frývaldov (German: Freiwaldau), Vidnava (German: Weidenau) or Krutvald (German: Krautenwalde). After 1945, such Germanisms became highly undesirable. Searches for new names were accompanied by media campaigns and sometimes competitions that were organized to find the "best" name for a certain municipality. The attempt to name a town after war hero Ludvík Svoboda has already been mentioned. However, such "ideological" proposals were usually refused, and most municipalities got new Czech names, either based on translations of their original German names, or inspired by the specifics of local landscape, such as Travná (*Tráva* = grass), Břidličná (*Břidlice* = Slate) or Žulová (*Žula* = Granite) (Kolář 2022, 25). Ironically, such new local names inadvertently referenced the traditional lifestyle and professions of the original German population.

5 Such cases were common in many other places in the borderland. Probably the most notorious was the case of police building in Western Bohemian district capital Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad), which was commonly nicknamed "Gestapo" until the demolition of the house in 2020.

Conversely, regions with pre-war Czech and Polish population usually attempted to restore some traditions that were disrupted during Nazi period. In the Ostrava industrial agglomeration, local working-class identity easily merged with (proto)communist narratives. Official propaganda also successfully utilized the local tradition of anti-Catholicism (Jemelka 2014). The surrounding territories of Hlučín, Opava and Bílovec (Wagstadt) districts were characterized by a much stronger traditional rural and religious identity. In the 1946 elections, the local population demonstrated a distant approach to communist ideology and a lasting sympathy for the Catholic and nationalist parties. Coincidentally, this traditionalist territory was also the one most affected by the combat operations of 1945. As a result, many stone crosses and other small religious memorials were erected during the first post-war years to celebrate victory.

Simultaneously, locals quickly returned to pre-war commemorative practices. Many memorials removed by Nazis were spontaneously returned to public spaces, such as the statue of teacher and nationalist activist Vincenc Prasek in Milostovice near Opava. Local identity was continually constructed using the heritage of regional public figures of the 19th and 20th centuries, which consisted mainly of patriotic intellectuals, priests and artists. Such personalities were commemorated by monuments, memorial plaques and street names.

Thanks to continuity of regional Czech identity, Opava became a unique case within the Czechoslovak borderland. While in vast majority of towns and cities formerly inhabited by a majority of Germans, the "Czechization" of public space was based primarily on universal, nationwide symbols, Opava was able to utilize older regional Czech traditions in creating its new "purified" identity.

While in the Ostrava agglomeration and in formerly German areas of Western Silesia, the fall of Nazism was usually seen as a beginning of "new and better" reality, in the conservative agricultural territories surrounding Opava, many people just hoped for the return of the *status quo ante bellum*, and the reformist euphoria was much weaker. Local-patriotic "Silesian" identity often collided with pan-nationalism and pan-Slavism, enforced by state authorities (Jirásek & Knapík 2010, 423-427).

Soon after the war, Opava-based exponents of pre-war Czech public life attempted to renew a "Monument of Resistance of the Silesian People" at a hill called Ostrá hůrka, which lay approximately half-way between Opava and Ostrava. During the Habsburg era, Ostrá hůrka had already been among the ranks of places significant to Czech nationalist manifestations. In September 1918, Czech demonstrators at Ostrá hůrka demanded independence

from Austria. In 1929, a formal monument was erected there, which was demolished by Nazis in 1938. In 1945, a committee was formed to restore the monument, but it lacked both financial and institutional support. For the (predominantly communist) ZNVEO officials, the sculpture symbolized the pre-war "bourgeois" regime, and its renewal was seen as controversial. After the communist putsch in 1948, the committee was dissolved (Committee for Erection and Maintenance of Memorial at Ostrá hůrka, 758, box 1, State District Archive in Opava, Opava CZ).

Religious sites of memory, such as pilgrimage churches and chapels, kept their traditional significance, although the numbers of pilgrims naturally decreased after the expulsion of Germans from the Western Silesian localities. In many parishes, local clergymen stayed after the expulsion, and their presence helped maintain sacred buildings and monuments (Kolář 2022, 26-27). However, some abandoned churches in remote or depopulated localities decayed, or were plundered by new settlers or thieves.

In particular cases, the significance of religious sites of memory gained a new meaning connected to war remembrance. The most notorious was the case of Catholic pilgrimage church in Hrabyně in Opava region. Already before the war, the place was extremely popular amongst Czech population, not only due to the tradition of pilgrimage, but also due to the fame of local 19th Century patriotic priest Jan Böhm. In April 1945, the church, as well as the whole village, were severely damaged by fighting armies. Post-war reconstruction was presented as a symbolical rebirth of Czechoslovak Silesia (Kolář et al. 2016, 6-10). Similarly, Saint Urban Chapel, lying between villages of Služovice and Kobeřice in Hlučín district, was reconstructed as an unofficial war memorial, with artillery cartridges used as construction material.

In Těšín, the Polish minority endeavored to restore the cults of Polish patriotic intellectuals and artists. The 19th-century journalist and publisher Paweł Stalmach had traditionally been among the ranks of the most popular personalities. Some of Polish Great War memorials destroyed by Nazis were renewed, but due to unresolved mutual Czech-Polish territorial claims, Czechoslovak authorities kept a more distanced approach towards any manifestations of Polish identity in public space. Nevertheless, Polish commemorative activities were not generally actively suppressed (Friedl 2012, 274-277).

On the other hand, a policy of zero tolerance was applied to the Silesian autonomist movement, which was used to oppose ethnic nationalism in the Těšín region during the interwar period. After 1945, the memory of Silesian autonomism was simplistically re-interpreted as a pro-German initiative

and therefore refused. This approach was caused partly due to wartime Nazi attempts to misuse the narrative of "Silesian-ness" for propaganda purposes, but partly in an effort to avoid any questioning of the "Slavic" identity of the region (Karch 2018, 263-272).

The Cult of Petr Bezruč

Amongst the symbols of Czech patriotic traditions in Silesia, the cult of poet Petr Bezruč was unique in many ways. Bezruč, born as Vladimír Vašek in 1867 in Opava to a family of Czech nationalist activists, had already become a living symbol in the 1890s due to the enormous success of his collection of poems *Silesian Songs*, which combined nationalist and socialist, anti-imperial, anti-German, and anti-Polish rhetoric. Despite continual disputes about his authorship, Bezruč belonged to the nationwide canon of respected authors until his death in 1958. His reputation crossed the borders of Silesia and Bezruč as he became one of most frequently translated Czech authors. Ironically, the poet himself avoided public attention and spent most of his life as a modest post official in the Moravian city of Brno. After his retirement, he lived in North Moravia and visited Silesia only occasionally.

The lack of knowledge about Bezruč's real personality enabled repeated (and often conflicting) modifications and interpretations of his cult. During the interwar period, his nationalism and his defiance against the Habsburg monarchy were stressed. After 1945, the narrative combined his anti-Germanism with his interest in social issues. Meanwhile, his opposition against Polish patriotic and nationalist activities in Těšín were purposefully neglected, as well as his "bourgeois" family background. Bezruč was interpreted as a "Slavic socialist" and was incorporated into the rhetoric of "mutuality of Slavic socialist [i.e., communist] nations" (Kolář 2022, 24; Rektorisová 1947, 12-17). The ageing poet himself, as usual, did not comment on the attempts to reinterpret his work. Later, after his death, anti-Soviet papers had to be quietly discarded from his written inheritance (Šopák 2016, 126).

While prior to WWII the cult of Bezruč was very strong in eastern part of Czechoslovak Silesia and amongst Czech population of Opava district, after 1945 it was "imported" to previously German territories in the west. The society-wide obsession with Bezruč was intensified thanks to the author's 80th birthday in 1947. Hundreds of streets bore his name, not only in Silesia, but also in many cities and towns of newly-settled border regions, including Northern and Western Bohemia. In Western Silesia, the name of Bezruč served as a new moniker for "abandoned" monuments and memorials, tied to "German" memory of the region. For example, in Krnov (Jägerndorf), a

monument that had been dedicated to Austrian writer Peter Rosseger in 1910 was renamed after Bezruč in 1948.

There were many other cases of Bezruč's name being used to rename localities that evoked the "German" past of border territories. For example, hotels and spa facilities in Jeseník bore the name of Bezruč himself and of the characters of his poems. His verse "*Kdo na moje místo, kdo zvedne můj štít?*" (*"Who will replace me, who will bear my shield?"*) often appeared on war memorials.

German Sites of Memory

The overwhelming majority of Czechoslovak society of the early post-war period agreed on the need to "root out" German memory and traditions across the whole republic. Mainly monuments and memorials of the Great War in German towns and villages were targeted during this "purification" effort. Some of them were adapted and newly dedicated to the Red Army or to Czech victims of Nazism. For example, in Liptaň in the Krnov district, a former Great War memorial was moved from the churchyard to the village center and dedicated to Czechoslovak gendarmes and customs guard officers who were murdered during pro-Nazi uprising in the region in 1938.

Many monuments also completely vanished. In district capital of Jeseník, a local memorial by renowned sculptor Engelbert Kaps was thrown into the river. In other cases, Czechoslovak settlers disfigured sculptures, usually by symbolic removal of their heads. Details of particular incidents are often unknown, and some monuments might have also been vandalized by the Red Army before the Czechoslovak newcomers arrived (Kolář 2018, 60-62, Tinzová 2018, 14-19).

In the same vein, German tombstones were demolished in many cemeteries. Sometimes newcomers reused the stones as construction material. A unique case was documented in Vidnava in the Jeseník district, where German inscriptions were removed from all tombstones but the gravestones were preserved. Such an approach was more common in the "redeemed" Polish territories in Silesia. After the era of spontaneous "purification" of cemeteries, during Autumn of 1945, ZNVEO issued instructions for municipalities how to deal with "German" gravestones. The tombstones were supposed to be preserved, but all inscriptions evoking Nazism had to be removed. The order named some examples of unacceptable inscriptions, including any form of information about membership in the NSDAP or SS, or the formulation "*fallen for Führer and Fatherland*" (Removal of Problematic Inscriptions from Cemeteries, 955, box 2, folder 39, Municipal National Committee in Česká Ves, State District Archive in Jeseník, Jeseník CZ).

In the following decades, many "surviving" tombstones were also re-used by Czech settlers after removal of their original German inscriptions.

In the case of the Těšín region, German communities lived mainly in industrial and commercial localities before 1945. Due to multi-ethnicity of the territory, mixed Czech-German or Polish-German families were more common than in Western Silesia. Moreover, anational Silesians, who supported the pre-war autonomist movement, tended to use German in written communication (Gawrecki 2017, 123-136). Therefore, many tombstones with German inscriptions existed in the area. Following the war, many people decided to remove German texts from their family graves. Such act can be seen as part of a process of "rewriting" personal and family memory.

In the Hlučín region, it was probably local inhabitants themselves who destroyed or removed some "German" sites of memory during the final weeks of the war to avoid any allegations of pro-German sentiment. However, a lack of written sources also makes it impossible to verify this hypothesis. Some (real or alleged) "German" symbols might have also been annihilated by Soviet soldiers.

Czech and Slovak settlers in Western Silesia showed some level of tolerance towards religious sites and memorials. Despite the ongoing secularization of Czechoslovak society and the anti-clerical rhetoric of both the socialist and nationalist political parties, many newcomers from the rural areas of Moravia and Slovakia were Roman Catholics. The Catholic faith was also quite strong amongst the Roma population. In some cases, settlers removed German inscriptions from statues, crosses and chapels, but the monuments were spared. Many of the sites decayed during the following decades due a lack of maintenance during the communist rule (Kolář 2022, 26-27, Lucuk 2016, 54-66).

In general, the accessibility of the "German" monuments played an important role. In sparsely populated peripheral areas, the "social need" for removal of German sites of memory was weaker, and the "Czechization" of public space was not enforced by authorities. However, such remote localities usually suffered decay due to a lack of maintenance (Macháček 2019).

Military authorities played an important role in "re-shaping" public space. During the first post-war months, soldiers often spontaneously took part in the "purifying" effort in Western Silesia by removing or vandalizing German monuments, sometimes even using them as practice targets. (Such behavior was even more widespread amongst Polish troops in neighboring border regions.) From summer 1945 onwards, security alongside the Polish frontier was strengthened. The Czechoslovak army also forcibly depopulated some of

villages alongside the border, leading to the destruction of local memorials and cemeteries. Later, in 1950, the military decided to demolish many deserted buildings that were left uninhabited after the expulsion of Germans. Aside from safety justifications, the destruction was also politically motivated, and was done to avoid complaints from displaced German associations about the Czechoslovak administration's neglect of the borderland (Spurný 2011, 203-208).

Some symbols in public spaces originally related to German identity were preserved, but lost their original meaning. As a demonstrative example, the case of Rochowansky Fountain in Opava deserves to be mentioned. This fountain with a female sculptural figure, created by Jewish-German sculptor Marie Margarete Melzer, was erected in 1930s to honor a former mayor of the city (Šopák 2016a, 28). Due to the origin of the author, the statue was draped during Nazi era. After 1945, the fountain remained on the spot as a "nameless" site, and the original dedication to Rochowansky was forgotten. No attempts were made to rename it. Due to location of statue on a square named after Petr Bezruč, it was sometimes believed amongst local population that the female statue depicted Maryčka Magdonova, a female character in a famous poem by Bezruč. The original symbolism of the site was completely forgotten soon after the war.

Regional authorities occasionally showed some tolerance towards sculptures and busts of German artists or scientists, who were understood as "apolitical" personalities. For example, in Vidnava, a bust of physician Adolf Lorenz was preserved in his native home (Matela 2020). The legacies of other personalities were politicized in a simplified way. In the case of gymnastics educator Friedrich Jahn, who was seen as a predecessor of Nazi gymnastics movement, his memorials had to disappear (Kessler 2014, 82-89).

The debate about dealing with "German" past of Silesia was closely tied to the issue of how to reconstruct the built-up areas that were damaged by combat operations. Decisions about reconstruction or destruction of particular buildings were often influenced by their political and ethnic connotations. A typical case was that of the so-called "German House" in Ostrava, which had served as a meeting place for German political, economic, and cultural associations since the Habsburg era. Although the structure suffered only minor damage during the war, it was already symbolically demolished by May 1945. German prisoners were forced to took part in wrecking of the building (Testimonies about Liberation, 1955, III V 1147, Modern History Collections, Silesian Museum, Opava CZ).

Various approaches could be witnessed in cases of three towns and cities that probably suffered the worst damage during the last months of the war. In Opava, the destruction of 1945 was presented as an opportunity to modernize the city as a complex. Therefore, some of early modern burgher houses that had survived the bombing of the city were demolished in order to enable extensive redevelopment of the area (Šopák 2017, 47–52). Construction of new residential houses in the city center continued until the 1960s. The rebuilding of Opava was accompanied by a propagandic narrative of a "new beginning".

Conversely, the smaller town of Fulnek, with its predominantly German population, was originally intended to disappear. The extent of the wartime destruction, and the provincial character of the town, led to doubts about whether investments in reconstruction would be effective. ZNVEO officials even considered the possibility of using the town ruins as a form of "open air war memorial." Nevertheless, Fulnek was attractive for new settlers due to the tradition of its local textile industry and its proximity to the ethnically Czech regions from which the newcomers were arriving. Thus, in 1947, the local administration decided to restore the historical town centre to its pre-war form (Testimonies about Liberation, 1955, III V 1147, Modern History Collections, Silesian Museum, Opava CZ).

Similarly to Fulnek, Osoblaha was originally viewed with very little interest. Without systematic urban planning, new settlers started to rebuild (or demolish) houses on their own. While Fulnek's citizens managed to secure support for complex reconstruction efforts, Osoblaha continually dealt with indifference from both district and state authorities, which led to the almost complete disappearance of pre-war buildings from its town center.

Conclusion

In many ways, research on Czechoslovak Silesian sites of memory is determined by lack of, or fragmentation of, written sources. The circumstances surrounding the erection or removal of some memorials remain unknown, especially in the western part of the region, where administrative bodies were slow to be established during the first post-war months. Even in the Ostrava coal basin and the Těšín region, where there was partial personal and structural continuity in local administrations, preserved records are often incomplete. Many important details were either not recorded in the euphoric post-war era, or were destroyed or lost during the communist purges of the bureaucratic apparatus after 1948. Therefore, research often relies on secondary sources such as newspapers and written memoirs, as well as on the visual forms of the monuments and memorials themselves.

The period in question was naturally characterized by an endeavour to immortalize the victims of Nazism. In general, the glorification of the Red Army overshadowed Czech and Polish war victims. The cult of Soviet liberators also invoked a narrative of "Slavic unity." However, regional cults of distinguished Czech anti-Nazi combatants also emerged. Such cults were usually promoted by people with close professional or personal ties to the lionized individuals. Only very rarely were notable artists involved in commemorative activities, such as in the case of the mausoleum in Ostrava. The overwhelming majority of monuments, memorials, busts, or commemorative plaques were created by local stonemasons and engravers. The level of participation by leading artists increased during 1950s and 1960s due to the communist regime's effort to "petrify" the remembrance of the war.

Another typical phenomenon of the era was a complex change in local names in previously German-inhabited areas. The usage of symbols from Czech history in the newly resettled borderland aimed to emphasize the "Czech" character of the region, and also served as a means of education and assimilation of the new settlers, many of whom lacked deeper knowledge of Czech history and culture due to differences in their educational background. The most popular symbols were related to medieval history and to 19th-century Czech art and literature. Such symbols had no controversial connotations for Czech society, and could be used almost universally for naming streets, schools, and the like. The post-war regime also benefited from popularity of the 15th century Hussite movement, which was interpreted as anti-German and proto-socialist. While most of the nationally respected symbols were imported to Silesia, the cult of poet Petr Bezruč, by contrast, originated in the region and expanded throughout the Czechoslovak borderland.

Although the approach of both authorities and individuals towards German sites of memory was overwhelmingly negative, there were some partial exceptions. Czechoslovak society showed some tolerance towards religious and "apolitical" memorials, and sometimes municipal administrations attempted to care for German gravestones with reverence. Despite the extensive effort to uproot German symbols, some of them survived in the form of unofficial local names.

While the newly populated Western Silesia was characterized by the prevailing "mainstream" nationalist narrative, the Opava, Hlučín and Těšín regions in particular maintained strong local identities. Opava and Hlučín could be characterized by rural traditionalism and Catholicism; in the case of Hlučín, this was also combined with pro-German sentiment. In the Těšín territory, the Polish minority played an active role in re-shaping public spaces.

Despite the obvious predominance of "official" collectivist and centralist pro-Soviet "Slavic" narratives, several counter-narratives existed. One of them, which was more or less tolerated by state authorities, was Czech-Silesian patriotism, based on pre-war nationalist, but democratic, ideas. This tendency was manifested mainly by attempts to renew pre-war Czech memorials. (Unlike "Czech-Silesian" patriotism, Silesian autonomism was suppressed and labelled as "pro-German.") Hlučín region population developed another counter-narrative, attempting to question the generalized anti-German rhetoric of "official" state propaganda. In Hlučín, informal acts of remembrance were documented in German military cemeteries.

Many of above-mentioned processes were not concluded during the examined period. Both material and symbolic reconstruction of public spaces continued after the communist coup in 1948. Compared to the era under study, the new regime after 1948 left even less space for dissenting counter-narratives.

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