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Veterans Day Celebration in a Hlučín Village: A Unique "Confirmatory" Military Reenactment Event

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Abstract

The historical region around the town of Hlučín (Hultschin, Hulczyn), today in the Czech Republic and previously in Germany, is a space in which representations of national indifference as a principle of social organization are still discernible on many levels. One of the most obvious examples is the celebration of Veterans Day (11 November), including a multilayered commemorative ceremony and a military reenactment performance which defy the usual allegiance to discourses of 1945 "liberation" and the Czech-German historical antagonism. The current oral history project on the contemporary history and culture of military reenactment in the Czech lands, carried out at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague, has, among other things, explored the military reenactment in the Hlučín region. This article reveals the complex context and structures of meaning of the annual Veterans Day performance in the region, which refers to various historical and contemporary cultural discourses.

Keywords: Hlučín region; World War II; military reenactment; Veterans Day; performance

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Introduction

Historical military reenactment is a complex collective activity, systematically investigated within the framework of the so-called reenactment studies. For a long time, these have been mainly pursued in British and American scholarship, but in recent years, research on this phenomenon has also been successfully commenced in Central Europe. This is evidenced by a number of publications, the most important of which concern the Polish environment, ranging from large-scale monographs such as Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska's recent book (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2022) to numerous analytical studies (e.g. Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2021; Karpińska, 2019; Olechnicki & Szlendak, 2020; Pawleta, 2018). In Czech scholarship, the very first major work on the subject was only published at the end of 2024 (Wohlmuth, 2024b).

From the perspective of reenactment studies, historical reenactment is understood as an effort to reenact past events – a performative and interpretive production of historical meaning, based on a complex production of authenticity and the attendant affective bodily experience, with the essential involvement of the agency of material objects (Agnew et al., 2020). The initial long-standing emphasis on the study of the authenticity of reenactment performances has been subject to increasing critique, which has resulted in considerable skepticism about the possibility of authentic reenactments of past events. Reenactment, however, has been much more intensively studied in terms of, among other things, its production of historical meaning: reenactors usually approach history as a set of "unsettled scores", and through their collective actions they seek to influence memory and identity politics at various levels. The focus on this aspect of reenactment has brought studies that significantly deepen conceptualizations of the issue across the research field (Magelssen, 2020, p. 191).

In Czech scholarship, the research project *History and Culture of Contemporary Czech Military Re-Enactment in an Interdisciplinary Perspective* has been focusing on this issue in depth since 2022. In terms of theory, the project is based on the concepts of post-positivist oral history (Abrams, 2016; Portelli, 1991, 1997), which means that it has generated numerous new sources in the form of oral history interviews. So far, more than 130 interviews have been conducted with a total of 87 narrators. The research has quickly shown that the thesis highlighted above – stating that on the actor level reenactment is important mainly for reasons other than the desire to authentically present historical events – is strongly applicable in the environment of Czech military reenactment. The actors involved seem to be much more driven by the desire to deal with those "unsettled accounts" from history, or the historical issues that are still open and that interfere with their historical subjectivities. In other words, military reenactors do not mainly try to achieve some kind of absolute "authenticity" in their performances, but to produce historical meaning. This was particularly

evident in the case of military reenactment of the German side of World War II, especially in relation to its conclusion in the Czech lands.

In this context, one of the most significant contemporary reenactment endeavors in the Czech lands appears to be a quite specific local military reenactment practice – one that has been taking place for over a decade in a small region in the north of the Moravian-Silesian land: the Hlučín region. There are several reasons why the local tradition of military reenactment visibly transcends the limitations of time and space. In the framework of the project, 14 oral history interviews were conducted with leading protagonists of military reenactment in this region, members of two reenactment associations bearing the traditional local name of "military history club" (KVH – Klub vojenské historie), namely KVH Kurland and KVH Drang. As their names suggest, both clubs focus on the German military of World War II. Their activities have already been analyzed in the general terms of the production of historical meaning in a separate study (Wohlmuth, 2024a), especially in relation to how closely they mirror the principle of national indifference, which is historically firmly anchored in the Hlučín region. In the present article, therefore, we will deal with a different topic, which I discovered only thanks to the newly recorded oral history interviews.

Military reenactment as practiced by KVH Kurland, KVH Drang and other local reenactors is notable for yet another reason, which again concerns the production of historical meaning. Their practice is essentially "confirmatory". What does it mean? One result of the research conducted in 2022–2024, presented in the collective volume *Vojáci věčné války* [Soldiers of Eternal War] (Wohlmuth, 2024b), is a proposed typology of reenactments. These are characterized as either (a) confirmatory, (b) restorative-reinterpretive, (c) confrontational-emancipatory, or (d) imaginative-game. Considering the production of historical meaning, reenactments of types (b) and (c) are performances that seek to confront existing dominant ways of relating to the past. Imaginative-game reenactments, on the other hand, usually almost entirely lack this level.

In the case of confirmatory reenactments, the situation is different. Here, the production of historical meaning rests on the performance – it confirms a certain version of the past which is not necessarily hegemonic but is non-conflicting and is not securely anchored, and which can often be viewed as highly influential in a given culture. Considering the military reenactment of World War II and especially its end in May 1945 in the Czech lands, the overwhelming majority of reenactments – and this applies to both private and public ones – have supported the dominant version of the past in the form of the "1945 liberation" narrative. The "liberation" through the intervention of the Allied armies (mostly Soviet and American) ended the occupation of the Czech lands by Nazi Germany. Within this narrative, all reenactors of the German armed forces are still presented as not only those who "lost" the war, but also as obedient subjects of the criminal totalitarian regime, representing its essential personification. The dramatic events of the summer of 1945 can undoubtedly be seen as one of the "symbolic centers" of what is understood as Czech "national history" (Havelka, 2001, pp. 14–18). This is still linked to the highly negative stereotype of the "German" in Czech

culture, which also applies to the extremely violent expulsion of the German population from the Czech lands in 1945–1946 (Mrňka, 2019; Staněk, 1996, 2005, 2011).

Editors of a collective volume on oral history in Central and Eastern Europe point out that especially after 2000 "many oral historians in that region […] are bringing to light alternative experiences of the war that never reached public mainstream narratives" (Khanenko-Friesen & Grinchenko, 2015, p. 147). Although the reenactment and commemorative performances which we have examined do not differ significantly at first glance, behind the Hlučín performances lies a complex production of historical meaning, representing precisely this "alternative experience of war". Indeed, it is unique in the contemporary context of the Czech lands – and dare we say in the European context as well – that the reenactors of the WWII German armed forces represent an integral part of a confirmatory-type public reenactment. The results of the research project indicate, among other things, that no other public reenactment practice could be identified in which reenactors of the German forces were *not* subjected to critical interpretation.

This article attempts to answer the following research question: what type of production of historical meaning can be discovered behind contemporary (i.e. post-2000) military commemorative and reenactment practice taking place in one of the Hlučín villages (which we will anonymize as Langewitz)? The village is situated right in the center of the Hlučín region, a "land of three cultures" (German, Czech and Polish) defying the usual criteria of "methodological nationalism" (Wyss, 2020, pp. 123–124).

The local military reenactment practice went unnoticed by scholars (especially anthropologists and/or oral historians) for a long time and only became the subject of research as part of the abovementioned oral history project in 2022. The practice takes place on a significant date – Veterans Day, November 11. The reason is obvious: after the Hlučín region was forcibly reannexed to Germany in September 1938 as a result of the Munich Agreement, an extremely high percentage of local men were conscripted into the Wehrmacht and other German forces. The enthusiasm for reintegration with Germany (Hlučín had been under German rule between 1745 and 1918) was quickly replaced by disappointment and trauma. In the tiny region of about 45,000 inhabitants, almost 13,000 men donned military uniforms. Of these, more than 3,500 fell and more than 2,000 suffered serious injuries, which amounts to almost 50 percent casualty rate (Sovilj, 2020, p. 35). After World War II, Hlučín became a land of war memorials and graves. The region suffered severe human losses – in proportion to the population, they were higher than in any other region of former Czechoslovakia. At the same time, after the communist seizure of power in 1948, Hlučín remained distinctly different in socio-cultural terms because of its German (Prussian) heritage (Kubátová, 2015, 2016) and locally spoken Lachian (Silesian Moravian) ethnolect (Nábělková, 2016, p. 152), characterized by numerous Polish and German loanwords (Hannan, 2002).

Local family and collective memory of Hlučín men in WWII German uniforms was suppressed during the post-1945 period, and silenced narratives only surfaced after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Out of the forest of war graves (42 major military funerary places of memory were recently identified and cataloged in the Hlučín region;

see Fojtíková, 2018, p. 31), a local tradition of Wehrmacht military reenactment had slowly emerged during the 1990s, based on the communicative memory of the grandfathers who served during World War II (Wohlmuth, 2024a, pp. 239–240). The life stories of some Hlučín Wehrmacht veterans – such as Jan Gomola, native of prewar Czechoslovakia, who became an artilleryman with the Panzergrenadier Division Großdeutschland and later published a unique memoir – have become well known on the national level (Gomola, 2009).

Considering methodological aspects, the project has been very challenging. The main reason is rather obvious: military reenactment is an activity that is extremely ephemeral in terms of historical sources. Reenactors usually leave an absolute minimum of written sources. Visual sources, in turn, are today kept almost exclusively on social media platforms, where they fall into oblivion and are often destroyed, with individual profiles gradually fragmented or disappearing completely. During our research, we have discovered that, for example, a number of photo galleries taken by our narrators and posted on social media have a short lifespan and are rendered inaccessible after a few years for various reasons. Thus, there are two main sources for our research. Firstly, a series of oral history interviews, taken in the framework of the aforementioned project and followed by fieldwork in 2023. Secondly, and even more importantly, a series of audiovisual sources in the form of short videos taken by local actors, capturing the performances under study which were held between 2018 and 2023. The existence of such material was brought to our attention during oral history interviews, and we were subsequently able to identify, download and save those videos. Their content was subject to interpretive exploration using the "thick description" method (Geertz, 2017) in order to reveal their hierarchy of levels of meaning.

Langewitz Performances

The reenactment practice that we have been exploring in Langewitz centers around a recently established place of memory – the Veterans Bench (2017), a memorial park bench with commemorative landscaping. The back of the bench bears a motto associated with the legendary Czech Army veteran Staff Sergeant Jiří "Regi" Schams, who died in 2015 after a long struggle with the effects of severe injuries he had sustained in Afghanistan: "If you were maybe the only one who can or is able to do what needs to be done, you have to do it!"[1] The bench was installed in November 2017, and the first performance, involving a commemorative ceremony and subsequent military reenactment event, took place on 11 November 2018.

1 Staff Sergeant (*štábní praporčík*, OR-9 NATO rank) Jiří "Regi" Schams was severely wounded in a suicide attack while deployed in Afghanistan in 2008. His long struggle with life-threatening injuries and a serious illness serves as an example of strong will, courage and sacrifice in the contemporary military culture of the Czech Army; see e.g. Haberová (2018). A very similar bench bearing the same motto has been installed at his grave at Olšany Cemetery in Prague.

The hierarchy of levels of meaning of the first performance established a pattern that has developed in the following years. First of all, a guard of honor is mounted at the Veterans Bench. It is quite heterogeneous in historical terms, but it is neither contradictory nor problematic on the actor level: two local military reenactors, one personifying the army of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), and the other – the army from the times of communist dictatorship (1948–1989): the Czechoslovak People's Army (ČSLA); they are dressed in army uniforms from the respective periods. There is a Catholic priest and an officer of the current Army of the Czech Republic standing next to them. The form of the commemoration itself is very simple. Two members of a local military reenactment association (focusing on German units from World War II) dressed in Czech army camouflage uniforms of the standard Type 95, but with badges bearing the symbol of their association, carry and lay a wreath at the bench. They are followed by two representatives of the local government, who bow their heads. Afterwards, the changing of the guard takes place – two reenactors of a pre-1918 Austro-Hungarian infantry regiment arrive at the Veterans Bench. Some visual sources show that a large group of reenactors in uniforms of the WWII German armed forces (namely Wehrmacht infantry and field gendarmerie) stands in attention right next to where the entire commemorative ritual is performed. The unifying symbol that transcends all these culturally and historically heterogeneous military traditions represented by the various actors, is the poppy flower, a classic symbol of remembrance of victims of World War I – all participants wear a red poppy badge on their uniforms as a symbol of the Veterans Day commemoration. Former enemies now stand side by side.

At first glance, it might seem that this act of commemoration represents a strange mixture of levels of meaning that cannot be coherent. However, it is a clear example of a phenomenon observed by Mads Daugbjerg: military reenactment displays a general tendency to value and respect ordinary soldiers fighting on all sides, which stems from the conviction that they were ordinary people who, as conscripts, had no choice, but at the same time were genuinely motivated by the desire to defend their homeland (Daugbjerg, 2020, p. 26). In the case of the Langewitz performances, the general concept of "war veteran" fulfills a unifying and leveling function in terms of meaning, and it perfectly fits the concepts proposed by Daugbjerg.

The following year (2019), the performance was preceded by a Mass for "the fallen and war veterans", celebrated in the local Catholic church. The course of the commemoration ceremony at the Veterans Bench was identical in meaning to the one held the previous year. The novelty was a rather spectacular reenactment performance, combined with an exhibition of military equipment, covering the period from the armed forces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the current Army of the Czech Republic, which also had its static exhibition. Wehrmacht equipment was on display as well, and a small representation of a German military camp was set up next to other ones. Local Wehrmacht reenactors manned a light armored recon vehicle Sd. Kfz. 222/223 and a signature German WWII combat vehicle, a wheeled armored personnel carrier Sd. Kfz. 251. They participated in the performance, where the theme was the battles for the city of Ostrava in the spring of 1945.

A running commentary provided on the spot by the local government moderator (on loudspeakers) emphasized that "period uniforms and equipment were eye-catching" for all those present. The visual sources show that there was no hierarchy among the reenactor units (Austro-Hungarian, First Czechoslovak Republic, WWII Red Army and Wehrmacht) during their static and dynamic displays. "Everyone truly enjoyed the event", we learn from the loud moderator. The key adjective used in the commentary, which levels the meaning here, is "period": uniforms and weapons are simply "period" ones, with no other adjectives attributed to them. Then, in the video, a local government official can be heard emphasizing that the whole event was a commendable example of developing "national pride". These words are accompanied by a long shot of a slow-moving German WWII armored personnel carrier Sd. Kfz 251.

The 2021 performance was significantly affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. A small group of participants, consisting of a representative of the local government, a representative of the Czech Army, and local military reenactors, first laid flowers at the memorial to the fallen of both World Wars at the local cemetery. What is significant here is the speech of the local government representative, in which he states: "We are here... at the grave of our fallen from the Second World War", while the shot includes a part of the monument with German names in the frame. The narrative continues: "Of course, we have been at our Veterans Bench, which is dedicated to *all* fallen soldiers of all wars." In both places, the wreaths were laid by two representatives of local German military reenactors. In the commentary, the memorial in the cemetery is described as one that is

> dedicated to the citizens who gave their lives, leaving behind their children, families and friends. The memorial is a sign of remembrance of our people who died in the war. The turmoil of war affected our region as well as the whole world. And of course, we have a whole lot of people who died in the war, who died and never had a chance to choose their side.

At that point, the camera takes in the memorial with the dates that are symbolically significant: 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943 and 1944 (all those years during which local men were deployed on the German side of the Second World War) – and the German names on the memorial are recognizable on the screen, which makes it absolutely clear that the subjects of the commemoration are Wehrmacht soldiers and soldiers of other German formations.

Other audiovisual sources also show a dynamic public reenactment performance. The choice of musical accompaniment to open the event is symbolically significant. The popular 1943 war song "When the Lights Go On Again" by composers Bennie Benjamin, Sol Marcus and Eddie Seiler features lyrics that express hope and longing for peace and reconciliation and the restoration of normal everyday life.

In 2022, the ritual performance was held in an almost identical form, although in some respects it was transformed and the hierarchy of levels of meaning was slightly different. This time, the wreaths were laid by two people: first a representative of the local government,

and then a representative of one of the three local military reenactment associations (all focusing on the WWII Wehrmacht units), who was wearing clothing in the contemporary camouflage pattern of the Czech Army, with a badge of his association on the sleeve. The guard of honor at the Veterans Bench was, again, held by two reenactors, but this time they were performing members of the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps in the USSR (1942–1945). The commentary, in the adopted conciliatory spirit, only mentioned "war veterans" in general terms, without making any distinctions. The official delegation of the Army of the Czech Republic, identified in the commentary, was listed only as "other guests". Afterwards, the public reenactment took place again – a static show of weapons and army equipment, with the first shot of the surviving footage again showing reenactors embodying Wehrmacht and German airborne units (*Fallschirmjäger*).

A further deepening of the levels of meaning occurred the following year (2023) during the reenactment performance. For the first time, it was significantly expanded, as it also involved a Soviet WWII-era T-34-85 tank: the scenario included a depiction of a clash between WWII Czechoslovak exile units from the 1st Independent Czechoslovak Tank Brigade and a detachment of German infantry. In a video documenting the performance, the tank dramatically drives over improvised trenches, forcing the German side to surrender. The Wehrmacht soldiers wave a white flag, and the commentary states: "The Germans see there's no point now, they put their hands up and surrender." What follows is a remarkably realistic depiction of a war crime committed by the Czechoslovak troops. It is preceded by a comment pointing out that as far as the German soldiers were concerned, only the officers were relatively safe to be taken as POWs, as they were a valuable source of information. The commentary continues as follows:

> On the other hand, the rank and file German soldier… he had a hard time. If those Soviets or Czechoslovaks were not in the mood or could not slow down [their advance] because they had to move on quickly, they often dealt with them [rank-and-file German POWs] on the spot… So in that respect, too, the war was really cruel, especially on the Eastern Front.

At the end of the performance, without the commentator explicitly mentioning it, there was indeed a reenactment of the slaughter of captured German rank-and-file POWs: suddenly, a series of shots rang out and the German reenactors collapsed to the ground.

This episode is a clear representation of the special status of Hlučín Wehrmacht soldiers. In terms of current official versions of the past, they are still essentially enemies. However, in terms of the local culture of remembrance and the local culture of military reenactment, they are war victims, they are "our people", and the fact that they become victims of a war crime as part of the performance – which is, furthermore, accompanied by the explicit commentary – testifies to the clearly confirmatory nature of this reenactment. Indeed, shortly afterwards the performance was over, followed by applause from the audience. The captured Wehrmacht officers publicly shook hands with the soldiers of the Czechoslovak Army in exile who had executed their fellow soldiers just moments ago.

Then, all other reenactors, including the "resurrected" German rank and file, also received loud applause, shook hands, and embraced one another. The war was thus labeled as a fratricidal and senseless conflict.

It is possible that the Langewitz reenactments and other similar events, in which stereotypes of Germans in connection with World War II have been slowly transformed (in 2023 and especially 2024, some major events explicitly used the "revisionist" term "Bloody Summer of 1945", e.g. the large-scale annual reenactment event called "Akce Cihelna" [Operation Brickyard], organized near the town of Králíky),[2] may represent the first phase of a cultural process that has already been pointed out by Baraniecka-Olszewska in the case of contemporary Poland, namely that "currently the situation of German Nazis being perceived as evil is in a state of flux" (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2015, p. 63). The reenactors of the German armed forces of World War II in the Hlučín region are successful actors in this respect: they have managed to become regular participants in an annual ritual of great significance for the local community, essentially related to the construction of its historical subjectivity. The "German" soldiers are no longer perceived as essential enemies and representation of "evil" – in the commemorative ritual and the reenactment performances that follow it, they are "our" people who became war victims. Quite obviously, this has brought about a "normalization" of their image in the collective memory of the Hlučín region. This is reinforced by the fact that virtually all of the "German" reenactors involved belong to groups from the region or its close vicinity.

The local reenactors have also represented a group of actors who independently interpret and introduce into socio-cultural practice the results of many years of professional historical research focused on Hlučín men conscripted into the German armed forces during World War II. From the highly successful documentation project *Hultschiner Soldaten* [Hlučín Soldiers] to authoritative historical studies (esp. Maršálek & Neminář, 2020), a considerable number of scholarly works are already available and intensively used by local actors. In the introduction to the volume edited by Zdenko Maršálek and Jiří Neminář, the emphasis of these works on the WWII forced mobilization of Hlučín men and their subsequent occasional desertion from the German armed forces and involvement in the Czechoslovak armed forces in exile, is described as part of a Europe-wide tendency to critically examine and "deconstruct the master narratives" (Maršálek & Neminář, 2020, p. 11). In terms of the hierarchy of meanings conveyed by this volume – which is highly influential among reenactors – the symbolic message of its cover alone is crucial. The two photos on the cover show the young Hlučín soldier Adolf Grigarzik; in the first one, a black-and-white army photo, he is a Wehrmacht freshman and looks frightened; in a full-color photo taken after his desertion, we can see him as

2 The "Bloody Summer of 1945" is a term coined by the author and historian Jiří Padevět; it is an analytic umbrella term for both Nazi atrocities during the final phase of WWII on the territory of the Czech lands, and the brutal wave of retaliatory violence and summary justice by various antifascist Czech insurgents and paramilitaries between May and August 1945 (Padevět, 2016; see also Mrňka, 2019).

a decorated soldier of the Czechoslovak army in exile (1st Czechoslovak Army Corps in the USSR) – looking self-confident.[3]

Why the Hlučín Region?

This brings us to the question why it was the Hlučín region where a new Czech military reenacting tradition was established, namely the first one that no longer labels the Wehrmacht as the essential enemy – and this question is difficult to answer analytically. The available sources, particularly the oral history interviews with local reenactors conducted as part of the project, do not – at first glance – indicate the roots of this process. One may argue that the reason for the emergence of this phenomenon could have been the continuity of local settlement. In 1945, when the Hlučín region's return to Czechoslovakia was followed by the expulsion of the German minority, only less than 10 percent of the Hlučín population was expelled (Kubátová, 2016, p. 21). But that is not a convincing argument. The local inhabitants have never really defined themselves as a "German" minority. They have always highlighted the essentially local identity of their region, called "Prajzsko" (derived from "Prussia"), formed on the basis of the principle of ethnic indifference (Zahra, 2010). As for the language, they spoke German in official interactions and at school, but informally and at home – they used their Lachian ethnolect (Kubátová, 2016, p. 17).

The symbolic key to the interpretation of the phenomenon lies elsewhere, in the agency of a local Wehrmacht veteran, the abovementioned Jan Gomola, a native of Dolní Lomná (Łomna Dolna, Nieder Lomna), who was mobilized into the Wehrmacht in 1940 and spent the war as an artilleryman. In 1945, during the advance of the front in North Moravia, he deserted and returned home. His memory narratives are crucial to the local reenactment groups. Local reenactors accepted Gomola as a strong authority figure, especially after he published a book of memoirs in 2009 (Gomola, 2009). The title of the book – *Objevil jsem Katyň* [I Discovered Katyń] – is a clue in itself. Here, Gomola navigates the complexities of interpreting his service in the Wehrmacht by, among other things, pointing to the fact that he was fighting against another, perhaps even more dangerous dictatorship: the Stalinist USSR. He lends his interpretation a powerful symbolic weight with a story claiming that he was the first to uncover the mass graves at the site where the Soviet secret services, on Stalin's orders, committed the Katyń massacre. In this sense, it is irrelevant whether the narrative of the "discovery of Katyń" is factual or counterfactual. It is its symbolic meaning that crucially underpins his entire self-interpretation. In his book, Gomola presents himself as an ordinary man who happened to be caught up in dramatic

3 The case of Grigarzik is complicated because he was an active member of Hitlerjugend prior to his enlistment. Nevertheless, after his desertion from the Wehrmacht and joining the Czechoslovak army in exile, he gained recognition for combat exploits and even received the Czechoslovak Medal for Bravery and Czechoslovak War Cross 1939–1945 (Neminář, 2020, p. 165).

and cataclysmic events that went far beyond his freedom of choice, events in which, according to his interpretations, there was basically no "right" side to join. This is the core meaning of all the performances in Langewitz.

In 2016–2017, Gomola's initially local and marginal memory experienced an immensely powerful "authorization". This was a real turning point. Researchers from the project *Paměť národa* (*Memory of the Nation*),[4] which deals with the issue of resistance against Nazism and communism between 1938 and 1989, conducted two interviews with Gomola. *Memory of the Nation* has close ties with the liberal-democratic establishment and former anti-communist dissident circles, and each year the organization presents well-respected human rights awards at a ceremony broadcast live on national public television. After *Memory of the Nation* published Gomola's personal profile and recordings of the interviews with him on their website (2017), Gomola's narrative became de facto legitimized and widely known (*Jan Gomola*, 2017). *Memory of the Nation* apparently accepted Gomola's self-interpretations of his wartime agency, and local reenactors could suddenly refer to the meanings of his narratives quite safely in public.

During the interviews that we conducted with local reenactors for our project, Gomola's name came up repeatedly and with great emphasis. Reenactors would regularly visit him at the nursing home for the elderly where he lived, listen to his stories and support him. He was an important voice for them until his death in 2021. The fact that Gomola was publicly accepted by an immensely influential national memory institution provided the final incentive for reenactors to enter the public sphere locally with their activities. One year after the publication of Gomola's interviews by *Memory of the Nation*, the reenactors participated in the first of the performances which we have analyzed. The emergence of the Langewitz commemorations thus owes much to historical contingency and the politics of memory relating to one particularly significant local actor.

Conclusion

For further research, the following question arises: how far will local actors take this "deconstruction" and reinterpretation process in terms of the politics of memory? Their activities can serve as an example of successful practice that other military reenactors and those interested in military heritage can begin to emulate. During our research, we have already identified one other local agency focused on deconstructing the stereotypical "master narratives" concerning World War II. The case in point is the tragic fate of POWs from the 20th (1st Estonian) SS Division in May 1945 in the Czech lands, who became victims of brutal retaliatory extrajudicial violence by Czech paramilitary forces

4 The project *Memory of the Nation* is run by the NGO Post Bellum together with Czech Radio and the government-established Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR).

(Wohlmuth, 2023). This group and one of their legendary commanders, Major Paul Maitla, murdered by Czech paramilitary formations in the town of Nymburk, have already been the subject of a published study (Plavec & Rosenthal, 2006). The reenactors involved apparently seek ways to find Maitla's grave and arrange for his disinterment and honorable reburial in Estonia.

On the other hand, the attempt by a third group of local actors (members of the association called "Jizeran") to restore a memorial to fallen WWII German soldiers, which was erected in 1944 in the village of Kořenov (Bad Wurzelfdorf) in Northern Bohemia by representatives of the Nazi administration and which had a form of a large iron cross with a swastika, ended in a definite failure in 2011. Although the swastika had already been removed from the cross in 1945, the restoration of the memorial met with severe public criticism, and after a series of incidents, the cross was finally removed from its pedestal and destroyed in 2023 by unknown actors, apparently with an anarchist antifascist background (Anarchistická federace, 2022). However, the connection of the protagonists of the monument's restoration with the military reenactment community is uncertain.

Meanwhile, based on the analysis of the two relevant cases of reenactment (Hlučín and Czech-Estonian), I am convinced that the practices of such local "normalization" are difficult to identify with what Rosenfeld refers to as the "'normalization' of the Nazi past" (Rosenfeld, 2005, pp. 15–17), and what Baraniecka-Olszewska critically views as a significant downside to the problematic and relative democratization of history brought about by the practice of military reenactment (Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2021, p. 125). Indeed, the story of Hlučín soldiers fighting in WWII German forces is understood – among other things, through the reenactment performances and related commemorative rituals examined in this article – as a story of tragic, traumatic and senseless events (see e.g. Wohlmuth, 2024a). It is difficult to analyze whether the Langewitz performances resonate with the well-known revisionist myth of the "clean hands" of the Wehrmacht (Wette, 2006, pp. 195–250; Römer, 2012). So far, this does not seem to be the case. Their hierarchy of meanings is constructed differently: the reenactors do not attempt to gloss over the Wehrmacht's crimes, but they emphasize that war crimes are inseparable from war itself, and that all parties were equally guilty of committing them – including the Soviet Army. This problem needs further research attention.

On this level – i.e. war understood as something fundamentally negative, destructive to local communities – the meaning of the Langewitz tradition centered around the Veterans Day is strongly connected to that of the narrative of Jiří "Regi" Schams's struggle for life, which also refers to the key meaning of war as something essentially cruel and destructive, and which is a key symbol of contemporary Czech military culture. In the Langewitz performances, the memory of Scham's struggle for life is seamlessly linked to the narratives of the historical struggle and suffering of Hlučín soldiers, regardless of the uniform they wore during World War II. They are given the same honor, and their memory is given the same respect. In the oral history interviews conducted, the local

reenactors framed their work in terms of contemporary Europeanism and expressed their conviction that old dichotomies, including those dating back to World War II, are no longer relevant in united Europe.

One approach that may take our understanding of this unique phenomenon further might be to analyze the performances and related rituals under study also as a part of a military funerary culture, perhaps similar to contemporary German military *Trauerkultur*, with its typical non-heroic style (Nordmann, 2022). Langewitz military funerary culture does not represent a cult of the dead (*Totenkult*), does not have broader "political normalization" ambitions, and is rather a specific cultural form. It recalls and reinforces the very specific socio-cultural character of the Hlučín region, calling on local actors to re-attach themselves to the old local community tradition based on strong sense of belonging, solidarity and mutual help, and to define themselves against all national master-narratives that have historically tried to dominate Hlučín. In this sense, an influential coalition of military reenactors, local political representatives, and members of the current armed forces already exists on the local level. There is no opposition to this practice. Hlučín's confirmatory reenactments and related commemorative rituals thus face an open future now.

Audiovisual sources

Video recordings made by local actors, accessible via YouTube service. Their URLs and exact titles are anonymized.

Video 1: Veterans Day 2018 in Langewitz, URL anonymized.

Video 2: Veterans Day 2019 in Langewitz, URL anonymized.

Video 3: Veterans Day 2020 in Langewitz, URL anonymized.

Video 4: Veterans Day Reenactment in Langewitz, URL anonymized.

Video 5: Veterans Day Reenactment in Langewitz, URL anonymized.

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Obchody Dnia Weterana w hulczyńskiej wsi. Wyjątkowa wojskowa rekonstrukcja historyczna o charakterze „potwierdzającym"

Abstrakt

Region historyczny obejmujący tereny położone wokół Hulczyna (Hlučín, Hultschin), obecnie znajdujący się w Republice Czeskiej, a wcześniej w Niemczech, jest przestrzenią, w której przejawy narodowej obojętności jako zasady społecznej są nadal dostrzegalne na wielu poziomach. Jeden z najbardziej widocznych przykładów to obchody Dnia Weterana (11 listopada), obejmujące wielowątkową uroczystość upamiętniającą i wojskową rekonstrukcję historyczną, które rzucają wyzwanie przyjętym dyskursom na temat „wyzwolenia" 1945 roku i historycznego antagonizmu czesko-niemieckiego. Projekt badawczy z zakresu

historii mówionej, dotyczący współczesnej historii i kultury wojskowych rekonstrukcji historycznych na ziemiach czeskich, realizowany na Wydziale Nauk Humanistycznych Uniwersytetu Karola w Pradze, zajmuje się między innymi wojskową rekonstrukcją historyczną na ziemi hulczyńskiej. Niniejszy artykuł ukazuje zarówno złożony kontekst, jak i struktury znaczenia corocznych obchodów Dnia Weterana w regionie, które odnoszą się do różnych historycznych i współczesnych dyskursów kulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: ziemia hulczyńska; druga wojna światowa; wojskowa rekonstrukcja historyczna; Dzień Weterana; przedstawienie

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