

## STRATEGIES OF CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY AND PERCEPTIONS OF “SOVIET FACTOR” IN COUNTRIES OF EASTERN EUROPE HISTORY (BY THE EXAMPLE CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

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Actuality of the problem under consideration is stipulated by the necessity of rethinking the relationships of the USSR with the countries of Eastern Europe in the postwar period. The band “velvet revolutions” and the collapse of the USSR led to the collapse of the “socialist bloc”. Changes in the political sphere gave special impetus to the scientific community. The purpose of the article is to disclose the strategy of constructing memory and perceptions of the role of the “Soviet factor” in the history of Czechoslovak post-war period by the leadership of the USSR. The leading approach to the study of this problem is a problem-based approach and historical-systemic method which allows not only to identify the individual elements of the strategy of “constructing the past”, but to present them as a system. The article identifies and justifies the following strategies of “constructing the past”: the strategy of criticism (negative attitude to the assessments of the recent past that do not fit into the discourse, actively introduced by the Soviet leadership), the strategy of substitution (an effort to substitute the evaluation of the recent past events to assess the opposite polarity: “occupation” into “brotherly help” and “heroic sacrifice” was the ultimate action of “provocateurs’ scheme”), the strategy of exporting symbols (installations of monuments of Soviet leaders, the introduction of elements of Soviet political culture and traditions, new holiday dates, which didn’t exist in the Czechoslovak calendar). The article shows that they penetrated not only into the minds of top political leaders of Czechoslovakia, but in the consciousness of ordinary Czechoslovak citizens. The article can be useful for historians studying the relations of the USSR with the countries of Eastern Europe in 1940-1980-ies (primarily the Soviet-Czechoslovak relations), as well as for researchers, whose subject of study is historical memory, in particular, the mechanisms of its construction.

**Keywords:** historical memory ; politics of memory ; Prague spring ; Soviet-Czechoslovak relations.

### INTRODUCTION

The end of the Second World War meant the beginning of a new age in European and world’s history. This is reflected in the fact that the balance of power in international relations changed: “The victorious conclusion of world war II made the Soviet Union one of the recognized world leaders” (Volokitina *et al.*, 2002). The USSR played an important role in the liberation of Eastern Europe from fascism. In 1948 President of Czechoslovakia Edvard Beneš in his welcoming letter to the Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship was speaking about “feeling of a deep friendship of all Czech and Slovak people to the peoples of the Soviet Union” (Maryina, 2013). However, in the course of time, “the specter of

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Sovietization” (Maryina, 2013) in the relations between the two countries was delineated more clearly. This was due to the fact that the Soviet Union in its foreign policy strategy based itself “on the concept of spheres or zones of influence. In the sphere of special interests of the USSR was, in particular, Eastern Europe” (Volokitina *et al.*, 2002). Soon the creation of the “socialist bloc” became a reality and Czechoslovakia became an integral element of this system. A characteristic feature of this system was the synchronization of political regimes. The Soviet Union was the benchmark for all countries. However, along with synchronization of political practices and processes the Soviet leadership was trying to agree upon the “common past”, or rather to impose their view about the experience of “common history”, which began in the second half of 1940-ies.

This article is devoted to the history of Soviet-Czechoslovak relations, which were considered from an atypical angle: from the point of view of constructing memory and perceptions of the role of the “Soviet factor in the Czechoslovak history” from the leadership of the USSR. The history memory is one of the most important directions of modern world and national historiography. An important role in the study played a collection of documents (“*The Prague spring*” and *the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)). The documents of governing party organs represent extraordinary value for us (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)), since they reflect the policy of the Soviet leadership in relation to “formation of memory” and events in Czechoslovakia; as well as summaries of events, which usually were compiled by intelligence agencies to inform the government (*Czechoslovak events of 1968 through the eyes of KGB and MVD of the USSR* (2010)).

#### **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

When writing the article various methods were used, both General scientific (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction), and special ones.

The method of content analysis enabled an analysis of official Soviet documents. Special attention was paid to semantic analysis, which allowed to identify semantic structures with a definite negative connotation (“vicious anti-Soviet propaganda”, “hostile elements”, “occupants”, etc.) and, on the basis of this, to reveal the attitude of the Soviet leadership to the events in Czechoslovakia and treatment of these events in Czechoslovak society. The historiographical method allowed to examine the available literature on the topic of this study and to reveal the specific trends and approaches of researchers. The problem-based approach allowed to identify the main strategies in the construction of the “common past” and historical and systematic method made it possible to present these strategies not as isolated elements but as part of a General “politics of memory”.

## RESULTS

### Strategy for construction of the “common past”: a critique

As soon as Czechoslovakia became a part of the “socialist bloc”, the government was forced to act in concert with the policies of the USSR. From this point of view, the range of their actions was considerably narrowed and restricted. The consequences of an attempt to go beyond the established framework, are those of the Prague spring, or to be more exact, its suppression. However, ordinary Czechoslovak citizens and non-governmental organizations were freer in their actions. Even though they had no administrative resources, their protests and disagreement with the current situation (including official interpretation of the “common past”) could resonate in the Czechoslovak society. This could hinder the process of planting new ideological practices. Obviously, for the Soviet leadership was not only important to establishing political control, but also the desire to impose a single image of the historical past (in regard to the history of Soviet-Czechoslovak relations in the post-war period). This can be construed as a kind of “intervention” in the collective memory of the Czechoslovak society.

The first strategy in building a unified view on “common past,” included criticism of the Czechoslovak interpretations of individual events (particularly, events related to the suppression of the Prague spring of 1968) without offering an alternative interpretation was identified as a strategy of criticism.

For example, the Soviet intelligence agencies carefully monitored the content of Czechoslovak films, both artistic and documentary. Quoting the memoirs of the KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov to the CPSU Central Committee (“*The Prague spring and the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)”) about prepared at the request of “German and Polish friends” information about the activities of counterrevolutionary underground in Czechoslovakia (13th of October, 1968): “On 5th of September in the Prague cinema “Blanik” was shown a tendentious documentary film about the entry of allied troops in Czechoslovakia, which shows the mourning ceremonies, dedicated to the memory of Czechoslovak citizens, “who died when the allied forces were entered”. Narration of the film is filled with vicious anti-Soviet propaganda, characterizing the Soviet troops as “occupying”” (“*The Prague spring and the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)).

Persons who tore down the monuments to Soviet soldiers who liberated Czechoslovakia from the Nazis, were called “hostile elements” (“*The Prague spring and the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)), and such actions are not treated differently as “the desecration” (“*The Prague spring and the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)). It is characteristic that the Soviet leadership was very sensitive about facing towards the USSR as “occupiers” (“*The Prague spring and the international crisis 1968: Papers* (2010)).

### **Strategy for construction of the “common past”: the substitution**

The strategy of substitution was that the Soviet leadership sought to refute, to neutralize the Czechoslovak evaluation of events “shared history” that does not fit into popular discourse, and replace them with more appropriate estimate. The Soviet leadership was painfully reacting to alternative interpretations of the events of August 1968 in Czechoslovakia. December 26, 1968 the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee approved the decision “On the protest to the government of Czechoslovakia in connection with the publication and distribution in Czechoslovakia of the so-called “Black book””. The text of the note, in particular, says: “the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics draws the Czechoslovak government’s attention on publication and circulation in Czechoslovakia of the book “Seven Prague days. 21-27 August 1968. The documents”. This specified collection which was called “The black book”, compiled anti-Soviet fabrications that appeared in Czechoslovakia after 21 August, the texts of leaflets, posters, slogans, newspaper articles, anonymous sayings, speeches, radio and television, etc. The authors of the collection try to twist the policies of the Soviet Union against our fraternal Czechoslovakia, to sow discord between the Soviet and Czechoslovak peoples under the guise of an objective presentation of facts and statements of eyewitnesses and by cherry picking different material “ (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)).

The answer of the Czechoslovak leadership to the note was called “a formal reply”; moreover, in March 1969, “the staff of the Czechoslovak Institute of history of socialism prepared and published 500 copies of a new anti-Soviet collection under the name “Czechoslovakia. 1968”” (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)).

It is interesting that working for description of “the activities of the counterrevolutionary forces in Czechoslovakia” prior to the Prague spring, the Soviet government decided to publish the so-called “White book” (in contrast to the so-called “The Black book”) (*the Czechoslovak events of 1968 through the eyes of the KGB and MVD of the USSR* (2010)). However, the implementation of this plan could lead to the opposite effect –perpetuation of the memory of the opposition.

The leadership of the Soviet Union also tried to rethink the meaning of some important events and to offer their reinterpretations. On 23rd of January, 1969, the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee approved the text of a letter from Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin addressed to Alexander Dubè ek and Oldøich Èerník. The letter included the assessment of the Jan Palach’s act, who burned himself in protest against Soviet troops entering the territory of Czechoslovakia: “We have serious concern about the fact that in Czechoslovakia in the last days certain hostile forces, trying to bring a nationalist, anti-Soviet mood, to complicate the normalization of the situation in Czechoslovakia with impunity create a tense

political situation. For this purpose the fact of J. Palach's self-immolation is used. As it now became evident, J. Palach was not aware of all the consequences of his act and was a victim of the intentions of the instigators that pushed him to this tragic act. Special attention is drawn to the fact that press, radio, television and other media are exaggerating unhealthy and dangerous mood, excite the public, aiming to conceal the true organizers of a new political campaign, to give patriotic shape to the actions of antisocialist and anti-Soviet elements. This goal is pursued by those who seeks to portray the death of J. Palach as a heroic act of national importance" (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)). A similar assessment was given to the self-immolation of Jan Zajíc. (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)).

#### **Strategy for construction of the "common past": export of symbols**

Among the strategies for the constructing of the concept of "common past" an important role was played by the export of symbols. The Soviet leadership sought to impose ideological and cultural practices of the Czechoslovak society of certain symbols (e.g., monuments) and rituals (activities associated with the celebration of memorable dates) that were part of everyday ideological practices in the USSR, but were not illustrative of the Czechoslovak society. One of the first significant manifestations of this tendency were the preparation and organization of the Stalin's monument in Prague: "The construction of the monument lasted much longer than the top of the Communist party expected. The contest was announced in 1949, that is, four years after the end of WWII, which was quite late. All well-known sculptors and architects had to take part in the competition. Among the participants was listed Otakar Shvets. In his distress, the project which he presented was chosen among 60 variants as the winner. However, it is worth mentioning that 60 projects were not taking part in the first round. To the first tour of the contest were sent only about ten projects, which was considered insufficient. Then, the Minister of information, Vaclav Kopecky ordered to gather in the old town hall all well-known sculptors and architects. There they were showed a film about Stalin, relevant materials were distributed, so the participation was on voluntary-obligatory basis, and no one dared not to send his project to the competition." says Rudolf Zainer, the author of the book "Granite Stalin" (Straffelov and Kaimakov, 2012).

Relatively "late" start of the preparations and organization of the monument to Stalin in Prague is explained as follows: "It was Connected with February in 1948 and the fact that at first the Communists cared more about coming to power. A year passed before they ventured to declare such a contest. And again, it happened, more or less, because of pressure of the Kremlin. Of course, this is due to delusions of grandeur. Once the monument is built so late, let it be something big!" (Straffelov and Kaimakov, 2012).

It is obvious that the installation of the monument of the head of one state on the territory of another state was intended to underline not only the fact of respect (imaginary or real), but also the recognition of the achievements of this person in the history of Czechoslovakia. Thus Stalin seemed to be “fastened” to the Czechoslovak history and became an important part of “common history” between the two countries.

Another similar example can be found in the events leading up to “the Prague spring”. In February of 1968 in Czechoslovakia were scheduled celebrations “on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the victory of the Czechoslovak workers in February 1948” (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)). It was planned that the Soviet delegation will be headed by Leonid Brezhnev. In the USSR on this occasion received the following instruction: “the Soviet-Czechoslovak friendship community must organize a photo and literature exhibition on the events of February, 1948 in Czechoslovakia” (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)).

One year later, in February 1969, the “freeze” came instead of the “Prague spring” in the CPSU Central Committee a note was handed, where its authors Vasily Kuznetsov and Oleg Rakhmanin – offered “to express the friendly wishes” of the Central Committee for inclusion in the plan on cultural and scientific cooperation between the USSR and Czechoslovakia activities associated “with the preparations for the 100th anniversary of the birth of V. I. Lenin and the upcoming 25th anniversary of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (*Czechoslovak crisis 1967-1969 in documents of the CPSU Central Committee* (2010)).

## DISCUSSIONS

The history of relations between the USSR and Czechoslovakia were actively studied by both Soviet (Russian) and Czechoslovak (Czech) historians. In the center of attention of researchers there were issues such as diplomatic relations, military cooperation, cultural contacts, the history of emigration.

Generalizing works on this subject give a general idea of the socio-political and cultural-historical background against which unfolded grandiose events of momentous importance for the history of Czechoslovakia. In 1988, was published “a brief history of Czechoslovakia” edited by A. H. Klevan (1988) (“*A short history of Czechoslovakia. From the earliest times to the present day*” (1988)). There the evaluation of the many events had ideological nature. Among the major works on the topic at the present stage should be mentioned the book “the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the twentieth century: essays on the history” (*the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the twentieth century* (2005)). In fact, it is a collection of essays that discuss various aspects of the history of Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century. However, the book gives a fairly comprehensive picture of the historical path traversed by the country in the past century.

Historians have turned to separate aspects of this problem. The monograph of V. Marina (2013) “the Second Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš: the politician and the man. 1884-1948” tells us about the course and value of the events of February 1948 in the history of Czechoslovakia.

“The Prague spring” is another subject that attracts historians’ attention very much. Among the latest publications one should mention the proceedings of the conference “1968. The Prague spring (Historic retrospective)” held in the autumn of 2008 at the Institute of Slavic studies, RAS. The conference was devoted to the fortieth anniversary of the Czechoslovak events of 1968 and reflects the current state of knowledge of “the Prague spring” - a watershed moment in the development of socialism in Europe. In these articles on the basis of previously unknown or not available to researchers documents outlined a number of poorly explored problems of a systemic crisis and the reforming of socialism movement. The main attention is focuses on the impact of Czechoslovak developments on society and the consciousness of Europeans (1968. “*The Prague spring*” (2010)).

Also historians are trying to understand what changes happened in Eastern Europe in the new environment and how they overcame their “Soviet past”, particularly in political and socio-economic spheres (*Visegrád Europe: how and where? Two decades on the way of reforms in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic* (2010)).

Thus, we can conclude that the problem stated in the title, even if was considered by historians, still remains unexplored in a proper way.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, in this study was made an attempt to examine the Soviet-Czechoslovak relations in the post-war period with a new, unusual angle. The study found out that after Czechoslovakia became part of “socialist block”, the Soviet leadership attempted to synchronize not only political practices, but also to construct “common past” (or rather its interpretation). In total, three basic strategies were identified: critique, substitution and export of symbols.

The Soviet leadership had extremely negative attitude to the attempts of the Czechoslovak society (individual citizens or organizations) to have a unfavorable estimate of the “Soviet factor” in Czechoslovak history after 1948 (critique).

All such manifestations were suppressed, and a different interpretation of events was offered instead in which, for example, the USSR was not an “occupant” (the Czech version) and had the Czechoslovak Republic “fraternal assistance” (strategy of substitution). A similar approach was observed in the evaluation of J. Palach’s self-immolation: the Soviet leadership sought every possible way to counteract his glorification and wished to present it as “the idea of provocateurs, anti-Soviet provocation”.

The strongest and deepest trick was an attempt to embed political symbols in the ideological sphere of the Czechoslovak Republic and the Czechoslovak society (foreign in relation to Czech history) — such as monuments to political leaders of the USSR; mausoleum construction for political leaders, etc; and rituals (the celebration of the anniversaries of the Communist party, Lenin, etc.)

The target of these strategies was not only the Czechoslovak leadership (to which the Soviet leadership addressed its disagreement and even the protests), but also all Czechoslovak society as a whole, which according to the intention of the Soviet leadership was to appreciate and remember the events of the recent past in a determinate manner. All these activities were part of the campaign, the purpose of which was to reach uniformity in the assessment of the historical past and use this as a Foundation for building a “bright future”, thus once again confirming the validity of the truths about the importance of history not only in cultural but also in the ideological practices of the state and society as a whole.

### ***Recommendations***

The article is of interest to practitioners in the history of Eastern Europe of the post-war period. The approach used in this article can also be used to reveal the USSR relationships with other countries of the “socialist bloc” with a new, unusual angle.

The article is also of interest to historians working on issues of historical memory in general and the study strategies of constructing in particular.

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