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**NATIONAL INDIFFERENCE CONCEPT  
AND CONTEMPORARY WWII MILITARY REENACTMENT  
IN CZECH LANDS: A COMPARATIVE VIEW  
OF THE GROUPS REENACTING HULTSCHIN  
AND ESTONIAN SS CONSCRIPTS\***

**Abstract**

For the first time in the Czech Republic, a research project on contemporary military re-enactment has been carried out based on oral history. The research team managed to record memory narratives of, among others, three military reenactment associations, two of which still engage in a controversial reenactment of Wehrmacht Heer units (coming from the Hultschin/Hlučín/Hulczyn region). At the same time, the third reenacts Estonian SS units. In the spirit of post-positivist oral history, the collected narratives have been analysed primarily to reveal the cultural content, forms, and processes that shape the historical subjectivity of the narrators, that is, the way they understand themselves in history. One key cultural form the narrators use is the so-called ‘national indifference’. The reenactors refuse to identify themselves ethno-culturally (and ideologically) with German or Czech/Czechoslovak warring sides. These cultural forms are further augmented with the concept of an ‘ordinary soldier’, which is well-known in reenactment studies. As a result, reenactors self-interpret themselves as subjects who reenact Axis German armies, but consciously, within liminal contexts, whilst rejecting Nazi ideology, which makes them significantly more acceptable in Czech military reenactment milieus. In this respect, the study provides a comparative view of the Hultschin and Czech Estonian SS reenactors within the context of reenactor associations.

**Keywords:** military reenactment, national indifference, Czech lands, Hlučín region, Estonia

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## INTRODUCTION

Historical military reenactment (and reenactment in general) still represents a heavily under-researched phenomenon of contemporary history within the Czech academia.<sup>1</sup> Unlike in Poland, where several scholarly texts, including authoritative case studies, already exist,<sup>2</sup> the Czech academic community has produced only a few peer-reviewed papers.<sup>3</sup> Several unpublished theses have also dealt with the subject,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank both reviewers for their informed comments, which helped to refine and improve the text.

<sup>2</sup> See Kamila Baraniewska-Olszewska, *World War II Historical Reenactment in Poland. The Practice of Authenticity* (London–New York, 2022). Although Krzysztof Olechnicki and Tomasz Szlendak point out that the local “scholarly literature” tends to be rather fragmentary, Polish scholars still do much better in terms of providing analytical insights not only into historical reenactment in general but also into military reenactment itself. Some of the key concepts of historical reenactment in Poland, like the production of historical meaning, authenticity, performativity, educational effect, or relevance for state cultural policy, have already been well covered. See Krzysztof Olechnicki and Tomasz Szlendak, ‘Historical Re-enactment in Poland. Between Faithfulness to History and the Imperative of Spectacularity’, *Polish Sociological Review*, cxix, 1 (2020), 3–22, here at 4. Moreover, Klaudia Karpińska also looked at the gender dimension in reenactment, see Klaudia Karpińska, ‘Women in Viking Reenactment’, in Tom Birkett and Roderick Dale (eds), *The Vikings Reimagined. Reception, Recovery, Engagement* (Boston–Berlin, 2019), 69–88. Michał Pawleta analysed historical reenactment as an epiphenomenon of the search for community under the postmodern condition, see Michał Pawleta, ‘Historical re-enactment as a new form of contemporary people’s relation to the past’, *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne*, lxx (2018), 9–29.

<sup>3</sup> There still exists only a single peer-reviewed study published within Czech academia that deals explicitly with military reenactment: Lenka Hadarová, ‘Za oponou autenticity minulosti: Vytváranie dobových historických ukážok druhej svetovej vojny’, *Cargo*, 1–2 (2019), 75–95. The author of this text also published a study in 2014, dealing partially with the subject of military reenactment in the Josefstadt fortress town, as seen through the lens of Michel Foucault’s heterotopic theory. See Petr Wohlmuth, ‘Heterotopická mimočasovost pevnostního města Josefov. Teoretické a výzkumné podněty’, *Historická sociologie*, 2 (2014), 43–62. It is within the framework of the current project that more peer reviewed studies emerged in late 2023, see Jiří Hlaváček, ‘Hraní na socialistické vojáčky? Reenactment Československé lidové armády v akterské perspektivě současné mladé generace’, *Český lid*, cx, 3 (2023), 407–28; Přemysl Vacek, ‘Czech Historical Reenactment of the Early Middle Ages: Initial Research Problems and Concepts’, *Národopisná revue/Journal of Ethnology*, 5 (2023), 19–29; and finally Petr Wohlmuth, ‘The Triad of Resistance, Defeat and Reconciliation: The Production of Historical Meaning in the Performances of Czech Military Reenactment on the Example of Estonian SS’, *Národopisná revue/Journal of Ethnology*, 5 (2023), 3–18.

mostly attempting to analyse various ideas of authenticity and material agency. This text represents one of the outcomes of the first academic research project focused on the contemporary history and culture of military reenactment in the Czech lands, conducted at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University and supported by the Czech Science Foundation.

### THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Both the project and this text combine theoretical concepts from two fields: post-positivist oral history and reenactment studies after the affective turn. Post-positivist oral history originated in the Euro-Atlantic context in the 1990s. This paradigm of oral history (OH), sometimes also referred to as OH after the cultural or theoretical turn,<sup>4</sup> focuses its epistemic interest on the analysis and interpretation of acquired narratives in terms of uncovering the cultural content, forms, and processes that provide narrators with the means to understand themselves in history. In this sense, OH interviews are the product of a three-way dialogue; as Lynn Abrams describes it, they take place between “the respondent [and] him or herself, between the interviewer and the respondent and between the respondent and cultural discourses of the present and the past”,<sup>5</sup> whereby these cultural discourses constitute a “horizon of shared possibilities”<sup>6</sup> within which the narrators performatively present their historical subjectivities during the interviews. In his recent book, Alessandro Portelli quotes Carlo Ginzburg’s metaphorical formulation that carries the same meaning: “Underneath the textual surface and the explicit information they [oral sources] are meant to convey, even against or beyond the narrator’s intentions and awareness, the fragments and traces of a deeper truth”.<sup>7</sup> I understand OH as an interdisciplinary paradigm of historical science, theoretically resting between

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Shopes, ‘Insights and Oversights: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History’, *Oral History Review*, 2 (2014), 257–68.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2016<sup>2</sup>), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, 1997), 88.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, *Hard Rain: Bob Dylan, Oral Cultures, and the Meaning of History* (New York, 2022), 103–4.

historical anthropology, microhistory, ethnology, and memory studies. In military-historical research topics, I adhere to a tradition that is represented, for example, by the now-canonical OH texts of Alistair Thomson (*ANZAC Memories*) and Alessandro Portelli (*The Order Has Been Carried Out*).<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary reenactment studies, which recently embraced concepts of “affective history”,<sup>9</sup> are interested in, among other subjects, the analysis of the production of historical meaning during reenactments, which corresponds to the emphasis of post-positivist OH on the interpretive exploration of the historical subjectivity of the narrators, as explained earlier. Here lies the intersection of the epistemic emphasis of both concepts. For our narrators, the production of historical meaning seems to be an equally significant component of their reenactment, as represented during their OH interviews, shaping the reenactor experience (and subjectivity), as the “materiality and touch” that Mads Daugbjerg refers to in terms of ‘patchworking’, the result of which is an ‘assembled experience’ of military reenactment.<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, just a few representations from recorded OH interviews can be interpreted, for instance, in terms of concepts borrowed from the history of the body or notions of agency of material objects. Contemporary reenactment studies examine reenactment practices primarily within the triangle of authenticity – corporeality – experience,<sup>11</sup> which reflects the crucial components of the restaging of history, but in OH interviews with WWII reenactors, what can be described as the unsettled scores of WWII history is constantly coming to the fore. The usual analytic triangle is slowly morphing

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<sup>8</sup> Alistair Thomson, *ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend* (Clayton, 2013<sup>2</sup>); Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York–Houndmills, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Vanessa Agnew, ‘History’s affective turn: Historical reenactment and its work in the present’, *Rethinking History*, iii, 11 (2007), 299–312; or Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering (eds), *Historical Re-Enactment. From Realism to the Affective Turn* (New York–Houndmills, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Mads Daugbjerg, ‘Patchworking the Past: Materiality, Touch and the Assembling of “Experience” in American Civil War Re-enactment’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, xx, 7–8 (2014), 724–41.

<sup>11</sup> See ‘Authenticity’, ‘Practices of authenticity’, ‘Body and embodiment’, ‘Experience’, and ‘Production of historical meaning’, in Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies* (London–New York, 2020).

into a square in which the production of historical meaning becomes the fourth vertex.<sup>12</sup>

The WWII reenactors-narrators interviewed for the project consider themselves primarily in the following subjective way: as ones who right old wrongs, deal with old traumas, and negotiate and act in a field that is still open – the field of research into the final stages of the Second World War in Czech lands, where long-postponed unpleasant questions concerning such topics as the “crimes of the victors” in the form of large-scale massacres of the German population<sup>13</sup> or the fate of tens of thousands of pre-war Czechoslovak citizens forced to serve in the German Wehrmacht during the war, have only recently begun to be more widely discussed. In the eyes of these narrators, the ongoing war of aggression by Putin’s Russia against Ukraine has helped accelerate this process. In 2022, for example, several events at which Red Army reenactors were to perform were cancelled. In her recent monograph, Kamila Baraniewska-Olszewska interprets the agency of Polish WWII reenactors primarily through the lens of authenticity, seen as the dominant factor in their type of experiential history.<sup>14</sup> Instead, we characterise and interpret the WWII reenactor-narrators involved in our project regarding historical meaning-making, representing the strongest component of their historical subjectivity.

The names of all reenactor clubs are anonymised, as are the names of individual narrators who provided OH interviews to our project. We explain the reasons for this decision in the following section.

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<sup>12</sup> See Ralf Hoppadietz and Karin Reichenbach, ‘In Honor of the Forefathers: Archaeological Reenactment between History Appropriation and Ideological Mission. The Case of Ulfhednar’, in Vanessa Agnew, Sabine Stach, and Juliane Tomann (eds), *Reenactment Case Studies. Global Perspectives on Experiential History* (London–New York, 2022), 77–104.

<sup>13</sup> See Jaromír Mrňka, *Limity lidskosti. Politika a sociální praxe kolektivního násilí v českých zemích 1944–1946* (Praha, 2019); and especially Tomáš Staněk, *Perzekuce 1945. Perzekuce tzv. státně nespolehlivého obyvatelstva v českých zemích (mimo tábory a věznice) v květnu-srpnu 1945* (Praha, 1996); *id.*, *Poválečné “excesy” v českých zemích v roce 1945 a jejich vyšetřování* (Praha, 2005); and *id.*, *Tábory v českých zemích 1945–1948* (Šenov u Ostravy, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Baraniewska-Olszewska, *World War II Historical Reenactment in Poland*.

## THE PROBLEM OF WWII GERMAN MILITARY REENACTMENT IN CZECH LANDS

As of this writing, almost 120 OH interviews have been conducted as part of the project,<sup>15</sup> 30 of which relate to WWII-era German reenactment. Nearly all the narrators involved in reenactment of Axis German armed forces have expressed fear of being accused of ideological Nazism and reflected on the controversial nature of their choice of units for reenacting. In the Czech context, German WWII military reenactment has always required justification and explanation. In their OH interviews, reenactors commonly recall various reproaches from their family members,<sup>16</sup> or verbal attacks from audiences accusing them of Nazi sympathies. This is why most reenactor associations' websites and their members' personal social media profiles contain disclaimers stating that they fundamentally reject totalitarian ideologies, and their activities are limited only to reenactments of historical events, without political overtones.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, however, these same reenactors feel the urge to define themselves against the minority of German WWII reenactors who, according to them, are indeed genuine Nazi sympathisers. They are disparagingly referred to as “ragamuffins” – ridiculous characters who cannot and, in fact, do not want to live up to the high standards of historical authenticity in weaponry, uniforms, equipment, and training, and instead focus on “idiotic” demonstrative public displays of Nazi-like behaviour during reenactments.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, our

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<sup>15</sup> As of late January 2024. The project aims to conduct at least 140 oral history interviews. WWII Axis German is one of the most popular forms of military reenactment in the Czech lands.

<sup>16</sup> Terezie for instance mentions her long-standing conflict with her mother regarding socially acceptable form of her wedding. Her fiancé is a military reenactor himself and Terezie's mother feared the wedding would take place in a re-enactment setting, which she refuses to condone on principle. OH interview with Terezie by Lenka Hadarová, 16 Aug. 2022.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the disclaimer on the website belonging to the Klub vojenské historie [Military History Club] *Drang*, declares that the “military history club is a duly registered non-political association dealing with military history. We fundamentally reject any extremism, its support, or any of its manifestations”.

<sup>18</sup> “If a few idiots show up [...] who raise their right hand, they'll screw it up for all of us, pardon me!” according to Jörg, the founder of the *Feldberg*. OH interview with Jörg by Petr Wohlmuth, 24 June 2022.

narrators usually particularly condemn excessive showy siegheilings and hoisting of Nazi flags.<sup>19</sup>

There are very few existing studies about WWII reenactment that explicitly deal with the subject of ideological bias. A recent study by Ralf Hoppadietz and Karin Reichenbach<sup>20</sup> points out Nazi influences in military reenactment of early medieval Germanic tribes; archaeologist Karl Banghard is one of a few authors who now identify the annual Viking-era re-enactment event called the “Festival of Slavs and Vikings” in Polish Wolin as a pilgrimage site for European neo-Nazis.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Nazi tendencies in military reenactment have so far been identified and analysed in events focussed on the early medieval era, closely connected to neopaganism and the black metal subculture.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, WWII-era German military reenactment seems to have been largely overlooked by scholars. It might simply be too easy to assume that reenactors who show interest in portraying Axis-German troops will also sympathise with the Nazi ideology. It is too early for a definitive judgment on this matter, which I will try to demonstrate by using the example of Hultschiner and Czech Estonian SS reenactors, who have been active in the Czech Republic over the past twenty years. The implied belief that, especially in the

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<sup>19</sup> The standard Wehrmacht army salute was replaced by a Hitler salute with the arm outstretched only after the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler’s life on 24 July 1944. Therefore, any Hitler salute given during WWII reenactments set in an earlier period is almost certainly inauthentic and suggests potential Nazi sympathies.

<sup>20</sup> Ralf Hoppadietz and Karin Reichenbach, ‘In Honor of the Forefathers. Archaeological Reenactment between History Appropriation and Ideological Mission. The Case of Ulfhednar’, in Agnew, Stach, and Tomann (eds), *Reenactment Case Studies*, 77–104.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Banghard also elaborates more on the related topic of neo-Nazi memory sites, see Karl Banghard, ‘Germanische Erinnerungsorte. Geahnte Ahnen’, in Martin Langebach and Michael Sturm, *Erinnerungsorte der extremen Rechten* (Wiesbaden, 2015), 61–77.

<sup>22</sup> The prolific use of Viking references and the overlap between neo-Nazi groups and Viking reenactment was documented for instance by Georg Schuppener, see Georg Schuppener, *The Germanic Tribes, The Gods and the German Far Right Today* (London–New York, 2022), 17. However, the present study by Přemysl Vacek, based on OH interviews with contemporary Czech Viking reenactors, does not confirm such findings. See Přemysl Vacek, ‘Czech Historical Reenactment of the Early Middle Ages: Initial Research Problems and Concepts’, *Národopisná revue/ Journal of Ethnology*, 5 (2023), 19–29.

case of authoritarian or totalitarian military traditions, an overlap necessarily exists between the reenactors' historical subjectivity and the military culture of the reenacted armed forces cannot, in my opinion, be accepted.

#### CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL INDIFFERENCE: CZECH ESTONIAN SS REENACTORS

Klub vojenské historie [Military history club, MHC] *Feldberg*, founded in 2005 and active in Central and Eastern Bohemia, was one of the first we approached. Research into its activities and interpretation of OH interviews with its members resulted in the first identification of the concept, which I later called "national indifference in military reenactment". In both interviews (life-story and semi-structured), *Feldberg* reenactors were visibly reluctant to define themselves in national terms openly. However, their commander, Jörg, constantly referred to the mixed ethnic background of his and other members' families: their grandparents were often both Czech and German, hailing from the northern borderlands.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the *Feldberg*, however, this dual national identity has been overshadowed by a more profound phenomenon. We can speak here of a type of national indifference based on the adoption of a specific third-party position, the purpose of which is primarily to avoid becoming embroiled in the immense complexity of debates around the Czech/German issues of alterity and historical conflict.<sup>24</sup> *Feldberg* members launched the Estonian phase of their MHC activities after discovering in their local archive a series of period photographs depicting Estonian soldiers in SS uniforms encamped in the central square of their hometown. At first, they could not explain their presence in the city. Subsequent research showed that the appearance of Estonian SS-men on Czech territory theme

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<sup>23</sup> Jörg, for example, created his reenactment nom de guerre from his German great-grandfather's surname. OH interviews with Jörg, conducted by Petr Wohlmuth, 24 June 2023 and 14 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> The production of historical meaning in the case of the *Feldberg*, excluding the phenomenon of national indifference, is dealt with in my recent paper, see Petr Wohlmuth, 'The Triad of Resistance, Defeat and Reconciliation: The Production of Historical Meaning in the Performances of Czech Military Reenactment on the Example of Estonian SS', *Národopisná revue/Journal of Ethnology*, 5 (2023), 3–18.



at the end of WWII is closely linked to the hitherto mostly ignored and suppressed issue of the “crimes of the victors”.

The reenactment of Estonian SS units, specifically the 20th SS Division,<sup>25</sup> mainly consisting of Estonian men conscripted by force, not ideological Nazi volunteers,<sup>26</sup> may at first sight seem odd in the Czech context. *Feldberg* primarily focuses on the final phase of the unit’s combat journey, i.e. the last few months of the war, during which the 20th Division attempted, under dramatic circumstances, to cross the Czech lands in several columns into American captivity. One of these columns, centred around the 45th Panzergrenadier Regiment under the command of Paul Maitla, gradually surrendered to insurgents around the towns of Mělník and Nymburk under a previous agreement for free passage westward and accepted disarmament by Czech Revolutionary Guards. However, local revolutionary units and committees did not respect the earlier pact and subjected several thousand Estonian prisoners to inhuman treatment, with an uncertain number, probably exceeding five hundred – including the regimental commander, Paul Maitla, a legendary character within official Estonian military culture – being tortured to death or executed without trial.<sup>27</sup> In Estonia, this incident is referred to as the Czech Hell [*Tšehhi põrgu*]; characterised as a severe war crime, it represents a highly traumatic episode in contemporary Estonian history.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2015, most military reenactment events organised or co-organised by the *Feldberg* have focused on the Estonian theme, and

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<sup>25</sup> 20th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (1st Estonian).

<sup>26</sup> Nuremberg Tribunal ruled in the case of the Estonian SS that men who were “drafted into [SS] membership by the State in such a way as to give them no choice in the matter” and who did not commit war crimes were exempt from being classified as members of a criminal organisation. Ruling of Nuremberg Tribunal, 30 Sept. 1946, *Nuremberg Trial Proceedings*, xxii (Yale), 516, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/imtproc\\_v22menu.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/imtproc_v22menu.asp) [Accessed: 15 May 2024]. More in: Tomas Hiio, ‘Combat in Estonia in 1944’, in Tomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, and Indrek Paavle (eds), *Estonia 1940–1945* (Tallinn, 2006), 1035–94; and Jochen Böehler and Robert Gerwarth (eds), *The Waffen SS: A European History* (Oxford, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Michal Plavec and Reigo Rosenthal, ‘Nymburská poprava. Pokus o rekonstrukci jedné historické události’, *Historie a vojenství*, 3 (2006), 64–70.

<sup>28</sup> See Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle (eds), *Estonia 1940–1945*, 1048–54; or Tiina Kirss, ‘When is the War Over? Ylo-Vesse Velvet’s Life Story and Surviving the Czech Hell’, in Ene Kõresaar (ed.), *Soldiers of Memory: World War II and Its Aftermath in Estonian Post-Soviet Life Stories* (Amsterdam–New York, 2011).

the former emphasis on the reenactment of Wehrmacht Heer has primarily fallen into the background. This has allowed them to gradually assume the role of a kind of a ‘third party’, commenting from a seemingly safe distance on the historical Czech-German antagonism set against the backdrop of the tragic events of the Nazi occupation and the Second World War. This was made possible by the historical circumstance of the triple occupation of Estonia during the war: first, Soviet occupation carried out under the provisions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact; second, German occupation between 1941 and 1944; and finally, Soviet occupation from 1944 to 1991.<sup>29</sup> In fact, both in their in-person (field) and audio-visual reenactments, which I analyse in detail in the abovementioned study,<sup>30</sup> the situation of the Czech lands and Estonia during WWII is understood in essentially identical terms, each being a small nation sandwiched between aggressive totalitarian powers – Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. These regimes have alternately invaded both countries, made continuous demands on the loyalty of the local population, and conducted campaigns of mass political reprisals and propaganda to assimilate them into their spheres of influence.

This position of a third party in the Czech WWII context is reinforced by the adoption of a ‘victim position’, in reference to the numerous war crimes committed by Czech insurgents against Estonian POWs in May – June 1945. A total of 12 OH interviews were conducted with *Feldberg* members; representations contained in virtually all of their narratives strongly support the conclusion that the adoption of numerous Estonian cultural elements and forms has led to the creation of a central cultural complex in the historical subjectivity of the *Feldberg* best identified as national indifference, which is clearly not revisionist in the sense of advocating Nazism or neo-Nazism. Complex meanings of similar significance are present in their audio-visual reenactment miniseries *Division 45*, which I analyse in detail in my recent paper.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to the “referral sampling” mechanism,

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<sup>29</sup> See Olaf Mertelsmann, Aigi Rahi-Tamm, ‘Cleansing and Compromise. The Estonian SSR in 1944–1945’, *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 2–3 (2008), 1–22; and also *eid.*, ‘Soviet mass violence in Estonia revisited’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, xi, 2–3 (2009), 307–22.

<sup>30</sup> Wohlmut, ‘The Triad of Resistance, Defeat and Reconciliation’.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* *Division 45* consists of five 20-minute episodes.

which finally bore fruit after a year-long effort of gaining the trust of the *Feldberg*, we were able to come in contact with other WWII-era German MHCs and gradually learnt that we were engaging with a loose grouping of MHCs for whom national indifference is even more immediately the defining feature of historical subjectivity.

#### CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL INDIFFERENCE: HULTSCHIN

The current region of Hlučín (known as Hulczyn or Hultschin in Polish and German, respectively),<sup>32</sup> or Prajzská (or belonging to Prussia – Preußen), is a well-defined minor historical region that now belongs to the Czech Republic. Its inhabitants, the so-called Moravci, nowadays speak predominantly a Lach ethnolect closely related to Czech and Polish but full of German loanwords. The past and present situation of the people of the Hultschin region has been the subject of numerous sociological and ethnographical studies, mainly in terms of their liminal position between the spheres of influence of several nation-states.<sup>33</sup> Even Tara Zahra specifically mentions Moravci (“the Hultschiners of Moravian Silesia”) as those who were “not so easily swallowed up by the forces of nationalization”, and for whom manifestations of national indifference are typical.<sup>34</sup> Petr Lozoviuk sees manifestations of ethnic indifference as an “anomalous” social organising principle while asserting that it does apply to the Hultschin region.<sup>35</sup>

The reasons for such an intense scholarly interest are apparent. The Hultschin region belonged to the Habsburg monarchy until it was lost to Prussia in 1742, after the War of Austrian Succession. It was then annexed in 1920 by Czechoslovakia, based on the highly

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<sup>32</sup> In Polish “Kraj hulczyński”, in German “Hultschiner Ländchen”.

<sup>33</sup> See František Znebežánek, ‘Proměny hodnotových orientací a sebehodnocení obyvatel Hlučínska a České republiky’, *Historická sociologie*, 2 (2016), 75–99; Helena Kubátová, ‘Collective Memory and Collective Identity of Hlučín Region Inhabitants in the 20th Century’, *Historická sociologie*, 1 (2016), 11–32.

<sup>34</sup> Tara Zahra, ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’, *Slavic Review*, lxxix, 1 (2010), 93–119, here at 96.

<sup>35</sup> Petr Lozoviuk, ‘K problematice “etnické indifference” (příklady z českého jazykového prostředí)’, *Český lid*, lxxxiv, 3 (1997), 207. See also Zdenko Maršálek, ‘Regional Identity under Pressure from the Centres. Silesians During World War II, the Clash of Loyalties and Marginalization of Regional Specifics in the Post-war Creation of Nationals Narratives’, *Ethnicity*, xvi, 1 (2021), 5.

questionable nationalist claim that the inhabitants of Hlučín were Germanized Czechs.<sup>36</sup> Hultschin then changed hands again, falling under the German sphere of influence in the form of Nazi Germany in 1938, and finally, after the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945, it was reintegrated into Czechoslovakia. The population of the Hultschin region gradually developed a national indifference in response to all these violent changes, which were always accompanied by an unwelcome *Kulturkampf* that clearly aimed to achieve the speedy assimilation of the local population into the socio-cultural frame of the given nation-state.<sup>37</sup>

As Zahra points out, the phenomenon of national indifference was typical for the Hultschin region as an expression of persistent resistance to (self-)identification with either the German or Czechoslovak/Czech nation-state and nation, as evidenced by several local studies. Both the Czechoslovak and German armies, which entered Hultschin in 1920 and 1938, respectively, were mostly understood as armies of occupation.<sup>38</sup> In 1919, for example, more than 90 per cent of adult Hultschiners petitioned against joining Czechoslovakia, but the authorities disregarded the petition.<sup>39</sup> The “nationally indifferent” and “rebellious” character of the people of the Hultschin region seemed to be confirmed in 1945, when the new Czechoslovak government introduced the category of an “unreliable population” subject to the so-called Great Retribution Decree [*Velký retribuční dekret* – Dekret 16/1945 Coll.], which established the post-war practice

<sup>36</sup> In 1920, locals mostly reported that their language was “Moravian” and considered Czech as a completely foreign language. Kubátová, ‘Collective Memory’, 17.

<sup>37</sup> In this sense, and especially in relation to military history and military reenactment, the Hultschin case bears a strong resemblance, for example, to the phenomenon found in the Polish Pomerania. See, for instance, the project ‘Virtualna wystawa: Dziadek z Wehrmachtu. Doświadczanie zapisane w pamięci’ [Virtual Exhibition: My Wehrmacht Grandfather. Experience Written in Memory] prepared by the Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej/Haus der Deutsch-Polnischen Zusammenarbeit, <https://muzeum.haus.pl/wystawa/dziadek-z-wermachtu/> [Accessed: 16 May 2024]. Another Czech case is the region of Vitorazsko (Weitraer Gebiet), see Matěj Spurný, ‘Reliability and the Border: The Discourse of the Czech Borderlands, 1945–49’, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, xlii, 1 (2013), 83–94.

<sup>38</sup> This is also an interpretation by Marcel Mečiar, who analysed a sizable corpus of narrative sources, see Marcel Mečiar, ‘Mezigenerační proměny sociálních identit obyvatel Hlučínska’, *Sociální studia*, 1–2 (2007), 97–114.

<sup>39</sup> Lozoviuk, ‘K problematice “etnické indiference”’, 207.

of retaliatory justice and launched a process of violent expulsion of the pre-war German population. Nevertheless, at that time, Hultschiners refused to identify themselves as German nationals, staunchly calling themselves Moravians, and subsequently, less than 10 per cent of the region's population was deported, thus creating the abnormal situation that de facto persists until today.<sup>40</sup> Even though Hultschiners were not expelled with the rest of the "German" population, they came to represent an often despised and marginalised minority, always suspect in the eyes of the Czechoslovak communist governments for the entire duration of the regime (1948–1989).<sup>41</sup>

Due to the vivid memory of German presence during the Second World War, the region's historical culture represents a source of historical subjectivity<sup>42</sup> for all active Axis-German military reenactment clubs operating in northern Moravia. The reason is apparent: after the return of Hultschin to the German Reich in 1938, nearly 12,000 local men were compulsorily conscripted into the Wehrmacht and other branches of German armed forces<sup>43</sup> and went on to fight on many fronts, the most fortunate of them returning home in 1945 or within the next few years, if they became Soviet prisoners of war.<sup>44</sup> In the

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<sup>40</sup> Ondřej Kolář and Hana Dostálová point out that out of 326 Hultschiners tried by the Extraordinary People's Court [Mimořádný lidový soud] in Opava after 1945, the vast majority were charged for their involvement in violent conflicts in the Czechoslovak borderlands in 1938, and sentences for WWII-related offences, except one, were much less serious in terms of the broader Czechoslovak context. Ondřej Kolář and Hana Dostálová, 'Obyvatelé Hlučínska před Mimořádným lidovým soudem v Opavě 1945–1948', *Historica – Sborník prací historických*, 52 (2017), 163–88.

<sup>41</sup> Hultschiners were officially labelled as "national guests" in Presidential Decree 33/1945 Coll. Mečiar, 'Mezigenerační proměny', 106.

<sup>42</sup> See Kubátová, 'Collective Memory', 12.

<sup>43</sup> More in: Aleš Binar, *Hospodářský a sociální vývoj Hlučínska v letech 1945–1989* (Opava, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> The extent of scholarly literature dealing with the experiences of these soldiers is fairly sizeable. In addition, there exists a documentation project called *Hultschiner Soldaten* (<https://hultschiner-soldaten.de>), collecting a variety of primary sources and providing free access to an online database of Hultschiner soldiers, containing more than 10,000 individual profiles. Moreover, in 2019, the Hlučínsko Museum and the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences held a conference entitled 'Ve dvou uniformách: nuceně mobilizovaní do Wehrmachtu a jejich účast v odboji' [In Two Uniforms: Mobilised to the Wehrmacht by Force and Their Participation in the Resistance], which dealt with the topic. The conference produced an eponymous collective monograph, see Zdenko Maršálek, Jiří Neminář

European context, this number represents a rather extreme proportion of the mobilised population, reaching almost 25 per cent. All our narrators emphasised their family heritage as the primary source of their interest in military history and reenactment itself.

MHCs *Drang* and *Kurland*,<sup>45</sup> two military reenactor clubs very active in the region, were extremely difficult to reach and interview at first. The reason is simple: they represent that elusive, almost hidden part of the Czech military re-enactment community, which organises strictly invitation-only private events inaccessible to the general public. Both MHCs are among the most renowned in the country and form the basis on which major private reenactment events are established. Their members are well-known within the community, but they deliberately and systematically avoid unwanted attention from outsiders. Gaining their trust was possible only thanks to the research done with narrators from *Feldberg*. All three MHCs found their activities in narratives that are in many ways in conflict with the official contemporary Czech military culture and memory and have long been marginalised or outright silenced.<sup>46</sup> The experience of men from the Czech lands (including the Hultschin region) forcibly mobilised into the Wehrmacht questions the main categories of meaning in this official memory.

The publicly discernible agency of these two Hultschin MHCs has been limited to producing a single audiovisual reenactment and a stylised photo session, both of which were published on their social media profiles.<sup>47</sup> We consider it a considerable success that our

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(eds), *Ve dvou uniformách: Nuceně mobilizovaní do Wehrmachtu a jejich účast v odboji (okolnosti, souvislosti, marginalizace)* (Hlučín, 2020). The topic is also dealt with more generally in the monograph: Zdenko Maršálek *et al.*, *V uniformě nepřítel: Čechoslováci a služba ve wehrmachtu* (Praha, 2024). See also Jiří Neminář, 'Feldgrau i Battledress: Hlučíňané v československé zahraniční armádě', *Slezský sborník*, 2 (2018), 75–96.

<sup>45</sup> The two MHCs have approximately 20 regular members.

<sup>46</sup> These narratives have only recently become the subject of scholarly interest, and in this regard, see Maršálek *et al.*, *V uniformě nepřítel*.

<sup>47</sup> There are a few other scattered audiovisual sources available on social media that document how member of both MHCs trained for the reenactment of Axis German paratroopers [*Fallschirmjäger*] by actually taking a paratrooper course, including practice jumps. A regional (web) TV station also recently broadcast several short news segments about the local Veterans' Day celebrations in one of the villages of the Hultschin region, where a few *Drang* members can be seen for a fraction of a second as part of a static period military camp reenactment.

intersubjectivity in the second OH interviews was already positive enough for us to conjecture the whereabouts of their private reenactments. Still, we learned off the record that de facto, the only way to learn more about them is to negotiate access to the next round of these events as participant observers. In interviews, we were able to accrue rather vague knowledge of these events at an excruciatingly slow pace.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the proper multi-modal analysis of those (private) reenactments, that is, the analysis of the performative practice of the production of their “assembled experience”,<sup>49</sup> is yet to be done. It represents a subject of our follow-up research.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the available audiovisual representations and conducted OH interviews allow us to address the question of the concept of national indifference, devised to encompass a significant segment of our narrators’ historical subjectivity.

OH narratives of *Drang* and *Kurland* members closely correspond to the narratives offered by members of the *Feldberg* regarding national indifference, yet they differ structurally. First and foremost, both during the interviews and unofficially, these reenactors willingly confirm that they consider themselves to be “from Hultschin”, *Prajáci* (local term for Hultschiners) or simply “from here” (Hultschin region).<sup>51</sup> All our narrators from Hultschin (Carl, Siegfried, Verner, Feldman, and Richter) have developed their subjectivities – and their interest in military reenactment – predominantly within the context of communicative (counter)memory, acquired through contacts with the

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<sup>48</sup> OH interview with Peter by Petr Wohlmuth, 2 Dec. 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Daugbjerg, ‘Patchworking the Past’, 728.

<sup>50</sup> Especially in this respect, there is no previous research to build on. How the past is restaged during these private events is still unclear. In terms of authenticity, the central event, which traditionally takes place in winter, is based on the affective bodily experience of the proverbial “Winterschlacht im Osten”. Most of the narrators mention the harsh environment with temperatures well below zero and emphasise the dangers of sleep deprivation and frostbite (see e.g. OH interview with Richter by Petr Wohlmuth, 23 Aug. 2023; OH interview with Feldman by Petr Wohlmuth, 23 Aug. 2023). The only other recorded narrative available is that the event is held in a remote region where communities display a traditionally anti-communist attitude and, according to some, the locals occasionally approach the Wehrmacht reenactors they happen to meet to express sympathies with them (OH interview with Peter by Petr Wohlmuth, 2 Dec. 2023).

<sup>51</sup> This was confirmed, for example, by Carl’s wearing of local lifestyle apparel featuring the labels “Prajáci” or “Prajská” during both interviews.

generation of their grandfathers – Hultschiners conscripted in the Wehrmacht (Carl) or *Feuerschutzpolizei* (Siegfried)<sup>52</sup> – and other veterans, who even went on to receive West German war pensions starting in the 1960s. The most prominent character among local veterans is Jan Gomola (1916–2021), who published his memoirs in 2009.<sup>53</sup> As Richter immediately notes when asked about the local memory: “Then there was that book, ‘I discovered Katyn’ [*Objevil jsem Katyň*].<sup>54</sup> Mainly because the author came from here, he’s a *Slonzák*<sup>55</sup> [...] He was drafted into the Großdeutschland division.<sup>56</sup> I have the book, signed by him. He lived to be 105 and died only two years ago”.<sup>57</sup> Richter also mentions Hultschiner Wehrmacht recruit Herbert Sněhota, another often-quoted name among local military reenactors, whose wartime career was the subject of an academic study.<sup>58</sup>

During the first, unstructured phase of the OH interviews, when the narrators were asked a general question about their reflections on the beginnings of their involvement in military reenactment, contacts with Wehrmacht veterans were immediately mentioned as one of their main inspirations. Siegfried states: “We still used to visit Jan Gomola four years ago, and he told wonderful stories [...] it was exceptional [...]”. Carl: “We used to visit him in person [...] in the local retirement

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<sup>52</sup> *Feuerschutzpolizei* was a branch of *Ordnungspolizei* tasked with fire protection and civil defence in the rear.

<sup>53</sup> Jan Gomola, *Objevil jsem Katyň* (Praha, 2009). The life narrative of Jan Gomola was extensively recorded by the Paměť národa [National Memory] foundation, see ‘Jan Gomola’, <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/gomola-jan-1916> [Accessed: 11 May 2024].

<sup>54</sup> Jan Gomola claimed that he was one of the first German soldiers to report the existence of mass graves in the Katyn area: “I was absolutely the first to discover the mass graves of Polish soldiers and officers. Of course, I didn’t know that at the time”, Gomola, *Objevil jsem Katyň*, 40.

<sup>55</sup> A person speaking an Upper Silesian (or Jablůnków Silesian) ethnolect as the mother tongue.

<sup>56</sup> Panzergrenadier Division Großdeutschland, one of elite Axis German WWII-era military formations.

<sup>57</sup> OH interview with Richter by Petr Wohlmuth, 23 Aug. 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Jiří Neminář, ‘Českoslovenští tankisté z wehrmachtu v Ostravské operaci’, *Vlastivědné listy Slezska a Severní Moravy*, 1 (2015), 1–3. Herbert Sněhota deserted from the Wehrmacht and was enlisted in the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps in the USSR in August 1944. He fell in late April 1945 near Opava (Troppau) while in the ranks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade.



home”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, at the time of the foundation of the two MHCs between 2000 and 2005, the region was, in the words of the reenactors, still full of old Second-World-War-era military artefacts that could be easily acquired. Carl, for example, recalls the discovery of iconic Wehrmacht helmets: “At that time [...] there were still a lot of German military helmets here. They were black, they were found at fire stations, and they were used as you would”.<sup>60</sup> Siegfried tells a very similar story, emphasising the initial source of his motivation coming from long conversations with his grandfather: “My grandpa and I hit it off, and he told me many stories from the war [...] So, I started collecting [militaria] [...] and I was happy to find perhaps a [Wehrmacht] bayonet somewhere in the cellar [...]”.<sup>61</sup> Reenactors thus became collectors as well, and in their eyes, they represent the last generation that still had the chance to buy historical local militaria at affordable prices. Today, the situation is quite different and the demand from antique dealers has caused prices to increase many times over.

However, the complex accounts of the wartime experience conveyed to reenactors by their grandfathers are of even greater significance.<sup>62</sup> Carl recalls: “[...] well, that’s what Grandpa said. They all served in the [German] army here [...] and you start to wonder how it all could have happened. And then we did research in archives and other places [...]”.<sup>63</sup> Siegfried adds: “I think the biggest breakthrough in thinking came when [...] you let go of the idea that the parties in a war conflict were [...] some like angels and some like demons [...] Suddenly you think [...] yes, if grandpa was there [in the Wehrmacht], he’s not automatically a dick [...] Why did he do it? [...] [H]ere 90 per cent of the people enlisted because they had to, because nobody gave them a choice”.<sup>64</sup> This moment is further presented as a sort of epiphany, affecting their

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<sup>59</sup> OH interview with Siegfried by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023; OH interview with Carl by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023.

<sup>60</sup> OH interview with Carl by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> OH interview with Siegfried by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Siegfried mentioned another important veteran character: “I had a classmate from Bolatec, and he had a grandfather who [...] at the end of the war served in a Panther [PzKpfw. V Panther tank] and he described [...] how they didn’t want to fight anymore [...] he told us all about it quite vividly”.

<sup>63</sup> OH interview with Carl by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023.

<sup>64</sup> OH interview with Siegfried by Petr Wohlmuth, 22 Aug. 2023.

future reenacting choices: “When you heard the stories, everything came together [...] it was an impulse and a symbol of some defiance’ for me to say, I’m not going to do [to reenact] the Russians that everyone says are cool. I don’t think our Germans [Hultschiners] had been any worse [...]”.<sup>65</sup>

This reasoning nevertheless differs from the historical revisionism present among certain historical reenactors of WWII-era German units, both in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Europe. Rather, their cultural contents can be understood in terms of moral ambiguity (relativity) of war, which is typical for many of our narrators. It was clear that Siegfried was conveying meanings laden with strong emotions: immediately after he was asked related questions, his narrative changed, became significantly more fluent, his paraverbal communication intensified, revealing a familiar subjective meaning, and the narrative began to layer very substantial meanings very densely in few long sentences.

A semi-professional YouTube video recently jointly produced by the *Drang* and the *Kurland*, which addresses crucial historical issues behind their reenactment practice, offers a symbolic key to their historical subjectivity.<sup>66</sup> The significance of the video is considerable. Although their home region (Hultschin, as well as Ostrava) was the scene of heavy fighting, especially in the first half of 1945, current military reenactment events rarely reflect this. This is also why *Drang* and *Kurland* members need to look for opportunities to participate in private events in other regions (they participate significantly, for instance, in invitation-only events co-organised by the *Feldberg*). Consequently, they are involved more in audio-visual reenactments or stylised photographic sessions, working explicitly with local historical topics.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> OH interview with Siegfried by Petr Wohlmuth, 22. Aug. 2023.

<sup>66</sup> The video has been extremely popular among Czech reenactors, receiving more than 400 likes on YouTube and almost 200 shares, which represent truly high numbers in the Czech context. The reenactors from MHCs *Drang*, *Kurland*, and *Feldberg* have quite extensive experience as extras in film productions. They have performed episodic roles as Axis German soldiers, for example, in the critically acclaimed Czech TV series *Bohéma*, depicting the world of film and theatre during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939–1945.

<sup>67</sup> For example, in 2022, a local art photographer organised a photo shoot of both MHCs featuring 25 reenactors, on the theme of the 1945 battles for Ostrava.

The video depicts the tragic WWII story of a Hultschin household. It opens with an elderly woman, Truda, flipping through a family photo album and narrating in detail, in a strongly Germanised sub-variant of the Lach dialect, the harrowing ordeal of her grandfather [*Opa*], father [*tata*] and uncle [*Onkel*], who were involuntarily drafted in Wehrmacht during WWII. The very beginning of the video represents an open declaration of the concept of national indifference: the central character-narrator, Truda, proclaims: “My name is Truda, and I would like to tell you something about our family [...] [We were Germans and] after the First World War we became Czechoslovaks [...] in 1938 we became Germans again [...]”.<sup>68</sup>

As a subject [*chtop*] of the Third Reich, *Opa* was the first to fight for his country. Truda intentionally uses the Lach ethnolect term *chtop*, in the strongly archaic sense of a ‘subject’, a serf, which carries clear connotations of harsh subordination and involuntary servitude.<sup>69</sup> The video then shows *Opa* reading the draft order, shaking his head disapprovingly, and looking bewildered at his wife, who tries to comfort him. Then, in the next scene, *Opa* is already dressed in a Wehrmacht uniform and on his way out. His wife says goodbye to him and hugs him. Truda says: “Two years later, it was *tata*’s and *Onkel*’s turn. It almost broke my mother’s heart when she said goodbye to my father. That was the last time we saw him. *Oma* lost all the men of her life that day”. Truda’s narration emphasises again the complete absence of heroism. Commenting on the contents of the letters from her father and uncle, she mentions that “They never wanted to talk about the front. Maybe they wanted to forget [...]”.

Truda continues: “There was bad news, which everyone feared [...] *Opa* Franz fell”. In the following scene, *Onkel* reads a Wehrmacht

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The resulting photoset is highly regarded in the reenactor community for its raw, gritty, “authentic” atmosphere. The reenactors used a wide variety of small arms here, including MG42 machine guns, Panzerschreck (Raketenpanzerbüchse 54) and Panzerfaust anti-tank weapons replicas, as well as light wheeled equipment: motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles.

<sup>68</sup> After 1945, Hultschiners were officially classified as Czechs, without a choice. Kubátová cites similar statements, also echoed by Mečiar: “When the Czechs took us, we became Czech [...] but don’t listen to the Czech authorities, ‘Die Tschechei’ won’t be your homeland for long [...] they told us in school [...]”; Mečiar, ‘Mezigenerační proměny’, 99.

<sup>69</sup> See similar narratives in Kubátová, ‘Collective Memory’, 24.

military death notice, featuring a photograph of his father, his hands shaking. The narrative goes on to say that the news of his father's death caused him to fundamentally question his involvement in the German armed forces. Truda's commentary continues by saying: "He didn't know why he had to be there in the first place, why he had to fight side by side with his loved ones against his other loved ones. He had to lose his loved ones just for someone else's ideals [...] And which side is he supposed to be on? He said he didn't know how to go on [...]"

The subsequent scenes present the inevitable outcome of this reasoning: *Onkel's* desertion. He walks out of the woods with his hands above his head, holding a white handkerchief in one of them. He was discovered by a reconnaissance unit of the 1st Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade (a part of the British 21st Army Group). Soldiers in typical British battledress (No. 5 Uniform) with Czechoslovak insignia immediately take him prisoner, and Truda comments: "In the fighting for Dunkirk, he surrendered, deserted, or as he said – saved himself". With equal emotions, however, Truda adds immediately afterwards, "But my father stayed in the German uniform... So many wasted lives, so much blood in that black land [...]", emphasising once again her understanding of the fratricidal nature of the war.

The situation thus comes to a dramatic, violent end. *Onkel* switches sides and becomes a soldier in the Czechoslovak army-in-exile. The following scene shows *Onkel* and Truda's father meeting on a field road in June 1945: *tata* in the tattered remains of his Wehrmacht uniform, *Onkel* in the brand-new uniform of the Czechoslovak army in the West. They rush towards each other, greet each other warmly and embrace. Truda adds: "He and *Onkel* met not far from our forest [...] my father was returning from the American POW camp [...] he was all beat up [...] but happy to see me again after all these years". But Truda's house is occupied by Soviet soldiers.

What follows is a scene depicting a group of heavily armed Soviets drinking vodka in the yard. Truda's father enters the yard, and one of the Soviet soldiers, "drunk as shit", spots the German uniform, pulls out a pistol, throws Truda's father violently to the ground, and shoots him on the spot. *Onkel* tries in vain to intervene, then just runs up to his dead brother, hugs him and shouts at the Soviet soldiers, but all is in vain. "A short distance from his destination [...]"

a short distance from home [...] after all that suffering, the war took my father from us [...] a month after the war ended". Truda's voice breaks. The film comes to the end of its dramatic arc.

The final minute of the video consists of Truda's monologue against the backdrop of her entering the cemetery in the village of Ludgeřovice (Ludgierzowitz/Ludgierzowice) in the Hultschin region, laying flowers, lighting a candle, and crossing herself by the memorial to the fallen of the Second World War. In the voice-over, she adds: "Through the uniform, we cannot see who has a heart and who is crying for them [fallen soldiers] back at home [...] The pain is still the same [...]". Then her voice breaks: "My *tata* was the biggest hero to me, no matter what uniform he wore".

The production of historical meaning here is clear: in her interpretation, the uniform is merely an artificial screen imposed by nation-states, covering over individual – and real – human subjectivities. According to Truda's commentary, for Hultschiners, any uniform of any power was alien. The local men were forced to wear them and saw no purpose in their military service – and neither did Truda, who outlived them all. This is very different to the common tendency in military reenactment, which, according to Daugbjerg, serves to "honour the war participants of both sides equally" in the spirit of a "wider discourse of heroism and purity", as Truda's narrative is distinctly anti-heroic: neither *Opa*, *Onkel*, nor *tata* wanted to fight, whatever the reason.<sup>70</sup> In terms of the hierarchy of levels of meaning and historical subjectivity, this type of narrative can be placed alongside the familiar anti-heroic narratives of war veterans, such as those from Alistair Thomson's *ANZAC Memories*, particularly the prototypical narrative of the soldier Fred Farrell.<sup>71</sup>

It is through Truda's voice that *Drang* and *Kurland* reenactors speak to the audience.<sup>72</sup> This is again highly unusual in terms of the prevailing

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<sup>70</sup> Mads Daugbjerg, 'Battle', in Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies* (New York, 2020), 25–8.

<sup>71</sup> Thomson, *ANZAC Memories*, esp. Chapter 3: 'Memories of War', section 'Fred Farrall', 107–20.

<sup>72</sup> Truda's narrative passages in the video are, of course, interspersed with more 'typical' reenactor scenes, showcasing the capabilities of the *Drang* reenactors, since *tata* and *Onkel* fought in an infantry squad. The reenactors dig trenches, fire various small arms, including a MG42 machine gun, face artillery fire simulated by pyrotechnics, etc.

androcentric bias, typical for military reenactment. Nearly all the military reenactments in Czech lands communicate the essentially masculine values of aggression and dominance. The video is, in fact, a story of the gradual destruction of a household or a family by nation-states fighting each other and using local men merely as cannon fodder.<sup>73</sup> The story is told from the subjective but authoritative standpoint of a local elderly woman, which is again rather unusual in terms of contemporary WWII military reenactment.<sup>74</sup> However, it seems that this could be part of what Juliane Tomann identifies as a recent tendency toward gender inclusivity in military reenactment, weakening the usual idealisation of masculinity,<sup>75</sup> or reenactments transcending the usual emphasis on “frontline fighting”, where the role of women is considered secondary.<sup>76</sup>

The narrative presented in the video consistently pits ‘us’ against ‘them’: ‘us’ from Hultschin, resisting ‘them’ who try to force ‘us’ to subscribe to some foreign nationality, to some alien social order, some externally, violently imposed order of things. The narrative describes Hultschiners opposing both German and Czech attempts at including them in their respective national communities. In the video, the only symbol treated with respect is the pendant in the shape of a Christian cross, worn by the men around their necks. The men of Hultschin simply do not fit any of the uniforms: neither German nor Czechoslovak (even if they swap the one for the other after they

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<sup>73</sup> Truda’s narrative corresponds to similar narratives collected by Kubátová, e.g. “Did a lot of people from the Hlučín Region die? – Many, in my family alone, my mother’s brother, and two brothers of my father fell [...] My father [...] only returned in 1946”, Kubátová, ‘Collective Memory’, 20.

<sup>74</sup> Women within Czech military reenactment still struggle for recognition. As far as WWII reenactment is concerned, there is one all-female Axis German MHC, whose place within the reenactment community remains precarious. The MHC has already been involved in several reenactments, including large-scale annual events such as *Truppenübung* (in Lešany near Prague), but a number of male reenactors express their disapproval of their presence, regarding their “understanding of authenticity as historical accuracy and fidelity”. See Juliane Tomann, ‘You can’t just put men in the field and be accurate: Women in American Revolutionary War Reenactment’, in Agnew, Stach, and Tomann (eds), *Reenactment Case Studies*, 219. This issue is the subject of further research within our project. No relevant texts have been published in the Czech academia to date.

<sup>75</sup> Tomann, ‘You can’t just put men’, 217–218.

<sup>76</sup> Baraniewska-Olszewska, *World War II Historical Reenactment in Poland*, 141.

desert). Their only valid and valuable identity is their centuries-long close-knit connection to their land, their faith, and their families, all conceptualised in a clearly pre-modern way. Yet another symbol of this long-term ambivalence is that during the social transformation after 1989, up to one-third of the inhabitants of the Hultschin region successfully acquired German citizenship by claiming German parents and grandparents. Metaphorically speaking, they carry their liminal character in their pockets in the form of two citizenship ID cards issued by two different nation-states.<sup>77</sup>

The main element of how the past is restaged in the video can perhaps be described as an affection of contested loyalty. The past is presented as a series of violent, traumatic, and nonsensical occurrences resulting from the never-ending external pressure to change allegiance, to switch to the “right side”. In this sense, *Drang* and *Kurland*’s audiovisual reenactments carry meanings of both trauma and nostalgia. They express the deep sorrow caused by the Second World War, but also the longing for the “old” and traditional pre-1914 social order.

The concept of national indifference represents a key cultural form structuring the historical subjectivities of all our narrators from the Hultschin region. Here are the key sub-concepts present in recorded OH narratives and in the analysed video:

a) The liminal historical and socio-cultural character of local Wehrmacht veterans (in terms of their ethnicity), who wore German uniforms during WWII. In this sense, the reenactors draw on the dominant historical cultural tradition of Hultschiners rejecting classification into the dominant nationality exercising rule over Hultschin at the given historical period.

b) The fundamentally involuntary entry of Hultschiners into WWII-era German armed forces.

c) Their staunch loyalty to their Hultschiner heritage, and the local traditions of mutual aid and solidarity superseding loyalty to any nation state and its armed forces, which was reflected, among other things, in the numerous desertions of Hultschiner conscripts from the Wehrmacht.<sup>78</sup> The very act of desertion from the Wehrmacht is

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<sup>77</sup> Mečiar, ‘Mezigenerační proměny’, 111.

<sup>78</sup> Zdenko Maršálek argues that in the later stages of WWII, almost 30 per cent of the 1st Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade in the West (part of UK

not condemned by the narrators or in the video. On the contrary, it is seen as an expression of loyalty to native land and family.

d) The concept of moral ambiguity (relativity) of war as an inherently destructive and unjust form of collective violence which leaves little room for moral autonomy and ethical action, regardless of affiliation to a particular armed force.

#### THE CONCEPT OF THE 'COMMON MAN'

The concept of national indifference seems strongly defining for *Feldberg*, and even more for *Drang* and *Kurland* reenactors, shaping their historical subjectivity as military reenactors. However, there is one more concept present in the self-image of military reenactors: the concept of an ordinary soldier or a 'common man', previously analysed in detail by Mads Daugbjerg, Jenny Thompson, and others.<sup>79</sup> There is a distinct variant of this concept, present in nearly all OH narratives and audio-visual reenactments made by all MHCs involved. The concept of the common man/soldier points to what Daugbjerg sees as a legitimisation narrative (within the Czech context, perhaps exculpatory) designed to explain why certain military reenactors keep wearing a uniform that belongs to some decidedly authoritarian or totalitarian military tradition. For instance, reenactors of Confederate units of the American Civil War "deflected" Daugbjerg's questions concerning such issues as slavery, made during his field research (participant observation), "with responses circling around the celebration of the typical, average, or common man, uninformed in politics and merely 'fighting for what he believed was right'".<sup>80</sup> Examples of the use of this concept in the video have already been discussed here. Regarding the OH interviews, our narrators mostly referenced this concept without any intersubjective prompts on my part and attached only a slightly different meaning to it. "What I'm trying to show [...] is that most of those soldiers were ordinary people who were told:

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armed forces), were ex-Wehrmacht Hultschiners and deserters of similar origin. Zdenko Maršálek, *Česká, nebo československá armáda? Národnostní složení československých vojenských jednotek v zahraničí v letech 1939–1945* (Praha, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> Jenny Thompson, *War Games: Inside the World of Twentieth-century War Reenactors* (Washington, 2004); Daugbjerg, 'Patchworking the Past', 727–41.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 727.



Look, you're just going to die somewhere, and you don't even know why. Off you go! [...] I just don't like ideological explanations", said Richter during our interview.<sup>81</sup> Verner provided a substantially similar interpretation when referring to Hultschiner conscripts: "The German army was not an army of some [superior] Aryans or anything like that [...] they were normal people you would meet on the street today, who were just caught up in the war. It was the same on all sides".<sup>82</sup>

This reasoning strongly resonates with the concept of the 'universal soldier' typical of the military history of a conservative bent, as highlighted by John A. Lynn in his seminal volume *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, in what concerns reenactment studies, and even more prominently within the larger family of cultural studies, including the cultural history of war, it is quite clear that even "ordinary people" often undergo severe re-socialisation after their entry into the armed forces and gradually acquire capabilities to act in utterly "extraordinary" manner, as Christopher R. Browning convincingly shows in his seminal work *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*.<sup>84</sup> However, the Hultschiner veterans mentioned by our narrators did not belong to any *Einsatzkommando*. Most of them were rank-and-file Wehrmacht soldiers who fought at the front and were not prosecuted for war crimes after the war.<sup>85</sup>

Given the dominance of an essentially anti-heroic narrative in the video, it is clear that even here the concept of the "common man" is not used to legitimise any authoritarian or criminal historical military traditions, but refers predominantly to the shared elements of historical subjectivity of the war veterans and our narrators, who are all Hultschiners.

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<sup>81</sup> OH interview with Richter, conducted by Petr Wohlmuth, 23 Aug. 2023.

<sup>82</sup> OH interview with Verner, conducted by Petr Wohlmuth, 23 Aug. 2023.

<sup>83</sup> John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (New York, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).

<sup>85</sup> For instance a number of war crimes are attributed to the Großdeutschland division, to which Jan Gomola belonged: in 1940 in France (several large-scale massacres of French POWs belonging to African colonial units) and in 1941 in Yugoslavia (reprisal killings during anti-partisan operations). For the France massacres, see Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge, 2006). Jan Gomola did not belong to the division during these events.

## CONCLUSION

The concepts of national indifference and of the common man not only represent a vital part of the content of historical subjectivity (a proverbial pillar of self-assessment) for all *Feldberg*, *Drang*, and *Kurland* narrators, but also serve as a powerful legitimisation tool, helping all three MHCs gain recognition and trust among non-Axis WWII reenactors, which allows them to participate as opposing forces in private military reenactments. These reenactments, organised according to a loose tactical agreement, arguably represent the ‘Holy Grail’ of military reenactment practice in Czech lands in general. As I already mentioned, those most attractive with the best reputation have long been held completely out of the public eye, organised by two MHC confederations: on the Axis German side, *Unsere Kompanie* [Our Company], in which the *Drang* and the *Kurland* play a key role, and on the Czechoslovak side, *Čtvrtý prapor úderný* [4th Assault Battalion], an amalgam of various MHCs reenacting Eastern Front Czechoslovak WWII units. Regular participation in these quintessentially prestigious events is the desired goal of most WWII reenactor groups, not only because these invitation-only private events are organised on the sites of WWII historical battlefields, both in Slovakia and Czech lands. As Verner describes it: “People [...] just want to experience for themselves the experiences of those veterans, for example, that are just described in books somewhere”. Being in the same places as the veterans is essential for our narrators.

Non-Axis reenactors, especially those representing US and Czechoslovak and Soviet Eastern Front units, naturally need to find an opposing force for their reenactment events – but one they can trust, regularly cooperate with, and one that will not cause trouble because of a neo-Nazi political orientation or public displays thereof by its members.<sup>86</sup> Ongoing research also continues to reinforce the hypothesis

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<sup>86</sup> Despite the fact that both Hultschiner MHCs enjoy a high reputation among non-Axis WWII reenactors and have long been accepted, Richter said there are still minor subjective problems during reenactments: “Richter: Sometimes even in that unit there were problems with some people who didn’t want to talk to me at all, just because I was wearing a German uniform [...]. PW: But they needed you as a reenactor of the enemy during that event [...]. Richter: It was fine during the action itself, but when we sat down together afterwards, it wasn’t. He just didn’t want to talk to us at all. But fortunately that’s only a smaller percentage of people.

that there is a rather sharp dividing line between reenactors of German WWII-era units who pursue the subject for the love of military history and a desire to come to terms with conflicting aspects of their family or local heritage and those whose strong motivation stems from an ideological sympathy for Nazism. The combination of national indifference and common man representations seem to have ensured that the *Drang* and the *Kurland* have been interpreted as reliable and acceptable within the Czech reenactment scene.

Last but not least, the findings of this OH-based research also tend to support the conclusions of recent large-scale quantitative sociological surveys in the Hultschin region, which focused on the historical comparison of the development of value orientations and self-assessment.<sup>87</sup> František Znebežánek concluded that local traditionalism still plays a vital role in the value orientations of the inhabitants of the Hultschin region, differing significantly from the rest of the Czech Republic. The primary influence is its 'historical experiences', most strongly involved with the oldest age cohorts.<sup>88</sup> The strong presence of the concept of national indifference in local military reenactment groups can thus be understood in this context because military reenactors derive their historical subjectivity primarily from the communicative memory shared in their contacts with their grandparents in particular, and with WWII-era Wehrmacht veterans in general.

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Most people sit down with us afterwards, have a drink, have fun, it's cool. But, unfortunately, there are people on their side and our side who won't talk to someone just because they're wearing a different uniform. They're similar in that way".

<sup>87</sup> Znebežánek, 'Proměny hodnotových orientací', 75–99.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. The same position is taken by Mečiar, see Mečiar, 'Mezigenerační proměny', 110.

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