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RUMOURS IN THE PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA: 100 DAYS FROM THE LIFE OF AN OCCUPIED COUNTRY

Abstract

The article discusses rumours recorded by the German Security Service [Sicherheitsdienst, SD] in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia between 1 January and 10 April 1943. The author pursues quantitative and qualitative analysis and discusses rumours shared by Czech and German inhabitants of the country. The analysis results indicate that early 1943 saw a real crisis of confidence in the state and the Nazi regime among Germans living in the Protectorate. The Czech public opinion had likely reached a turning point, still highly afraid of German repressions, but also with a growing hope for the defeat of the Reich and a swift end to the war.

Keywords: rumours, gossip, Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, occupation, *Sicherheitsdienst*, public opinion

On 8 April 1943, the Prague Central of the Secret Service of the *SS Reichsführer* [Sicherheitsdienst des *SS-Reichsführers*, SD-Leitabschnitt Prag] reported that “a rumour had been circulating among the Czechs in the Hradec Králové region that the Führer had suffered a serious nervous breakdown and his doctors recommended he take rest in Switzerland. Once he returns from his rest leave, a government reshuffle will occur in Germany. The new government will be headed by Baron von Neurath”. The following paragraph of the top-secret situation report, available only to the highest Nazi dignitaries in Bohemia, relayed another rumour: there have been talks around Prague that the Germans have pressured Emanuel Moravec, minister of the Czech

government of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, to form a volunteer legion to join ranks with the Wehrmacht.¹

Similar accounts appear in an abundance of reports of the *Sicherheitsdienst*. The Nazi intelligence carefully recorded rumours and gossip circulating in the country about the current military and political situation. SD functionaries devoted copious amounts of space and attention to discussing and interpreting them. This should come as no surprise: in a totalitarian state such as the Third Reich, conversations overheard by spies and informers of the secret police provided the authorities with a unique perspective on actual public sensibilities. Obviously, what the *Sicherheitsdienst* was most interested in within the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were the attitudes of the occupied Czechs. Still, SD functionaries did not lose sight of their compatriots.

As familiar as reports of the Prague central of the SD are to historians, they are yet to be used as a source on rumours circulating under occupation. As far as I know, no one has even engaged in studying this phenomenon in the territories of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Yet, frequent mentions in memoirs of various unverified information circulated throughout the country during the war justify the assumption that rumours played a vital social role in this context.² The same is suggested by the analogous case of the findings of scholars analysing rumours in occupied Warsaw or the American society and the US armed forces during the Second World War.³ It should be added that rumours and gossip have been an

¹ Národní archiv, Úřad říšského protektora (hereinafter: NA, ÚŘP), k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 41/43 (8 April 1943).

² Jan Slavík, *Válečný deník historika*, ed. Jaroslav Bouček (Praha, 2008), 71, 101, 124, 212, 217, 239, 260, 333, 357, 360, and 387; Bedřich Golombek, *Co nebude v dějepise* (Brno, 1945), 204, 212–13, 254, 274–6, 290, 300–3, and 315; Boris Valníček, *Špatné časy pro život. Jak jsme přežívali válku* (Třebíč, 2012), 63 and 86.

³ The subject of rumours in the occupied Warsaw, primarily in the context of the outlook of its inhabitants, is discussed in Tomasz Szarota, *Okupowanej Warszawy dzień poprzedni* (Warszawa, 2010), 253, 404–26. The phenomenon is discussed in detail in a thesis written at the University of Warsaw under the supervision of Jerzy Kochanowski; see Katarzyna Brańska, *Plotka w okupowanej Warszawie 1939–1945* (Warszawa, 2007). I would like to thank the advisor for sharing a copy of the work with me. On rumours in the US context, see Robert H. Knapp, 'A Psychology of Rumor', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8 (1944), 22–37; Theodore Caplow, 'Rumors in War', *Social Forces*, xxv (1947), 298–302.

object of interest for many social sciences, resulting in an entire series of theoretical studies.⁴

The credibility of the reports of the SD seems to be a difficult question. Some historians dispute the objective nature of German police sources, claiming that they tend to overemphasise the Czech enmity toward the Reich while downplaying the extent of dissatisfaction among German inhabitants of the Protectorate.⁵ This deformation may have been caused by the radical nationalist attitudes of the functionaries tasked with compiling the reports, as well as by the pursuit of recognition from their superiors. It can also be assumed that the *Sicherheitsdienst* was vitally interested in maintaining a sense of threat from the Czechs since that allowed it to pose as the diligent protector of the interests of the Greater German Reich.

Many of the reports are unquestionably marked by clear tendentiousness. In particular, the *Sicherheitsdienst* depicted the Czech intelligentsia as chauvinist and 'incurably Czech', while characterising the popular classes as potentially susceptible to the national-socialist influence.⁶ Thus, it provided German authorities with proof that their policies toward the Czechs were correct. However, the manipulations that SD functionaries engaged in seem to have taken place mainly on the level of interpretation and not the selection of facts. Concealment of information or deliberate falsification were not in the interest of the Nazi Reich nor its protective guardian, the *Sicherheitsdienst*.

The same applies to rumours; the very fact that so many have been mentioned in reports makes it highly unlikely that the Prague central of the SD engaged in selection. At most, it could have sought

⁴ See, e.g., Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966); Dan E. Miller, 'Rumor: An Examination of Some Stereotypes', *Symbolic Interaction*, 4 (2005), 505–19; Ravi Bhavnani, Michael G. Findley, and James H. Kuklinski, 'Rumor Dynamics in Ethnic Violence', *Journal of Politics*, 3 (2009), 876–92; Heng Chen, Yang K. Lu, and Wing Suen, 'The Power of Whispers: A Theory of Rumor, Communication and Revolution', *International Economic Review*, 1 (2016), 89–116; Ward E. Jones, 'Rumor, Reproach and the Norms of Testimony', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 3 (2005), 195–212. For a more popular perspective, see Klaus Thiele-Dohrmann, *Unter dem Siegel der Verschwiegenheit die Psychologie des Klatsches* (Berlin, 1975).

⁵ See, e.g., Hsi-Huey Liang, *Mezi Berlínem a Prahou. Střední Evropa ve vzpomínkách čínského historika*, transl. Petra Kůsová (Praha, 2006), 290–301.

⁶ NA, ÚRP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 25/43 (2 March 1943).

to further highlight some by devoting a separate section of the paper to them, while others were reduced to a brief mention in the text. Yet, it cannot be excluded that the network of SD informers was not dense enough to capture all of the rumours circulated among the Protectorate inhabitants. For this reason, the information relayed in the reports of the SD should be treated as a representative, though likely an incomplete set.

An analysis of all of the reports of the Prague central of the *Sicherheitsdienst* from the perspective of the rumours it recorded would substantially exceed the bounds of this article. During the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, SD compiled at least 1045 situation reports. More than 90 per cent of them survive; the least complete set comes from the last year of the war. Depending on the period, documents of this kind amounted to between a handful and a dozen pages and appeared every two or three days. The first came out on 1 June 1939; the last surviving bears the date of 20 March 1945.

Due to the extensive source material, the analysis presented in this article is limited to rumours recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* between 1 January and 10 April 1943. The hundred days selected for a study serve as a sample for a preliminary review of the scale and characteristics of the phenomenon. The choice of the period was determined by the fact that the internal conditions in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were relatively stable at the time. The brutal repressions implemented during the preceding year, following the successful attempt on the life of *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich, proved effective in subduing the Czechs, and the policy of the German occupiers was somewhat softened in response. At the same time, the period abounded in crucial events on the front lines of the Second World War: on 2 February, the Wehrmacht suffered defeat at Stalingrad; American and British troops steadily pushed the Axis powers out of North Africa; and Allied air forces continued their bombing campaign against cities in the Reich. It seemed reasonable to suspect that news of these events would have filtered into the rumours circulating in the Protectorate.

The 43 situational reports of the *Sicherheitsdienst* under consideration here mention 257 rumours in total circulating among the Czech and German populations of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia during the period in question, spread by word of mouth

from one person to another in casual conversations.⁷ German institutions referred to them as *Gerüchte*; they called the oral transmission of rumours ‘whispered propaganda’ (*Flüsterpropaganda*). In the eyes of German authorities, engaging in such activities amounted to insubordination or even resistance to the Reich, if only because they involved spreading information heard on enemy radio stations.⁸ Yet, combat against the spreading of rumours was doomed to fail. As an American scholar observed during the war, a campaign of this kind has almost always reinforced the phenomena it was aimed against.⁹

The limits of what counted as a rumour, according to the *Sicherheitsdienst*, were somewhat flexible. Robert H. Knapp, a psychologist engaged in developing countermeasures to this phenomenon in the US during World War II, defined a rumour as “a proposition for the belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification”.¹⁰ From this perspective, speculation about the current military situation would also qualify as rumour – though SD functionaries applied markedly different criteria when their countrymen were involved as opposed to Czechs. At least as much is suggested by the reports of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, which often describe Germans voicing concern about the current situation on the fronts, while Czechs are typically criticised for gossiping and spreading defeatism.¹¹ Yet, it is not unimaginable that both nationalities acted in very similar ways, expressing anxiety over an uncertain future. The tendentious nature of the descriptions

⁷ Hereinafter, the quantitative analysis is based on SD reports nos. 1-43/43 (5 Jan. 1943 – 13 April 1943), collected at the National Archive in Prague. I have organised the rumours registered in them in a table, found in the appendix. Archival signatures of specific reports are cited whenever they are referenced in the text.

⁸ See, e.g., NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 10/43 (25 Jan. 1943).

⁹ Caplow, ‘Rumors’, 300.

¹⁰ Knapp, ‘A Psychology of Rumor’, 22.

¹¹ The SD report of 25 January 1943, for instance, states: “The German population now finds itself completely under the influence of events on the Eastern Front. OKW reports, as well as other pieces of information – especially from the Stalingrad region – are followed keenly and with trepidation. The German forces at Stalingrad are universally believed to be lost. In addition, it is being said that this supposition is only confirmed by the recurring mentions of their heroic struggle in the reports”. Further on, the same report proclaims: “For the Czechs, news of events on the Eastern Front only confirm what they have been gossiping about for the longest time. Whispered propaganda is universally taken for gospel truth”; NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 10/43 (25 Jan. 1943).

leads to a situation where statements are classified as rumours based on the context in which they are presented in SD reports.

Of the 257 rumours recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* between 1 January and 10 April 1943, only 31 (12 per cent) were shared by Germans; the other 226 (88 per cent) – by Czechs; 2 were shared by both Germans and Czechs. It is easy to calculate that, in the period in question, Germans in the Protectorate generated one rumour per roughly three days, while among the Czechs, more than two rumours a day were registered on average.

Should this mean that the informal channels of communication operated primarily among the Czechs? It seems likely even if, in the period under consideration, there was, on average, 3.14 rumour per 100,000 Czech inhabitants of the country, and 7.75 per 100,000 Germans. (The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was inhabited by 7.2 million Czechs and only about 400,000 Germans).¹² Those numbers do not necessarily suggest, however, that Germans gossiped twice as much as Czechs did. SD functionaries could have simply shown more diligence in observing attitudes among their fellow citizens because they had a denser network of informers among them. The comparative scale of the phenomenon was probably determined not as much by the size of the two communities but by their political situation: Czechs had simply more reasons to spread war rumours because they less believed in the official news. On the other hand, it is undeniably correct that during the period in question, Germans spread unverified rumours almost as eagerly as Czechs did. This is proven, if indirectly, by the accusations levelled in several of the reports against dispersed German populations [*Streudeutsche*]. By the reckoning of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, these persons were particularly susceptible to the influence of the Czech element they lived among and became an undesirable conduit for rumours between the two nations.¹³

The SD reports under consideration make only two direct references to rumours circulating among Czechs and Germans alike. The first concerned the eruption of panic among local German authorities in Moravská Ostrava, which took place purportedly on 23 January

¹² Adolf Bohmann, *Das Sudetendeutschtum in Zahlen* (München, 1959), 194.

¹³ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 5/43 (14 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 15/43 (6 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943).

in response to alarmist news from the Eastern Front; the other emerged in early March in Brno and concerned a supposed mass escape of Allied prisoners of war from a camp within the Reich.¹⁴ Both confirm the existence of an exchange of informal information between the Czech and German populations of the Protectorate, which the authorities were powerless to control.

Most German rumours – 18 out of 31 – referred to the worsening military situation of the Axis powers. According to the typology proposed by Knapp, these should be classified as ‘fear rumours’ expressing the hidden fears of the community.¹⁵ In the case of Czech Germans, the vast majority of rumours of this kind reflected anxiety over an impending catastrophe on the Eastern Front, which seems pretty unsurprising given that the Wehrmacht has suffered its worst defeat in that theatre since the start of the war during the same period. For Germans living in Bohemia and Moravia, it became apparent that ‘there was something to’ rumours of defeat spread by the Czechs.¹⁶ It was said that a special envoy from Hitler himself was to come to the Protectorate to institute a draft of all German men capable of bearing arms.¹⁷ Soon after the surrender of the 6th Army at Stalingrad, there was even a report that Germans from the Reich had begun to abandon Prague in great haste.¹⁸

Speculation about a catastrophe on the Eastern Front was followed closely by news of the reverses the Axis powers suffered in Africa and of the ferocious bombardment of German cities, as well as rumours about the deepening conflict with Italy and Turkey’s entry into the war on the side of the Allies.¹⁹ One of these rumours claimed Italians had begun erecting fortifications in the Brenner Pass against Germany; stories were also making the rounds about Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop’s trip to Rome with the supposed goal of turning the heir to the Italian throne, Prince Umberto, to the Reich’s

¹⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 10/43 (25 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943).

¹⁵ Knapp, ‘A Psychology of Rumor’, 24.

¹⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 5/43 (14 Jan. 1943).

¹⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, report 14/43 (4 Feb. 1943).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, and 16/43 (9 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 37/43 (30 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, reports 38/43 (1 April 1943) and 42/43 (10 April 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 41/43 (8 April 1943).

side.²⁰ Some German inhabitants of the Protectorate allowed themselves to express obvious defeatism. They stated that the war has been irretrievably lost and that society is entirely exhausted by the never-ending conflict.²¹ Interestingly, these rumours continued to spread even after Minister Joseph Goebbels' famous speech in the Berlin Sportpalast on 18 February, in which he announced the beginning of the total war.²²

Germans were far less likely to share unverified information about an impending improvement of the wartime fortunes of the Reich, what Knapp identifies as 'pipe-dream rumours', which express the wishes and hopes of the society in which they circulate.²³ The SD noted six such rumours in the period under consideration. Two of them associated the anticipated turn for the better with the expected deployment of poison gasses by the Wehrmacht; another three mentioned the major counteroffensives being prepared by the Axis powers; and one advocated hopeful anticipation of Hitler's speech revealing his ingenious plans.²⁴ What each of them expresses is, for the most part, desperation, even if they seemed to betoken the hope for Germany's triumph.

The person of the Führer was the subject of two other German rumours. According to the first, he had made a surprise visit to the Eastern Front, where he found the soldiers freezing in cloth uniforms while the officers were draped in furs. In anger, he supposedly tore a wool coat off one of the commanders and ordered him to take watch duty in the cold.²⁵ The other rumour augured Hitler's impending ouster and establishment of a dictatorship of the generals in the Reich.²⁶ Though the former appears to express confidence in the Führer, and the latter can be seen to conceal the hope that he might be deposed, both were generally symptomatic of the weakening morale of the Germans: those who passed the rumours on had begun to doubt

²⁰ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 26/43 (4 March 1943).

²¹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 15/43 (6 Feb. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943).

²² NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 21/43 (20 Feb. 1943).

²³ Knapp, 'A Psychology of Rumor', 23-4.

²⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 12/43 (30 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, reports 26/43 (4 March 1943) and 28/43 (9 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, reports 30/43 (13 March 1943) and 33/43 (20 March 1943).

²⁵ NA, ÚŘP, k. 138, sign. 109-11/27, report 36/43 (27 March 1943).

²⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 40/43 (6 April 1943).

the leader's genius, the power of his authority, and the superiority of the Wehrmacht over the Allied forces. This crisis of confidence in the armed forces is also signalled by another rumour the SD had previously reported to be circulating in Austria, which claimed that decorations for service in the field of battle had been doled out unjustly because the army was consumed by corruption and cronyism.²⁷ Knapp classified stories of this kind as 'wedge-driving rumours', which played a destructive part, ravaging the people's confidence in the authorities and state institutions.²⁸

Other German rumours did not refer directly to the current military-political situation, making it harder to obtain an unambiguous interpretation of their meaning. Two of them reflect on questions of personnel – one surmised that the late *Reichssportführer* Hans von Tschammer und Osten would be replaced by the *Gauleiter* of the Sudetenland, Konrad Henlein; the other expressed the conviction that the former *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia, Konstantin von Neurath would soon be made the German ambassador in Lisbon.²⁹ Another rumour claimed that the Soviets offered superior treatment to those German prisoners of war who were Catholics. Yet another augured the dissolution of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the subsumption of Czech lands into the neighbouring administrative units of the Reich. The latter may have been a distant echo of the unimplemented project devised by some Nazi dignitaries a year or so before.³⁰

Although Czechs and Germans evidently did occasionally trade gossip about the current situation on the fronts, the rumours that spread within these communities clearly differed in character. The occupied found themselves in a completely different situation than members of the Nazi 'master race', which inevitably bred distinct sympathies, antipathies, hopes, and fears.

Of the 226 rumours, the *Sicherheitsdienst* recorded among Czechs during the period under consideration, as many as 67 (or 30 per cent) concerned the military or political reverses of the Axis powers.

²⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 299, sign. 114-301/2, report 22/43 (23 Feb. 1943).

²⁸ Knapp, 'A Psychology of Rumor', 24.

²⁹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 37/43 (30 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 42/43 (10 April 1943).

³⁰ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, reports 13/43 (2 Feb. 1943) and 15/43 (6 Feb. 1943).

In contrast to analogous rumours circulating among the Germans, they were unquestionably optimistic in their outlook, making it reasonable to treat them as pipe-dream rumours. They usually referred to the situation on the Eastern Front. Czechs shared among themselves the information that the German troops were in a panicked retreat and that Hitler would soon suffer the same fate as Napoleon had; some even went so far as to claim that the Reich was on the brink of collapse.³¹

Czechs also speculated about the worsening situation of the Italian and German forces in North Africa, which one rumour claimed to have been left for dead by Field Marshal Rommel, who did not want his name besmirched by an inevitable defeat.³² Other stories referred to the Allied bombing campaign against German cities. The most popular among those predicted that by 20 April, Hitler's birthday, the English and the Americans would level Berlin to the ground. According to the *Sicherheitsdienst*, this rumour sparked a kind of psychosis in some towns within the Protectorate: Czechs wrote to their kinsfolk living in the capital of the Reich as forced labourers, imploring them to abandon the city with all haste regardless of the consequences.³³ According to another rumour, coffins with the bodies of 260 Czechs killed during previous air raids had arrived from Berlin to Prague already in the first days of March.³⁴ Thus, while Czechs responded to the Allied bombing of the Reich with apparent satisfaction, their attitudes were also coloured by a dose of anxiety. It found an outlet in rumours that mass Allied air raids would soon arrive in the Protectorate.³⁵

One common denominator of the many Czech rumours about Wehrmacht's defeats was the belief that the end of the war and the final collapse of the Reich was drawing near. People gossiped that the Allies were about to open a second front in Europe. One such rumour even included a precise date of the invasion, which was supposed to take

³¹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 4/43 (12 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 14/43 (4 Feb. 1943).

³² NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 39/43 (3 April 1943).

³³ NA, ÚŘP, k. 138, sign. 109-11/27, report 36/43 (27 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 38/43 (1 April 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 40/43 (6 April 1943).

³⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 30/43 (13 March 1943).

³⁵ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report, 30/43 (13 March 1943).

place on 15 March 1943; people were told to expect a massive assault by Allied troops transported to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia by gliders.³⁶

Czechs also gossiped about the deepening isolation of Germany in the international arena. People said that Italy had already capitulated or would soon do so, whether through the collapse of their own government or an anti-German coup.³⁷ Like their German neighbours, Czechs disseminated rumours about Italians erecting fortifications in the Brenner Pass and the prospect of Turkey joining the war. (As one version of the story had it, this event would force the Reich to shift some of its forces to the threatened Turkish-Bulgarian border; another stated that Turkish authorities agreed to the transporting of weaponry into the Soviet Union or for the entry of British navy vessels into the Black Sea). These stories testify to the existence of an informal exchange of information between members of both nationalities of the Protectorate.³⁸

Rumours about German defeats also include reports of Hitler's supposed removal from power or nervous breakdown. In one variation of this story, the Führer was even said to have died or been killed, his headquarters destroyed, and control of the Reich taken over by Goering and Goebbels. During the period under consideration, reports of Hitler's fall appeared among the Czechs on as many as seven occasions, that is, significantly more often than among the German population.³⁹ They can be interpreted as a symptom of the collapse of the myth of the unvanquished leader of the Nazi Reich. Even as the occupied continued to fear German repression, as will be discussed

³⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, reports 30/43 (13 March 1943), 33/43 (20 March 1943) and 41/43 (8 April 1943).

³⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 2/43 (7 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 12/43 (30 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943).

³⁸ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, reports 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943) and 24/43 (27 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 28/43 (9 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 40/43 (6 April 1943).

³⁹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 4/32 (12 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, reports 19/43 (16 Feb. 1943), 21/43 (20 Feb. 1943), and 24/43 (27 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 27/43 (6 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 41/43 (8 April 1943).

below, they lost all conviction in the menacing genius or causative powers of the Nazi leader.

The wildfire pace with which rumours of Germany's impending collapse spread among the Czechs seems to testify rather clearly to the hopes that the occupied community could not have expressed in any other way. On the other hand, the fear that the fortunes of war might turn to the side of the Reich found expression only very sporadically. The *Sicherheitsdienst* recorded only two rumours that represented such a perspective in the period under consideration. Both referred to the possibility of deployment of poison gasses by the Wehrmacht, which would prolong German resistance without necessarily leading to victory for the Reich.⁴⁰

The rumours that began to spread among the Czech population claiming that the occupying regime would moderate its policies were most likely inspired by the defeats suffered by the Reich. During the period under consideration, there were 14 such rumours in total. Some foresaw a future amnesty for all Czechs; others anticipated the return into the office of former *Reichsprotektor* Konstantin von Neurath, who was dismissed in September 1941 (an evident sign of nostalgia for the relative peace and prosperity of the early years of occupation).⁴¹ Rumours about the supposed thawing typically cited some historically relevant boundary date. Initially, the liberalisation was expected to occur starting 30 January, to mark the tenth anniversary of the rise of Nazis to power in the Reich; then, 15 March was cited, the fourth anniversary of the formation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; and finally, it became 20 April – Hitler's birthday.⁴² A similar tendency to attach anticipated developments to anniversaries of specific historical events also marked rumours on other subjects.⁴³

By sheer coincidence, the period under consideration saw precisely the same number of rumours concerning various forms of resistance

⁴⁰ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, reports 27/43 (6 March 1943) and 35/43 (25 March 1943).

⁴¹ See, e.g.: NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 33/43 (20 March 1943).

⁴² NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 12/43 (30 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 30/43 (13 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 38/43 (1 April 1943).

⁴³ See, e.g.: NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, reports 28/43 (9 March 1943) and 29/43 (11 March 1943); k. 138, sign. 109-11/27, report 36/43 (27 March 1943).

to the Reich as those about the thawing of the regime of the occupiers. Some of them looked out confidently to future large-scale anti-German protest actions; one openly predicted the arrival of a communist revolution; and two others, of a national uprising. The stage has supposedly already been set in each case – paratroopers from Great Britain had infiltrated the community and now lay in wait for the call to arms. Less far-fetched predictions anticipated mass demonstrations or sabotage activities.⁴⁴ Others reported on the activities of the underground that had supposedly already taken place: the blowing up of an employment office in Prague; the blacklists of collaborators purportedly opened by the resistance; or the theft of the remains of the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, from the Lány cemetery, reportedly perpetrated by former legionnaires to bury Masaryk next to Czech kings at the Prague castle after the war.⁴⁵ Without a doubt, rumours of this kind were a means to keep one's spirits up. It seems especially telling that they always described the resistance as a mysterious, elusive force acting beyond the society, akin to the noble robbers of folk tale fame.

The belief that Germany was losing the war and that the moment of liberation drew near did not free Czechs from their many fears. A total of 111 rumours (49 per cent) recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* between 1 January and 10 April 1943 expressed anxieties over what the future might bring. These were classic fear rumours. Roughly every fifth referred to some of the forms of repression by the occupier. Particularly sensational in nature were tales describing the Germans arresting the entire Czech government of the Protectorate, select ministers, or other famous personages. Perhaps the most absurd of the rumours claimed that the occupiers had shot the son of leading Czech collaborator Minister Emanuel Moravec, and was overheard in the street in Prague by none other than the self-same dignitary.⁴⁶ According to another rumour, the same Moravec had betrayed his colleagues from the government to the Germans; it was also said that he would

⁴⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 14/43 (4 Feb. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 19/43 (16 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/1, report 39/43 (3 April 1943).

⁴⁵ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 23/43 (25 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, reports 29/43 (11 March 1943) and 37/43 (30 March 1943).

⁴⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 24/43 (27 Feb. 1943).

soon be ordered by the occupiers to replace the ailing Czech President Emil Hácha.⁴⁷ Stories of this kind clearly illustrate the fears that the Protectorate might be dissolved and the Czech territories swallowed whole by the Reich. Some rumours even stated that openly.⁴⁸

What Czechs feared the most, however, was Germanisation. During the period under consideration, there were 27 rumours of various kinds about it. In most cases, they foretold seizures of Czech agricultural properties for the benefit of German colonists; less often mentioned were closures of Czech middle schools. The former was perceived as a deliberate colonisation policy element, while the latter was seen as a means to destroy the Czech intelligentsia.⁴⁹ These suppositions were not without merit. Occupational authorities did not hide their interest in reinforcing the German hold on land in Bohemia and Moravia and have treated educated Czechs as enemies of the Reich virtually since the beginning of the war.⁵⁰

According to the most pessimistic rumours, Germans were expected to imminently evict all Czechs from the Protectorate. What lay at the root of these stories was perhaps the memory of Heydrich's secret speech of 2 October 1941. He announced to his subordinates the implementation of the self-same programme once the war against the Soviet Union was won. It is known that a transcript of the speech reached the chancellery of the Czech president by accident, from where it may have spilt out further. Members of the public could also have been conscious that at Heydrich's funeral, Hitler had threatened the authorities of the Protectorate with a reprisal eviction of the entire Czech nation if the perpetrators of the *Reichsprotektor's* assassination were not handed over.⁵¹ Apparently, Czechs did not

⁴⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, reports 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943) and 24/43 (27 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 33/43 (20 March 1943).

⁴⁸ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 10/43 (25 Jan. 1943).

⁴⁹ See, e.g.: NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 3/43 (9 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 10/43 (25 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 19/43 (16 Feb. 1943).

⁵⁰ Isabel Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die Rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen, 2003); Polish edition: *Rasa, ziemia, niemiecka krew. Główny Urząd Rasy i Osadnictwa SS i nowy porządek rasowy Europy*, transl. Justyna Górny (Gdańsk, 2014), chapt. 2.

⁵¹ *Protektorátní politika Reinharda Heydricha*, ed. Miroslav Kárný and Jaroslava Milotová (Praha, 1991), doc. 9, speech by R. Heydrich (2 Oct. 1941), 99–112.

doubt that the Germans were capable of implementing repressions this brutal.

Their belief was reinforced by the deportations of Jews from the Protectorate starting in autumn 1941. Several rumours explicitly predicted that the same fate would soon befall the Czechs. One claimed they would be subjected to even worse treatment than the Jews were, since “they were at least given the name of their destination, while the Czech population would be placed completely outside the law”.⁵² Incidentally, this rumour proves that not all inhabitants of Czech lands realised in the early months of 1943 what tragedy had been devised for their Jewish neighbours transported to the east. Only one rumour recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* in the period under consideration stated that the Jews were murdered by lethal injection or poison gas, but it did not resonate, suggesting a lack of faith in the narrative.⁵³

Rumours circulating among Czechs also spoke to the fears induced by the worsening economic situation. The *Sicherheitsdienst* registered 22 rumours on that subject during the period under consideration. Almost a third of them referred to the depreciation of the reichsmark and of the Protectorate koruna. Some sounded somewhat paradoxical: people recommended expending the occupational money and acquiring pre-war Czechoslovak crowns (especially high-value banknotes) as savings because only they would be honoured after the war.⁵⁴ According to other rumours, banks ceased accepting deposits in korunas and reichsmarks, and an official devaluation of both currencies was imminent. The common ground among all these rumours was the conviction that, as one SD informer put it in a literal quotation, “money is like shit”.⁵⁵

For a detailed analysis, see Piotr Maciej Majewski, *Niech sobie nie myślą, że jesteśmy kolaborantami. Protektorat Czech i Moraw, 1939–1945* (Warszawa, 2021), 237–42.

⁵² NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943); k. 312, sign. 114-314/6, report 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943).

⁵³ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 9/43 (23 Jan. 1943).

⁵⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 9/43 (23 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 19/43 (16 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 33/43 (20 March 1943).

⁵⁵ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 7/43 (19 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 16/43 (9 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 33/43 (20 March 1943).

Other rumours concerning material issues referred to the economic over-exploitation, supply shortages, and the implementation of a command economy in the country. Labourers in Mladá Boleslav spread the news that a 12-hour workday was about to be implemented and that there would soon be three working Sundays every month.⁵⁶ In Moravská Ostrava, a conspiracy theory spread that the miners were being given vitamin C to increase their efficiency at the expense of their health.⁵⁷ In České Budějovice, people were talking that the compulsory registration of bikes was a preparation for their future seizures.⁵⁸ Rumours circulated in Brno and Moravská Ostrava that permanent waves would be banned; women queued in long lines outside hair salons, seeking to acquire the then-fashionable hairdo before it was too late.⁵⁹ Predictions were made across the country that the current limitation of the cigarette ration would be followed by analogous cuts in other restricted foodstuffs.⁶⁰

The third set of fears, most often expressed in rumours, referred to the military service of the Czech people in the German armed forces. The SD recorded 21 different stories of this kind; they included a plethora of predicted developments, from the formation of a volunteer legion to join the Wehrmacht, through the transfer of Czech gendarmerie into the Reich, up to universal conscription of all men of service age.⁶¹ In some versions, the initiative for the draft of Czechs was said to have come from Hitler himself; in others, it came from minister Moravec.⁶² The most sensationalist rumour claimed that the latter, chief among Czech collaborators, shot ministers Hrubý and Kamenický during a government meeting because they had dared to oppose his plans.⁶³

The proliferation of rumours about the impending military service of Czechs was most likely inspired by an actual proposal minister

⁵⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 7/43 (19 Jan. 1943).

⁵⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943).

⁵⁸ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 40/43 (6 April 1943).

⁵⁹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 23/43 (25 Feb. 1943).

⁶⁰ NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 41/43 (8 April 1943).

⁶¹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 12/43 (30 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 23/43 (25 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 33/43 (30 March 1943).

⁶² NA, ÚŘP, k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 26/43 (4 March 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 41/43 (8 April 1943).

⁶³ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 16/43 (9 Feb. 1943).

Moravec presented on 25 January 1943 to President Hácha and Prime Minister of the Protectorate Jaroslav Krejčí, which they lacked the courage to oppose. While the German side subsequently turned down the proposal, uninterested in putting Czechs in uniform, news of the event seeped into the broader society and spread out on its own. In any case, as many as 18 of the 20 rumours on this subject only appeared after Moravec's conversation with Hácha and Krejčí.⁶⁴

The next spot on the list of Czech fears was occupied by the prospect of transfer into the Reich for forced labour. In the period under consideration, the *Sicherheitsdienst* recorded 17 rumours that referred to this form of repression. Some foresaw the dispatching of specific groups of people for labour (such as retirees below 65, agricultural workers, former officers of the Czechoslovak army, or youths), while others described the removal of even half of the Czech society.⁶⁵ For some people, German activities reeked of covert perfidy: it was speculated that Czech labourers were deliberately sent into towns most threatened by Allied bombardment to decimate the nation.⁶⁶ The gloomy prospect of forced labour in the Reich seemed even less appealing thanks to rumours about the terrible conditions of existence of the Czech workers – or, for instance, of the plans to turn Czech girls into sex slaves for Wehrmacht servicemen.⁶⁷

Like those about the threat of sending Czechs to the front, rumours concerning forced labour drew their content on the contemporary reality. Recruitment for work within the Reich has been taking place in the Protectorate since 1939. For the first three years, employment was theoretically free, but the pressure from the occupiers to drive up the number of recruits has been steadily increasing. In June 1942,

⁶⁴ *Dokumenty z historie československé politiky*, ed. Libuše Otáhalová and Milada Červinková, ii: *Spolupráce československé emigrace na západě s domácím odbojem, její vztah k tzv. protektorátní vládě a germanizační politika okupantů* (Praha, 1966), doc. 505, note by K.H. Frank (26 Jan. 1943), 705–7. Cf. Majewski, *Niech sobie nie myślą*, 392–3.

⁶⁵ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 6/43 (16 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 11/43 (28 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, reports 27/43 (6 March 1943) and 28/43 (9 March 1943).

⁶⁶ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 12/43 (30 Jan. 1943); k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3 reports 30/43 (13 March 1943) and 41/43 (8 April 1943).

⁶⁷ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/4, report 3/43 (9 Jan. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 30/43 (13 March 1943).

German authorities demanded the transportation of 100,000 Czech workers; three months later, the decision was made that several cohorts of teenagers would be dispatched for the Reich. Roundups of shirkers were conducted in train stations, restaurants, cinemas, and other public places.⁶⁸ When the government of the Protectorate followed Germany's lead on 26 February 1943, announcing a total mobilisation of the society for the struggle against Bolshevism, it became apparent that the threat of forcible removal of labour increased even further. It is not by coincidence that two-thirds of the rumours about forced labour appeared after that date.

The list of Czech fears captured in the reports of the *Sicherheitsdienst* ends with the rumour that, should Germany suffer defeat on the Eastern Front, "the rest of Europe would be swallowed by Soviet Russia as its province"; in this context, members of the intelligentsia purportedly expressed the fear that, should this come to pass, they might be exterminated by the Bolsheviks, just as Russian bourgeois were.⁶⁹ However, during the period under consideration, these were entirely isolated concerns. Meanwhile, the SD recorded two rumours that took on the accusations levelled against the Bolsheviks directly. One claimed that Stalin supposedly allowed the citizen of his state to own private property to the value of 100,000 rubles and that the Soviet Union differed little in substance from democratic countries; the other expressed the conviction that Stalin would not advance the cause of a communist Europe, but only free it from the German yoke.⁷⁰ It leads to the conclusion that the anti-Bolshevik propaganda the Germans and their Czech collaborators within the Protectorate engaged in on a mass scale since autumn 1941 yielded no tangible results.⁷¹

It seems highly interesting that the period under consideration did not see Czechs share any rumours that would speak of the dangers of collaboration. Many of the rumours assign the role of chief traitor

⁶⁸ Stanislav Kokoška, 'Nucené pracovní nasazení českého obyvatelstva v letech druhé světové války (historický úvod)', in *Pracovali pro Třetí říši. Nucené pracovní nasazení českého obyvatelstva Protektorátu Čechy a Morava pro válečné hospodářství Třetí říše (1939–1945). Edice dokumentů s historickým úvodem Stanislava Kokošky*, ed. Zdeňka Kokošková, Jaroslav Pažout, and Monika Sedláková (Praha, 2011), 20–1.

⁶⁹ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 16/43 (9 Feb. 1943).

⁷⁰ Ibid.; NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 14/43 (4 Feb. 1943).

⁷¹ On anti-Bolshevik propaganda during that period, see Majewski, *Niech sobie nie myślą*, 407–11.

and sell-out to minister Emanuel Moravec; no other Czech politician has been portrayed in this manner. On the contrary, some were described as having been victimised by German repression or Moravec's overzealousness. It is difficult to avoid the sensation that the public had used the collaborator as a scapegoat to shoulder the blame of the entire Czech society for its subservience to the enemy so that it could preserve its moral integrity. The same phenomenon was also observed in occupied Poland, where, as one cultural anthropologist notes, it was common to think that "collaboration with the occupier was an affair of individuals, exceptions, not the nation; the nation passed that test in highly adverse conditions".⁷²

It is also characteristic that not all rumours portrayed Moravec as a fanatic in unconditional service to the occupiers. The *Sicherheitsdienst* also recorded two stories about his supposed arrest by the Germans upon attempting to elope the country.⁷³ Apparently, Czechs did not have confidence in the purity of intentions of their leading renegade and suspected he would try to save his hide if given the opportunity. That collaborators were viewed negatively is also illustrated by the isolated pieces of news about the collapse of the Curatorium for the Education of Youth, which Moravec headed, as well as about the dubious moral qualifications of the members of that institution.⁷⁴

The rumours circulating among Czech and German populations of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in early 1943 can be given an interpretation that follows the pattern established by scholars of other instances of the same phenomenon. Firstly, these rumours fulfilled the demand for information natural for any armed conflict and thus compensated, at least fleetingly, for the sense of insecurity about what the future would bring.⁷⁵ In a totalitarian state such as the Reich, the absence of reliable information was much more severe than was the case in democratic states. It was especially keenly felt by occupied nations, which rejected Nazi propaganda and sought alternative sources of knowledge about the situation within the country and

⁷² Agnieszka Haska, *Hańba! Opowieści o polskiej zdradzie* (Warszawa, 2018), 300.

⁷³ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/6, report 20/43 (18 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/4, report 29/43 (11 March 1943).

⁷⁴ NA, ÚŘP, k. 313, sign. 114-314/5, report 14/43 (4 Feb. 1943); k. 308, sign. 114-309/3, report 34/43 (23 March 1943).

⁷⁵ Knapp, 'A Psychology of Rumor', 27.

in the world at large. This accounts for the high frequency of rumours among the Czech population.

The analysis of Czech and German rumours also confirms the hypothesis that unverified information is often bred by plans that were altered or shelved indefinitely, leading to the appearance of many half-truths, approximations, and misrepresentations.⁷⁶ This applies to many of the Czech and German assumptions about military matters and rumours about plans for Germanisation, the possible draft of Czechs into the German armed forces, or the dissolution of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

Scholars of the phenomenon also believe that “rumours express the group’s underlying hopes, fears, and hostilities” and are a crucial marker of public opinion.⁷⁷ This maxim can also be applied to the rumours recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. They bring to light that in early 1943 Germans experienced a severe crisis of confidence in their state and in the Nazi regime (58 per cent fear rumours and 6.5 per cent wedge-driving rumours as opposed to 19.5 per cent pipe-dream rumours). The view taken by the Czechs was less unambiguous, as indicated by the high incidence of pipe-dream rumours (42 per cent) against an even higher share of fear rumours (52 per cent). Clearly, the Czech public opinion has not yet shaken itself from the shock of German repressions, but it increasingly gave in to the hope of the defeat of the Reich and an imminent end of the war.

The conclusions presented above are obviously limited to the period between 1 January and 10 April 1943. However, the analysis of rumours circulating in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia can be expanded in the future to the earlier and later periods of its existence. A chronologically broader view could enable a study of the dynamic of the phenomenon and its correlation with the country’s internal situation and critical events on the front and in the international arena. Such a study should deploy tools of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, along the lines that I tried to apply them in this article. The list of primary sources for this type of work can be expanded beyond the reports of the *Sicherheitsdienst* to include the likes of journals, memoirs, newspapers, or information that the

⁷⁶ Caplow, ‘Rumors’, 301.

⁷⁷ Knapp, ‘A Psychology of Rumor’, 27.

Czech underground relayed to the Czechoslovak government in exile in London. Perhaps this would allow for a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon of rumours, for the identification of their primary channels of dissemination and geographic and social distribution, as well as the means German and Czech authorities, used to combat 'whispered propaganda'. Such a study would certainly constitute an invaluable contribution to the study of history of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, as well as of German occupation in general.

APPENDIX

Table 1. German rumours in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from 1 January to 10 April 1943

Subject	Number	Type	Share (in %)
Axis defeats	18	Fear rumours	58,0
Disorder, corruption	2	Wedge-driving rumours	6,5
Axis victories	6	Pipe-dream rumours	19,5
Other	5	Other	16,0
Total German rumours	31		100

Table 2. Czech rumours in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from 1 January to 10 April 1943

Subject	Number	Type	Share (in %)
Axis defeats	67	Pipe-dream rumours	42
Occupation mitigation	14		
Resistance activity	14		
Political and police repression	25	Fear rumours	52
Germanisation	27		
Occupier exploitation	3		
Currency depreciation	8		
Worsening material conditions	11		
War service of Czechs	21		
Removal for forced labour	17		
Bombings	3		
Bolshevism	2		
Collaboration weaknesses	4	Wedge-driving rumours	3
Discrimination against Czechs	1		
Corruption	2		
Other	7	Other	3
Total Czech rumours	226		100

transl. Antoni Górny

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