



## Guarding against the ‘loss of national memory’: The communist past as a controversial issue in Czech history education

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**ABSTRACT:** In the first decade of the 2000s, a wave of qualitatively new anti-communist politics of memory resulted in a specific “upsurge of memory” in Czech history education. Various remembrance agents started to influence history education with the goal of turning schools into an area where Czech society could continue the process of dealing with the troubled communist past. Using new methods and media, such as emotional TV documentaries and debates with eyewitnesses of communist repression, civic society initiatives got involved in negotiating the public consensus over the question of how to teach and remember the history of state socialism. The author examines the context and consequences of this discourse of dealing with the past for history education, especially in the way this remembrance activism utilises the totalitarian paradigm. It is evident that the mobilisation of remembrance to serve present day citizenship objectives has resulted in recent controversies, as teachers had to deal with the dilemma of how to expose the historical significance of various memory-carrier groups in their classrooms. Based on the experience from an educational project in which students investigated family memory, the author advocates that teachers should encourage students to analyse familial and pop culture narratives in order to enhance their own understanding of how these reconstruct the past.

**KEYWORDS:** dealing with the past, post-communist transformation, history education, historical thinking, remembrance education, totalitarian-historical narrative, Czech national memory, family and culture memory, inquiry-based learning.

### Introduction

Arguably, amongst the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic implemented one of the most comprehensive policies of dealing with its troubled past. While the effects of various components of transitional justice have been the subject of intensive research interest (David, 2012; Nedelsky, 2009; Ústavněprávní Kontexty, 2003), historical and pedagogical researchers, however, have paid little attention to the process of constructing students’ understanding of the communist past in school history and civic education classes. There are several interrelated factors for this lack of research. Research centres at universities had limited capacity, and there was an academic reluctance to address a topic that politicians and journalists repeatedly politicised in public political discourse (Beneš & Gracová, 2015). Importantly, for researchers it is challenging to examine the complexity of memory practices related to both the construction of students’ individual historical consciousness and the

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transmission of images of the past that have been stabilised as part of the cultural memory of post-socialist Czech society (Assmann, 2010; Welzer, Moller & Tschuggnal, 2002).

How memory practices related to the issue of dealing with the past appear, and what their consequences might be, is a matter of great importance. In the first decade of the 2000s, new civic educational initiatives began to influence history education, with the goal of turning it into an area where Czech society could continue the process of dealing with its troubled communist past. The Czech Republic is an example of a post-socialist country undergoing transition where remembrance activism made a specific renaissance of the totalitarian paradigm possible, which by that time had already been overthrown in western academic debates (Mervart, 2017; Pauer, 2009).

In this paper, qualitative content and discourse analyses are combined in order to examine the implications of this process for history education. First, the work of a student who investigated family memory illustrates the multiple-perspective aspect of teaching contemporary history. Media and memory practices in both public and educational discourse are analysed in order to reveal which stories and testimonies of the communist past have prevailed in the most widely used educational materials, and which memory discourses inform the materials' production. The mobilisation of remembrance to serve present day citizenship objectives is questionable, as teachers deal with the dilemma of how to expose the historical significance of various memory-carrier groups in their classrooms. Rather than promoting unchallenged, ready-made stories, it is advocated that teachers should encourage students to analyse familial and popular culture narratives in order to enhance their own understanding of how these influential media reconstruct the past.

### **Inquiring into family history as an alternative to memory practice**

As a starting point, an inquiry-based educational project that I coordinated at *Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů* (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes) in 2011–2015 is used as an example. The students (aged 14–18) taking part in the project, *Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin* (Stories of Modern History Great and Small), were encouraged to research primary sources of historical information: family memories.

Tereza was a 17-year-old secondary school student who investigated the multi-generational family experience of life in communist Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup> in the Moravian village of Fryšták. In her 2014 final paper, she shared the story told by her grandmother Helena (born 1949), which described the persecution of the family for opposing collectivization, which was forced upon them by the communist authorities in the 1950s. When asked to interpret life under communism, Helena condemned the violation of human rights during the era of dictatorship, explicitly mentioning the existence of the Iron Curtain<sup>2</sup> and the oppression of freedom of speech. However, some stories from Tereza's great-grandmother Marie (born 1925) were new and surprising. When asked the question "What did you like about life during communism?" the great-grandmother started to tell a story framed not only by repression, but also by a narrative of the everyday life in the modernised socialist village she lived in:

What did you like about life during communism?

How much we travelled, and that people no longer had to do drudge work and started to cooperate. At the beginning, working in the agriculture cooperative (JZD) was poorly paid, but as the team started working, people were paid well and they were doing fine. We had a good chairman – our tata [Marie's husband] led the people, and they earned enough, we constructed a new manufacturing plant, everything was mechanized.

As Marie went on recalling her memories of a regular socialist village, she mentioned that she was able to travel a lot thanks to the financial support of the agricultural cooperative farm. She

visited Italy once and Yugoslavia and Germany twice; she took a trip to Russia (for her 60th birthday), travelled to Cuba. This travel experience continued to challenge Tereza's preconception of the story of life under state socialism. In order to gain back her lost confidence, Tereza closed the interview with this question: "Did our family have a conflict with the communists?" "No, it did not," answered her great-grandma Marie.

I believe Tereza most likely expected her great-grandma to tell the dramatic story in which her great-grandfather would symbolize the archetype of the defiant peasant from a famous Prague Spring's movie *Všichni dobří rodáci* (All My Compatriots, Jasný, 1968). Her Grandma Helena narrated a family story using the frame of this famous Czech film:

They would plough our roads, they would confiscate the best fields and substitute them with the one three kilometres away from Fryšták, and they kept increasing obligatory supply deliveries. Nevertheless, dad relentlessly resisted. I always say that he was like Radek Brzobohatý, who played a major role in the film *Všichni dobří rodáci*. With one exception – my dad was not put in prison.

Instead, Tereza heard the story of a thriving agricultural cooperative farm chaired by her great-grandfather that provided employees with recreational opportunities. Marie's conciliatory memories challenged the concept of Tereza's narrative of what life under communist rule looked like. In her final reflection, she recounted the cognitive unrest she had experienced regarding her family's attitude towards the pre-1989 regime:

Because I have been told since my early childhood that communism is bad and I should be thankful for the freedom we have now, I was very surprised by her minimal critiques of communism. (...) I expected her to be more critical. When I recall the stories I used to hear when I was a kid, I expected my family to have been more resistant towards the regime; especially when I realize how the communists handled my family with respect to my great-grandpa's attitude toward joining the agricultural cooperative.

In this family, the school project helped to uncover different memories of the state-socialist era that coexist in the country, the first being critical and stressing the anti-communist stance, the latter being nostalgic. Thanks to the method of inquiry, Tereza learned that even in her family, there was more than one interpretation of the past. Since traditional methods of teaching history such as lecturing and reading textbooks still prevail in the Czech Republic (Borries & Magne, 1997; Gracová, 2006), talking to different family members about the past and recording their testimonies represent alternative media practices that, in Tereza's case, eventually opened up new ways of reflecting upon the communist past.

Students taking part in the family memory inquiry-based project had various experiences, depending mostly on how successful their teachers were in encouraging them to apply the oral history method. Despite the fact that Tereza's experience was rather unique in how it had captured two alternative stories, her situation can be analysed in terms of the processes of constructing historical narratives and a student's understanding of the communist past. With one sentence "I have been told since my early childhood that communism is bad," she unintentionally sums up the long and complicated process of constructing her individual historical consciousness.

What stories and testimonies had she been told? Evidently, she might have been predominantly witnessing critical comments from her Grandma Helena and her parents, who belong to the generation taking active part in the student protests during the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

However, in order to generalise her experience, other sources of her historical consciousness are focused on and the landscape of public discourse and history education in the Czech Republic is mapped. The question of what story Tereza and her peers learned about life in 1948-1989, has been perceived as a controversial and highly political issue within the Czech history education public debate.

## Public memory discourse about the communist past

Every single political regime in Czech or more precisely Czechoslovak history since 1918 used and abused history for the political purpose of the formation of cultural memory. Communist politics of memory, being enforced since the late 1940s, for example, publicly celebrated only the memory of ideologically relevant social groups such as the World War II (WWII) partisans and communist resistance fighters, participants in strikes and other class struggles, while other memories were excluded from the public space (Kšišňan et al., 2012).

The essential difference in comparison to dictatorships can be found in the fact that the system of a pluralistic democracy, having been established in Czech Republic in the 1990s, created a space for free competition of group memories, which were based on the plurality of political and social identities in transforming Czech society. The fact remains that different social groups had different opportunities and strategies to pull strings to get their group experience into the reformed cultural memory. In her book, *Češi a jejich komunismus* (Czechs and Their Communism, 2009), the French historian Françoise Mayer identified different memory groups in the Czech post-communist society, such as, dissidents, political prisoners, members of the Communist Party, or the so called "silent majority" of others. Mayer (2009) gives evidence that since the 1990s, two particular collective commemorative frames, represented by victims and active opponents of the 1950s Stalinist persecution and the 1970s and 1980s dissidents have dominated the public space.

As for historiography, the former dissidents and historians persecuted in the era of Czechoslovak normalisation of the 1970s had a major influence on establishing the post 1989 interpretation of the 40 years of the communist reign, which was termed by Pullmann (2008, p. 704) as "totalitarian-historical narrative." This narrative also dominated the first issues of new history textbooks (Kopeček, 2008; Najbert, 2017). For the Czech situation, it is typical that, unlike foreign (especially Western) and even Polish historiography, the debate on totalitarianism was not practiced, and the concept itself was introduced in the local contexts rather intuitively than theoretically (Mervart, 2017). According to this simplified theory, the period of Czechoslovak communist rule from February 1948 to November 1989 was one of continuous totalitarian rule; its legitimacy was explained by stressing the fact that the communist power controlled society through propaganda, fear of repression, and social corruption. The era of the communist dictatorship was described as a painful and unnatural path of Czech national history, closed by the revolution in 1989 (Činátl & Mervart & Najbert, 2017; Kopeček, 2008; Sedlák, 2013).

At the turn of the millennium, Czech society witnessed qualitatively new politics of anti-communist memory of certain right wing and conservative politicians, who belonged dominantly to the *Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democrats Party, ODS). They interpreted the fact that the *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy* (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, KSČM) was still successful in winning the majority of protest-votes in the national and regional elections as proof that the Czech society had not dealt enough with its communist past. In their view, as Kopeček (2008) stresses, the correct politics of liberal economic transformation should have been accompanied by uncompromising politics of anti-communist memory that strove to re-educate the nation about the totalitarian past.

This re-politicisation of memory in the Czech Republic resulted in the passing of the Act. N. 181/2007, establishing *Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů* (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes) and *Archiv bezpečnostních složek* (Security Service Archive), which – along with the similar Institutes of National Memory in Poland and Slovakia – found its model in the 'Gauck-Behörde' (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic) in Germany. The problematic aspects of

establishing the centrally organised and state-sponsored institution based on the concept of national memory and connected to anti-communist politics of memory, have been contested in public, political and historiographic discussions (Cuhra et al., 2010; Dinuš, 2011; Kopeček, 2008; Slačálek, 2013).

The political pressure on the forms of how the Czech society would remember the communist past coincided with various civic society petitions and initiatives, which described the communist ideology as an “eternal evil” (Slačálek, 2013, p. 115) and topical threat to the democracy. The concerns of civic activists were related to the fact that communist representatives gained stable popularity in communal and regional elections, and were allowed to take a part in coalition governments with *Česká strana sociálně demokratická* (Czech Social Democrats Party, ČSSD) – mostly in regions which were structurally affected by the negative consequences of economic decline and unemployment. The petitioners even demanded that the Czech parliament impose a ban on the communist party because of its totalitarian heritage (Slačálek, 2013).

It is also noteworthy that all of this coincided with a relative public dominance of victims' testimonies, which have been receiving far more attention in public debate. The memories of the victims and resistance fighters gradually became an arbiter of historical credibility, which challenged the traditional academic production of knowledge. A group of journalists and historians, members of the civic organization *Post Bellum*, started to document the testimonies called *Hlasy hrdinů* (Voices of Heroes) in 2001. The testimonies were later made public in the Czech Republic's largest digital archive of witnesses called *Paměť národa* (Memory of Nation) and in several books. Since 2010 *Post Bellum* has also honoured several WWII veterans, holocaust survivors, political prisoners and dissidents with the *Cena Paměti národa* (Memory of Nation Award). In addition, Czech public service TV *Česká televize* broadcasted several documentary series promoting the anti-communist memory of persecution and freedom fight (Sommerová & Nikolaev, 2002). Finally yet importantly, a series of articles was published in reputable newspapers such as *Lidové noviny* or *MF DNES*, which became marketing partners of new educational initiatives (Najbert, 2017).

Following the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004), the political and civic initiatives can be conceptualised in the context of remembering and forgetting as the memory carrier groups, which tried to bridge the gap between the traumatic communist past and its current representations, which were claimed to be too conciliatory towards communist legacy. Public presentation of the activities and materials of the new memory initiatives was dominated by the 'coming to terms with the past' discourse which operated with the formula 'loss of national memory'. We may conclude, using the concept of Gil Eyal's (2004) traumatic will to remember, that the very normalcy of the future could be secured only through the confession of historical guilt and the assumption of responsibility for the crimes of communism. Memory was to protect the society from the return of the moral failures of the past. Pavel Žáček, the assistant director of in 1995 established *Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu* (Office for the Documentation and Prosecution of Communist Crimes) and future founder and first director of The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, also used the metaphor of healing the social trauma through revealing *the truth* about the past in his analysis *Boje o minulost* (Fights over the past):

If the interest in the current affairs prevails, experiences of the negative consequences are being left out without understanding the close ties of today to the communist past. The process of coming to terms with the past is a syndrome of post-communism and cannot be solved through rejecting the painful issues. The only solution to this is the repeated exposure of infected wounds to healing power of democracy and public opinion (Žáček, 2000, p. 129-131).

The relative hegemony of totalitarian-historical interpretation of the communist past, however, has particularly eroded in popular culture and public discourse. Public surveys documented the

decline in positive evaluation of post-communist transformation, caused by many factors. For example, corruption scandals of politicians and consequences of the economic crises in 2008 (Hodnocení demokracie, 2014). The phenomenon of (*N*)*Ostalgia*, no matter the motives of its origin were political in nature or rather fed on popular retro-fashion and counter-culture incentives, generated another frame of remembrance of the socialist past (Franc, 2007; Kopeček, 2008). From 2009 to 2012 the most popular series in the Czech Republic was the Czech public service television's series *Vyprávěj* (Tell the story, Arichtev, 2009–2013), which offered a family memory perspective of the everyday life of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The popularity of the TV series, movies and other popular cultural images, which did not necessarily represent the perspective of communist repression, can be explained by their apolitical view of history. In Françoise Mayer's words, these representations returned the past to all the people "without a story", who were,

neither communist cadres nor former prisoners or former dissidents, who were especially involved neither against them, nor for them, and who, after all, make up the vast – silent – majority of the population under communism (Mayer, 2009, p. 257–259; see also Reifová et al., 2012; Činátl, 2014).

The phenomenon of *Ostalgia* has aroused a counter-movement involving anti-communist activists and politicians, who opposed this version of the life under communist rule as an unacceptable form of relativisation (Drda, Mlejnek & Škoda, 2011; Kroupa, 2015; for broader context see Kopeček, 2008, pp. 82–87).

## Media and memory practices in history and civic education

Since 1989, the comments on the quality of history teaching have been critical, creating the image of history education failing to achieve its goals. For example, the results of the first international comparison of the historical consciousness of European students in 1996 were seen as embarrassing by both teachers and public. The survey confirmed the low prevalence of modern methods of teaching such as activating students as well as the continuing emphasis on knowledge acquisition instead of creating an understanding of contemporary world issues (Klíma, 2001; see also Borries & Magne, 1997). The History Teachers' Association (*ASUD*) defended teachers and blamed the Ministry of Education for long-term undervaluing of history education instead. The reasons for low quality of education was explained by an unacceptably small number of hours allocated for history education, bad textbook policy, and lack of long-life education opportunities (Mandelová, 2010).

The memory shift of the first decade of the new millennium brought a new dimension to the public critique of history education. In 2004, the chair of *Konfederace politických vězňů* (Political Prisoners' Confederation), Naděžda Kavalírová made a statement in an influential teacher magazine. She expressed the concern that some teachers who were active before 1989, and thus felt morally guilty for taking part in the communist education, did not want to teach the so-called *truth* about the communist past (Šimek, 2004). The previously mentioned anti-communist civic initiatives also called for securing a more intensive history and civic education about communist crimes in Czech schools (Drda & Důdek, 2006; Na komunisty si zvykat nechceme!, 2008) and media repeatedly presented the results of surveys among students which suggested that teaching modern history ordinarily ends up with the end of the WWII (Najbert, 2017).

Since school education has become a matter of public interest, history teachers witnessed the growing activism of nongovernment initiatives entering schools in order to influence what Welzer et al. (2002, p. 10) call the "Lexicon" (of the communist past). Along with transformation of educational media, personal stories of witnesses, or documentary movies that

emotionally and visually represented the past began to supplement significantly the conservative methods of teaching as new remembrance institutions appeared.

In 2005, the new educational project *Příběhy bezpráví – Měsíc filmu na školách* (Stories of Injustice) entered schools with the goal of facilitating the discussion about the communist legacy. The human rights organization *Člověk v tísni* (People in Need), originally promoting global and citizenship education, decided to improve the way Czech/Czechoslovak history was being taught by using documentaries projections, accompanied by discussions with eye-witnesses of communist persecution. The director of the project Karel Strachota evaluated the first year as definitely successful:

It was clear from the reactions of the young people that they often did not know what injustice had happened in our country. The testimonies of persecution of innocent people, cruel methods of interrogation, torture of prisoners, and inhuman conditions in camps were a major hit. Discussions also showed that students are thinking about guilt, punishment, and forgiveness, about values such as courage, resilience, belief and respect. And that they distance themselves from the way of dealing with the past in the form of “thick lines”, in the form of forgetting and bottling up some events. This approach, on the other hand, always belonged to the Communists (2006, p. 4).

According to the statistics, the witnesses visited about 1900 schools and discussed with more than 250 000 students in the first decade of the program (*Příběhy bezpráví*, 2014). The program published several books for students and teachers, written by historians, publicists, and celebrities. Moreover, the day when Czechs commemorate the victims of the communist regime and the anniversary of the execution of Dr. Milada Horáková, an important victim of the political trials (27 June), the *Příběhy bezpráví* team organized an educational media campaign titled *Proti ztrátě paměti* (Against the Loss of Memory). Since 2013, among other things, students have taken part in ceremonial acts at the local memorials of the victims of the communist persecution. Walking the streets of Prague, students were dressed in the costumes of political prisoners, carrying banners claiming, “Communism still hurts”. The director Karel Strachota considered a permanent anti-communist stance “to be equally important as anti-Nazism or anti-Racism” (*Proti ztrátě paměti: Memorandum*, 2013, para. 5). *Příběhy bezpráví* became the largest and most publicised educational project, dedicated to promoting the anti-communist and totalitarian memories of Czechoslovak past.

In 2008, another civic organization, *Občanské sdružení PANT*, gathered various activists and teachers whose aim was to convey the public, and especially the students’ truthful information about communism and contemporary history (*I mlčení je lež*, 2009). Teachers presenting activities in public spaces explicitly connected the communist past and the present. Among other things, they criticised the Czech Social Democrats Party for cooperation with the communists in the communal politics.

The NGO *PANT* also organised a teachers’ conference *I mlčení je lež aneb proč je potřebné mluvit a učit o komunistických zločinech* (Even silence is a lie: Why it is necessary to teach about communist crimes). It operates the web portal *Modernidejiny.cz* (Modern History), most widely used by history teachers since 2009. The portal offers educational materials in the form of power-point presentations, documentary series, and digitalised editions of primary sources.

Representatives of the new organisations celebrated the 2008 and 2009 anniversary of the Prague Spring movement and the Velvet Revolution with public events and debates held at schools (Najbert, 2017; O’Dwyer, 2014). The projects drew a lot of media attention. Marketing success in presenting their educational activities resulted in an attempt of the communist party *KSČM* to criticise the anti-communist political manipulation in current education. Petr Šimíček, one of the leading figures of *PANT*, accused *KSČM* of relativizing the crimes of communist past, and misusing the debate about the quality of education in order to mobilise their voters (Šimíček, 2009). Provoked by the critique of his project *Příběhy bezpráví*, the director Karel Strachota repeatedly refused to invite former communists to schools as partners for discussion.

He compared this option to the situation when holocaust deniers would teach about Nazism (Drda & Saporová, 2012).

Moreover, Karel Strachota's co-worker Adam Drda along with another publicist Stanislav Škoda, and political scientist Josef Mlejnek, set off the campaign in 2011 not only against communist accounts, but also against all accounts of the past they described as "morally relativistic" (Drda & Mlejnek & Škoda, 2011, p. 6). In their book, *Mýty o socialistických časech* (Myths about Socialist Times) any positive evaluation of the communist past was described as "pure demagoguery," and a result of "lost ability to think" (p. 6). Some of the critical reviews accused the authors of overstating and making up the reality of mythology. Instead of critical analyses of the myths, the book offered subjective myth busting and thus uncovered the weakness of the argument, which rather than being based on authentic historical research was connected to the moral credit of chosen personal experiences (Najbert, 2017).

Karel Strachota, Adam Drda and Mikuláš Kroupa stayed involved in the public debate, kept on publishing and declaring their anti-communist stances (Drda & Saporová, 2012; Kroupa, 2015; Strachota, 2013). Despite the critiques, their interpretation of the communist past remained firmly seated in the construction of binary contradictions of the communist past, such as totality and democracy, regime and powerless society, truth and lies, good and evil, and heroism and cowardice. The remembrance activism from *Příběhy bezpráví* or *Post Bellum* organisations, as well as from some historians at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, also became subject to criticism from historians who refused their supposedly low methodological standards and political bias in approaching the past (Randák, 2014; Vaněk, 2013).

The interest in socialistic everyday life became evident in contemporary historical and memory studies research (Činátl, 2014; Havlůjová & Najbert, 2014; Pažout, 2015; Vaněk, 2009), and it even appeared as a preferred thematic perspective for Czech teachers (Stav výuky soudobých dějin, 2012; Labischová, 2013). However, if we look for representations of the socialist modernisation of the countryside, similar to the one Tereza investigated in her family, we would find out that history education has been dominated by memories of persecuted peasants and other social groups, who describe socialisation of Czechoslovakia as a cruel and illegitimate social experiment.

The *Modernidejiny.cz* web portal offers dozens of materials for which the central theme is the experiences of persecuted peasants and the communist propaganda, for example, the documentary *Abeceda komunistických zločinů – Kulak* (Alphabet of the communist crimes). Teachers can also download a collection of testimonies of *Post Bellum* witnesses, in which the forced collectivization is evaluated as an action that in an "irreversible and barbaric way disrupted the existing social and economic ties to the country and severely damaged agriculture as a sector of the national economy" (*Kolektivizace zemědělství ve svědectví pamětníků*, 2010, para. 1). The *Příběhy bezpráví* project offers a school projection of the Olga Sommerová 2002 documentary *Ztracená duše národa: Ztráta tradice* (Lost Soul of a Nation: The Loss of Tradition). According to the director's note, the plot reveals "the criminality of the communist regime by bringing the testimony of four of persecuted peasant families" and reaches the conclusion that "a nation which destroys peasant families loses its own tradition." (*Ztracená duše národa: Ztráta tradice*, para. 1).

Despite the rare exceptions,<sup>3</sup> it can be concluded that the stories of socialist transformation of the countryside available in given educational materials fit into the concept of the totalitarian-historical narrative. It is almost impossible to find a perspective that would, in a dignified manner, advocate for the socialisation of the countryside, and illustrate the motivation of those who had spontaneously founded an agricultural cooperative or who lived their ordinary life in the real socialism era of the 1970s and 1980s. The disproportion among the offered testimonies



is evident whenever Czech teachers decide to pursue conflicting issues of memory associated with the communist past.

### **Teaching about the communist past as a controversial issue**

Since the turn of the millennium, various remembrance agents, including journalists, historians, and teachers, have influenced history education with the goal of turning it into an area where Czech society can continue the process of dealing with its troubled communist past. They believed that the previous ideology and the moral complicity were still present in Czech society in the form of suppressed collective trauma or uncritical evaluations of the legacy of the communist past. Thus, they saw family memories of everyday life and popular culture representations as dubious sources for history education. The arbiters of historical credibility instead became victims of Stalinist repression, anti-communist resistance fighters, or dissidents. These initiatives demanded that students should not only condemn the regime based on the synergy of repression and social corruption, but also be able to find parallels with this regime at present, whether in the form of corruption, citizens' political passivity, or violations of human rights.

Consequentially, stories of politically motivated communist crimes and acts of resistance to the mechanism of life in the dictatorship, have an essential place in history and civic education in a democratic society. They help to fulfil the aims of the Czech curriculum, which focuses teachers on creating positive civic attitudes, developing a sense of belonging to European civilization and culture, and promoting the "adoption of the values on which contemporary Europe is being built" (*Rámcový program pro základní vzdělávání*, 2013, p. 43). From the perspective of ethics education, it is desirable to remember the stories of people who can act as positive role models for younger generations (Barton & Levstik, 2009). The efforts to strengthen civic society and encourage students towards social action including, for example, higher voter turnout and refusing political populism, should be appreciated.

However, this concept of remembrance education is open to being questioned. With respect to the critical historical thinking approach, history teachers should perceive civic educational initiatives cautiously. It is legitimate to challenge the presumption that exposure to the emotional testimonies of freedom fighters and communist victims automatically stimulates the historical and contextual thinking that is central to history education.

Educational literature on the development of historical thinking among students characterise the presentist approach as an obstacle to thinking historically (Lévesque, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). Emotional identification with stories of injustice from the past, and critical historical thinking, are two sides that must be balanced. The remembrance agents do not adequately teach students to reflect on the actual process of creating historical narratives, which is the keystone of the constructivist critical thinking approach to history education. They approach eyewitnesses as arbiters of historical credibility (the psychological or moral "truth" about the past) and claim their interpretation should naturally dominate the "memory of the nation". Remembrance activism of this kind does not respect the established principles of diverse and multiple-perspective interpretations of the past, which after all, are also expressed in Czech curricula documents and pedagogical literature.<sup>4</sup> This selective attitude toward the past implies that there is only one correct historical memory of the nation. Those who see themselves as guardians of national memory ascribe historical significance only to specific memory carrier groups, excluding others from the lexicon of school history at the same time. If teachers turn themselves into remembrance activists and do not bring diverse stories to the surface, students may assume that there is a greater degree of consensus than actually exists in Czech society

(Barton & McCully, 2007). As a result, students might feel disappointed, like Tereza did, when encountering in their inquiry an interpretation of the past other than one that is anti-communist.

Public disputes over the question of whether it is legitimate to regard the communist past positively in any way reflect the highly emotional Czech historiographical discussions that appeared in relation to the attempt to revise the totalitarian paradigm. In his book *Konec experiment* (The End of the Experiment), Michal Pullmann (2014), the most influential representative of this revision, inspired by works of Alexei Yurchak (2006), allowed historical characters to abandon the role of passive subjects of totalitarian control. Instead, he described how the consensus between the regime and society were discursively formed in everyday situations (see also Bren, 2010; Kolář & Pullmann; 2016, Mervart, 2017).

If this approach is applied to history education, students must be aware of their own family backgrounds while studying the past. When Tereza reflected on her experience by stating that she was very surprised that life under communist rule had not only been about repression, we may assume that she has had only limited training in the techniques that would have allowed her to deal with a plurality of memories, and with conflicting memories in her life outside of the classroom. The project that she took part in enabled her to analyse family memories, enhanced her epistemic stance (VanSledright, 2011) and uncovered the potential of the alternative educational sources for history education.

Family memories of everyday life, movies or television series, then, offer a broader context for the past. They expose the nuances between particular periods of Czech state socialism (such as, the Stalinist 1950s, or the reformist movement of the 1960s) and reveal unexpected changes, continuities, actions, and reactions, and thus lead to the erosion of the concept of totalitarianism. The limits of the totalitarian-historical frame of interpretation are obvious when we try to examine the ambiguous life story of Tereza's great-grandfather, who turned from a persecuted farmer into the chairman of an agricultural cooperative. How could Tereza understand the life values and motivations of her great-grandparents while the totalitarian-historical narrative only offers an interpretative frame of dichotomous categories, one in which her great-grandfather could have acted only because he was either scared of repression, brainwashed by propaganda, or socially corrupt?

Growing evidence suggests that historical thinking is best cultivated when students are actively engaged in inquiry-based learning (Barton & Levstik, 2001; Levesque, 2008; Lesh, 2011; Morton & Seixas, 2013; Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000; VanSledright, 2011). Instead of simply accepting authoritative or emotional interpretations of the past, students who actively participate in studying history are more likely to ask meaningful questions about the significance of the past that they are studying. Perhaps more importantly, they engage in the process of investigating, reading, questioning, and developing evidence-based interpretations that are open to criticism and revision.

Unfortunately, the potential of family memories as an alternative source for inquiry has remained largely untapped. In a representative survey in 2012, three-quarters of the nearly 1600 teachers considered family memory to be a factor that significantly affects the formation of the historical consciousness of students (Stav výuky soudobých dějin, 2012). Almost half of the six hundred teachers and students of history responded similarly in another history education survey (Labischová, 2013). Nevertheless, only a tiny percentage of the respondents of the second survey ranked family memories among the preferred sources of information about the past, and very few of the teachers surveyed systematically used family testimonies in their history classes.

There are undoubtedly more reasons why family memory has only been reflected sporadically in teaching practice. However, when asking teachers, one explanation usually prevails: it is an alarmingly controversial terrain, as the discussions among forty teachers who

participated at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes summer school, *Dějepis a rodinná paměť* (History and Family Memory) in 2012<sup>5</sup>. Also to take into account is that generally, history textbooks in the Czech Republic tend to be historicist in approach, rather than oriented towards the present or concerned with the current culture of remembrance (Kuklík & Kuklík, 2002; Kvaček, 2002).

Based on a three-year study into the techniques teachers use while approaching family memory with students like Tereza, it can be concluded that if teachers use well-developed instructive methods, and invite family memories to the classroom, this is effective in encouraging students to appreciate the past, question what they read and see in the media, and develop independent critical thinking skills (Havlůjová & Najbert, 2014). Nevertheless, in order to do so they need to be trained to critically approach current memory practices related to the very concept of dealing with the past. Unfortunately, the Czech educational system lacks a system of lifelong education for teachers, and promoting methodological innovations always takes a long time (Tematická zpráva, 2016). It is a matter of teachers' self-interest and discipline as to whether they attend any training courses.

## Conclusion

Whether the phenomenon of remembering the communist past will continue to generate controversy in public discussion and to create an essential context for teaching history has been the focus here. Society is always evolving, social and cultural frameworks are changing, and teachers should prepare students for a future life that they cannot foresee. History teaching in the Czech Republic faces a fundamental challenge of how to transform history education from a discipline devoted to studying the past into a real instrument of reflection, and thus cultivation, of both the historical consciousness of the individual student and of the culture of remembrance in society. In this sense, it will be crucial if the curriculum reform, which is estimated to be finished by 2022, clearly defines the goals of history education as building historical literacy and promoting the active participation of students in society's historical culture, which is slightly different from the aims of remembrance education oriented towards the present-day (Nieuwenhuyse & Wills, 2012).

On this account, family memories and the public memorial culture version of addressing the past should be explicitly included in the curriculum, and students should be able to reflect on the respective status and benefits of, but also the limits of, these specific forms of the construction of meaning. School history must serve students and help them to reflect on the memory practices of their families and school communities, and to understand the relationships between historical narratives and the current needs and future aspirations of those who construct these narratives (Günther-Arndt, 2016; Körber 2015; Schönemann 2011; Seixas, 2000). School history cannot resolve the conflicting remembrance of the communist past of the Czech society. However, it can help to cultivate the debate about the past. The intended outcome of teaching controversial issues is not necessarily establishing a consensus, but rather moving beyond conflict by democratic, non-violent means (Barton & Levstik, 2009; McCully, 2012).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Please note that former Czechoslovakia split into two independent states – Czech Republic and Slovak Republic – in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> The term *Iron Curtain* is being used as a [metaphor](#) for strict separation of the Soviet Union and its satellite states from open contact with the West in Europe since 1945 until the end of the Cold war. This meaning originally derives from Winston Churchill's Fulton speech in 1946. In post-socialistic Czech Republic, the term has become popular within those who want to put a stress on the fact that socialist dictatorship restricted individual rights and freedoms (e.g. freedom of movement).

<sup>3</sup> An Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes' educational DVD *Obrazy (z) kolektivizace* (Images of Collectivization, 2011), is unique as it works with the concept of multiperspectivity in the sense of using different types of historical evidences and perspectives, for example, film representations from different decades, memories including both peasants and supporters of the collectivization.

<sup>4</sup> The *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání* (Framework Educational Program for Elementary education), inspired by German pedagogy, emphasises that history is not just a knowledge-based subject, but also a subject promoting competencies. According to this, students should be encouraged to “recognize the symptoms and causes of subjective selection of information and understand that history is not about enclosed facts and definite conclusions, but instead “it is a process of asking questions about our own current character and our possible future” (p. 44). The mission of the educational field of history is to “cultivate the historical consciousness of the individual and to maintain the continuity of historical memory, primarily in passing on historical experience” (p. 43). The notion of multiperspective history teaching was introduced through comprehensive guides from British historian Robert Stradling (2001a, 2001b; translated into Czech in 2003 and 2005), and reflected by domestic authors (such as, Beneš & Gracová, 2015; Činátl & Pinkas et al., 2014; Gracová & Havlůjová & Najbert, 2014; Labischová, 2010; and others).

<sup>5</sup> The participants pointed out that working with family memories almost inevitably carries a conflict between the official interpretation of the past and the subjective experiences of witnesses. Some welcomed this fact, though, as it is then easier to counter the attempts to politicise and promote ideologies in history. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers warned that mastering the conflict between lecture and memories is not easy. There is always a danger that the clash of different perspectives in evaluating the past veer to an entirely personal level, that the “confrontation of values causes negative emotions” (Havlůjová & Najbert, 2014, p. 9-12).