Evil Communists or Times when the World Was Better?

Social Networks as an Arena for Conflicting Memories of So-called Normalisation and Democratic Transformation

Bohumil MELICHAR

This study is an analysis of the behaviour of Czech users of the social network Facebook in relation to carefully curated historical sources from the period of late socialism. It is the result of a social media campaign carried out by the author in cooperation with the Czech Television Archive in 2024, which consisted of the daily republishing of television reportage broadcasts from 1970 to 2000 on Facebook. This content attracted hundreds of thousands of users, who willingly shared their memories and attitudes towards late socialism and the democratic transformation in post discussions. Their contributions were evaluated as material suitable for an observational study of naturally occurring online discourse. Subsequent analysis of these discussions has illuminated the mechanisms of remembering, forgetting, and conflict over preferable remembrance that characterise the debate about the socialist dictatorship. The author thus analyses the persisting heated debates on the legacy of state socialism and the role of the media as a trigger of collective memory.

Keywords: late socialism, socialist dictatorship, contested past, social media, remembrance, nostalgia

Bohumil Melichar is a researcher at the University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Arts, and at the University of Jan Evangelista Purkyně in Ústí nad Labem, Faculty of Arts.
✉ bohumil.melichar@uhk.cz | https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2070-7758
© 2026 Bohumil Melichar

DOI: 10.14712/24645370.5653

This text is available under Diamond Open Access and the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (BY-NC) licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

In August 2024, a television report from 1987 was published on the official Facebook account of the Czech Television archive, showing the enthusiasm of young university students volunteering to help farmers harvest hops.[1] The young people addressed their enthusiasm for working

[1] Aktuality [News], Czechoslovak television news programme, 27 August 1987.

together and their willingness to help the national economy to the television viewers of the time. 37 years after it was broadcast, the Facebook post provoked 6,552 users to respond, with 1,075 commenting on the post.[2] One user wrote: "Those were still normal times," earning the critical response: "and imagine that these 'normal times' still exist in Cuba and North Korea!" The traumatic experience of Czech society with state violence and the totalitarian demands of Communist Party leaders complicates the escape from contemporary global problems into a nostalgic semi-fictional world, which Zygmunt Bauman explains with his concept of retrotopia as a symptom of the beginning of the 21st century.[3] It is not surprising that reminiscing about the late socialism of the 1970s and 1980s is still a contested topic in Czech society 35 years after the Velvet Revolution. This study is based on an analysis of nostalgic memories of late socialism sparked by a public history project carried out at the Czech Television archives. The project involved the daily republishing of old news reports originally broadcast between 1970s and 2000 to Facebook.

Observing conflict over memory on social media

A sociological survey on public attitudes towards the socialist past and the democratic transition, that was carried out in 2024 by the Institute of Empirical Research, shows that 31% of the population considers the current system based on the values of pluralist democracy to be worse than the socialist dictatorship[4] of its late phase.[5] In 2021, when the Czech

2 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 27 August 2024 with a reach of 643,779 users. 8,853 of them actively reacted to the video and a discussion was sparked under the post with 1,075 comments.

3 ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Retrotopia*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 1–4.

4 Throughout this study, the term "socialist dictatorship" is consistently used to refer to the period from 1948 to 1989. This represents a conscious effort to move away from a totalitarian-framed narrative in which the regime stands in strict opposition to society. This perspective gained traction within the anti-communist grand narrative, which was characterized by a dichotomous view of society. The reflections on this era analyzed in this study show that society was not merely a passive victim of terror, repression, or manipulation, and that this image does not hold up from the perspective of memory studies. For the difference between the terms "socialist dictatorship" and "socialist regime," see PAVEL KOLÁŘ, *Langsamer Abschied vom Totalitarismus-Paradigma? Neue tschechische Forschungen zur Geschichte der KPTsch-Diktatur*, Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Froschung 55/2006, pp. 253–275.

5 *35 let demokracie* [35 Years of Democracy], Prague 2024, p. 4.

Statistical Office conducted the last massive census, 39.13% of people in Czech society (4,119,157 citizens) were at least 18 years old in November 1989, and can be therefore considered as witnesses whose perception of the 1980s is based on their own lived experience.[6] The already cited survey from this year revealed that this large group of people is divided between positive and negative evaluations of the socialist past. While 52% of respondents aged 45 to 59 consider the current regime to be worse than or about the same as the late socialist regime, the figure is as high as 61% in the group over 60. Both the 2009 and 2021 surveys showed that while the vast majority of society perceives the Velvet Revolution as a positive historical event, a half, to slim majority believes that the noble revolutionary ideals of humanity and democracy were not fulfilled in the decades that followed and that the revolution was stolen by opportunists and careerists.[7]

The results indicate that a substantial part of Czech society appreciates that the socialist dictatorship brought considerable concern to the cultural and political elite. The media speak of a society-wide frustration, a dangerous nostalgia for a regime officially declared criminal, and question whether we are sentenced to repeat socialism.[8] The socialist past – and especially its later phase – has for decades resisted the transition from the realm of communicative memory to the sphere of cultural memory, and its significance is constantly being negotiated in public

6 The data is based on a survey *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů* [Census of Population, Houses and Flats], Prague 2021, https://scitani.gov.cz/vekova-struktura#skupina-282357 (accessed on 19 November 2025).

7 In 2024, 65% of respondents expressed that opinion, compared to 46% in 2009. Cf. *35 let demokracie* [35 Years of Democracy], Prague 2024, p. 27 with JIŘÍ ŠUBRT, JIŘÍ VINOPAL, *Historické vědomí obyvatel České republiky perspektivou sociologického výzkumu* [Historical Consciousness of the People of the Czech Republic from the Perspective of Sociological Research], Prague 2013, pp. 143–146.

8 See e.g. MARTIN UHLÍŘ, *Zlaté časy za Husáka. Více než polovina lidí v průzkumech oceňuje bývalý komunistický režim* [The golden days of Husák. More than half of the people in the surveys appreciate the former communist regime], https://www.respekt.cz/kontext/zlate-casy-za-husaka-vice-nez-polovina-lidi-v-pruzkumech-ocenuje-byvaly-komunisticky-rezim?srsltid=AfmBOoo38vSmJD3N7u-RbEhOFBKmVOAKK8qfSG0JnCv3jtSJQTPYbOfX (accessed on 19 November 2025); MARIE KUŽELOVÁ, *Češi jsou frustrovaní. Třetina jich hodnotí současný stav jako horší než komunistický režim* [The Czechs are frustrated. A third of them rate the current situation as worse than the communist regime], https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-cesi-jsou-frustrovani-tretina-jich-hodnoti-soucasny-stav-jako-horsi-nez-komunisticky-rezim-40492984 (accessed on 19 November 2025).

debate. According to the data cited, the nature of family narratives differs greatly from the canonical portrayal of socialism as an era of oppression and lack of freedom.[9] Similar sociological investigations open up a number of research questions for scholars engaged in memory studies. A particularly important unknown is the nature of the public's nostalgic relationship to late socialism, which affects not only the character of debates about the past but also their political content.[10]

Can we, then, perceive the nostalgia for the "normal" and predictable state of society in the 1970s and 1980s as a sense of regret over the uncertainty brought about by the gradual decline of organised modernity? This historical configuration was experienced by countries of the Global North from the early 20th century until the late 1970s and in the socialist bloc until the late 1980s. The sociologist Peter Wagner defined this era as the era of a strong state guaranteeing, through Keynesian approaches to economics or state-planned economics; a basic standard of living for its citizens; an era of strong collective identities overriding individual claims; as well as trust in centralisation, rationalisation and planning.[11] It thus naturally coincided with the flowering of an industrial civilisation built on large Fordist-controlled factories ideally covering the entire process of producing complex products from the input of the coarsest raw materials to the final product capable of immediate use.[12] It is precisely the combination of Baumann's concept of retrotopia – as a nostalgic longing for an idealised and secure world in which there was no threat of job loss, loss of social status, or the devaluation of professional

9 For a discussion of the distinction between communicative and cultural memory, between working memory and long-term memory, and the relationship between history and memory, see ALEIDA ASSMANN, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, Munich 2003, pp. 130–142; ALEIDA ASSMANN, *Transformations between History and Memory*, Social Research 75/2008, no. 1, pp. 56–63.

10 On the crucial political dimension of nostalgia in the post-socialist space and its serious research, see MARIA TODOROVA, *The Process of Remembering Communism*, in: Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation, (ed.) Maria Todorova, New York 2010, pp. 13–14.

11 On the periodisation of modernity, see PETER WAGNER, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline,* London–New York 1994, pp. 13–14.

12 Towards the late phase of Euro-American industrial civilisation in the Cold War era to the advent of the post-industrial era, see JOSHUA FREEMAN, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and Making of the Modern World*, New York–London 2018, pp. 226–269.

skills –[13] together with the identification of the object of this emotional bond in Wagner's definition of organised modernity as a world of clearly defined, institutionalised social roles and identities, that constitutes the main point of reference for the present study. The study is guided by an effort to answer the main research question: To what extent is nostalgic remembrance of the late socialist period linked to identification with Marxist-Leninist political ideology, and to what extent is it a rejection of the postmodern situation?

An important part of this inquiry will be an attempt to outline to what extent nostalgic feelings towards late socialism fit into the categories of restorative and reflective nostalgia defined by Svetlana Boym. She suggests that while reflexive nostalgia is carried by an individual's personal connection with the epoch and allows for a critical distance to be taken towards it, restorative nostalgia leads to the formation of political myths that shape communities promoting, through a specific definition of the past, the return of political structures, in our case dictatorship.[14] Analytically speaking, however, my use of these terms does not imply that I view a nostalgic relationship to the society of the 1970s and 1980s as merely a means of hiding the pain of losing an imaginary clarity of the world. On the contrary, as critics of Svetlana Boym's approach point out, nostalgia is an emotion that leads to a critical negotiation of the meaning of the past in public debate, with all its political implications.[15]

It is necessary to ask: a) how is the debate about socialist dictatorship and democratic transformation actually conducted outside the sphere of academic institutions?, and b) does the nostalgia expressed relate to the socialist social order as a set of Marx-Leninist ideology and institutions tied to the Communist Party, or is it rather a positive relationship to the world of industrial organised modernity replaced by the neoliberal turn that swept through the Eastern Bloc countries during the so-called "wild" 1990s?

The results of the Archive of the Day project, which was launched in January 2024 by the Czech Television Archive team, may help to answer these questions. Inspired by the viral trend "on this day", the team started to post on the official Facebook account of the institution

13 Z. BAUMAN, *Retrotopia*, p. 9.
14 SVETLANA BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia,* New York 2001, pp. 41–56.
15 MICHAEL PICKERING, EMILY KEIGHTLY, *The Modalities of Nostalgia*, Current Sociology 54/2006, no. 6, pp. 922–923.

domestic news broadcasts dating to the same present-day date but from decades prior – in the period from 1970 to 2000. Selected reports from contemporary news coverage were curated for publication based on the following criteria: a) relevance to the main themes defining the collective memory of the era of late socialism and transformation, encompassing in particular the conflict between the absence of civil rights and the stability provided by the high level of social security characteristic of late socialism; b) the team identified key components of collective memory related to the experience of the defined era: consumer habits, famous brands and enterprises of the industry at the time, experiences from school, compulsory military service, or collective rituals such as the Spartakiad or May Day celebrations; and c) the focus on everyday life, implying a nostalgic mode of remembrance, was complemented by an emphasis on well-known political figures and significant historical anniversaries.

In total, the corpus of all Facebook posts examined was 365 posts, which were published daily throughout 2024. The selection of 13 posts from this extensive dataset for a detailed qualitative analysis of Facebook users' discussions was based on audience interest; posts with the widest reach, the strongest user response in the form of interaction with the content, and the most extensive discussion under the post were subjected to closer examination. The selection of relevant content utilised the mechanism of the platformisation of memory, whereby Facebook's algorithms prioritise posts with high user engagement, which increases their reach; as a result, a large number of users were exposed to the archival material, and their reactions further reinforced its relevance.[16] The selection of material for closer analysis and interpretation was thus determined by its potential to evoke strong nostalgic or controversial emotions. The chosen approach resembles a platform-specific top-down analysis.[17] The content offering was based on a single source with a certain social relevance – the Czech Television archive –which manifested itself on Facebook, a specific platform. User reactions were then examined. It was precisely this selection strategy for the digital ethnographic study of Facebook users' relationship to the socialist past that made it possible to identify

16 ROBBERT J. ADRIAANSEN, RIK SMIT, *Collective Memory and Social Media*, Current Opinion in Psychology 65/2025, pp. 2–3.

17 ANAT BEN-DAVID, OREN MEYERS, MOTTI NEIGER, *How social memory works on social media: A methodological framework*, Memory, Mind & Media 3/2024, e20, pp. 7–14

key themes and the nature of the discussion.[18] This was analysed using a categorisation framework that reflects various forms of remembrance: positive nostalgia for the material aspects of life, the clarity of the social structure, and social security, as well as negative nostalgia manifested in the binary nature of anti-communist discourse.[19] This strategy made it possible to perceive individual statements in the discussions as symptoms of broader social phenomena captured through the concept of organised modernity or various forms of nostalgia viewed from the perspective of memory studies.

The content promoted to Czech users of Facebook quickly gained a significant number of followers. By the end of 2024, there were 49,834 long-term followers with an average reach of over 1,327,496 users and 276,041 users interacting directly with the content.[20] Given that the archive material was published in Czech without subtitles or translation into a foreign language, it is an influential channel in society with approximately 11 million active users of Czech as their primary language. At the beginning of the project, 7 million of them were actively using Facebook.[21] In addition, the content creators focused their selections on domestic news, which has the highest potential to appeal to those with experiences of everyday life in Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic since 1993).

18 Digital ethnography was chosen as an approach because of its ability to capture the reality of the public's engagement with the past through digital new media tools, such as social networks, which shift these discussions from informal conversations to the social practice of posting comments in online spaces. See SARAH PINK, HEATHER HORST, JOHN POSTILL, LARISSA HJORTH, TANIA LEWIS, JO TACCHI, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, London–Washington DC 2016, pp. 44–28.

19 It is necessary here to perceive a certain interconnection between the analytical part of the research and the interpretation of the data. The methodological foundations of qualitative research recognise that the system of data selection and organisation shapes the framework of the analysis and also constitutes the researcher's first interpretive act. In this study, we can speak of a strategic sampling approach. See JENNIFER MASON, *Qualitative Researching*, London–New Delhi 2002, pp. 123–127.

20 Archiv ČT, https://www.facebook.com/archivCT, [online], internal data on users following the profile, December 2024 displayed on 2 January 2025.

21 WORLD POPULATION REVIEW, *Facebook Users by Countries 2024*, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/facebook-users-by-country (accessed on 19 November 2025).

The majority of regular followers are middle-aged and older users. 77% of followers are over 35 years old. In contrast, teenagers and young adults under the age of 25 make up a negligible minority of followers (circa 3%).[22] This is a confirmation of recent research which shows that while young people are aware of the controversy over the interpretation of socialism, they do not feel part of it.[23]

Facebook is a tool of the digital world that enables non-institutional actors to express their own reflections on the past and reflects a communicative sphere of memory that would otherwise remain hidden in the private sphere.[24] The discussions under the posts, which regularly involve hundreds or even sub-thousands of users, thus, constitute an arena where the conflict between the middle and older generations over the definition of the socialist past from below is manifested. Admittedly, the content composed of television news reports attracts precisely those witnesses for whom television broadcasting was a daily experience. At the same time, they represent an audience strongly divided over the interpretation of late socialism. The comments under Facebook posts are thus a manifestation of a conflict whose content is only outlined by available sociological research and thus represent ideal material for qualitative research explaining quantitative data on the deep gaps unearthed in Czech society.

A key concept for interpreting data of this type is nostalgia, which we define as an anthropological category that enables researchers to analyse the positive emotional connection of individuals or society to the past.[25] The aim is to determine how these feelings are transformed into symbolic

22 The remaining 20 % of users are in the 25–34 age group. Archiv ČT, https://www.facebook.com/archivCT, [online], internal data on users following the profile, Data for December 2024 displayed on 2 January 2025.

23 VÁCLAV SIXTA, BOHUMIL MELICHAR, *Czech pupils' attitudes towards collective memory of socialism*, in: Changing Democracies in Local Contexts: Researching Educational Projects on Dictatorship and Democracy, (ed.) Martin van Alstein, Brussels 2025.

24 IRENA REIFOVÁ, *Theoretical framework for the study of memory in old and new media age*, in: Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere, (eds.) Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier, Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius, Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin and Richard Kilborn, Bremen 2015, pp. 191–192.

25 Nostalgia is a category that allows us to think about the reconstruction of the past through selective remembering or forgetting, which is based not on rational reasoning but on emotional relationships. See JANELLE L. WILSON, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, Lewisburg 2005, pp. 25–29.

acts and discourse of public debate as well as their influence on ongoing social processes. If Olivia Angé and David Berliner, in their essay on the nature of nostalgia through the quotation of Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, point out that under certain conditions even the guillotine can become an object of nostalgia[26] – and this is essentially what is happening in the Czech case: the concept becomes a key tool for understanding the effort to come to terms with history.[27]

The fact that the space of nostalgia – understood in the sense of longing for a distant past of security, stability and predictability, where contemporaries project their ideas of a better world – has become the very socialist dictatorship frustrates established intellectual elites. This is despite the fact that after 2000 there was a massive offensive by proponents of a very negative interpretation of Czechoslovak communism.[28] The publication of the Czech translation of the influential *Black Book of Communism* coincided with the emergence of specialised memory institutions dedicated to the issue of state repression, as well as the production of a number of films, novels, and other cultural images of the traumatic history.[29] This example illustrates a broader trend in the European post-socialist space based on the fact that elite memory makers – politicians, journalists, and intellectuals – utilise what Zoltán Dujisin calls "useable totalitarianism" to externalise communism and reject any connection be-

26 MILAN KUNDERA, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, London 1995, p. 33.

27 OLIVIA ANGÉ, DAVID BERLINER, *Introduction: Anthropology of Nostalgia – Anthropology as Nostalgia*, in: Anthropology and Nostalgia, New York–Oxford 2015, p. 9.

28 VERONIKA PEHE, *Totalitarianism as Defensive Memory of the Transformation: Unpacking a Czech Mnemonic Conflict*, in: Erinnerung des Umbruchs, Umbruch der Erinnerung, (eds.) Hanna Haag, Till Hilmar, Wiesbaden 2024, pp. 225–244.

29 On the birth of the anti-communist narrative of late socialism in the first decade of the millennium, see VALENTIN BEHR, MURIEL BLAIVE, ANEMONA CONSTANTIN, LAUERE NEUMAYER, MÁTÉ ZOMBORY, *Anti-Communist Consensus: The Black Book of Communism*, Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest 51/2020, pp. 2–3, 55–88. The available analyses of audience responses to films about Czechoslovak socialism on web fan portals show that viewers do not identify with the hegemonic narratives of society as a victim of the regime or, on the contrary, the self-reflexive stylisation of everyone's responsibility for its functioning, and judge the quality of films according to their perceived authenticity. This is the intersection of their own memories of the era depicted and the artistic emotional impact of the movies. See JAROSLAV PINKAS, *Jak vzpomínáme na normalizaci. Obrazy normalizační minulosti ve filmu* [As we Remember Normalisation. Images of the Normalisation in Film], Prague 2020, pp. 218–219.

tween the dictatorship and the internal functioning of the national community and its history. In doing so, they construct a mnemonic community of the nation to emphasise the suffering brought about by the alien communist experience.[30]

In spite of this fact, a significant part of the public maintains a rather positive association with the reality of real socialism in their imagination. Furthermore, as Veronika Pehe demonstrates in her influential research, a strictly anti-communist stance that criticises all expressions of positive nostalgia for the so-called normalisation era, its material culture, or the nature of the social contract based on stability in exchange for quiet submission to the Communist Party government, is itself a form of nostalgia. The concept of "nostalgia in reverse" allows us to perceive this dismissive stance as a desire to preserve a binary view of the past, where there is no doubt about who represented the positive and negative heroes of the narrative.[31] There is nothing left to do but to question the social and cultural mechanisms that make this situation of the clash of these two modes of nostalgia possible.

Memory triggers: late socialist television news and its reframing by web 2.0

Mnemonic conflict, like other manifestations of collective memory, is usually situated in proximity to an artifact that has the potential to evoke strong reminiscences. Like material artefacts, symbols, rituals, or pop culture products, television footage from the 1980s and its contemporary recontextualisation carries concentrated narratives and has the potential to initiate public debate about the past.[32] We build here on a series of

30 ZOLTÁN DUJISIN, *Post-Communist Europe: On the Path to a Regional Regime of Remembrance?*, in: Thinking through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, (eds.) Michal Kopeček, Piotr Wcislik, Budapest 2015, p. 562.

31 VERONIKA PEHE, *Velvet Retro: Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture*, New York–Oxford 2020, pp. 157–158.

32 Marita Sturken, for example, proposed this definition for working with television production in the field of collective memory research in her study of American society's memories of the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic. See MARITA STURKEN, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1997, p. 24.

research on nostalgia based on television media products,[33] in our case represented by contemporary Czechoslovak Television reports that were aired on the evening news and other programs devoted to domestic news. All Facebook posts selected for qualitative analysis reached more than a thousand users for direct interaction. Without exception, these were television reports broadcast between 1980 and 1989 on Televizní noviny – the main news programme – and on Aktuality, a programme dedicated to domestic news. The viewing figures for both programmes were staggering in the context of the state station's monopoly on all television broadcasting. Available viewing figures from 1983 to 1988 show that the average audience for Aktuality was 3,558,730 viewers and for Televizní noviny, as the main news programme. was as high as 7,609,289 viewers.[34] Both programmes thus became part of late socialist everyday life and of Czech collective memory.

In the 1980s, television news was part of the information structures fully controlled by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.[35] The director of Czechoslovak Television was a member of the ideological commission of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee, which also approved long-term thematic plans for the work of television news. The main goal of the Central Editorial Office of the TV news was to criticise Western society, demythicise capitalist consumerism, support the implementation of the policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and strengthen diplomatic, cultural and economic ties between

33 See e.g. STEFANIE ARMBRUSTER, *Watching Nostalgia: An Analysis of Nostalgic Television Fiction and its Reception*, Bielefeld 2016.

34 The data are based on historical audience surveys conducted on a limited set of viewers. The estimated total viewership is the result of the intersection of these data with sociological data on the number of televisions, the number of persons per household, and the total number of Czechoslovak citizens. See *Výzkum televizního programu a diváka. Televizní program roku 1987 a 1988 v ohlasu diváků* [Television programme and viewer research. Television programming in 1987 and 1988 in audience response], Odbor výzkumu programu ČST a diváků v ČSR, Czechoslovak Television internal document, April 1989.

35 On the relationship between the Communist Party and the media in the 1970s and 1980s, see MARTIN ŠTEFEK, *Tisková a informační politika orgánů ÚV KSČ v letech 1968–1989* [Press and Information Policy of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1968–1989], in: Optimální cenzurou bude kádrová politika. Tisková politika v období tzv. normalizace 1968–1989 [The optimal censorship will be a cadre policy. Press policy in the period of so-called normalisation 1968–1989], (eds). Petr Andreas, Martin Štefek, Prague 2023.

the countries of the socialist world.[36] A journalist's ethical code was obligated to be politically engaged and to report on reality in a consciously biased way in favour of socialism.[37]

Since the early 1970s, television was a key institution of the hegemony of the new Communist Party leadership that sought to delegitimise the democratising reforms of the Prague Spring.[38] Part of the media strategy at the time was to focus on the everyday achievements and concerns of ordinary working people, thereby distracting attention from the debates about the foundations of socialism as a social system opened up by the liberal 1960s. The aim was to give the appearance of normality to a late socialism ideologically based on a specific interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and the "common sense" of the working people.[39] The heroes of the TV series were ordinary men fighting in state institutions for the stability of society or the down-to-earth workers. Similarly, domestic news coverage thematised the work of ordinary citizens and their everyday problems. If criticism of partial problems appeared on the screens, it deliberately served to reinforce the stability of the system. The preferable approach was to outline the obvious problems of shortages of consumer goods, dysfunctional bureaucracies, or poor quality of services in the reportage, thus skilfully preparing the media space for the official explanation of the problem by the establishment. However, framing these shortcomings of real socialism as structural defects of the prevailing order was unacceptable. Nowadays, this type of content aimed at "constructive criticism" generates the most interest on social media, coupled with sharp discussions about the nature of socialism.

36 *Hlavní směry práce redakcí čs. televize: dodatek programové směrnice* [Main directions of work of Czechoslovak television editorial offices: supplement to the programme guidelines], Prague 1986, pp. 1–4.

37 *Zásady etiky socialistického novináře dle stanov Československého svazu novinářů z 25. 5. 1977* [Principles of Ethics of a Socialist Journalist according to the Statutes of the Czechoslovak Union of Journalists of 25 May 1977], quoted from MARCEL NOLČ, *Příručka novináře. Sborník informačních dokumentů pro novináře* [A journalist's handbook. Compendium of Information Documents for Journalists], Prague 1989, pp. 95–98.

38 On the role of Czechoslovak Television in the system of socialist dictatorship, see PAULINA BREN, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring*, Ithaca–London 2010.

39 On the concept of normality in the authoritative discourse of late socialism, see PETR FIDELIUS, *Byla normalizace normální?* [Was normalisation normal?], Slovo a smysl 35/2020, pp. 21–25.

For example, on October 24, 1988, the Aktuality programme interviewed customers of textile stores who complained that they could not buy quality cotton T-shirts anywhere.[40] In the studio, the director of one of the country's largest textile mills explained the situation. He reassured the audience that production capacities were gradually being increased by officials responsible for the planned economy, production was being modernised, and the situation would be greatly improved by the cooperation with textile enterprises in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After this programme was republished on Facebook, it drew a response from 4,090 users.[41] It sparked a heated debate, in which those who interpreted this historical source as proof of the dysfunctionality of the socialist economy clashed with those who fondly remembered their favourite socialist brands of clothing and shoes. The fact that many of the brands had disappeared during the market transformation was seen as a regrettable loss by some commenters.[42] Discussants from both these camps manifested their strongly emotional relationship to the past, which this post suddenly made present in their feed. It is emotion, not rational interpretation, that is the characteristic response to nostalgia for the past. This is not surprising, as Facebook and its commercial success is largely based on nostalgia.

Historian and media theorist Jason Steinhauer has commented on Facebook in the sense that it is a machine for creating on-demand nostalgia fuelled by micro-doses of sentiment in the form of packages of moments from the past. He explains the remarkable success of the #onthisday trend, which is built on the essentially random posting of remnants of the past (photos, videos, or texts) that are published on social media on the day of their creation decades ex post.[43] It is this practice, emerging in the Web 2.0 environment as early as 2011, that the Czech Television Archive project, on which the analysed data is based, was built on. The

40 Aktuality, news programme of *Czechoslovak Television,* 24 October 1988.

41 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 24 October 2024 with a reach of 292,074 users. 4,090 of them actively reacted to the video and a discussion was sparked under the post with 992 comments.

42 On nostalgia for socialist consumer goods in Czechoslovakia, see e.g. MARTIN FRANC, *Ostalgie v Čechách* [Ostalgie in Czechia], in: Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989 [Chapters from the History of Czech Democracy after 1989], (eds.) Adéla Gjuričová, Michal Kopeček, Prague 2008, pp. 205–216.

43 JASON STEINHAUER, *History Disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*, Washington 2021, pp. 33–41.

historical source, ideally in the visually appealing form of a photograph or short video, fits into a media-like personal archive created by each user. This archive of personal data is then used to nostalgically reminisce about one's own life.[44] The serendipitous discovery of a television report in an endless stream of other posts allows personal memories of the past to be linked to broader social issues or major historical events. It is precisely the way in which Facebook users incorporated historical news reports from Czechoslovak television – to which they responded en masse with comments – into their lived experience of late socialism that triggered the rapid spread of this content through the platform's algorithms, demonstrating the significance of this content for emotional ties to the past within the reality of "programmed sociality" described by the influential theorist Taina Bucher.[45]

It is the feeling of connecting a personal story to the era in which the television reportage was made that is a crucial part of the mechanism of nostalgic recollection that we can observe. One discussant commented on the above-mentioned report about the lack of T-shirts on the shelves of shops as follows: "...I lived through that time and the endless search for everything, going round the shops hundreds of times to see if any goods had arrived...well, disgusting!" In another case, however, the interviewee also based her positive attachment to socialism on her own authentic experience, albeit one that was completely opposite in value: "How can you know? You weren't even planned by your parents back then. I was twenty-three in 1983 and we normally bought everything in the shop." The commemorative experience thus has a dual function. Firstly, it generates interest in material that speaks of late socialism and of the witness as an individual; at the same time, the recollection of life in that era gives legitimacy to the emotions experienced at the moment of confrontation with the historical material.

But why is it that the visual representation of the material culture of the recent past evokes such a strong emotional response? Research on remembering and nostalgic experiences of the 1980s on social media works with the concept of "nostalgic bond", which has been defined to

44 BRADY ROBARDS, SIAN LINCOLN, BENJAMIN C. PINKARD, JANE HARRIS, *Remembering Through Facebook: Mediated Memory and Intimate Digital Traces*, in: Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media, (eds.) Amy S. Dobson, Brady Robards, Nicholas Carah, Washington 2018.

45 TAINA BUCHER, *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*, New York 2018, p. 4.

study generational differences in aesthetic and consumption preferences. This theory is based on the thesis that tastes are formed during the critical stage of late childhood and early adulthood, when there is a discovery of the individual's place in society and a consideration of the social and cultural values by which he or she intends to live. If, decades later, the individual encounters a visual, artistic, or commercial product, it is sure to trigger an emotional reaction, often a positive nostalgic attachment.[46] This is why, on a global scale, very successful generational groups are emerging on Facebook, sharing content related to a particular decade and its everyday life on their forums.[47] However, the post-socialist space does not offer even a slight semblance of apoliticality to such reminiscence. A positive relationship with a brand of popular sneakers, culture, or in general the interpersonal relations setup of the time easily leads to a heated debate about the repressive side of the dictatorship and the suspicion of supporting communist ideology.

In September 2024, a TV report from 1983 featuring the new model of the Skoda 120 was republished on the Facebook account.[48] It was a Czechoslovak product that the vast majority of the Czech population associates with socialism, and a number of people personally owned the car. Under the post, a discussion took place between so-called "nostalgics" and critics of the socialist car industry. The whole issue is illustrated by the following pair of comments. While one user openly expressed his purely emotional relationship with this relic of the past by saying, "It's beautiful. Granted, American cars had air conditioning and everything electric thirty years earlier, but the nostalgia is beautiful," another contributor brushed off similar nostalgic feelings with an ironic remark: "No progress for mankind, a sensation for communist freaks." As much as the news producers of the 1980s openly acknowledged their propaganda role and openly expressed full loyalty to socialist values and prac-

46 MORRIS B. HOLBROOK, ROBERT M. SCHINDLER, *Nostalgic bonding: Exploring the role of nostalgia in the consumption experience*, Journal of Consumer Behaviour: An International Research Review 3/2003, no. 2, pp. 108–109.

47 ALESSANDRO CALIANDRO, ALESSANDRO GANDINI, LUCIA BAINOTT, GUIDO ANSELMI, *The Platformisation of Consumer Culture: Digital Methods Guide*, Amsterdam 2024, pp. 49–69.

48 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 11 September 1983. The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 11 September 2024 with a reach of 831,600 users, 7,625 of whom actively responded to the post. The discussion has 1,091 comments.

tices of governance, many witnesses react to their reports by reminiscing about the beautiful golden days. Through a detailed qualitative analysis of these uncritical responses and their questioning in public debates, we will seek to uncover the mechanisms behind the selective remembering that allows one to ignore the limits set by the dictatorship and its repressive functioning.

A sense of stability and the world of late socialism

After the Prague Spring attempt to reform the foundations of the socialist dictatorship collapsed under the pressure of the Warsaw Pact occupation in August 1968, conservative hardliners tried to resolve the situation by promising social security. The process of "normalisation" was mainly to bring peace for work and the gradual development of a system of "real socialism". The calming down of the mobilised society supporting the reform plans from below was not possible only with the help of personnel purges in the leadership of state enterprises, offices, and other institutions. Ordinary citizens of socialist society were offered social reconciliation based on rising living standards and pro-family policies in an effort to transform their creative energies into the private sphere of family life and the cultivation of apolitical hobbies.[49]

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a large-scale construction of unified concrete apartment buildings ("paneláky"), but also schools, shops, and the modernisation of infrastructure buildings, starting with the construction of the motorway and the Prague metro. Parental leave with state guarantee was raised to two years in 1970 and extended to three years in 1980.[50] Late socialism legitimised itself as a system of social stability capable of guaranteeing everyone access to education and healthcare, as well as job security and a basic standard of living. Stability, security, and a certain predictability of life is perceived in retrospect by

49 On the basic developments during the Prague Spring and the period of so-called normalisation, see e.g. KIERAN WILLIAMS, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics 1968–1970*, Cambridge–New York 1997, pp. 3–61.

50 On the changes in the area of housing, the welfare state (especially the extension of parental leave), and healthcare that have led to a sense of social security, see LENKA KALINOVÁ, *Konec nadějí a nová očekávání. K dějinám české společnosti 1969–1993* [The End of Hopes and New Expectations. On the History of Czech Society 1969–1993], Prague 2012, pp. 188–207.

those who witness it as something that can be appreciated in the system of late socialism. This occurred despite the fact that while the purchasing power of the population and their consumption demands grew, the socialist system faced shortfalls in the production of daily necessities or the inability to meet the demand for cars or quality services. The shortage of toilet paper became a knot in the collective memory. This is evidenced by the reactions of Facebook users to a report that originally aired in the summer of 1988, which reported on a massive buyout of stocks of these goods.[51] More than 1,200 users reacted to it and a discussion of more than 900 comments was sparked under the post, replicating in content the debate on the shortage of clothes on the domestic market analysed above.[52]

The neoliberal turn, which was typical of the democratic transformation of Central Eastern Europe, brought with it an emphasis on individual responsibility, the cult of strong entrepreneurial individuals, and the rapid onset of deindustrialisation within a decade completely changed the material basis of ordinary Czechs.[53] According to oral history research, the sudden loss of social security and the growth of inequalities, together with the knowledge that Western consumerism would not be available to everyone, shocked the witnesses and left them with conflicting memories, tempering their joy at the restoration of civil liberties and respect for human rights.[54] A sociological survey carried out in 2024 by Institute of Empirical Research showed that 51% of respondents believed that socialism had been able to provide better conditions for families with children, 62% of respondents believed that socialism had been better

51 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 23 July 1988.

52 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 23 July 2024 with a reach of 212,511 users. 2,861 of them actively reacted to the video and a discussion was sparked under the post with 930 comments.

53 Philip Ther even notes that the concept of freedom in Central Europe soon after 1989 was concentrated in the neoliberal idea of the free market as a playground for the strong individual entrepreneurs. See PHILIP THER, *Europe since 1989: a history*, Princeton 2016, pp. 303–304. For current trends in research on this phenomenon, see *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989*, (eds.) VERONIKA PEHE, JOANA WAWRZYNIAK, London–New York 2024.

54 For a recollection of the acquisition of human rights and the shock of the loss of social security and the sensitive perception of unemployment, see MIROSLAV VANĚK, PAVEL MÜCKE, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society*, New York 2016, pp. 35–42 and 137–142.

for the elderly and the sick, and 70% of respondents had a negative perception of the degree of social disparity and also of the general ethics of society compared to the present day.[55] The nostalgic notion of socialism as a socially stable egalitarian system was reflected in social media users' reactions to the historical TV reports.

In September 2024, a report about a collective house built during socialism in Litvínov was published on Facebook.[56] The collective housing combined small apartments, collective sharing of housework, and other services, including communal meals in a large dining room. This radically collectivist project was never fully realised, and the reporter admits that the idea was "ahead of its time", but the tone of the report was very positive. Thus, at the time, the building was publicised as evidence of socialism's success in housing young families. In the form of a Facebook post, the report was viewed by 593,853 users, of which 6,911 actively responded to it, and the discussion grew to 802 comments.[57] The topic of this sometimes very heated debate was socialist housing. For the strong camp of debaters, socialist construction equated to a key achievement of the system at the time, one that holds social cohesion in society even 35 years after its end. One user even commented that "if it weren't for communist prefabs, half of the people would have nowhere to live today…Just look at what was built then and what has been built in the last 35 years." At the end of her statement, she added a self-identification with a certain generational group that can only understand the issue thanks to their personal experience. She reminded her opponents, "But it is useless to discuss this, those who are around 50 years old can understand it without explanation, but the young have no chance to understand it at all." Her opinion was immediately challenged by another user, who pointed to her ideological blindness and the situation in Western society, which had not gone through socialism at all: "How come they didn't build in the West and live in shacks? It's fascinating to me that you Bolsheviks still think you've been building and don't realise that it's thanks to you that we are poor relations today compared to the West." In addition to the nostalgic "what would today's young people give for

55 *35 let demokracie* [35 Years of Democracy], Prague 2024, p. 14.

56 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 3 September 1982.

57 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 3 September 2024 with a reach of 536,907 users.

it", there were further condemnations of the culturally alien imported "Soviet social engineering" and labelling this type of housing as "communist garbage".

Similarly polarised discussions were sparked by TV reports on iconic products of the socialist era.[58] The aforementioned Skoda 120 car or domestic appliances of both local and imported brands are objects that represent a whole set of memories for a significant part of the population, and thus are crucial triggers of memories. In October 1989, just before the fall of socialism, a TV news report was published about long queues of customers trying to buy automatic washing machines of the Western brand Philco.[59] The reporter concluded the story with a warning that this enormous demand was the result of domestic manufacturers being unable to meet the demand for these goods. The fact that such media space was given to a Western product, and the critical tone of the report, is a classic example of the language of perestroika, which was intended to reform the system, but in reality led to the opening of serious issues leading to the complete loss of legitimacy of the whole system.[60] The inability to compete with Western producers was certainly one of these issues. Nevertheless, the publication of this report 35 years later on Facebook provoked a wave of nostalgic reactions linked to the narrative of the high quality of socialist products.

The report was published on Facebook on October 3, 2024. It was viewed by over 728,080 users, 7,080 reacted to it, and over 1,400 posts appeared in the discussion. It again polarised the users into two camps, the first of which noted the unavailability of this type of good and its high cost, which was directly mentioned in the report. The second large group, on the other hand, praised the quality of the products and considered their purchase a lifelong investment. They drew attention to their own memories of the financial stability of family budgets, which were able to cover even higher purchase costs. One camp identified with the follow-

58 On the issue of iconic products and material culture in general as a trigger of memory for the socialist era, see the analogous example of the materialisation of memory in the DDR: JONATHAN BACH, *Consuming Communism: Material Cultures of Nostalgia in Former East Germany,* in: Anthropology and Nostalgia, (eds.) Olivia Angé, David Berliner, New York–Oxford 2016.

59 Aktuality, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 3 October 1989.

60 MICHAL PULLMANN, *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* [End of the Experiment. Reconstruction and the Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia], Prague 2011, pp. 145–172.

ing comment: "Terrible times. A washing machine that you queue for all day and you don't even know if it's going to get to you. The price was 9,000 CZK, which was equivalent to nine salaries, and today you can buy it without any problems from one or two salaries and even online without waiting. I don't see how anyone can defend that time." However, a number of discussants expressed very different views. One witness recalled: "I got a newlywed loan and quietly went to buy a washing machine and an ETA blender. By the way, I still have the blender at home. What lasts 36 years today?" It is this sense of stability and security that is often associated with late socialism, which forms the cornerstone for its nostalgia, linking this phenomenon in its basic contours to the broader anchoring of the cultural phenomenon of nostalgia in an anthropological sense.[61]

In his analysis of the contemporary epidemic of nostalgia, Zygmunt Bauman points out that a widespread reaction to technological and cultural globalisation is the strengthening of regional, national, or ethnic identities. This "return to tribes"[62] is also symptomatic of remembering Czechoslovak socialism. The above-mentioned 1983 report on the new type of Škoda car triggered memories of state ownership of all key enterprises and expressions of identification by discussants with the myth of Czechoslovakia's economic self-sufficiency in the late 1980s. Opponents of this optimistic image of the 1980s recalled the traumatic past of the expropriation of enterprises, the forced collectivisation of farmland, and the state terror that accompanied these processes.

The mechanism of remembering national economic self-sufficiency was triggered in many Facebook users by watching a report from July 1980 depicting the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant.[63] The report was viewed by 204,855 users on Facebook, 2,387 reacted to it, and a discussion of 538 comments developed.[64] It reflected the fact that 65% of Czech citizens currently perceive the results of the Velvet

61 According to David Lowenthal, nostalgia is mainly about finding a safe, predictable space in the past, which easily acquires political connotations. It is the predictability and clear sense of past reality that drives the sentimentalisation of history and thus its misrepresentation. See DAVID LOWENTHAL, *Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't*, in: The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia, (eds.) Christopher Shaw, Malcolm Chase, Manchester–New York 1989, pp. 19–20.

62 Z. BAUMAN, *Retrotopia*, pp. 49–85.

63 První televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 27 July 1980.

64 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 27 July 2024 with a reach of 196,907 users.

Revolution as a disappointment and a missed opportunity.[65] One of the discussants commented on the issue as follows: "After the coup we had a chance as a country and a great potential to change things for the better, instead we were sold for a few pennies, everything disappeared, what did not disappear was left to ruin or was expropriated. The result is that all we are left with is a mounting national debt. Thanks to several generations of incompetent governments, we are just an inferior Western colony..." Against this in the debate is a narrative affirming the neoliberal scheme of the supremacy of the market economy and competition. One user countered the quoted view by saying: "Such sweet talk about self-sufficiency. If a company doesn't have capable management and isn't competitive, don't be surprised. Then everyone here cries about how they are closing down businesses that were ruined by the communists to begin with."

It is symptomatic of all the analysed discussions under the published reports on Facebook that any positive relationship to the reality of the 1980s is very quickly labelled by opponents as a manifestation of Bolshevism and approval of the practices of the socialist security apparatus. The reaction to the praise of the Czechoslovak nuclear industry was, for example, surprise at "how many comrades are left here who managed to waste their lives not only for themselves but also for their children," or a reminder of the Stalinist political trials and even the millions of victims of Marxist ideology around the world. These reactions are evidence that the anti-communist discourse of the first decade after 2000 still has its social weight. At the same time, however, it should be stressed that only a negligible number of discussants expressing a positive nostalgic attachment to late socialism explicitly or implicitly subscribe to the policies of the Communist Party or Marxist ideology. Their emotions towards the past do not lead to a direct heroisation of the party apparatus, and therefore the focal point of nostalgia seems to lie outside the inclination towards the totalitarian claims of normalisation.

Nostalgic reminiscence is not always a celebration of the socialist regime

Despite the high degree of nostalgia expressed for the everyday reality of the last decade of Czechoslovak socialism, few people in the Czech

65 *35 let demokracie* [35 Years of Democracy], Prague 2024, p. 27.

Republic would actually want to live in that era. According to a 2009 sociological survey, 89% of respondents answered in the negative when asked directly if they would like to live under socialism or if they believe it is possible to return to this system.[66] Similarly, public support for socialist ideas of collective ownership is rather weak in the Czech context.[67] This paradox stems from the basic mechanisms of nostalgia, which expresses a desire for a form of stability, security, and predictability for which the past is only a space of projection. Few people identify with the bureaucratic rigidity of late normalisation or even the activities of its repressive organs, especially the state security. According to a 2010 survey, even among the members, voters, and supporters of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) – the successor organisation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) – there were only 35% outright rejected democracy and, conversely, 34% saw democracy as the best possible form of government. Only 5% of all Czechs, according to this poll, want to return to a socialist political regime, and 22% of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČM) voters would like a strong leader government without a parliament, and only an absolutely negligible part of the group would like an open military dictatorship.[68]

Nevertheless, a series of public debates took place in the post-2000 period about the political harmfulness of normalisation popular culture. The persistent popularity of domestic pop stars who had already built their careers during socialism, or the reruns of popular television series produced with an obvious propaganda component, irritated anti-communist intellectuals who accused the television management of spreading

66 J. ŠUBRT, J. VINOPAL, *Historické vědomí obyvatel České republiky*, pp. 143–146.

67 Available data from 2018 show that only 20% of the population identifies with the political left, while 40% identify with the right. At the same time, explicitly left-wing political parties have faced a decline in electoral preferences and a personal crisis in the last decade. JIŘÍ NAVRÁTIL, *Czech Republic,* in: Civil society and leftist values—Comparative study mapping the state of civil society organizations from a leftist perspective in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, Prague 2020, pp. 43–47.

68 21 % of the voters and members of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) claimed that it does not matter to the non-privileged whether democracy or dictatorship reigns, thus apparently expressing the opinion that freedom without material stability is impossible. See DANIEL KUNŠTÁT, *Za rudou oponou. Komunisté a jejich voliči po roce 1989* [Behind the Red Curtain. Communists and their Voters after 1989], Prague 2013, pp. 272–278.

a harmful ideology.[69] Veronika Pehe, based on her research on cultural production produced after 1989 depicting the era of socialist dictatorship, has formed a thesis about the need for cultural continuity fulfilled through the re-consumption of the products of socialist entertainment. According to her, the audience perceives normalisation TV series or music as an opportunity to realise that even before 1989 they lived a normal life and therefore that their youth was not necessarily deviant even though it took place in the context of a dictatorship.[70] A similar desire also led many Facebook users to watch the analysed TV reports.

In the summer of 2024, a television report taken at the Spartakiads in June 1985 was republished on Facebook.[71] Footage of young girls performing mass gymnastic exercises with ribbons, accompanied by commentary emphasising the symbolism of the desire for peace and life in a harmonious socialist society, attracted over 17,000 users who responded directly to it, sparking a discussion of over two thousand posts.[72] In 1985, almost 190,000 participants performed in Prague's huge Strahov stadium, and were selected in regional rounds in which 2,197,000 young people and children took part. This society-wide event left a deep mark on Czech collective memory. It is very difficult to imagine a comparably politicised ritual such as the Spartakiads, which occurred once every five years and were characterised by mass exercise performances meant to demonstrate social cohesion and the collective spirit of a healthy socialist national body.[73]

Nevertheless, many witnesses frame their remembrances of the Spartakiads in apolitical terms in an apparent attempt to remove their positive memories from their association with direct support for the

69 On the origin and ideological-propaganda role of the series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (Thirty Cases of Major Zeman), which was broadcast in 1975–1980, see DANIEL RŮŽIČKA, *Major Zeman. Zákulisí vzniku televizního seriálu* [Major Zeman. Behind the scenes of the making of the TV series], Prague 2005. On the structure of the public debate about the social impact of its reruns on national broadcasting after 2000, see KAMIL ČINÁTL, *Naše české minulosti aneb jak vzpomínáme* [Our Czech Past or How We Remember], Prague 2005, pp. 177–202.

70 V. PEHE, *Velvet Retro*, pp. 64–76.

71 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 29 June 1985.

72 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 29 July 2024 with a reach of 653,214 users. 17,305 of them actively reacted to the video and a discussion was sparked under the post with 2,036 comments.

73 PETR ROUBAL, *Spartakiads: The Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia*, Prague 2019, pp. 186–220.

dictatorship. One discussant, for example, commented on the report as follows: "I don't know what you have against Spartakiada. Why are you all bringing politics into it? How is this regime any better than before? Lying, stealing, murdering, cheating. What does it matter that people got together and trained. They just moved and created something nice. Now they sit on their asses, get fat and criticize. That's what they're good at." This is despite the explicitly political tone of the TV report. A number of witnesses in the Facebook discussion expressed similar views, while also describing rehearsing the routine or participating in the festivities in Prague as one of the best recollections of their youth. They often earned from the other discussants very direct and overwhelming criticism reminding of the liquidation of the Sokol sports organisation during Stalinism, the misuse of their regular gatherings for political purposes, or the crimes of communism in general. A number of contributors to the discussion demanded that the gymnasts publicly apologise for their active participation in the Spartakiads, and comparisons with Nazi physical education were also made. This was despite the apparent efforts of those who remembered the event nostalgically to neutralise or relativise the political dimension of the event, pointing out that the gymnasts did not identify with it anyway.

The analysis of the results of our project on remembering late socialism on Facebook shows that the political and ideological legacy of the socialist regime is mainly handled by the anti-communist part of the discussants in the process of remembering. It thus demonstrates what Veronika Pehe has described as nostalgia in reverse, where the main role is played mainly by the clarity of a black and white world, where the supporters of the dictatorship and its critics stand against each other. This struggle between good and evil is then transferred to the contemporary debate about the 1980s, leading a parallel monologue with the rest of the witnesses who express an apolitical positive emotional attachment to the decade.

However, if their positive feelings do not relate to the apparatus of the Communist Party, the political regime, and the implementation of socialist ideology in general, what is their objective? To answer this question, we can look to the reaction of one of the discussants on the subject of the last Czechoslovak Spartakiad: "Well, sure, it was a different time, but to say that everything was wrong is not correct. It just wasn't. Look, back then there were only two genders, schools were built in 'Z actions', apartments were built that your children now take mortgages for, and

back then apartments were free. We built airplanes, dams, we had a big army to help in floods or in the fields in the summer. We retired at 60, women even at 58, and today? What do we have today? They sold everything, we don't own anything here, but we can travel again. You just can't say that everything was wrong. Certainly a lot of things were bad, but we were young and that was the beauty of it."

In addition to the apparent effort to merge the personal story of the witness with the larger history, the stability of basic identities upset by the postmodern turn in society, the collective effort to provide affordable public education, a stable standard of living for employees of prosperous factories, and the existence of strong state organisations on which the individual could rely all play a significant role in his assessment. Such positive memories belong not only to locally embedded Czechoslovak socialism, but to the whole era of organised modernity. The disintegration of organised modernity and the emergence of the rapidly changing liquid modernity of the contemporary world is causing global waves of nostalgia not only in the post-socialist world but also in Western Europe and the US.[74]

Nostalgia for the world of organised modernity is linked to more or less successful attempts at its political appropriation. For example, many theorists describe Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 United States election as an exploitation of nostalgia for the lost world of 1980s industrial society.[75] Similarly, Czechs, who spent their youth in the reality of huge state-owned enterprises and supposedly stable socialist institutions tend to escape into an idealised past in the face of the uncertainty of the contemporary world. The wave of deindustrialisation that swept across the country during the neoliberally-driven economic transformation of the 1990s caused consternation. Many employees watched in disbelief as a large industrial plants, which guaranteed them not only a monthly

74 Nostalgia is thus a reaction to the uncertainty of basic values in the form of constant rearrangement of the social structure and individuation. Bauman argues that social security in the form of stable work or stability of relations in society in general is "grandfather's nostalgia". See ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Liquid Modernity*, Malden 2006, p. 161 and following.

75 JARREL DE MATAS, *Making the Nation Great Again: Trumpism, Euro-Scepticism and the Surge of Populist Nationalisms*, Journal of Comparative Politics 10/2017, no. 2, p. 26; GLADDEN J. PAPPIN, *Machiavelian Politics, Modern Management and the Rise of Donald Trump*, in: Trump and Political Philosophy. Leadership, Statesmanship and Tyranny, (eds.) Angel J. Torres, Marc B. Sable, Cham 2018, pp. 144–145.

wage but also housing, leisure activities, and, last but not least, an identity linked to pride in their work performance and a collective of colleagues, moved to places with cheaper labour, collapsed, or underwent radical fragmentation under the pressure of Western global trends.[76]

The sensitivity of the topic of deindustrialisation in the Czechoslovak context is illustrated by the reactions to the Facebook post on Botas sneakers.[77] Footage from a 1975 TV report on the production of these shoes attracted 161,129 Facebook users and sparked a discussion with 534 comments, in which anti-communists and "nostalgics" clashed again.[78] While one user ironically asked "who did the communists steal the factory from this time," another emotionally attacked the main actors of the post-revolutionary transformation by writing: "Havel and Klaus, the two biggest criminals in the history of the Czech Republic. They caused us to be de facto unable to produce anything here." He attributed responsibility for the consequences of the global mechanisms of the market economy to only two powerful political figures who function as personifications of the rapid changes of the first decades after 1989. Václav Havel, as an icon of the human rights movement and revolutionary president, is put on the same level in this narrative as the architect of the rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, economist, and finance minister, Václav Klaus. Although Václav Havel had in some aspects a different vision of the transformation process (in 1990, he emphasised the importance of preserving social security and limiting the rise in unemployment) than the neoliberal driver of privatisation, Klaus, he publicly supported the government's actions, and this has left a strong imprint in the collective memory.[79] The fact is that the discussion quickly slipped

76 Demographic research dealing with analogous examples in other countries of the post-socialist area shows that the sharp loss of prestige of working-class professions, rising unemployment, and other manifestations of deindustrialisation have led to an increase in mental health problems and alcoholism in the population to the point of increasing mortality. See, for example, the comparative study of Hungarian and Soviet industrial areas: GÁBOR SCHEIRING, AYTALINA AZAROVA, DARJA IRDAM, KATARZYNA DONIEC, MARTIN MCKEE, DAVID STUCKLER, LAWRENCE KING, *Deindustrialisation and the post-socialist mortality crisis*, Cambridge Journal of Economics 47/2023, no. 2, pp. 341–372.

77 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 16 June 1975.

78 The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 16 June 2024 with a reach of 149,565 users. 2,073 of them actively reacted to the video.

79 VÁCLAV RAMEŠ, *Trh bez přívlastků, nebo ekonomickou demokracii? Spory o podobu vlastnické transformace v porevolučním Československu* [A Market without Attri-

into a conflict about deindustrialisation and the sustainability of socialist industry, despite the fact that the Botas brand has not disappeared and is, on the contrary, evidence of the commercialisation of the mechanisms of nostalgia for socialist products.[80]

However, large factories built on the mass production of goods were only one of the pillars of organised modernity. Others were institutions of control and discipline, notably school and the army. These were associated with strong state institutions, order, and security.[81] A Facebook post in the form of a TV report recorded in 1987 about the lining of the edges of exercise books in primary schools generated considerable interest among Facebook users.[82] In the report, the reporter asked an official of the Ministry of Education why it was necessary for children to manually trace the page borders of notebooks with a ruler and pencil and why it was not possible to mass print them during production. He explained the situation of standardising the production process. These images triggered not only personal memories of users' school years, but also a dispute about what education should transmit to children. Advocates of modern pedagogical trends that encourage creativity and defenders of tougher school drills were pitted against each other. One user endorsed a similar routine task by pointing to the stability of the order of industrial modernity into which children were to be gradually integrated: "I remember that, and why not. The children have acquired manual dexterity and a bit of work on the assembly line." The next Facebook user created a formula for the ideal education which he saw as a hardened generation, indirectly attacking contemporary education. In his commentary he wrote: "school and military service equals the only right course of action."

Compulsory military service, often associated in collective memory with socialism, despite the fact that it was abandoned in the Czech

butes or Economic Democracy? Disputes over the Form of Property Transformation in Post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia], Prague 2021, pp. 274–278.

80 On the commercial success of the Botas brand after 2000 based on the commodification of nostalgia, see V. PEHE, *Velvet Retro*, pp. 103–106.

81 On the role of institutions of discipline, which, in addition to prisons or asylums, include the quasi-repressive institutions of the school, factory, or barracks in the era of the emergence of modern European society, see MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York 2012, pp. 136–155.

82 Aktuality, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 25 September 1987. The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 25 September 2024 with a reach of 1,047,929 users. 11,472 of them actively interacted with this content, and the post sparked a discussion of 2,036 comments.

Republic only in 2004, is still a highly controversial topic. While its defenders argue that the army is an institution that educates strong, resilient, and self-sufficient men according to a gendered pattern of masculinity typical of organised modernity, its opponents recall the repressive form of barracks life and see this obligation as state bullying that limits individual freedom.[83] In August 2024, a regular TV news programme broadcasted a report from August 1971, titled "Letter from the Army", which depicted the daily duty of the guard unit, was republished on Facebook.[84] The images of People's Army uniforms, patrols around barbed wire fences, and guard dogs resonated with several established points of collective memory. In the discussion below the post, which captured the attention of hundreds of users, there was conflict not only over the role of compulsory military service in the education of young men, but also a heated debate about the state borders.

Although the subject of the report was not about that – as it depicted security guards at an ammunition depot – the topic of the sharp verbal exchange under the Facebook post was the violence of the border guards against those who illegally attempted to cross the Iron Curtain and emigrate.[85] At some point, the debaters split into a group of advocates of sharply defined state sovereignty, heavily guarded borders, and

83 Oral history research shows the conflict between the official discourse about masculine defenders of the homeland and the discourse of remembrance based on the individual experience of men who underwent compulsory military service. While the social prestige of the Czechoslovak army declined after 1968, the contemporary culture wars over the gender order have brought back into circulation the old narrative of the army as a school of masculinity. See JIŘÍ HLAVÁČEK, *The Myth of Defending the Homeland. Combat Preparation in Conscripts Reflections of Compulsory Military Service (1968–2004),* Soudobé dějiny 28/2021, no. 3; JIŘÍ HLAVÁČEK, *Ztracený čas, který z tebe udělá chlapa!? Významy základní vojenské služby a jejich reflexe v generační paměti českých mužů* [Wasted Time Making you a Man!? The Meanings of Basic Military Service and Their Reflection in the Generational Memory of Czech Men], in: Mezi pakárnou a službou vlasti. Základní vojenská služba (1968–2004) v aktérské reflexi [Between a Military Drudgery and Service to Motherland. Compulsory Military Service (1968–2004) in Actor-Reflection], (ed.) Jiří Hlaváček, Prague 2021.

84 Televizní noviny, news programme of Czechoslovak Television, 15 August 1971. The report was republished on the Facebook profile Archiv ČT on 15 August 2024 with a reach of 198,630 users. 2,945 of them interacted directly with the content, and a discussion of 696 comments was sparked under the post.

85 More than 300 people were killed by border guards during the socialist era while trying to cross the border illegally. See TEREZA MAŠKOVÁ, VOJTĚCH RIPKA, *Železná opona v Československu. Usmrcení na československých státních hranicích*

cultural closed-mindedness that stood in opposition to those who reminisced about the border troops' bloody past. The following comment by one discussant concentrates on both the desire for a closed, secure world without multicultural otherness and the subscription to the values of traditional masculinity symbolised by military training: "One day it will be fenced off again anyway, when the mohammedans overrun that 'glorious west', as if it's only a matter of time. I'd just like to see which of today's mama's boys would give 2 years of military service." The call for the safe world of late-industrial organised modernity thus has little to do with leftist ideas of equality, ethno-cultural inclusiveness, and visions of universal human progress, but is rather a conservative call for a vanished and now idealised "normal world".[86]

Conclusion

The recontextualisation of historical sources in the form of 1980s TV reports broadcast by Czechoslovak Television republished on Facebook helps to reveal how the debate about late socialism takes place outside forums dominated by the cultural elite. The analysis shows that even 35 years after the collapse of the socialist dictatorship, this period still represents a highly controversial part of Czechoslovak history, provoking strong emotional reactions in society. The transformation of society that followed the disintegration of the Communist Party's monopoly of power, alongside the clear successes of establishing solid institutions of parliamentary democracy, an independent judiciary, and a civil society based on the ideal of human rights, meant for many a bittersweet experience of unfulfilled revolutionary ideals or even a feeling of exclusion. These "losers" (in the sense that these people feel that they lost out on an imagined or promised future) judge their memories of the last decade of socialism through a comparison with subsequent developments, projecting onto it their ideas of a world of stability and normality. An analysis of the discussions among Facebook users that have commented on the

v letech 1948–1989 [The Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia. Executions at the Czechoslovak State Borders in 1948–1989], Prague 2015.

86 The idea of exclusive ethnic claim to a territory, cultural superiority, or masculine superiority goes directly against the idea of equality on which leftist political thought is based. See NORBERTO BOBBIO, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, Cambridge–Chicago 1997, pp. 80–82.

republished 1980s television reports on Facebook show that despite the hegemony of anti-communist discourse in popular culture, a strong layer of positive nostalgia for everyday life under socialism persists among the witnesses.[87]

Although at first sight it may seem that anti-communist democrats are clashing with so-called "nostalgics" superficially identified with those sympathetic to the socialist dictatorship, this is rather a parallel monologue of two camps perceiving the historical sources in very different ways. Those who interpreted the republished television reports as evidence of everyday life under the socialist regime or as a source of information about the functioning of the media with an overtly propagandistic agenda framed the material very critically as evidence of the unsustainability, irrationality, and authoritarian nature of the rule of the Communist Party nomenklatura. Conversely, users who shared positive emotions when viewing the republished television reports often expressed their connection to late socialism through purely personal experience. In this context, the often-articulated view, which can be paraphrased as "it wasn't all that bad, that's how it's interpreted in retrospect," implies an attempt at reflective nostalgia towards one's own life. The common and perfectly natural experience of temporality, linked to the fast pace of modernity, which establishes the significance of the cultural phenomenon of nostalgia, is complicated in the former Czechoslovakia, as in the entire post-socialist space, by the fact that the patina-clogged backdrop of everyday life is an environment of dictatorship and tyranny. The effort to retrospectively incorporate positive personal emotions associated with youth into the narrative of great history leads to attempts at a non-political interpretation of the most profane rituals of the socialist dictatorship, such as the Spartakiads. Such treatment of the past then provokes sharp disapproval from the anti-communist spectrum of users in the open debate on social networks.

In addition to the numerically strong group of discussants expressing reflective nostalgia for the lost world of their own youth, a strong set of those who recall socialism with obvious political overtones through a restorative nostalgic narrative joined the debate under the individual contributions. The two sets overlap to some extent. However, it should be

[87] The presented conclusions thus complement the findings of Veronika Pehe's research on the analysis of images of socialism in post-revolutionary popular culture. See V. PEHE, *Velvet Retro*, pp. 154–160.

stressed that, with few exceptions, this politicised reminiscence did not advocate the rule of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Communist Party or even the repressive actions of state security. On the contrary, according to our research and other available data, we can conclude that almost no one in today's Czech society defends these aspects of socialism. The restorative nostalgia associated with the interpretation of late socialism is linked to a broader wave of idealisation of organised modernity – a world in which strong state institutions were able to guarantee or contribute significantly to the material stability in the lives of individuals, the collectivist ethos clearly defined the space for identity politics, and strictly defined ethnic or national boundaries provided a sense of security and safety. Thus, referring to the 1980s in Czechoslovakia as an era when "the world was still okay" is not an appeal of convinced Marxists, but rather a conservative projection of the uncertainties of liquid modernity into the recent past through its idealisation. In other words, a positive, nostalgic attachment to the Czechoslovak experience of the 1970s and 1980s is more akin to an affinity with Bauman's "retrotopia" and is certainly not a hallmark of pro-communist mobilisation aimed at restoring a socialist dictatorship.

An analysis of Facebook discussions under the historical television reports thus revealed a number of disconnected dialogues, where individual participants, in an attempt to place their personal lives in the context of history, or nostalgic for the order of organised modernity, reaped criticism from the anti-communists, which, however, mostly missed the point of their statements. The situation where other discussants remind someone who shares the view that in the 1980s the world was still fine because there were two sexes and the guarded borders of the Iron Curtain protected national communities from the unknown threat of an alien – usually Islamic – culture, and that the totalitarian pretensions of Soviet-style socialism are historically responsible for the suffering of millions of people, is evidence of the confusion of languages in the face of the current situation of retrotopia. This Baumanian concept, defining the present as a wave of nostalgic political projects seeking to revive the forgotten past and save "the world as we know it," allows us to unravel this complex situation of social misunderstanding. In the context of 2024, the often-caricatured exclamation in the Czech context – "golden communists, at least they didn't ask for anything from man" – is not a demand for the return of the nomenklatura party cadres to power, and certainly not the credo of a convinced proponent of Marx-Leninist ideology. Restorative

nostalgia for late Czechoslovak socialism is more akin to political conservatism, which has experienced a strong renaissance in the Global North in the last decade.