

BOOK REVIEW

PLAYING SOLDIERS IN BOHEMIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF NATO MEMBERSHIP

Hana Červinková. (2006). Prague: Set Out.

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Hana Červinková's *Playing Soldiers in Bohemia* is an ethnographic study of the Czech military's entry into NATO. It draws upon Červinková's fieldwork carried out from February, 2001 to June, 2002 on Czech military bases and at other sites in the Czech Republic. In 2001, the Czech Ministry of Defense initiated a campaign to reform the massive war machine left over from the days of the Cold War. The new military would be small, specialized, and useful to NATO. The author caught the Czech military at a fascinating time of transition before the new Czech military was fully established and operational and before the old Czech military was fully dismantled. She documents the tensions (the generation gap) between old and young officers. She notes the frustrations expressed by members of the Czech Republic's last group of drafted soldiers. A responsible archivist, she focuses mainly on the disappearing rather than the emerging military culture. Červinková's work does, however, more than document the end of a particular military sub-culture. *Playing Soldiers* provides great insight into the larger issue of state formation. The author is aware that she worked in a "blurred stage" where the Czech military was suspended in a state of both "post-" and "pre-." She is able to show the new Czech military in its awkward first stage before its violent purpose and its mercenary submission to the ends of NATO could be covered up by state discourse.

Chapter One documents the initial failure of Czech military reformers to institute a new image of an idealized "professional soldier." This initiative pushed against a long-established cultural current, for the traditional image of the military in the Czech imagination was, rather, that of "the good soldier Švejk," the eponymous hero of the anti-war novel by Jaroslav Hašek. Unlike other anti-war novels of the 1920s and 1930s, *The Good Soldier Švejk* did not depict the Great War as a terrible yet grand tragedy. Švejk never takes seriously the cruel and absurd system that would send him to war. Švejk bumbles, but there is something subversive in his bumbling. Ultimately, his antics show those committed to the system that oppresses him to be the greater fools.

Švejk has provided a model for passive resistance to the Czech people and particularly to the Czech conscript soldier. Within the paradigm of "švejkism," the professional soldier becomes reminiscent of the stiff, militaristic straight-men of Hašek's novel.

Chapters Two and Three show passive resistance in operation among old-guard officers and enlisted conscripts, respectively. Červinková organizes Chapter Two around an anomaly: the Czech military had no distinguished record to defend; yet the officer corps did not welcome military reform. As the author notes, the Czechoslovakian military has "submissively observed the course of foreign invasions from their barracks." The old-guard officers nonetheless felt nostalgia for the Cold War era. While it is true that the old guard must have seen its status threatened by the arrival of young, educated, English-speaking officers, Červinková credits the "dinosaurs" with understanding, and motives beyond mere defensiveness. The old guard saw that the professionalization and democratization of their military amounted to a mere change of masters, the Soviet Union for NATO and the United States. In a liminal phase characterized by obsolescent equipment, poor discipline, no enemy, and no coherent strategy, the old guard officers indulge in nostalgia. They reserve criticism for a future that only their successors idealize.

Chapter Three documents the experience of the last men to serve as conscripts. Many began service with a willing attitude, hoping to experience a meaningful rite-of-passage. The Czech Republic had already committed to the concept of a small professional Army. The conscripts who had joined to become men were ignored by a distracted military hierarchy or at best used only for domestic tasks such as cleaning or cooking. Determined to experience a rite of passage, and using the little material available to them, the conscripts make a cult out of enduring the wasted year. Around the ordeal of time wasted, they invent ceremonies and construct a hierarchy. They willfully rebuild the experience that history tried to deny them.

In Chapter Four, Červinková analyzes the feeling of the old guard officers for the old days. The author is a sensitive archivist, and she wisely gives much space in this chapter for her subjects to speak for themselves. The results are sometimes touching. One officer speaks of his glory days in the following terms:

You probably don't think so when you look around and you are so young, but I think my job was beautiful and I loved it. I looked forward to coming to work every single day, because I loved planes and here I could touch them all day long.

As we learn that this officer-mechanic was being pushed out of his Air Force (for lack of formal education), the reader is reminded not of Švejk, but of the horse of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Using Benjamin's concept of mimetic attachment, Červinková depicts the old guard Air Force officers behaving and becoming like their aging and obsolescent aircraft. Yet Červinková never allows the reader to forget that the beloved aircraft were machines of death, and that the officers of whom she writes so beautifully were privileged agents of active collaboration with an occupying power.

Chapter Five describes the awkward treatment by civic authorities of a socialist-era monument to war dead (the National Monument in Prague). The ambiguous attitude toward this monument on the part of the state resulted from the radical change underway in the space between civil society, state, and the military. The government was in the process of creating an elite fighting force capable of rapid deployment. Yet the government wanted this new military to be separated as much as possible in the public consciousness from the actual violent acts of war.

Much of the author's ethnography focuses on how members of the Czech military imagined reality to themselves during a period of great change. Using the theoretical paradigm of liminality, Červinková reveals a contest between competing state discourses. Neither the military nor the public had yet accepted the Ministry of Defense's version of events. In this liminal period, the fantasies and nostalgia of old-guard soldiers contained a sophisticated critique of what was to come. The Czech military did become democratic and professional, but the transformation did not mean an end to militarism. It is true that a massive war machine became significantly smaller, but it also became more deployable. The old military was designed (ostensibly) for self-defense, but the new military is designed to be a flesh-and-blood offering

to the will of NATO and the United States. Conscription came to an end, only to be replaced by a system of mercenary volunteerism. Červinková's work is an insightful study of the chaotic space between two militarisms, and in this space resides the calculated betrayal of the ideals of the Velvet Revolution. Červinková frames her observations in such a way that the reader is never allowed to forget the violent purpose of the military. For this reason, although writing an ethnography of a peacetime military, Červinková nonetheless succeeds in creating an insightful and compelling contribution to the anthropology of war.