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Post-Socialist Political Necromancy: Weaponization of Dead Bodies in Czech Culture Wars

Vladimír Naxera  and Petr Krčál 

University of West Bohemia, Plzeň, Czech Republic

Corresponding author: Vladimír Naxera, email: vnaxera@kap.zcu.cz

Abstract

This article contributes to discussions on culture wars, memory politics, and the politics of dead bodies. It uses the example of the annual celebration of the liberation of the city of Pilsen by the American army in 1945 to demonstrate the use of the concept of “political necromancy.” The Pilsen celebrations are one of the events during which participating politicians use fallen (or suffering) soldiers as an argument to support current political goals. Metaphorically, the politician as a necromancer brings the fallen back to life and sends them as an army of the dead to fight in culture wars and memory wars. The article focuses on introducing the different strategies used in this process (depersonalizing the fallen or creating a ghost hero) and shows how dead bodies and the appropriate use of memory politics are used to bolster foreign policy ties to the US and to lash out against Russia and communism.

Keywords: politics of dead bodies; use of history; collective memory; culture wars; post-socialism

Introduction

Culture wars, defined some thirty years ago in relation to American society and politics (cf. Hunter 1991), have, in the last decade or so, become a significant factor in political development (and the subject of active interdisciplinary research in the social sciences) in the Central and Eastern European region (e.g., Barša, Hesová, and Slačálek 2021; Issacs, Wheatley, and Whitmore 2021), including the Czech Republic (e.g., Čulík 2020; Slačálek 2021), which is the focus of this article. They are both fought and examined primarily (but not exclusively) in relation to collective memory and collective identity (cf. Rupnik 2017) as well as norms and morality (cf. Hesová 2021a and 2021b; Issacs and Rudzite 2021). Moreover, cultural-political struggles in Central and Eastern Europe take on another more general feature – they are fought, among other things, de facto over whether a given community considers itself part of the West (or at least should be oriented towards the West) or not. It is precisely this broader issue that profoundly reflects the disputes over collective memory, identity, and morality. After all, these struggles are usually fought and interpreted as a dispute between the “global” and the “local” (Graff and Korolczuk 2021); in this case, we can say between “the West” (whose principles are spread by globalization) and “the East” (which resists globalization).

This article, which elaborates on the concept of so-called political necromancy (see below), builds on ongoing discussions about culture wars, but also about the politics of memory (e.g., Maurantonio 2014) and especially the politics of dead bodies (cf. Verdery 1999; Uzelac 2019). Our ambition is to link the different concepts together and show how politicians metaphorically “revive dead bodies” related to the central points of a given community’s collective memory, de facto

sending them into battle against their political enemies. These bodies thus become an effective weapon (or “army of the dead”) in the cultural-political struggle. The main aim of the article (and its contribution to existing studies on dead bodies) is therefore to define the concept of “political necromancy” and to present its possible application in the specific space of post-socialist Europe (from the perspective of memory politics), namely on the festivity associated with the end of the Second World War in the Czech Republic.

The Second World War is the central point of the collective memory of not only European political communities. There is a myriad of mutually incompatible and competing interpretations of the events of the Second World War and its aftermath (Roediger et al. 2019), and there are many examples of the use of the war legacy in contemporary political processes (e.g., Bernstein 2016; Biesecker 2002; Naxera and Krčál 2017; Pakhomenko and Gridina 2020; etc.). Given its prominent position within collective memory, it is the Second World War that has become a frequent subject of disputes within the culture wars (cf. Hesová 2021b).

The events of the Second World War are still remembered and revived today not only in the form of “soft memory” but also in the form of “hard memory” (Etkind 2004, 2013), i.e., in the form of physical sites of collective memory (cf. Nora 1989) and various commemorative events around them (cf. Gilbert, McLoughlin, and Munro 2020). These events (whether dedicated to the commemoration of positive moments or, conversely, traumas) constitute a relevant research domain. Commemorating the Second World War cannot do without commemorating the fallen. Therefore, during commemorative events, the participating politicians often adopt formulations such as “... in the name of the fallen we must/we must not ...”

The article is based on our six-year field research (2015–2020) and semi-participant observation of the celebrations associated with the liberation and the end of the Second World War in the Czech Republic. It concerns the annual Liberation Festival held in the West Bohemian city of Pilsen to commemorate the city’s liberation by the US Army in 1945 (see below for a brief description of the event). Although the event is aimed at commemorating the incidents of 1945, a much “wider battle of the present” is taking place during the event. The festival thus becomes a battlefield for cultural-political struggles, with the dispute implicitly and explicitly being fought primarily over (non-) affiliation to, or alliance with, the West. And it is the fallen, commemorated during the event, that are used as weapons. Although the festival is of a local nature (albeit with the presence of constitutional officials), the conflict within these struggles that unfolds during the festival is thus of a society-wide significance (cf. Furedi 2018).

Culture Wars, Memory Politics, and Czech Post-Socialist Experience

Generally speaking, the term “culture wars” refers to political conflicts fought over the irreconcilability of opposing positions on moral, cultural, and social values (Weyrich 2003, 17). Culture wars then serve as an instrument in political struggles, which are often framed as a struggle against “moral decay” (however vaguely defined), as well as an attempt to exaggerate “the right values.” Culture wars can take place on several different levels – from the local level, through argumentation at the level of political elites, to the level of a society-wide conflict having a high polarizing potential (cf. Hunter 1991; Smith et al. 2003).

As we already know, these struggles not only in Central Europe are mainly associated with three areas (Hesová 2021b) – identity politics (mainly in relation to migration; e.g., Kalmar 2018), moral politics (primarily the topics of gender or sexual minorities; e.g., Žuk and Žuk 2020¹), and memory politics (mainly, though not exclusively, in relation to the Second World War and the former communist regime; e.g., Naxera and Krčál 2021). The large-scale controversies about memory politics that are of primary interest to us in this article can be seen in all Central European countries – they have resonated most strongly and for the longest time in Poland (e.g., Stryjek and Konieczna-Safamatin 2021; Belavusau 2018) and Hungary (e.g., Benazzo 2017), and somewhat less strongly in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (e.g., Tomczuk 2016).

The allegedly exemplary transition made it seem that the Czech conflicts over the past would be concerned mainly with the question of the previous regime (Mayerová 2009) and not older matters, not to mention other aspects of identity (Holy 1996). The issues of the state border, foreign policy orientation, or attitude towards ethnic and religious minorities did not really seem to matter in the homogeneous Czech Republic, a country based on inter-elite pro-Western consensus. The predominance of traditional approaches to history and the weakness of the cultural left did not initially give much room to the narrative of the political left.

However, the rise of identity politics and Fukuyama's (2018) "demands for dignity" and "politics of resentment" emerged in the Czech Republic at the end of the first decade of our century, as well as in other post-communist new democracies much earlier. Apart from the "traditional" political disputes over the past associated with the Communist regime, debates over other historical periods appeared (e.g. Sniegon 2016; Naxera and Krčál 2021). The prevailing illusory consensus had been broken, and conflicts over the past had been linked in various ways to existing political cleavages, in some cases completely transforming them, in other cases having an effect outside this framework. Simultaneously, for the first time in the Czech Republic, the cultural left spoke up more strongly, presenting their understanding of history which replaced, or in other cases reformulated, some of the postulates of the illusory consensus whose supporters agreed with the reformulation or turned away from the existing narrative and adopted the traditionalist version of identity politics (e.g. Kopeček 2011; Slačálek 2010). In addition to the clash between the left and the right, cultural and identity conflicts within the right and within the left have intensified in recent years (especially in the conservatism x progressivism dimension, which has proven to be perhaps more important than the right x left division), whereas the dispute over the interpretation of history within different ideologies plays a significant role within these conflicts. In the already consolidated Czech democracy, both the disputes over the former regime and disputes over a much older past reopened, and history fully entered the political space.

These conflicts have been focused on both the historical subjects and fundamental points of collective memory, and on sites related to this memory and history (Nora 1989; François and Schulze 2007). These sites in a specific time and space (Alexander 2006) represent a certain tale, a certain interpretation of a historical event, and at the same time allow the development of other tales, often updated and in some cases politically competitive.

Sites of memory are thus reifications of narratives about people and events that are significant enough for a particular community to deserve public spotlight (Cingerová and Dulebová 2020: 71). Sites of memory are a tool for localizing memories and, if appropriately instrumentalized by political actors, can serve as a source of political mobilization in the form of heroizing the actions of those who are commemorated (Forchtner 2016). A series of political rituals also often take place around sites of memory. From our perspective, primarily important are reconciliation rituals, in which the culprits and victims of (historical) wrongs are identified and atonement is made,² and commemoration rituals. Who shall be included in these rituals and who shall be celebrated and commemorated³ is one of the fundamental instruments of (self-)legitimation of political regimes (Benazzo 2017, 198).⁴

Building on Katherine Verdery (1999), we locate our research terrain in the post-socialist space, characterized by a specific instrumentalization of the past. First, in this space, defining against the communist period has become a political calculus (Benazzo 2017, 201); second, political actors within commemoration rituals show a tendency to link them to the communist past even when the celebrated historical event has nothing to do with the communist regime (Tomczuk 2016: 108; Naxera and Krčál 2021). This is, among other things, the case in our research field – defining oneself against communism (and also Russia) is an essential part of the annual celebration of the liberation of the city of Pilsen. As we have already stated, although it is a "local battleground," the culture war being fought there is of a society-wide character.

Discussions on the politics of memory, as well as other disputes within the culture wars, have a broader dimension (not only in the Czech Republic but in the whole area of Central and Central-

Eastern Europe) and are drawn to the question of the (non-)affiliation of given political communities to the “West” (Chlup 2020). After the fall of the communist regime, the question of self-identification as part of the West was clearly resolved not only in the Czech Republic. There was talk of “rejoining Europe” and a consensus on a pro-Western orientation of foreign policy, culminating in accession to NATO and the EU (Barša, Hesová, and Slačálek 2021). However, with the intensification of conflicts over the politics of memory, identity, and morality in the last decade at least, voices calling for a departure from the West, for an own “Central European” path (manifested by an emphasis on cooperation within the Visegrad Four), or openly for turning towards Russia, have begun to grow in the Czech environment. These voices began to be heard at the highest political level and were driven, among other things, by the strengthening of the far-right in the form of Tomio Okamura’s SPD not only as a result of the so-called migration crisis (Stulík 2019; Wondreys 2021), by the change in the political orientation of President Miloš Zeman and his inclination towards Russia and China (Naxera and Krčál 2018), or by the worsening attitude of former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš towards the EU (Vachudova 2020), as well as by the growing prominence of the Communist Party, which supported Babiš’s minority government between 2018 and 2021. The symbolic culmination of these tendencies was the visit of Viktor Orbán at the start of Andrej Babiš’s election campaign in 2021. With this move, Babiš clearly demonstrated his vision of a post-election direction to his voters. In this perspective, the West is presented as the bearer of values incompatible with the traditions of the Central European space and a symbol of negative deviances (for example, in the form of accepting migrants [Kalmar 2018] or discussions on gender issues, sexual minority rights, ecology, or political correctness).

These processes of the departure of some representatives of the executive power from supporting the Western direction were accompanied by, at that time, opposition center and right-wing parties increasingly emphasizing “the Czech Republic as part of the West.” In many ways, however, this was a political calculation on the part of these actors. In this case, it is interesting to mention the Civic Democratic Party, the main pole of the right-wing part of the party spectrum and once the strongest political grouping in the country. It was the leaders of this party who emphasized perhaps most strongly the need for a Western orientation, but on the other hand, they have long defined themselves against a number of issues that resonate with the political mainstream in Western countries, whether it is the issue of progressive taxation, minority rights, political correctness, or the debate on climate change. (The party’s chairman and candidate for prime minister shortly before the 2021 elections, for example, presented an opinion in an interview questioning the influence of humans on climate change.) These and other topics are not only rejected in the Czech case by actors who openly proclaim anti-Western positions, but also by the Civic Democratic Party. Even from the party’s side, these topics are framed as a global attack against the local (Graff and Korolczuk 2021) and against “common sense,” in some cases using the labels of neo-Marxism or cultural Marxism (Busbridge, Moffitt, and Thorburn 2020), or argued as an attempt to return to the days of communism. In some cases, this is accompanied by expressions of sympathy of party leaders towards Donald Trump or Viktor Orbán. At the same time, the Civic Democratic Party has relatively strong Eurosceptic tendencies⁵ (Hanley 2004), and its representatives within the European Parliament are part of the European Conservatives and Reformists faction, together with, among others, the Spanish party Vox or the Polish Law and Justice Party. The rhetorical alignment with the West is thus, in many cases, to be read as a foreign policy orientation towards the United States and at the same time a manifestation of anti-Russian and anti-communist positions.

Particularly during Andrej Babiš’s government and the presidency of Miloš Zeman, it has also been an act of the opposition defining itself. The reaction to the political orientation of some representatives of the executive branch was the strengthening of anti-communist⁶ and anti-Russian statements of the opposition. After all, anti-communism has a specific position in the Czech environment (Navrátil and Hrubeš 2017 and 2018), as well as anti-Russian stances (Klvaňová 2019). More than 30 years after the fall of the regime, the negative framing of the communist past by the Czech right is still strongly instrumentalized and, in some cases, masks the absence of other

political topics. The possibility of a “return to communism” and information about the number of victims of the communist regime have become an integral part of election campaigns, including the 2021 elections. It is the “victims” argument that is crucial for us and will be addressed in the following sections.

Therefore, it can be concluded that one of the basic topics addressed in the culture wars in the Czech context is the inclination towards/departure from Western values, which are represented in a very specific and simplified form and are reduced primarily to the relationship with the USA, anti-communism, and the relationship with Russia. Such creation of binary heterotyped categories and their amplification meets the basic definition of culture wars as a metaphorical struggle between two opposing positions related to moral, cultural, and social values (Weyrich 2003, 17).

Anti-Russian attitudes have significantly intensified in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and have taken various forms. On the one hand, this is an understandable rejection of the Russian aggression by political representatives and a large segment of society. On the other hand, the struggles of this kind sometimes involve the use of almost bizarre strategies of de-Russification, such as renaming the traditional product “Russian ice cream” to “Ukrainian ice cream,” or the application of collective guilt, in some cases in the form of symbolic or physical attacks on Russian children in Czech schools. From the perspective of “political necromancy,” what is interesting is, among other things, the efforts of the Capital City of Prague to surround the Russian embassy with dead bodies. Besides the fact that the Boris Nemtsov Square and the Promenade of Anna Politkovskaya (i.e., victims of the Putin regime) are already located in the immediate proximity of the embassy, the street in which the embassy is located and has its official address is currently in the process of being renamed the Ukrainian Heroes Street.

Political Necromancy: Ghosts, Spectres, and Revenants as Weapons of Culture Wars

Dead bodies and their political instrumentalization are one of the tools used by political actors to support their arguments. By referring to the “heroically fallen,” the “insidiously murdered,” or simply the deceased, political actors add a symbolic level to the demands they express and make. This is often anchored in references to important components of (modern) national mythology.

The issue of the political significance of dead bodies and their political instrumentalization is a relevant topic in contemporary social science debates (cf. Verdery 1999; Harrison 2003; Mbembe 2019). Dead bodies and how they are treated have been analyzed in different ways in scholarly discourse. Katherine Verdery (1999) discusses the political lives of dead bodies, and her perspective is focused on how dead bodies (whether real or their metaphorical reifications in the form of statues) are used as political symbols within the so-called “post-socialist necrophilia.” Verdery’s analysis focuses on the post-socialist space and on explaining why the high level of activity concentrated around dead bodies is emblematic of this area. She argues that, on the part of political actors within the post-socialist space, dead bodies represent politically significant artifacts. Thus, the conclusions of her analysis suggest that the politics of dead bodies is a relevant tool for political actors and can shape significant political conflict leading to significant political mobilization (Verdery 1999, 3). Disputes over which dead bodies are to be revered and immortalized can very often translate into social cleavages based on narratives of national heroes and villains. Dead bodies and their instrumentalization can therefore polarize society. Social contestation is conducted along the lines of which specific dead bodies will be remembered and which, on the contrary, will be ignored and forgotten (Gugushvili, Kabachnik and Kirvalidze 2018).

The political instrumentalization of dead bodies brings a number of controversies and debates about whether it is ethically appropriate to treat dead bodies (whether real or symbolic) as a tool to achieve political goals (Domańska 2005). The ways of utilizing corpses and cadavers are quite numerous – starting, for example, with the way the political sphere produces dead bodies by deciding who will die and how (Mbembe 2019), which represents the fulfilment of the concept of biopolitics in its absolute sense (Foucault 2010; Prozorov 2013). Furthermore, dead bodies can serve

as artifacts bearing symbolism related to their death, around which specific narratives are subsequently (re)produced (Verdery 1999; Sendyka 2016; Naxera and Krčál 2021). Another approach that addresses the political relevance of dead bodies is the so-called “ghost hero” approach (Eglitis and Kelso 2019). This is a concept that is intertwined with collective memory and based on the celebration, commemoration, and glorification of historical figures, especially those whose actions (whether positive or controversial) have earned them a place in a society’s historical memory and its narratives about the past (Eglitis and Kelso 2019: 271).

In addition to the above examples of perspectives on the political lives of dead bodies, we can refer, for instance, to the analysis of Nagy (2019), which focuses on the interpretation of how the obituaries of (politically relevant) personalities are politically instrumentalized. The way they are written, structured, and framed is often a tool for working with social memory and instrumentalized towards an appropriate interpretation of the past and its relation to the present. In a similar vein, Ben-Amos (2000) points out that in the political instrumentalization of dead bodies, another possible dimension is how the remains are dealt with. State funerals play a specific role in this regard. On the one hand, they are an instrument of glorification of the buried, but on the other hand, they serve as an instrument of government (e.g., to perform a symbolic adherence to the values that the buried professed/promoted). Thus, state funerals are an instrument that does not primarily serve the dead (the buried) but the living (state apparatuses, political actors, society) as a tool of ritualized performance of specific values.

The use of symbolism of dead bodies is not only directed inside the society but also outside, and thus serves as one of the tools in international relations. In the context of dead bodies at the international system level, the so-called “spectropolitics” is often discussed. This “is where the mediatic structures of spectrality meet biopolitics/necropolitics to highlight the global power relations that dispossess subjects, producing death-in-life and inhuman states of existence” (Papailias 2019, 1053). In a general sense, then, the instrumentalization of dead bodies and the use of their legacy and symbolism serves as one of the arguments used in diplomacy (Auchter 2014).

In a more general sense, it is thus possible, at the social science level, to speak of a spectral turn (Hite and Jara 2020). The scholarly discussion focuses on the role and political relevance of dead bodies and their symbolism. This refers both to dead bodies in the sense of physical remains and their politically ritualized exhumations/reburials (Rolston and Berastegi 2018; Iturriaga 2019), and the political instrumentalization of dead bodies viewed in a more metaphorical sense, namely in terms of working with their legacy and symbolism. This is the direction and aim of the concept of political necromancy, which we elaborate on in this study and illustrate below with the example of political necromancers at the Liberation Festival in Pilsen. Dead bodies are instrumentalized by state apparatuses and political actors in the sense that they are appropriated and transformed into symbols and artifacts. Often to such a degree that dead bodies are completely dehumanized and depersonalized by political actors and reduced to the level of symbols (Uzelac 2019).

From the above, it is evident that the political instrumentalization of dead bodies, whether in the sense of manipulating physical remains via exhumations/reburials or performative work with their symbolism, is a relevant research topic that is still alive in current social science debates. Our ambition is to contribute to this debate by viewing the instrumentalization of dead bodies through the lens of political necromancy. From this perspective, political actors play the role of necromancers who, through specific rituals performed in specific places on specific dates, summon armies of the dead to serve as weapons in the culture wars they wage. The armies of the dead in the culture wars represent a weapon mainly because they are metaphorical reifications of specific values and symbols and can serve as “peculiar mechanisms of digesting and actualizing the past” (Iordachi and Trencsényi 2003, 426).

The places where their “magic of raising the dead” is performed play an important role for political necromancers. Sites of memory, in our understanding, are places where political necromancers summon dead bodies through commemorative rituals and send them to fight against their enemies. In post-socialist societies, commemorative rituals play a key role in that their

post-revolutionary re-arrangement/creation of new ones is crucial for creating and maintaining the narrative of “breaking away from a troubled past” (Tomczuk 2016; Nagy 2019). Thus, it can be concluded that the dead bodies that perished in the name of freedom form bones and spirits that haunt the society and symbolically impose on it how it should (not) act (Fontein 2010). This establishes an underlying narrative relating to the fact that we as a society should not abandon the legacy of the dead. On the contrary, we are obliged to continue to uphold the ideals for which they fell (Kücher 1999). The commemoration and celebration of the deeds of dead bodies and cadavers are subsequently reified in the form of physical sites of memory that evoke strong emotional appeal (Etkind 2013; Moshenska 2020).

As mentioned above, the instrumentalization of dead bodies often uses the argument that the commemorated and glorified dead gave their lives in the past so that the present living could “do something.” The standard argument goes on to say that in order for the dead not to have died in vain, the current generation “must” or, conversely, “must not” do something – otherwise the memory of the dead would be violated. Political actors often do not address (or deliberately ignore/distort) the motivations of those who have fallen.⁷ The motivations of the fallen are very often framed in specifically glorifying narratives that fit into the overall situational definition of political necromancers and reflect current ideological positions within the culture wars.

As we have already mentioned, (not only) in the Czech case, criticism of the former communist regime is frequently instrumentalized (Benazzo 2017), which includes the symbolic use of the legacy of people persecuted or killed by the regime. It has been an integral part of discussions about the former regime throughout the post-communist period. A good example is a typical ghost hero whose legacy is almost fetishized. This is Milada Horáková, a democratic politician loyal to the democratic first Czechoslovak republic and its Masaryk’s tradition, and, at the same time, former MP of the National Socialist Party executed in a mock trial in 1950. In 2017 (almost 30 years after the fall of the communist regime), a feature-length historical film has been made about her. The way in which the legacy of Milada Horáková resonates in political discussions borders on political kitsch. For example, representatives of the Czech conservative right adore Horáková as a fighter against injustice. But if she were a contemporary politician, instead of being adored as a socialist and feminist, she might be labelled a neo-Marxist.

Disputes about the communist regime have been a part of Czech society throughout its evolution since the fall of the regime (Mayerová 2009). In recent years, disputes over the interpretation of the past have deepened and focused on the pre-communist periods, including the Second World War (Hesová 2021b). Typically, however, discussions about the pre-communist past tend to be linked to discussions about the communist regime (Tomczuk 2016). This is also reflected in the debates about dead bodies, whether real (e.g., the legacy of fallen soldiers) or metaphorical (statues). The discussion about removing the statue of Soviet Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev can serve as an example from recent years that combines both these levels and demonstrates the intensification of disputes about memory politics. The figure of Konev is represented by several lines – during the Second World War, he commanded the Eastern Front troops, which drove the Germans out of much of Central and Eastern Europe and took part in the conquest of Berlin. Konev’s statue was erected in Prague in 1980, officially on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia. Disputes over the statue began shortly after the fall of the communist regime when several other statues reminiscent of the earlier regime were removed. However, the final decision (which led to the diplomatic conflict between Czech Republic and Russia) was made by the council of the given city district in 2019. The statue was finally removed in the spring of 2020 after it had been damaged repeatedly. For several days, the news was filled with clashes between opponents and supporters of the removal. Proponents of the statue’s removal mainly argued that the statue is not a reminder of Prague’s liberation by the Red Army, such as a monument to fallen soldiers built immediately after the war would be, but a manifestation of Soviet imperialism⁸ and symbolic consolidation of Soviet power over Czechoslovakia that, by the time of the statue’s construction, the Soviet troops had occupied for more than ten years.

Spectres of American Soldiers as Anti-Communist and Anti-Russian Warriors?

The Liberation Festival is a several-day celebration and a commemoration of the liberation of Pilsen by American and Belgian troops at the end of the Second World War. Every year, the festivities follow a similar scenario and consist of a whole range of events – from official memorials, through concerts, to an accompanying program for military enthusiasts. Pilsen was the largest Czech city that was not liberated by the Red Army,⁹ which affected the (non)celebration of liberation both before and after the fall of the communist regime. The Pilsen festival is one of the largest events associated with the celebrations of the US Army in all of Europe. The liberation of Pilsen was relatively peaceful. Laconically speaking, it was almost without a shot. The massiveness of the Pilsen commemoration event, which has been held since the 1990s, is related to the defining against the communist past¹⁰ and with a bit of exaggeration, it is a manifestation of the attitude described as “we were not able to celebrate it for years, so now we will celebrate in a big way.” A number of memorial events held as part of the several-day festival (the organizational aspects of which we have described earlier; cf. Naxera and Krčál 2019) are attended not only by local and regional politicians, who are in charge of organizing the festival, but also by top constitutional officials.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a clear consensus on the course of the festival at the level of the city of Pilsen. The city coalition has always been formed by parties with a clearly declared pro-Western stance. Regardless of who exactly constituted the coalition, the festival was held in a similar spirit. It has been primarily about adoration of the USA and a clear opposition to communists (who had not allowed the celebrations to be organized earlier) and also to the Soviet regime (as the guarantor of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia). This course was supported, among other things, by the fact that the celebrations have not been attended by politicians viewing the Communist regime as favorable (i.e., for example, members of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which has never participated in the city’s government). On the other hand, it should be stated that despite the clear anti-Soviet appeal, the festival has not been used extensively as a tool for defining oneself against contemporary Russia. The symbolic demarcation has been conducted against the “past sources of threat,” Nazi Germany and the USSR. Contemporary Germany, on the other hand, has been usually framed as a NATO ally, while contemporary Russia long remained out of focus.

The year 2015 was crucial for the instrumentalization of dead bodies as a tool of culture wars, because a significant part of the speeches reacted to the Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the period under study (2015–2021), the Liberation Festival in Pilsen can thus be seen as one of the platforms on which political necromancers evoke dead bodies and then metaphorically instrumentalize them as a weapon of culture wars. In this way, public political events can be seen as metaphorical battlefields, within which pro-Western values are reified, albeit in a clear reduction related primarily to the enactment of symbolic inclination towards the USA and opposition to Russia. Although this festival has a local character, the narratives emerging here take on a society-wide relevance (Furedi 2018, 47).

In the course of the several years of celebrations we have observed, there have been many references to the fallen who sacrificed themselves for something. Those who also helped to liberate Pilsen (i.e., suffered in combat), but survived, are effectively instrumentalized during the festival in the same way as the fallen. The figures of American soldiers (whether fallen or survivors) are an essential component of the annual celebrations. In all the cases we will mention, there is a linking of the pre-communist past with the framing of the communist regime (which is typical of culture wars and memory politics in the post-communist region; cf. Tomczuk 2016) and with interpretations from the perspective of contemporary values.

Every year, the American presence at the festival is crucial. Dozens of American veterans participated already in the spontaneous celebrations in 1990. The largest number of them arrived in 1995 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the liberation – almost two hundred. Over the last few years that we have been conducting the research, their numbers have dropped to the low teens at

most. Their function is mainly symbolic; they represent a reification of an American veteran (not just a veteran of the liberation of Pilsen). This timelessness of the American veteran was aptly played out during one of the festivals. One of the real veterans of the Pilsen liberation pointed out that due to advanced age, it is likely that the direct participants of the liberation will not be able to attend in the upcoming years. At the same time, he introduced his friend, an American veteran of the Korean War, who was also a member of the Second Infantry Division, which had liberated Pilsen and later fought in Korea. The Korean War veteran took over the symbolic baton. Once the direct participants are not available, they will be replaced by another category of American war veterans (having only a symbolic bond with Pilsen – an American veteran and a former member of the Second Infantry Division). However, the figure of an American veteran is key to the festival's dramaturgy and plays a vital role in the symbolic transmission and reification of the narrative portraying the USA as the liberator and contemporary ally. The way in which American soldiers (both those who have fallen and those who have survived) are treated is equivalent to complete depersonalization (Uzelac 2019). Whether fallen or survivor (and fighting in any war), the American soldier is a symbol and a de facto prop in the hands of political necromancers (Goffman 1956).

In 2021, at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the festival took place in a different format. There were only a few small memorial events, and much of the program went online. In-person presence of the veterans was not possible, but dozens of banners with life-size photos of the veterans were set up downtown. These included both those still living and those who have died in recent years. Such a display illustrates the reduction of a veteran-man (living or deceased) to a veteran-symbol or a veteran-prop that serves the participating politicians in paper as well as bodily form.

One of the few non-depersonalized yet highly instrumentalized veterans was Earl Ingram, the unofficial spokesman for the veterans during the annual festivities. Even a banner with his photo was placed downtown during the 2021 festival. Earl Ingram died in the fall of 2021 at the age of 99 and immediately after his death became a prime example of a ghost hero (Eglitis and Kelso 2019) used in political struggle. He died less than two weeks before the Czech parliamentary elections.

Martin Baxa (MP, mayor of Pilsen, and vice-chairman of the Civic Democratic Party) immediately began addressing Ingram's death. He performed the imaginary necromancy in several steps. First, through a series of commemorative rituals, including a specific form of obituary on social media (Nagy 2019), in which he presented Ingram as "a hero who brought freedom." But the crucial step came about a week after when Baxa faced a Communist Party representative in a televised pre-election debate. During the discussion, he clearly instrumentalized Earl Ingram's dead body in order to use it as a weapon in the political clash.

He posted a video of the discussion on his social media profile¹¹ with the following comment:

THE INSOLENT OF RED MARTA: On the Aréna programme, I clashed sharply with Comrade Marta Semelová of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. Her insolence really knows no boundaries, so I called it out clearly: it is better for the communists and Marta Semelová to make the Czech Republic a Putin gubernia. WE WILL NEVER LET THAT HAPPEN!!

In the discussion,¹² among other things, Baxa said:

Two different worlds are presented here. Mrs Semelová wishes we were not members of the EU, not members of NATO. Mrs Semelová wishes we were a Russian gubernia. I wish we were part of NATO and the EU. Simply because it stands for the values of freedom and democracy that we fought for. Today, Mrs Semelová, we remembered in Pilsen a 99-year-old veteran of the US Army who died a few days ago and who brought us freedom in 1945. And it was your comrades who, since 1948, have persecuted anyone who wanted to remember. So, it's just like we live in different worlds, and I wouldn't want to live in your world for a second, and I believe the vast majority of Czech citizens don't either.

Even though Earl Ingram died at the age of 99 and was therefore not a soldier killed during the liberation, his legacy was used in the same way as if he had given his life for freedom. Moreover, this example demonstratively links the pre-communist past with the framing of the communist regime and uses them to support contemporary political arguments. Earl Ingram, who fought against the German army, was thus used instrumentally in the electoral clash with the Communist Party.

While Ingram is an example of a highly personalized ghost hero, in other situations, the depersonalized (Uzelac 2019) mass of “American soldiers/fallen/veterans” is used as a political argument, especially when creating the metaphorical dichotomy of “the American soldier fell for freedom” while “the Soviet soldier fell as an occupier.” The creation of this dichotomy stretches across the years of the festival and was particularly striking in 2015, shortly after the annexation of Crimea. It was during these celebrations that the link between the pre-communist and communist past and the present was made (especially by the aforementioned Martin Baxa). While the American soldier (living, fallen, or a veteran) is a timeless source of freedom, the Russian or Soviet soldier is an equally timeless source of occupation. Arguments were made such as, “Young American soldiers fought far away from home to bring us freedom. In order not to trample on their legacy, we must support the current foreign policy of allying with the US.” But also, “American soldiers brought freedom to Pilsen, but it didn’t last long.” So, while American soldiers brought freedom in 1945, Soviet soldiers were bringing occupation throughout Central Eastern Europe at the same time. This was discursively linked to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and ultimately to the annexation of Crimea.¹³ On the part of political necromancers, the dead bodies of American soldiers killed in the fight for freedom are sent to fight communism and Russia. In contrast, Russian or Soviet dead bodies are entirely ignored (Gugushvili, Kabachnik, and Kirvalidze 2018).

A number of sites of memory serve to commemorate the dead bodies of American soldiers in Pilsen, mostly in the form of small monuments, but also in the form of the sacred topography of the city – in Pilsen, among others, we can find the American Street or Patton Bridge. General George Patton, who commanded the American troops, is another good example of a ghost hero. In 2015, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation, a statue of him was erected in the city center, representing a dead body cast in bronze (Verdery 1999). However, discussions about Patton’s statue have been going on in Pilsen for a longer period of time and have shown a significant potential for conflict based on the connection between the pre-communist and communist past. Initially, a different statue of Patton was supposed to be erected elsewhere in the city center in 2005, but the city did not approve its erection at the last minute. It turned out that the author of the statue had been a confidant of the secret police before 1989. The then-mayor from the Civic Democratic Party himself stated that the communist past of the author played a role in his decision-making. From this perspective, in the context of the ongoing controversy over memory politics, the possibility of having the dead body of a “hero of the West” cast in bronze by a “minion of the East” was rejected.

Conclusion

Thus, the “argument of the West” and the “argument of the East/communism” become a single entity. In this respect, the celebrations analyzed here fit well into the overall social context – the fact that Andrej Babiš ruled with the support of the Communist Party and was himself a confidant of the Communist secret police before 1989 have for a long time been the most vociferous criticisms of his government by the right-wing opposition, led by the Civic Democratic Party, which itself (as indicated above), despite proclaiming that “the Czech Republic is part of the West,” has implicitly or explicitly defined itself against the West in the ongoing cultural-political struggles. Being part of the West is thus reduced to cooperation with the USA and defining oneself against Russia and communism.

One of the platforms that (albeit in a local context, but with solid media coverage and the participation of constitutional officials) serves these processes quite well is the Pilsen Liberation Festival. In fact, one Pilsen politician told us as part of our research that he “sees promoting a

positive image of the USA as his duty as a local politician of a city that the Americans have liberated.” Some of the American soldiers were killed in the liberation of the West Bohemian region. It is the fallen (whether nameless or explicit ghost heroes) that tend to be used as an argument or weapon in culture wars.

It is worth pointing out, however, that although the Liberation Festival is primarily a local event (albeit with the participation of high-ranking constitutional officials and the aforementioned media coverage), its symbolic scope can be applied to a society-wide context. This is especially true since culture wars make it possible to reframe locally relevant events on the general level of the conflict between “the West” and “the other values” (Furedi 2018, 47).

As we have shown in several examples of the Pilsen festival, references to the dead bodies of American soldiers (or specters brought to life by politicians in the role of political necromancers) serve on various levels to attack political enemies – in this respect, especially Russia and communism. In the process, the pre-communist and communist pasts become fused into an integral whole with current political preferences, and dead bodies become timelessly usable symbols. Earl Ingram, mentioned in the article, may have fought against Germany during the Second World War, but shortly after he died in 2021, he was sent as a specter to attack the current Communist Party.

Our interpretation of the analyzed celebrations builds on the current debate related to the political use of dead bodies, especially the line concerning the transformation of dead bodies into a dehumanized symbol. We develop this debate by operationalizing the concept of political necromancy, metaphorically situating political festivities and the political actors participating in them as specific rituals in which dead bodies are evoked and weaponized and sent into battle against imaginary enemies in the culture wars. The concept of political necromancy thus contributes to the debate on the political role of dead bodies in particular by allowing us to capture the specific strategies and practices that are employed by necromancers to use the symbolism of dead bodies and achieve support for the political demands they make.

The fact that through the lens of political necromancy, it is possible to capture and interpret specific figures and practices used by necromancers is, on the one hand, its asset. On the other hand, however, it is one of the limitations of this perspective. Precisely by reducing the actions of political actors in a highly metaphorical way to specific evocative rituals, it assumes *a priori* that they work with the symbolism of dead bodies in a purely instrumental way. From this perspective, other than strictly pragmatic motivations of political necromancers are therefore difficult to capture. However, this significant reduction is not, in our view, a fundamental problem because the dominant part of the debate on the political role of dead bodies assumes that political actors deal with the symbolism of dead bodies in a purely pragmatic and instrumental way.

Using the concept of political necromancy, we have attempted to provide an interpretation of the specific ways in which political actors handle the symbolism of dead bodies. Our argumentation aimed at pointing out that in the context of the currently unfolding culture wars, the armies of the dead serve as a weapon used in the metaphorical “fight for the West,” which in the Czech (and de facto the whole post-socialist) space is significantly reduced by a part of the political representation to anti-communism and anti-Russian attitudes and considerably detached from the broader spectrum of values and ideas that are mainstream within the standard “Western” politics.

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Notes

- 1 In many ways, this dispute in the countries of Central Eastern Europe is inspired (for example, in terms of arguments) by the conservative turn that has taken place in Russia in the last one or two

- decades. Under the impact of this turn, it has become part of the dominant discourse towards the West to portray it as degenerate due to unbridled liberalism, often precisely with regard to the politics of morality. The West is thus represented as a place where homosexuality (hence the term “Gayropa”), child abuse, and other “anti-civilization” tendencies are rampant. Russia then styles itself as a protector against these evils (Morris and Garibyan 2021; Jarkovská 2020).
- 2 The guilty acknowledge their responsibility and are forgiven by this ritual. Forgiveness may in some cases be replaced by an act of punishment (cf. Auerbach 2004; Esterling, John-Hopkins, and Harding 2020). Reconciliation rituals take various forms, ranging from a single act to periodically repeated festivities. Without this symbolic closure of old wrongs, images of ancient enemies can be instrumentally revived over and over again.
 - 3 Or, conversely, purposely ignored and forgotten, as in the case of forgetting and not remembering the Roma Holocaust (cf. Sniegon 2014). In this regard, the political conflicts over the former Roma concentration camp from the times of WWII are significant for the current Czech political debates. During the post-communist history, many politicians were creating different narratives, such as “there was no concentration camp (or Roma Holocaust as such)” or “we can not close pig farm (built under the Communist rule on the place of the former camp) and built the site of memory there, it would be uneconomical” (cf. Vaňáčová and Naxera 2021).
 - 4 Our field research is primarily concerned with the ritual of commemoration, during which the liberation of Pilsen by Allied troops is being remembered. During this festivity, on the other hand, there is not much discussion of the possible atonement for the injustice – reconciliation has already taken place and the Germans are seen by the participating actors as historical enemies but contemporary allies.
 - 5 In terms of the relationship with Russia, it is quite interesting that even the representatives of this party have made references to Brussels as the new Moscow or the EU as the new USSR (cf. Craiutu and Kolev 2022, 13).
 - 6 Given that the minority government was supported by the Communists and the fact that Andrej Babiš used to be a confidant of the communist secret police before the fall of the régime (Hanley and Vachudova 2018).
 - 7 In the case of individuals who have fallen in war conflicts, there can be a wide range of motivations or reasons why they fought – from a genuine fight for freedom (however conceived) to various forms of enforcement (conscription or threat of violence) and to various forms of psychopathological motivations (propensity to violence). Indeed, this discussion applies to contemporary soldiers as well (cf. Wong 2006).
 - 8 Among others, Konev was (in the leading position) participating in the bloody suppression of the uprising in Hungary (1956) and in preparing for the Czechoslovak occupation in 1968.
 - 9 In Pilsen, as elsewhere in Czechoslovakia, only the liberation of the country by the Red Army was celebrated. As for the liberation of Pilsen at the end of the war, there were several interpretations of this event during the communist regime. The original narrative that Pilsen was liberated by the Red Army (but disguised as Americans) was subsequently replaced by a narrative linking the American presence in the region to its imperial ambitions. A propaganda publication presenting a historiographical reflection on the liberation of Pilsen at the time (Bartošek and Pichlík 1953) also highlighted the terrorist acts of the US army related to the massive bombing of Pilsen (the location of the Škoda Factory, a major arms factory for Nazi Germany during the war).
 - 10 After all, the conservative right-wing Civic Democratic Party, which has governed in Pilsen most of the time since the fall of Communism to the present, is characterized by loudly articulated anti-communist positions, often linked to anti-Russian positions. We discussed this in the previous section in connection with the monument to Marshal Konev.
 - 11 See Baxa (2021).
 - 12 See TV Barrandov (2021).
 - 13 Leaving aside the instrumentalization of dead bodies, and its interpretation pursued in the article, we can take a brief detour to illustrate one of the metaphors that are evident in the Czech

context of culture political struggles, namely the metaphor of “American tank = symbol of freedom versus Russian/Soviet tank = symbol of occupation.” This example is linked to the events at the Liberation Festival in 2016. In that year, a re-enactment of a battle on the demarcation line was planned (for audience appeal), with a Soviet tank featuring in this performance. However, this caused a moral panic among a part of the Pilsen public, and the subject was taken up even by local representatives of the conservative TOP09 party. This can be illustrated by a statement on the party’s regional organization website (TOP09 Plzeňský kraj 2016): “[...] the city authorities have included the Red Army battle in the program of the festival. [...] And why should the Red Army fight in Pilsen as part of the celebrations when we know from history that Pilsen was liberated by the American army?” Subsequently, the conservative party went on: “We all remember how history was being rewritten under the previous regime. My peers and I were taught in school that Pilsen was not liberated by the Americans but by the Red Army. For this reason, I find it extremely inappropriate to have the Soviet soldiers participating in the battle in May. We are quite sensitive about that here.” The issue even resonated on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies.

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