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↳ PLAYING SOLDIERS IN BOHEMIA

CHAPTER 4 – MIGS AND CADRES ON THE MOVE: DISPLACING THE WAR MACHINE

lshlam'
"So what is this tickling at the heels to which Kafka's all too human ^{ape} would refer us all too apish humans to? I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power."³²

In this essay, I approach "post-communist transition" from the perspective of identity change that I see as the displacement of a particular form of a mimetic faculty in favor of another. I focus on the institution of the Czech Air Force and its officers whose professional identity is seriously challenged by the circumstances of large socio-political and institutional changes that ^{accompany} the "transition" from socialism to democracy. The mimetic faculty at the basis of the professional identity of the Czech Air Force officers whom I interviewed is firmly tied to the Soviet technology and Soviet-type military discipline. Following the sociopolitical reorientation of the Czech Republic from the East (membership in the Warsaw Pact) toward the West (membership in NATO), the Czech state apparatus of legitimate violence (war machine) changes the original object to be mimicked from the Soviet to the Western type of military discipline and technology. In this essay, I use ethnographic material to comment on how this process of mimetic change "happens" on the level of individual Air Force officers who find themselves in the liminal (Gennep 1909; Turner 1966) space and time of the war machine "in transition."

³² Taussig. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, p. xiii.

I.

By the time I arrived at base X, I had some experience interviewing men in the Czech military. It has been almost a year since I began my job as a social scientist at a military research institute in Prague. Even though I was a civilian in the military, many of the same military rules applied to me and the first six months on the job were quite difficult. The main pillar of my dissertation research proposal which I defended before my committee at New School for Social Research was a plan to interview officers about the changing demands of the military profession. But for the first five months on the job, I was not sure whether I would ever be even allowed to leave the premises of my office. Most of my work at the time consisted in translating and editing what my boss and other people wrote and in meeting with foreign military researchers and NATO representatives to whom I was presented as "our Hanka who lived in America for 10 years" and who "speaks such good English!" After months of being mentally and physically exhausted from endless commutes to my job, long work hours, and general deprivation from employment in the military research establishment where I was pushed into participating on projects whose titles and contents sincerely scared me, I was beginning to lose hope that I would ever be able to accomplish my ethnographic ambitions. I realized and was repeatedly reminded in case I forgot, that in order to go anywhere and talk to anybody, I needed to secure the order of the top military man – the Chief of the General Staff. I was told that this difficult task could only be achieved by writing a proposal for a project that would be completely indispensable to the military.

In the absence of access to literature on which I have previously so foolishly relied and without the customary (and by the standard of military social science highly overrated) freedom anthropologists like to enjoy when they are conducting their fieldwork, I created a project over two days and nights in the office based on media reports that at the time spoke of the upcoming exodus of Czech Air Force officers.³³ I already knew how most newspaper reports about the Czech military were

produced – through isolated phone calls between several higher-ranking officers and the three or four Czech reporters who were loosely interested in military and security issues – and so the question of whether the rumor was a fact or a fiction seemed particularly irrelevant. Based on these media accounts, which talked of the imminent depopulation of the Czech Air Force, I wrote a project proposal bursting with urgency. Reasons for such exodus of qualified and indispensable officers must be investigated! I included a plan of action to deal with the problem through ethnographic research. My research, I said, would help military leadership deal with this burning issue, crucial for militaries in the 21st century. I did not forget to list the exact number of people I would interview, the length of each session and the methods of data processing. This proposal got me not only the signature from the Chief of the General Staff, but also a grant from the Office of Naval Research through its Human Factors program entitled, *Attrition and Retention in the 21st Century*. I was free to go! Thanks to the grant for which I was eternally grateful, I had funds for gas for my ancient Škoda car, a laptop computer in which I recorded interviews and in my bag an order signed by the Chief of the General Staff, laminated for protection against frequent use.

When I arrived at Base X, I had more than thirty interviews completed and transcribed based on sessions with men who were planning to leave the military that year. After several months of interviewing on one base, I was now slightly frustrated by what I perceived was a sense of repetition – of hearing similar stories over and over again. Before going to the field I was told that the point when you feel like you are not learning anything new is usually a good indication that you should stop what you are doing and start with something else. I could not do that – for one thing, my project proposal to the Navy stated that I would complete 101 interviews – and I did not dare to mess about with numbers when it came to military research! More importantly, I felt strongly that

³³ E.g. Gazdík (2001), „Šedivý: Čekají nás mimořádné potíže: Krize armády, důstojníci chtějí do civilu;“ Jan Gazdík, „Armáda se vyliďňuje kvůli fámám a nejistotě,“ Pavel Mácha, „Mozky a stíhačky,“ Jan Gazdík, „Armádu deptají zastaralé stereotypy.“

there was a significance to the repetition of stories; I realized that the monotonous content of the interviews was indistinguishable from their manner of deliverance – resigned discourse of men leaving the military institution, saturated with disenchantment and melancholia. In the stories of these experienced officers, the decay and finally the termination of the old Russian fighter planes – Migs and Sus – intermingled with ironic and self-deprecating observations testifying to the end of good times for the people of the Czech Air Force and for the institution in general. Crucial to the men's stories was the narrators' acute awareness of an historical process of change, which was bringing about their own obsolescence as soldiers. Their accounts of the decline of the military profession as they have known it and of the deterioration of the aging Soviet technology on which they have spent their lives flying and working, were simultaneously stories of their own inevitable displacement.

II.

The displacement of the military men and machines was an integral part of the process of military professionalization, which was instigated by the geopolitical changes following the end of socialism. It was largely from the interviews with the men who were leaving the Air Force that I came to see military professionalization itself as a highly paradoxical form of displacement – a movement of the military in the outward direction from the core of the state. But while this process characteristic of post-communist modernity involves the removal of the military from the center of state power through its depoliticization and voluntarization, it simultaneously entails a greater infiltration and dispersion of the very idea of the military in the minds and lives of the civilian public. The goal of military professionalization is the achievement of the harmonious and therefore uncontentious coexistence of the military with the democratic state and civil society. This is achieved by the externalization of the war machine to where it really belongs – outside of the state apparatus³⁴ – to a less prominent location from where it can be

more conveniently and without public participation or protest harnessed for the goals of the state and the transnational regime of military violence.

This general movement of the military in the outward direction is accomplished through a series of concrete measures, which involve multiple layers and forms of displacements. The one that became central to my sixteen months' fieldwork in the Czech Air Force had, like all things military, a name. It was called "officer attrition" (*odchodovost*). Attrition normally denotes gradual deterioration, a slow death of an object. In the military terminology, "attrition" as opposed to "retention" denotes the termination of the employment contract between personnel and the military institution. Military scientists spend much time and tax payers' money looking for scientific ways to determine the appropriate levels of attrition, in order to prevent the deterioration and the death of the military institution.³⁵ In my project for the Office of Naval Research and the Chief of the General Staff called, "The Problems of Officer Retention in the Czech Air Force," I followed the calling of military science and promised the military leadership to use ethnographic methods to find the reasons for the exodus of qualified people from the Czech Air Force.

Essentially, the results of my research confirmed a highly predictable process of displacement initiated by a new military law and by concrete measures instituted by the state. The new Law

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (1987). "1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine."

³⁵ The military studies focused on attrition and retention usually identify determinants that are sure to affect military personnel retention, such as "the family factor," pay and bonus, job content satisfaction and peer recognition, as well as different sets of psychological dispositions of individual soldiers. Through questionnaires and psychological tests, the researchers find the most likely factors causing attrition and through mathematical calculations they determine the probability of future levels of retention if each of the factors negatively affecting retention is eliminated. E.g. L.N. Rosen and Doris Briley Durand, "The Family Factor and Retention Among Married Soldiers Deployed in Operation Desert Storm," Brice Stone, Vince Wiggins, Kathryn Turner-Holland, Larry T. Looper, "Air Force Pilot Retention: Evaluating the Results of Alternative Models," Gerald D. Gibb, Tatree Nontasak and Daniel Dolgin, "Factors Affecting Career Retention Among Naval Aviators."

on *Professional Soldiers*³⁶ passed in 1999 and effective in November 2001 (the first law on this issue since 1959³⁷), directly encouraged people to leave the military institution, determining substantial pensions based on the number of years spent in service. Moreover, unlike the previous law, which only loosely defined the relationship between rank, education and job position, the new code strictly determined this relationship, generally requiring higher education level and lower rank for a given job position than was customary before. At the same time, an official military decree gave promotion advantage to those people who passed special military English language exams. An associated ruling lowered the number of high ranking officers allowed to serve on the bases outside of the headquarters. The combination of these measures forced many officers with high ranks but low education levels and no English language skills to leave the military. The new law thus set a new standard of "the military professional" and the new "professional military" – a modern, young, English speaking, internationally deployable, mobile and quantitatively small force. *niklas*

While the standard explanation blames military downsizing on the advancements in technology and military strategy that require operation by fewer personnel than before, the case of post-communist militaries reveals an additional factor. Namely, the reorientation of NATO-member militaries from large forces intended to protect the nation state, to smaller militaries composed of highly specialized units capable of contributing to allied military operations. "The new NATO," said NATO's secretary general, "is going to be about countries who do different things, and each of them well."³⁸ During the Gulf War II, the negligible importance of the quantity of soldiers and technology needed to contribute to allied operations was exposed in the U.S. assessment of Poland's loyalty in the American struggle against Saddam Hussein. Poland was *praised* by the United States for the combat participation of approximately 250 mem-

bers of the Polish military in Iraq and awarded the administration of a large section of the territory in post-war Iraq. This American decision has caused a dilemma for Polish state and its military, *moreover* utterly unprepared for such a task and unable to finance the operation from its own sources. The grotesque effect of the situation whereby the former member of the Soviet bloc is awarded a privilege and order to *major* conquer another country, for which it lacks means and motivation, was topped by the fact that due to insufficient finances, the American government will have to help finance the participation of the Polish contingent.

In case of post-communist militaries, the quantitative reductions of forces and their specialization toward international deployment especially strongly affects the national Air Forces. In the Czech republic as well as of the other new post-communist NATO-member states, the Air Force has been considered the most expensive and difficult part of the military to modernize due to the costs of new technology and training.³⁹ The new logic of the political and military alliance of which the Czech Republic became a part, moreover, did not encourage the new member countries to build their Air Force, considered an ineffective investment limited to the defense of the national air space and not useful for deployment in allied operations. Despite international pressure, most post-communist countries have attempted to save their national Air Force through modernization programs and extremely costly contracts for the purchase of new air craft. During his visit to the Czech Republic in the spring of 2001, NATO Secretary General George Robertson (as well as other NATO leaders) was quite *not satisfied* upset with the Czech government's decision to invest over 100 billion in the purchase of new supersonic jets, JAS 39 Gripen, from a British/Swedish consortium. In his criticism, Mr. Robertson seconded Mr. Frank Kramer, Deputy Secretary of Defense of the United States, who had warned the Czech Republic in November 2000 against the purchase of new supersonic planes: "Your military is too big, it is *major* awkward, most officers are not educated, you do not have enough ammunition with which to

³⁶ Zákon č. 221/1999 Sb., o vojácích z povolání, www.army.cz.

³⁷ Zákon č. 76/1959 Sb.

³⁸ Richburg (2002), "Czechs Become Model for New NATO."

³⁹ Szayna (2002). *NATO Enlargement 2000–2015*, especially Chapter 5.

shoot, enough fuel for your cars and planes. Those are the things in which you should invest!" The angry author of an article covering George Robertson's visit, which he shrewdly entitled, "Jet Fighter for Švejka," laments: "Three months later, the government did the exact opposite. As if despite the „American hawks“ the government decided to put out tender for the acquisition of supersonic jet fighters!"⁴⁰ The conflict over the purchase of the supersonics finally escalated to the point, where it seemed that their potential purchase would result in the suspension of Czech Republic's membership in NATO!⁴¹ Eventually, the country's financial difficulties caused by the 2002 disastrous floods have led the Czech government to use the \$ 2 billion set aside to buy new Gripen combat aircraft for flood relief. In the absence of Western-made replacement for the Soviet jet fighters, the last of which was eliminated in 2004, the Czech Air Force was facing the dismal facts: it will not have a single supersonic fighter plane on time. Jaroslav Tvrdík, the member of the social democratic government that for several years unsuccessfully advocated the purchase of the new aircraft before the Senate, resigned in May 2003 in protest of budget reductions. The Ministry of Defense was then for a while led by Miroslav Kostelka, who was not a party member, but like Tvrdík, he was a former officer who took down the uniform to become a civilian leader of the defense sector. This new Minister of Defense, soon after he assumed his office, presented a solution to the problems of the Air Force – to lease the protection of the national air space from the Germans.⁴²

⁴⁰ Spurný (2001), "Stíhačka pro Švejka."

⁴¹ Spurný (2002), „Gripeny, nebo NATO."

⁴² An abundance of jokes and cartoons replied to the protracted negotiations for the purchase of new jet fighters. A newspaper cartoon (Illustration 17), for example, shows Jaroslav Tvrdík, the Minister of Defense ordering a Czech Air Force pilot to fly at supersonic speed on a subsonic speed air craft of Czech origin, L-159: "Shut up! I have issued an order! You will fly at supersonic speed!" Eventually 14 Gripen aircraft were leased from Sweden in 2005 and baptised by Kostelka's successor Karel Kühnl, vice-chairman of the Unie svobody party.

III.

It is no wonder that my research among Czech Air Force officers satisfied one of the fundamental urges that bring anthropologists to the field – to study and record the life of cultures threatened with disappearance. But beyond the displacement of people and machines, ostensibly brought about and explained by the discourse and practices of military modernization and professionalization, a less tangible and infinitely more complicated dilemma of post-communist modernity is reasserting itself with great insistence. In the liminal absence of secrecy which covers military power with a veil of seriousness, the excessively mimetic condition of the modernization process was revealed – cadres and Migs merging in their melancholic exodus.

The mimetic faculty, according to Walter Benjamin, is "nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else."⁴³ Mimesis, the faculty "to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other,"⁴⁴ Michael Taussig claims, testifies to the fundamentally sensuous nature of human thought. "Like Adorno and Benjamin, my concern is to reinstate in and against the myth of Enlightenment, with its universal, context-free reason, not merely the resistance of the concrete particular to abstraction, but what I deem crucial to thought that moves and moves us – namely, its sensuousness, its mimeticity."⁴⁵ Both Benjamin and Taussig also indicate that the mimetic faculty as a fundamental aspect of human thought is strongly brought out by modernity. Together with the resurfacing of the primitive, and the juxtaposition of the very new with the very old, modernity "both stimulates and is predicated upon mimetic modes of perception."⁴⁶ Initially through the optical perception of the camera and the movies, but now increasingly

⁴³ Benjamin (1978), "On the Mimetic Faculty," p. 160.

⁴⁴ Taussig, (1993): xiii.

⁴⁵ Taussig, (1993): 2.

⁴⁶ Taussig, (1993): 20.

through the computer, the internet and television, the language of the human body "combines thought with action, sensuousness with intellection,"⁴⁷ signaling the importance of mimesis for human thought.

The pilots' and the technicians' stories of their attachment to the Soviet planes – which for them were the Air Force – were saturated with an abundance of ^{mimesis} ~~sensuousness~~ based on tactile knowing. Over the course of their careers, in the process of mimetic transference made possible by bodily contact, the men have merged with their machines and with the military institution itself. There is no doubt that the displacement of the Soviet machines, the displacement of the officers and the displacement of the former military system are connected through the logic of mimesis, whereby the original becomes indistinguishable from the copy. It seems, moreover, that what I encountered in the melancholic stories of the Czech Air Force officers, was a condition of mimetic excess, spilling out of control. After the closure of the supply flow of spare parts from the Soviet Union, the old technology was slowly dying out, while new Western-made forms have not yet replaced it. Trapped in the moment of liminal uncertainty, the Czech Air Force officers realized their obsolescence brought about by post-communist modernity, which required different forms of technology and corporeal knowledge that was not at their disposal. While visiting base X, this mimetic cause of the melancholic disposition of Air Force officers, which were the subject of my study of military attrition was revealed to me in an illuminating set of experiences.

⁴⁷ Susan Buck-Morss (1991), *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 267 in Michael Taussig (1993), *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 20.

IV.

I was staying in barracks far from Base X, so I left very early – I could not be late. I did not mind getting up before sunrise, because I looked forward to the drive, which I knew would hold surprises for me. I avoided the highways. The roads were empty and I passed only few slowly moving tractors going to the fields and buses collecting workers at countryside stops to take them to their jobs in towns. I preferred to drive off the main roads because that way I could watch the ^{captivating} ~~intriguing~~ pace of life in the villages. I was especially fascinated by the regularity with which people went to work before sunrise and returned in early afternoons to tend their beautiful gardens full of useful and edible vegetables. While the inhabitants of Czech cities have often adopted the capitalist work ethic, in the villages as well as in the military, the old socialist-time work principles still reigned – after coming from their public jobs, men and women worked even harder their second shift cultivating a family plot.

As always, I hoped that a hitchhiker would stop me. This morning it was a young woman. She worked as a shop assistant and she said she often hitchhiked since the bus service had gotten more expensive and less frequent. She said she was not scared of male drivers – in the nine years she had been hitchhiking she had met only a few men who had tried to "seriously molest" her. She said that customers at the supermarket where she worked were much worse, especially mothers with young children, who leaned against the shop's glass counters and touched them with dirty fingers. During the half an hour she spent in my car, she complained about her boss and her ex-husband who both took advantage of her. When I mentioned that maybe she should not put up with what sounded like an abusive treatment, she responded that she would have to be a "crazy feminist" ("prdlá feministka") to make a big deal out of the situation. Then she continued complaining about men and her life in general until she got off in front of her supermarket. When she left, I realized that I again failed in the elaborate cultural ritual of gendered complaining whose end was not a resolution of what I naively saw as a power-imbued conflict

between her and two important men in her life. Instead, hers was not a problem calling for a solution, but rather an irreconcilable condition not void of certain charms. It reminded me that I have been largely unsuccessful in exploiting the reassuring nature of the dialogic exchange with the few Czech female officers that I have met. At the end, I felt them to be quite as distant from me as were their male counterparts. So much for sisterhood and gendered access in fieldwork!

When I arrived at the base two hours later, I knew what to do. I had ten minutes left till my scheduled appointment at 7:15 a.m. After I had parked my car, I called the Base Commander from a familiarly dilapidated gatehouse. While I waited, a teenage enlisted whose tired eyes spilled apathy filled out my visitor's pass. As I watched him fill out my pass, unhurriedly dropping cigarette ashes on my ID, I felt confident that this would be a good day. *ppp*

The commander was already expecting me in his office. After an official welcome and after I showed him my research authorization and my previous report to the command, he asked the secretary to bring us coffee. The secretary asked me what coffee I wanted - Turkish or instant and whether I wanted milk or sugar. I asked for black Turkish coffee. The secretary did not ask the Commander. She knew exactly how he drank his coffee. We chatted informally with the Commander for about ten minutes during which time I laughed at his jokes and he in return seemed to acknowledge my presence. He was a man with authority - commanding a base with thousands of employees - yet his manner was lenient, almost jovial. On the wall behind the commander was the Czech Armed Forces 2001 official calendar, which featured women in uniform (Illustration 18). I had seen the calendar on all the bases that I had visited and I had my own copy in Prague. Everybody had the calendar in the Czech military - before the beginning of the New Year the central military publishing house distributed it to all the departments. The calendar bonded military employees together in the same manner as was accomplished by the special internal military phone system with receiver displays that identified callers from the outside world, enabling you to get prepared for unpleasant

questions from the civilians and to treat them differently. As I was laughing at the commander's jokes, I realized that his humor matched remarkably well the playfully pornographic rendering of female military officers in the calendar. Having mentioned strategic names of people we both knew in the Air Force and having thus clarified our mutual positions, the Commander imparted me to his subordinate who led me to the place where I was to meet a group of officers that I was planning to interview that day.

As we were silently walking through the base, passing by dilapidated barracks and staff buildings, I was overcome by a sense of warm familiarity. When I first came to the Czech military, I wondered what NATO observers and official visitors thought when I saw them driving in the latest models of military jeeps through the bases overgrown with grass or when I once accompanied a group of them to see the decades-old Russian Mig jet fighters helplessly stationed in the hangars. Most of these Western men built their careers at the time when former Czechoslovakia was on the other side of the Cold War divide as a member of the Warsaw Pact. I figured, therefore, they must have felt like victors inspecting a combat zone after a prolonged battle. The trouble was that due to the hoaxes of history, the former Warsaw Pact enemies were now NATO Allies, and their military weakness was no longer of advantage to the victors. Today, not even a year in the military and things that had first shocked me made me feel at home. The decrepit buildings, overgrown grass, bored conscripts, gloomy officers in uniforms, diffident secretaries - they were all part of my world now. While walking through Base X, I realized that I was more shaken by the congenial beauty of the Bohemian countryside through which I drove to get here than by what my senses few months ago had perceived as a desolate ruggedness of the military establishment. A week before I arrived at base X, I met one of my friends in the center of Prague, and I remember feeling quite traumatized by what I recognized as the city's dazzling beauty and optimism. I had been broken in, having mimetically merged with an institution that had first shocked my eyes as an appalling remainder of the socialist system. *prolonged* *hoaxes* *diffident*

After few minutes of walking from the Staff building where I had met the Commander, my escort and I arrived at an edifice located at the end of the row of barracks. Because of the sharp light outside, I could not see much of anything in the long dark cold hallway completely lined with old yellow and brown tiles. When we arrived at the hallway's end, my escort knocked on the door and left without a word. After some time, the door opened and I was let into another hallway. When my eyes got used to the darkness, I was first comforted by the familiar sight of pornographic posters of well-endowed blondes on the yellowed walls and cigarette smoke lazily hanging in the air. I was at the right place, I thought, and lowered the computer bag from my shoulder. I then looked into the room to the left where in torn armchairs and on a very old polyester couch sat several men who were smoking cigarettes and sipping unidentified liquid from chipped mugs. Except for one, they were all dressed in old tracksuits wearing slippers. The man who opened the door turned out to be their superior, because he told the others: "This is the young lady from the General Staff who came to interview you, so be nice." The men continued to sit and smoke, quite unimpressed by my presence. There was awkward silence when none of us knew what to do next. I felt the acute absence of a female secretary who would be asked to bring me coffee, which would interrupt the uneasiness of the situation.

At the worst possible moment, as usually, I needed to use the bathroom. Into the general silence interrupted only by a radio on which popular Czech singer Lucie Bílá was singing her early hit, "Love is love, when girls marry girls and boys marry boys," (Láska je láska, když se holky ženějí s holkama a kluci s klukama), I asked the commander of the group for directions to the toilet. He hesitated a little, but then showed me to the door back in the hallway. It is not that I was not ready for a dirty lavatory customarily found in our part of the world, with the reassuring sour smell of urine and no toilet paper. But this one was special. The bowl was caked with layers of excrement of various ages and sources. There was also urine on the floor and cigarette butts swimming in a half-empty dirty pickle jar on the miniature sink to the left side of the toilet. Pornographic posters that I expert-

ly judged to be the socialist Škoda Car company advertisements from the early 1980s were not missing from the walls. "Láska je láska," I thought. My natural instincts directed me to "put my hands on my nipples and run" – as I was recommended to do on my second day on the job by a retired colonel employed in the same department within the military. But because I was desperate after four hours of driving and the coffee with the Commander, I did what I needed to do and for what toilets are made, and slightly shaken by the experience, I returned to the room where I left my bag.

I set the laptop computer on a dusty desk, which I cleaned with my sleeve and asked for coffee, which was eventually brought to me in a filthy mug. I walked out of the room and asked the group of smoking men for four volunteers whom I would interview in the course of the day, one at a time.

V.

The man who came in the room first was in his fifties, rather good-looking, slim, in a golf T-shirt and blue jeans. He was smiling at me as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. I liked him. He asked me how I was and I said that I thought I had had better days. He said he understood that, noting that I looked tired and pulled out something out of his pocket. Then he extended his hand and opened it – on his palm was an exquisite head of garlic. He said he grew a lot of garlic in his garden and this one was fresh and he wanted to give it to me to make me feel better. He had a slightly perceptible Slovak accent – that was nothing surprising, at least one third of the people I have interviewed were former Slovaks who opted for Czech citizenship when Czechoslovakia divided into two separate states by the end of 1992. After the "Velvet Divorce" as the separation of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic was called, former mates eventually technically became military opponents, since Slovakia was not admitted to NATO at the same time as the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary.⁴⁸ I asked him to sit down, and he did. He seemed in a great mood and kept smiling at me.

This was little disconcerting to me. I was not used to meeting happy people in my interviews with departing officers. I told him, like all others before and after him, that I was doing research, which was paid for by the U.S. Navy and the Czech Armed Forces and that I was interested in hearing about his career and why he was leaving the Air Force.

Officer X, so we shall call him, was an air-ground crewmember – a technician – and he had served in the Air Force for 32 years. He was married and had three children, all of whom were married – one of the two sons was an officer in the military. His wife was a teacher and all of their life together they lived in the same two-bedroom apartment in a military a bloc of flats (*panelák*) in the nearby housing estate (*sídliště*) built in the 1950s for the officers' families. His income was approximately 16,000 CZK (450 USD) a month, only slightly more than mine.

When I asked him to tell me something about his motivations for joining the Air Force and to talk generally about his job, he smiled broadly and told me a passionate story of his love affair with planes. His story included the *falling in love* – when he first sat down in a Russian Mig during an air show as a teenager in the early 1960s; *the pursuit* – surviving through and graduating from military high school; *the frustration and setback* – when he did not pass the physical tests required for him to receive training as a pilot; *the consummation* – becoming a technician and spending almost thirty years in a beloved job in which “I was able to touch planes everyday, feeling like they touched me gently back right where my soul is.”

I asked him to tell me more about planes, which he did, smiling incessantly, his eyes shining with pure pleasure. In his account, his love of planes and the Air Force family was the main storyline for which the history of the Soviet occupation and then political change and NATO membership were little more than stage sets that switched between acts:

⁴⁸ While the Czech Republic entered NATO in 1999, Slovakia became a member in 2004.

You see, with planes, it is not like with cars. When something goes wrong with a car, you stop by the side of the road and repair it. But when something goes wrong with the plane, it falls down on the ground and it is gone. In the almost thirty years that I have been a technician, not a single plane that I prepared for flight had a mechanical failure. I have worked on three types of the Migs and then Sus. Those I particularly loved. I have a beautiful miniature model at home and whenever I touch it, I feel warm all the way to my soul. The day when they recently took them out of operation was a terribly sad moment for me. Those planes could have lasted several more years. They never failed you. I remember that once one of the planes sucked in part of the cabin, the engine was bare, but it was still running till it stopped at the depot. Those Russian engines were great; they just kept going, completely reliable. You cannot compare that to this new Czech plane L-159 that they are bringing in now. The day that they put the Sus out of operation was one of the saddest days in my life. I thought that the best planes would stay, but the decisions were made at the top where other things than technical considerations mattered. It is such a shame that we do not have this great plane any more.

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. We used to be in contact with the pilots all the time as well. The pilot, the technician and the plane – we were all one. We were like a family. The pilot depended on the plane and the plane depended on the technician. When the Soviets brought the Sus for the first time, it was terribly exciting. We prepared the plane for the test pilot who took it for a ride and when he returned, and said that it all ran smoothly, there was such a great feeling that spread all over me. We had an excellent collaboration with the Soviets. When they came here, they brought all the technology with them and they showed us how to work on the planes. We could also understand each other

- the languages are so similar, it is not like with English. We were real partners, not like now. I thought we would get new planes and we would work with the NATO guys on them, but they are nowhere to be seen. I thought that we would collaborate much more closely. I thought perhaps we would go visit one of the Western bases, to exchange experience and learn something new. Or maybe, I thought, they would come here and look at what we are doing - but nothing...

You see, those were very different times before the change came; we were flying all the time, we worked all the time. Overtime was never paid; we were tired as dogs, but happy, because we worked. There were emergencies, we were on call twenty-four hours a day, and there were ^{Norman} mock alarms - but you could never know they were mock, because the enemy was there. We worked weekends too... There were planes standing ready all the time... We were the attack force of the Warsaw Pact and that was what we were being prepared for. I know it was a different international situation - there was the enemy in the West and the friends were in the East and so you knew how things stood and why you exercised. Now, after the change, things are different - the discipline is gone. We used to have to walk in uniforms - people could see that you were a soldier. Now you don't have to wear a uniform and the discipline went down terribly. We don't have the enemy now, but we also do not have people who would understand the military at the top. Now with the new young minister - Tvrdík - things might change, because he is a former military and he seems to be taking military seriously. But I remember Havel, how he mocked the military at first and then he turned around and thought we would not remember it. Or one of the first civilian Ministers of Defense ^{Walter} after 1989 - I remember him on TV, showing the military shoeshine kit and ^{my minimal} ridiculing it. That really hurt me - how could someone like that make decisions about the Air Force?

And you ask me what changed? Everything changed - those times are gone now. There are no planes for me to work on - the old ones are gone and new ones are not about to arrive

any time soon. I am leaving in few months - I never thought I would leave, I thought I would serve till retirement, but then this new law came and now I do not have enough education for my rank. I have already been asked to stay as a civilian, but as what - as a guard at the gatehouse? But I might consider staying if I could be civilian technician. They have this new law, which they follow, but they are losing people they will not be able to replace - apparently they do not have enough airground crews. But I do not know if I am offered the job. It means anyway, I will never wear the uniform again. It is so sad you know - what it came down to. I sit here in the office all day long, waiting for my time to go home and then soon, I might never come back. When they were taking those last planes to be put away, I cried... And you see, now I am too. I just never thought this would be the end - like this, here - waiting for the end. But this is the end and that is how I look at it. Fortunately, I have my garden.

He stopped talking, and I looked at him - his eyes were shining, there were tears in them. But then he gave me a broad smile and said:

You should see my garden, it is an unbelievable thing - I work on it now all the time. I have a lot of garlic, but many other things as well. I have these new roses coming this week, I cannot wait to go and plant them.

I looked at the garlic he gave to me and then at him. This guy ^{Norman} astounded me. It is not that he would have said something so different from what I have heard many times before when interviewing other officers on other military bases. The difference between them and officer X was primarily the latter's astonishing lack of melancholia. Articulating the reason for his sadness - the loss of his beloved work with planes - he was able to mourn it as genuinely lost.⁴⁹ His mourning of the past signaled the lack of melancholic desire that refuses to acknowledge the missing

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud (1914-1916).

object as forever gone. He cried about the planes and the dying Air Force, but only as a closed chapter in his life that he was able to externalize and displace onto a different object and activity – the planting of garlic and roses in his garden.

Pointing to the fetishizing tendencies of the mimetic urge," Michael Taussig claims: "The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power."⁵⁰ In their displacement, the Czech Air Force officers merge with their Soviet planes and the socialist Air Force, indistinguishable from each other in their melancholic disappearance. I owe this anthropological insight to the post-communist moment of liminality whose mimetic excess of the reciprocal longing between the machines, the men and the institution was revealed to me in the dialectical images of dilapidation and modernity on one sunny day on Base X.

Postscript 1

Flying and gardening seem to share love and control as defining characteristics of people's mimetic attachment toward them. A former Air Force pilot decided not to part with his plane, placing a disabled Soviet jet fighter as a decoration in the garden of his house (Illustration 19).⁵¹

Postscript 2

The pilots on an elite Air Force base where I spent several months later that year have a club room, which holds an intriguing exhibit. On one of the walls, they place metal pieces of

⁵⁰ Michael Taussig (1993). *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. xiii.

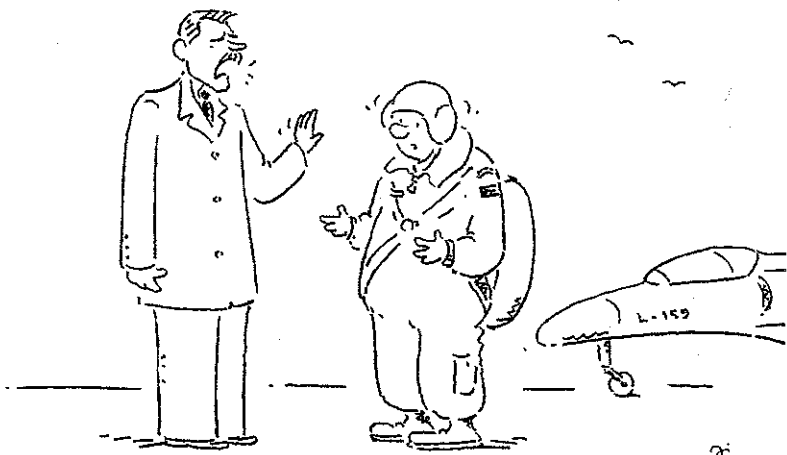
⁵¹ The photograph was taken by the owner, Pavel Vaňouš, and included in the book about the history of the Czechoslovak and Czech Air Force 1989 - 1994, eloquently called, *Zrušená křídla* (Displaced Wings), see Lorenc and Rogl (2000), p. xciv.

wrecked planes with a name of the pilot that died during its crash. It is hard to imagine a more complete consummation of love through mimesis.

Postscript 3

Some time after I had returned to the base which was my primary fieldwork site, its Commander was approached by American filmmakers with an intriguing proposition. Another line of Soviet jet fighters, which were in fact the only fighter planes left on his base, were going out of operation. The American star and movie director Vin Diesel was making a film in the Czech Republic and insisted on having Russian jet fighters included in its final action scene. The Commander welcomed the proposition in exchange for English language laboratory equipment for his pilots.

For several weeks, the elite pilots of the base were training under the instruction of American movie makers how to elegantly run towards their planes before take-off. Ironically enough, I saw the movie, XXX (read "triple x"), on the plane from the United States. In the theatre of violence, which the movie essentially is, the Czech lands and Czech women serve as a location on which the battle between the American government and the Soviet mafia takes place. Vin Diesel, the lover of extreme sports, is the main hero named XXX who is hired by the US secret service to fight his Soviet counterparts on the Czech territory. The final scene takes place on the Vltava River in the historic part of Prague. In an American action movie, the melancholic Czech pilots with whom I worked on a lonely country base fly the Soviet jets into the timeless space of the Hollywood silver screen. The filming took place on the last day when the Soviet jet fighters were in operation. "At least we can now look at them whenever we want," commented the pilots when I asked them how they felt about the movie.



NEZAJÍMÁ! SLYŠEL JSTE ROZKAZ: POLETÍTE NADZVUKOVOU RYCHLOSTÍ!

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Illustration 17: "Shut up! I have issued an order! You will fly at supersonic speed!" A newspaper cartoon showing Jaroslav Tvrdík, the Minister of Defense ordering a Czech Air Force pilot to fly at supersonic speed on L-159, a subsonic-speed air craft of Czech origin. Source: Cartoon Vladimír Jiránek, in Lidové noviny, November 8, 2001.



Illustration 18: The cover page of the official 2001 calendar of the Czech Armed Forces. Source: Photo Oldřich Jeřábek, Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic, Prague, 2000.

CHAPTER 5 – BRINGING THE VIOLENCE BACK IN (PRAGUE 1989–2002)

“For the continuous coming-into-being of the state rested, in other words, on the continuous passing away of the body of the Liberator into the body of the people, and this constant passing-away itself depended on a capacity not merely to continuously resurrect his image, but to be possessed by his spirit by virtue of that image.” (Taussig 1997: 101–102)

“Optimist: ‘Militarism means increasing the state’s authority by exercising force, so that – ; Grumbler: – the means will lead to its eventual disintegration, the dissolution of the state. In wartime, everybody becomes his fellow man’s superior. The military men become the superiors of the state, which sees no way out of this unnatural constraint but corruption. If the statesman allows the military man to control him, he has fallen under the spell of a grade-school idol which has had its day and which, in our day, can be allowed to rule over life and death only at our peril.’” (Kraus 1974: 18)

“Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn’t the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn’t done a thing to the Germans, I’d always treated them friendly and polite. I knew the Germans pretty well, I’d even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I’d spoken their language. ... But from that to shooting at us right in the middle of the road, without so much as a word of introduction, was a long way, a very long way. If you asked me, they were going too far.” (Céline 1983: 7).

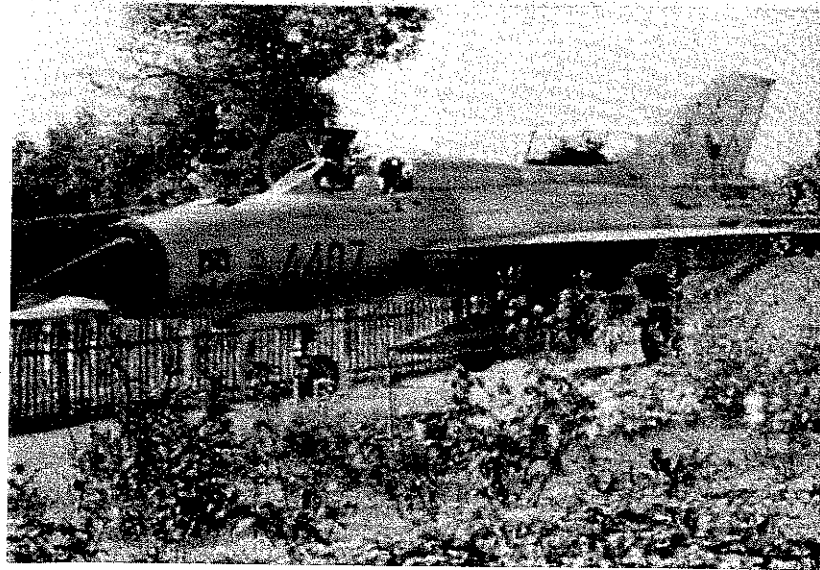


Illustration 19: *Photograph of a disabled plane that Pavel Vaňous purchased from the Air Force and placed in his garden.*

Source: Photo P. Vaňous, in Miroslav Lorenc and Stanislav Rogl. Zrušená křídla: Poznámky k československému a českému vojenskému letectvu v letech 1989 až 1994.

Olomouc: Votobia, 2000.