
THE UNOFFICIAL HIERARCHY IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK PEOPLE'S ARMY BETWEEN 1968 AND 1989: FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ETHNOLOGY¹

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Abstract

The length of the already completed period of compulsory military service (CMS) played an unofficial but exceptionally important role in the everyday practice of CMS soldiers conscripted into the army for two years (730 days). The decreasing time remaining until their return to civilian life (the „number”) significantly strengthened the real position of a CMS soldier within the military community, a part of which he was. Alongside the official hierarchy, an unofficial hierarchy (an old-sweats' system) was being created which recycled dangerous discrepancies (old sweats vs. rookies) and marked the everyday life of military units, especially in terms of interpersonal relations.

Keywords: *Army of the Czech Republic, Czechoslovak People's Army, compulsory military service, everyday life, normalization*

In the Czech Republic, research fellows have lately paid considerable attention to the phenomenon of compulsory military service (hereinafter referred to as „CMS”) in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, especially between the years 1968 and 1989, i.e. during the period of „normalization“ (Kubáčková 2009: 133 – 161, Murín 1994: 334 – 347, Votruba 2001: 39 – 64). Focused research is certainly warranted, as the institution of the CMS is extremely relevant: in its time, it was one of the important tools through which the ruling power disciplined and indoctrinated its citizens to defend the existing political system. At the same time, it had a considerable impact on

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the lives of the vast majority of young men who were subject to general conscription and who joined the CMS in various parts of the country in order to spend a limited period of time (usually two years) with a variety of military activities in different ranks and capacities, thus fulfilling their *honourable duty*, as this was officially proclaimed. The expert research in particular observes the impact of the CMS on several generations of Czech men, as well as its societal, social, ethical and cultural significance in a broader perspective.

The above theme also became a focus of the research conducted by scholars from several social-science disciplines, especially contemporary history and ethnology, and enshrined in the project “*The Army as a Tool of Socialisation: A Reflection of the Phenomenon of Compulsory Military Service in the Czech Lands (1968 – 2004)*.”² *The research conducted within this project was aimed, based on the analysis and interpretation of a variety of sources, at describing the essence and transformations of the CMS phenomenon in the Czech lands during the observed period, and at the assessment of its significance. The research focused, among other things, on exploring the changing relationship between formality and practice.*³ *As can be seen, the time span of this investigation consists of two distinctly different periods, with the landmark being the fundamental change in the political system associated with the events of late 1989. Our essay is therefore primarily focussed on the first of these periods (from August 1968 to November 1989) and is aimed at the specific issue of interpersonal relations between members of the then Czechoslovak People’s Army (hereafter CSLA). These relations were officially determined by the system of hierarchical ranks on which the army structure was based.*

The CSLA was made up of two types of soldiers: the career soldiers and the CMS soldiers, the difference between them being professionalism. Career soldiers (officers, warrant officers, staff sergeants) performed service in the army as their occupation. On the other hand, the CMS members were non-professional soldiers; they performed their jobs in the civilian sector, from where they were called up to the CMS and then they returned to it (unless they joined the professional army during their service). By 1990, the CMS lasted for two years (730 days), but not for everyone: the exception was for graduates of the university military departments

² Czech Science Foundation’s project No. 19-19311S, Jiří Hlaváček was the principal investigator and Karel Altman was the co-investigator; Petr Wohlmuth was another team member.

³ *This means that the difference between the state’s proclaimed idea of the importance of the CMS (i.e. the official discourse) and its practical impact on a conscript, i.e. a CMS member, and his own experience, is observed.* In terms of theory, the project is based on the concept of a cultural model of military history, which is possible by combining the methods of several scientific disciplines: a) classical historiography (especially archival research and criticism of written sources), b) historical anthropology (discourse and narrative analysis, data collection through qualitative semi-structured interviews), c) ethnology (research on written sources, publishes memoirs, correspondence, and diaries; re-search on social relations, material culture, folklore, and verbal art etc.).

(hereinafter referred to as MUDs) who, after completing their two years' training during their studies, entered the CMS for one year (365 days).

Our research deals precisely with the CMS phenomenon in the Czech lands during the aforementioned period. One of the priority topics concerns the research on the hierarchy created among the CMS soldiers, which also was a space for extremely relevant discrepancies that marked the everyday life of military units in the Czech lands, especially in the realm of interpersonal relations. At the outset, it should be noted that there was *de facto* a double hierarchy among the CMS soldiers; not only official, but also unofficial. The two coexisted, while being in quite stark conflict with each other, as one denied (and suppressed) the other.

The official hierarchy among the CMS soldiers was defined by military orders that differentiated privates, non-commissioned officers, and graduates from the university military departments. The largest numbers of CMS soldiers in the observed period were privates; a private was a soldier of the lowest military rank and his epaulettes were empty. However, some privates became non-commissioned officers, i.e. lance corporals, corporals, and sergeants, during their CMS. If it was necessary to determine the superior-subordinate relationship between two soldiers of the same rank, the one who was senior was considered to be superior. Military orders did not recognise any hierarchy other than the official one. According to them, the position and powers of each soldier in the army hierarchy were quite strictly defined by his military rank.

Besides this official hierarchy, however, there was also an unofficial hierarchy among the CMS soldiers; it was based on completely different principles than the official hierarchy. The principle that determined the unofficial hierarchy was the time that a CMS soldier had already spent 'in his military service', since joining the CMS. This time was expressed in numerical terms, by *the number*, which, however, did not indicate the number of days spent in the service but, on the contrary, it indicated the number of days remaining until the end of the service, i.e. until leaving for civilian life. The significance attributed by the CMS members to this figure was of mystical proportions, and because of its gravity one could speak even of a „cult of the number” (Altman 2020: 44 – 70).

The conscripts joined the two-year-long CMS every six months, in spring (1 April) and in autumn (1 October). The basic division was into the first and the second year of CMS service; the unofficial structure thus consisted of two basic grades, whereby each of them was further divided into two halves, i.e. two further grades.⁴

The unofficial hierarchy considered the first-year soldiers to be young soldiers who were called *zobáci* [rookies], which was a disparaging, humiliating and insulting title. However, they were also given other similar names – *pigeons*, *pheasants*, *birds*, *mice*, etc. The first-year soldiers (hereafter also referred to as rookies) were mainly responsible for performing fatigue duty, called *rajony* in Czech, i.e. cleaning the barracks, which they did every morning and evening. At that time, accommo-

⁴ „Privates from the first year of the CMS, so called young forces or rookies, and privates from the second year, called old sweats, were here.” (Glet. n. d.).

dation rooms, common rooms and sanitary facilities, as well as stairs and corridors were cleaned. Even though the fatigue duty was assigned to the rookies and second-year soldiers, this was performed exclusively by the first-year soldiers. If there were soldiers of both years on everyday specialised duty, it was the rookies who performed a significant part of the duties. They had a whole range of obligations like this. In the military dormitories there were metal bunk beds and the rookies slept exclusively on the top bunk, called a *perch*. The rookies were only rarely allowed to watch evening entertainment programmes on television; they were usually prevented from doing so by the CMS second-year soldiers, who usually only wanted to demonstrate their own power or they made the watching so uncomfortable for the young soldiers that these preferred to leave. Going outside the barracks was then a real rarity for the rookies (Glet, n. d.).

However, this first grade – the rookies – further included two half-year stages. From the entry to the CMS until the end of the sixth month, (i.e. the first half-year) it was the *recruits*, also called *young soldiers*, who were most often given the clearly pejorative names – *pheasants*, *pigeons*, *birds*, *mice* etc.⁵ It was these soldiers who experienced the hardest conditions of the CMS. If they were not on duty, they had to work continuously from the wake-up call to the lights-out. They also became the most vulnerable, because they were practically defenceless, as a target of various insults from the CMS second-year soldiers, or of open bullying.

From the beginning of the seventh month until the end of the CMS first year, the rookies were called *půlročáci* [≈ half-yearers], *půlky* [halves] or *older rajonisti* [≈ fatigue-duty performers]. As compared to the recruits in their position of the youngest rookies, the *půlročáci* had at least some advantages. If they worked together with the recruits, they had the right to choose an easier or a less degrading labour: for example, when they were assigned to fatigue duty together, the older *rajonisti* mopped the corridors, while the recruits cleaned the toilettes.

The CMS second-year soldiers were considered to be *older soldiers* and they were unofficially called *old sweats* – *mazáci* in Czech. These older soldiers were quite powerful in informal interpersonal relations, which allowed them to exercise a firm control over the young soldiers and which guaranteed them a number of unwritten rights and privileges that were essentially illegal and not enshrined in any official document. Their main privilege was to delegate their own work duties to the first-year soldiers; the rule “an old sweat does nothing, an old sweat only walks” applied not only during the normalization period, but virtually until the abolition of the CMS.

The second grade also included two levels, two half-year stages. In the first stage – six months from the beginning of the CMS’s second year – the soldiers were called old sweats (without any attribute), and from the mid-second grade they were called old super sweats, also shortly *supráci*.

⁵ „A young soldier, bird, beak or rookie; these were names for soldiers who served in the army their fifth to sixth months.“ (Glet, n. d.).

There was a fundamental difference in the unofficial hierarchy between the first-year and the second-year soldiers, meaning the rookies, on the one hand, and the old sweats on the other, consisting in the access to power of one over the other. An eyewitness expressed it succinctly, but using apt words: „Briefly said, rookies had a minimum of rights and a lot of obligations, old sweats were much more free as they delegated a large part of their obligations to the rookies.“ (Glet. n. d.). The old sweats considered themselves to be superiors of the rookies, imposing this idea upon them in day-to-day barracks operation.

The fact is that older soldiers (2nd grade), as a result of their previous one-year experience in the performance of the CMS, acquired a number of appropriate knowledge and skills, which, on the contrary, younger soldiers (1st grade) lacked; these acquired the knowledge and skills through training organized and led mainly by career soldiers, but also by older CMS members. Not only career soldiers, but also older CMS soldiers could and should have set an example for young soldiers.

The problem was that the older CMS soldiers often greatly overused these dispositions, or rather abused them to create a base for their despotic control over young soldiers, i.e. for the *old-sweat system*. For this reason, we can perceive the old-sweat system, in a simplified way, as an abuse of the more or less natural authority of the older soldiers. The unofficial hierarchy significantly denied or completely negated the official hierarchy when a CMS first-year soldier acquired a non-commissioned officer rank (usually a lance corporal, or even a corporal), which statutorily placed him in a higher position due to which, according to the military orders, the privates of the unit in question were subordinate to him. In informal practice, however, this relationship was not recognised by the second-year soldiers (including privates, meaning the lowest military rank!); on the contrary, it was ignored or even repressed, often very harshly and brutally.⁶

The old sweats' dominance (i.e. that old-sweat system) was maintained by daily military practice, which was interspersed with a whole range of various tasks and favours, uncompromisingly enforced by old sweats on young soldiers. Joining the CMS meant a radical change in the living conditions for young soldiers, and in their initial shock they usually easily and quickly succumbed to the pressure of the new environment and submitted to the set conditions; they adapted themselves. It was the awareness of the hopelessness, futility of effective resistance that played a crucial role here, especially when they imagined the slowly shortening two years of the CMS. The newcomers thus accepted the rules that were firmly established in the life of the military community more or less by tradition, and maintained for many years or rather decades. The old-sweat system had a form of concrete relations between the two groups of CMS members, but it became more acute at the individual level between two specific persons; as a rule, each old sweat had „his” rookie, a kind of personal servant, but sometimes also a whipping boy who was at his mercy.

⁶ This issue is mentioned e.g. in a memoir publication by Oldřich Rajsigl (Rajsigl. 2013). The author of those very peculiar memories, noticeably fictionalized and probably written with a high level of author's licence, patently celebrates this system and his active role in it.

In order to keep their privileges recognized and respected without reservation, the old sweats had to ostentatiously display, permanently present and flaunt them to inculcate them into the first-year soldiers so that these would learn to respect them. The presentation of the second-year soldiers' old-sweat system was a demonstration of power (i.e., not a show of military prowess, skill, and ability), and it featured arrogance with which it was practiced. The means of presenting the old-sweat system included a variety of attributes which the old sweats invented and implemented and which they inherited from their predecessors; these were various symbols, rituals, privileges, etc. This presentation was linked to the above-mentioned *number* and its cult.

It was this *number* that in the unofficial hierarchy explicitly defined the position of a soldier in a strictly classified category (recruit, half-yearer, old sweat, and super-old-sweat); from this number the soldier's real position, his current social status in a particular CMS community, was derived. This was the reason why this number was considered to be „one of the most significant things” for each CMS soldier.⁷ The number was reflected in a very sensitive way, undoubtedly through the lens of an unusually strong and emotionally felt desire to return to the civilian sector. These feelings very suggestively illustrate the real relationship of many soldiers to the CMS performance, which was perceived by them as extremely agonising and traumatic, and seen as the loss of a significant part of their young lives.

A young soldier was obliged to know the *number* of the old sweats from his unit (company, platoon, and squad), and he was often forced to prove his knowledge in practice, as he was asked about it by the old sweats, often several times a day and even in the middle of the night after being forcibly awakened from sleep. In case the young soldier did not prove his knowledge of the old sweat's number, a sentence was imposed on him, which had to be executed immediately afterwards; as a rule, it was a significant number of push-ups (Valent. n. d.).

A widespread custom was associated with the celebration of a round number of days (i.e. the *number*) remaining to the return to civilian life. In such a case, however, it was relevant whether it was the number of a rookie or that of an old sweat. While a young soldier had to conceal his number (and thus „celebrate” it secretly), an old sweat flaunted it, and the celebrations were to demonstrate his sovereign position. This was done through peculiar rituals which were performed on the corresponding day and which usually consisted of humiliating and tormenting the first-year soldiers.

These celebrations included some other specific attributes that were of material, three-dimensional nature and had a symbolic meaning: fictitious banknotes, funeral

⁷ This is explicitly stated, for example, by an anonymous author of a text describing the everyday life of the CMS soldiers in the Czechoslovak People's Army, *Jak jsme se bavili* [How We Had Fun], published on a website: „The number that defined the number of days remaining to the return to civilian life was one of the most important things for each soldier.“ (Československá lidová armáda. Jak jsme se bavili. [Czechoslovak People's Army. How We Had Fun.] n. d.).

cards, old-sweat tape measures, reservists' IDs, etc. It is these things – in addition to the memories of military customs and practices – that have most often survived to the present day as a long-ago witness to the CMS performed by many hundreds of thousands, or rather several million, young men in the days when military service was compulsory. It seems to be quite symptomatic that those „documents” were made of available materials quite voluntarily and for largely prestigious reasons, not only in the soldier's free time, but also at the time of ordered and compulsory military occupation, on night duty, and on similar occasions whereby it was even necessary to shorten own time.

Peculiar *military banknotes*, fake means of payment produced by old sweats on which the *number*, usually round, thus worthy of celebration, was depicted, were a widespread symbol. In addition, there was a variety of humorous drawings and cheerful sayings; a mechanised infantryman, doing military service in a spa town in western Bohemia in 1989–1990, remembered the inscription „Whom God did not love, he was conscripted to Karlovy Vary.”⁸ The banknotes were usually made by hand, by drawing and colouring, but often the initial design was copied, usually photographically.

Thus, on the occasion of number 300, a „three-hundred-day” banknote used to be issued. All those concerned had been preparing for the „three-hundred” long in advance, in particular by making a suitable pseudo-banknote, which was painted, photographed and further reproduced to the required number of copies. It was as big as the then official hundred-crown note, even with the Hradčany⁹ on its front side, while the reverse side depicted a motif from the military life of the corresponding unit; for example, the Border Guard used a motif from the state border. The banknote featured number 300, or the entire inscription „300 days”, as well as funny claims referring to its place of origin, which was the barracks, that it was issued by the local bank, that it was „covered with the sweat of the old sweats” from that very place, and that its forgery was punishable by a new enlistment in the compulsory military service (Grobelný 2013: 129). The banknote was part of a flamboyant „celebration of the three-hundredth day”, which the CMS soldiers, but only those who had served for two years, i.e. not by the graduates of the university military service, considered to be the second „biggest feast of old-sweat traditions”, right after the start of the “*cutting of the tape measure*”. Undoubtedly, the fact that it was the first round number experienced by a CMS soldier as a second-year soldier, i.e. as an old-sweat, played an important role.

The *funeral card* was another important document associated with number 300. It was a fictive obituary note which informed that „the three-hundredth day” died; the funeral card was inserted into an envelope, edged in black. The banknote and the funeral card were sent to relatives, girlfriends and mainly to friends who also did

⁸ Interview 023, conducted by Jiří Hlaváček (2019), Digital collections of COH ÚSD AV ČR – funds ZVS

⁹ Prague Castle, a landmark in the capital of Czechoslovakia.

their military service and who „had to wait for more days”. However, funeral cards like these were not associated exclusively with number 300, but they could also be made on the occasion of other „hundredth days”.

It was also the *old-sweat tape measure* that was among the popular symbols of the old-sweat system; this measured the remaining time until the return to civilian life and symbolized the last period of the CMS. It was a real tailor tape measure, 150 centimetres long, which an old sweat purchased and then personally modified; the tape measure was decorated in a variety of fashions, and its fractions were cut into different shapes (hearts, diamonds, ovals, etc.) and then coloured in different colours, which repeated every week for particular days: blue Monday, brown Tuesday, red Wednesday, green Thursday, black Friday, yellow Saturday, white Sunday (Grobelný 2013: 146). The old-sweat tape measure did not have a unified form; while making it, each soldier applied his fantasy, taste and skills: ‘The soldier begins to produce shapes unlimited by fantasy, where he turns every centimetre into a work of art in all colours. Some choose ovals, squares, coffins or coats of arms. On the rear side they write the names of the planets in the solar system as a symbol of the distance to civilian life.’ (Gruber 2012: 124).

The day the old sweat began to cut the tape measure (i.e. number 150) was considered by many of them to be the biggest holiday in the CMS performance. The act itself was one of the most widespread old-sweats’ customs not only during the normalization period, but also later, practically until the abolition of the CMS. Individual fractions of the old-sweat tape measure were usually cut with a razor blade for easier separation from the rest, so they could be torn off the remaining ones, or they had to be cut off.

The act of cutting or tearing off the next centimetre-long piece of the old-sweat tape measure was uniformly timed. It was done every weekday afternoon after four o’clock, after the Daily Order of the Unit Commander had been read. Usually this act became a ritual, performed jointly by all those concerned (Gruber 2012: 124). Each old sweat usually cut his tape measure by himself, or he always had one fraction torn off by his rookie. This continued to number 13, inclusive. The last twelve numbers were not cut (or torn) off and each old sweat kept them as a souvenir; somewhere it was customary to give them to his rookie as a reminder (rather like a spiteful reminder) that his service would continue for another twelve months (Grobelný 2013: 147).

Another way of recording the gradually decreasing number was the *sportka* [sports lottery]. It was a common lottery ticket, in which the remaining days until leaving the CMS were ticked. The lottery ticket contained forty-nine boxes with numbers which were ticked off gradually, day by day (always one cross per day), from the 49th day (i.e. from number 49) until the last day of the CMS.

The *sportka* was related to the *reservist’s card* (also called a *civilian’s card*) that the super-old-sweats made, on a self-help basis, at the very end of the CMS, in the last two months before leaving for civilian life. This “document” had the form of a fold-out pass, which the super-old-sweat made according to his taste, using his own

inventiveness and artistic skills. „There were no limits to the artistic conception; the main thing was to have as many naked women as possible there,” remembered a veteran, who was performing the CMS from 1982 to 1984.¹⁰ Each reservist’s or civilian’s card also contained the aforementioned sports lottery ticket, in which the days remaining until his return to civilian life were ticked (Československá lidová armáda. Jak jsme se bavili. [Czechoslovak People’s Army. How We Had Fun.] n.d.).

As the preceding lines, let us believe, demonstrate, the old-sweat system, which represented an unofficial and nowhere codified order of service and interpersonal relations among the CMS soldiers, extremely influenced their everyday life in perhaps all units of the CSLA, at least in the normalization era. It was on the principle of the old-sweat system that various forms of bullying were practiced in military units, the most controversial being the relations between the first-year and the second-year soldiers. At the time of socialism, the manifestations of the old-sweat system and bullying were officially in fundamental contradiction with the proclaimed principles of building the CSLA; therefore, they were closely monitored by the career soldiers, usually sanctioned and often severely punished. The fight against these social deviations was one of the important tasks of the then political workers, who were also career soldiers, especially the representatives for political matters (RPM), i.e. the political commissars, called *politruks* in military slang.

The old-sweat system and bullying were combated not only by the direct work activities of these persons (and, in addition, by the activities of the members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and of the activists of the Socialist Youth Union among the CMS soldiers), but also through a number of promotional materials disseminated in the CSLA, including comprehensibly created brochures and propaganda films. Every week, the CMS soldiers were also obliged to watch television programmes promoting the official form of the CMS performance, etc.

The manner of restrictions against the bearers of the old-sweat system, and the effectiveness and success of these restrictions gave rise to the unofficial division of the then military units into two categories, the „old-sweat military service” and the “brass hat military service”. The brass hat military service was a unit in which career soldiers (called *lampasáci* in Czech after *lampas*, stripes on their trousers) succeeded in combating the old-sweat principle with harsh sanctions; the old-sweat military service functioned in places where career soldiers failed to do so or where they lacked the ability or will to restrict the old-sweat system. However, in addition to this „basic dichotomy”, there were many differences in the everyday life and in the way interpersonal relations developed among the CMS soldiers, which also resulted from the particular type of armed forces to which the soldier was assigned, etc. From the available sources (soldiers diaries, correspondence, memoirs) already

¹⁰ Interview 010, conducted by Jiří Hlaváček (2019), Digital collections COH ÚSD AV ČR – funds ZVS.

published or made available electronically, as well as from the statements of the respondents interviewed, it is evident that the situation was to some extent different in each military unit.

We can wonder to what extent the old-sweat system, symbolized by the cult of the *number*, would in its consequences paralyze the role of the CSLA in terms of its ability to act in practical combat deployment, i.e. in the proclaimed defence of the homeland and, at the same time, of the political regime, for which this army was designated, and for which it served, or rather was supposed to serve. Undoubtedly, however, the old-sweat system significantly marked the mind-set of the participants, i.e. all those who performed the CMS, not only at the time they directly executed it, but also afterwards, in civilian life.

Let us add that even after November 1989, after a fundamental change of the political regime in Czechoslovakia, the old-sweat system in its army (later in the Army of the Czech Republic) did not completely disappear until the abolition of the CMS in 2004, although the cult of *number*, which symbolized the old-sweat principle especially during the normalization period, lost the base for its effect to a large extent (the length of the CMS was significantly shortened several times, which fundamentally changed the number of days remaining for soldiers to leave for civilian life). It can be concluded that this is also the reason why the old-sweat system lost its previous, i.e. normalization, drive and relevance. However, this claim requires further verification, which is what our consistently planned research projects also aim at; these focus on the old-sweat system as such and on the bullying through which it was manifested.

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¹¹ Since the Middle Ages, Chodové [≈ Patrollers] served as guards along the western border between Bohemia and Bavaria. They had a guard dog in their emblem, which had always accompanied them; the emblem was also adopted by the socialist Border Guard.