

Narratives of Czechoslovak Prison Staff from the Communist Era

**KRISTÝNA BUŠKOVÁ, KLÁRA PINEROVÁ,
MICHAL LOUČ**



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Kristýna Bušková, Klára Pinerová, Michal Louč, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, nám. Winstona Churchilla, 1800/2, 130 00 Praha, Czech Republic; e-mail: klara.pinerova@ustrcr.cz; michal.louc@ustrcr.cz

The Czechoslovak prison system is closely bound up with the political situation, and period before the year 1989 was no exception. Its transformation reflects changes in society and politics. The role of the prison system, attitudes to prisoners, as well as modernising trends are all a reflection of the dominant master narratives of that time. This study examines how university-educated employees who were in expert positions within the prison system (psychologists, doctors, a librarian, educators, top management) between 1965 and 1992 adapted to the prison system in place or tried to transform it at the time, and how they reflect on their engagement with it at present. By exploring these questions, we are ultimately asking how their experience as prison staff in communist prisons influenced their professional (narrative) identity and course of life, and how dominant social and political narratives under the communist rule impacted their individual lives.

The study adopts a qualitative, idiographic and social constructivist narrative engagement approach to capture the interplay between the prison system and individuals within it. It finds that former employees constructed three different identity configurations reflecting their engagement with the prison system. The consequences of these configurations for prison employees, prison system and society in general are discussed.

Keywords: narrative engagement, ideological setting, master narratives, communism, humanism, prison system

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INTRODUCTION

The prison system may be described as the last resort of the judiciary to protect society from crime. It is a repressive institution, a symbol of the power of the state and its ability to punish. It is a tool of discipline and rehabilitation (Crewe, 2007: 123). While isolated from the rest of society, it is still an institution that is embedded within the larger social discourse connected to the political and historical conditions of society (Foucault, 2000). While at some time periods the need to protect society from criminals takes priority, at other times the focus is more on human rights and rehabilitation of prisoners. The link between the prison institution and political climate is even tighter in societies under dictatorships, like Czechoslovak society between 1948 and 1989; dictatorship societies require their citizens to adhere to its ideological worldview as the only worldview, or narrative, permitted to govern their lives.

This study is part of a larger multi-disciplinary research project “Transformations of the Prison System in the Czech Lands in the Years 1965–1992. System and Individual Adaptation”, which was implemented at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů) and looks at how the Czechoslovak prison system was transformed between 1965 and 1992. These selected years were important legislative milestones that completed long-term processes. As Klára Pinerová has shown in more detail (Pinerová, 2018a), at the end of the 1950s there was a departure from the class concept of punishment in Czechoslovak prisons. These gradual changes culminated in Law no. 59/1965 Coll., On Imprisonment. In the late sixties the trends in the prison system were in the direction of self-critique, professionalisation and humanisation, but these positive changes were interrupted by the invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact forces. After the revolutionary year of 1989, there were major changes that culminated in Act no. 555/1992 Coll., On the Prison Service and Judicial Guard, which fundamentally reformed the organisation, management and ethos of the Czech prison. In the same year a new concept of the prison system was formulated, to steer the sector in a new direction based on the humanist tradition.

This particular study examines how university-educated former employees who were in expert positions within the prison system (psychologists, doctors, a librarian, social workers, teachers, top management) between 1965 and 1992 adapted to the prison system in place or tried to transform it at the time and how they now look back on their engagement with it. By exploring these questions, we are essentially asking how their experience as prison staff in communist prisons influenced their professional (narrative) identity and course of life and how dominant social and political narratives/discourses in Czechoslovak communist dictatorship affected their individual lives until today.

Because this is a multi-disciplinary project involving a historian, a social anthropologist and a psychologist, we looked for a common scientific language that would enable us to capture the interplay between the prison system as one level of analysis and individuals as another level of analysis. We were inspired by Hammack’s proposal that one such emerging paradigm transcending boundaries both within social sciences and humanities is *narrative engagement* (Hammack, Pilecki, 2012: 76). Narrative engagement is a social constructivist approach (e.g. Gergen, 1994). It emphasises the integral link between self and social structures (Crossely, 2000: 9). Constructivist approaches do not

see the self as an entity. Instead they see language and relations as playing the key role in the formation of self and identity. Narrative approaches presuppose that humans need to see meaning in their life experiences and this meaning is conveyed through narrative, as an organising principle of human action (Sarbin, 1986). People derive meaning from their individual narratives as well as from the collective narratives that they inherit. They can either appropriate the content of collective narratives to their individual narratives or reject them. Individual narratives are therefore always in engagement with collective narratives, usually described as *meta* or *master narratives* (e.g. Hammack, 2008; Jaraus, Sabrow, 2012; Kolář, 2011).

Hammack conceives of master narratives as serving as a resource for appropriating meaning into one's life narrative, by allowing the individual to set his personal narrative within some ideological context. The ideological setting connects the personal with the master narrative levels (Hammack, 2011: 313). Master narratives serve as a source of ideological setting for personal narratives. It is through the individual's identification with cultural context (master narrative), that the ideological setting as a set of beliefs and values is transmitted or refused.

The ideological setting of personal narratives is defined as referring to *the abstract system of beliefs that develops within an individual, through a discursive engagement within a particular cultural context* (Hammack, 2008: 231). This definition is therefore broader and less pejorative than that of ideology as defined by other social scientists (e.g. Marx, 1978; Le Bon, 1969). By the identification of the individual with his or her cultural context/master narrative, the ideological setting as a set of beliefs and values is transmitted across generations. The way that ideology is incorporated into personal life stories therefore reflects the reproduction or repudiation of social discourse and values in each generation (Hammack, Thompson, Pilecki, 2009).

By choosing the narrative engagement approach we committed ourselves to an idiographic approach to the study of individual lives of employees within the meaning structures of their shared social reality. This kind of approach enables us to see the changes in the shared meaning structures and narratives including values embedded in these structures (Schweder, Sullivan, 1993). We can track the process of "social reproduction" or repudiation as it takes place. This is of particular importance when studying individuals in societies in transition such as our prison staff who worked in the Czechoslovak prison system from the late 1960s. This time was perceived as a humanist period of Czechoslovak prisons when prisoners were considered more as subjects than objects. Through the 1970s and 1980s, which was the period of so-called "normalisation", prisoners were objectified and seen as tools for achieving desired production rates, up to the 1990s following the fall of the dictatorship, which is sometimes described as the period of extreme humanisation of prisons (Pinerová, 2018a; Pinerová, Louč, 2020). Each of these periods brought discontinuity to collective stories and social discourse and demanded its restructuring and reconsideration. This study is therefore also about how all these societal discontinuities are reflected in the personal narratives of the prison staff.

DOMINANT MASTER NARRATIVES IN THE CZECHOSLOVAK PRISON SYSTEM BETWEEN 1965 AND 1992

The transformation of the Czechoslovak prison system between 1965 and 1992 reflects changes in the social and political sphere. The role of the prison system, attitudes to prisoners, and modernising trends, all reflect the dominant discourses of the time. In our project we identified three prototypical master narratives (political-ideological, technocratic and humanistic), which proved to be suitable both for a comprehensive analysis of the prison system and the adaptation of the main actors to prison conditions. We are aware that this is a simplification, but the selection of the most dominant master narratives has helped us to a better understanding of the main trends in prisons, which then manifested themselves in a change in approach to prisoners.

The dominant master narrative throughout the period was undoubtedly the political-ideological master narrative that was fully enforced after the coup in 1948. This narrative was based on the official state ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which legitimised the domination of communist and workers' parties in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Its correct interpretation was taken care of by selected interpreters of the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism: Marx, Engels, Lenin and later Stalin too (Bettelsheim, 2001). Czechoslovak penology policy was based on Marxism-Leninism and theoretically based on a dialectical combination of the principles of repression and coercion with the principles of belief and re-education. The official ideology was translated into the practice of prison management and the approach to prisoners in various ways, and over the forty years of the Communist Party's dictatorship it gradually changed in line with social and political changes. Repression and coercion were primarily applied to political prisoners who were considered the main enemy in the initial phase of stabilisation of the dictatorship. While there was doubt about the re-education of political prisoners (although it was ongoing), there was no doubt about the re-education of criminal prisoners. The idea was to transform the criminal prisoner into a "new socialist man". In addition to ideological education, this was done primarily through productive work, which was perceived as a constitutive element of imprisonment. It was hoped that through work prisoners could be improve and re-educated.

The prison was influenced by the educational theory of Anton S. Makarenko in the 1950s. He emphasised not just work but the role of the collective in educating the individual (Bosewitz, 1988). In practice in the Czechoslovak prison, however, the collective became a control body. Collective education was essentially supposed to break a man, and authoritarian principles were applied accordingly. With the Communist Party playing an important role, discipline was applied to prisoners and they were required to adhere to a strict regime. This discipline was also required for the guards and other prison staff, who were monitored by various control systems, particularly in the Communist Party (Kaška, 2014). Adherence to rule and the demand for discipline was also associated with the militarisation of the prison. The prisoners, but also the prison guards and other staff were required to obey orders, and the individual opinion and individual approach were suppressed. The political-ideological master narrative, which was dominant until 1989, created the conditions for authoritarian practices, in which prisoners were perceived only as an object of

re-education, who were to be “broken” and forced to change by work and ideological training. They were thus to be re-educated into socialist men, and later to be fully integrated into socialist society. A criminal prisoner, like a political prisoner, was in the communist ideology perceived as an enemy who did not understand the achievements of socialist life. The political prisoner, however, had tried to destroy socialism consciously. By contrast the criminal inmate was seen as a relic of the bourgeois society and it was believed that as society moved towards communism, there would eventually be no more criminals (Zimmermann, Pullmann, 2014: 1).

While this was the political-ideological master narrative dominant in the socialist countries, technocratic (expert) and humanistic (human rights) narratives were applied in the countries of the Western bloc, where they significantly influenced the political, social and economic situation. In the Czechoslovak prison system both the latter narratives can be seen as either supplementary to the political-ideological narrative or under certain political and social conditions competing with it. The technocratic master narrative began to be applied to Czechoslovak prisons mainly in connection with expert rule in the 1960s (Sommer, 2019; Kopeček, 2019). The basis of this narrative is the supremacy of reason and rationality. Here the position of science as the discoverer of objective truth is key and the emphasis is on information as power; reason and science should be applied in every situation and under all conditions. The conditions of human life can be improved by applying scientific knowledge (Hall, Gieben, 1992). This belief is a general characteristic of modernity, while the rise of the premium placed on expert knowledge and experts in Czechoslovakia came in the 1960s. The Prague Spring in 1968 was the culmination of long-term efforts by experts and some of the party elites to build socialism with a stress on scientific rationality. As research by historian Vítězslav Sommer has shown, these trends were not reversed after 1968, but continued to be used in various ways (Sommer, 2019: 8–9). The psychologists and pedagogues who had been entering the prison service since 1963 had set themselves the goal of resocialising criminal prisoners with the help of scientific knowledge. They not only sought to create knowledge, but also worked to transform the behaviour and living standards of prisoners. Thanks to their knowledge, they would correct “bad habits”. In the mid-1960s, the first professional institution was founded with the task of penitentiary and penological research. The Research Institute of Penology, as this experimental workplace was called, not only worked on research tasks, but also disseminated new scientific knowledge among prison staff. The Research Institute of Penology experts cooperated with psychologists and pedagogues, who often participated in its research (Pinerová, 2018b, Pinerová, 2019). Although the Research Institute of Penology was supposed to be a purely expert institution promoting technocratic ideas in the prison system (while its direction was limited by the values of the political-ideological master narrative) in reality its activities led to the promotion of humanistic ideas and there are grounds for agreement with witnesses’ and some historians’ arguments that it was a humanistic institution (Bajcura, 1999; Kýr, 2003; Hladík, 2012).

The progressive tendencies remaining from the Prague Spring were largely ended in the early 1980s (Pinerová 2018a). The Research Institute of Penology was abolished in 1980 and the functions of psychologists and pedagogues shrank to mere “workers”. They were no longer experts who would bring new knowledge, with which they could help resocialise prisoners, but were only helpers in problematic situations and in the daily administrative work associated with the evaluation of the prisoner and their

inclusion in the work process. While technocratic tendencies continued to be discernible in other areas in Czechoslovakia until 1989, in prisons, expert thinking was silenced in the 1980s (Pinerová 2018a, 2018b).

The last master narrative we have mentioned is the humanistic (narrative of human rights). This made a mild appearance in the Czech prison system as early as the 1960s, and was most marked in 1968, only to be vehemently rejected in the period of so-called “normalization”. It reappeared and gained dominance after 1989, at least as far as official documents are concerned. This narrative is based on the ideas of civil liberties and equality, democracy, progress and the prison environment, and above all on the concept of human rights. It is founded on the belief that man has the inalienable right to be treated humanely and not to have his human dignity violated. In the prison environment, the narrative manifested itself in an emphasis on psychological therapy, a humane approach to prisoners as individuals, with whom staff should work individually. In contrast to the political-ideological narrative, where the prisoner is understood as the object of re-education, in the humanistic narrative the prisoner is considered as a human being who has his or her rights.

In the terms of this narrative, accommodation, meals and health care should be fully adequate and, and prisoners should be treated humanely without any hint of violence or unnecessary intimidation and discipline. While after 1968 trends in this direction disappeared from Czechoslovak prisons, period of so-called normalisation the same ideas found expression in dissident circles, which drew on the materials of the UN and other human rights organisations such as Amnesty international or Human Helsinki Watch. They thus worked on the prison mainly from the outside. Charter 77, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), and foreign non-profit organisations sent various requests for the observance of prisoners’ rights, recording non-compliance and thus pushing for a change of approach, especially towards political prisoners (Tomek, 2018). These tendencies became fully apparent after 1989, when a number of dissidents or persons associated with the dissident movement became involved in the reform of the prison system (Pinerová, Louč, 2020).

INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES OF PRISON EXPERT EMPLOYEES

While master narratives provide discursive resources on which individuals draw to construct their own personal narratives with corresponding ideological settings and values that convey meaning to their lives, it is up to individuals to decide what they appropriate from master narratives and what they reject in their personal narratives. Staff who came to prisons after 1965 had at their disposal the three most dominant social narratives, according to which they could model their approach to prisoners: the political-ideological narrative, the technocratic narrative subordinated to the political-ideological, and the technocratic narrative, where a humanising approach was promoted under the auspices of science. A purely humanistic narrative was also present in prisons, but its bearers were primarily political prisoners, and therefore open identification with it was very risky and essentially incompatible with survival in prison employment. Which of these social narratives employees identified with greatly influenced their approach to prisoners and the meaning and values that they saw in their work.

We have recorded 25 interviews in the years 2017–2019. We tried to address such a diverse group of narrators that we could look at prison life from different perspectives. Interviews with witnesses were based primarily on oral historical methodology. In some respects, however, we deviate from the usual concept. Parts of the interviews were attended by two to three interviewers, i.e. the entire project team. The interviews were semi-structured, with partially prepared questions. It was conducted by the main interviewer and the others asked additional questions. Typical was one meeting (maximum of three) for the purpose of recording and subsequent cooperation with the narrator in the drafting and interview authorization. Narrators from the ranks of criminal prisoners did not participate in interview authorization, as we had difficulty in accessing them.

For purposes of this article we decided to analyse the interviews with 9 university educated (expert) employees who worked in the system between the late 1960s and the present. While most participants were employed until the late 1990s and all of them are already of retirement age, one participant is still active in the prison system as a prison psychologist. Our choice of participants reflected our wish to have a ‘theoretical sample’, rather than a representative sample of Czechoslovak former prison staff (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). Out of this sample, we selected three cases for their ability to illustrate different ways in which individual employees engaged with (and adapted to) the prison system and how they reflect on their engagement at present. While these three cases cannot capture and fully explain the effects of the prison system on the narrative identity of the prison staff as a whole, it can serve as a window into the “idiographic specificity” of the experience of living a professional life with the Czechoslovak communist prison system.

In each narrative type, the individual engaged differently with the socio-political master narratives governing the prison system and society at the time. The three types were: 1) *A compliant narrative*: participants forming this narrative did not identify with the dominant political-ideological master narrative but complied with it out of fear of consequences for their own career and mainly their children’s prospects in the then political system. 2) *Narratives of rejection*: people who openly identified with humanistic values and rejected the master narrative the system. The system also rejected them because their approach to prisoners as well as colleagues was seen as too threatening for the system. They usually left out of concern for their own safety within the system and mostly lived an existence outside the mainstream society. 3) *Narrative of identification with the prison system*: individuals with this configuration fully identified with the then prison system and its Marx-Leninist ideological setting and worked on its behalf. They are its advocates to this day and do not show awareness of the potential moral problems with their behaviour from today’s moral perspective. The following three cases illustrate each of these narrative identity configurations and ways of engagement with the prison system.

MR DVOŘÁK, A COVERT HUMANIST: A COMPLIANT NARRATIVE

Mr Dvořák’s narrative is that of a story *contaminated* by obstacles the system laid in his way when he, as a prison psychologist identifying with the humanist master narrative, wanted to introduce humanising measures in the approach to prisoners. It is also a story

contaminated by his compliance with the then prison system and its dominant political ideological master narrative despite the fact that he did not identify with it. This contamination is reflected in the depressed tone of the narrative and in the way he wraps up many episodes in his narrative with the resigned sentence: *That's simply how it was, or That's how it was done at those times* followed by a sigh. Implicitly, one feels a sense of sadness and resignation.

The humanistic ideological setting is present throughout his narrative. He remembered how in his first years of work in the prison system, prisoners were still perceived as individuals rather than objects, showing that the political ideological narrative was losing its dominance over the humanistic narrative until the end of the political thaw in 1968 and remained influential within the prison system into early 1970s. He highlighted his cooperation with the Research Institute of Penology, which was generally perceived as humanistic within the system.

He sees the then political climate as having contaminated his and his colleagues' efforts to introduce humanising and psychological measures into the prison system to aid prisoners in their rehabilitation and foster their psychological well-being. While he talks excitedly about all the work he did or was trying to do, these episodes end in contamination and despair, with his acknowledgment that there was not enough political will to carry his intentions through. One such episode concerns his effort to establish a ward for paedophiles, where there would also be cooperation with the Ministry of Health. He tried to push for this for twenty years but in his view *the result did not reflect the effort put in. It was complicated. There was nobody motivated enough to put the effort in.* Later, he adds that *those times were bad and every time period reflects its people*, suggesting that it was not just political climate per se but also the people who learnt to exist in it and co-created it. Another such episode is interesting in that he talks very animatedly about how he and his colleagues used what at the time were cutting-edge methods from the West such as the Minnesota and Bass-Durkheim questionnaires. He used these questionnaires to conduct research and a specially built computer and software was used to analyse data from the Minnesota questionnaire. Suddenly, however, Mr Dvořák's narrative turned from excitement to contamination again, and once again he blames the problem on lack of political will:

An interesting study came out of it. A journal issue was published focusing on this research. We also researched changes in the perception of criminal punishment by prisoners. (unintelligible sentence). There it hit an obstacle (unintelligible), politically and so on.

Mr Dvořák was openly critical of the Marx-Leninist ideological methods of rehabilitating prisoners. With his psychological awareness, he felt sorry for the prisoners, whom he saw as suffering in very poor work conditions:

The work routine was not as bad but the work conditions were awful. Poor them, they really toiled there. It was heavy work with concrete and shovel and it was hard.

He believed that such "rehabilitation" led to exploitation and potential self-harm and suicides, and did not share the ideological attitude of the time that self-harm was pure manipulation and sabotage of the collective efforts of prison staff for the prisoners' rehabilitation:

It has always been known that re-education through work does not have much of an effect. They were treated like robots: "Work! Work! We don't care about anything else!" [...]

Today there is not so much pressure and self-harming behaviour has diminished substantially.

He mocked the compulsory political education for both prisoners and employees. Commenting on one of the ideological workshops and topics covered there, he said:

[They taught us] what Marxism is. What Lenin said on crime, that theory, simply nonsense. Class struggle and such nonsense. Scientific communism was the stupidest thing I have ever heard.

Yet despite this attitude and his frustrations with the system and implicit rejection of its values, outwardly he complied with any demand the system made on him. He joined the Communist Party, attended the ideological courses he was assigned to by his employer and did everything that was required of him to show loyalty to the system. He justified his behaviour on the grounds of his worries regarding the protection and wellbeing of his family and children and their prospects for good education. This compliance is reflected in the following quote:

Look I eventually joined the party. I regret to say it but that is simply how it was. [...] I have to admit I was quite cowardly at the time. They called me up: "Look! Your son is applying [to a school]?" "Yes, he is applying." "Well, then I don't know how [unfinished sentence]." I knew this, so I joined [the party]. [...] Now everybody says that they went there against their will, but there were many people like me. Not everybody but many. There was simply a lot of pressure.

Again, this episode ends with simply ("simply a lot pressure") adding to a pattern in his narrative where episodes regularly end with similar phrases such as: "simply how it was", "simply those times were such", etc., indicating a sense of helplessness and resignation. In his compliant attitude, he was also critical of those prisoners who were influenced by political prisoners. He saw the influence of political prisoners as in a way detrimental to his work because their actions such as the issue of Charter 77 brought more propaganda into prisons and more restrictions on his own work. While he did not reject their ideas, he was himself fearful of the prison system and so, saw them as dangerous and the source of complications. The strategy of open protest clashed with Mr Dvořák's strategy of compliance.

MR BENEŠ, AN OVERT HUMANIST: NARRATIVE OF REJECTION OF THE PRISON SYSTEM

Mr Beneš only worked in the prison system for a year and a half as a young psychiatrist in the early 1970s, half-secretly specialising in psychoanalytic approaches. Psychoanalysis was illegal at the time and nothing psychoanalytic could officially be published. The psychoanalytic training was organised outside the official system. Mr Beneš appropriated the humanistic master narrative into his personal narrative and found it impossible to remain in the prison system for long because of the incompatibility of its values with his own. He also felt that promoting humanism in prison was dangerous both for prisoners and for him.

As a young psychiatrist he worked directly at the Research Institute of Penology and led a psychotherapeutic group for prisoners. His narrative is a narrative of redemption in that he managed to stick to his humanistic values and authenticity through pursuing

psychoanalysis despite its illegality. It is a balanced narrative in that he is fully aware that at times he was afraid or felt angry with the people in the prison system and later in psychiatric hospitals that complicated his life. He even says that working in the prison system made him afraid that he, as a psychoanalyst, was *'always with one foot in prison'*. Leaving the system was a relief. Yet despite his fears and problems he also encountered later in life, he managed to stick to his profession and humanistic beliefs and after 1989 became the head of the now official Czech Psychoanalytic Society.

In his narrative reflections he stressed how the prison of the time was so incompatible with a humanistic approach to prisoners that treating prisoners with human dignity risked bringing them into dangerous conflict with the prison warders:

Prisoners were increasingly telling me: "You'd better stop coming here. Whenever we straighten our backs [meaning gain some dignity after group therapy], we smile at the warder and he orders us into a solitary confinement cell as punishment." Or they forgot that when they were called they had to introduce themselves not as Josef Novák but as 'convicted' Josef Novák. They forgot to say 'convicted' and overall came across as more dignified. So they said: "You'd better stop coming. We are getting into trouble." So I myself accepted that the method of mine, the group psychoanalytic psychotherapy, did not quite fit there.

He later added that there was an incongruence between his belief in humanism, human rights and human dignity, and the guards' belief in the inherently bad nature of the prisoners, sometimes combined with the *from today's point of view sadistic tendency* of some of the warders and their free hand to punish.

Mr Beneš believed that behavioural therapy was more congruent with the system because it focused on change in behaviour without probing for any contextual information in a way that would clash with the ideological setting of Marxism-Leninism. Also, he was sure that there were informants among the prisoners at his group therapy sessions, and so sensitive information was leaking. This has not been so far confirmed by the archival research, but it is probable that this could indeed have been the case.

Mr Beneš's focus on psychoanalysis represented a focus on individuality as opposed to collectivism, and human dignity, strong self and authenticity as opposed to compliance. In this respect the humanistic ideological setting that he appropriated to his personal life was incongruent with the values of the political-ideological master narrative. This meant that he had to leave the prison system to be able to express his way of life and not endanger himself or the prisoners in the system. Even in his civil life, he had to live a half-secret existence outside the official societal structures, not showing his true beliefs and actions publicly. While he was officially employed at a psychiatric facility, his psychoanalytic professional life took place in private flats of his colleagues where the psychoanalysts would meet and conduct their work.

MR NOVOTNÝ: NARRATIVE OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE PRISON SYSTEM THROUGH THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGICAL MASTER NARRATIVE

Mr Novotný worked as a prison doctor in the Czech(oslovak) prison system for 30 years, beginning in 1981. While he introduced himself as a doctor and a psychologist, priest and teacher, all in one, his narrative is a narrative with an openly aggressive tone,

mocking the humanisation of prisons since 1989. It is a narrative of identification with the Marxist-Leninist ideological setting, with an accentuated belief in rehabilitation through hard labour and punishment. In his view the aim of prison sentences was to “maintain order and good behaviour”. In his narrative he sees those criminal prisoners who suffered from psychological problems as saboteurs who needed to be punished. The sense of power and ability to punish is hinted at throughout the interview. Mr Novotný fully identified with the political-ideological narrative and is still its advocate:

The meaning of the sentence was that in addition to being deprived of freedom, the convict pays for his sentence through work. This is an ideal state of things and it is something that is missing today. It is ideal!

As a prison doctor, he mainly saw his duty as one of keeping prisoners healthy so that they could work. He talked proudly about how he managed to assess everybody within the first two days after their arrival so that they could go to work. Throughout the interview he hinted at his role as somebody who would reveal “the saboteurs” and “explain to them”, if necessary, why they should be happy to work. He did not elaborate on how he explained it to them but in the context of the whole interview the listener is left wondering. Furthermore, the way in which he speaks about his approach to prisoners in his professional role as a doctor is somewhat unsettling. In the following excerpt, summarising all these issues, he uses an evocative phrase “to check somebody up according to my taste”, leaving the listener with a sense of the doctor having disproportionate power over the inmate. The phrase “according to my taste” indicates that he did the check-up according to his needs and not the needs of the prisoner. It may also reflect the fact that in the political-ideological narrative, the body belonged to the state and he as a doctor worked primarily for the system and not for the patient.

In line with his political ideological setting, he saw self-harming behaviour and suicide as weakness that needed to be punished. While unlike Mr Dvořák, in line with his idealising picture of the then prison system, he thinks that self-harming behaviour was an exception, and asserts that he did not sympathise with such behaviour and would punish it immediately:

And to those convicts who did it to themselves [self-harmed] I sewed it back together without any anaesthesia so that they would ‘enjoy’ it and remember.

While rehabilitation through work may be considered a good and important part of the process, in Mr Novotný’s narrative there is no sense of an awareness of the system’s potential weaknesses or any of its shortcomings, such as unsatisfactory work conditions that were detrimental to the prisoners’ health and their physical overburdening. On the contrary, he highlighted the need for compliance with the system by prisoners and his role as somebody who was there to make them comply and like it. Yet, as a prison doctor, he felt that it had been his duty to make sure that the health of individual prisoners was preserved despite the hard work they were subjected to. So while he identified with the then prison system and its values, he equally accepted his role as a guardian of the inmate’s health and, as he says, would not compromise on that.

At the end of the interview, interestingly without being asked about it, he exclaimed:

I don’t want to boast! I don’t want to boast but my conscience is clear. I can go to bed at night, and I always could, knowing that I never harmed anyone, never harmed anyone for no reason.

Mr Novotný fully identified with the political-ideological setting and remained identified with it long after Czech society had rejected it. In doing so, he remained consistent and his professional identity did not go through any period of moratorium. The fact that he was not expelled from the prison system after 1989 and thus did not suffer any personal crisis around that time but instead remained working there until 2000 dispensed him from the need to engage in any critical reflection on his professional life. Nor did he have to ponder on the questions of potential guilt and shame that some might see as raised by his actions. His approach could thus be considered a highly self-protective strategy that permits no true reflection.

SUMMARY

Individuals construct their personal narrative identities through their engagement with social discourse. Groups propagate master narratives of a collective view on history, politics, etc. and expect these to be reproduced through the personal narratives of their individual members (Hammack, 2008). Dictatorship societies go even further in their pressure on citizens to appropriate dominant political master narratives in their personal narratives and live accordingly, and make it dangerous to openly repudiate them.

This study showed that prison staff working in Czechoslovak communist prisons with the dominant political ideological narrative had to engage with this narrative in their personal professional narratives and relate to it in one way or another. In this process of narrative engagement they had to negotiate the need for meaning making and the need to be aligned with the good (Taylor, 1989) and the need for security (Crittenden, Landini, 2011). The tensions resulted in different narrative identity configurations, reflecting different adaptation strategies as well as belief systems. Two types of narrative identity configurations converged with one of the master narratives present in the prison system and society – the political-ideological and the humanist – each of them identifying with one and rejecting the other. The third type of narrative identity configuration reflected a more complicated pattern in that the concern of security prevailed over the need for a meaningful professional life. While not identifying with the dominant political-ideological narrative and rejecting its ideological content implicitly, individuals with such identity configuration complied with the dominant master narrative in their behaviour.

By showing how their narrative identities are constructed and the adaptive function of their construction within the then prison system, we can gain a better understanding of some of the behaviours of former prison staff, which may now be criticised, and a better appreciation of the differences between different identity configurations. This can first help us to understand the prison system at the time – how it worked and how it reproduced itself and the suffering inherent to it – and second, it can aid the reconciliation process related to the narrative positioning of individual actors within the dominant master narrative.

Mr Beneš's humanising life story illustrated how individuals who openly repudiated the political-ideological master narrative had difficulties existing within official society. The dominant master narrative with its ideological setting pushed them outside official

social structures into the underground where they were constantly threatened by potential persecution for non-compliance. Mr Beneš's case showed that such people were not just expelled from the prison system but also struggled in other work places. Some authors wrote about a phenomenon they described as "inner emigration". Its meaning was that they had to somehow find a meaningful existence outside official society, either in their inner life or in a small circle of like-minded individuals.

Mr Beneš's humanising approach to prisoners clashed with the political ideological narrative and approach advocated mainly by the warders because the warders saw the prisoners as enemies and their identity was polarised with their own. Their aim was to punish the prisoner and to make sure that they would not escape or engage in behaviour considered inappropriate or outright prohibited. They found Mr Beneš's humanistic approach threatening because he would not respect the polarity between the prisoner and the warder, and instead perceived them not as people dangerous to him but as people in need of help. Mr Beneš's approach was also at odds with those experts who advocated the technocratic approach to prisoners. He believed that science promoted behaviourism in prisons, which enabled the practitioners to work with prisoners without questioning the ideological setting within which they worked and lived, and thus ignoring the root causes of the mental health difficulties encountered by the prisoners. Because his humanising approach was shared by political prisoners at the time, which had been supported by Western NGOs such as Amnesty International, his colleagues who worked in the prison system as psychologists but who were compliant with the system also feared him. They saw his behaviour as too openly against the prison system and thus as threatening to them all, as is illustrated by the story of Mr Dvořák.

Mr Dvořák's compliant, yet humanistic, story illustrates how fear could be stronger than one's need for an authentic and meaningful way of life, forcing one into previously unimaginable compromises. Such an attitude has been criticised as typical of the "grey zone", i.e. for the majority of people who did not agree with the communist regime but openly showed no protest, thus legitimising its existence. While such an approach to life may not be moral – Narvaez (2011) calls it an ethic of security where one justifies one's actions in the name of security – it may be understandable from the point of human nature, for humans' first instinct is to survive and maintain a certain level of well-being in life (Crittenden, Landini, 2011; Damasio, 1994).

The position of expert employees in the prison system that were recruited in the name of the Communist Party's proclaimed need for evidence-based practitioners, was complicated because it was in tension with another key principle of the communist dictatorship – the political ideological. The political ideological principle justified the repression and re-education of prisoners to turn them into socialist men. From that position, covertly humanistic psychologists were able to help prisoners and function as a humanising principle in prisons. Because they themselves wanted to survive within the prison system, they were more efficient at providing such help to prisoners than the openly humanistic employees whom the warders saw as too threatening, and after whose interventions the warders even tended to punish the prisoners.

Mr Novotný's story is the story of one employee who identified with the political-ideological narrative and the repressive attitude to prisoners stemming from such narrative. His story illustrates that in Czech society there are still advocates for some

of the values of the political-ideological master narrative who do not question their past actions. In accordance with the political-ideological narrative Mr Novotný saw prisoners in a polarised way as enemies. A prisoner was an object of re-education which justified the use of repressive approaches. Key in this mental representation was the idea that a prisoner was always a danger to others. For this reason, Mr Novotný saw penological approaches as threatening to the repressive approach he supported. He was critical of the penological view that prisoners have mental difficulties that should be addressed during their stay in prison rather than being seen as inherently bad and dangerous people. His story shows that it is difficult for these workers to abandon a learned, relatively distinct, black-and-white idea. The question, then, is to what extent these values of political-ideological narrative still persist in the current prison system? According to Lukáš Dirga's current sociological research (Dirga, 2018) the repressive approach to convicts does indeed persist. What is less clear is whether this approach is a hangover of the previous approach to convicts, or whether there are other factors behind it.

Theoretical sampling and the idiographic approach of this study has enabled it to shed light on the specific and unique to the Czech cultural context and the relationship of individuals or a group – in this particular instance the group of prison employees – to societal power structures. The study of prison staff revealed the general need to engage with the specifically Czech socio-political context in order to understand the meaning of experience within the then prison system. At the same time, it revealed the different social positions of individual actors within the dominant political-ideological narrative and thus within the then communist society. While it is a study of prison staff it also suggested broader mechanisms of how individuals living in communist Czechoslovakia engaged with their socio-political context on a daily basis at work and how it shaped who they are now. This approach can be useful for the study of other groups in Czech society and for achieving a better overall understanding of what communism meant to Czechs and what they pass on further through master narrative structures which are then appropriated to the personal narratives of young Czechs.

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INTERVIEWS

The author's archive (hereinafter AA), interview with Mr Beneš (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč and Kristýna Bušková, 2018.

AA, interview with Mr Horák (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč and Kristýna Bušková, 2018.

AA, interview with Mr Čermák (pseudonym, pedagogue) was conducted by Michal Louč, Klára Pinerová and Kristýna Bušková, 2018.

AA, interview with Mr Dvořák (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč, Klára Pinerová and Kristýna Bušková, 2018.

AA, interview with Mr Kučera (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč and Klára Pinerová, 2018.

AA, interview with Mrs Kopecká (pseudonym, employee of VÚP) was conducted by Michal Louč, Klára Pinerová and Kristýna Bušková, 2017.

AA, interview with Mrs Marková (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč, Klára Pinerová and Kristýna Bušková, 2017.

AA, interview with Mrs Němcová (pseudonym, psychologist) was conducted by Michal Louč, 2019.

AA, interview with Mr Novotný (pseudonym, doctor) was conducted by Michal Louč, Klára Pinerová and Kristýna Bušková, 2017.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KRISTÝNA BUŠKOVÁ – psychologist. She holds an MPhil degree in psychology from the University of Cambridge and a PhD degree in clinical psychology from the University of Nottingham. Her dissertation dealt with the impact of political persecution of individuals and families in the 1950s and 1970s in Czechoslovakia, with emphasis on the process of adapting to threats and perceived threats induced by the system, as well as the present consequences of this adaptation. Until the end of 2015, she worked as a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Nottingham. In the years 2017–2019, she worked in the 1945–1989 Research Department of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, ÚSTR) in Prague, where she was involved in the research project *Proměny vězeňství v českých zemích v letech 1965–1992. Systémové a individuální adaptace* [Transformation of the Prisons in the Czech Lands 1965–1992. Systemic and Individual Adaptations].

KLÁRA PINEROVÁ (ORCID: 0000-0002-5738-002X) – historian. She graduated in Modern Economics and Social History at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. She is a researcher at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, ÚSTR) in Prague. Her research focuses on modern economic and social history, the relationship between the intelligentsia and the Communist Party, the anti-Communist resistance, and chiefly on prisons in Czechoslovakia during the Communist dictatorship. She has published a book on this topic: *Do konce života. Političtí vězni padesátých let – trauma, adaptace, identita* [For the Rest of Their Lives. Political Prisoners of the 1950s – Trauma, Adaptation, Identity] published by ÚSTR – NLN, Prague 2017. She was in charge of the research project

Proměny vězeňství v českých zemích v letech 1965–1992. Systémové a individuální adaptace [Transformations of the Prison System in the Czech Lands 1965–1992. Systemic and Individual Adaptation].

MICHAL LOUČ (ORCID: 0000-0001-5311-064X) – social anthropologist. He graduated in Social Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pardubice. He is a doctoral student in the field of Contemporary European Cultural History at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University. Since 2017, he has been working in the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, ÚSTR) in Prague, where he was involved in the research project *Proměny vězeňství v českých zemích v letech 1965–1992. Systémové a individuální adaptace* [Transformation of the Prisons in the Czech Lands 1965–1992. Systemic and Individual Adaptations]. He created the thematic website *Jazzová sekce 1971–1988: historie, vydavatelství a dokumentace* [The Jazz Section 1971–1988: History, Publishing and Documentation, <http://jazz.ustrcr.cz/>] for the ÚSTR. He has long been interested in oral history and the issue of memory, especially in connection with the fate of Czechoslovak political prisoners under the Communist regime.