

They Had Beautiful Boots and Bananas There. (In)visible Presence of Soviet Soldiers in a Small Town

KATARÍNA KOŠTIALOVÁ



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.2.15> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i.
© 2023, Katarína Košťalová. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

Katarína Košťalová, Department of Social Studies and Ethnology, Faculty of Arts at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Tajovského 40, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic; e-mail:katarina.kostialova@umb.sk

The Warsaw Pact armies invaded the state territory of the former Czechoslovakia in August 1968 in order to suppress liberalisation reforms. The event fundamentally transformed further political, democratising, economic, cultural and social processes in Czechoslovakia. The military presence of Soviet intervention troops resulted in the establishment of special garrisons that became de facto foreign and 'invisible' zones. Zvolen became one of such places where Soviet soldiers operated, worked and lived. The garrison as well as a purpose built residential district for the members of the Soviet army and their families were situated in Zvolen. The objective of this study is to explain in detail whereabouts in the town their presence was (in)visible and to demonstrate examples of situations in which the soldiers, their families and local citizens came into official and unofficial contact. The study is based on archival materials, contemporary regional print and field research.

Keywords: socialism, town, Slovakia, Zvolen, Soviet soldiers, the housing estate Družba

How to cite: Košťalová, K. (2023). They Had Beautiful Boots and Bananas There. (In)visible Presence of Soviet Soldiers in a Small Town. Slovenský národopis, 71(2), 147–164. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.2.15>

Introduction

We can think about a city as a composition of layers, each being the expression of economic, cultural, political and ideological relations of a certain period in physical and symbolic perception. The current form of the city is thus the result of a unique layering of functional and spatial patterns that form its character (Muliček, 2009). What was a socialist city like? What shaped it, what did it offer, what kind of people

lived there? How did the socialist period affect its development? These are the questions that a number of architects, urban geographers, sociologists, and recently also ethnologists have been working on. The understanding of a socialist city¹ is considerably diversified and ambiguous in literature. Some authors point out that the development period is short and must therefore be treated with caution while others consider the conceptualisation of a real socialist city as legitimate and point to the need to comment on four decades of socialism. The American architect Kimberly E. Zarecor refers to a socialist city as not being tied to the beginning or the end of the socialist regime, but more fittingly it can be defined as an interval of urban development with a recognisable set of preferences (Zarecor, 2018: 233). A city can be conceptualised in many ways – as a place for a population with specific lifestyles, as a place of economic production, social and cultural reproduction, as well as a space expressing political power. These concepts are not mutually exclusive, but rather provide fitting frameworks for research (Matlovič, 2004; Muříček, 2009; Musil, 2002).

Socialist cities represent a certain subgroup of modern industrialised urban forms. Structurally they are similar to other modern urban typologies in Europe and the world, identified by their way of governance, one-party politics, rigid planning and economic practice and regular five-year urban development plans, the absence of market mechanisms, nationalisation of private property et cetera (Ferenčuhová, 2011; Matlovič, 2004). The Eastern Bloc countries had declared their intention to establish a harmonised and cooperative society with minimal social inequality, promising a better future and moreover, they wanted to create a 'new man' (Musil, 2001: 279). Socialist cities thus became a spatial and cultural proof of the socialist system itself where 'the new man' lived, and was co-created under ideological control. Although these cities show certain similarities, they differ from each other in, for example, to what extent their spatial structure is influenced by the application of the principles of socialist urbanisation. René Matlovič writes about *purely socialist cities*: e.g. Nová Dubnica, *cities with a dominant socialist residential class*: e.g. Považská Bystrica, Žiar nad Hronom, *cities with a clear socialist residential class and preserved pre-socialist centre*: e.g. Bratislava, Košice, Prešov, Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Nitra and *cities with indistinct signs of socialist urbanisation*: e.g. Levoča, Banská Štiavnica, Skalica (Matlovič, 2004: 139).

One of the traumatising events in the socialist era, that seriously affected Czechoslovak society and the city as a living entity, was the Warsaw Pact armies' invasion and the militarisation of the state in 1968.² With the deployment of the Soviet intervention troops on our territory, special garrison areas were also created, which became alien and invisible zones, in the sense of being deliberately ignored. Citizens noticed the presence of Soviet troops in the cities, but they did not become an integrated part of their lives. (In)visible zones are also related to the official version for the stay of the Soviet troops, which regularly assigned political significance to the citizens by describing the invasion

1 René Matlovič uses the term of socialist city, or city of real socialism (Matlovič, 2004).

2 The Nation's Memory Institute (ÚPN) deals with the period of non-freedom between 1939 and 1989 by the means of research, publishing, education, and popularisation.

on one hand as fraternal aid in the fight against the counter-revolution and on the other hand tried to soften its political meaning by referring to it as a temporary stay. As a result, the Soviet army on the territory of Czechoslovakia was on one hand celebrated as heroic, on the other hand it was politically trivialised highlighting its harmlessness of its social presence (Černá, 2015: 446).

One of the cities where the Soviet soldiers and their families operated, worked and lived was the town of Zvolen. My intention is to draw attention from the ethnological point of view to the topic that has not been sufficiently reflected on so far, which is the presence of Soviet troops in the urban environment.³ In terms of research and publication, it is historians who are engaged to a larger extent, and at the centre of their interest is, in addition to the historical context, various political, social and cultural aspects of the almost twenty-five year stay of the Soviet Army (SA) in Czechoslovakia, various forms of coexistence of military crews with the civilian population, and summaries of the victims of the Czechoslovak citizens (for example, Černá, 2015, 2021; Pecka, 1996; Purdek, 2012; Tomek, 2018; Tomek, Pejčoch, 2015). The aim of the paper is to point out the establishment of the Soviet army soldiers (SA) in the city and subsequently to explain in detail where and when their presence was (in)visible. I will focus on situations in which there were official and unofficial contacts among the soldiers, their families and local people. When studying the situations and analysing research materials, many new topics suitable for further research gradually opened up to me, for example, culinary culture, housing and the living culture of Soviet soldiers, spatial transformations, perception of habitats of meaning by the younger generation, etc., which due to the scope of the study, I could not devote my time to. In my future research I would like to delve deeper into the issue and continue the research that will complement the presented text. The research topic is broad, interesting and relevant to the current situation (the war in Ukraine), when freedom, basic human rights and the security of democratic societies are under threat, it is important for scientific research, discussions and popularisation.

The subject of the study is the town of Zvolen, in central Slovakia, five kilometres away from the small spa town of Sliač where the Three Oaks airport,⁴ was established in 1936. What attributes can we use when describing Zvolen? It is one of the oldest cities in Slovakia, a royal city,⁵ a city with a significant railway hub and a forestry city. It is also a city that was shaped by socialist ideology at a certain stage of its development, and a city where the barracks and residential areas for the members of the Soviet army and their families were located.

The study utilises a combination of ethnological and historical methods. I drew upon archival research, literary studies, regional press, contemporary documents,

3 The exception is the biographical memories of August 1968 by the inhabitants of Trenčín, as analysed by Monika Vrgulová (2009) and the interpretations of political changes in the rural environment by Tatiana Bužeková and Táňa Grauzelová (2016).

4 Besides the name The Airport Three Oaks, it was known also as The Airport Zvolen, The Airport of SNP Sliač – spa, most recently as The Airport Sliač and the like.

5 In 2023, it commemorated 780th Anniversary of the restoration of the city royal privileges by Bela IV.

city chronicles, and analyses of articles and web pages. In addition, I conducted semi-standardised interviews⁶ and non-participating observations. I used the collection resources of the Forestry and Timber Museum in Zvolen and relevant photographs. In general, I approached the examined issues by analysing the available original materials and empirical research findings.

When examining this socialist city, which was affected by the invasion of the SA troops, who subsequently lived here for twenty years, I was inspired by the views of Ulf Hannerz. Based on the idea of Zygmunt Bauman (1992), he adopted and sketched a conception of a 'habitat of meaning'. Habitats, he noted at the time, can expand and contract, they are not necessarily particularly autonomous or clearly bounded, and they can be identified with either individuals or collectivities (Hannerz, 2010: 9). Political events and decisions, social and cultural phenomena affect places of meaning and thus several of them carry specific local (historical and contemporary) contents, but ultimately they reflect developmental changes. Similarly, Dagnosław Demski and Dominika Czarnecka also consider the transformations of specific (military and post-military) places, being of the opinion that they represent *de facto* multilayer 'cultural texts' which reflect the aims, values and ambitions of multiple generations. They represent the given relations of power, ideology, identity, the power of human (Demski, Czarnecka, 2015: 101).

August 1968

The Sixties in Czechoslovakia signified the start of the democratisation processes, the softening of the totalitarian regime, the activation of non-communist parties and the revival of cultural, social and religious life. The process of democratisation and political liberalisation was forcibly interrupted and stopped by the Warsaw Pact (WP) armies' invasion. On the night of August 20th 1968 the troops of five WP states – The Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, GDR, and Poland, crossed the borders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and began the occupation of the country.

Despite the appeals from the central committee of the Communist Party and the president Ludvík Svoboda for deliberation and circumspection, people started to gather in many places to protest against the military invasion and demand the departure of the foreign troops. The protests turned into active resistance with frequent retaliation by the WP soldiers. As a result of shootings and accidents, 16 people died in Slovakia on 21st and 22nd August 1968, with the death toll in the following months reaching 37 in total in Slovakia (108 in Czechoslovakia) with hundreds more serious injuries.⁷

6 The research group consisted of 23 respondents (14 women and 9 men, date of birth between 1930 and 1976). In their statements in the text I stated their gender and year of birth.

7 ÚPN – The Nation's Memory Institute. Available at: <https://www.21august1968.sk/sk/kalendarium/>.



Fig. 1: Zvolen - The Square of the Slovak National Uprising, The Soviet occupation armies, August 1968 (Negative-032540, The archive of the Forestry and Timber Museum in Zvolen)

In the morning of 22nd August 1968 Zvolen was occupied by the 30th Irkutsk-Pin motorised infantry guards division. It was followed by the Bulgarian 12th infantry regiment (Syrný, 2013: 200) and fighter planes landed at Sliach airport. Local residents expressed their disapproval by putting up signs and posters condemning the intervention and calling for the troops to leave. The unity of opinion on the arrival of troops and perception of the occupation was uniform among the general population and representatives of the city and district.

Representatives of the Communist Party District Committee and city officials took part in several negotiations with senior officers of the occupying forces (Soviet and Bulgarian non-commissioned officers.) The commanders complained about the hostility of the local people and they expressed surprise about it: *the immense resistance of the people towards the WP troops, who came to help with the counter-revolution, and in the event of the city official failing to restore order, their troops would assume responsibility for the maintaining order themselves.*⁸ They demanded to set up premises for the Soviet and Bulgarian military staff, command posts, the removal of anti-occupation slogans in the city, the coordination of the regional press and warned against the disruptive behaviour of young people. The talks were conducted under political intimidation by the commanding officers, who made no secret of the fact that they regularly sent reports to Moscow about the situation in the city. According to archival records, the city and district officials opposed the allegations and publicly

8 The State Archive Banská Bystrica, Zvolen branch, *The District national committee Zvolen, DNC Plenary* 1968.



Fig. 2: Zvolen – The Square of the Slovak National Uprising, August 1968 (Negative-032542, The archive of Forestry and Timber Museum in Zvolen)

thanked the residents of Zvolen: *Thanks to all the population for their conscious and disciplined behaviour, thanks to all our young people who carried the burden of the events, previously not encountered in their lives, very hard whilst managing to keep their composure.*⁹

The everyday life of Zvolen citizens was disrupted. The feelings of threat were also amplified by the fact that armed soldiers were moving freely in the city, using armed personnel vehicles and tanks as transport. *The city was suddenly different. Damaged roads, broken windows, destroyed fences. We could not believe it, that just could not be true. We felt very angry, unhappy and we were also afraid* (m. 1945).

The city's residents, amid the tense situation and growing uncertainty, formed long queues in front of shops trying to stock up on food. The situation was getting more complicated because the Soviet soldiers were buying up basic food items. The supply for the army (soldiers and equipment) was provided by air and rail transport from the USSR, but the logistics of transport was not adequately managed. Trains were arriving without a railway schedule thus blocking the railway network. On the morning of 26th August 1968 the Soviet cargo aircraft Antonov (An-12) en route to Sliač airport crashed into wooded hilly terrain near Pustý Hrad. The plane was carrying food supplies, which local residents took from the site of the accident.

⁹ The State Archive Banská Bystrica, Zvolen branch. *The District national committee Zvolen, DNC Plenary 1968.*

The billeting of SA soldiers in Zvolen

On 16th October 1968 in Prague, the Soviet and Czechoslovak government representatives signed The Agreement of conditions for the temporary stay of the Soviet troops in the territory of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. On that basis, the operational command of the SA central group was established. The treaty legalised the presence of the Soviet army and postponed their withdrawal indefinitely, which most of the society perceived as a political defeat and an act of submission (Černá, 2018: 400). The Czechoslovak side was supposed to provide the Soviet troops with accommodation and storage facilities, also to provide them with certain type of foods and fuel.

The 30th Irkutsk-Pin guard division was deployed in the territory of Slovakia. Its headquarters were located in Zvolen, which thus became one of the most important bases of the occupation troops. The motorised artillery guard division (63rd and 64th radio-engineering battalion, 11th medical battalion) were based in the city and the helicopter regiment at Sliach airport (VHÚ¹⁰; Purdek, 2012: 48). Given the military importance of the nearby airport and for the protection of the Soviet soldiers in Zvolen, a special department of the Committee for State Security (thereafter referred to as KGB) was situated in the city (Syrný, 2013: 201).

The political pressure exerted by the Soviet side after August 1968 took many forms and had many intermediaries. The political SA officers in the places of their deployment and selected command posts, significantly expanded their network of informants who submitted various reports to the centre and actively promoted Soviet policy directly within the territory of Czechoslovakia (Černá, 2018: 401).

Even as early as mid-August 1968 the local press was drawing attention to the movement of NKVD¹¹ agents and calling on citizens: *Avoid them! Do not give any information to people you do not know well. Do not degrade this nation by whistleblowing. Only unity can save us.*¹²

The reforms and strong emotions of democratisation efforts were replaced by disillusionment and moral devastation. The civil protests, under the influence of intimidation, persecution and sanctions by the new leadership of the Communist Party, entirely loyal to Moscow, began to weaken in Zvolen as well. One of the very few, was on 26th June 1969, when anti-Soviet feelings were manifested during the performance of the Georgian Song and Dance Ensemble (Memory Book, 1969: 21).

The citizens were surprised, shocked, traumatised and frustrated by this new situation. An era of normalisation followed, which reinforced the pro-Russian narrative. The official state rhetoric gradually started to call the military occupation of our sovereign state by the foreign army with euphemisms such as *the stay* or

10 VHÚ – The Military History Institute. Available at: <https://www.vhu.sk/6078-sk/vojenska-intervencia-v-auguste-1968/>.

11 The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

12 *Vpred, Zvolen*. The special issue of the free newspaper, 26th August 1968: 1.

presence of troops, or friendly assistance. Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship was to be forever and ever, and the appearance of brotherly love was being intensely promoted by ideological means. The abovementioned facts in the process of changes caused the individualisation of one's social memory a) through personal interpretations and experiences b) also through political representations widespread in society in a certain historical period. Political influence and the atmosphere of fear represent a powerful tool which alternatively interprets and construes the national memory and the social memory of an individual (Košťalová, 2017: 81). During heightened periods of fear people behaved and thought differently at home and in the family circle, to how they behaved at work and in the wider, public society, where they had to proclaim their officially expected identity (Košťalová, 2017; Profantová, 2012).

Družba [Friendship] – a housing estate

After arriving in Zvolen, soldiers slept on field beds in military tents. Even as early as in September 1968 the District National Council approved the report on the permanent occupation of Zvolen and the use of the airport and military facilities by members of foreign armies. For this purpose, the premises of the Yegorov's barracks, which until then had served the Czechoslovak People's Army were allotted. Despite the concerns, no orders were given to address the housing issues for Soviet soldiers at the end of 1968, apart from the barracks. However, by 1969 the construction of flats was already underway.¹³

A separate 'microcosm', the Družba housing estate was built for Soviet officers and their families in a suburb of Zvolen called Podborová. The first three twelve-storey blocks of flats were built here in 1969 – 1970. They were built according to the Soviet prototype project and the Soviet building regulations.¹⁴ The blocks and all material were transported directly from the USSR by rail. Even now these buildings are called *towers* in slang.

Simultaneously with the new flats on the housing estate being built, the construction of the Officers House complete with the Hall of Martial Traditions, a nursery and school, a gymnasium, a medical clinic and laundrette were built.

The construction of other flats on the Družba housing estate was provided by a local company Ground Constructions Zvolen. They were built according to the Slovak building regulations, using Slovak materials, and with help of the Soviet

13 Aleš Zapletal writes about political and organisational provision of accommodation for Soviet soldiers in his dissertation thesis on the example of Olomouc. Providing the accommodation for the soldiers in Olomouc barracks ended the temporary accommodation period and therefore the position of the soldiers changed. It changed from the non-scheduled and provisional presence to a planned and stable presence, although it was still being referred to as „a temporary stay“ (Zapletal, 2019: 18–19).

14 According to the engineers the *towers* did not meet the hygiene (bathrooms, toilets and kitchens) or the safety standards (the lifts) valid at the time in Czechoslovakia.



Fig. 3: Classroom decoration, Zvolen – Podborová (photo: K. Košťálová, 2022)

soldiers on the building sites. As the number of officers who arrived in Slovakia with their wives and children increased, building of flats also expanded. In addition to Družba housing estate, they also had flats on the square, near the freight railway station and in Lipovec housing estate (built at the end of the 1970s). They lived in the blocks of flats alongside the families of members of the Czechoslovak army. In total, in the Central Region the Soviet army had 2,010 flats in use, 288 of which had been funded and built by the Soviet army (Pecka, 1996: 155–158). However, it is not possible to determine how many families lived in these flats based just on the number of the flats. For instance, a four-room flat was occupied by two or three families with a shared kitchen, bathroom and toilet.

The housing estate gradually expanded, and in addition to the primary housing function, it also provided basic amenities. The Officers House was expanded to include premises for a restaurant, a confectioner, a bar and some shops. In 1977 Ground Constructions Zvolen completed a new primary and secondary school, and a dormitory with 315 beds (The Memory Book, 1977: 389). At the beginning of the 1980s, the Town National Committee in Zvolen approved a request for a building permit for a two-storey department store of the Soviet trade company Vojentorg.¹⁵ The Družba department store was unveiled on February 25, 1984 and the local people called it *Russian Tuzex*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Vojentorg – Soviet military trading company.

¹⁶ Tuzex (domestic export), was a chain of special lucrative shops that existed in socialist times. They sold foreign goods otherwise unavailable in Czechoslovakia, and also exported domestic products for foreign currency or for Tuzex vouchers called Bony. Because of this, the store was known amongst the people as “Družba Russian Tuzex”.

Local people's contacts with Soviet soldiers and their families

Members of the SA and their family members did not live and function in a social vacuum. Communication links between the majority and minority, although they cannot be generalised, depended on ambivalent specific relationships through political tasks, work tasks, and even 'business acquaintances' (Košťalová, 2015: 83).

The situation in places where the Soviet garrisons were stationed shows that since the summer of 1969, the open rejection of Soviet soldiers by city officials and citizens had certain consequences and led to punishment. Along the lines of the broadly understood '*fraternity*', the relevant authorities began to take the initiative in planning how to create contacts between Soviet soldiers, especially officers and local people. Many cultural and political celebrations, quizzes, competitions, demonstrations and ceremonial meetings of party representatives took place during the year and they culminated in the Month of Soviet-Czechoslovak Friendship. Also the Soviet soldiers were charged with a task to actively cooperate, to join the celebrations and through lectures, company evenings, and visits to schools, establish contacts with local residents (Černá, 2018). Many archival materials, for example from 1973, testify to the fact that the displays of friendship, with the aim of supporting the official policy, became regular in cultural and social events in the city:

*The Positive development in political consolidation is also demonstrated by the fact that we have no record of any conflicts during political events in the district – the celebrations of the 52nd anniversary of the GOSR [the Great October Socialist Revolution], the 100th anniversary of birth of V. I. Lenin were very dignified and cordial. Hundreds of festive gatherings, discussions with young people and cultural events took place in the district. The fact that the overwhelming majority of our citizens rightly understand our relationship with the Soviet Union was clearly manifested. The representatives of the Soviet troops contributed significantly to that, they participated in many events and were received warmly and sincerely everywhere.*¹⁷

Partnership gatherings were also organised in schools. For instance, Slovak teachers participated in the GOSR celebrations which were organised by the Soviet teachers and students, as well as in many meetings of Slovak and Soviet students.¹⁸

As a teacher of Russian language I went there to see an event a few times. The teachers who taught there were very happy that they could be in Slovakia. The selection for Slovakia was very strict. The event programme was a hundred percent prepared. The girls in school uniforms with large ribbons in their hair recited with such pathos that it all sounded very unnatural (w. 1938).

17 The State Archive Banská Bystrica, Zvolen branch, *The District national committee, DNC Plenary 1970*.

18 Forms of building children's positive relationship with the Soviet Union in the period of socialism was also written by Gubricová (2021).



Fig. 4: The Officers' House, Zvolen – Podborová (photo: K. Košťalová, 2006)

We had a joint disco with those Russians in the gym at our college. And they were smoking, just like that. We weren't allowed to smoke in front of the school, XY [the name of the college teacher] would immediately give us a mark 2 [bad mark] for behaviour. But they were smoking. And when we asked them, how it was possible that they could smoke, and whether they had any problems because of it, they said no. They said teachers couldn't give them mark 2 for behaviour because they had a communist upbringing and the communist education and mark 2 for behaviour were mutually exclusive (m. 1968).

The Officers' House was the place where cultural and political events took place. This was where high-ranking Soviet officers had their meetings, the children of Soviet soldiers took the pioneers' oath, and discussions, exhibitions and concerts also took place there. In the Officers' House the most popular singers and bands from Czechoslovakia, as well as artists from the USSR regularly performed, and Soviet soldiers from many different places were ferried to these performances. Slovak officials and soldiers, as well as local residents were invited to many events.

We met by chance with Nela. She was a former flight attendant and was in charge of the cinema here. She was beautiful, I guess that's why she got a job here. And I also

went to the Officers' House. There was a huge stage, where you could dance. That's where I saw Kostolányiová [Slovak singer] for the first time (m. 1931).

Relations in the Soviet army were based on the principle of total subordination. Due to access to the premises of the Soviet military garrisons being prohibited, we have little knowledge of the private life of the soldiers (Tomek, Pejčoch, 2015). The conscripted national service soldiers did not have the opportunity to move freely outside the garrison and their contact with local people was minimal. They rarely left the barracks, only when accompanying officers, as part of mass-organised political and cultural events, or helping as casual workers (for example, construction of blocks of flats, Zvolen outpatients clinic, etc.). Employees' assistance in factories represented an important form of the presented "friendship" (Zapletal, 2019). The initial anger with the invaders seemed to have turned into pity over the soldiers' bad condition and appearance (Vrzgulová, 2009: 373). Many statements of the respondents testify to the ambivalent attitude of the citizens to the soldiers.

They were friendly (...) They were selfless (...) They would have liked to be hosting (...) They were hard-working, they even built a playground near us (...) And then, where their service ended, poor souls, they had to move somewhere beyond Ural (...) But overall people did not like them here. They were not popular with the people. We cursed at them, of course, but nobody could say it loudly (w. 1945).

Local residents and also people from the wider area specially visited the Družba store – *Russian Tuzex*, whose goods satisfied even the most demanding consumer. It sold not only food, but also electrical appliances, clothes and footwear, sportswear, household goods, toys, carpets and toiletries. The scarce, good-quality and imported goods were on offer there, at the time not available in Slovak shops. Customers mainly bought leather shoes and boots, denim clothes, electrical and electronic equipment, various brands of beers and alcohol (mainly cognac) and Russian chocolate confectionery. Shoes and clothes were on the first floor and when the new goods arrived, such as Italian-made shoes, a long queue of customers formed. The fact that the store for Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia, where even the basic grocery products were missing, was so well stocked, seems absurd from the current evaluation viewpoint of the respondents (Košťalová, 2015).

They had beautiful boots made in Italy, leather shoes, sport jackets and also bananas there. When the goods arrived, we used to go there. Even though they glared at us, they still served us (w. 1952).

I went there several times with my parents. But thinking about it now, it was turned on its head. How was it even possible that in an ordinary shop in the centre, in Slovakia, a mother was not able to get hold of oranges and bananas, but the shop which was not even supposed to be there, had it all? (w. 1966).

The housing estate Družba was a transient, temporary place, which went against any historic continuity. Despite the political propaganda, some local citizens were not able to come to terms with Soviet soldiers' existence in the city. They tried not to see them, and the places where Soviet soldiers existed were considered non-existent places. We can perceive this attitude as a silent revolt, as an attempt to erase a negative event from memory, and as an internal defence mechanism. This is also why it was not customary for the local citizens to walk, play or cycle in the Družba housing estate. These specifics of Zvolen can be viewed as "a city-within-a-city" model, while the boundaries between them were in the level of mental perception.

My parents were religious. My father in particular was unhappy about it. He never came to terms with it. And although we watched the Russians through the windows, we weren't allowed to talk about them. As if they did not exist. If I had said that I had played with or talked to a Russian girl, he would have been very angry (w. 1966).

I did not want them to be here. I guess, that's why I don't know anything about them. Their store was not very far from here, but I never went there (w. 1943).

The SA soldiers sought out and tried to establish unofficial contacts with local residents that provided opportunities for illegal trade. The purchase of cheap petrol, oil and spare parts for Soviet-made vehicles, as well as building materials, illegally transported from the premises of military garrisons, was extremely popular. In addition, the soldiers brought goods from the USSR, which were scarce or unavailable in shops in Czechoslovakia. They were mostly colour TVs, radios, record players, cameras, vacuum cleaners and pianos, etc. The unavailability of these commodities and opportunities to purchase them at favourable prices made them tempting for unofficial contacts to be made which ceased once a transaction was completed (Černá, 2021; Tomek, 2018). Soviet soldiers traded most intensively when their service was coming to an end and they were returning home, especially during the period when it was clear that their final removal was guaranteed by political agreements. At that time, they also tried to sell home furnishings – tiles, wash basins, door handles, refrigerators, as well as varied military supplies (equipment, petrol, even clothes).

The limited period of their stay in Czechoslovakia did not contribute to the creation of mutual trust and informal relationships. They came for a set period of time, usually three to five years. Family members did not form more personal emotional attachment with the new environment, city or the local people. According to Czech historians (Tomek, 2018; Tomek, Pejčoch, 2015) it is thus possible, at least in part, to explain their inconsiderate behaviour, indifference towards the environment and natural resources, and the disrespect for the manners and rules of coexistence, which the Soviet soldiers did not adopt, and often were not even aware of. The residents who shared blocks of flats with them complained about their non-compliance with hygiene standards, lack of interest in the technical state of the flats, and so on.

The political and state authorities consistently covered up violations of the law by Soviet soldiers from the public. They were minor criminal offences, mostly fighting when drunk, and theft. Traffic road accidents and in particular extensive environmental pollution were among the most frequent violations of the law (Černá, 2021; Tomek, Pejčoch 2015). Zvolen, Sliač and the surrounding areas suffered from extensive pollution, in some places 100 times more than the set limit (contaminated soil, ground waters, levels of heavy metals). Helicopters constantly flew over the city, even in the evening and at night, which increased lead pollution in the area. Soviet soldiers took no notice of the air space boundaries and the specified flying hours.

Remediation works to remove the ecological damage began to be addressed only after their departure. The last of the Soviet soldiers left Sliač airport in the autumn of 1990.

Conclusion

The slang expressions *Russians at Podborová, towers, Russian Tuzex, Yegorov's barracks* give an account of the historical situation, the plurality of places and time, power and political structure, political negotiations and the system that was unjust, restricted and subordinate to the Soviet Union. Intervention, occupation or the euphemism 'friendly assistance' impacted on the development of Czechoslovakia and had an effect on the fate of many of its citizens. The above-mentioned slang expressions also tell a story of activities, relationships, atmosphere, and the specific environment that had a special function and was used in a specific way at a certain time. Taking inspiration from Ulf Hannerz (2010), we can perceive them as 'habitats of meanings', which are attributed with various interpretations and contents related to their experiences and stories, in which physical, mental and communication space, and communication events intermingle. The people perceived and interpreted the presence of Soviet troops differently. The space inhabited by the soldiers and their families was invisible for some citizens in the sense of deliberate oversight, for some it was a silent acceptance, and a certain group accepted their presence for their own benefit.¹⁹

Based on the information database, we can perceive the presence of the SA soldiers and their family members in Zvolen through:

- socio-spatial structure of the city:
 - the housing estate Družba at Podborová, a complex of residential buildings with amenities, flats on the square, next to the freight train station and in the suburb of Lipovec;
 - Yegorov's barracks (for soldiers undertaking national military service and non-commissioned officers);

¹⁹ For more details, for example Černá, 2015; Zeman, Tížik, 2016.

- the presence of military vehicles and ecological damage:
 - frequent and heavy traffic of military trucks, military jeeps, ambulances and other special vehicles;
 - frequent aircraft flyovers and flight simulation exercises;
 - strain on the environment;
- ideological propaganda and cultural-political events:
 - the KGB operation and its control activities;
 - anniversary and personalities' celebrations, quizzes, political lectures;
- work contacts;
- illegal business activities, illicit trade in scarce or illegally obtained goods;
- random meetings in public spaces;
- traffic offences and increased varied criminal activity;
- personal traumas, misfortunes and vice versa, as well as work promotions of a particular group of people.

Local 'habitats of meaning' in the cities of Central and Eastern Europe often had to engage with dramatic changes in the political, social and cultural environment. Urban landscapes accumulated traces of these shifts. Although there have also been varied attempts in different periods to preserve, or to obliterate, or to restore particular pasts (Hannerz, 2010: 9). Dramatic transformations were not only related to the establishment and functioning of Soviet military bases, which shaped the local landscape and affected people's lives, but were also related to the departure of the troops (Seljamaa, Czarnecka, Demski, 2017). After the departure of the Soviet soldiers, the places of their operation were left in a desolate state.²⁰ The soldiers destroyed and looted almost everything. Revitalisation processes are time-consuming and also depend on current processes and investments. And thus, when thinking about a socialist city, we can also pose the questions such as how does the socialist past affect the 21st century, what do we preserve, revitalise or level out and why and how the citizens and cities themselves feel about the heritage?

References

- Bauman, Z. (1992). *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Bužeková, T., Grauzelová, T. (2016). Lokálne dejiny: rok 1968 v interpretáciách politických zmien v rurálnom prostredí. In: M. Tížik, N. Kmeť (Eds.), *Príliš ľudská tvár socializmu? Reforma zdola a okolnosti reformného procesu v Československu 1968* (pp. 492–531). Bratislava: Sociologický ústav SAV.
- Černá, M. (2015). Okupace, přátelská pomoc, devastace. Sovětská armáda 1968–1991 v paměti české společnosti. *Soudobé dějiny*, 22(3–4), 440–464. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v. v. i.

20 For more details, for example Košťálová, 2015; Tomek, Pejčoch, 2015.

- Černá, M. (2018). „Ten boj si musíte vybojovať sami“. Politická role Sovětské armády a jejích místních spojenců v „normalizaci“ Československa (1968–1969). *Soudobé dějiny*, 25(3–4), 400–432.
- Černá, M. (2021). *Sovětská armáda a česká společnost 1968–1991*. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v. v. i. a Univerzita Karlova, Nakladatelství Karolinum.
- Demski, D., Czarnecka, D. (2015): Mapping meanings in the post-Soviet landscape of Borne Sulinowo. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, 95(2), 96–109. Available at: <https://www.vhu.sk/6078-sk/vojenska-intervencia-v-auguste-1968/> (accessed May 19, 2023).
- Ferenčuhová, S. (2011). *Meno, mesto, vec. Urbánne plánovanie v sociológii mesta a prípad (post)socialistického Brna*. Brno: MUNI Press.
- Gubricová, J. (2021). Forming Pupil's Positive Relationship to the Soviet Union in the Period of Socialism in Czechoslovakia Through the Lens of Chronicles. *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology*, 69(2), 236–254. <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2021-0013>
- Hannerz, U. (2010). The World and the City since the Iron Curtain: Changing Habitats of Meaning. In: A. Bitušiková, D. Luther (Eds.), *Cultural and Social Diversity in Slovakia. III. Global and Local in a Contemporary City* (pp. 8–16). Banská Bystrica: Inštitút sociálnych a kultúrnych štúdií FHV, Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici, Bratislava: Ústav etnológie SAV.
- Košťalová, K. (2015). Hlavné aspekty transformácie sídliska. Sídlisko Zvolen – Podborová. In: J. Darulová (Ed.), *Kultúrna a sociálna diverzita na Slovensku V., Občania a priestory mesta* (pp. 69–94). Banská Bystrica: Belianum – Vydavateľstvo Univerzity Mateja Bela.
- Košťalová, K. (2017). Mesto – ľudia – trauma: „Dočasný“ pobyt sovietskych vojakov v malom meste. In: B. Soukupová, R. G. Węclawowicz (Eds.), *Národy – města – lidé – traumata: urbánní studie* (pp. 79–88). Praha: Karlova univerzita, Fakulta humanitních studií UK.
- Matlovič, R. (2004). Tranzitívna podoba mesta a jeho intraurbánnych štruktúr v ére postkomunistickej transformácie a globalizácie. *Sociológia*, 36(2), 137–148.
- Mulíček, O. (2009). Prostorové vzorce postindustriálního Brna. In: S. Ferencuhová, M. Hledíková, L. Galčanová, B. Vacková (Eds.), *Město: Proměnlivá ne/samozřejmost'* (pp. 153–175). Brno: Pavel Mervart & Masarykova univerzita.
- Musil, J. (2001). Vývoj a plánování měst ve střední Evropě v období komunistických režimů. Pohled historické sociologie. *Sociologický časopis*, 37(3), 275–296.
- Musil, J. (2002). Urbanizace českých zemí a socialismus. In: P. Horská, E. Maur, J. Musil (Eds.), *Zrod velkoměsta: urbanizace českých zemí a Evropa* (p. 237–297). Praha: Paseka.
- Pecka, J. (1996). *Odsun sovětských vojsk z Československa 1989–1991: Dokumenty*. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR.
- Profantová, Z. (2012). Žili sme v socializme. Slová na úvod. In: Z. Profantová (Ed.) a kol., *Žili sme v socializme I. Kapitoly z etnológie každodennosti* (pp. 5–41). Bratislava: Ústav etnológie SAV.
- Purdek, I. (2012). Vývoj Československej armády po druhej svetovej vojne, vznik a vývoj Armády Slovenskej republiky. *Vojenská osвета*, 9(2), 41–76.
- Seljamaa, E. H., Czarnecka, D., Demski, D. (2017). “Small Places, Large Issues”: Between Military Space and Post-Military Place, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 70, 7–8. Available at: <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol70/index.html> (accessed May 19, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2017.70.introduction>.
- Syrný, M. (2013). Z povojnových dejín mesta. In: J. Bebej, P. Maliniak, S. Čatayová (Eds.), *Monografia mesta Zvolen* (pp. 197–206). Zvolen: Mesto Zvolen.

- Tomek, P. (2018). Sovětská základna uprostřed Čech. Milovice v době sovětské vojenské přítomnosti na území Československa (1968–1971). *Soudobé dějiny*, 25(3–4), 433–487.
- Tomek, P., Pejčoch, I. (2015). *Černá kniha sovětské okupace. Sovětská armáda v Československu a její oběti 1968–1991*. Cheb: Svět křídel.
- Vrzgulová, M. (2009). Mesto v spomienkach jednej vekovej skupiny. Mládež v Trenčíne v 60. rokoch 20. storočia. In: M. Ferencová, J. Nosková (Eds.), *Paměť města. Obraz města, veřejné komemorace a historické zlomy v 19.–21. století* (pp. 359–378). Brno: Etnologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky, v. v. i., pracoviště Brno, Statutární město Brno – Archiv města Brna.
- Zapletal, A. (2019). *Lidé v obsazeném městě. Olomouc, Olomoučané a sovětská posádka. Disertační práce*. Available at: https://theses.cz/id/6uknqr/Disertacni_prace_Zapletal_Ales.pdf?zpet=%2Fvyhledavani%2F%3Fsearch%3Dtomek%26start%3D12 (accessed May 18, 2023).
- Zarecor, E. K. (2018). The Socialist City as a Distinct Urban Typology in Postwar Europe / Socialistické město v poválečné Evropě jako urbánní typ(ologie). *Dějiny-teorie-kritika*, 15(2), 231–245.
- Zeman, M., Tížik, M. (2016). Pohľad na udalosti roku 1968 po polstoročí. In: M. Tížik, N. Kmeť (Eds.), *Príliš ľudská tvár socializmu? Reforma zdola a okolnosti reformného procesu v Československu 1968* (pp. 532–583). Bratislava: Sociologický ústav SAV.

Internet sources

- ÚPN – The Nation's Memory Institute [Ústav pamäti národa]. *Kalendárium*. Available at: <https://www.21august1968.sk/sk/kalendarium/> (accessed July 1, 2022).
- VHÚ – The Military History Institute [Vojenský historický ústav]. *Vojenská intervencia v auguste 1968*. Available at: <https://www.vhu.sk/6078-sk/vojenska-intervencia-v-auguste-1968/> (accessed June 28, 2022).

Archive funds

- Memory Book – The Town National Committee Zvolen, 1969. [Pamätná kniha MsNV Zvolen, 1969].
- Memory Book – The Town National Committee Zvolen, 1977. [Pamätná kniha MsNV Zvolen, 1977].
- State Archive Banská Bystrica, branch Zvolen, *The District national committee Zvolen, DNC Plenary 1968* [Štátny archív Banská Bystrica, pobočka Zvolen. Okresný národný výbor, Plénum ONV 1968].
- State Archive Banská Bystrica, branch Zvolen, *The District national committee Zvolen, DNC Plenary 1970* [Štátny archív Banská Bystrica, pobočka Zvolen. Okresný národný výbor, Plénum ONV 1970].
- Vpred, Zvolen*. The special issue of the free newspaper. (26th August 1968), p. 1. [Vpred, Zvolen. Mimoriadne číslo slobodných novín].

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATARÍNA KOŠTIALOVÁ (ORCID: 0000-0002-3573-9353) – graduated in ethnology and received a PhD. at the Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. Since 2000, she has worked as a researcher at Matej Bel University (UMB) in

Banská Bystrica. She currently works as a university teacher at the Department of Social Studies and Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts at UMB. She is the author of many domestic and foreign publications focusing on urban anthropology, especially post-socialist social and cultural changes in the urban environment, social and cultural diversity and cultural heritage. She has taken part in several international projects of European framework programmes; projects financed from European structural funds (especially 5RP, 6RP, 7RP, Horizon 2020); and several domestic research projects.