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Hana Cervinkova’s ethnographic portrait of the Czech military in its “post-socialist” moment is a fascinating contribution to the literature on post-communist transitions. Not merely concerned with the provision of several anthropological descriptions of disappearing cultures, such as the obsolescent enlisted ranks and Air Force technicians expert in the mechanics of moth-balled Soviet aircraft, Cervinkova is determined to link the military’s post-socialist story to the Czech state’s own fortunes in the post-cold war world. Her use of interdisciplinary perspectives, blending the key precepts of civil-military relations with cultural anthropology effectively result in rich characterizations of the political-military-societal relationships. These play out against the backdrop of a Czech national psyche necessarily affected by its past history of subordination and victimization under foreign rule.

Political scientists engaged in the study of post-communist transitions, myself included, search for frameworks of explanatory factors seeking to understand both the process and progress of systemic change from communist state control to democratic political control. We have also focused on professionalization, more accurately stated as “re-professionalization” of Warsaw Pact military professionals to meet the demands of service in NATO. These analyses may attribute some role for culture, but often cultural factors are absent. Cervinkova puts culture at the center of her analysis as the crucial component for understanding the paradoxes associated with the Czech Republic’s post-socialist military transition.
Key to her approach is the anthropological concept of liminality which describes persons or groups passing from one state to another. Liminal entities in such transitional periods are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between” (p. 3). Cervinkova portrays the Czech military in transition as such a liminal entity affected by both the unsettlement of the old norms that ruled society and politics under socialism and the constitution of a new social and political order. Her analyses are steeped in discussions of identity – professional, institutional, and national with an eye toward highlighting the identity shifts occurring in the post-socialist moment.

With such concepts in hand the reader can grasp the complexities involved with the Czech Republic assuming its position among the western democratic states of Europe, particularly via its military to which fell the task of gaining entry into NATO. While NATO entry was achieved in 1999, compliance with NATO standards continues to elude the Czech military to this day. Cervinkova’s work helps to explain the underlying forces at work. There is the challenge of pre-existing strategic culture which valued conscription as a civic duty, elevated the military officer over his civilian counterpart in terms of social and economic benefits, and was inextricably linked to Russia in terms of the language, technology, and doctrine of its arms. Many elements of the pre-existing strategic culture continue to hold sway in the post-socialist reality presenting serious obstacles to what Cervinkova describes as the “fantasy of professionalization” (p. 8).

Yet professionalization is the linchpin of reform, the “anti-corrosive” that can stem the rusting of the Czech military and by extension the Czech state itself. Dependent on acquiring top-level technology and the provision of quality and relevant training to volunteer practitioners, professionalization also requires a cadre of professionals committed to achieving its goals. Cervinkova’s interview subjects did not seem to fill that bill. She introduces us to “David”, a young Czech officer selected for English language and military training in the United States only to be notified that his position had been eliminated while he was training abroad. There are many “Davids” weary of reforms that never come to fruition promulgated by a bureaucracy and military leadership chronically resistant to change. We meet the older officers who came to age in the Soviet period mainly concerned with hanging on to their positions in an era of downsizing and professionalization. “Through their inability to adapt to the many changes in the military profession – to become different professionals – they are an obstacle” ... toward the bright future (p. 28) The portrait compiled from Cervinkova’s 16 months in the field is an ethnographic snapshot from February 2001-June 2002 of a military institution burdened by its historically negative relationship with its society and state thrust into a transformed strategic environment and democratizing political system. Neglected by the state and shackled with the national cultural legacy of the Good Soldier Švejk, the Czech military has nevertheless assumed increasing importance as a political tool of the Czech state through its military reform and has emerged as a player within NATO.

Cervinkova’s book provides an important and often missing dimension to the post-communist transitional literature. Her story is both personal and professional as she applies her Czech upbringing and her US-acquired anthropological training to her subjects. The result is a rich reminder to observers and participants of the post-socialist transitions that the new order never completely replaces the old and that which remains is the crucial explanatory factor needed to fully understand the present moment.
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