

The Silence of the Occupied in Czech Literature, 1940-46¹

The use of silence to characterize the dominant response of the occupied to German occupation during the Second World War, which recurs throughout Europe, stands out in Czech literature. Its prominence there perhaps derives from the instructions given in the radio broadcast at 7am on March 15th 1939, announcing the German occupation: “We appeal to you to realize that the Czech nation would be destroyed by any untoward acts motivated by feelings of pain and revolt. There is only one salvation for our nation. Be silent and go about your work.”² This study traces the varying interpretations of this silence in more and less familiar texts written and published during and immediately after the war. It shows how more ambiguous interpretations were quickly marginalized in favour of those accounts that unequivocally presented silence as resistance, which remain the best-known and studied texts from this period. Simplifying the meaning of the silence of the occupied proves central to the establishment of a preferred narrative of the Occupation, a process scarcely unique to the Czechs, driven by what Tony Judt terms the “distrust of short-term memory, the search for serviceable myths of anti-Fascism”, the “collective amnesia” that “in its positive form [...]

¹ My thanks to Robert Pynsent for his suggestions throughout the writing of this article, and to various colleagues and peer reviewers for advice that has immensely improved it.

² Quoted in Vojta Beneš, *Ten Million Prisoners (Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia)*, trans. Roderick A. Ginsburg (Chicago, 1940), 24. This account, by the elder brother of President Edvard Beneš, was one of the earliest published about the period from December 1938 to June 1939, and came out in Czech in 1947 as *Žalář milionů*. What remained of pre-war Czechoslovakia following the Munich Agreement (September 30, 1938) and Vienna Arbitration (November 2, 1938) broke up after autonomous Slovakia declared independence on March 14, 1939. Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia on March 15, 1939, establishing the Protectorate the next day. The Occupation ended with the Prague Uprising (May 5-9, 1945) and the arrival of Soviet troops in Prague, a day after Germany's surrender. President Beneš resigned and left Czechoslovakia for Britain in October 1938. In November 1938, Emil Hácha became president of rump Czechoslovakia and in March 1939 president of the Protectorate. Beneš's national liberation committee in London was formally recognized as the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in 1941. He returned as president during the liberation and restoration of Czechoslovakia in April 1945.

facilitated national recovery.”³ The narrowing range of possible interpretations of silence, however, amounts to an abandonment of documentary objectivity and plurality in favour of unifying mythology consonant with the political direction taken by Czechoslovakia after the liberation. This study recalls the forgotten range of possible interpretations of the silence of the occupied available to Czechs in 1945, while offering a method and point of comparison for those revisiting similar national contexts in the short period before familiar narratives became embedded.

The silence of the occupied in wartime writing

Studies of silence and the Second World War commonly focus on the post-war silence about what happened, the individual, collective or institutional inability or unwillingness to speak about the experience, whether that means recalling atrocities witnessed or survived or acknowledging the extent of complicity and collaboration with the enemy. For example, *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* examines how societies construct silences to “enable men and women to survive and make sense of the catastrophic consequences of armed conflict.”⁴ The title of Ernestine Schlant’s study of the treatment of the Shoah in West German literature, *The Language of Silence*, refers above all to “silence about the Holocaust,” and how “the enormity of these crimes and their legacy have become part of German self-understanding” over several decades.⁵ Here, however, I examine the portrayal of a

³ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York, 2005), 61.

⁴ Efrat Ben-Ze’ev et al., eds, *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010), i.

⁵ Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust* (New York, London, 1999), 2, 7. Her title recalls that of the psychologist Dan Bar-On’s interviews with children of perpetrators of the Shoah, where silence refers to the parents’ unwillingness to discuss their actions and motivations. See Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Mass., London, 1989).

less discussed, earlier silence, silence as a response to occupation, as it is presented in Czech works written at the time.⁶

The interpretation of the silence of the occupied as an expression of resistance is most familiar from the French context. In the paradigmatic occupation text *Le Silence de la Mer* (1942) by Vercors (Jean Bruller [1902-91]), the billeting of a German officer with a French uncle and niece serves as a metaphor for the occupation of France; while he tries to be friendly, the uncle and niece refuse to speak to him.⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) alludes to the story in his September 1944 essay “La République du silence,” in which he emphasizes that silence was imposed by the Germans: “Since the Nazi venom was sliding deep into our minds, every true thought was a victory; since an all-powerful police sought to compel us to be silent, each word became precious as a declaration of principle; since we were being hounded, each of our gestures had the weight of a commitment.”⁸ Though Sartre privileges the silence of Resistance members who did not betray their comrades, even under torture, he extends membership of his “republic of silence” to all French people who “for four years said no.”⁹ This straightforward interpretation of the silence of the occupied facilitates the emergence of a dominant narrative about “nations of resisters,” preventing a more complex discussion of the range of responses to

⁶ Like their German counterparts in this period, these works are noticeably silent about the experience of Jews, which, by contrast, dominates the moderately revisionist wave of Czech writing about the war in the late 1950s and 1960s, as in German and other European literature. At most, the texts discussed here reflect Pynsent’s assertion that ‘for Czech Gentiles the persecution of the Jews was part of general German infamy’ (Robert B.Pynsent, “Conclusory Essay: Activists, Jews, the Little Czech Man, and Germans,” *Central Europe* 5, no.2 [2007], 260.)

⁷ With the 1942 second edition of the story, the French exile government in London launched a series entitled *Les Cahiers du Silence*, where silence is clearly a synonym for resistance.

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, “La République du silence” in his *Situations III* (Paris, 1949), 11

⁹ *Ibid.*

occupation, their meaning and impact. Luz Patricia Rivera Lynch highlights this problematic aspect of the uncle and niece's silence in *Le Silence de la mer*:

The silence in this novel is not only an attitude assumed in the face of the enemy; it reigns as much between the uncle and the niece, since implicitly they have always refused to admit the presence among them of this undesirable guest [...] Indeed, even when he has definitively left the house, silence reigns between the uncle and niece, as though nothing has happened.¹⁰

Le silence de la mer was published in Czech translation in 1945, but the motif of silence appears independently much earlier in Czech works about the period. Chad Bryant cites possibly the first example, the poem "Mlčící národ" (The silent nation), published in the underground newspaper, *V boj*, in December 1939, which presents silence as resistance, "a powerful weapon as explosive as a large grenade."¹¹ According to Hana Benešová, President Beneš's wife, *J sme němí?* (Are we mute?, 1946), a cycle of short patriotic poems by the otherwise unknown Marie Pissingerová, landed on her desk in London from occupied Prague in late 1940. This study centres on *Mlčení* (Silence[s]) by Josef Horal (the pseudonym of Josef Chmelař [1885-1969]), published in September 1945 and considered the first novel about the Czech experience of occupation.¹² The title may be read as singular or plural, reflecting the encyclopaedic range of interpretations of the silences of the occupied in the novel, which contrasts with the unequivocal presentation of silence as resistance in the canonical short-story

¹⁰ Luz Patricia Rivera Lynch, "Le Silence de la mer de Vercors, ou Le Manifeste de la resistance," 54-55. Dated 1993. Accessed December 16, 2021. <http://www.politproductions.com/content/le-silence-de-la-mer-ou-le-manifeste-de-la-r%C3%A9sistance>.

¹¹ Bryant, *Prague in Black*, 89.

¹² See, for example, Boh[umil] Milčan, 'Okupace v dokumentech a románě', *Svobodné slovo*, December 29 1945, 2, and Karel Sezima, *Z mého života III* (Prague, 1946), 211.

cycle *Němá barikáda* (The mute barricade, 1946) by Jan Drda (1915-70), the title story of which was first published in the Social Democrat weekly *Svět práce* in July 1945. In this study, I shall use the spectrum from Horal to Drda to map the narrowing meanings of the silence of occupied Czechs in the earliest accounts of the Occupation. This silence also features in *Bili nás pruty železnými* (They beat us with rods of iron, 1945) by Ladislav Narcis Zvěřina (1891-1980), an instantly popular collection of stories about German violence based on eye-witness and newspaper reports, and in journalistic literature, like the accounts of the Occupation in Brno by the leading inter-war journalist and novelist, Bedřich Golombek (1901-61) (*Co nebude v dějepise* [What will not be in the history books, 1945]), and the novelist and First World War veteran, Čestmír Jeřábek (1893-1981) (the wartime diary *V zajetí Antikristově* [In the thrall of the Antichrist, dated 1945 but according to the publisher's archives not actually published until early 1946]).¹³ Its most heroic form – silence in the face of torture – is highlighted in the subtitle of the 1946 anthology *Výkřik mlčení: Svědectví o němém hrdinství* (The cry of silence: Testimony about mute heroism) collated by Vladimír Thiele (1921-97) to honour Vladimír Tůma (1897-1945), a member of the resistance killed in German custody in Prague, which begins with the poetic tribute “Mlčel” (He was silent) by František Halas (1901-49). This silence is quintessentially associated for Czechs with *Reportáž, psaná na oprátce* (Report from the Gallows, 1945, in complete form, 1995) by the Communist journalist, Julius Fučík (1903-43), a last testament written between March and April 1943 while in Gestapo imprisonment.

Interpreting silence

¹³ My thanks to Josef Urban at the Historical Archive of the Olomouc Regional Museum for finding the correspondence between Jeřábek and his publisher about the diary, the manuscript of which was submitted in early June 1945 to beat the rush, but fell victim to production delays, much to the author's frustration.

For Horal, the meaning of the silence of the occupied varies and is often uncertain; frequently the narrator, instead of firmly defining a particular silence, asks rhetorical questions about its possible meanings. Horal's approach reflects that, as anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists repeatedly argue, the key to silence as a response to aggression is its openness to multiple interpretations. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb writes:

the power of silence resides in its inherent ambiguity, and its ambiguity stems from its universal acceptance as a form of withholding, hence as a kind of absence and, simultaneously, the understanding that such withholding or absence exists only in the ear of the listeners [...] who willingly or wilfully ignore or veil the pregnant presence encompassed by each instance of silence. Perhaps that is why silence is so slippery a concept.¹⁴

Roland Barthes presents silence as an example of "the Neutral," defined as "all that frustrates [d  joue] the paradigm [understood as] the opposition of two terms, of which I actualize one."¹⁵

For Barthes, the Neutral seeks to neutralize the power of the other to force a choice and thereby preserve all the possibilities of meaning; in the specific context of silence, he asserts the value of the implicit as a "polyvalent weapon."¹⁶

Barthes, however, notes that we struggle to live with the inherent ambiguity of silence: "what is produced against signs, outside signs, what is produced expressly not to be a sign is very quickly recuperated as a sign."¹⁷ Several reviewers of *ml  en  * rejected its balanced

¹⁴ Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb, "Silence as the Currency of Power" in *Silence as the Currency of Power*, ed. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb (New York, Oxford, 2006), 2.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: Cours au Coll  ge de France (1977-78)* (Tours, 2002), 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

approach in favour of a definitive vision. One reviewer of *Mlčení*, writing in the Communist Party youth newspaper in 1946, comments: “Czech literature is suffering at this point from a chronic case of chronicling and “reportaging” [...] Let us, however, label all this as an experimental, preparatory period, from which a timeless, formally definitive body of work should eventually emerge.”¹⁸ Another notes: “where we would like the author to break through the tissue of “reality” and mould the fleeting moments of human action into shape, we find description, commentary, documentary.”¹⁹

Given the prevalence of the motif of silence in Czech writing about the Occupation, recuperating its meaning became a crucial aspect of literary efforts to establish a national narrative. In *The Language of War*, James Dawes writes: “Wars are born and sustained in rivers of language about what it means to serve the cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity; and they are reintegrated into a collective historical self-understanding through a ritualistic overplus of the language of commemoration.”²⁰ For the Czechs in 1945, however, that reintegration centred on an experience not of the front, but of occupation, where what it means to “serve the cause” proves more complex and the more pertinent question was how to live with dignity. As Judt writes, “most of occupied Europe either collaborated with the occupying forces (a minority) or accepted with resignation and equanimity the presence and activities of the German forces (a majority).”²¹ The creation of a Czech narrative was further complicated because:

¹⁸ Rr, “Románový pokus o válečnou tematiku,” *Mladá fronta*, April 18, 1946, 4.

¹⁹ ah, “Pohled nazpět,” 3.

²⁰ James Dawes, *The Language of War* (Cambridge, Mass., London, 2002), 14-15.

²¹ Tony Judt, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe,” in *The Politics of Retribution: World War II and Its Aftermath*, eds István Deák et al. (Princeton, 2009), 295.

Some places had quite a “good” war, at least until the very last months. Bohemia and Moravia, for example, did relatively well under Nazism, favoured for their natural and industrial resources, their skilled and pliant workforce, and their proximity in manner and outlook (if not race) to their German neighbours. Most Czech workers and peasants were coddled by the Germans, securing high wages, full employment, good rations and so forth; only resisters, Communists and Jews, here as elsewhere, were seriously at risk and exposed to the constant threat of harassment, loss, and deportation.²²

In September 1945, the popular writer Eduard Bass (1888-1946) compared the dominant response of the Czech occupied to the cautious, but for him incomparably effective style of the footballer Josef Bican:

There are terribly few of those who – here at home – hurled themselves at the enemy, fearing neither concentration camp nor guillotine. But everyone, intellectuals and ordinary folk, played a different game; they held their positions, dodged the blows, saved their strength and were ready to go forward at the right moment. Whether they like it or not, when danger threatened, they played like Bican.²³

As Bass anticipates, this unheroic image, often represented as silence, proved insufficient. Christiane Brenner summarizes the view of the historian Vladimír Klecanda (1888-1946) that the senior figures returning from exile in London or Moscow had ‘no real understanding of the suffering and dangers faced daily by people living under German occupation. Far from the motherland, fixed, overstretched concepts of collaboration and

²² Ibid., p.294. For a recent account of the Czech experience of occupation, see Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), esp.66-103, 179-207.

²³ Eduard Bass, ‘Bican, Švejk a kočičí fenomén’ in his *Kázáníčka* (Prague, 1946), 232.

resistance were established that had no basis in daily Protectorate life.’²⁴ Alongside the promotion of an uplifting narrative to unify the population and drive recovery, the notion of a ‘nation of resisters’ was increasingly exploited, especially by Communist sympathizers, to exclude people and perspectives.²⁵ In this context, Horal’s measured approach recalled the vacillation and weakness of the late 1930s, while Drda’s clarity radiates strength. Writing in 1960, Jan Petrmichl argued that Drda’s stories “through their apotheosis of everyday heroic action free our fiction from the remnants of Protectorate passivity, despair and self-flagellation.”²⁶

Mlčení: Documenting silences

Mlčení was not, however, a mere staging-post, but a distinct method of portraying the Occupation, a defence of balance and objectivity that accords with Chmelař’s inter-war background as a senior Foreign Office civil servant, whose accounts of First Republic minorities policy and domestic politics were translated internationally. During the early months of the Protectorate, when he worked in the press section of the Presidium of the Ministerial Council, he had intimate knowledge of the matters about which Czech writers had to be silent. Assessing Czech literature in the period, he asserts:

the Czech writer had to avoid what was currently going on in public life and give up in advance the task of expressing the thoughts and feelings of the Czech people during the Occupation. He had to pass over questions of their relationship to the Czech past and

²⁴ Christiane Brenner, *Mezi Východem a Západem*, trans. Blanka Pscheidtová (Prague, 2015), 124.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ Quoted in *Malá knížka o Němé barikádě*, ed. Jaroslava Janáčková (Prague, 1988), 53.

present and close his eyes and ears to everything that the military and police power of the Nazi empire visited on the Czech nation and Europe.²⁷

He writes *MIČENÍ* as a chronicle of these points. In 1946, František Buriánek commented: “*MIČENÍ* with rare authenticity reproduces the thinking and feelings [of the earlier period of the occupation], the reactions and assessments of that time, and reminds us of what we already often forget or what some now interpret differently, guided by today’s victorious perspective.”²⁸ Horal uses the professional and personal connections of a fictional middle-class family, the Martineks (*sic*), to create a panoramic account of different aspects of economic, social and private life in occupied Prague. The novel mirrors the project devised by the family’s second son, Vláďa, like Chmelař a civil servant in the press and publishing section of the Foreign Ministry, as a way of not staying silent while staying silent:

A documentary study that lays bare in all its brutality what the Reich Protectorate of the Bohemian crownlands looks like. All the atrocities of Gestapo rule [...] How a Czech sees and feels it in daily life. How he tries to defend against it. Facts about which the Protectorate Government must be silent, which the so-called Czech press has to cover up with phrases from the Nazi propaganda armoury, but which fall like drops of boiling oil on the heart of the ordinary Czech and arouse his hatred. Let Paris and London judge how to use the study.²⁹

²⁷ Josef Chmelař, “Česká literatura a kniha za okupace,” in *Kniha a národ 1939–1945: Rekonstrukce nevydaného pamětního sborníku Svazu českých knihkupců a nakladatelů z roku 1947*, ed. Václav Poláček (Prague, 2004), 238.

²⁸ František Buriánek, “První román o okupaci,” *Zemědělské noviny*, February 28, 1946, 2. *MIČENÍ* ends in late 1943, with liberation still eighteen months away, and therefore lacks the euphoric mood that drives the mythicization of the occupied Czechs in other texts.

²⁹ Josef Horal, *MIČENÍ* (Prague, 1945), 77.

Negative Silences

The interpretations of the silence of the occupied that distinguish *Mlčení* from other texts appear in its description of the early days of the Occupation. As German troops arrive in Prague, Horal shows how, in keeping with the radio's instruction, a silence falls that unites children and servants, factory and office workers, postmen and policemen. This silence signifies widespread fear not found in other texts: "The doors of houses open inaudibly."³⁰ It is an expression of shock and shame. A recurring silence in the novel is the failure of President Hácha and his government to speak, accompanied by the passive silence of Czechs waiting for guidance. Horal writes of Hácha's eventual radio broadcast, three days later: "[his words] fell like clods of earth that bound anxiety and weakness together and are thrown by trembling hands onto a coffin..."³¹ Horal presents the Occupation sentences as a living death, for which silence is the most frequent metaphor. The failure of Czech leadership is reinforced later when Czechs on the street hear news of killings and look up to see only the inscrutable, "mute statue of St Wenceslas," Josef Václav Myslbek's 1912 monument to Bohemia's patron saint, a tenth-century ruler on horseback, in full battle dress, who, according to a tale popularized in the nineteenth century, should ride out of Blaník Hill with his knights when the country's need is greatest.³²

Silence also expresses indifference, most notably through Vláška's sister, Helena, a stereotypical middle-class woman preoccupied with fashion, gossip and marriage, who, even as the occupying army arrives, is more worried about fixing her hair, and refuses to get

³⁰ Ibid., p.7.

³¹ Ibid, 21.

³² Ibid., 100.

involved in the family's political discussions. In *Co nebude v dějepise*, Golombek records with anger and shame the silence of Brno gendarmes who stand by as local Germans beat up and kill an elderly Jewish man in the autumn of 1938. This silence resembles the indifference or cowardice portrayed by Horal, but also suggests assent. Golombek's title predicts that history books will omit the experiences of ordinary people, but his book also presciently anticipates the aspects of the Occupation – including Czech collaboration and antisemitism – about which historiography would long be silent.

Silencing the occupied

In *Mlčení*, Horal suggests that there is no alternative to silence; those who speak out are killed. In the first chapter, the Martineks' housekeeper reports seeing German soldiers shoot an old man who bursts, shouting, from a crowd of silent onlookers. His resemblance to the first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Masaryk, signals that the Occupation has destroyed what Horal's generation mythologized as the free, peaceful, tolerant republic founded in 1918. Another sign of its demise is the deportation of the father of the family, a retired civil servant characterized as one of the men who helped Masaryk build Czechoslovakia, who dies in Auschwitz following a Gestapo campaign against the patriotic Sokol gymnastics movement.

Silence and silencing feature prominently in portrayals of the most nationally shocking instance of repression during the early Occupation: the shooting of the student Jan Opletal and apprentice baker, Václav Sedláček, on October 28th 1939, during anti-German demonstrations marking the anniversary of the creation of Czechoslovakia, and the reprisals against students following further protests at Opletal's funeral procession. Horal presents the students' shouts

during the procession as a courageous repudiation of other onlookers, who stay silent from fear: “If they wanted to lighten their burden, they could not remain silent through the mute street.”³³ By contrast, in the defining early account of this episode, in Zvěřina’s *Bili nás pruty železnými*, those in the procession accompanying the coffin choose silence as their method of protest:

Huddles of students walked about in silence and organizers ran round them with final instructions. At every point keep a dignified calm! Don’t let yourself be provoked by anything! Silence will say more than the loudest gestures. And the students agreed. There had been enough victims who had already fallen. One should live for the nation, as [the patriotic liberal journalist Karel] Havlíček [(1821-56)] said, not die for it.³⁴

Zvěřina asserts that the silence of the procession is broken not by undisciplined students, but by agents-provocateurs planted by the Germans to justify a harsh response. The authorities silence the student voice through mass arrests and internments, the exemplary executions of nine student leaders and the closure of Czech-language higher education institutions.

Another means of silencing the occupied is through censorship and self-censorship. In his Dachau memoir, *V zahradě muk* (In the torture garden, 1946), Vladimír Šacha (1903-86), a Communist writer and teacher, writes: “in the century of Hitlerism, the honest artist must hide. Artists have begun to be silent. A great silence has taken power in the heart of the nation.”³⁵ In *V zajetí Antikristově*, Jeřábek gives many examples of the silencing of Czech language and

³³ Ibid., 110.

³⁴ Ladislav Narcis Zvěřina, *Bili nás pruty železnými* (Prague, 1945), 26.

³⁵ Vladimír Šacha, *V zahradě muk* (Brno, 1946), 10. The title is an allusion to the novel *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) by Octave Mirabeau (1848-1917).

culture, notably in schools, publishing, public life and interaction, and public spaces. In response to criticism from the most powerful Czech mouthpiece of Nazi propaganda, Emanuel Moravec, Minister of Schooling and Further Education in the Protectorate government, he defends writers who write “for the desk-drawer,” asserting: “Honest, truthful thoughts must be kept under lock and key. Freedom of expression is only permitted to Judases and Tartuffes. What an amazing reaction, what an explosion it will be, when people whose mouths are gagged today are allowed to speak!”³⁶

In *Mlčení*, after a law is introduced that bans “works of an anti-German nature,” Vláďa is briefly arrested for including unacceptable Czech classics in a parcel sent to expatriate Czechs in Zagreb.³⁷ In prison, he meets a patriotic carpenter who views silence as collaboration and believes that if all Czechs spoke up, the Occupation would be over. After receiving no reply to a letter he wrote to Hácha, he circulated a protest leaflet; then, when all the men in his street were arrested, he owned up. This story could easily come from *Němá barikáda*, except that for Vláďa, the carpenter’s repeated refusal to stay silent is not heroism, but suicidal folly. Vláďa’s own silence nevertheless comes to indicate a sense of guilt, notably when the narrator refers to the “festering silence” of journalists in a newspaper office, silently acquiescing to greater pro-German activism in their writing.³⁸ It seems to suggest obedience, at least to the occupier and

³⁶ Čestmír Jeřábek, *V zajištění Antikristově* (Olomouc, 1945), 279.

³⁷ The parcel includes works by Jindřich Šimon Baar (1869-1925) and Karel Václav Rais (1859-1925) set in German-dominated Bohemian borderlands that were incorporated into Hitler’s Germany under the Munich Agreement. Baar writes about a region of western Bohemia where, in the seventeenth century, the historical privileges of local freemen were removed after they rebelled against Habsburg recatholicization. Rais’s *Zapadlí vlastenci* (Isolated patriots, 1894) describes efforts in the 1840s to awaken Czech national identity in the north Bohemian mountains.

³⁸ Horal, *Mlčení*, 123.

those, like Vláďa's younger brother, Zdeněk, who crave more action: "we are all pulling together like a yoke of oxen and are silent, afraid to look around us."³⁹

Silence and noise

In *Mlčení*, silence is unequivocally preferable to noise, which is associated with the occupier from the moment of their arrival:

Foreign armies march through the silent land [...] Motorcycles bark at the windows of sleeping Czech villages, armoured vehicles cast their blows at the wooden coats-of-arms of peaceful little towns, goods vehicles jolt along the cobbles, whose eyes are still heavy with sleep, and cars whistle into abandoned huts and fields pining from deep sleep for the spring and the sun.⁴⁰

What Horal describes as the "terrifying, mute silence" of the robotic German soldiers acts as a corollary to this intimidating noise. While the silences of the Czechs in the novel are all implicitly expressions of humanity, whether weakness or strength, this German silence suggests inhumanity.

Noise is also associated in the novel with collaboration, an attempt to silence the silence of the occupied, to create the illusion of normality and quell guilty consciences. Late in the novel, Prague's population is portrayed as divided between those who silently reject the Occupation and those who noisily seek to prosper from it: "one [Prague] mute and mourning with a heart kept alive only by hope... The other all talk with a smile on her face."⁴¹ Silence here

³⁹ Ibid., 451. This perception of silence as submission contradicts Barthes's characterization of silence as a means of undermining the power of another.

⁴⁰ Horal, *Mlčení*, 9.

⁴¹ Ibid., 369.

represents depth of awareness of the situation, noise an attempt to conceal that awareness. At one point, Zdeněk, infuriated by the passivity of his elders, petulantly joins a German-language college and takes an office job in a Bohemian German-owned factory. When the Gestapo come to arrest striking workers, he tries to drown out the din by loudly dictating a letter. This approach is manifested more banally by Helena, who meets her friends every week in a café to chat endlessly about anything except the Occupation. Her fiancé is a collaborator-journalist, who willingly sacrifices his Czech patriotism to advance his career and abandons Helena when Vláďa is arrested. He accepts being silenced: “Not everyone can just let their tongue off the lead as they might like. You have to weigh up five times what you are going to write.”⁴² He nevertheless stands out because of his constant, grating chatter, intended to radiate self-confidence and ingratiate himself with people of influence, but which equally suggests nervousness and the masking of guilt, and is empty of substance beside the weighty silences of his compatriots.

Silence, self-preservation and self-sacrifice

In *Mlčení*, Horal shows how silence evolves during the Occupation into what Barthes terms a strategy of hesitation, an ambiguous neutral position between ignominious collaboration and self-destructive resistance. For those with historical experience, silence connotes stoicism, encapsulated in the recurrent pathetic fallacy of “Mother Prague.” Prague’s silence is compared to a widow’s in mourning. Like Demeter, the city casts “a handful of smiles through a riddle of sympathetic silence” over arrested Czechs on their way to prison.⁴³ At

⁴² Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Ibid., 163.

one point, her silence is equated with hatred, not only for the Germans, but also for the Czechs who collaborate with them.⁴⁴ Through the maternal imagery, Prague is linked to the eventually widowed Mrs Martinková, who, like Prague, silently assumes all the suffering of her family and neighbours. For Vlastimil Vrabec, the Martinek parents “represent more passive resistance than open revolt,”⁴⁵ but their silence is dignified. It also expresses disapproval when Zdeněk ostentatiously brings home his earnings from collaboration.⁴⁶

Zdeněk views his brother's and parents' silence as cowardly acquiescence; at one point, he snarls at his father: “And what if it is not a matter of dignity, but of comfort and fear?”⁴⁷ He finds a path to action through his contact with the working-class at the factory, notably Blažena, meaning “blessed one,” whose Communist father is killed by the Gestapo while resisting arrest. In contrast to Zdeněk's disordered mind, her calm faith in liberation and a more just world is the most confident silence in the novel. Mrs Martinková's embrace of their anticipated marriage symbolizes her class's gradual acceptance that a fusion of the bourgeois and the proletarian should shape post-war Czechoslovakia.

The conflict between Vláďa and Zdeněk is reduced in the final pages to that between self-preservation and self-sacrifice, which had haunted Czech thinking since Czechoslovakia's acceptance of the terms of the Munich Agreement. In an argument around the dinner table, Vláďa, who continues to seek less risky ways of resisting, including briefly harbouring a wanted

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁵ Vlastimil Vrabec, “Pod nacistickou pěstí,” *Nová svoboda*, XXIII, no.8 (1946), 128.

⁴⁶ Through Zdeněk, Horal continues the analysis of the chaotic mentality of young adults that featured in his first novel, *Bláhové mládí* (Foolish youth, 1941), about the migration of rural youth to Prague. Zdeněk most resembles the ‘prodigal-son’ figure of Karel Kábrt from that novel, but unlike Kábrt does not have the chance to outgrow his youthful pride and be reconciled to his parents' worldview.

⁴⁷ Horal, *Mlčení*, 238.

man, enrages Zdeněk by pompously declaring: “There are situations in which it is possible to organize an uprising. At other times it is better to fold one’s hands in one’s lap and wait it out.”⁴⁸ Zdeněk cracks a dinner-plate with his knife and his mother sees the “dignity of a good bourgeois family [...] smashed to smithereens.”⁴⁹ The gesture seems to signal revolution. Hearing gunfire outside, Zdeněk impulsively rushes to join a confrontation between the Gestapo and saboteurs and is shot. As he dies and the novel ends, he hears choirs singing, for him an intimation of imminent liberation and reward for his action, but in the context of Zvěřina’s quotation from Havlíček, his death seems like a futile waste.⁵⁰

This sense of futility is absent from Drda’s stories, which repeatedly describe ordinary Czechs giving their lives to resist the occupier. The tension between preserving and sacrificing oneself for the nation contrasts with accounts of the period in notionally comparable places like Poland, of which Stanley Bill writes: “the doomed Warsaw Uprising of 1944 took its place in the national insurrectionary tradition of heroic catastrophes, while poets like Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński (1921–44) and Tadeusz Gajcy (1922–44) revived Romantic tropes of personal sacrifice for an idealized Poland.”⁵¹ The similar exploitation in post-war Czechoslovakia of the Prague

⁴⁸ Ibid., 451.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 454.

⁵⁰ In his 1946 review of *Mlčení*, Karel Polák reads the portrayal of Zdeněk as a warning against giving too much power too early to this young generation, who have experienced so much chaos at a vulnerable time in their development: “We would wrong them terribly if we contented ourselves merely with praising them for their blessed idealism on May 5 [1945, during the Prague Uprising] and for their enthusiastic, but by now multiply confused and muddled passion for the next phase of building the republic, when now, instead of struggle and active work, they need, first passively and then actively and individually [as Lenin wrote], to study, study and study again.” (kp [Karel Polák], “Josef Horal, Mlčení”, *Kritický měsíčník*, VII, no.1-2 (1946), 34.) As the relative fates of the works discussed here show, the Zdeněks would in fact soon consign the Vládas to the past.

⁵¹ Stanley Bill, “The Splintering of a Myth: Polish Romantic Ideology in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,” in *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*, eds. Tamara Trojanowska et al. (Toronto, 2018), 56. The failed Slovak National Uprising of August 1944 acquired an analogous function in Slovak culture.

Uprising and the cultivation of the Fučík myth constitutes an attempt to cultivate a Czech version of this “insurrectionary tradition” and what Polish scholars term the “Romantic paradigm” that, according to Joanna Niżyńska, had for Poles “consistently proved its usefulness and confirmed its force as *the* metanarrative in times of historical and social upheaval.”⁵²

Towards silence as resistance

While in Barthes’s terms, Horal strives to preserve the ambiguity of silence, other writers in the period seek to recuperate its meaning, typically as a form of resistance. Some, however, distinguish between silence in the face of torture and other kinds of silence, which they view as facilitation if not collaboration. Introducing the Czech translation of *Le silence de la mer*, the prominent critic, Václav Černý (1905-87), implicitly compares the Czech response to the German occupation unfavourably with the French response as he understands it:

This is genuine resistance literature. Literature of defiance. That is to say, of struggle. Why then is their so little fighting spirit in it?, some might ask. So few calls to arms? So few fanfares? Commands to attack, aggression, hatred? [...] Indeed, this book will be reproached for the moderation of its message. But find me a single line where that “moderation” equates to indecisiveness or half-heartedness. There is none. That moderation is simple calm. And that calm is certainty. And that certainty is the secure

⁵² Joanna Niżyńska, “Delectatio morosa, or, the Modes of Affective Compensation in Polish Memory Culture,” in *Being Poland*, eds. Trojanowska et al., 224. The Warsaw Uprising has subsequently formed a focal point in Polish literature for critiques of Polish neo-Romantic martyrology, notably in *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* (*A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, 1970) by the poet Miron Białoszewski (1922-83).

awareness of superiority [...] the certainty of culture itself, unshakeable moral supremacy.⁵³

Černý's references to indecisiveness, half-heartedness and lack of national self-confidence are aimed at Czech behaviour during the Occupation. In his later memoir, he mocks the discrepancy between the post-liberation bombast about the "national resistance against Nazism" and the more modest reality.⁵⁴ In 1946, the Social Democrat journalist Jaroslav Vozka (1904-54) published an account of Czech resistance activity prompted by a concern that declaring the whole nation "resisters" would obscure and diminish both the genuine actions of a brave few and the extent of Czechs' failure to resist actively. He criticizes the post-war silence about actual heroic activity, fostered by those seeking to hide their own failure to resist: "today so many people boast that they worked underground and it is their good fortune that the dead cannot speak. People who crouched in fear and anxiety present themselves as heroes and very often even profited and still profit from the creation of false legends."⁵⁵

This fear of people exploiting their experience for personal gain extends to the immediate post-war flood of memoirs written by Czechs returning from German camps. In 1947, Václav Běhounek, a literary historian and archivist imprisoned in camps between 1942 and 1945 for resistance activity, wrote: "it was only the net of the expert committee of the

⁵³ Vercors, *Moře mlčí*, trans. Jindra Kvapilová (Prague, 1945), 11. In 1939, following the German occupation of rump Bohemia and Moravia, Černý had been involved in preparing an anthology of nationalist poems by contemporary Czech poets, eventually published in Paris in 1940 as *Hlasy domova*, but originally entitled *Křik koruny české* (The cries of the Bohemian crown) (see Jiří Rambousek, "Křik koruny české: málo známá odbojová akce českých spisovatelů," *Universitas*, I, no.1 (2003), 3). The title echoes a political pamphlet, *Pláč koruny české* (The lament of the Bohemian crown, 1869, revised 1893), by Jakub Arbes (1840-1914), about the actions of the Viennese government against the Czech national movement after 1867. Černý would later use the title for his memoirs about resistance activity during the Occupation, dated 1970 and first published abroad in 1977.

⁵⁴ Václav Černý, *Paměti 1945-1972* (Brno, 1992), 24.

⁵⁵ Jaroslav Vozka, *Hrdinové domácího odboje* (Prague, 1946), 23.

Union of Freed Political Prisoners that caught another avalanche of handwritten proposals, submitted not so much out of the authors' inner need and with appropriate literary responsibility, but sniffing a boom and craving profit for both author and publisher."⁵⁶ In his review of *Mlčení*, Běhounek, like Chmelař a social democrat, praises Horal's plural interpretation of the silences of occupation and lack of tendentiousness: "We have here a grand novelistic canvas, which works by evoking the contrasts [...] and raw dark realities of those years in their entirety, with features both positive and negative, with a realistic vision of reality, without the idealization to which the material could potentially lead."⁵⁷ For Běhounek, "it is the politician in Horal that commands him to [...] capture all that is essential: what came down on us in those years, stifled us, taught us to dissemble and conceal, both destroyed and united minds, what crushed with uncertainty and shone with hope, what was chaos and fear and what was heroism."⁵⁸

Mlčení shows few examples of action against the Occupation; what we see is either furtive or quickly crushed. The most significant instance is the strike at Zdeněk's factory, motivated, however, not by patriotism or ideology, but by the government's failure to deliver promised increased food rations. The first instance of silence explicitly expressing defiance comes when a German schoolboy is asked by his teacher of Czech why he has not completed his homework. He explains that he has been busy training with the Hitler Youth and does not care about Czech-language homework; after this confrontation, in another example of the silencing of the Czechs, the teacher is replaced by one whose Czech is poor. Silence in the sense

⁵⁶ Václav Běhounek, 'Naše vězeňská literatura', *Kytice* 2, no.9 (1947), 386.

⁵⁷ Vbk [Václav Běhounek], 'První román z okupace', *Práce*, January 12, 1946, 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

of refusing to speak German is shown to be a strategy for Czechs: a worker on a tram declares that “a true Czech won’t speak to a German,” while at a meeting of coalmen and drivers, a speaker is shouted down for addressing them in German.⁵⁹

Other writers who do not present the silence of the occupied unequivocally as resistance nevertheless seek to present it more positively than Horal, as preparation for an outburst to come. The title poem of Pissingerová’s cycle *Jsme němí?* asks whether all lips have been struck dumb in this time of cruel oppression:

They are not mute! They are only waiting
for the day when God’s face shines
again they will gloriously roar
Ye who are warriors of God!⁶⁰

In April 1940, Jeřábek writes of the silence of the occupied: “The language of silence is a mode of human expression too. And where we cannot be silent, we speak through a line in an obituary, the sound of a poem or the melody of a symphony. In the depths of the quiet, the nation is preparing the shout of its liberation.”⁶¹ This idea finds more militant expression in a once well-known post-war poem, Halas’s “Barikáda” (The barricade, 1947). Halas here echoes Drda’s heroic image of the nation, summarizing the preferred story of the transformation of the occupied Czechs from silent inertia under the swastika, through chatter to rebirth in revolutionary action:

⁵⁹ Horal, *Mlčení*, 82.

⁶⁰ Marie Pissingerová, *Jsme němí?* (Červený kostelec, 1946), 6. “Ye who are warriors of God” is a patriotic Czech hymn, originally a battle chorale of the fifteenth-century Hussites.

⁶¹ Jeřábek, *V zajetí Antikristově*, 69.

And there was quiet

Beneath the perverted cross

Into the bones crept

the inaudible gnawing of wrathful time

Finally

Words revealed, born from muteness

scurried menacingly and furiously

And then it began to grow

From the magnetic fields of hate

From a subsoil soaked in blood

Grew a Partisans' [barricade implied]⁶²

Halas shows that for silence to constitute resistance, it must express hatred for the occupier. While we glimpse this meaning in *Mlčení*, Horal, unlike other writers discussed here, resists conflating the present experience with long-standing Czech nationalist conceptions of Germans. He never shrinks from portraying the cruelty of the occupier, but he includes in his panorama an ordinary German soldier, who is also presented as a victim, a naïve peasant who misses his home and sweetheart and is eventually left to drown in an eastern swamp, a human

⁶² František Halas, *V řadě* (Prague, 1948), 19.

being deformed by Nazi ideology and military hardware. Reviewers questioned whether the author could convincingly convey the thinking of the occupier, but the mere attempt to empathize is noteworthy.

By contrast, Zvěřina, Jeřábek and Drda share Halas's view that the atrocities committed by Germans reflect their inherently inhuman nature. In *Bili nás pruty železnými*, the dominant motif is not silence but German violence towards Czechs. Though some stories describe resourceful Czechs who escape imprisonment or resist, Czechs are more commonly innocent victims of sadistic German brutality. Zvěřina describes how, following the closure of the Czech-language universities, female students are raped by Germans during their expulsion from halls of residence, while in a concentration camp another is repeatedly beaten with iron bars, has her nipples scorched and is sterilized with a red-hot needle without anaesthetic. For Jeřábek, the arrogance, cruelty and treachery of the occupying Germans has long been anticipated in Czech national mythology. While he views the silence of the occupied Czechs as preparation for retaliation, the silence of Brno's Czechoslovak Germans in the face of the oppression of Czechs constitutes tacit assent.⁶³

In an early study of Drda's cycle, Černý, however, criticizes this demonization of the Germans from a perspective closer to Horal's:

Drda's German has nothing human in him [...] On the contrary, the horror and perversion of the Germans lay in the fact that, while remaining model sons and fathers of German

⁶³ As early as October 1941, Jeřábek foreshadows post-war rhetoric justifying the initially violent expulsion of the Czechoslovak German population in May and June 1945: "It will no longer ever be possible for Czechs and Germans to co-exist under one roof, for it will not be possible to erase from Czech hearts the memory of bloody injustices that the great majority of our Germans approved and before which the rest stayed silent, without any effective word of protest or condemnation." (Jeřábek, *V zajetí Antikristově*, 169.)

mothers and children, they ceased to be capable of filial and paternal feelings whenever it was a question of mothers and children from other nations [...] What was terrible was that these people were corrupted not in their animality but in their humanity, to the point of bestiality. By what were they corrupted? By false pride, by a criminal idea, by fascism.⁶⁴

This presentation of Germans as separate from the rest of humanity, reiterated by politicians and in the press, underpinned post-war tolerance for Czech atrocities against Germans after the liberation and justifications for the expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans.⁶⁵

Jeřábek's fiercely nationalist rhetoric is weakened by the relative normality of the Occupation he describes, until the upheaval of liberation; what Moravec, in a propaganda pamphlet from 1942, calls "the calm and peaceful place that our lands have found amid the horrors of the war."⁶⁶ Silence in the diary is most frequently positive; it is linked to moments when he can escape from the realities of the Occupation through writing or reading, walking in the countryside or attending concerts or plays. By juxtaposing accounts of his daily life with references to the progress of the war, rather than fear, Jeřábek presents the experience of occupation in Brno as helpless stasis, which contrasts with the sense of momentum elsewhere. His main example of Czech resistance is a comic incident at a teachers' training course in April 1942, when a collaborator-teacher gives a speech attacking Masaryk and Beneš. Fits of

⁶⁴ Václav Černý, "Hrst poznámek k socialistickému realismu," *Kritický měsíčník*, 8, no.15/16 (1947), 351.

⁶⁵ See Brenner, *Mezi Východem a Západem*, 142-47. In 'Až vstanou mrtví' (When the dead rise), Drda actually reverses the conventional portrayal of Czechs and Germans. The central character, a German officer, a stereotypical cowardly petty bourgeois, who has looted items for his family during the destruction of a village, is humanized – he has a name, a civilian life, is shown to be vulnerable and pleads for his life – while the Czech Partisans, who ignore his pleas and refuse his bribes, are anonymous, merciless killers. Drda does not explore whether the experience of occupation has brutalized these violent, vengeful Czechs, but instead, like the Czechoslovak authorities after the war, justifies their actions by amassing in the story evidence of German guilt for atrocities committed against the Czechs.

⁶⁶ *Tři roky v Říši*, Prague, 1942, 10.

coughing gradually break out around the room until the enraged German representative brings the meeting to a premature end. The coughing functions like silence in Barthes's definition as an "operation designed to thwart [...] the dangers of speaking."⁶⁷

As in Sartre's essay, in *Bili nás pruty železnými*, Halas's "Mlčení" and Drda's *Němá barikáda*, silence as resistance manifests itself in refusal to betray others, even under torture. Zvěřina's account of the treatment of Czech students ends with the execution of a Dr Dušek and his wife for sheltering his niece, a student who escapes to Prague from a concentration camp in Germany: "Dušek [...] was silent as the grave. They beat him, but he remained silent."⁶⁸ In "Hrdinové" (Heroes), nine villagers are executed after falsely denying that they were harbouring someone; in "Bylinkář zpod Lysy" (The herbalist from the foot of Bald Mountain), it is the fugitive who stays silent, rather than admit that the herbalist had given him shelter; both are hanged. In Drda's "Včelař" (The beekeeper), the beekeeper hides a radio transmitter in one of his hives. He refuses to tell the SS investigators anything, so they smash the hives and then kill him as he attempts to rescue the queen. In the title story, which ends *Němá barikáda*, during the Prague Uprising (May 5th to 8th, 1945), in a model of internationalist revolutionary action, one Czech and one Dutch veteran of the Spanish Civil War and a policeman hide silently inside an overturned tram until German soldiers come close enough for them to launch an ambush in which all are killed. Here, for the first time in all the works discussed, silence becomes a weapon. Unlike at the end of *Mlčení*, no voice suggests the pointlessness of their

⁶⁷ Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 51.

⁶⁸ Zvěřina, *Bili nás pruty železnými*, 74.

action, which serves as an emblem of heroic Czech resistance as the Occupation ends.

From documentary to myth

Drda's portrayal of the Occupation breaks decisively with the documentary approach that underpins the other works discussed here. All are structured chronologically, but Drda's dates are self-consciously chosen, creating a symbolic frame that fuses the national and Communist, beginning on October 28th 1939, the twenty-first anniversary of the creation of Czechoslovakia, and ending with the Prague Uprising, in Communist propaganda the moment of national sacrifice from which the new society would be born. *Zvěřina* also ends with the Uprising; his account is gripping and patriotic, but factual, detailing brave actions of Czechs at Czech Radio and on specific barricades, and again he emphasizes the senseless violence of the Germans. His account of the arrival of the "triumphant Red Army," a "helping and avenging hand," "accompanied by the mass cheers of the population," is, however, relatively sober and brief, and pointedly concludes not with bombast, but with a poem written at the end of the First World War by Georges Chennevière (1884-1927) warning the victor not to restart the violence.

Zvěřina presents *Bili nás pruty železnými* as a reliable record. The last part is a "fragmented calendar" of the Occupation from September 1st 1939 to May 10th 1945. He notes here, in relation to the student protests after Opletal's death, that he heard the details from many participants. Both "Hrdinové" and "Bylinkář zpod Lysy" are specifically located geographically to emphasize their basis in actual events, and "Hrdinové" ends with a copy of the list of those executed from a newspaper. Drda is less meticulous in tying his stories to real-life episodes. "Až vstanou mrtví" ends with a reference to a newspaper report, while in "Nenávist" (Hatred), the author briefly intervenes as an eyewitness. During the Communist

period, critics traced the origins of other stories, often inadvertently revealing how far Drda had adapted the historical events, perhaps by conflating several incidents, but often simply fictionalizing them to suit the image of the occupied Czechs he wants to promote.⁶⁹ Černý described the cycle in 1947 as “factually improbable, from the trains flying into the air every minute to the fantastically un-farmer-like psychology of farmers.”⁷⁰

Noting the reported success of Drda’s cycle among Soviet critics, Černý associates Drda’s approach with the author’s adoption of the Socialist Realist cultural model, “another, better example of which we would not find in current Czech fiction.”⁷¹ Černý argues that nearly all the characters in the stories have been “psychologically reduced to sheer national and socialist exemplariness.”⁷² Their authenticity derives not from their basis in fact, but because they embody an idea of the whole nation’s response to occupation. Writing in 1961, Josef Hrabák, while claiming that “there is no longer any point in polemicizing with voices that have long fallen silent,” rejects Černý’s criticism:

⁶⁹ See, for example, the discussion of the origins of “Vyšší princip” in a 1982 article reproduced in *Malá knížka o Němé barikádě*, ed. Janáčková, 44-46.

⁷⁰ Černý, “Hrst poznámek”, p.348. In the story “Hlídač dynamitu” (The dynamite guard), the title character supplies dynamite from a quarry to a group who use it to blow up German trains. In his analysis of attacks on Protectorate railways, Vojtěch Šír counts only nine significant acts of sabotage on the railways between October 1939 and March 1944, of which only four involved explosives, and only one –in north-east Moravia in September 1943 – damaged a train and caused injuries (see Vojtěch Šír, “Útoky na železniční dopravu v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava”. Dated 2015. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.fronta.cz/utoky-na-zeleznice-v-protektoratu>). Given Drda’s connection to Příbram, in central Bohemia, and the chronological positioning of the story, it seems based on a local group called Hammer and Sickle, which in August 1943 caused three minor incidents on lines in the area, only one of which involved explosives, and only one of which caused a derailment. Šír cites a Gestapo report which asserts that “preparations for the acts of sabotage committed between August 5 and 26, 1943 were totally inadequate from a technical perspective, and therefore no significant personal or material harm occurred” (Ibid.) Attacks increased during 1944, mainly in Moravia, where most Partisan activity took place, by far the most serious in Jihlava in April 1945, when Partisans blew up a train, killing 65 and injuring 115. Pynsent cites the post-liberation prime minister, Zdeněk Fierlinger’s assertion that, at the end of the war, “under 50 per cent of railway track was usable in Moravia, but 75 per cent in Bohemia” (Pynsent, “Conclusory Essay”, 227.)

⁷¹ Černý, “Hrst poznámek”, 348.

⁷² Ibid., 349.

One can of course point to other features than those on which Drda concentrated. During the Occupation, there were certainly cases of collaboration, blackmail, shirking, selfishness and God knows what else, and during the Uprising there were also cowards and devious types. Drda is, however, an optimist to his bones and in *Němá barikáda* celebrates a quality that was typical of ordinary people's attitude under occupation.⁷³

The apparent apotheosis of silence as resistance in Czech war-time literature is Fučík's *Reportáž*. Vladimír Macura and Peter Steiner have shown how Fučík, imprisoned by the Gestapo for resistance activity in April 1942, constructs himself as a Socialist Realist hero, laying the ground for his post-war canonization as an anti-fascist martyr and central ideological symbol of Czechoslovak Stalinism.⁷⁴ The reduction of Czech resistance to a single, politically correct, emblematic figure is implicitly criticized in Thiele's forgotten anthology devoted to Vladimír Tůma, which notes that just because Tůma "did not leave a literary work behind him like Julius Fučík, the story of his life and fate is no less worthy of attention."⁷⁵ Tůma, a doctor, was arrested in March 1945 for his involvement in a non-Communist resistance group, but refused to talk under torture and died from the beatings in April 1945.

For decades, readers were led to believe that Fučík did the same for over a year. At the end of *Reportáž*, he writes that during his initial period of interrogation, he regarded silence as a form of active resistance: "For seven weeks I did not talk. I was conscious that no word could

⁷³ Josef Hrabák, "Hrdinství a hrdinové: Zamyšlení nad Drdovou *Němou barikádou*," *Host do domu*, 8, no.11 (1961), 512, 514. Hrabák quotes Černý's article without mentioning his name. From 1945, Černý declared himself a socialist but not a Marxist, opposed the Stalinization of Czech culture and did not join the Party. He was removed from all teaching activity in 1950, tried and briefly imprisoned for anti-government activity in 1952, and then held a marginalized position as an archivist at the Academy of Sciences.

⁷⁴ See Vladimír Macura, "Motáky jako literární dílo" in Julius Fučík, *Reportáž, psaná na oprátce* (Prague, 1995), 281-300, and Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia* (Ithaca, London, 2000), 94-150.

⁷⁵ Václav Thiele (ed.), *Výkřik mlčení: Svědectví o němém hrdinství* (Prague, 1946), inside cover flap.

save me but could, on the other hand, endanger comrades on the outside. In silence lay my action.”⁷⁶ In a post-war context where silence constituted resistance, while speaking indicated collaboration, the next lines were cut from every edition until the publication of the complete text in 1995. In them, Fučík explains that once the comrade who had informed on him talks, and in the context of the mass arrests that followed the attempted assassination of Heydrich in May 1942, he doubted whether keeping silent still constituted resistance sufficient to protect comrades outside:

Could I save them by my silence? Was my silence still active? Was it not now passive? [...] I realized that even here I had a chance to fight: using completely different means from outside, but with the same meaning and the same purpose. To continue keeping silent meant not to exploit this chance. Now something more was needed, so that I could say that in every place and in every situation I did my duty [...] They were expecting something sensational from me. So I gave them it. They promised themselves a lot from my talking. So I “talked.” How, you will find in my protocol.⁷⁷

Having examined this protocol, Pavel Janáček confirms that “in a situation when [Fučík] was stripped of other possibilities for action, but was still determined to continue in the struggle, he took advantage of – in our terms – his verbal negotiation skills to deflect the interest of the Nazi secret police from the elite of Czech literature and intellectual life.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Fučík, *Reportáž, psaná na oprátce*, 90.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Pavel Janáček, “„Abych tu věc protáhl...” (K strategiím Fučíkova protokolu)” in *Julek Fučík / věčně živý!*, ed. František A. Podhajský (Brno, 2010), 95.

When the cuts made to the manuscript by post-war editors are restored, we see that the unsilenced Fučík frequently fails to conform to the post-war view of the occupation espoused by Drda and Party ideologues, and indeed comes closer to Horal in his view of silence, Germans and heroism. Despite his terrible experiences in prison, he does not propound a racist view of Germans, differentiating between their characters and motives and, like Černý, viewing Nazism as the distorting factor. Like Horal, he does not embrace self-sacrifice, but considers it better to try to remain alive. Describing the moment of his arrest, Fučík admits that he was hiding behind the door with a gun, but chose not to shoot, apparently to protect the other four comrades in the room.⁷⁹ The closing line of *Reportáž*, later converted into a Communist Party slogan, is not a call to arms, but a merging of New Testament allusions that encourages the Czechs, similarly to Horal's *Vláda*, merely to wait for the hour of their liberation: "People, I loved you. Be on your guard."⁸⁰

Conclusion

The difference between the censored and uncensored version of Fučík's *Reportáž* – between, as Barthes describes, imposing a meaning on silence or acknowledging its ambiguity – encapsulates the contest in immediate post-war Czech literature over the narrative of occupation that this study has sought to illuminate. The reduction of the silence of the occupied to a single meaning, and the silencing of other apparent meanings, is the first step towards the silence about what happened. Echoing Judt's assessment of the benefits of 'collective amnesia', Jay Winter labels this a "yielding, "political", strategic" silence, a choice of national unity over

⁷⁹ Steiner quotes the 1945 report of an eye-witness who was "quite disappointed by Comrade Fučík's behaviour." (Steiner, *Deserts of Bohemia*, 103.)

⁸⁰ Fučík, *Reportáž*, 91.

division: “silence is chosen to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence [...] The hope here is that the passage of time can lower the temperature of disputes about these events, or even heal the wounds they cause.”⁸¹ In her study of post-war German literature and Nazism, however, Hamida Bosmajian characterizes the perpetuation of this “strategic” silence as a “refusal to become aware, the escape into which memory and guilt are repressed.”⁸²

In the Czech context, the rejection of documentary plurality in favour of mythical unity mirrors the shift in post-war Czechoslovak public discourse away from liberal democracy towards nationalist authoritarianism documented by Brenner.⁸³ She rejects the common perception of this period as a contest between ‘democracy’ and ‘Communism’, arguing instead that the post-liberation political elite – including but not yet limited to the Communist Party – had already conflated these in the variously understood notion of “people’s democracy” (*lidová demokracie*). Their rhetoric reveals the early establishment of limits on what could be said and ‘anyone who breached them risked losing their public voice and criminalization,’ as the contrasting fates of the writers and works discussed here show.⁸⁴ *Mlčení* and *Bili nás pruty*

⁸¹ Jay Winter, “Thinking about Silence,” in *Shadows of War*, eds. Ben-Ze’ev et al., 5.

⁸² Hamida Bosmajian, *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism* (Iowa City, 1979), 17.

⁸³ Both Horal and Jeřábek capture the gradual shift in occupied opinion from West to East. The most positive breaking of silence in *Mlčení* is when the Martineks hear their eldest son, a soldier, on the BBC, cheerfully greeting them from England after months without news. Later, however, he is remembered less and with more hostility by his brothers, who envy him for escaping the Occupation and acquiring ever more heroic status the longer he is absent. As the Occupation wears on, the exile government and the First Republic it seeks to represent grow distant from the occupied. In January 1941, Jeřábek complains of the nostalgic, patriotic music broadcast by the BBC Czech-language service: ‘We are living in a cramped dungeon and a fellow prisoner’s tapping on the wall, promising help at hand, interests us more than distant sweet music on a violin’ (Jeřábek, *V zajetí Antikristově*, 161). In September 1941, noting the fighting in the USSR, Jeřábek approvingly contrasts the ‘school of hard knocks’ that Russians have gone through with ‘effeminate France’ (ibid., 142.) As the tide turns on the eastern front, he starts re-reading classic Russian literature and listens more to Russian-language radio for his news.

⁸⁴ Brenner, *Mezi Východem a Západem*, 338.

železnými were recommended to libraries for the last time in the librarians' periodical dated January-March 1948, the period of the Communist takeover, prefaced with the familiar assertion that "the real artistic work about the years 1938 to 1945 is still maturing. This list also includes works that fairly soon will surely lose their appeal, but today still have it."⁸⁵ *Mlčení* and *V zajetí Antikristově* have only been published once to date. Two editions of *Co nebude v dějepise* and three of *Bili nás pruty železnými* had been published by 1946, demonstrating their commercial appeal, but in April 2014, Czech Radio broadcast a serialized reading of *Co nebude v dějepise*, describing it as a "more or less forgotten" book.⁸⁶ To date, none has received significant critical attention. By contrast, according to Jan Němeček, *Reportáž* appeared in thirty-eight editions between 1945 and 1995, of which only the last contained the complete text, and 317 translations.⁸⁷ The Collected Catalogue of the Czech Republic lists twenty-six editions of *Němá barikáda* between 1946 and 1985. Stories from it inspired two of the best-known Czech cinematic representations of the Occupation, *Němá barikáda* (Otakar Vávra [1911-2011], 1949) and *Vyšší princip* (Higher Principle, Jiří Krejčík [1918-2013], 1960). Golombek, Horal, Jeřábek and Zvěřina all disappeared from public life soon after the Communist takeover, while Fučík became a Socialist icon and Drda, who joined the Communist Party in 1945, a prominent Stalinist functionary, notably as chair of the Writers' Union between 1949 and 1956.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ "Druhá světová válka a náš odboj", *Česká osvěta*, 41, no.1-3 (1948), 103.

⁸⁶ "Bedřich Golombek: *Co nebude v dějepise*, 1/13." Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://vltava.rozhlas.cz/bedrich-golombek-co-nebude-v-dejepise-5019867>.

⁸⁷ See Jan Němeček, "Komparace českých vydání," in Fučík, *Reportáž, psaná na oprátce*, 101.

⁸⁸ Zvěřina fleetingly attempted to conform to the preferred communist-nationalist style, with his 'short story from the May revolution', *My Prahu nedáme*, about a young man fighting on the Prague barricades, but he published no more imaginative literature after 1948. Golombek had to leave the newspaper *Lidové noviny* following the

Over thirty years after the fall of Communism, we can see that the interpretation of the silence of the occupied was driven in Czechoslovakia not by communist ideology but, as elsewhere, by populist nationalism, which endures today. Leading Czech politicians, including the first popularly elected presidents, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman, continue to reiterate the narrative of Czech resistance and innocence and German brutality and collective guilt established in the period discussed here, while in a school curriculum that has undergone sustained examination for remnants of communist ideology, *Reportáž* and *Němá barikáda* remain the most frequently taught texts from this period, alongside the triumphalist verse of the post-war Avant-garde.⁸⁹ To the extent that, as in Britain and throughout formerly occupied Europe, this heroic national narrative must now co-exist with more complex accounts, then, as this study shows, the Czechs are returning to the situation in 1945, when Drda and Horal were published.

Communist takeover, when Drda became its editor-in-chief, and became a salesman for an x-ray machine factory. Jeřábek flirted with Communism after May 1945. but quickly became disillusioned and was unable to publish from 1948 until 1957. In his diaries from the Stalinist period, he reserves particular loathing for Drda, whom he describes variously as an 'opulent impostor', 'little Nero' and 'the most disgusting character in Czech literary history of the past thousand years' (Čestmír Jeřábek, *V zajetí Stalinismu: Z deníků 1948-1958* (Brno, 2000), 19, 26, 200).

⁸⁹ See, for example, the most widely used textbook, Lukáš Andree et al., *Literatura pro 4. ročník středních škol*, (Brno, 2015 [2012]), 23. My thanks to Petr Fuka, a senior teacher of Czech literature at Gymnázium Olomouc-Hejčín, for his assessment of the situation in Czech literature classes at the time of writing.