



JOYFUL TANKS MEET GAY POET

Commemorating Liberation by ‘America’
in the Age of Global War on Terror

When you “pay” attention to something, you buy that experience. [...] Be selective in your focus because your attention feeds the energy of it and keeps it alive. Not just within you, but in the collective consciousness as well.

Emily Maroutian

He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.

George Orwell

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the role of memory in the US-Czech relations as it analyzes two very different events of May 2015 commemorating the liberating presence of the United States in the Czech history. It demonstrates that ‘America’ to this day serves as a powerful source of inspiration, feeding imagination shaping the Czech concepts of liberty. More specifically, the purpose of the paper is to bring to the reader’s attention the fact that in the context of commemorative events associated with the US held in the Czech Republic, the notion of liberation has two very different meanings. The first one is connected with the physical liberation by the US Army, the second one relates to cultural liberation through exposure to subversive American culture. The two contrasting versions of liberation by ‘America’ celebrated in the Czech Republic serve to indicate the concurrence of two competing ways to approach bilateral Czech-US relations in the age of the global war on terror. The findings hereby presented may

prove relevant in the context of wider debates about the role of memory in international relations, as well as in discussions about the perceptions of the liberating capability of 'America,' both in the Czech Republic and world-wide. The conclusion offers some fresh ideas concerning the potential of working with memory in the context of Czech-American ties.

When compared with the early years after its victory in the Cold War, the once idealized image of the United States in the world has become much more contested. Back then, the US neoliberal approach to the economy as well as to politics was seen as a model for solving internal problems, especially for countries transitioning to democracy after decades of discredited communist rule. However, after the botched occupation of Iraq starting in 2003, reports of torture at Guantánamo, the financial crisis of 2008 and the Snowden revelations of the extent of espionage practised by US government agencies, the concept of the United States being a role model around the world became questionable (Ash, 2005: 13). This creates a serious problem for the US foreign policy, which, to a great extent, continues to rely on its soft power to accomplish its goals (Nye, 1990: 3–5). Negative perceptions of the United States do not only complicate the country's policy objectives, but may also pose a national security threat: such an atmosphere may prove conducive to easy and cheap recruitment of anti-American individuals and organizations by the enemies and antagonists of the USA.

For this reason, it is relevant to question and analyze the various foundations of the strong ties that still bind the US with its allies around the world. One important type of such a bond depends on memory shared and consciously reproduced by a given community (Assman, 1995: 126). The relevance of the connection between memory and international politics has been persuasively argued elsewhere and encompasses both actions of politicians as well as responses of the general public to them (Langenbacher and Shain, 2010: 11). Such focus on memory comes from constructivist approaches in international relations, which link subjective interpretations of reality with agency on the international level (Wendt, 1992: 405). The perception of one's role in the world, as well as the perception of the roles and motives of others, help shape

social reality of the subject to the point of supporting or opposing policies proposed by those who are able to set the dominant agenda. On the individual level, memory plays a key role in the processes of filtering and interpreting social reality, which is true also for relevant policymakers who are not immune to its pervasive, though at times latent or even subconscious, influence (Finney, 2014: 445). Complex game-theoretical models of international relations based on rational choices fail to take sufficiently into account this crucial aspect of memory in the context of socially constructed reality (Lebow, 2006: 6).

Cultural memory is a fascinating field of study, as we can observe and even participate in constant efforts to reassert a certain version of the past by various actors over time. Knowingly or even unknowingly, the present with its dilemmas and debates is never far away, as it serves as the symbolic benchmark for the evoked past events. Even though it is important to search for the objective historical truth supported by available evidence, for the purposes of cultural memory the only important 'history' is contained in the minds of the relevant group of people in any given moment (Novick, 1988: 523). From this perspective, cultural memory becomes essential in preserving historical consciousness over time. As the process of the formation of cultural memory is a social phenomenon, a temptation always exists to control and shape it according to the prevalent needs of the present. George Orwell's formulation in his *1984* of an absolute position that links complete control of the past with complete control of the future was prescient indeed. What is more, his claim is relevant not only for totalitarian regimes, but also for democracies, as ruling regimes strive to highlight events from the past which support or increase their legitimacy. These controlling efforts are helped by the fact that it is impossible for individuals to grasp an infinitely rich and complex historical reality with its various conflicting interpretations. At the same time, there is a natural need to embed one's life within a meaningful historical perspective, however limited it might be. This requires a process of mediation of complex historical reality through various versions of cultural memory which are then shared by most members of the given commu-

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nity. This process brings ample opportunities for subtle (as well as not so subtle) manipulation.

It is for this reason that commemorative events deserve special attention. They can be defined as deliberately staged acts, designed to reinforce cultural memory of selected events from the past (Tóth, 2015: 38). The arbitrariness of these celebrations is crucial if we want to understand their social as well as political aspects. Why is it that we do not hold a huge global event every December 10th to commemorate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Or a global day of mourning for those who died in Hiroshima on every August 6th? Cultural memory is not innocent, as it is a product of specific social and political decisions. An analysis of commemorative events helps us understand the underlying values as well as interests of the participating actors (Confino, 1997).

2. COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN CZECH-US RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to appreciate the nuances of commemorative activities related to US-Czech relations, a basic introduction to the context of the Czech collective memory with respect to the United States is necessary. The main turning point relevant for the situation today was the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Before that, the US role in the Czech (or more precisely Czechoslovak) history had been downplayed by the official communist media, and the US was portrayed as a decaying imperialist power—in line with the predominant Soviet Cold War narrative at that time. The communist regime would take great care to ensure the erasure of any positive feelings related to the liberation of Pilsen and the western part of Bohemia by the US Army in 1945—strategic efforts were made to downplay, or even deny, the role of the United States in the liberation of Czechoslovakia (Bartošek and Pichlík, 1953). A picture from the book by Bartošek and Pichlík showing the map of Western Bohemia under a bloody club with the American flag with swastikas replacing stars suggests the malicious and destructive role of the US presence. The graphic imagery testifies to the viciousness of the efforts to eliminate any sentiments of gratitude to American soldiers as liberators (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Picture from the book *Američané v Západních Čechách* by Karel Bartošek and Karel Pichlík, published in 1953 by Mladá Fronta in Prague. Available at: <<http://www.moderni-dejiny.cz/clanek/američane-v-zapadnich-cechach-v-roce-1945>>.

Official commemorative events celebrating the end of World War II and culminating with massive military parades in Prague would focus solely on the role of the Soviet Red Army, while the American contribution would deliberately be omitted from the news by the ruling of the Czechoslovak communist party. The blatant disregard for the role of the US Army in the liberation of western Bohemia was duly noted by the US Embassy in Prague, which frequently complained about the absence of any recognition of the American input in the official news coverage, but to no avail.¹ The efforts of the Embassy of the United States are nonetheless important, as they indicate that American diplomats were well aware of the potential power of memory, which the communist regime tried to manipulate to its own advantage.

After the regime change in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the US, almost overnight, became both an inspiration to, and an ally of, the newly constituted government. This was immediately reflected in the organization of massive events commemorating the American liberation of Pilsen. The celebration, organized for the first time in 1990, gradually became the key official event

1. A 1973 telegram message from the US Embassy in Prague, available in the collections of the National Security Archive, College Park, Maryland, confirms the diplomatic efforts of the part of the State Department.

in the World War II anniversaries from the perspective of prominent Czech politicians. Even though organized locally by the city of Pilsen to make up for the years of forced neglect, the event quickly gained national recognition for its symbolic significance, as the country strived to become a part of the West by joining the NATO and the EU.

Together with the focus on atrocities of the communist regime in post-1989 historical research, the newly emergent representation of Czech-US relations emphasized the shared traditions of liberal individualism and political democracy, which, in the Czech case, had been tragically interrupted by 40 years of communist totalitarianism. Special recognition was granted to the role of Woodrow Wilson in the creation of independent Czechoslovakia, as well as to the connections of the first president of Czechoslovakia Tomas Garrigue Masaryk to the US. The era of the First Republic (1918–1938) would be portrayed by politicians and mainstream media alike as the golden age of economic progress: an era built on values congruent with those symbolized by the United States and, at the same time, promoted by the new post-1989 Czech administrations. Tomas Bata, the founder of Bata Shoes, is the main protagonist of this narrative—the fact that he learned Fordist principles in the US and applied them in his modern factory complex in Zlin in eastern Moravia highlights the symbolic importance of the transatlantic connection at that time (Szczzygieł, 2008: 53–55).

To add to this, the end of the Cold War was interpreted in Czechoslovakia as a vindication of Ronald Reagan's hard-line anti-communist policies. By emphasizing the importance of Reagan's militancy towards communism, this interpretation of history allowed the neoliberal Czech government of Vaclav Klaus to legitimize its other, Reagan-inspired, social and economic policies. It is for the same reason that to this day the figure of Ronald Reagan remains a frequent object of a variety of commemorative acts, ranging from street renaming ceremonies to high-profile events on important dates related to him.²

2. Daniel Anýž, "Praha má ulici Ronalda Reagana. Pokřtila ji i Condoleezza Riceová," 30.11.2011 <<http://zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-52207170-praha-ma-ulici-ronalda-reagana-pokrtila-ji-i-condoleezza-riceova>>.

Apart from the fascination with Reagan's policies, people who were critical of the communist regime were heavily influenced by US cultural products that made their way to Czechoslovakia before 1989. American culture was often seen as more dynamic and liberating than the somewhat sterile, officially sanctioned cultural production that censored voices critical of the regime at home. Even if portrayed as decadent by official media, the popularity of the culture of the USA (including the much sought-after jeans) effectively contributed to the formation of a positive image of the United States as a whole, especially among the youth. After the fall of communism, this became apparent in terms of huge turnouts at massive concerts of American (as well as British) music stars. Anti-authoritarian aspects of much of the lyrics by performers such as Bob Dylan were not lost on Czech audience at that time.³

Even before the concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye, the US had been exerting significant symbolic, as well as real, impact upon Czech politics and society in the 1990s. Both the anti-communist credentials of the US government as well as the liberating influence of American culture were deeply ingrained in living cultural memory of the people who witnessed the transition from communism to liberal democracy.

The historical backdrop sketched thus far provides the context, in which my analyses of two US-oriented commemorative events held in 2015, offered in subsequent sections of this article, become particularly relevant. Each of the events symbolizes one conceptual approach to the cultivation of the continuity of cultural memory related to the Czech-American ties.

3. THE US AS A PHYSICALLY LIBERATING FORCE: THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF PILSEN'S LIBERATION BY THE US ARMY

After 1989, cultural memory in Czechoslovakia focused on images of the US as a strong, physically liberating force safeguarding liberal democracy. Already in World War I, the US helped to defeat the Triple Alliance, which opened the way for Czechs and Slovaks to form democratic Czechoslovakia in 1918 with important diplomatic

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3. Vladimír Vlasák, "Připomeňte si česká zastavení Boba Dylana," 08.06.2008, <http://kultura.zpravy.idnes.cz/pripomente-si-ceska-zastaveni-boba-dylana-fg3-/hudba.aspx?c=A080608_155348_hudba_jaz>.

support from Woodrow Wilson. The fact that Czechoslovakia itself was a direct product of Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs⁴ had profound influence on post-1989 Czech foreign policy, which supported US efforts to promote freedom and democracy around the world (Pojar, 2015: 81). Today, the main train station in Prague bears the president's name, and his statue is situated in front of the main entrance. It was remodeled in 2012 after the original 1928 statue by Albín Polášek, which had been torn down by German soldiers in 1941.⁵ Notably, during the communist period, the train station was officially called only "main train station": Wilson's name was formally reinstated only after the Velvet Revolution.

During World War II, the US helped to liberate Czechoslovakia from the Nazi occupation; at the end of the Cold War—America helped to liberate the country from the communist rule by outspending the Soviets in military expenditure. This (historical) narrative is coherent with that underlying Czech Republic's membership in NATO—a memory-based narrative oriented toward the future. Since Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, the common membership in the Organization warrants Czechs American assistance in time of need: should the country face any threat in the future, the United States will come again, deploying their powerful military to help eliminate any potential danger.

The main *place of memory* (as theorized by Pierre Nora [1989]), and central to these narratives, is the city of Pilsen, the largest of the Czech cities liberated by the US Army in May 1945. As such, it is home to several monuments that serve as permanent reminders of these events and are the focus of annual commemorative activities.

The rather impressive *Thank you, America* granite monument was erected in 1995 by the city of Pilsen, ostensibly to make up for their deliberate neglect of the US role in the liberation of Czechoslovakia during the communist times. The tender for the monument

4. See the argument proposed by Walter Russel Mead in "Carter Syndrome," *Foreign Policy*, January 2010 <<http://www.cfr.org/history-and-theory-of-international-relations/carter-syndrome/p21106>>.

5. Michal Kalina, "Před hlavním nádražím opět stojí pomník W. Wilsona" 05.10.2011 <<http://zpravy.aktualne.cz/regiony/praha/pred-hlavnim-nadrazim-opet-stoji-pomnik-w-wilsona/r~i:article:716530>>.

attracted widespread attention, with renowned sculptor Vladimír Preclík eventually winning the competition. His original concept featured an abstract representation of a shattered Czechoslovak flag. Albeit winning, the design was poorly received by the inhabitants and the politicians of Pilsen, as it seemed to reflect the lost opportunities and bleak decades that *followed* the liberation of 1945 rather than the celebration of joy and gratitude. After an emergency meeting in the city hall held to find a more acceptable solution, a more conservative classical design was selected, in many features similar to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. (see Figure 2).⁶



Fig. 2. *Thank You, America* memorial on May 6th, 2015. (Photograph by Kryštof Kozák).

A major memorial to US General George Patton was unveiled as part of the Liberation Festival in 2015 on a busy thoroughfare near the center of the city. Previous efforts to erect the monument ended in failure, as the realization of the winning design of a larger-than-life, realistic portrayal of the famous American commander by Jaroslav Bocker was blocked by the votes of the city assembly on account of the artist's alleged past collaboration with the communist secret police.⁷ Years later and after a new tender, an abstract

6. For basic information about the monument, see Marcel Fišer, *Díky Ameriko* <<http://www.socharstvi.info/realizace/diky-ameriko>>.

7. Czech Press Agency ČTK, "Plzeň konečně odhalila památník generála Pattona" ["Pilsen finally revealed General Patton's memorial"], 01.05.2015

design featuring seven meters tall steel plates shaped to allude to George Patton's profile, was unveiled during the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the city (see Figure 3). According to a poll carried out by the regional newspaper *Plzenske listy*, the abstract design—in whose curves it is fairly difficult to actually recognize the General's facial features—is not very popular with local residents, who have also criticized its cost (100,000 USD).⁸ Nonetheless, the erection of the monument in 2015 testifies to conscious efforts on the part of the city administration to shape cultural memory in US-Czech relations.



Fig. 3. General Patton memorial by Václav Zůna, Lubomír Čermák and Tomáš Beneš on May 6th, 2015. (Photograph by Kryštof Kozák).

<http://www.lidovky.cz/plzen-70-let-od-valky-odhalila-pomnik-general-pattona-p0d-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A150501_212438_ln_domov_sho>.

8. Veselá, Dana, "Pattonův pomník budí vášně. Jak se líbí vám? Hlasujte!" ["Patton's memorial stirs emotions. How do you like it? Vote!"], *Plzeňský deník*, 05.05.2015 <http://plzensky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/pattonuv-pomnik-budi-vasne-20150504.html>.

The Pilsen cultural center Peklo (meaning “Hell” in Czech) houses the Patton Memorial Museum. Established in 2005 on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, it offers a sizeable permanent exhibition on the liberation of the city, recently supplemented with material collected specifically for the 2015 Liberation Festival. Apart from the predictable collection of military paraphernalia and historical artefacts, a large part of the museum is devoted to communist efforts to distort the history of the US presence in Pilsen, including access to newspaper articles from the communist era, outright denying the role American troops played in the liberation of the city. Somewhat paradoxically, the existence of the museum, which itself is a product of a pro-active approach toward cultural memory, is thus legitimized by the actions of the gone-by regime, whose attempts to manipulate facts have now been documented.

The above notwithstanding, the main objective of the Patton Memorial Museum is to commemorate General Patton himself and the liberation of Pilsen by the US troops with a simple dominant narrative glorifying the American commander. He is presented as a hard-headed, aggressive and strict leader, draped in the aura of military successes. These personal attributes ideally fit the narrative of protection, by the logic of which the strong and unwavering ally will always come to the succor of friends-in-need. A narrative, which arguably provides the fundament to the various commemorative acts.

While the permanent exhibit at the museum vilifies the communist distortions of the 1945 liberation, it does not try to raise any questions or debates about the events themselves. At the same time, the exhibit also unwittingly reveals that there are other layers of memory politics that could be explored. For example, a 20-minute film collage from the original 1945 footage conveys both the joyful atmosphere of liberty among the victors and the grim prospects for those defeated. Scenes featuring young girls dressed up in traditional costumes designed for special occasions intertwine a few frames later with footage of the harsh treatment that German prisoners, both military and civilian, had to face; no explanation or commentary is provided to account for the contrast. Like the propaganda posters discussed earlier in this text, to a careful observer the exhibition opens space for uncomfortable

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questions that have not been formally addressed by its creators, perhaps for the sake of the clarity and simplicity of the message intended for the visitors.

Extensive commemorative celebrations take place in Pilsen each year, but the year 2015 was special, as it marked the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the city. The commemoration consisted of a series of events and exhibitions that lasted for over a week. It is instructive to analyze these activities in greater detail, since they reveal those of the shared representations of the past that are meant to be institutionalized and preserved. The analysis demonstrates that the commemoration festivities serves primarily to reinvigorate the feelings of joy related to freedom regained owing to the contribution of the American troops, and thus to cement the NATO ties both on the Czech, and on the American side.

During the events of 2015, symbolically, the US as well as the Czech military played prominent roles in the course of the celebrations. One of the traditional highlights was the Convoy of Liberty, a long parade of over 300 historical US Army vehicles maintained mostly by local enthusiasts. The program included also reenactments of daily camp life in the US military of World War II, and a live presentation of Czech units fighting on the Western front performed by re-enactors. In order to make a clear connection to the present, the program also included the presentation of a current US Army checkpoint. The Czech Army had a special presentation within the program, offering coordinated fly-overs by jet fighters at key times.⁹

Representatives of the world of politics attended the official ceremony held at the *Thank you, America* memorial as well. Present dignitaries included the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, Chairman of the Czech Chamber of Deputies Pavel Hamáček, Chairman of the Czech Senate Přemysl Sobotka and the US Ambassador, His Excellency Andrew Schapiro. In their speeches, they emphasized historic ties between the Czech Republic and the United States of America, and thus reinforced the cultural memory in this respect. The theme of the necessity to fight for freedom and democracy today as well as back then

9. The official program of the Liberation Festival is available online: <<http://www.slavnostisvobody.cz/slavnosti-svobody/program>>

was prominent, with implicit references to the conflict in Ukraine.¹⁰ The explicit link between memory and the present was provided by the US Ambassador:

We are once again reminded that liberty is not without cost and that every generation who wants to enjoy freedom, must make sacrifices of its own. So once again, Americans and Czechs must work together to defend our common values, as partners committed to transatlantic security—only this time, as NATO Allies. We look forward to working together in the future to ensure that both our countries—and in fact all of Europe—is protected against future threats.¹¹

This quote serves as a clear example of how a commemorative event may be used to attain present-day political objectives. As was well known to His Excellency, the Czech President Miloš Zeman was one of the few European leaders who had traveled to Moscow for the Russian Federation's anniversary celebrations commemorating the end of World War II, and he was not present in Pilsen. Highlighting the traditional US-Czech ties thus had an underlying political message: it simultaneously affirmed the place of the Czech Republic in the structures of NATO and rebutted President Zeman's overtures towards Moscow.

After the speeches, each dignitary laid a wreath at the *Thank you, America* monument in the center of the city to the sound of traditional Czech music performed by the military brass band. Altogether, around 20 wreaths from various institutions were laid at the monument, including one presented by a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. By laying the wreath, official participants subscribed to the dominant narrative of the event. The public was separated from the monument by a cordon, and the overall atmosphere resembled that of a funeral rather than that of an experience of liberation, given the somber tone of the speeches, the traditional military brass music and the wreaths. This, however, is understandable, as the ceremony was commemorating US soldiers who fell liberating Czechoslovakia. This format

10. Přemysl Sobotka, "Snažme se poučit co nejvíce z historie" [Přemysl Sobotka, "Let us try to learn as much from history as possible"], <<http://www.ods.cz/clanek/9548-snazme-se-poucit-co-nejvice-z-historie>>.

11. The transcript of the speech was provided to the author by the US Embassy.

allowed the speakers to use the opportunity to focus the discourse on current threats and the ensuing necessity to sacrifice personal comforts for higher goals and principles also today. In this aspect, the commemoration bore traits of a rally, in which the speakers would clearly mobilize their listeners against all enemies of freedom and democracy, who, throughout the event, would be symbolically linked to the Nazis.

The presence of a dozen US veterans who actually were in Pilsen 70 years before brought an important element of living memory to the event. Organizers invited the veterans to actively participate in a series of discussions in the Pilsen area, thereby providing audiences with an opportunity of a face-to-face interaction with actual witnesses of historical events. Even though personal memories must inevitably be selective and incomplete, such personal meetings are seminal for the formation of cultural memory, as real-life presence adds the element of authenticity that might otherwise be missing in commemorative activities.¹² On the symbolic level, one of the dominant narratives behind the commemoration activities is the narrative of gratitude: the veterans' interaction with Pilsen residents opened space for the reification of this discourse, since it is easier to express gratitude to flesh-and-blood individuals than to abstract ideas. In this sense, the content of actual memories of the veterans may not be as important as their mere physical presence, which serves as the vital link to the events of May 1945. Expressions of gratitude added an emotional layer to the event, as the veterans were deeply touched by the reverence with which their Czech hosts would receive them. As one of the main organizers put it, the liberation festival will not be the same without them.¹³

The main conceptual theme of the festival, expressed also in internal documents of the organizers,¹⁴ was to take the participants back in time to relive the experience as well as the atmosphere of May 1945. Going back to the time of intense emotional experience

12. Veselá, Dana, "Veteráni, vítejte v Plzni," *Plzeňský deník*, 24.04.2015, <http://plzensky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/veterani-vitejte-v-plzni-po-70-letech-20150423.html>

13. Interview with Denisa Krylová, 25.05.2015.

14. "Concept of the Liberation Festival," internal document of the organizing committee provided to the author by Denisa Krylová, 25.05.2015.

connecting individual soldiers of the US Army and Czech people reinvigorates current bilateral relations, as the commemorated past becomes present for the duration of the festival. During the evening festivities, people were asked to come dressed in historical clothing, and they danced to music from 1945. This is consistent with the so-called “period rush,” where participants strive to achieve total immersion in the other time period (Thompson, 2004).

Army camps complete with historical gear and reenactors in historical uniforms offered explanatory tours to visitors, including schoolchildren on field trips. Going back in time may also involve an element of fright: the author personally witnessed how one of the reenactors slightly terrified the unsuspecting schoolchildren with an explanation of how to use the bayonet to get to the coronary vein of the enemy, describing the technique in gory detail. Still, the atmosphere of festivity notwithstanding, the high-profile presence of current army units mixed with historical reenactors opened many eyes to the existence of a threat that needs to be jointly fought today.

In their efforts to transport the audiences back in time, the organizers created an unusual display: a fence covered with wartime posters, both political and commercial. While this form of a presentation served to debar and critique the propaganda tools employed at the time, it also unwittingly gestured towards the rather uncomfortable fact of widespread Czech collaboration with the Nazis during the war. Pilsen was a major industrial town with modern weapons factories supplying the Wehrmacht during the Nazi occupation, for which reason the city was heavily bombed by the Allies at the end of the war. The Czech communist propaganda used these bombings against the West, arguing that the Allies only wanted to eliminate any potential future competition by communist economies (Bartoš and Pichlík, 1953). This line of reasoning persists in fringe internet publications associated with the communist party, providing a counterpoint to the dominant narrative to this day.¹⁵ Other present-day efforts

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15. J. Groušl, “O čem se v Plzni nehovořilo” [“What was not mentioned in Pilsen”] <http://www.novysmer.cz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1058:o-em-se-v-plzni-nehovořilo&catid=39:historie&Itemid=50>.

at diminishing the role of the US Army focus on the contribution of the Czech resistance, which took control of much of the city even before the arrival of US troops.¹⁶

One of the most intriguing as well as ambitious efforts to link the past to the present and solidify the memory of the role of the Americans in the struggle for the liberation of the city was a large-scale photographic exhibition in the main park in the city center. The authors collected photos from Pilsen taken in May 1945, took pictures from the same exact locations in 2015, and then superimposed the corresponding images on one another.

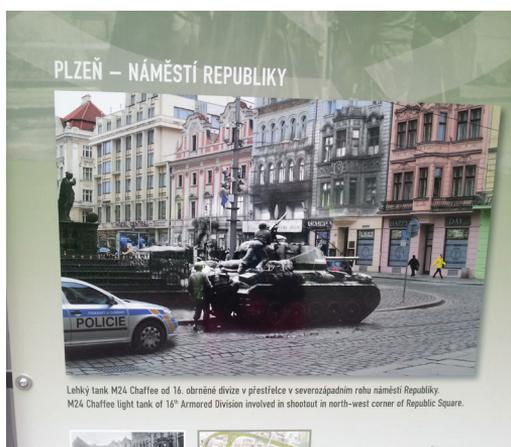


Fig. 4. Example from the open air photo exhibition meshing historical and contemporary photos. Collage by Pavel Kolouch; photograph by the author.

Thus, a Sherman tank in black and white shared the same picture with people walking home with full shopping bags 70 years later. Expert historical commentary was provided for each of the 50 collaged photos. The distance traveled in time in the same exact space was thus made evident in an easily accessible visualization. Bringing the images of war so close to home in this way served

16. Josef Vít, “Pár slov k osvobození Plzně” [“A Few Words on Pilsen Liberation”], 04. 05. 2009 <<http://blisty.cz/art/46674.html>>. See also Vojtěch Laštovka, “Plzeň v boji proti fašismu: stručné dějiny odboje Plzeňanů proti fašistickým okupantům” [“Pilsen in its Fight Against Fascism: A Brief History of Resistance of the People of Pilsen Against the Fascist Occupiers”], 1938–1945, Západočeské nakladatelství, 1975.

as an effective reminder of the current peace and security symbolically guaranteed by the alliance with the USA.

Two most prominent cultural events connected with the Liberation Festival was a concert of southern classic rock music by Lynyrd Skynyrd, and a closing concert titled “Light of Understanding” featuring various artists performing *5774–Kindertransport to Theresienstadt* composed by Peter Gyori. The Lynyrd Skynyrd concert was meant to symbolize the free spirit of the US (as in the band’s iconic “Free Bird” song), without necessarily raising more serious questions (like the lyrics for “Simple Man”). Even though one might be tempted to look for more profound symbolism in the selection of the band, the reality is simpler—it is a favorite band of the owner of the Viktoria Plzeň soccer club, who sponsored the show. On their part, Lynyrd Skynyrd were at first reluctant to come all the way to Pilsen, but the fact that they would be part of a major Liberation Festival, an important commemorative event and a joyful, pro-American festivity where people show gratitude and other positive sentiments with respect to the US—eventually persuaded them.¹⁷

This corresponds with the excitement of the veterans and parallels the sentiments of the US Ambassador. Both the veterans and the American diplomats would univocally suggest that on the personal level they found it deeply gratifying to see people representing a distant culture actually appreciating the United States. This becomes especially relevant today, when many Americans are dismayed by the intensity of negative feelings towards their country in many parts of the world. In this sense, the Liberation Festival strengthens the bilateral US-Czech ties at the level of personal affects: participants from the US were moved by the demonstrations of gratitude based on the memory of the past, but clearly resonating in the present.

The “Light of Understanding” was an event connecting the experience of the celebration of freedom with the memory of the horrors of the war reified in the suffering of Jewish children. Since admittance was limited and the tickets, by Central European

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17. An interview with main organizer of the festival, Daniela Krylová, September 18, 2015.

standards, were relatively expensive,¹⁸ the performance was obviously designed to cater to a more refined and educated audience compared with the open-air festivities, even though both main vocalists, Bára Basiková and Michal Pavlíček, are famous names in Czech popular music.¹⁹ The uneasy connection with suffering added a deeper, reflexive, dimension and a new moral message to the otherwise more joyful liberation narrative of the Festival. At the same time highlighted the heroic nature of the struggle of good vs. evil, in which the American soldiers were on the righteous side.

Overall, the 2015 Liberation Festival was a major commemorative event with high budget and attendance, as well as ample media coverage. While trying by various means to relive the liberation experience of 70 years before, its goal was not to present complex historical realities or pose pointed questions about the past and its relevance to the present. Its main aim was to bring into spotlight a specific historical moment, the interpretation of which was clear—the joyful citizens of Pilsen (and by extension also all Czechs) gathered to symbolically thank the US military for its contribution to the liberation of the country from tyrannical oppression. The main poster advertising the event conveys this narrative (Figure 5). The implicit message was also clear—as NATO members, the Czechs are hoping that in case of dire need, the US soldiers will arrive again to aid the liberal democratic ally under threat. Even though it was not expressed explicitly, the event had high significance as a political and rhetorical gesture, especially in the context of Russia's policies in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The fact that the Liberation Festival happened one month after the military operation “Dragoon Ride,” in which US Army vehicles drove through Czech Republic on their way from Baltic States to Germany, added clear political salience to the commemorative event. The military exercise (which in fact resembled the Festival Convoy of Liberty, only with modern weaponry), aimed at reassur-

18. 14 USD, considering that most other events at the Liberation Festival were free of charge.

19. For basic information about the show and links to excerpts from the performance visit the following website: <<http://www.plzenskavstupenka.cz/cz/ostatni/title/8819-svetlo-porozumeni>>.

ing Central European countries of continued US support, but was at the same time a litmus test for the attitudes towards the US. Overall, it generated widespread support, with 20,000 people visiting the convoy at its overnight post in Prague-Ruzyně. At the same time, there were isolated instances of protests of the far-right and pro-Russian groups that were taken up by pro-Kremlin media.²⁰



Fig. 5. Poster advertising the Liberation Festival in the street of Pilsen. Photograph by the author.

Tu sum up, one might argue that from the standpoint of US-Czech relations, the festive, high-profile commemoration of the 1945 liberation serves as a constant, or recurring, reminder of an unquestionable bond rooted in the past, yet supposed to shape the future as well, very much in line with what both Czech dignitaries and the US Ambassador proclaimed in their speeches. However, the Festival, in its multidimensionality and diversity, could not be reduced to the overall message alone. As mentioned, on several occasions, however, the organizers' efforts of to travel back in time brought forth painful memories and uncomfortable questions, including those concerning Czech collaboration with Nazi Germany and the fate of Czechoslovakia's ethnic Germans after the war. The focus on the moment of liberation practically precluded

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20. Dan Lamothe, "In show of force, the Army's Operation Dragoon Ride rolls through Europe," *Washington Post*, 24 March 2015. Retrieved 4 April 2015.

any discussion of the complex aftermath of that event that lead to the communist takeover. These problems were not addressed, as they would complicate the desired primary narrative of the united Czechs joyfully thanking their American liberators, which became part of Czech national cultural memory after 1989.

Liberation in this instance comes primarily in physical form, with tanks playing the main role—in an odd visual coincidence with official military parades of the communist past, celebrating the Red Army. The change of emphasis in commemorating the end of World War II for Pilsen is understandable after 1989, but only underscores the fluid, as well as politically charged, nature of cultural memory. With respect to the US-Czech ties, the Liberation Festival reinforced the narrative of asymmetrical relationship based primarily on the military prowess of the US and its willingness to defend its weaker allies who share the same values. Yet, political rhetoric notwithstanding, it is the authentic gratitude of those who were liberated, demonstrated in thankful commemorative activities, that is the prize that feeds back into the American resolve to liberate again, if it ever becomes necessary.

4. THE US AS A CULTURALLY LIBERATING FORCE—NO GUNS, ALL BUTTER

I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, dragging themselves through the Negro streets at dawn, looking for an angry fix ...

Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"

Constellating Americas

RIAS VOL. 9, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2016

In the context of the Czech cultural memory, the United States function as an important liberating force in yet another sense. Despite the communist rule starting in 1948, elements of the American counterculture were able to seep in through the Iron Curtain and served as an important source of inspiration for Czechs and Slovaks who felt constrained or outright repressed by the totalitarian political system.²¹ At times, even the communist regime tolerated publishing works by US artists, which

21. A basic overview of Czech subcultures under communism and their foreign inspirations is available in Vladimír Štich, Ivan Adamovič et al., *Kmeny 0*, Prague: Big Boss, 2013.

were deemed either apolitical or critical of the US government.²² In the hands of a receptive audience, such officially sanctioned works could quickly acquire subversive if not outright liberating potential. Transatlantic linkages between the US and Czech Republic thus have a major other foundation: cultural liberation. Commemorative activities could further reinforce the cultural memory of this important aspect of the Czech-American ties.

No event symbolizes the cultural liberation linkage better than the crowning of the American beat poet Allen Ginsberg as the King of May in 1965 during Majales, a traditional student festival held in Prague, with tens of thousands in attendance. Fascinating original film footage from the Majales of 1965 is fortunately available online, and it captures the extraordinary atmosphere of the time.²³ The filmmakers guide the viewer from the preparation phase through the parade to the final event, emphasizing the fresh energy and joyful spirit of the festival. On the surface, the images of the parade look similar to official marches encouraged by the communist regime. Closer inspection, however, reveals the playful, ironic and at times subversive aspects of the event, which is mostly evident on the signs that the marching students hold and in the hyperbolic tone of the moderators of the event.

Allen Ginsberg arrived in Prague first in 1964 after he was deported from Cuba for supporting the rights of homosexuals—and, allegedly, also for criticizing Che Guevara's body (Blažek, 2011: 30). Already a known figure in Prague's intellectual circles, he was well received even by the official Writer's Guild of Czechoslovakia. Ginsberg's criticism of US society had made him a potentially valuable propaganda asset from the standpoint of the ruling communist regime. He spent most of his time in Prague at Viola café, drinking alcohol and pursuing numerous sexual encounters with his young male Czech admirers.²⁴ Respectable translators

22. Zuzana Semínová, "Počátky časopisu Světová literatura a angloameričtí autoři" ["Beginnings of the World Literature journal and its Angloamerican authors"], *Souvislosti*, 1, 2003.

23. The short film is available on Youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrB1Wb91LBM>>.

24. According to Czechoslovak secret police file—16 conquests in total. This, comprehensibly, did not go unnoticed during the Festival. When Carlton Rounds, one of the two invited speakers, learned of Ginsberg's

of his work—Jan Zabraná and Josef Skvorecký—were unimpressed with his demeanor as well as his shabby appearance. Nonetheless, the presence of a celebrated icon of the American counterculture in Prague electrified the city's students, and when he was designated as a candidate for the King of May, he won the election won the election by a landslide: he was crowned King of May by popular acclamation of the audience even though his candidacy 'speech' consisted solely in ringing some Tibetan bells.

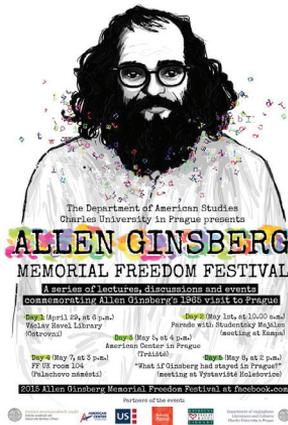
Yet, after he became King of May, the Czechoslovak secret police grown suspicious of Ginsberg's activities. When the police operatives stole his notebook, their suspicions were confirmed. In his notes, Ginsberg was very critical of the regime, even as it was gradually becoming more liberal and open at the time. Eventually, Ginsberg was deported out of the country and became a target of a sophisticated smear campaign by the official media, which would accuse him of corrupting the nation's youth.²⁵

Nevertheless, the symbolic crowning of an American poet in a communist country during a major public celebration presents a fine moment in the history of the Czech-American relations: a moment that deserves proper commemoration, as it symbolizes the liberating effect of the US counterculture, which continued to played an important role in the intellectual life of Czechoslovakia until the end of the Cold War. Fully aware of the implications of commemorative activities, at the behest of György Tóth, the Department of American Studies of the Charles University in Prague decided to create a major event in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Ginsberg's crowning. According to official festival documentation, the main intent was "to transmit the memory and values involved in Allen Ginsberg's 1965 visit to Prague to a new generation of Czech and European students,

rather promiscuous behavior in Prague, he quipped: "It looks like Allen was liberating Prague with his penis [...]" In his own talk, Justin Quinn, another speaker, jocularly responded that Ginsberg would perform his acts of subversion by both "what he did and *did not do* with his penis," thus connecting two dimensions of liberation in one witty adage.

25. The main indictment was published in official Communist Party newspaper *Rudé právo* on May 17th under the title "Kocovina s Ginsbergem" ["Hangover with Ginsberg"]. FBI was interested in the allegations and had it translated into English for its own Ginsberg files.

and to the general public,” as well as “showcase the Transatlantic (US-Czech) connections in struggles for social justice, minority rights, and democracy, and to show how US social, political and cultural movements enriched the Czech society since 1965.”²⁶ In the context of the events commemorating the American military liberation of West Bohemia, the festival aimed at celebrating other types of liberation that bond Americans and Czechs together.²⁷



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Fig. 6. Poster for Allen Ginsberg Memorial Freedom Festival.
 Source: author's collections.

The main aim of the week-long festival was to refresh and reinvigorate the memory of Allen Ginsberg's visit to Prague and to convey a more abstract message about personal liberation across-the-Atlantic. The funds for the program were provided by Charles University as well as by the US Embassy Small Grants Program, where the responsible officials understood the idea of the cultivation of the shared cultural experience between the US and Czech Republic—especially if, by celebrating those elements of it which would appeal to the younger generation, the project should foster

26. Grant application for the festival held in the private archive of the author.

27. The fact that the author was personally involved in organizing the event creates methodological problems, as the analysis cannot be entirely impartial. At the same time, close proximity to the event makes it possible to clarify what we, as academics, tried to accomplish together with the students and why we thought it was important. In this respect, direct involvement may prove to be an asset.

the continuity of the cultural connection. It helped that the connection with LGBT struggles of today was consistent with the priorities of US Embassy—one of the first supporters of Prague Pride.²⁸ The irony of the fact that the US Embassy supported events commemorating a person who had been deeply critical of the US government was not lost on the participating students, who prepared a sign reading “We are paid for by the US Embassy” for the final parade.

The Allen Ginsberg Memorial Freedom Festival featured two distinguished guests from the US to help us convey our central message. The first guest speaker was Ralph Young from Temple University, who had recently published a book on dissent in America, which was partly dedicated to Ginsberg (Young, 2015). The scholar delivered several talks and gave a music performance at the Festival. In his talks, Young situated Ginsberg within the broader countercultural movement, explaining the essence of its profound criticism of the official US government policies at that time, and pointed out mechanisms responsible for the canonization of the once countercultural artistic production. Among others, he reminded his audiences that many songs that are now part of the mainstream canon and are aired on commercial radio stations were, in fact, protest songs criticizing US politics and society, pointing out that even Ginsberg’s “Howl,” now widely accepted as one of the most significant poems of the 20th century, almost ended up as a banned book as it became a target of a major obscenity trial in 1957.

The second prominent guest from the US was Carlton Rounds, a well-known LGBT rights and anti-HIV/AIDS activist. His main contribution was to connect the countercultural liberation of the 1960s with current struggles in the US. The screening of the movie *The Normal Heart* about the shocking unwillingness of the US government to address the HIV epidemic in the gay community in the early 1980s, held at the American Center in Prague, served this purpose very well, with subsequent discussion leading to the topic of difficulties in the fight for sexual as well as personal liberation. The follow-up program at *A Studio Rubín* (a major meeting point for progressive artists both in the 1960s and today) featured Carlton Rounds in a musical performance that traced the influence

28. An interview by the author with a US Embassy official who preferred to remain anonymous.

of gay composers on US music. Apart from his talks for students and faculty, in the course of the Festival Rounds was also able to establish connections with Czech activists fighting for LGBT rights and the rights of HIV positive people, who participated in the events.

Apart from the guest-speaker presentations, the program included other talks delivered at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, on topics related to Allen Ginsberg by György Tóth, Andrew Giarelli and Justin Quinn.²⁹ The session was enriched with testimonies of Czechs who personally met Ginsberg when he was visiting Prague, such as the renowned translator Josef Rauwolf. Their living memory thus complemented other materials present at the Festival. Furthermore, in an effort to evoke the mythical *illud tempus*, a reenactment of Ginsberg's coronation was staged in the city center, accompanied by a public reading of passages from "Howl."

Another highlight of the Festival was the screening of the movie *Howl*, which traced the origins of the poem—a collage of some archival footage and the actor James Franco's impersonation of Ginsberg. The poem itself was presented in an animated form with subtitles on several occasions throughout the Festival, effectively becoming ingrained in the memory of all participants.

As a side project, participants of the festival were asked to stage scenes in black-and-white photos, as if they were taken in 1965. The results were exhibited at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. The underlying theme of the exhibition was "Are we more free than in 1965?," which generated numerous discussions among the participants.³⁰

The festival's final event took place on May 8 (the official Czech holiday of the Victory Day, commemorating the end of World War II) in a busy popular park in Prague. Blank signs were prepared and each participant was given a chance write his own sign to carry. This was reminiscent of the 1965 Majales parade, when students carried signs throughout the city, many of the slogans with subversive overtones. We even had several signs with the original messages from 1965, which fit seamlessly with the ones relevant 50 years

29. See footnote 24 in this article.

30. The photo gallery is available at <<http://ginsberg.rajce.idnes.cz/1965>>.

later, such as “Better silly regime than the need to think,” “Long live the small Czech man” or “Even God’s mills need to change stones.” Signs with current topics reflected primarily critical perspectives on politics and society, with US civil rights veteran Ralph Young carrying the sign made famous at the Occupy movement: “I can’t believe we are still protesting this s@#t!”

The afternoon concluded with a musical performance by Ralph Young, in which he traced the evolution of protest songs in the US and commented on their unifying potential during the protest movements, which had clear parallels to protest songs against the communist regime in former Czechoslovakia. Songs by Pete Seeger such as “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” were translated and became widely popular in Czechoslovakia. The same was true for Bob Dylan’s “The Times, They Are A-Changing,” which became a hit in 1965, when it was translated and performed by a Czech band with an English name, “Golden Kids.”³¹

Most of the official events were followed by late night discussions in various venues connected with the Prague Spring in 1965. The participants from the faculty, students as well as the general public were thus able to exchange their views on a variety of subjects, including political dissent, forms of personal, cultural and sexual liberation, continued forms of repression, different forms of freedom, new racism, as well as the current migration crisis in Europe. The overarching theme was the connection between personal liberation and action, whether cultural or political. Given the shared experiences from the official events at the Festival, the discussions had a common denominator—the shared cultural memory and the legacy of Ginsberg’s visit. Official guests were able to share their personal experiences also in informal and open settings, again trying to recreate the liberatory, as well as critical, atmosphere of 1965.

Overall, the Allen Ginsberg Memorial Freedom Festival aimed to convey the liberating spirit of 1965 both in its form and content, using various means at our disposal. The combination of poetry, music, academic lectures, talks by witnesses, movies and debates with knowledgeable as well as personally accessible guests willing

31. A clip of Golden Kids singing the Czech version of *Times, They are a Changing* is available online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_7pvZEBz3Y>.

to share their experiences, created a sense of shared community out of the ordinary day-to-day experience. In personal interviews, even the younger participants confirmed that they felt the refreshing spirit of 1965 to the extent that the presented archival documents came alive again in their perceptions of the past.

From the perspective of cultural memory, the Festival was an effort to duly commemorate (to the best of our ability) a significant moment in the Czech-US relations: a moment which symbolizes another kind of important liberating influence of America that remains underrepresented in the current discourse on the US-Czech ties. Allen Ginsberg was critical both of the US government *and* of the governments of communist countries. Commemorating his presence in Prague highlighted the importance of these critical perspectives, which bind the US and Czech Republic cultural memories together at the *normative* level.

The fact that the US Embassy in Prague supported both the Pilsen Freedom Festival and the Ginsberg Memorial Freedom Festival in a single year indicates a certain contradiction at the heart of the US public diplomacy, explicable only in terms of “higher goals.” Since Allen Ginsberg, the quintessential critic of the US political practice, became part of the American literary canon, the US diplomats have been feeling free to use him in their programming, irrespective of subsequent administrations’ political agenda. Likewise, the US public diplomacy has been relying heavily on figures like General Patton, who became part of the military history canon and an icon of the idea of America and the benevolent liberator, in their daily work. The fact that Ginsberg and Patton embody two very different narratives about the role of the United States in the world seems not to matter. Icons are icons, and in light of political rhetoric no holds are barred: both the American and the Czech diplomats conveniently forego the attempts to eliminate Ginsberg from the public space (obscenity trial in the US, deportation from Czechoslovakia), or the lack of the discussion concerning the political follow-up of the division of the influence zones after World War II or the fates of the ethnic Germans in post-liberation Czechoslovakia. The two-sided bi-polar disorder of sorts seems to raise no eyebrows, yet the cultural memory, cultivated in public commemorative events, prob-

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lematizes the seemingly unproblematic issues, and thus remains the guard of intellectual liberty.

The words “freedom” and “liberation” were used frequently on both commemorative occasions, suggesting a unifying theme in the US cultural diplomacy, but the underlying meanings of the concepts were not congruent with each other. Commemorating a subversive, anti-authoritarian figure critical of the US government while simultaneously celebrating the US military and General Patton reveals that the only possible unifying message with respect to public diplomacy could be the complexity and the diversity within the United States proper. This would be an admirable goal, but it would require going beyond simplistic celebratory narratives. If the US public diplomacy is to remain relevant in 21st century, it should embrace this challenge, despite the negative reactions it might cause both at home and abroad.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper described two specific case studies of commemoration related to the US-Czech relations. It juxtaposed very different instances of liberation originating from the US, the first one consistent with mainstream official concerns related to international politics and security, the other celebrating progressive cultural, social and political influences that had profound impact on Czech society.

The two commemorative events highlighted an important division between people who have a great respect for the US in the Czech Republic. Those whose thinking is rooted in the cultural memory of physical liberation by military means (and are to this day deeply sorry that it was not the US Army, but the Red Army that liberated Prague) tend to reflexively condone the US military actions abroad (the late president Havel included). Major commemorative events, such as the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Pilsen serve to reinforce this particular political use of the past, with important implications. For example, any critique of the US government is automatically interpreted as undermining Czech national security, which is dependent on the willingness of the US military to defend its NATO allies. In his noteworthy speech about “New Europe vs. Old Europe,” the former Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld attempted to exploit these sentiments to support his own agenda.³²

On the other hand, another group of people with deep respect for the US draw inspiration from important cultural as well political figures, who, as Americans, were nonetheless critical of actions of the US government and fought hard domestic battles in the name of political, cultural as well as personal liberation. For Czech dissidents who became prominent politicians after 1989, subsequent political developments represented a difficult conundrum. During the Cold War, it was relatively easy to admire the culturally liberating influences from the US and at the same time admire the US government, which was working towards undermining the communist regimes in the name of individual freedoms and liberties. The paradoxical fact that inspiring figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Pete Seeger or Martin Luther King, Jr. were at odds with the contemporary US authorities seemed less relevant. Twenty five years after the Velvet Revolution, it seems that the divide between those who like the US because of its liberatory potential through military means and those who like the US because of the liberatory potential of its cultural influences, but who are at the same time critical of the US government or society, is wider than before. This is not necessarily a generational issue, as young Czechs can be found in both camps, as was evident in the demographics of participation in each of the analyzed events.

This finding has important implications for the role and image of the US in the world. The concept of soft power, as theorized by Joseph Nye, supposes that exposure to the US culture, thinking and values goes hand-in-hand with the effective promotion of interests of the US government. The ideas and attitudes coming from the US, such as a healthy distrust towards authorities or the need for critical thinking, can be applied not only against repressive regimes, but also back on the actions of the US government or the US military itself. Therefore, as US cultural diplomacy becomes successful in promoting subversive figures advocating personal liberation (such as Ginsberg), it should not count on the fact

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32. Mark Baker, "U.S.: Rumsfeld's 'Old' And 'New' Europe Touches On Uneasy Divide," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 24, 2003 <<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1102012.html>>.

that this form of American cultural influence will inevitably lead to the support of the US government or the US military.

The above mentioned commemorative events bring to light the contested nature of the cultural memory of the US-Czech ties in the Czech society, with different actors attempting to reinforce the cultural memory that is consistent with what they consider most relevant to the present. On one side, there are clear efforts at renewed Atlanticism based on close military cooperation against common threats; on the other—a need to reinvigorate personal freedom and creativity as opposed to security culture and repressive political discourse of Western governments in the context of the global war on terror.

In this respect it is important to mention the concept of the social responsibility of academia. By doing research on the role of memory in transatlantic relations, we decided that by consciously highlighting Ginsberg's visit to Prague, we would bring to popular attention the important, yet sidelined aspects of the Czech-American transatlantic ties, namely the liberating cultural and social influence of the US as well as the importance of critical thinking shared through cultural memory on both sides of the Atlantic. By choosing to remember the physical liberation of Western Bohemia, a specific image of the United States is preserved, with triumphant soldiers and tanks forming the main frame of reference. By choosing to remember Ginsberg in Prague, we highlight the common memory of culturally, personally, as well as sexually liberating critical voices. These two types of liberation are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and taken together they create a more complex image of the United States in Czech cultural memory. At the same time, it is important for the dominant narrative affecting the Czech-US ties whether the US is remembered primarily as an instrument of military liberation provided by its government, or primarily as an inspiration for personal liberation irrespective of (or even against) the position of its government. Given the arbitrary nature of commemorative activities, it depends on our conscious choices in the future.

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