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Chad Bryant

## The Language of Resistance? Czech Jokes and Joke-telling under Nazi Occupation, 1943–45

The last years of nazi rule in Europe were extremely depressing ones for Czech patriots in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a nazi rump state carved from the remains of Czechoslovakia six months after the 1938 Munich agreement. Following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in May 1942 nazi authorities razed the village of Lidice to the ground, killing the men and sending the women to concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> Gestapo and SS agents had nearly wiped out organized, armed resistance groups. In the spring of 1945, even as Soviet troops began to organize domestic resistance groups and sweep across Moravia and Bohemia, there were only about 30 partisan groups in the Protectorate. Each group had between 15 and 20 members; the largest had 70 — and this in a country where seven million Czechs outnumbered their German rivals thirty to one.<sup>2</sup> Most Czechs seemed cowed, obedient, and, in some ways, barely distinguishable from their German oppressors. Czech propagandists filled print and airwaves with nazi ideas and phrases. The machinery of government continued to function, although just 2000 German administrators oversaw 350,000 Czech state employees.<sup>3</sup> Foodstuffs, while becoming scarcer, continued to be distributed. Protectorate factories, manned by Czech workers receiving hefty salaries, produced about 10 per cent of the German Reich's industrial output.<sup>4</sup> 'A trip to Prague at the end of 1942 was a trip to tranquillity', one Reich German wrote. 'Surrounded by war, a truly worldwide conflagration, the Protectorate was the only Central European land living in peace.'<sup>5</sup> 'We worry that our efforts at active military aid in the

1 German Regular Police shot 173 men while 198 women were shipped to Kladno. Most of the women were then transported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. The children were tested for German racial suitability; the majority were deemed racially inferior and killed. Vojtech Mastny, *Czechs under Nazi Rule. The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942* (New York and London 1971), 216.

2 Detlef Brandes, *Die Tschechen unter deutschem Protektorat*, vol. II (Munich and Vienna 1975), 101–6; Petr Němec, 'Český národ a nacistické teorie germanizace prostoru', *Český časopis historický*, 88, 4 (1990), 538.

3 Detlef Brandes, 'Kolaborace v protektorátu Čechy a Morava', *Dějiny a současnost*, 1 (1994), 28.

4 Alice Teichová, 'The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945). The Economic Dimension', in Mikuláš Teich (ed.), *Bohemia in History* (Cambridge 1998), 287, 283.

5 Toman Brod, *Československo a sovětský svaz 1939–1945* (Prague 1992), 241; cited in Zdeněk Sládek, 'Vliv nacistické nadvlády na politický vývoj v Čechách a na Moravě', *Soudobé dějiny*, 1, 4–5 (1994), 535.

liberation of the people will be small, remaining forever a stain on the reputation of our nation and generation', a young partisan lamented in a 1945 radio message to the Czechoslovak government in London.<sup>6</sup>

Still, patriots maintained, there was reason to not despair. The Czechs were smiling. Jokes and other forms of humour<sup>7</sup> dot numerous 'reports from the Protectorate' penned for President Edvard Beneš and other Czechoslovak officials in London. Most of these reports — letters forwarded by foreign consulates, papers carried by couriers racing across Europe, or transcribed interviews of Czechs who had escaped the Protectorate or had been assigned to industrial centres in Sweden — contained information about troop movements, industrial production and collaborationists. They also spoke about everyday life, national feeling and the political attitudes of the population, which they described by pointing to jokes and anecdotes. Five per cent of Czechs were 'downright traitors', one Czech engineer in Plzeň explained, while another 20 per cent, out of 'financial, personal, or family reasons, tended to blow with the wind'. The remaining 75 per cent, however, formed the 'healthy core of our nation' and could be 'instantly identified, thanks to their smiling faces'.<sup>8</sup> Ever since the beginning of the occupation Czechs had 'live[d] from jokes and innumerable anecdotes that travel like an avalanche from Prague to the countryside'.<sup>9</sup> Jokes were everywhere. And 'resistance' had continued.

Informants to London were not the only ones who saw in jokes Czech patriotism and noble resistance. The Prague intellectual Oskar Krejčí risked his life collecting hundred of jokes before being arrested by the Gestapo in 1944. He saw jokes as both proof of opposition to the regime and a particularly intriguing form of Czech culture.<sup>10</sup> Krejčí's friends published his book after the war when Czech patriots were beginning to sort out the war experience and create what Tony Judt calls the 'resistance myth'. In countries all over Europe, Germans, and those who actively worked for Germans and their interests, were deemed guilty, while whole populations were judged innocent. 'Thus to be innocent', Judt continues,

. . . a nation had to have resisted and to have done so in its overwhelming majority. . . . Where historical record cried out against this distortion . . . national attention was consciously diverted, from the very first postwar months, to examples and stories that were

6 Josef and Jindřich, 'Zprávy z domova', 11 April 1945, Vojenský historický archiv (hereafter VHA), fond 37, sig. 91/8, 1.

7 Czech sources cite both 'vtipy' and 'anekdoty'. The former refers to a crisp, short form of humour often involving word play that ends with a distinct punchline. The latter usually comes in the form of a very short story, although it, too, usually ends with a punchline. In the interest of word economy I refer to both as 'jokes' in this article.

8 Inž. Šrajbera, 'Zpráva z domova', 2 September 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2.

9 [Anonymous informant], 'Vnitropolitické situace', 14–15 March 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1 díl, 1, 6.

10 Oskar Krejčí, *Země úsměvů, 1939–1945* (Prague 1945).

repeated and magnified ad nauseam in novels, popular histories, radio, newspapers, and especially cinema.<sup>11</sup>

‘We didn’t have arms’, another collector of jokes wrote shortly after liberation. ‘Our only weapon was the joke, which, like a beetle, gnawed away at the feeble foundations of that monstrous colossus.’<sup>12</sup> After 1989, Aleš Dubovský, a local historian and Protectorate national, repeated a similar call: ‘From the first day when the German fascists occupied our town there arose among our inhabitants a cryptic but open fight. . . . Jokes went from mouth to mouth among us and, for the first time, the fascists capitulated.’<sup>13</sup>

Communist historians writing after 1948 took little note of smiling Czechs. The heroes of their resistance myth were the Czechoslovak communist partisans, aided and inspired by the great Soviet Union. Yet their histories, and many histories written after the fall of communism, still perpetrate dichotomies first imposed by Czech patriots under nazi rule. Like many works on occupied Europe, studies on the Protectorate have tended to look for resistance and condemn collaboration, placing a small group of people and their actions in one of these two categories.<sup>14</sup> Since 1989 a number of Czech historians have studied culture, higher education, state rule, and the murder of the Jews and Gypsies under nazi rule; they have asked new questions and broadened our understanding of the occupation years.<sup>15</sup> Yet scholarship on everyday practices and experi-

11 Tony Judt, ‘The Past is Another Country. Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe’, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe. World War II and Its Aftermath*, in István Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt (eds) (Princeton, NJ 2000), 298–9.

12 Josef Gruss, *Jedna paní povídala* (Prague 1945), 10.

13 Aleš Dubovský, *Kroměříž ve štínu hákového kříže* (Kroměříž 1995), 127.

14 Of course this is not true everywhere. In the past 40 years, historians of nazi Germany have engaged in complex, thoughtful debates about the extent, lack of, and meaning of ‘resistance’. Among the most important contributions was the ‘Bavaria Project’ launched by the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich in 1973. Focusing on all spheres of ‘everyday life’, the Project’s authors sought out actions that blocked the nazi state’s total control and penetration of society. Martin Broszat, Elke Fröhlich and Falk Wieseman (eds), *Bayern in der NS-Zeit*, 6 vols. (Munich and Vienna 1973–83). For overviews of recent scholarship on resistance in Germany, see Ian Kershaw, ‘“Resistance without the People”’, in I. Kershaw (ed.) *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London and New York 2000), 183–217; Jo Fox, ‘Resistance and the Third Reich’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 2 (April 2004), 271–83. In Poland, Jan Gross’s book about the massacre of Jews at Jedwabne has recently prompted Polish historians and public figures to question the simple betrayal of Poles as either victims or active opponents of nazi rule. Jan Gross, *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ 2001); John Connelly, ‘Poles and Jews in the Second World War. The Revisions of Jan T. Gross’, *Contemporary European History*, 2, 4 (2002), 641–58; Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ 2004).

15 See, for example, Jiří Doležal, *Česká kultura za Protektorátu. Školství, písemnictví, kinematografie* (Prague 1996); Pavel Maršálek, *Protektorát Čechy a Morava* (Prague 2002); Hana Barvíková (ed.), *Věda v českých zemích za druhé světové války* (Prague 1998); Alena Mišková, *Německá (Karlova) univerzita od Mnichova k 9. květnu 1945* (Prague 2002); Helena Krejčová, Jana Svoboda and Anna Hyndráková (eds), *Židé v Protektorátu. Hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942* (Prague 1997); Ctibor Nečas, *Holocaust českých Romů* (Prague 1999). For an

ences is lacking;<sup>16</sup> few works examine in detail the last years of the occupation, which is the focus of this article. Historians of the Protectorate, like the Czech informants who preceded them, have tended to imagine a clear delineation between Czechs and Germans, and between pro-Czech and pro-German actions. Patriotism is still a vital ingredient of the story. The opening chapter to the only major work on everyday life in Protectorate is entitled 'The Nation Defended Itself'.<sup>17</sup>

This article challenges the resistance/collaboration, Czech/German dichotomies that have informed history writing on the Protectorate. In doing so, it proposes a different approach to the study of everyday life and experience under occupation, and not just in the nazi-controlled Czechlands. The first half of the article takes the point of view of patriots<sup>18</sup> at home and abroad and takes their assertions seriously. Jokes, patriots argued, constituted a particular form of resistance (*odboj*) against a regime that demanded total conformity and obedience. Patriots also saw in jokes proof that the Czech nation still existed and that people were still acting 'Czech', despite nazi attempts to 'Germanize' the Protectorate's economy, political structures, economy and population. The second section complicates the patriots' interpretations, suggesting other ways in which we might read Czech jokes and joke-telling. At times Czechs' 'resistance' was individual, not part of a collective, national effort against the regime. Drawing inspiration from recent oral histories, memoirs, biographies and films,<sup>19</sup> I also suggest that ambiguity and uncertainty, not the heroic or villainous convictions imposed by patriots and historians, constituted the essence of everyday life for most Protectorate inhabitants. The lines between resistance and collaboration, Czechs and Germans, pro-Czech and pro-German actions,

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excellent overview of Czech-language literature on the Protectorate, see Jan Gebhart, 'Historiography on the Period 1938–1945', *Historica*, 7, 7 (2001), 145–63. The only English-language and German-language studies of the Protectorate, both written in the 1970s, are comprehensive and detailed, yet their focus is on high politics, resistance movements and collaborationist officials: Mastny, op. cit.; Brandes, op. cit.

16 One important German-language work examines nazi rule and Sudeten German attitudes toward that rule in the occupied Sudetengau: Volker Zimmermann, *Die Sudetendeutschen im NS-Staat. Politik und Stimmung der Bevölkerung im Reichsgau Sudetenland (1938–1945)* (Essen 1999).

17 Jan Gebhart and Jan Kuklík, *Dramatické i všední dny protektorátu* (Prague 1996); the title seems to be a reference to Albert Pražak, *Národ se bránil. Obrany národa a jazyka českého od nejstarších dob po přítomnost* (Prague 1946).

18 'Patriots', borrowing from Miroslav Hroch, will be defined here as 'those individuals who consciously, of their own volition, and over a long period of time, devoted their activities to the support of the national movement, endeavoring in particular to diffuse patriotic attitudes.' Miroslav Hroch, trans. Ben Fowkes, *Social Preconditions for the National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (New York 2000), 14.

19 Pavla Frýdlová (ed.), *Všechny naše věřešky*, 2 vols (Prague 1998); Heda Margolis Kovály, trans. Franci Epstein, Helen Epstein and the author, *Under a Cruel Star. A Life in Prague 1941–1968* (Cambridge, MA 1986); Monika Glettler and Alena Mišková (eds), *Prager Professoren 1938–1948. Zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik* (Essen 2001); *Divided We Fall/Musíme si pomáhat*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (2000).

were constantly being crossed, blurred and erased. In the Czechs' laughter we can hear how they maintained social bonds, circumvented oppression and attempted to come to terms with a world gone mad.

The reasons for the lack of armed, organized resistance in the Protectorate were simple. The front was far away, and most of the Czechoslovak army's weapons had been confiscated shortly after the 1939 take-over. The Protectorate lands lacked the mountainous terrain that protected Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslav partisans. Many Czech leaders from the Habsburg era had had practice working under 'German' rule; some embraced the opportunity. An efficient, modern Czechoslovak state had detailed records on all inhabitants. Nazi authorities took note of anyone who had gone missing, and, unlike in Poland, terror was not random but carefully targeted at transgressors. Although the Protectorate seemed like a 'land of tranquillity' from the outside, the concentration camp was never far from Czechs' minds. Nazi leaders demanded total conformity, and, especially after 1942, even the slightest 'anti-Reich' action or even thought could lead to arrest.<sup>20</sup> Public placards announced daily executions. Whole families were killed for the actions of an individual family member.<sup>21</sup> Most debilitating, however, was the seeming omniscience and omnipresence of the Gestapo, whose success depended upon the work of Czech traitors and spies.<sup>22</sup> Gestapo spies infiltrated illegal opposition groups, public spaces, schools and even homes: 'Public life does not exist. In the cities and in the countryside it is written everywhere: "Political discussions are forbidden.'" In pubs, restaurants and cafes in which one sits political conversations are only begun by provocateurs, who are everywhere. This is true within families as well.<sup>23</sup>

Back in London, however, Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš was desperate for word of resistance. British and later Soviet Allies demanded evidence that Czechs were contributing to the war effort. To many members of his government, including the head of the intelligence service charged with collecting 'reports from the Protectorate', Colonel František Moravec, resistance

20 For example, months after war with Poland was declared, the top SS official in the Protectorate warned a crowd in Prague's Old Town Square that anyone 'who is not with us, is against us. And whoever is against us will be pulverized.' Dušan Tomášek and Robert Kvaček, *Causa Emil Hácha* (Prague 1995), 81. After Heydrich's assassination a quisling paper announced, 'Hitherto elements opposing the regime have been dealt with by Reich authorities. But from now on the Czech government will exterminate all elements who, even should they not oppose the Reich directly, are by their ambiguous attitude menacing the existence of the Czech people.' 'Prague populace "mourns" Heydrich', *New York Times*, 8 June 1942, 2.

21 Karel Příkryl, 'Zprávy z domova', 23 September 1943, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/6, 5; [anonymous informant], 'Zpráva z domova', 5–8 February 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 5; [anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z domova', 13 July 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 3; Kovály, 29.

22 [Anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z Protektorátu', 17 August 1943, VHA fond 37, sig. 91/6, 1; [anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z domova', 21 February 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 1; for an overview, see Oldřich Sládek, *Zločinná role Gestapa. Nacistická bezpečnostní policie v českých zemích 1938–1945* (Prague 1986).

23 Netíka, 'Zpráva z domova', 5 February 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2.

at home was a matter of national pride.<sup>24</sup> To this end, Beneš's government had ordered its London agents to plan and execute the assassination of acting Protector Reinhard Heydrich, despite the desperate pleas of resistance groups based in the Protectorate to assassinate a Czech collaborator instead. Now the Czechoslovak radio station in London beamed out calls for Czechs to participate in large-scale acts of sabotage — to no avail. In the first half of 1944 broadcasters returned to the theme with new energy, but again without much effect.<sup>25</sup>

Beneš and others in London had another worry. Nazi 'Germanization' policies threatened to corrupt and eventually erase the Czech nation from the map. In 1940 Protectorate leaders had concocted a massive plan to expel half the Czech population and make the rest into 'Germans'. Rumours of these plans leaked out. Mothers refused to allow their children to be inoculated; racial testing thinly disguised as health examinations fooled no one.<sup>26</sup> Just as disturbing to London officials was the 'Germanization' of the economy, political structures and culture — all symbols of Czech national pride and achievements. Czech businesses, industries and farms, when not taken outright by the state, came under the co-ordination of Central Associations. Germans had complete control of state institutions once manned by proud Czechoslovak patriots and committed democrats. The only Czechs who remained in government included eager collaborationists, gutless yes-men and apolitical bureaucrats. Nazi officials had halted the publication of 1887 newspapers, magazines and newsletter titles. Publications that remained were embarrassingly conformist — at best neutral, at worst the 'Germans' cuckoo'.<sup>27</sup> Nazi officials 'Germanized' schools' curricula, reduced the number of children allowed to attend college-track high schools and prohibited study at Czech higher education institutions. Soon after the invasion of Poland in 1939 Gestapo agents arrested several thousand intellectuals, priests, communists and social democrats. Prominent Czech writers, journalists and politicians continued to fill nazi concentration camps until the end of the war. Leading members of the opposition were 'gone, shot, silenced'.<sup>28</sup> By the end of 1942 nazi police had forcibly disbanded all independent Czech organizations. Public demonstrations of Czechness, even the most subtle, became impossible. Soon after the massacres at Lidice Brno patriots clothed themselves in the national colours (red, blue and white), and in Prague good Czechs wore red carnations. A year

24 Zbeněk Zeman with Antonín Klimek, *The Life of Eduard Beneš 1884–1948. Czechoslovakia in Peace and War* (Oxford 1997), 180–2.

25 Brandes, op. cit., vol. II, 88, 89.

26 By 1943 nazi leaders had temporarily abandoned plans for large-scale expulsions and murder; their priority now lay with winning the war. Chad Bryant, 'Making the Czechs German. Nationality and Nazi Rule in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, 1939–1945', (Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 2002), chaps 2 and 3.

27 Tomáš Pasák, *Soupis legalných novin, časopisu a úředních věstníků v českých zemích z let 1939–1945* (Prague 1980), 78; Inž. Barton, 'Zprávy o domově', 24 September 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 4; [anonymous author], 'Zprávy z domova', 12 July 1944, VHA fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2.

28 Marek, 'Zprávy z domova', 2 October 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2.

later, however, Gestapo agents arrested anyone wearing red ties or carrying red umbrellas.<sup>29</sup> The reputation and soul of the nation, leaders worried, were in peril.

To most Czechs reporting to London, resistance, which their government abroad saw as organized acts of violence or sabotage, meant choosing a worthless death over embarrassing complacency. It was a position difficult to debate, especially while Czechoslovak propagandists remained safely in their London broadcasting stations. But, informants to London insisted, all was not lost, and they scoured for proof that Czechs were resisting nazi rule and Germanization, that nazi propaganda was having little effect, and that Czechs were, albeit without risking much, still acting Czech. As one informant to London wrote:

In conclusion I offer a rude and unpleasant anecdote, but I repeat it because it documents our opposition to the Germans. Grandma Hanačka enters the tram in Prague with a heavy sack and a suitcase. While stowing her baggage, she, how do I say it, behaves badly. The Germans in the car hold their noses in opposition. The grandmother gives them a spiteful glance and turns to her Czech fellow-travellers: 'They've closed off our mouths, but they can't do the same to our a . . .'<sup>30</sup>

The joke is thick with meaning for anyone in the Protectorate. Few spaces in the Protectorate were more wrought with danger than trams, a favourite spot for Gestapo spies and agents provocateurs. Trams represented an intensified microcosm of the Protectorate — a closed, intensely watched space wrought with potential dangers. The choice of a grandmother as the heroine is also significant. Women, and especially grandmothers, were a repository of national symbols. 'Trifles become big symbols', Milena Jesenská wrote in the liberal political and literary review *Přítomnost* shortly after the occupation began. 'And since it is woman who wields in her hand the trifles, she reigns over the big symbols. Czech song and the Czech book. Czech hospitality. The Czech language and the old Czech customs. Czech Easter eggs, little Czech gardens, and clumps of Czech roses.'<sup>31</sup> The grandmother was the nation, a symbol representing the whole since the 'national awakening' in the early nineteenth century. Božena Němcová's novel *Grandmother*, first published in 1855, was, and still is, required reading for any good Czech. Jesenská's own grandmother, she continued, looked just like Němcová's heroine, 'just as did all your grandmothers'.<sup>32</sup> In the joke, the grandmother metonymically represented all Czechs. Her defiance, her wit, her chutzpah was theirs too. The telling and reception of the joke were also significant to informants. The joke, while imagining dissonance in a strictly-controlled public space, 'documented' Czech opposition by showing that Czechs, while telling and hearing this story, were mocking their oppressors.

29 Stanislav Michalec, [no title], February 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 1.

30 [Anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z domova', 10 July 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 10.

31 Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia. A Czech History* (Princeton, NJ 1998), 226.

32 Ibid.



Humour was a national trait; laughing was a way of acting Czech. Czech popular songs, folklore and literature, as contemporaries knew, were infused with humour.<sup>33</sup> Jaroslav Hašek's satire *The Good Soldier Švejk* was a bestseller in the interwar period. Most importantly, Czech jokes were told in Czech, which informants found significant for a number of reasons. Nazi rulers could coerce Czechs into doing many things — working ten-hour shifts to produce Wehrmacht bombs, harvesting food for consumption in the Reich, and avoiding open, blatant and violent resistance to the regime. But they could not prevent Czechs from speaking their own language:

One morning [the Protectorate's leading nazi official] Karl Hermann Frank looked out his Castle window toward its wall and saw, in huge letters, the following message, clear and precise: 'Hitler is an ass!' Beside himself with rage, the trusted minister of the Reich dashed straight to [Czech President] Hácha's workplace and let loose a horrible tirade about the Czechs, their loyalty to Europe [and so on]. The old man [Hácha] took his cigar from his mouth and made accommodating gestures with his lips: 'These people, these people', [he said], 'And I have repeatedly told them: everything in German, everything in German!'<sup>34</sup>

It was in the realm of spoken language that Czechs had the most room for manoeuvre. It was also relatively safe and pragmatic. Unlike printed material, spoken words left no hard evidence behind. Even with the help of informers few in the Gestapo could understand the simplest of Czech phrases, let alone multi-layered irony. Overt, easily translated political statements could lead to trouble, but jokes were too nebulous, too slippery to get one arrested. Jokes, with their ironic tones and ambiguous messages, flew underneath the radar of the nazi authorities.<sup>35</sup>

To patriots, speaking Czech and telling jokes were also ways in which Czechs could put their national loyalties on display, where Czechs could act Czech in public and draw the national community together. Early nineteenth-century patriots, Vladimír Macura has argued, invested Czech nationalism with a 'lingocentrism' or a 'one-sided orientation toward language and an overestimation of the role of culture in representing the nation'.<sup>36</sup> Dictionaries and grammars standardized the language. Actors performed Czech plays, and literary lights, who later became celebrated national heroes, wrote in Czech. Lesser-known patriots published Czech-language cookbooks, songbooks, calendars and newspapers. Inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder, early nationalists saw each nation as an organic, individual whole with its own history,

33 See, for example, Ferdinand Strejček, *Humorem a ironií k vítězství národa* (Prague 1937); Josef Trojan (ed.), *Úsměvy naší země. Čtvrt století českého humoru* (Prague 1942); and after the war Jiří Horák, *Humor vtíp a satira v české lidové písni* (Prague 1947).

34 Krejčí, op. cit., 22.

35 SS agents in the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*), while obsessed with finding any signs of anti-nazi thinking or behaviour in the Protectorate, almost never mention jokes in their reports. Or perhaps they did not consider them worth mentioning?

36 Vladimír Macura, 'Problems and Paradoxes of the National Revival' in Mikuláš Teich (ed.), *Bohemia in History* (Cambridge 1998), 144.

personality, fate and, most importantly, language. 'Even the smallest of nations cherishes in and through its language the history, the poetry, and the songs about the great deeds of the forefathers. The language is its collective treasure', Herder wrote.<sup>37</sup> People naturally belonged to one or other primordial tribe and became conscious of their place in the national organism through language. Language, patriots believed, pulsed through the heart and soul of the nation. Thus, when Prague intellectuals after the war wrote of the 'nazis' battle against . . . the Czech soul', they were not only referring to measures aimed against the Church but the imposition of German words and other symbols on Czech films, radio, theatre, monuments, museums and libraries.<sup>38</sup>

Speaking Czech animated the Czech nation. It was also an action tinged with potent political meaning. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, marking a certain 'language of everyday use' during census counts had a direct effect on the composition and character of local administration. Few issues aroused more passion among patriots than schooling and the language of instruction. Language usage in the bureaucracy and the language of street signs were some of most contested political issues before and after the first world war; when nationalist rivalries were at their most intense, reading certain newspapers, seeing a Czech- or German-language film and speaking a certain language on the street placed you in one of two mutually hostile camps.<sup>39</sup> Under occupation, German had become omnipresent in a country where national identity often hinged on language usage and old rivalries over language usage assumed a new guise as nazi leaders established the primacy of the German language in the Protectorate. Paperwork created by state bureaucracies had to be written in both German and Czech, or only German. Shortly after the take-over, the regime announced that all public servants and functionaries had until March 1942 to prove competence in German and Czech bureaucrats spread rumours that their ranks would be cut by one-third. All publicly displayed signs, even those hanging outside small shop windows in solidly Czech areas, had to be in German and Czech.<sup>40</sup> The German version, significantly, was always on top. As one joke went, an old man from the countryside arrived by train in Prague. '*Hauptbahnhof — Hlavní nadraží!*' announced the loudspeaker, telling him that he had arrived at the main train station. On the tram came the words '*Wenzelsplatz — Václavské náměstí*'

37 John Edwards, *Language, Society and Identity* (Oxford and New York 1985), 24; for Herder's influence on Czech nationalism, see Emanuel Rádl, *Válka Čechu s Němci* (Prague 1993), 170–3.

38 *Šest let okupace Prahy* (Prague 1946), 83–105.

39 Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton, NJ 1981); Mark Cornwall, 'The Struggle on the Czech–German Language Border, 1880–1940', *The English Historical Review*, 59, 433 (September 1994), 914–51; Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton, NJ 2002), esp. 48–152.

40 Brandes, op. cit., vol. I, 164; Libuše Otáhalová and Milada Červinková (eds), *Dokumenty z historie československé politiky 1939–1943*, vol. I (Prague 1966), doc. 398, 538–9, doc. 405, 545–6, doc. 425, 576; Němec, op. cit., 543.

(Wenceslas square, in German and then Czech). The old man rushed to the statue of Saint Wenceslas, clasped his hands together, and called out: ‘Saint Wenceslas, prince of the Czech lands, what do you make of all this!?’ The knight balanced his lance in his hand and quoth: ‘*Dreck — hovno!*’ (crap — crap!).<sup>41</sup>

Speaking Czech, and not speaking German, was a way of halting the progress of Germanization; it was a form of ‘cultural opposition’<sup>42</sup> that for many patriots was more important than armed resistance. As one woman recently remembered of her teenage years under the Protectorate:

I never went to German films, I didn’t tolerate German; we had it in school every day, daily we had to read German publications, we had to know *The History of the Hitlerjugend* by Horst Wessel. Everything in me demanded resistance, and therefore I loved Latin, which we had every day . . . . Luckily I didn’t have to major in German. I graduated in Czech, Latin, French and Biology.<sup>43</sup>

Because of its intimate, precarious and constructed emphasis on culture and language, Macura writes elsewhere, Czech nationality has always involved a choice of sorts to become a conscious member of the nation and to participate in the creation of Czech culture. Participating in that culture means participating in a project of affirming and recreating what it means to be Czech.<sup>44</sup> As plans to Germanize the entire population took form, old battles took on a new significance. Speaking Czech, and not speaking German, was a way of resisting nazi attempts to eradicate the Czech nation, allowing individuals safely, but significantly, to reaffirm the existence of the nation.

Jokes, informants wrote, also constituted a verbal attack on the regime’s legitimacy. ‘A joke ceases to be a joke’, Goebbels warned in a different context, ‘when it touches on the holiest matters of the national state’, which included, among other things, racial policy and the nazi movement’s leading personalities.<sup>45</sup> Czech jokes targetted these holy matters, lampooning Goebbels’ sexual frustration and duplicity, Goering’s girth and Himmler’s stupidity. A favourite target of jokesters was the word ‘Protectorate’. In the first months of the occupation humorists optimistically referred to the Protectorate as ‘proten-tokrát’, meaning ‘for the time being’. Later, punsters labelled the regime

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41 Zbyněk Válka, *Olomouc pod hákovým křížem. Temná leta okupace 1939–1945* (Olomouc 2001), 60; another version of the joke goes: “Hitler is a villain and a murderer” is scribbled in Czech on the castle’s bathroom wall. Hácha responds by saying, “[O]ur nation is really incorrigible! Oh, how I’ve told them over and over that every notice must first be in German and then Czech.” Gruss, op. cit., 58.

42 Václav Černý, *Křik koruny české. Paměti 1938–1945. Náš kulturní odboj za války* (Prague 1992).

43 Dagmar A. interviewed by Pavla Frýdlová, *Všechny naše včerejšky*, op. cit., vol. I, 47; see also Zdeněk David, ‘The War, The Nazi Protectorate, and Victory. Recollections’, *Kosmos*, 12, 1 (Summer 1996), 7.

44 Vladimír Macura, ‘Tak vlast si tvoří’ in *Masarykovy boty a jiné semi(o)fejetony* (Prague 1993), 11–13.

45 Zbeněk Zeman, *Heckling Hitler. Caricatures of the Third Reich* (Hanover, NH 1987), 67.

‘Protektorkrad’, combining the word ‘Protector’ with a permutation of the Czech word ‘steal’.<sup>46</sup> One joke from Moravia combined the irony of the word ‘Protectorate’ with tones of self-deprecation. Told in a dialect found in the villages surrounding Olomouc, the joke goes:

Joséfek Melhoba enters the pub to find neighbour Kropal and says, ‘Neighbour, the wife tells me to tell you that you should go home right now, we have a Protectorate at home’. Kropal responds, ‘Alright I’ll go and take a look at this Protectorate’. When he arrives home, Kropal claps his hands and yells ‘Jesus Christ, they’ve robbed us!’.<sup>47</sup>

In the joke, Melhoba — a play on the phrase ‘mlít hubou’, meaning ‘to gab’ — and Kropal are unassuming, naïve pub-goers who drag down an official word, confuse it and then turn its meaning inside out. Instead of being ‘protected’, the Czechs were being robbed. The very name of the ruling state, as well as its claim to rule, was a joke.

Another favourite target was nazi propaganda. Unlike the sombre, realistic tone coming from London, official nazi radio propaganda reports were bombastic, romantic and unthinking. Grandiose promises of victories crashed against the knowledge of Allied advances, providing easy fodder for anyone with a sense of irony and satire. When Goebbels’ tone finally changed to sombre realism, the message was that the Czechs would be better under German than Soviet rule — unimaginable at the time. In response to one propaganda poster calling on Czechs to prevent the Bolsheviks from bombarding the Castle, the historic home of Czech leaders and now the seat of the nazi government, quipsters responded: ‘We’re not afraid, we don’t live there.’<sup>48</sup> Most disastrous for nazi propagandists, however, was Goebbels’ ill-conceived attempt to co-opt the ‘V’ symbol from Churchill and the British propaganda machine. ‘V’ stood for (Allied) ‘victory’ and Goebbels feared the sight of ‘Vs’ dotting public spaces and underground literature across Europe. ‘V’, Goebbels decided, would instead refer to the fictitious German pagan god Viktoria or Caesar’s ‘veni, vidi, vici’ and ordered nazi-constructed ‘Vs’ to be placed everywhere.<sup>49</sup> In the Protectorate, Goebbels’ semantic acrobatics flopped. Wilhelm Dennler, a mid-level German bureaucrat in Prague who had been learning Czech, wrote in his memoirs:

At the moment all over the Protectorate there is a flood of V-symbols, on clothes and ribbons, painted in white on house doors, monuments, on street asphalt in all localities up and down the land, everywhere. However, the fact that the German word for victory [‘Sieg’]

46 ‘Die politische Entwicklung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren seit 15. März 1939’, SD report 15 March, VHA, box 7, fond 74/5, sbirka c 74, jednotka 46, 1940, 2; Gebhart and Kuklík, op. cit., 12; Gruss, op. cit., 102.

47 [Anonymous informant], ‘Ze soukromého dopisu z Moravy’, 6 June 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1 díl, 1.

48 [Escaped Protectorate soldier], ‘Zprávy z domova’, 10 September 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 1.

49 Zeman, *Heckling Hitler*, op. cit., 112; Gruss, op. cit., 40.

can be translated into the English word 'victory' and in Czech 'vítězství' means that the propaganda is all too easy to make light of. And in order to choke off any doubt among the Czechs, loudspeakers in movie theatres and on the streets day in and day out blare: 'The Reich is winning on all fronts.'

The Czechs are laughing.<sup>50</sup>

'V' could also stand for 'verloren', the past tense of the German verb meaning 'to lose'. Graffiti artists would add the letters 'en' to nazi Vs, spelling out the Czech word 'ven', meaning 'get out'.<sup>51</sup> Thus, when Czechs held up their index and middle fingers to make a 'V', perhaps saluting a nazi soldier or greeting a neighbour, they were not, as Goebbels had intended, expressing an unreal wish for nazi success. They meant 'victory', 'vítězství', 'verloren' and 'ven'.

While deflecting German words and symbols, jokes also reaffirmed one principle that, along with language usage, had been a leitmotif among many Czech nationalists since the nineteenth century — a hatred of Germans. Despite differences in class, age, geography or political stance, most patriotic Czechs shared, after years of occupation, an intense hatred of anything or anybody 'German'. 'Everyone is united in hatred of the Germans', one resistance fighter wrote in 1944. 'The solidarity is tremendous', he continued, bringing together city-dwellers and those in the countryside, workers and intellectuals. A 'hatred of all things German', another commented that same year, 'had become the common, uniting national idea'.<sup>52</sup> With the fall of Mussolini, one informant reported, Czechs were 'smiling ear to ear'.<sup>53</sup> And as the Allied armies drew nearer, jokesters could hardly resist poking fun at the Germans' military misfortunes. Upon hearing word that men in their sixties were being drafted, Czech jokesters remarked that old men might actually be useful to the war industry. They did, after all, have silver hair, golden teeth and legs made of lead.<sup>54</sup> Most disturbing was a particular strain of *Schadenfreude* that dehumanized and took pleasure in the thought of some day doing violence to Germans. Often the punchline, and act of revenge, was given to Jews — the most improbable and delicious inversion possible.<sup>55</sup> Czechs, too, participated in imaginary acts of revenge. As one graveyard sign supposedly announced: 'Czechs arise, and make room for Germans.' Other jokes foreshadowed the expulsions and hinted at Czech hopes to benefit financially from them: 'A son

50 Wilhelm Dennler, *Die böhmische Passion* (Freiburg i.Br. and Frankfurt a.M. 1953), 99. Although related in the present tense, Dennler actually wrote of these events after the war.

51 Albert Kaufmann, 'Zpráva z domova', VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/6, 2; Albert Schmidt, 'Pax Germanica. Bohemia and Moravia under Heydrich, 1941–1942' (PhD dissertation, Brandeis University 2000), 106, fn. 340.

52 Netika, 'Zpráva z domova', 5–8 February 1944, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2; [anonymous informant], 'Pro doktora Beneše', 22 January 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 2.

53 [Anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z Protektorátu', 30 August 1943, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/6, 1. The event, of course, made for good jokes. As one untranslatable jab went: 'What's the declination of the word Duce? *Erster Fall* Mussolini, *Zweiter Fall* Hitler.' [Anonymous informant], 'Zprávy z domova', 24 January 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 12.

54 [Anonymous informant], 'Zpráva z domova', 24 January 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 8.

55 Gruss, op. cit., 21–8.

is walking with his father across the square. From several houses he sees German banners hanging. Jeniček asks his father what the meaning of those banners with [nazi] crosses is. “That, Jeniček, is for us to know where the available apartments will be after the war”, the father explained.<sup>56</sup> Hating Germans, and revelling in the idea of revenge, had become a patriotic act.

Eager to show Beneš and the London government indications of Czech ‘resistance’ and national loyalty, informants pointed to jokes and joke-telling. Jokes demonstrated that Czechs opposed the regime. Jokes deflected nazi propaganda and stoked the fires of hatred against the Germans. Jokes, in other words, showed that ‘resistance’ existed, even if it was not the type of resistance that London wanted — organized, armed resistance and sabotage. Most importantly, they showed that the Czech nation and its culture were surviving. In the Protectorate, ‘nationness’, what Rogers Brubaker calls a ‘contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action’, was constantly seeing its lens adjusted.<sup>57</sup> Soon no one could avoid its gaze as questions of national health and survival obsessed Czech patriots. To see anything ‘Czech’, including jokes, offered medicine for patriots sick with worry that their project might come to an end. To save the nation, a carefully nurtured creation dating back a century and a half, was their primary goal. The nation provided the most important context within which actions could be morally judged as well. To act ‘Czech’ was to act morally in a world where all that was evil was ‘German’.

Our sources leave many questions unanswered. They do not provide a topography of where jokes were told. Nor do we know about transmission and reception across class, age and gender lines. Were jokes more prevalent in cities like Prague than in Moravian villages? Were the jokes told on the streets, in pubs, in homes or other places? Did men joke with women, university-educated élites with industrial workers? What proof do we have that they were telling the same jokes? Informants to the London government used phrases like ‘one hears this [joke] everywhere’ and, unfortunately, left it at that. We can only guess at the intonation, gestures and facial expressions that accompanied the joke-telling.<sup>58</sup> Our sources, to borrow a formulation from Erving Goffman, provide clues as to the expression that the joke-teller gave, but little about the expression that he gave off.<sup>59</sup> Most importantly, our interpretations so far have only come from one perspective — that of Czech patriots intent on demonstrating ‘resistance’ and national feeling. Questioning their perspectives and then stepping outside the strict resistance/collaboration,

56 Krejčí, op. cit., 22; Dubovský, op. cit., 128.

57 Rogers Brubaker, ‘Nation as Form, Category, Event’ in *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge 1996), 19.

58 Henk Driessen, ‘Humor, Laughter, and the Field. Reflections from Anthropology’ in Jan Bremmer and Hermann Roodenburg (eds), *A Cultural History of Humor: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge 1997), 223.

59 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock, NY 1973), 2.

Czech/German dichotomy reveals more ambiguity, angst and ordinariness than patriots were willing to admit.

Not all jokes were necessarily an expression of resistance to the regime. Many poked fun at Czech collaborators. A constant target of derision was Czech State President Emil Hácha, whom Hitler had battered and coerced into signing over the Czechlands to nazi rule before German troops invaded Prague in 1939. Although at first determined to halt nazi influence within state structures, he had, by 1943, become a sad, impotent figure struggling to convince Czechs of their need to accept German rule. 'When Hácha was in Berlin', a joke began, 'they had to give him something to eat. So he sat next to Goering, who gave him a menu. Hácha took the menu and asked where he should sign.'<sup>60</sup> Many Germans, Detlev Peukert points out, often expressed discontent with a particular policy or aspect of nazi rule without necessarily rejecting the regime as a whole.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Byzantine bureaucratic structures, the Germans' infamous sense of order and economic injustices informed one Protectorate joke in which a worker attempts to find the ministry office that would increase his pay scale. When he enters the building he finds two doors, one marked 'Germans', a second marked 'Others'. He enters the second. Beyond it lie two more doors, one with a sign reading 'married', the other with a sign reading 'single'. He enters the first. Then there are more doors, each marked 'one child', 'two children' and so on. He enters the appropriate door; the adventure continues. 'So what happened?' a co-worker hearing the narrative asks. 'Nothing', the worker responds, 'but that's what I call organization!'<sup>62</sup> Still other jokes subtly lamented Czech unwillingness to make sacrifices for the cause of liberation while satirizing the foolish martyr. In the countryside someone had hanged and strung up a hen on a tree. 'Rather than to Hitler sixty eggs give, I chose no longer to live.'<sup>63</sup> Here resistance is drawn into the world of the absurd while making a powerful point. Was resistance really worth it? Was losing one's life really worth withholding a basketful of eggs, sabotaging a few planes or dynamiting a single railway track?

Nor were jokes and joke-tellers entirely 'Czech'. As Robert Darnton has written, to 'get' a joke requires fluency in the joke-teller's cultural frame of reference.<sup>64</sup> Anyone who did not understand that culture, let alone the basic

60 Krejčí, op. cit., 35; 'Ze soukromého dopisu z Moravy', 6 June 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1. díl, 2, 1.

61 Detlev Peukert, trans. Richard Deveson, *Inside Nazi Germany. Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT and London 1987), 63–4.

62 Krejčí, op. cit., 30–1.

63 [Než bych Hitlerovi 60 vajec dala, raději jsem si život vzala.] Inž. Barton, 'Zpráva o domově', 14 August 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 6.

64 Robert Darnton, 'Workers Revolt. The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin' in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York 1985), 75–106, esp. 78. And, as Darnton argues, by trying to 'get' the joke we can glimpse a foreign culture and a people's worldview. For other studies that use humour as a gateway to understanding a past culture/experience/worldview see J.P. Daughton, 'Sketches of the *Poilu's* World. Trench Cartoons from the Great War' in Douglas Mackaman and Michael Mays (eds) *World War I and the*

symbols deployed by Czech speakers, was excluded from the joke and the community as a whole. Yet Czech culture was not insulated and neatly bounded. Czechs, of course, were not the only ones telling jokes in occupied Europe,<sup>65</sup> and many of these jokes crossed imagined national boundaries. In Prague and Vienna one could hear the following: ‘One day Hitler was meditating in his office in front of his own portrait. [Hitler] spread his legs, folded his arms on his waist and asked: “So how’s it going to turn out Adolf?” At this the painting stirred and replied: “I’m being taken down and you’re going to be hung up.”’<sup>66</sup> Joke-tellers in Germany played with the same caricatures of top nazi leaders — Himmler as dolt, Goering as glutton. (For this reason it was Goering who handed Hácha the menu in the joke above.) Numerous variations on these jokes contrasted imperfect nazi leaders to the nazi ideal: ‘What should the ideal nazi look like? For the protection of the race and in the interest of the nation’s population he must have as many children as Hitler. He must be racially pure like Leni Riefenstahl. A slim, resilient frame like Goering. He must speak truthfully like Goebbels. And be true to the cause like Hess.’<sup>67</sup>

Many jokes in the Protectorate were told in German. Sometimes this was because the wordplay involved could not have been translated.<sup>68</sup> In other cases a translation could have preserved the humour but the joke-teller decided to keep certain phrases in German. Here, as elsewhere, the body of the joke was told in Czech, but the punchline was in German. Jokes might remind us that bilingualism was common in Bohemia and Moravia and that people, and not just words, crossed or lived between imagined national boundaries. In fact, a sizeable portion of the Protectorate’s population lived between nationalities, switched sides according to situation or lacked a strong affinity to a certain nationality. About 300,000 ‘Czechs’ registered as Reich German citizens under the occupation.<sup>69</sup> The boundaries separating the two nationalities in the

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*Cultures of Modernity* (Jackson, MO 2000), 35–67, and Mary Lee Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter. Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor, MI 1992).

65 The Belgian Information Centre, *Belgian Humor under the German Heel* (New York 1943); Otto Ramfjord, *Ockupationshumor. Historier från ockupationstidens Norge och Danmark och andra länder* (Stockholm 1944); *Wien wehrt sich mit dem Witz. Flüsterwitze aus dem Jahren 1938–1945* (Vienna and New York 1946); Sait Orahovac, *Partizani u anegdutama* (Sarajevo 1964); Hans-Jochen Gamm, *Der Flüsterwitz im Dritten Reich* (Munich 1979); Franz Danimann, *Flüsterwitze und Spottgedichte unterm Hakenkreuz* (Vienna 1983); Fritz Karl Michael Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945* (London and New York 1995).

66 Dubovský, op. cit., 130–1; *Wien wehrt sich*, op. cit., 18; similar jokes can also be found in Danimann, op. cit., 24.

67 Gruss, op. cit., 61–2; Gamm, op. cit., 50.

68 One joke from the summer of 1939, for example, went: ‘Hitler, when he gave Poles their ultimatum, said at the end: “*Entweder-oder*” (translation — “either-or”). The Poles answered: OK as far as the Oder.’ (The Oder is a river which now marks the border between Germany and Poland.) ‘Ze soukromého dopisu z Moravy’, 6 June 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1. díl, 2, 1.

69 Benjamin Frommer, ‘Expulsion or Integration. Unmixing Interethnic Marriage in Postwar Czechoslovakia’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 14, 2 (Spring 2000), 387; King, op. cit.,



Protectorate were messier than patriots and postwar scholars have been willing to admit.

While questioning the jokes' national character and the extent to which they constituted what patriots called 'resistance', we might also question their political purpose and reconfigure the meaning of 'resistance'. Whether overcoming the mind's 'censor', protesting against modern automation and rigidity or degrading dominant values and destabilizing existing hierarchies, jokes have always constituted a challenge to authority.<sup>70</sup> In jokes we might see an individual and localized 'resistance' quite different from the resistance portrayed by Czech patriots. 'One resists', Stephen Kotkin writes, 'without necessarily rejecting, by assessing, making tolerable and in some cases even turning to one's advantage the situation one is confronted with'.<sup>71</sup> The motivations and intentions in telling a joke might have been selfish. Joke-telling might have acted as a 'safety valve', a harmless vent that allowed Czechs to continue working in factories while maintaining a vague sense of patriotism and integrity. Other jokesters might have had little or no regard for the fate of the national collective. Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, we might see such acts of 'resistance' as small, personal and calculated victories — opportunities seized at a moment in time. Then the victory disappeared.<sup>72</sup> When the occupation began, one joke relates, an elderly woman raised her arm in salute to German troops, who promptly returned a 'Heil Hitler' in her direction. Only the Czech speakers nearby could understand that at the same time she was also yelling 'May God punish you all!'<sup>73</sup> But her protest lasted only a second. It was perhaps relived many times in hushed tones among a small number of friends, but here too it questioned the state of things, gave a devious sense of self-satisfaction and then disappeared. The woman and the storytellers then went about their business, as did powerful members of the regime.

Jokes also served immediate local and personal functions outside the concerns of 'resistance'. Rumours, Lydia Flem notes, are means by which individuals within local cultures, 'through the pleasure of expression and understanding . . . bring about a consummation of social bonds'.<sup>74</sup> The same might

184. For an overview of how nazi and then postwar Czechoslovak rulers attempted to come to terms with these 'amphibians', see Chad Bryant, 'Either Czech or German. Fixing Nationality in Bohemia and Moravia, 1939–1946', *Slavic Review*, 64, 4 (Winter 2002), 683–707.

70 Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (Leipzig and Vienna 1905); Henri Bergson, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York 1911); Mary Douglas, 'The Social Control of Cognition. Some Factors in Joke Perception', *Man*, 3, 1 (September 1968), 361–76. Of course, not all jokes are destabilizing. Ethnic jokes, for example, can reinforce rather than question debilitating stereotypes and, hence, existing orders and hierarchies.

71 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA 1995), 121–2.

72 Michel de Certeau, trans. Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA 1984), xix.

73 [Anonymous informant], 'Vnitropolitické situace', 14–15 March 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1 díl, 1, 6.

74 Cited in Alain Corbin, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *The Village of Cannibals. Rage and Murder in France, 1870* (Cambridge, MA 1992), 7–8.

be said about jokes, which were one of the few safe, available means by which friends and acquaintances could express common fears and wishes. Two or three people at a time, they were fighting the fragmentation of society.<sup>75</sup> Jokes were also a way of coping, staving off despair and attempting to come to terms with a world that lacked order and clarity. 'One does not live now as before', an informant wrote in 1939. 'We cannot say, for example, in fourteen days we'll go there and there. We live without a daily schedule, as, I would say, as if we weren't people.'<sup>76</sup> After 74 months of occupation, life and its basic values had become even more confused. Slacking at work was deemed patriotic; a misstatement from an innocent child could lead to the arrival of Gestapo agents at the home, looking for parents 'guilty' of anti-Reich statements. Many workers who earned pay bonuses by volunteering for Sunday shifts in armaments factories also participated in underground activities. Farmers often fulfilled nazi quotas but could be generous and courageous in giving food to partisans or refugees. Fathers of students arrested in 1939 joined the Czech Committee for Co-operation with the Germans, hoping that shows of loyalty would win their sons an early release from concentration camps. Once the students were freed, they had to promise to report on their neighbours to the Gestapo.<sup>77</sup>

Rather than clearly staking out a Czech or anti-Reich position, Protectorate inhabitants were often befuddled by the greys. Jokes, and a particular form of irony born during the first world war, allowed them to make sense of an absurd world, or at least laugh it away for a few seconds. As Paul Fussell has argued, English descriptions of the war depended upon a particular form of irony, 'an immense and unprecedented Satire of Circumstance' in which, among other things, victories led to increased casualties.<sup>78</sup> In an essay composed amidst the political uncertainties of the 1960s, the literary historian Karel Kosík wrote of the first world war:

There is an irony in Socrates and there is also a romantic irony but the 'World War' gave birth to yet another irony: the irony of history, the irony of events, the irony of things. Events themselves bring together and drag down into one space and maelstrom things so dissimilar and mutually exclusive as victory and defeat, the comic and tragic, the elevated and lowly.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Gruss, op. cit., 10.

<sup>76</sup> 'Ze soukromého dopisu z Moravy', 6 June 1939, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/1, 1. díl, 2, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Inž. Šrajbera, 'Zpráva z domova', 2 October 1944, VHA, fond 37, sig. 91/7, 7; 'Zpráva v poměrech v vlasti', 6 October 1943, VHA fond 37, sig. 91/6, 3; Jar. P. Blašek, 'Národní školy za okupace', *Šest let*, op. cit., 47; Sládek, op. cit., 535; Tomáš Pasák and Milan Drápala, 'Čeští vysokoškolští studenti v Sachsenhausenu a postoj protektorátní správy', *Soudobé dějiny*, 2, 4 (1996), 509, 512.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London and New York 1975), 3–35.

<sup>79</sup> Karel Kosík, trans. James H. Satterwhite, 'Švejk and Bugulma, or, The Birth of Great Humor' in *The Crisis of Modernity. Essays and Observations from the 1968 Era* (Boston, MA 1995), 98–9.

Among jokes in the Protectorate it is not difficult to locate the irony of history, events and things. Referring to the Iron Cross medals bestowed upon war heroes, one joke went: ‘What is the difference between the Romans and the Germans? The Romans put hopeless miscreants on the cross. The Germans put crosses on hopeless miscreants.’<sup>80</sup> For workers, there was the irony that being employed under the Protectorate, because of shortages, was no better, materially, than being without work before the occupation: ‘The youngest member of the family once asked his mother what beef fat was. His mother answered: “Fat is something that we had before, when your father was unemployed, that we spread on bread.”’<sup>81</sup> Ambiguity, irony and the juxtaposition of opposites defined life in the Protectorate just as much as Czech patriotism and anti-Reich feelings.

Soon after liberation, Beneš’s government began to tidy up the ambiguities, to establish lines separating Czechs and Germans and to punish collaborators. Following the ‘wild transfer’ that left between 19,000 and 30,000 ethnic Germans dead, the newly established Czechoslovak government began to implement the ‘organized transfer’ approved by the Great Powers at Potsdam in July 1945.<sup>82</sup> Germans were registered, publicly marked, rounded up and eventually loaded onto trains. Local courts determined the nationality of people whose ‘Czechness’ or ‘Germanness’ was in question. Three million Germans fled or were ‘transferred’, leaving only a small German minority of a little more than 165,000.<sup>83</sup> Retribution courts tried more than 50,000 war criminals and collaborators while local tribunals heard almost 180,000 cases of ‘offences against national honour’. Over 700 defendants were executed.<sup>84</sup> As demands for retribution and justice waned, and with the vast majority of Germans gone, patriots constructed stories of Czech innocence, suffering and heroism. The foundation for the ‘resistance myth’, whose origins can be traced to the occupation period, was now firmly laid. The story, like in many European countries after the war, stuck. After the 1948 communist coup Czech historians had to work from the same, ideologically correct script. Ironies, ambiguities and uncertainties were officially forgotten. Neat resistance/collaboration and Czech/German dichotomies contoured the study and memorialization of the occupation years.

Czech jokes and joke-tellers might have been doing many things: expressing opposition to the regime, uniting the Czech nation through language and humour and stoking a hatred of all things German. They did not do many things. They could hardly substitute for organized, armed resistance. Jokes did not hasten the approach of Allied troops, disrupt the Nazi war machine or save

80 Dubovský, op. cit., 128.

81 Dubovský, op. cit., 129; Gruss, op. cit., 97.

82 Iva Weidenhofferová (ed.), *Konfliktní společenství, katastrofa, uvolnění. Náčrt vykládu německo-českých dějin od 19. století* (Prague 1996), 29–30.

83 Tomáš Staněk, *Odsun Němců z Československa 1945–1947* (Prague 1991), 367.

84 Benjamin Robert Frommer, ‘National Purification. Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia’ (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University 1999), 2.

any Jews from destruction. They also did many things left unmentioned by our sources, and relegating these actions solely to artificial categories only muddies our own understanding of how people experienced the occupation. While providing a glimpse of life under the Protectorate, Czech jokes and joke-telling might be seen as humble attempts to halt the fragmentation of society and to make at least partial sense of an absurd world. We can see in them an expression of something peculiar to the twentieth century — the irony of history, the irony of events and the irony of things. Laughter, Aristotle once stated, is what separates our species from the animals. And in the Czechs' nervous laughter we might detect an understandably human reaction to unimaginable horror, fear, impotence and uncertainty.

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