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Reflecting national trauma: The Second World War in Czech feature film 1945-1948

The Second World War and the events leading up to it and immediately related to it were a deeply traumatic experience for the entire Czech population. Nazi aggression and its aftermath left behind many victims, broken families, shattered relationships, bruised souls, and trampled national self-esteem. Czech culture also suffered a cruel blow – and films were no exception.

It was necessary to cope with the horrors experienced on both the human and the artistic level. The quickest to react were of course writers, specifically poets, but for the first time in Czech history there was someone breathing at their necks – filmmakers. While at the end of the First World War Czech film production had not yet been capable of serious reflection on the conflict, the newly nationalized cinematography of the Third Czechoslovak Republic was already considerably advanced both sound- and craft-wise and offered very good conditions for the production of films thematizing the recent historical events. The urgency of the need to speak out about the war through film is reflected in the fact that this happened in a very short period of time in several overlapping waves that rose as quickly as possible.

The first films to reach the audience were documentaries: *Faithfulness We Pledge* (*Věrni zůstaneme*, 1945, dir. Jiří Weiss) depicted foreign resistance activities, while *The Way to the Barricades* (*Cesta k barikádám*, 1946, dir. Otakar Vávra) compiled footage taken during the Prague Uprising; a number of short documentaries were also made. The first two short feature films thematizing war were, however, made already in the year of the end of the war: *The Mother's Day 1945* (*Svátek matek 1945*, 1945,

dir. K. M. Walló) a *A Little Story* (*Malá historie*, r. 1945, dir. Bořivoj Zeman), which were released in May 1946 together with Weiss's British film *Before the Raid* (*Ohnivý rybolov*, 1944) under the cumulative title *The Occupation Trilogy* (*Okupační trilogie*). [1] Based on its format, one slightly more recent film – *I Do not Understand* (*Nerozumím*, 1947, dir. Vladimír Čech) – can be loosely added to the two films.[2]

Finally, the first two Czech feature films set in wartime were previewed at the festival in Mariánské Lázně in August 1946. The first of them, *The Mountains Are Rumbling* (*V horách duní*, 1946, dir. Václav Kubásek), was released in cinemas immediately afterwards (on 16 August 1946), while the second, *The Heroes Are Silent* (*Hrdinové mlčí*, 1946, dir. Miroslav Cikán), was released less than two months later (on 4 October 1946). By the end of the year, the films *Men Without Wings* (*Muži bez křídel* , dir. František Čáp, premièred 25 October 1946), *Supermen* (*Nadlidé*, dir. Václav Wassermann, premièred 29 November 1946), and *A Big Case* (*Velký případ*, dir. Václav Kubásek, Josef Mach, premièred 20 December 1946) followed. The year of 1946 was the richest one for war and occupation themes; the five films out of thirteen produced accounted for almost 40% of the production. It was no wonder, then, that the individual films literally "pushed against each other" in the cinemas, and reviewers, already over-saturated with the subject matter, stopped holding on to the initially conciliatory attitude towards their imperfections. In a strongly critical review of *Supermen* in the *Národní obroda* (National Revival) newspaper, it is aptly stated: "Having seen only one or two of the films, the viewers may find some pleasure in them, but those forced to watch them all see their shortcomings all the more clearly."[3]

The following year brought a clear reduction in the frequency of films on these topics, but their quality increased. Both *The Stolen Frontier* (*Uloupená hranice*, dir. Jiří Weiss, premièred 15 March 1947)[4], and *Nobody Knows Anything* (*Nikdo nic neví*, dir. Josef Mach, premièred 28 November 1947), while completely different in genre, are among the most appreciated works to this day. The year of 1948 gave birth to *White Darkness* (*Bílá tma*, dir. František Čáp, premièred 27 August 1948), *The Silent Barricade* (*Němá barikáda*, dir. Otakar Vávra, premièred 6 May 1949), and *Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*, dir. Alfréd Radok, premièred 1949). At the same time, this was the last year that allowed relatively free filmmaking before the ideological mechanisms of the incoming communist regime began to be established.

Czech feature film of 1945-1948, a brief period of respite between two totalitarianisms, was generally very diverse in terms of its evolving creative paths. The purpose of this article is to reflect on how Czech feature filmmakers of the era dealt with the Second World War and the German occupation as an immediate experience to which they had to respond. I will examine what sub-themes related to the just-ended conflict were approached, how they were treated from the perspectives of genre and style, and how the Good and the Evil were portrayed in the films of the time. It is not my intention to interpret or evaluate the events of the period themselves – I do not intend to present my own view of these events, but to discuss how the filmmakers of the time approached them.

A suffering and, above all, resistant nation as a protagonist

To reflect on the depicted sub-themes, let's ask the following question: Where and when do these feature war films take place? In some cases, the location is specifically identified and named (e.g. in films depicting the Prague Uprising in May 1945, it is Prague; in *Distant Journey*, it is Prague and then Terezín; in *Men Without Wings*, it is around Lidice). It is not a rule, sometimes there are even fictional names (the village of Kalich in *The Stolen Frontier*), but these film locations always represent a general location type (in the case of *The Stolen Frontier*, a village in the Czechoslovak-German border region). It can be noticed that no part of the plot of any of the films takes place anywhere other than within the territory that belonged to Czechoslovakia both before and after the war. Contemporary feature cinema did not depict wartime events that took place elsewhere than in the domestic space of existence, nor, unlike documentary filmmaking, did it depict, for example, the organisation of the Resistance abroad.[5] Its representatives themselves *are* depicted, but only when they have returned, or have remained, within the occupied Czechoslovak territory.

The films usually capture relatively short periods of time (days to months) from one particular phase of a conflict. The only exceptions in this respect are *I Do Not Understand* (which begins in 1939 and continues after the end of the war) and *Distant Journey* (which begins in the Second Czechoslovak Republic and ends in 1945, depicting the entire war in a condensed form). There are basically three main periods and associated events that are often depicted: The first is the period before the "official" beginning of the war (1 September 1939, when Poland was invaded), during

which the Sudetenland was about to be occupied (*The Stolen Frontier*), though, with the rest of the state territory being later occupied as well (*Supermen*). The second represented period is the year of 1942 with the beginning of the Heydrich Terror (*A Little Story*, *Men Without Wings*). Most often, the filmmakers set their stories in the period just before the end of the war while combining it with the theme of the collapsing Nazi authority (*A Big Case*), accentuating the Resistance (*The Mountains Are Rumbling*, *The Heroes Are Silent*, *White Darkness*), or depicting the Prague Uprising (*The Mother's Day 1945*, *The Silent Barricade*). Missing from the list is *Nobody Knows Anything*, in which the time of the story is not specified.

These findings reveal that Czech filmmakers actually portrayed "occupation" rather than "war" in this period – not the frontline fighting, but the domestic experience of the Nazi aggression and domination. The stories they told usually took place in settings that were familiar to contemporary audiences; they spoke about the "everyday" of the recent past. In doing so, they dealt with those events and specific moments of the past years that were the most significant ones for life in the pre-war Czechoslovakia and later in the Protectorate. The term "war film" was already avoided by Petr Koura in his study in the collection of essays *Film a dějiny* (Film and History), where he consistently refers to these as "films thematizing occupation".[6]

This already indicates to a large extent that the filmmakers usually dealt with the war and the related events as with a tragedy for the Czech nation. The films often feature a collective protagonist who, with a greater or lesser degree of symbolism, represents the nation as a whole. This is most evident in *Supermen*, which focuses on the perception and impact of the beginning of the occupation in a small Czech town and in which this idea is directly expressed already in the opening commentary: "You will see a film that has no hero. The hero here is the nation. People of towns and villages, men, women and children."[7] A similar concept is evident in many other films: in *The Mountains Are Rumbling*, villagers can be thought of as the collective protagonist symbolically representing the nation; in *Men Without Wings*, it is the airport workers; and in *The Silent Barricade*, it is the insurgents in the streets of Prague.

At the same time, these examples show that active resistance against Nazi domination was thematized more than passive suffering – not only *national tragedy*, but *national heroism* in the first place. In every film depicting national oppression, there is also an

emphasis on some form of resistance. The inhabitants of the small town in *Supermen* organise their own resistance movement, the villagers in *The Mountains Are Rumbling* cooperate with the partisans, the workers in *Men Without Wings* carry out inconspicuous small-scale sabotage and collect weapons. Nevertheless, individual heroes representing a rather diverse range of personalities can often be perceived as the representatives of the heroism of the nation. Members of the foreign resistance (at that time also of the Western resistance) can be seen a lot (the pilots in *The Mountains Are Rumbling*, *I Do Not Understand* and *Nobody Knows Anything*, the parachutist-saboteur in *The Heroes Are Silent*). Individual members of the domestic resistance are represented by the distributor of anti-German leaflets in *A Little Story* or the avenger of the burned Lidice who tries to sabotage "on his own" in *Men Without Wings*. A special type is represented by alleged collaborators about whom other characters are convinced are helping the Reich, but in reality, they are fighting against it (Tomešová, the director's secretary in *Men Without Wings*, Jakub Skýva, the tailor in *The Mountains Are Rumbling*).

Based on the above, it can be assumed that the filmmakers needed both to cope with the nationally traumatic events and to strengthen national self-confidence by richly thematizing the unbreakable resistance against them. That the audience expected both as well is indicated by contemporary reports on the success of the first occupation films.[8]

However, the presentation of national heroism in contemporary Czech cinema was not always entirely unproblematic. Set in a post-war time frame (the main story unfolds retrospectively in relation to this frame), *The Heroes Are Silent* shows "chatterboxes" boasting about their wartime heroic deeds, which were, however, mostly banal; it contrasts them with Vojtěch Tomek, a modestly silent true hero who lost his brother and his sweetheart and was willing to sacrifice himself for the lives of others. The film thus engages in a light criticism of people who tended to exaggerate their merits after the war. The satirical comedy *Nobody Knows Anything* went much further, depicting, in one of its scenes, a premature, unfinished "revolution" – when news spreads among the Czechs that a coup is taking place, they take out flags and banners and start a celebratory march, but as soon as they find out that it was a hoax, they immediately disperse and hide the Czechoslovak symbols away. The satire thus criticizes the tendency of the Protectorate people to be "open patriots" only

when it was “safe” to do so.

And we cannot omit the thematization of collaboration, which the contemporary filmmakers did not try to avoid. In a number of these films, the antagonists include characters of Czech henchmen of the Nazi regime. However, these characters usually stand alone against the clear preponderance of Czechs resisting the regime, and the exaggerated themes recede into the background (with the exception of the “urban royalty” in *A Big Case*). The individual characters of the collaborators will be discussed in more detail in the section on the portrayal of the Good and the Evil.

Although the themes of tragedy and national resistance dominate these films, the filmmakers focused on much more. Some of the films also evolve around the tragedies of *families* or *lovers*. This theme is central to the short films: *A Little Story* depicts the inner conflict of a woman whose husband is taken away by the Gestapo and she considers whether or not to turn in a resistance group in order to save him. *The Mother’s Day 1945* depicts the dramatic moments that a young family (especially the woman from the family, once again) experiences during the Prague Uprising. *I Do Not Understand* is about a father’s post-war search for his son who has been taken away to be re-educated by a German family, and about the tragedy of the estrangement between them when they are eventually reunited. However, the emphasis on the family tragedy of the can also be found in some feature films; the fate of the ferryman Svoboda’s family comes to the fore in Supermen: the father and son are arrested, the daughter is shot in the woods, and the broken mother delivers a message addressed not only to the other characters, but, above all, to the audience – to never forget “the murderers and traitors.”[9] In a unique and unconventional way in the context of the time, the theme of the family tragedy is dealt with by the creators of *The Stolen Frontier* – they depict the ethnically and religiously mixed Langers, consisting of a German but politically reticent father, his Czech wife, a pro-Nazi son, and a pro-Czech daughter. After his wife is shot by the followers of the Sudeten German Party, Langer commits suicide; even this does not curb the ideological fanaticism of their son, though, and he himself eventually dies in a gunfight. The daughter thus remains the only survivor.

It is clear now that the Czech feature films about the war that were made during the period under review focused on the events in the occupied state, highlighting both

the tragedy of the occupation for the nation and for families, and (above all) the heroic resistance against it. But were there any important war-related themes that the filmmakers almost avoided? There actually are at least that two deserve to be mentioned: The first one is the persecution of the Jews, which was the first and at that time the only one to be dealt with by Alfréd Radok in his *Distant Journey*. The depiction of the oppression of the Czech nation in these films is therefore not only dominant, it is almost exclusive – the oppression of other population groups also living on the Czech territory was, with the exception mentioned above, omitted by the filmmakers. The second overlooked theme is the events in Slovakia, presented only in František Čap's *White Darkness*, which depicts rebels hiding in the mountains at the end of the war. It can be assumed that the Slovak war events were deliberately avoided by the filmmakers, given that the wartime Slovak State was pro-German and only took a definite turn with the uprising in August 1944.

When comedy meets documentary

As already mentioned, Czech feature film of the period 1945-1948 is characterised by a considerable variety of genres and styles. Does this also apply to the films about World War II, though? Even a quick glance at them reveals that at least to some extent it does, if only because, in addition to a number of occupation dramas, two occupation comedies – *A Big Case* and *Nobody Knows Anything* – were made during this period. In later years, however, it was a taboo to treat the war themes in a funny way for a long time, a taboo that was partly broken only by Jiří Menzel with *Closely Observed Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966) and later by Jindřich Polák with his crazy sci-fi comedy *I'll Get Up and Scald Myself with Tea Tomorrow* (*Zítra vstanu a opařím se čajem*, 1977). On the other hand, it is necessary to correct a statement from *Panorama českého filmu* (*Panorama of Czech Film*), according to which the director Josef Mach "broke the unwritten rule that the theme of occupation should not be conceived in a comedic way" with his film *Nobody Knows Anything*.[10] Given that this was not an isolated case, it would be more accurate to state that the discourse of war narratives was only just being established in Czech film and that comedy ceased to be part of it for a long time after 1948.

A Big Case tells the story of a series of confusions that take place at the end of the war in a fictional town of Křemení, after the local Sturmbaumführer decides to

decorate the local nobs with honorary shields. Miller Valnoha is to be among the honoured, but he tries to avoid the Reich award at all costs. He flees outside the town and shaves, coincidentally becoming indistinguishable from an SA commander who is about to visit Křemení. In the meantime, a scandal takes place in the town – someone attaches one of the shields to the head of an ox. The honourees then secretly pass the shields among themselves so that the investigation into the incident does not discover that many of them have lost the awards. Eventually, the expected guest arrives in the town – it is the miller in disguise, though, who duly benefits from the confusion. The plot of *Nobody Knows Anything* is a bit simpler: We follow the story of a couple of Prague tram drivers who try to dispose of the body of a presumed dead (in fact, he is just unconscious) SA-man. However, their efforts are constantly thwarted by something – the basket they throw into the river is fished out by other people; the bass case they hide the body in is unknowingly taken away by the bassist, etc.

From the above content summaries it is evident that although the films portray contemporary themes, their basic plot structure is not innovative and is not based on the specifics of the war – quite on the contrary, they are adapted to tried and tested models. The motif of substitution and doubling used in *A Big Case* is an old comedy technique that Czech cinema first applied in *The Prague Adamites* (*Pražští adamité*, 1917) and used with great popularity in the interwar period – see, for example, the comedies with Vlasta Burian: *Imperial and Royal Field Marshal* (*C. a k. polní maršálek*, 1930), *Don't Make Grandpa Angry* (*Nezlobte dědečka*, 1934), *Three Boiled Eggs* (*Tři vejce do skla*, 1937), etc. Similarly, the principle of *Nobody Knows Anything*, based on the complex wandering of an unconscious man's body, had already been portrayed in Czech cinema, specifically in *Night Terror* (*Noční děs*, 1914). Only the circumstances change – the position of the confused or dragged person is now occupied by a representative of the Nazi regime.

The new themes are thus applied to tried-and-tested schemes in 1940s occupation comedies. Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the filmmakers only used it as a "backdrop" for universal comedy stories. Many of the little gags employed are based on specific war experiences. In *A Big Case*, these are the absurd grotesque scenes that mock the Nazis and their henchmen, as the main actor Jaroslav Průcha also said: "[…] why shouldn't we laugh today at serious situations, the

reverse of which was ridiculous, in which men were small and wretched in their servile vulgarity – or, to the contrary, in their lord-like haughtiness. It is this kind of 'little people' and 'supermen' we mock through the film."[11] The Sturmbaumführer and the honourees get drunk after the shields get awarded and the local veterinarian delivers a double entendre: "I accept this distinction not only for my smallness, but also for all the pigs of the Reich."[12] By contrast, *Nobody Knows Anything* does not minimize the danger that the Nazis posed; even the dragged, unconscious and later also drunk SA-man does not lose any of his insidiousness (he is still capable of killing). Here, the satire focuses more on everyday life under the Protectorate. The Prague residents consider the tram drivers carrying the basket with the SA-man to be hucksters with flour, which one of their neighbours decides to spoil by pouring water all over the basket. It has already been mentioned that the film partly hits the Czech "pseudo-heroism", which it satirizes with the scene of the "revolution" (sharply criticized in its time) [13].

Other period films with war themes are dramas. Not monotonous ones, though! Some of them concentrate mainly on open battles and firefights, thus emphasizing the action component – these include both films depicting the Prague Uprising (*The Mother's Day 1945*, *The Silent Barricade*), but also *The Stolen Frontier* to a large extent. These films show a tendency to portray the depicted as realistically as possible: the neorealism of Otakar Vávra in *The Silent Barricade* and the influence of British documentaries on *The Stolen Frontier* by Jiří Weiss have already been described many times. In other films, psychologization can be found, sometimes supported by expressive stylistic techniques: in *A Little Story*, when the protagonist contemplates whether or not to go to the Gestapo, her psychological processes and the idea of an alternative horrific future are portrayed through images projected in the background. The protagonist of *Distant Journey*, the Jewish doctor Hana Kaufman, contemplates suicide at one point; this intention is expressed entirely without words, with dramatic music, camera angles and shots of the injection and the poison she has prepared. However, the whole film is strongly expressive, focusing on the oppressive atmosphere of the concentration camp and the suffering of the internees. František Čáp chose a combination of action and psychological scenes in *White Darkness*, where shots of fighting and battles alternate with depictions of the fear, pain, and bravery of people in a makeshift mountain infirmary. The variety of

approaches is completed by the short film *I Do Not Understand* which even borders with the detective genre in its search for a missing boy.

This also partly illustrates that wartime themes often prompted contemporary filmmakers to experiment, either formally or stylistically. The “allegory of victory” occurring at the end of *Men Without Wings* also deserves mentioning in this regard – shots of the dying Petr Lom are intercut with shots of a marching female revolutionary, of men with guns, barricades, fleeing occupiers, and finally of the raising of the Czechoslovak flag. The frequent combination of fiction scenes with authentic documentary footage is what should be mentioned in the first place, though. Yet in none of the films is this footage used simply to put things in context: in *The Silent Barricade*, it is combined with fictional action, and the distinction between the authentic and the fictional is blurred, reinforcing the reportage-like nature of the film. The creators of *Supermen* used a similar approach when they incorporated footage from the Nazi occupation of Prague into the scene in a completely organic way. *A Big Case* begins by showing the events in Berlin in 1939 and then contrasts them with the events in the small town of Křemení in 1945. The most inventive use of the documentary footage, though, some of which comes from Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1934), can be observed in *Distant Journey*. Here, it serves as a line between some of the scenes, with the last shot of a scene always shrinking into a small window and remaining in this form in the lower right corner, complementing the documentary shots, only to transition into the first shot of the next scene after a while. For this reason, the documentary footage used here can be understood not only as a means of moving the plot in time, but also as a sometimes frightening, sometimes cruelly ironic commentary on it.

The Good versus the Evil – the scheme and its distortions

We have already discussed both the protagonists and the antagonists in the examined films. In many films, the Good and the Evil are clearly and unambiguously distinguished from each other. To illustrate what was narrated about the war in the post-war cinema and how, it may be useful to have a look at this dichotomy in more detail – who are the heroes, who are their adversaries, and how are both groups portrayed?

The basic model of the distinction of the positive and the negative characters is determined by the undeniable historical fact that Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany, and the occupiers and their henchmen were responsible for many deaths among the local population. Despite that, even the contemporary reviewers complained at times of undesirable schematism. In his review of *Supermen*, Jan Žalman criticized the uneven "distribution of forces" in contemporary cinema, specifically the filmmakers' idea that "every second inhabitant of this country conspired against the invaders during the occupation, hiding weapons, reporting abroad, shooting Germans, and eliminating traitors, while there was usually one traitor for every five fundamentally brave Czechs."[14]

The positive characters are mostly suffering and, at the same time, resistant Czechs. The various heroic types were already listed when discussing the themes. The frequent use of a collective protagonist not only represents the heroism of the nation, but also suggests post-war leftist tendencies – in the case of *Men Without Wings*, the collective hero is a group of workers. The individual heroes are, above all, characterized by the strength of their character – they do not give up even in the most extreme situations, they remain unbreakable even at the cost of self-sacrifice or great personal losses. The personality of many of them is unreservedly positive – a typical example is the publishing house employee Tomek from *The Heroes Are Silent*, about whom we learn (from a conversation with his brother) that he took care of him as a child, making up for their absent parents. This way of portraying heroes is consistent with the point made earlier about the desire to bolster national self-esteem; it can be argued that a heroic figure who falters in their efforts would not be accepted by contemporary audiences, yet at the same time, most of these figures are denied more character development and plasticity. This being said, there are some exceptions: despite being hesitant, even the wife in *A Little Story* eventually chooses to save the nation over the uncertain rescue of her husband, and instead of denouncing the resistance group, she becomes part of it herself. A less clear-cut hero is Peter Lom in *Men Without Wings*, whose sabotage efforts are ill-conceived and do more harm than good.

A special group of positive characters are the liberators – soldiers of the Red Army. With the exception of *The Mother's Day 1945*, they appear only in the 1948 films *White Darkness* and *The Silent Barricade* – it is not without interest that they do

appear neither in *A Big Case* nor in *The Mountains Are Rumbling*, two films depicting the end of the occupation as well but employing the Czech themselves as the instigators of the revolution, without mentioning the Red Army. These Czechs are portrayed in a completely positive light. Saša Dugin, the protagonist and commander of a group of soldiers and partisans in *White Darkness*, is the prototype of a tough man, but at the same time a gentle protector of the weak – he saves a girl in a blizzard, takes care of a baby in a cradle. In *The Silent Barricade*, the role of the Red Army in the Prague Uprising is exaggerated in a way that, according to Jakub Egermajer, does not correspond to historical reality.[15] This shows how quickly similar purposeful distortions began to infiltrate Czech cinema after the rise of the communist regime.

Unsurprisingly, the central negative characters are German. Usually, however, not much distinction in terms of values is made between the German soldier or Gestapo man and the German civilian, nor is the question of the reason and degree of their identification with the Nazi ideology raised – in most films, everyone believes in the ideology without reservation and every German is a Nazi. The power of the post-war generalization of all Germans as (at least potential) enemies is shown by the scene from *The Silent Barricade*: even an old woman poses a danger to the Czechs – when clearing out the houses in Prague, one of the citizens leaves her in her apartment out of sympathy, but she later turns out to be hiding her son who shoots one of the characters from the window. Petr Koura observes that the German characters tend to be stereotyped in terms of their appearance – many of them are played by Eduard Linkers whose physical features were similar to those that characterize Adolf Hitler (one of the gags in *Nobody Knows Anything* is even based on this similarity – a drunk SA-man mistakes his reflection in the mirror for the Führer).[16] The generalization of the Germans becomes strongest in *Supermen*; already in the opening credits, they are depicted as the ancient enemies of the Slavs: “Since the time of Charlemagne, the Germans have made one hundred and twenty military campaigns into Eastern and Southern Europe to gain Slavic land […]. For a thousand years we have rejected the morality of supermen who do not recognize the rights of other peoples to live freely.” [17] This vision of the filmmakers, from today’s perspective tendentious, obviously authentically reflects the post-war mood of the Czech society and the desire to justify the often violent displacement of the inhabitants of the borderlands. It is no

coincidence that it is the Sudeten Germans who receive the label of “the worst ones” from the people around them;[18] this applies not only to the smug workshop manager Ullmann in *Men Without Wings*, but also to the superior wife of the grocer Krejza in *Supermen*.

Another group of antagonists are Czech collaborators and informers. They are usually servile elderly men who kowtow to the German administrators, although they do not show them much respect. These include the aforementioned grocer Krejza in *Supermen*, the innkeeper Vrňata in *The Mountains Are Rumbling*, and the municipal secretary Kolta in T*he Heroes Are Silent;* only Miss Marta from the post office in *Men Without Wings*, to whom Petr Lom confides a lot, not knowing about her collusion with the Nazis, avoids the usual narrative of her type. Since in two of these cases the collaborators are merchants, one wonders whether this is the result of incipient anti-capitalist tendencies. Krejza points out: “Where there are soldiers, there is money, and where there is money, there is business.”[19] Vrňata, on the other hand, complains about the lack of customers: “People don’t trust me anymore, I’ve ruined my business.”[20] Kolta’s motivation is clearly ideological – he seeks publication of a book of his pro-Nazi writings, but Tomek, an employee of the publishing house, refuses to comply. All of the named collaborators end up being killed, and in all cases their killings are conceived as acts of justice by the positive characters.

A commonly cited exception to the described rules of the distribution of the “forces of the Good and the Evil” is *The Stolen Frontier*. In direct contrast to the concept in *Supermen*, the Germans are not portrayed as eternal enemies here, but as a people whose peaceful neighbourhood has been disturbed only by succumbing to a fanatical ideology, and even that is not without exception. Langer’s behaviour is reserved, he does not believe in Nazism and tries to remain loyal to Czechoslovakia, but the pressure of the people around him does not allow him to maintain this attitude very well. Chief Forester Otto Czapan, on the other hand, wants peace above all, and he is not joining the Nazi side out of ideological conviction but because he sees no meaning in resistance. The characters here are not portrayed in black and white, which is true even of Langer’s son who is completely devoted to Nazism – Oldřich Kautský reveals the son’s motivation in his contemporary review, describing the young lad as “compensating for a breed inferiority complex with an even greater fanaticism, according to the notion of his friends.”[21]

Although such highly-developed figures can only be seen in *The Stolen Frontier*, the film is not entirely alone in disrupting the described scheme. In *Distant Journey*, Jews take the position of sufferers instead of Czechs, and it is also suggested that it the Germans were not the only ones involved in their persecution – Dr Kaufman is dismissed from the hospital during the so-called Second Czechoslovak Republic (a short, 169 days lasting period between 1938 and 1939) and the man dismissing her is Czech; later she passes Czech signs: "Jews out!" Special mention should also be made of the comedies *A Big Case* and *Nobody Knows Anything*, which, although they did not break the usual scheme of clearly distinguishing the positive and the negative characters, introduced a different, satirical way of portraying them. In the former one, only the Nazis and their henchmen are the target of ridicule, while in the latter, the behaviour of some anti-Nazi characters is caricatured, especially in the two protagonists and the aforementioned scene of the premature "revolution." In spite of the scheme applied by the majority, neither the division of the Good and the Evil, nor the way of characterizing their representatives in all post-war films is entirely monotonous.

Summary

Post-war Czech feature films about the war focused on what happened at home and on periods and events significant from this point of view. The filmmakers thematized national suffering, but usually mainly the heroic and resistance activities of the Czech nation, represented both by collective heroes and by many types of individual heroes. The tragedy of families and loving couples also comes to the fore. The suffering of groups other than those named remained almost or entirely dismissed, just like the contemporary filmmakers took a restrained approach to the thematization of the events in the Slovak state, concentrating – with the exception of the *White Darkness* – on the Czech part of the Czechoslovak territory. It can be assumed that the creative intention of many filmmakers was to strengthen the Czech national self-esteem after the traumatic experiences of the years of occupation.

The filmmakers used a relatively wide range of genres to tell the story of their chosen themes. Usually, dramas were made, but not all of them were conceived in the same way – while in some the emphasis was on the action, others had the characteristics of psychological films. In two cases, the war theme was also portrayed as a comedy,

each time in a slightly different way. The theme also encouraged formal and stylistic experimentation in the form of expressive narration or the combination of documentary footage with live action.

The positive and the negative characters are almost always clearly distinguished from each other. Usually the heroic Czechs on the one hand and the evil Germans and collaborators on the other are pitted against each other, with neither the positive nor the negative characters offering much depth of perspective in most films. However, this is not an absolute truth – hints of the problematisation of the positive characters can be seen in *A Little Story* and *Men Without Wings*, while the scheme as a whole is disturbed in *The Stolen Frontier*, *Distant Journey* and, in a way, in the comedies.

We can thus observe that, while in terms of form and style the discussed films partly display a general contemporary creative diversity, in terms of content the contemporary reflection of the war experience tends to follow more uniform themes and a unified view of the reality depicted. Films like *The Stolen Frontier* and *Distant Journey*, on the other hand, suggest that with the slowly passing time since the end of the war, the schemes employed were beginning to be reassessed. Unfortunately, the promising development towards a more elaborate view was soon thwarted by the onset of the new totalitarianism.

Notes:

[1] All data on premières are based on the Filmový přehled database.

[2] Although this film is medium-length, for the sake of simplicity it will also be classified as a “short film” in this article.

[3] Nadlidé. *Národní obroda* 11/01/1947, p. 4.

[4] Although the plot of *The Stolen Frontier* takes place before the beginning of the war and the occupation, it is so closely related to the events of the war that it is impossible not to include it in this article.

[5] However, foreign events are sometimes conveyed to the viewer through documentary footage incorporated into the feature films.

[6] Petr Koura, Obraz nacistické okupace v hraném českém filmu 1945–1989. In: *Film a dějiny*. Praha: NLN 2005, p. 219–242, here p. 219.

[7] *Nadlidé*, minute 2.

[8] See e.g.: F. CH., Konfrontace českého filmu se zahraničím v Mar. Lázních. *Lidová demokracie* 07/08/1946, pp. 4. Hrdinové mlčí. *Národní obroda* 23/08/1946, pp. 3.

[9] *Nadlidé*, minute 62. The original title of the film – *Do not Forget* (*Nezapomeň*) – was changed at the last minute before completion and distribution.

[10] Petr Bilík, Kinematografie po druhé světové válce. In: *Panorama českého filmu*. Olomouc: Rubico 2000, p. 85–130, here p. 94.

[11] Jaroslav Průcha, Filmujeme novou českou veselohru. *Pravda* 04/08/1946, p. 5.

[12] *Velký případ*, minute 21.

[13] For example, according to Emil Radok's contemporary review, "the scene of the announcement of the revolution becomes almost tasteless." See Emil Radok, Okupační komedie opět prohrává. *Práce* 30/11/1947, pp. 6.

[14] Jan Žalman, Nadlidé. Ani drama, ani dokument. *Kino* 2, 1947, no. 1, p. 4.

[15] Jakub Egermajer, „Přátelé, soudruzi… děkujeme vám, že jste nás osvobodili!" Pražské povstání v hraném filmu. *Revue Filmového přehledu* [online], 24/05/2022 [cit. 30/08/2023]. Available at: https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/pratele-soudruzi-dekujeme-vam-ze-jste-nas-osvobodili-prazske-povstani-v-hranem-filmu https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/pratele-soudruzi-dekujeme-vam-ze-jste-nas-osvobodili-prazske-povstani-v-hranem-filmu.

[16] Petr Koura, Obraz Adolfa Hitlera v českém hraném filmu. In: *Film a dějiny 2*. Praha: Casablanca a ÚSTR 2009, p. 83–97.

[17] *Nadlidé*, minute 1.

[18] From the mechanics' talk about Ullmann: "Is he German?" – "German? Even worse, he's Sudeten!" – See: *Muži bez křídel*, minute 19.

[19] *Nadlidé*, minute 19.

[20] *V horách duní*, minute 9.

[21] Oldřich Kautský, Tam, kde se začala válka. *Filmové noviny* 1, 1947, no. 11, p. 5.