

Dr. Rosamund Johnston

Research Center for the History of Transformations (RECET)

University of Vienna

rosamund.johnston@univie.ac.at

Comrades in Arms: A Global History of Czechoslovakia's Weapons Industry, 1954-1994

Czechoslovakia, rarely thought of as one of the Cold War's major players, was perhaps the biggest exporter of small arms to Africa throughout the 1960s. And lurking in the background of Cold War crises—from Guatemala and Suez in the 1950s to Angola and Afghanistan in the 1980s—were Czechoslovak weapons.

Comrades in Arms places Czechoslovakia's Cold War history in its imperial, democratic and wartime context, acknowledging the importance of the weapons industry and trade relations established prior to the Communist takeover in 1948. It thus qualifies claims that socialist Czechoslovakia simply followed Moscow's orders in its weapons sales. While showing how leaders drew on past practices when deciding who to sell arms to, however, this study is attentive to the new set of power relations that elites navigated as the Cold War crystallized.

If this story takes us to Angola, Cuba, and Egypt, then it begins in Brno, Uherský Brod, Martin, and Dubnica where these weapons were made. *Comrades in Arms* follows the flow of commodities from the Czechoslovak provinces to the Cold War's flashpoints, excavating the role played by Czechoslovak arms in shaping global conflict in the twentieth century. Conversely, it asks how global conflict shaped class configurations and gender relations on the factory floor. It thus connects two Cold War narratives that, as Paul Chamberlin remarks, wrongly remain separated from each other: that of peace in Europe, with that of violence in what was then called the Third World.

Rather than a top-down tale of politics and diplomacy, *Comrades in Arms* focuses in turns on the state's leaders, arms dealers, munitions workers, international students, and the general public to demonstrate the complex web of interactions upon which Czechoslovakia's international arms trade relied. It reveals both the sovereignty of Soviet "satellite" states during the Cold War and socialist internationalism's shifting forms.

Chapter Overview: Each chapter revolves around a different set of actors as a way of looking at the industry from a new vantage point. By bringing these different perspectives together, *Comrades in Arms* reveals how thoroughly embedded the arms industry was in multiple strata of Czechoslovak society.

Chapter 1: Leaders reflects upon how elites made decisions about Czechoslovakia's potential trading partners, highlighting how their actions were set in a complicated web of power relations. Moving beyond the traditional characterization of Czechoslovakia as a Soviet "pawn" in its arms sales, this chapter examines how leaders navigated their relationships with three key groups: domestic arms workers, the Soviet Union (as ultimate arbiter of Czechoslovak arms sales and, perhaps more importantly, the biggest customer for Czechoslovak weapons), and foreign buyers who paid for Czechoslovak arms in hard currency. Examining the cases of Egypt in the 1950s-1970s, and Libya during the last two decades of Czechoslovak communism, this chapter charts how Czechoslovak leaders worked themselves into a position of possessing many arms but, by their own accounts, little influence by the end of the 1980s.

Chapter 2: Arms Dealers turns to the individuals who brokered weapons sales. Using oral histories with former employees of the state arms monopoly, and documents about the concern from the Security Services Archive, I show how the connections Omnipol established extended beyond weapons. When private individuals, including Czech and Slovak émigrés, became salespeople in the 1960s, I assess how this changed the nature of the international trade in Czechoslovak arms.

Chapter 3: International Students examines how weapons brought overseas actors to Czechoslovakia in search of expertise. This chapter considers how the Antonín Zápotocký Military Academy in Brno became a site both of socialist internationalism in practice, and knowledge production about Czechoslovak arms.

Chapter 4: Workers shifts the perspective to the factory floor to understand the experience of munitions workers during socialism. This chapter examines the cases of Zbrojovka Brno, ZŤS Martin, Agrozet Uherský Brod and ZŤS Dubnica to consider whether workers understood their labour in socialist internationalist terms. Did they care about where the weapons they produced were going? Or was this just a well-paying job?

Chapter 5: The Public examines broader social attitudes to Czechoslovakia's role as an arms exporter. The chapter concentrates on media coverage of arms sales and its public reception at two key moments, 1968 and 1991-1992. While an exposé of Czechoslo-

vakia's role arming Nigerian government forces in the Nigerian-Biafran War created outrage in 1968, revelations of the state's role selling arms which ended up in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s received a more muted response.

Chapter 6: A Farewell to Arms considers workers' and leaders' changing circumstances when the international context changed around 1989. It returns to Brno, Martin, Uherský Brod and Dubnica to understand the effect of regulation on the arms industry, which predated the Velvet Revolution, but which was strengthened in its wake. Exploring the social effects of downscaling and factory closures, this chapter attests to what Philipp Ther calls the "growing inequality on a... spatial level" wrought by the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Central Europe.