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Review

Deaths of Border Guard Members on the Czech-Bavarian Border[1]

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The Border Guard was an elite component of the Czechoslovak Army. Only selected individuals with suitable qualifications and class background could become members. The Border Guards, whose main task was to guard the state border, were subject to high demands, both physically and mentally. The Communist regime presented service in the Border Guard as very dangerous. Claims of hundreds of border guards murdered by Western intelligence agents or other armed intruders were a myth presented by the propaganda of the time. In fact, most of the border guards died as a result of traffic accidents, suicides and severe injuries. Suicide was the second most common cause of death for Border Guards. The most common reasons were health problems (physical and mental), problems in personal relationships, financial problems or career difficulties.

[Border Guard; Iron Curtain; Czechoslovakia; Causes of Death; Suicides]

Introduction

The Czechoslovak Border Guard (Pohraniční stráž – PS) was formed in 1951 to protect the Czechoslovak state border. The structure and functioning of this new armed force was based on the Soviet model. Border guards had the powers of both the military and the security authorities, and were also authorised to use weapons in the course of their duties. The previous method of border protection by means of patrols was replaced by the so-called military method of guarding the border. A military security engineering system of protection was progressively constructed along the border with West Germany and Austria, representing a physical form of the Iron Curtain. This primarily consisted of multiple lines of barbed

1 The study was created within the SGS–2023–026 project, *Selected Problems from Modern History III*, undertaken at the Department of Historical Sciences of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

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wire fences (connected to a high-voltage electrical source until 1965). This wire barrier was further supplemented by minefields (only used in the 1950s), a control belt where any intruders would leave behind tracks, booby traps and, of course, observation posts from which border guards monitored their section.

PS headquarters was located in Prague. The border brigades, which commanded individual border companies, fell under its command. The companies formed the basic unit of the entire organisational structure of the PS, as they were the ones who carried out the actual border guard duty. After the new structure was established in 1951 (the transition to the military method of guarding the border), the number of border companies averaged between 35–40 men, with each company guarding a 3–4 km long section of the state border. The number of border guards was gradually increased through regular conscription, and in the 1960s up to 98 men served on the most exposed sections.[3]

The daily routine of the company was based on the daily schedule, work plan and border protection plan. The daily schedule determined the exact time of wake-up, physical warm-up, morning hygiene, cleaning, breakfast, lunch, dinner, evening drill, personal rest and bedtime. In addition, it defined the time allotted for employment, training, political instruction, cultural and educational work of the combat division, and daily orders.[4] Duty length was usually set at 8 hours. However, this could be extended to 9–12 hours in the event of increased border protection, with larger numbers of patrols being deployed in the field. Border patrols usually consisted of two men, as there was a danger of a border guard defecting if a one-man patrol was used. For each patrol, a (senior) patrol leader was appointed, usually a second-year soldier. The combat task and the associated arms and equipment of the patrol were determined by the company commander during the division of combat. In the 1950s, the most commonly used PS weapons were the Model 24/26 submachine gun and the Model 52 rifle. At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, rearmament took place. The rifles were discontinued and the submachine guns were replaced by the more modern Model 58 and Model 61 guns.[5]

3 T. JÍLEK – A. JÍLKOVÁ, *Železná opona: československá státní hranice od Jáchymova po Bratislavu 1948–1989*, Praha 2006, p. 48.

4 Archiv bezpečnostních složek (eBadatelna), f. A 6/5 i. j. 544, Nařízení MV č. 56/1962, Služební předpis PS-I-1 Pohraniční služba (pohraniční hlídka, pohraniční rota), p. 145.

5 Z. ŠMÍDA, *Z historie 10. brigády Pohraniční stráže Volary*, Praha 2017, p. 36.

The Border Guard was a prestigious unit within the Czechoslovak army, whose members were held to high standards and were expected to be completely loyal to the regime. Hence, not everyone could become a member of the PS. Recruits were selected very carefully and all had to undergo a vetting process. As a rule, they were members of communist families, union functionaries or direct members of the Communist Party.[6] The actual service on the state border required both physical and mental endurance. Border companies were usually located in mountainous terrain, several kilometres away from the nearest settlements. Furthermore, in winter, snow and frost complicated all the activities of the border guards. They spent long hours on patrol, where they had to be constantly on the alert. Regular political instruction and ubiquitous propaganda made the young soldiers feel that every breach of the state border was the work of an armed enemy agent.

The communist regime portrayed serving at the state border as very dangerous. It pointed to hundreds of detained intruders and dozens of border guards who died in shootouts with them. The reality, however, was that only a small number of PS officers had died in clashes with people attempting to cross the state border illegally. The others had died in traffic accidents, as a result of severe injuries or after being hit by accidental gunfire. However, many border guards could not bear the demands of border duty and the long separation from the civilization around them and decided to end their lives voluntarily. This study focuses on cases of deaths of PS members serving in units stationed on the Czech-Bavarian border. After analysing the causes and frequency of deaths in individual brigades, it focuses on the issue of suicide, which, together with traffic accidents, was one of the most frequent causes of death among border guards. For the purpose of the text, five specific cases have been selected. Their descriptions, conveyed through investigative reports, provide a snapshot of the circumstances and causes of the act itself, as well as a certain picture of the functioning of the border company, relations between the soldiers, the course of border duty, etc. Cases were selected to illustrate the most common motives for suicide, which included problems in personal relationships, health and psychological difficulties,

[6] Tajný rozkaz ministra národní bezpečnosti č. 9 ze dne 25. ledna 1952 „Odvody branců v březnu 1952, výběr pro službu v PS“, in: ibadatelna.cz [online], [2024–04–25], https://www.ibadatelna.cz/data/pdf/badatelna/1952/TRMNB_1952_9.pdf.

and financial problems. Both regular soldiers, who logically dominate the overall number of suicides, and officers, whose motives were usually.

Causes of Death

Cases of deaths of members of the PS were examined by Martin Pulec in his work, Death in Border Uniform. Myths and Reality, in which he managed to collect the records of a total of 952 soldiers who died during their assignment in the border armed forces between 1945 and 1991. However, far from all of them died in connection with their service. Pulec's extensive study primarily aimed to dispel the myth put forward by the communist regime about hundreds of dead border guards murdered by Western intelligence agents and other armed intruders. There were indeed shootings on the border, but only to a greater extent in the period 1945–1951, i.e. until the construction of the Iron Curtain and the transition to military border protection. Between 1951 and 1991, only four border guards died in armed clashes with intruders. The remaining deaths occurred, for example, as a result of committing suicide, serious injuries, traffic accidents, accidental shootings or by misadventure.[7]

A total of 211 border guards died in the area investigated on the Czech-Bavarian border in connection with their service between 1951 and 1991. This number does not include cases that occurred during leave and outings (e.g. accidents involving private vehicles, drunken brawls, etc.) and natural deaths. Suicide was by far the largest cause of death. Of the 211 cases, one in three was suicide (70 in total). Traffic accidents were the second most common cause of death, killing 42 soldiers. A relatively high number (24) of border guards were killed by a shot from the weapon of another border guard caused by accident, careless or unskilled handling. A total of 20 members of the PS were killed by the engineering and technical security devices intended against intruders. These cases date mainly from the 1950s, when the wire barricade was reinforced by mines, and the middle section of the barricade was charged with high voltage. Mine explosions killed 8 border guards and electrocution, which unlike mines continued to be used in the protected border area until 1965, resulted in 12 casualties. The number of 6 PS members drowned is perhaps somewhat surprising. Again, however, these are only service-related cases; the total number of drownings in the PS was much higher. Most of the cases, however, occurred while swimming, e.g. in a pond or a river,

7 M. PULEC, *Smrt v pohraniční uniformě. Mýty a skutečnost*, Praha 2021, pp. 27–28.

during personal leisure and outings. It is also worth mentioning 5 deaths caused by mistaken armed encounters between border patrols, which occurred exclusively during night hours, i.e. in poor visibility, and 5 cases of murder by a fellow border guard. The murders occurred in two cases as a result of the aggressor's drunkenness, twice in mutual confrontation between members of the patrol when one of them tried to desert, and one soldier was killed in a fight at the company building. Other causes of death included injuries during construction work (5), discharge of own weapon caused by accident, careless or unskilled handling – not proven to be suicide (4), railway accidents (3), gunshot wounds (3), grenade or explosive blast (5) and falling from the observation post (2). Rather curious cases include two lightning strikes, frostbite, injuries while playing football[8] and being kicked by a horse.[9] All the deaths are listed in the table (see Appendix 1), which lists both the causes and the respective numbers of cases.

Suicide

As previously mentioned, suicide was the most frequent cause of death of PS members. A total of 70 border guards committed suicide within the Czech-Bavarian border area in the studied period of 1951–1991. Possible suicide was speculated in another five cases. The most frequent (57) cases were suicides by shooting or hanging (nine). Two soldiers decided to end their lives by ingesting poison, one jumped out of a window and one jumped from a moving train. The majority of the cases (56) were ordinary soldiers aged 19–24, on compulsory military service. The remaining 14 deceased were professional soldiers. The motive for the act could only be clarified if the person concerned had indicated one in his suicide note. Otherwise, during the investigation, the long-term psychological state of the deceased, his personal relationships (both in the army and in private life), family situation, disciplinary sanctions, financial problems, etc. were examined. It was problems in personal relationships that predominated among soldiers of basic service. For 10 of them the suicide could be linked to problems in their relationship to their partner, most frequently as a direct result of breaking up with their girlfriend. Other motives for suicides

8 Injuries sustained during football are included among the cases related to the performance of service due to the mandatory participation of soldiers in regular physical training.

9 Archiv bezpečnostních složek (hereinafter ABS), f. 2342, k. 146, č. j. PS-0412/01-1964, Vyšetřující zpráva o usmrcení vojína Sádeckého Miloše.

of regular soldiers included family problems, disciplinary sanctions, financial debts, as well as dissatisfaction with military service, bullying, and psychological and health problems. For professional soldiers, in addition to personal and relational problems, motives stemming from career sanctions[10] and investigations[11] were common. They usually ended their lives using a service pistol, either at their residence or outside their unit. In contrast, in most cases (29), soldiers on basic duty shot themselves in the company building, specifically in the drying room, ammunition store or weapons cleaning room. This fact is somewhat curious, given that soldiers were not allowed access to ammunition while off duty and, since about the 1960s, not even to weapons kept in a locked munitions store.[12] Some of them thus gained access to the weapons room, for example, by distracting the company supervisor or by taking advantage of the unlocking of the room at a time when the soldiers were about to go on duty.[13] Other options included stealing a submachine gun (or other weapon) and bullets at an unguarded moment,[14] or storing bullets, e.g. from a practice shoot, and using them before handing in the submachine gun after the patrol, while cleaning it, or stealing it.[15] Ten soldiers shot themselves during a patrol, i.e. at a time when the border guards had weapons loaded with live ammunition. Suicides by hanging most often took place outside the company area, usually in the woods.

In terms of any link between the suicide and the performance of compulsory military service, such a link could only be proven in eight cases. In four cases it was a reaction to a disciplinary sanction (imprisonment). The reasons for the sanctions were drunkenness, illegal possession of submachine gun bullets, late return from leave and the unintentional killing of another border guard. Two suicides were related to disagreements with other border guards and bullying. One soldier shot himself after he caused a crash of a service vehicle he was driving without a license, in which another border guard was slightly injured. In the last case on this

10 Ibid., f. 2344, k. 10, č. j. PS-0470/1970, Hlášení o sebevraždě majora Lukáše Miroslava.
11 Ibid., f. 2347, k. 10, č. j. 1065/71, Dokumentace v případu sebevraždy Václava Kačerovského – závěrečná zpráva.
12 JÍLEK – JÍLKOVÁ, p. 46.
13 ABS, f. 2347, k. 8, č. j. PS-0855/69, Vyšetření případu mimořádné události pokusu o sebevraždu zastřelením vojína Petra Albrichtera.
14 Ibid., f. 2345, k. 28, č. j. PS-0309/01-62, Vyšetřující zpráva o sebevraždě vojína Kubiše Emila.
15 Ibid., f. 2344, k. 8, č. j. PS-3550/1969, Bárta Jan, svobodník – sebevražda.

list, the PS member killed himself because he did not want to serve in a first-line unit.[16]

In analysing the frequency of suicides in individual border brigades on the Czech-Bavarian border (see Annex 1), only the Volary 10th Border Brigade stands out, which, unlike the others, was operational only until 1962. Of the six recorded cases, four took place in the 1950s and two in the 1960s. Numbers are similar for the other border brigades (see Annex 2). The highest number of suicides (19) occurred in the Sušice 7th Border Brigade and the lowest number (13) in the Cheb 5th Border Brigade. It is also worth noting that the highest number of suicides (eight) were committed in the 1950s in the Sušice Brigade, whereas the highest number of suicides in the Plana and Domažlice Brigades were committed in the 1970s (seven in both brigades). When examining the individual decades, the numbers for the 1950s and 1960s are identical (23). In the 1970s there was a slight decrease (19) and in the 1980s there are only four recorded cases. The last suicide in the PS occurred in August 1990.

Private Ján Farkaš

On 18 December 1958, at 6.45 pm, Private Ján Farkaš, born on 28 August 1939, of Hungarian ethnicity, assigned to the 2nd Company of the Bířkov Training Centre of the Domažlice 9th Border Brigade, committed suicide by gunshot.[17]

Private Farkaš joined the guard shift on 18 December 1958 at 4 pm in order to guard the Bířkov training centre. During the period of preparation for guard duty, the private did not exhibit any agitation which might have aroused suspicion. Between 4.00 pm and 6.00 pm, when the appointee was off duty, he wrote a letter to his girlfriend with the approval of the Chief of Guards. At 5.50 pm, by order of the Chief of Guards, he prepared to assume duty. He took up his post in good order at 6.00 pm. At about 6.45 pm, several officers heard 2 muffled shots and accordingly alerted the unit supervisor, Sergeant Kováč, who immediately went to investigate the cause of the shooting. Sgt. Kováč then attempted to call the guard in the area from several locations, but there was no response. He therefore decided to search the pistol range and the edges of the barracks where the guard was supposed to be. After searching the pistol range, he climbed the embankment of the range where by the light of his torch he

16 Ibid., f. 2343, k. 86, č. j. PS-050-1/72, Záznam o mimořádné události.
17 Ibid., f. 2344, k. 8, č. j. PS-0847/58, Hlášení o sebevraždě vojína Farkaše Jána.

saw the guard lying on the ground. Near him lay the butt of a rifle with the buttstock over it, and the barrel of the rifle was tucked under his coat. Two NCOs on basic service subsequently rushed to the scene. Since the unit supervisor did not see any signs of life on the deceased, he ordered the NCOs to guard the said area, not to allow any movements and also not to allow access to other officers. He himself then ran to inform the centre officials. The soldier responsible for tending the wounded, Private Bina, conducted an examination of the wounded Private Farkaš, testing his pulse and the reaction of his pupils to the light but with negative results. He therefore concluded that Private Farkaš was already dead. Nevertheless, he decided to transport Private Farkaš by ambulance to the 3rd Military District Hospital in Plzeň in order to carry out a possible medical procedure or to make a medical declaration of death. Upon the immediate transfer of the named person to the said hospital, the doctor on duty there pronounced him dead and had the body of Private Farkaš placed in the hospital morgue.[18]

Investigations into the activities and behaviour of Private Farkaš revealed that he had had a very difficult time adjusting to the transition from civilian to military life. In his dealings with his superiors, he behaved almost rudely, was reclusive but at the same time hard-tempered, unforgiving and disrespectful of authority. He was given a two-day punishment of working out of turn on 19 November 1958 for failure to obey orders.[19] He achieved poor results in theory, whereas he performed well when practicing on equipment in which he showed interest. It was also known that he had a close personal relationship with Alžbětová Kollerová, with whom he had had daily contact before joining the army. At the beginning of his military service in particular, especially in November, they corresponded almost daily, as Private Farkáš sometimes received two letters at the same time. However, as time went on, he did not receive letters so often, which he took quite badly. He was very jealous of his girlfriend, which got to the point where he asked his friend to look after the girl for him. Private Farkaš was too preoccupied with his personal affairs, which resulted in his inattentiveness, especially during exercise. On 16 November 1958, he did not pay attention during a political lecture and instead wrote a letter to his girlfriend, for which the platoon commander reprimanded him.

18 Ibid.

19 This was a punishment in which the person concerned performed the designated work during his personal leave.

On 17 December 1958 Private Farkaš received a total of 3 letters and 1 postcard. One of these letters had been sent to him by his girlfriend. Private Farkaš sat in thought after reading this letter. Within a short time, particularly after opening the other letters, the other border guards did not observe any further agitation on his part.

Nothing suspicious was observed in his behaviour during the day of 18 December 1958. He behaved in the same way as at any other time and during the day he again wrote a letter to his girlfriend. In this letter he made no mention that he might be saying goodbye or anything of the sort. Nor were there any irregularities in the other letters which might have upset Private Farkaš.

Private Farkaš's jealousy was apparently prompted by a reduction in the sending of letters from his girlfriend, which had recently occurred for unknown reasons, and which he discussed and drew various conclusions. This probably also occurred while he was on duty as a guard, where he probably brooded undisturbed over his troubles and, under some disturbance of mind, decided to commit suicide. He had prepared himself for this act, as evidenced by the disassembly of the rifle by separating the barrel from the stock, reinserting the magazine into the barrel and putting the muzzle of the rifle to his heart and then firing two bullets to kill himself.

Following an investigation into the whole case, the Brigade Commander ordered a debriefing of the whole case with all officers and leaders of the training centre units. The objective was to increase vigilance and attend to those officers who were found to be in a disturbed state of mind on the basis of reports from home or from the transition from civilian to military life. The case was brought to the attention of the lower military prosecutor in Plzeň. According to his instructions, Private Farkaš was transported and buried at his home.[20]

Sergeant Jiří Vinický

On 22 September 1960, at 10.55 pm, a sergeant by profession, Jiří Vinický, born on 21 March 1939, of Czech ethnicity, a senior member of the 20th border company of the Sušice 7th border brigade, committed suicide by shooting himself with a service pistol in a Finnish lodge.[21]

20 ABS, f. 2344, k. 8, č. j. PS-0847/58, Hlášení o sebevraždě vojína Farkaše Jána.
21 Ibid., f. 2343, k. 86, Zpráva o spáchání sebevraždy četařem z povolání Vinickým.

After joining the army, Jiří Vinický proved to be an average member of the training centre. He had a weaker rating in physical training. Otherwise, in other subjects he was rated well. He showed the same results at the 18th Border Company, where he was assigned after completing his training. On 1 November 1959, he was transferred to the 20th Border Company and organizationally assigned as an armour officer of the 1st Rifle Squad. He was rated very well in both combat and political training. Prior to being commissioned as a non-commissioned officer, he was rated as outstanding and was one of the best officers in the 20th Border Company. He was rewarded for his good performance and achievement in combat and political training on ten occasions, was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal, and was awarded the Exemplary Border Guard Badge as of 9 May 1960. He was not punished throughout his military basic service. He was of a mild, cheerful disposition, displayed a certain moodiness and often changed his opinions. The officers liked him for his directness and his friendly attitude towards others. He was happy to provide assistance to other officers when they approached him.

In civilian life, his conduct sometimes displayed volatility, especially at parties when he consumed alcohol, when his temper was explosive. Before entering military service, he had had an acquaintance with Marie Chotová. After a short time, a civilian friend informed him that the girl had cheated on him. At his request, he was given leave to settle the matter. After discovering the facts, he broke up with the girl. However, he found the break-up difficult to accept and doubted whether his actions were right. While he was still in the 18th Border Company, he contemplated whether he should shoot himself because of the girl. According to the testimony of Private Varyš, a member of the same company and also Vinický's best friend, Vinický had said that he would stay in the army for her sake, and partly because he would otherwise have to seek civilian employment. He later had a relationship with a girl, Jana Kneisová, who was studying medicine. According to his account, Private Varyš concluded that he was in a serious relationship with this girl.

In view of vacancies for non-commissioned officers in the 20th Border Company, the company's recruiting officers considered accepting the then still lance-corporal Vinický as a non-commissioned officer on the grounds that he had shown himself to be the best member of the unit. Lance Corporal Vinický himself stated that he had no place in civilian life and that he was thinking of staying with the PS as a non-commissioned officer. To this end, the commander granted him a leave of absence to

confer with his parents at home. On his return from home, he informed the Assistant Commander for Political Affairs (ZVP) that his parents had agreed to his taking the post. In the month of June 1960, the Company Commander granted him a regular leave of absence and on his return from leave, he informed the ZVP that he was no longer interested in becoming a career NCO. No further comment was made by the appointee on his refusal to accept the appointment until the time he was to be sent for medical examination at the military hospital, in the month of August 1960. He stated that he had no intention of leaving, and that he no longer wanted to become a non-commissioned officer by profession. He justified this on the grounds that his whole recruitment process was lengthy and that he was probably not interested. His negative attitude was again manifested when he was due to leave for his acceptance interview at the brigade headquarters. In front of Sergeant Šerfl, he said that he would not stay, that he would rather shoot himself. Later he changed his mind again, saying that he would stay there for two years or that he would ask to be transferred to another brigade. He went for an interview at the brigade headquarters and there declared that he wanted to be accepted as a non-commissioned officer by profession. Since he had hitherto held a negative position, the company officials and other members were surprised by his decision.

He was admitted as a non-commissioned officer on 1 September 1960, when he also took up the post of senior officer of the 20th Border Company. On 10 September 1960, he went to his parents' home for a leave of absence, which he had previously urgently requested. Upon completion of his leave, he reported for duty on 21 September 1960. When asked by the company ZVP how he had got on during his leave, he replied that he had done well. The company officials, and the officers themselves, observed no apparent change in his behaviour, conduct or mood.

On 22 September 1960, he reviewed the company's senior officer's documentation. He then talked to the cooks about their work and assured them that if they had any problems, he would resolve them with them. Later in the day he made several statements that he was sorry he had remained a non-commissioned officer, and that he would have had a better life as a civilian. In the evening, Jiří Vinický, together with other members of the military, attended a screening of the film "The Undefeated". After the film, he went to the company office where he informed the ZVP of when he was on duty. He then went to the guardhouse where he talked with the company members. No one observed that there was any change

in Vinický's mental state on these occasions either. He said he was going to go to sleep and at 10.00 pm he went to his apartment in the attic room of the Finnish house. This room was shared with a second lieutenant on basic duty, Josef Pohořalý, who was not present in the bedroom when Vinický arrived. Lieutenant Vrabec, who was off duty, slept on the ground floor of the Finnish house.[22]

At about 10.50–10.55 pm Private Kostelec, on company guard duty, heard a hollow bang in the direction of the Finnish house. He reported the fact to the company supervisor, who brought a searchlight to verify the observation. However, they only searched the outside area where they found nothing suspicious. Sergeant Vinický's body was found only by Second Lieutenant Pohořalý after his return from duty at 00.45 am on 23 September 1960. He immediately reported the case to Lieutenant Vrabec. A search of the scene revealed that there was an unfinished half-litre bottle of plum brandy on a chair by the stove. Sergeant Vinický had apparently consumed a large quantity of alcohol before his act. Also on the chair was a photograph of Marie Chotová, the girl he had broken up with after entering military service. On the unmade bed there were letter papers with a written letter and a piece of paper on which he had said goodbye to his parents. None of the officials were able to determine at what point Sergeant Vinický had removed his service pistol from its holster, which hung with his belt in the company office. Nor did Lieutenant Sparrow, who was sleeping on the ground floor of the Finnish house, hear any shot. No correspondence was found on the named man.[23]

The following probable motives for the suicide emerged from the investigation of the whole case: the most likely determining motive was the separation from his girlfriend Marie Chotová. Jiří Vinický had been unable to come to terms with this break-up, as evidenced by the remarks he had made in his notebook, in which he blamed himself for having probably drawn the wrong conclusion. After the act had been committed, a photograph of the girl was found at the scene, placed next to a bottle of alcohol. The matter of his recruitment as a non-commissioned officer had also had an immediate impact on his decision. He had changed his mind several times about serving in the PS. When there was interest in him and no pressure was exerted on him, he declared before the brigade committee his firm decision to remain a non-commissioned officer. He

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.

regretted his decision upon his arrival at the unit, as stated in his farewell message to his parents. His decision to commit suicide was to some extent influenced by watching the film "The Undefeated", which depicts the withdrawal of the army units from the borders of the pre-Munich republic in 1938. In the last part of this film, there are scenes showing a drunken lieutenant who surrenders to the fascists and is shot, the helplessness of the staff captain who seeks a way out in suicide, and the violent parting of lovers where the girl is shot by the fascists and the young man hurls himself suicidally into enemy fire. These moments and the misunderstanding of the situation may have influenced Sergeant Vinický's feelings to some extent and probably brought about an even greater unsettlement in his character at this point. Last but not least, just before committing suicide he had consumed alcohol, which had most certainly influenced his actions.

Private Ladislav Kruml

On 16 April 1963, the suicide of Private Kruml Ladislav, born on 22 March 1942, of Czech ethnicity, a member of the 2nd year, and the attempted murder of Private Oravec, born on 30 August 1943, a member of the 1st year of the members the Cheb 5th Border Brigade both took place.[24]

On 16 April 1963, at 4.00 pm, a two-man patrol consisting of the patrol commander, Private Kruml, and the dog handler, Private Oravec, with his service dog, went on duty. While moving the service vehicle to the post, Private Kruml handled a machine gun in an unauthorised manner. The other border guards intervened to prevent him from acting in this fashion, and it is likely that the submachine gun was switched between Private Oravec and Private Kruml. On arrival at the scene, the patrol took up a position at the observation post and carried out their task.

Private Kruml, in a casual conversation with Private Oravec, had stated that he would never see civilian life anyway, something Private Oravec did not understand. After a while, he told Private Oravec that he was going to go and perform a personal errand. When he left, he took his submachine gun with him. When he returned, he fired two shots from the observation post into the checkpoint strip. Private Oravec responded by saying: *"What are you doing? Give me the radio link, this must be reported to the company."* However, Private Kruml refused to hand over the link. After

24 ABS, f. 2342, k. 146, č. j. PS-0 380/11-1963, Hlášení o sebevraždě vojína Krumla Ladislava a pokus vraždy.

the discussion, service was calm again. Kruml lit a cigarette and offered it to Oravec, who refused, saying that he was a non-smoker. About three minutes later, Kruml lit another cigarette and offered it again to Private Oravec, who again declined. At this time Private Oravec noticed that Kruml's face was turning red and pale at times. After smoking the second cigarette, Kruml took a moment to reach into his pocket again. Private Oravec believed that he was again reaching for a cigarette. At the same time, Oravec noticed that the service dog was sniffing something, so he turned in the direction of the state border. As soon as Oravec turned around, Kruml punched him in the nape of the neck. When Oravec turned around, Kruml attacked him again, this time with a pocket knife, which he used to stab Oravec in the nape of the neck. Private Oravec fell from his seat (from a height of about 1.5 m) and, without his weapon, which had remained on the seat, began to flee in the direction of the company post. About 10 metres from the observation post, Private Kruml fired a short burst from his submachine gun at Private Oravec. Oravec fell to the ground as he fired in self-defence. He then started to run again along the edge of the forest and Private Kruml fired another burst from his submachine gun at him. Oravec fell again, and when the shooting stopped, he got up again and fled. After a short time, Private Oravec heard 2–3 more shots, as confirmed by the neighbouring patrols. Private Kruml presumably left his seat, took both submachine guns with him and advanced in the direction where Private Oravec had fled. He appears to have killed himself with the last shots. Private Oravec ran to the post of a neighbouring patrol, which reported the incident to the company. The company officer in charge arrived at the scene and first ascertained from Private Oravec what had happened and then went to the scene with other border guards. They found Private Kruml lying on the forest path at a distance of about 70 m, towards the state border. They found that he had been shot in the head and, after checking his pulse, that he was dead. The officer in charge arranged for the area of the crime scene to be guarded and the wounded Private Oravec was taken to the hospital in Aš.[25]

The investigation into the case found that the following circumstances had influenced Private Kruml's actions: there was insufficient organisation of the life and activities of the company on 16 April 1963. The company commander was on leave at the time and the second-in-command had left the company on a private trip without authorisation. The ZVP was

[25] Ibid.

attending training at the brigade headquarters and of the officials in the company, only the company elder, Staff Sergeant Banko, remained, who was also on duty as the company's supervisory officer. Although political training of the men was held from 2.00 pm, many of the border guards did not attend and performed agricultural work in the company area. Privates Kruml, Votýpka and Kozlík took advantage of this work to leave the company premises and visit the local Jednota shop in order to consume beer. When their absence from the company was discovered, insufficient measures were taken to locate them.

Border guards Kruml, Votýpka and Kozlík drank a considerable amount of alcohol, and Private Kruml also purchased a quarter-litre bottle of vodka, which, judging by the bottle found near the seat, he had drunk while on duty before attacking Private Oravec. In the afternoon, other border guards confessed that they had also visited the Jednota to drink beer. Actual attendance at the men's political training and farm work was not recorded.

Although the job of company supervisor was performed by Staff Sergeant Banko, at that time the only professional soldier in the company, the posting of patrols for state border duty was carried out by the graduate Sergeant Reitmayer. He did not carry out the posting of the patrol according to regulations since the appointed officer had overlooked Private Kruml's drunkenness and had not checked the readiness of the patrol.

Even though the company supervisor, Corporal Drahorád, knew about the drunkenness of some of the border guards, in particular Kozlik and Kruml, he did not report this fact even when he presented them for the issue of a combat order. Some other border guards who knew about the drunkenness did not report anything either. Only in the case of Private Kozlik did the patrol commander report from the field that the appointee was in a drunken state. Staff Sergeant Banko sent Staff Sergeant Durny to investigate the situation, and he reported that everything was fine.

One of the most significant problems at the 24th Border Company in the previous year had been the drunkenness of the border guards. The company commander, Captain Tichý, and his deputy, Lieutenant Commander Veselý, had had a crucial influence in this respect, as they themselves had got drunk in several cases, in the presence of both border guards and civilians. This behaviour was repeated on 15 February 1963 at the pub in Doubrava. The conduct of the commander and his deputy aroused public indignation, and the case was therefore dealt with by

military command and the Communist Party. Captain Tichý was relieved of his post as company commander and his deputy, Lieutenant Veselý, was given a warning for irresponsible performance of his duties.

There were several repeat offenders in the company, and among them were privates Kruml, Votýpka, Kozlík and Adamec, who were disciplined several times, mainly for drunkenness. They were constantly being dealt with and the situation had improved somewhat, although no major improvement had been achieved. The case may also have been influenced by the fact that Private Kruml had been hit several times on the head with a pistol by a member of the National Security Corps (SNB) during a walk in Aš on 24 March 1963, which had given him concussion. He received treatment for about 14 days at the state hospital in Aš. An investigation into the case found that Private Kruml was not guilty.

Private Kruml came from a working-class family. His parents had not lived in the same household for the last 8 years. His mother had been sentenced in court several times, mainly for prostitution. Kruml had grown up in poor conditions and was mainly raised by his grandmother. He joined the 24th Border Company in 1961. He was disciplined four times for shortcomings in the performance of his duties, with an unconditional imprisonment of 35 days. Of these, he was punished twice for drunkenness, once for returning late from an outing and once for falling asleep on duty. He was not punished for the case of a clash with a policeman in Aš. On the basis of consistently conducted interviews and individual work with him, he had shown effort and had recently improved, as confirmed by officials and border guards.

Private Emil Oravec came from a working-class family and joined the unit in 1962. He performed his tasks very well, he had not been disciplined and, conversely, he had been rewarded twice for his initiative and activity. He had a very responsible approach to fulfilling his military duties and was rated by his superiors as one of the best border guards of the company.

The investigation did not show that there had been any disagreements between Private Kruml and Oravec earlier or just before he left the service. Nor did the contents of Private Kruml's correspondence or the inquiry among the border guards clarify any motive for his actions. Private Kruml was of a more private nature, and this was reflected in the fact that he was not close friends with anyone in the company and that he was very reluctant to confide his problems, especially family problems, and only rarely did so.

The investigation further revealed that the main cause of the suicide of Private Kruml and the attempted murder of Private Oravec was drunkenness. Private Kruml had a considerable propensity for this. The fundamental weakness which prevented a more effective solution of the problems of morale and military discipline was considered to be a false comradeship which, in the case in question, was most markedly manifested in the conduct of a number of border guards and of the officials themselves.

Another cause was the poor organization of the unit's life and activities on that particular operational day. The life and activity of the company did not correspond to the regulations and the functionaries did not fulfil their basic duties. The battalion functionaries did not know the actual situation in the company well. A long-term review conducted by the Chief of Staff, Major Vrba, did not address these problems. The battalion had not consistently addressed morale and military discipline issues over the previous year.

Although the brigade headquarters and the political department had dealt with the situation in the company in connection with the former commander, Captain Tichý, they did not continue to follow the development and the situation in the company. Neither the battalion nor the brigade provided the new company commander with the necessary and consistent assistance. Consequently, the brigade chief of staff proposed a comprehensive solution to the problem of drunkenness through a series of training sessions, focusing on party-political work. He also established a procedure for dealing with individual cases of drunkenness and imposed disciplinary penalties, both on specific regular border guards and on their superior officers.

Lieutenant Václav Kačerovský

On 20 October 1971, Lieutenant Václav Kačerovský, born on 2 May 1942, of Czech ethnicity, assigned to the 12th Border Brigade in Planá u Mariánských Lázní, committed suicide by hanging himself in his apartment.[26]

At 6.45 am on 20 October 1971, Lieutenant Kačerovský arrived in front of the unit's shoeshop, where he asked civilian employee Pikl to hand over two envelopes to Major Šiling. Pikl shortly thereafter handed said envelopes to Ensign Toman, who noticed that one envelope was open

26 ABS, f. 2347, k. 10, č. j. 1065/71, Dokumentace v případu sebevraždy Václava Kačerovského – závěrečná zpráva.

on the side and that it contained two other letters. One was addressed to Lieutenant Kačerovský's wife and the other to the President of the Senate, Maria Lukešová, who had judged Kačerovský the previous day. He therefore immediately opened the letter addressed to Major Šiling and from its contents he discovered Lieutenant Kačerovský's intention to end his life by hanging himself in the attic of his flat. He immediately dispatched the officials present to the spot, with the intention of stopping him. At the same time he called the department doctor to render first aid if necessary. In spite of all these precautions, at about 7.10 am Lieutenant Kačerovský was found hanging from a beam in the attic of his house. He was immediately cut down, brought down from the attic and the doctor called in started resuscitation attempts, which succeeded in restoring cardiac activity and breathing. Kačerovský was subsequently taken to the hospital in Plana near Mariánské Lázně, where he died the following morning despite all medical care. The body of the deceased was then taken to the Central Military Hospital for a forensic autopsy.[27]

An examination and investigation of the circumstances of the suicide revealed that on 19 October 1971, the District Court in Tachov, headed by the presiding judge, Maria Lukešová, had sentenced Václav Kačerovský to three years' imprisonment without parole for his involvement in poaching. A year earlier, on 15 June 1970, Kačerovský had applied for admission to the service of the Czechoslovak People's Army and for assignment as a political worker. From all the assessments and checks carried out on the named person and from other characteristics, it was clear that he was a non-adversarial person. Accordingly, he was recruited, promoted to the rank of lieutenant and given the post of ZVP, which he held from 30 June 1971. In connection with the above-mentioned criminal activities, he was removed from his post on 1 July 1971 and subsequently transferred to the accommodation department of the Border Brigade.[28]

Václav Kačerovský was evaluated as a politically mature officer with a good overview of the international and domestic political situation by the military. He was active in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He led an orderly family life. He fulfilled his duties conscientiously, honestly and independently. Overall, the evaluation shows that he was a promising officer. The reputation report showed that Kačerovský's attitude towards the socialist establishment was good, and he behaved as a good party

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

member and citizen of the republic during the events of August 1968. Even in the civilian community he showed himself to be a sincere and friendly person towards others.

Kačerovský was accepted for service in the Czechoslovak People's Army (CSLA) on the basis of good judgment and characteristics. The first defective findings were discovered by the authorities of the District Department of the Tachov police force only after Kačerovský had entered the service of the CSLA. On the basis of the contradictions that came to light in connection with his additional vetting, the military authorities had to re-verify Kačerovský's origins and relationship to the socialist establishment. The assessments up to that time had shown that Kačerovský was of working-class origin with a positive attitude towards the Communist Party. However, it was now established that Kačerovský's father had taken ownership of a farm of about 7 ha in the village of Všeruby in 1945, although he was more involved in the cattle trade. In 1950, during the political evaluation of the inhabitants of the border villages, the Kačerovský family had had to leave the border villages back to Kdyně. From that time on, Kačerovský's father worked in that place until his retirement as an auxiliary worker at the Kdyně Machine Works. Especially when drunk, he showed a certain aversion to the state and political establishment. It was further established that at the time of Kačerovský's recruitment for service in the CSLA, the Kdyně police authority (at the place of residence of his parents) were not asked to carry out a background check and report on his parents.

The investigation concluded that the immediate motive for the suicide of Lieutenant Kačerovský could be considered to be a severe depressive state resulting from a combination of personal problems resulting in the imposition of an unconditional prison sentence. The military staff bears no blame for the death of Václav Kačerovský. Certain misconduct must be noted which occurred in connection with the investigation of the individual named at the time of his recruitment to the CSLA. The military authorities were alerted to this fact and drew the appropriate conclusions from it.

Private Dušan Berko

On 26 February 1973, at around 12.15 am, Private Dušan Berko, born on 20 June 1953, of Slovak ethnicity, assigned to Sušice 7th Border Brigade, committed suicide with a submachine gun near the Javoří Pila border company.[29]

[29] ABS, f. 2343, k. 86, č. j. PS-0277/1973, Vyšetřující zpráva – Berko Dušan.

Private Berko had been granted border leave on 25 February 1973. In the afternoon he took part with other border guards in a trip to Sušice, where he visited a cinema. Afterwards they returned to their unit at 9.00 pm. During this time, none of the border guards observed Private Berko showing any changes in his behaviour. On arrival at his unit, he was reported for duty, namely company guard from midnight until 1.00 am, and then from 2.00 am to 3.00 am, with further duty starting in the morning to guard the national border. He stayed in the washroom until the first duty started, where he complained to Private Mlynárčik that he was again on night duty. In all probability, he also wrote a farewell letter in his pocket calendar. At midnight he then took up his company guard duty, to which he was introduced by the company supervisor, Corporal Kerekeš. Under his command, Private Berko carried out the loading of his submachine gun and relieved the old guard, Private Srna. During this activity, according to the testimony of Corporal Kereš and Private Srna, Berko behaved quite normally. After about 10–15 minutes, the company supervisor heard a machine gun shot near the company. He immediately ran with Private Srna to the front of the unit to check on the situation. In the process, they both called for the guard, but he did not answer. Following fresh footprints in the snow, they began to look for him, proceeded along the road towards the state border and found him at a distance of 100 metres from the area of the sentry, lying on the road on his back in a prone position, with the submachine gun lying about 2 steps beside him. On first examination they found that Private Berko had been shot in the head and was showing no signs of life. They reported the case to the company officer in charge, who immediately summoned medical assistance and informed the company commander. As it was snowing heavily, he had Private Berko transferred to the unit so that he could be given first aid and the suicide scene secured. The doctor who was summoned stated that death by gunshot had occurred immediately.[30]

Private Berko had joined the Javoří Pila border company on 15 May 1972. He performed his tasks in the state border guard well, was conscientious in his service and was awarded the title of border patrol commander. He was rated good to outstanding in combat and political training and was awarded the title of Exemplary Border Guard on 22 February 1973. He did not integrate into the wider team and was friends with only a few border guards of Slovak ethnicity in the company. He was known to get

[30] Ibid.

very angry over small things and to have violent outbursts of anger. He did not consume alcoholic beverages during his military service. In civilian life, according to the reports, he was positively evaluated.

An investigation conducted by a designated committee at the scene found that Private Berko had written a suicide note in his personal calendar before committing suicide, which was the main evidence that he had committed suicide. The act could not have been committed by another person, not least because there were no other traces in the freshly fallen snow. In his farewell letter, Private Berko mentioned that the company was in disarray and that he had to commit suicide in order to resolve the ethnic question in the company. The Commission had to investigate these serious reasons thoroughly.

The investigation found that border guards were taking disproportionately long shifts in the current winter conditions. This was apparent when manning posts on the signal wall, where patrols were ordered for periods of up to 8 hours continuously. This duty also extended into the night time, and checks had to be made on the wall, which greatly exhausted the border guards. In many cases this was not followed by rest to rebuild strength, but by additional duty of 1–3 hours on guard duty at the company. Moreover, the period between each duty during the operational day did not ensure that equipment could be dried for further service, and so it was common for border guards to leave for duty with their equipment soaking wet. In addition, there was no regular rotation of night and day duty. A heavy workload was recorded in the month of February, when a large snow cover was building up and the company commander, in an attempt to keep the signal wall in working order, organised its clearance at the expense of the border guards' personal leave. In this situation, the company also fulfilled the set programme of combat and political training. Partial tasks in this direction were also performed in the personal time of the border guards. The company commander left one-third of the plan for guarding the state border to subordinate officers. Therefore, the plan was not thoroughly thought through, which resulted in a disproportionate burden on some border guards. This burden had an adverse effect on the morale of the border guards, especially since they learned from border guards of a neighbouring unit that there was no training, no repair of the signal wall, no work being done in their company and, therefore, that their life was considerably easier.[31]

[31] Ibid.

Although the company commander regularly granted border guards border leave within the limits of the company's capabilities, its use was influenced by other regulations. During border leave, a border guard was required to attend roll call for breakfast, lunch, dinner, combat differentials, specified drills, and last but not least, all topics in political training. When granted an excursion to the settlement of Srní, about 10 km away, border guards had to walk in most cases, which in difficult snow conditions meant a 3-hour journey there and back. On their return, they were usually expected to be on night duty, so they preferred not to go on the walk for fear of falling asleep on night duty. It also reflected negatively on the collective of the unit's border guards that the company commander in some cases, in connection with the high workload, treated the border guards inappropriately or even arrogantly. He had little response to their comments and requests, which were not handled flexibly because there was no mutual and sincere contact between the commander and the border guards. This led to various discussions amongst the officers and there were opinions to the effect that some border guards were more or less burdened by both duty and various jobs at the company compared to others. In particular, it was said that the members in question were of Slovak and Hungarian nationality. On careful examination, no differences between Czechs and Slovaks, differences between the collectives or various forms of bullying were confirmed, as most of the border guards testified. Such a view came from the fact that the specialist positions in the company (sleepers, engineers, cooks, drivers, etc.) were mostly held by members of Czech nationality and were therefore not encumbered by border service on such a large scale.[32]

Both the problems of duty and of mutual relations were often discussed by border guards in smaller and larger groups. About 15 days before the suicide, a group of 15 border guards, of varying makeup, met in the company washroom to discuss the ongoing strain on the physical and mental state of the border guards. Among them was Private Berko. Most of the border guards agreed that something had to happen at the company, that someone would either have to shoot themselves or run away in order for their problems to begin to be addressed. Private Berko did not comment on this.

Such facts had some influence on the conduct of Berko, who was known to be of a violent temper and got annoyed even when he was given

[32] Ibid.

the night shift. Examination of Private Berko's workload showed that he was not overworked in terms of duty. His average daily duty time was 7.15 hours and of this 44% was night duty. On some days he had more hours of service, but this evened out on other days. His higher workload was confirmed in other tasks, especially manual work, just in the winter period.

The investigation also found significant findings at Private Berko's place of residence. His father reported that they had expected such a thing from their son. The parents also stated that Private Berko had twice attempted suicide at home. The first time had been by crashing his motorcycle, and the second time had been before entering military basic service, when he had tried to cut the veins in his arm. In his civilian life, he often consumed alcoholic drinks, for which he had been treated in an alcohol treatment centre. He was also highly religious. These facts, however, were not known prior to his entry into military basic service, as they were not registered in the slightest in the enlistment documents. This had to be regarded as a serious deficiency, since such a soldier could not perform tasks on the state border.

The investigation into the whole case led the commission to conclude that he was a psychopath, a fact that was established at his place of birth and verified by the unit. He appeared to be a nervous, short-tempered border guard and had frequent outbursts of anger. He had only a few friends in the unit, with whom he did not confide his problems. He also limited written contact with his parents, and at the critical time, when he returned from a walk and discovered that he was on night duty, he became agitated and could find no other solution and committed suicide. The identified deficiencies in the unit's organization and educational work cannot be regarded as a major cause, and cannot have had an impact on the perpetration of the act. Although they caused dissatisfaction among the border guards, they were not such a burden as to exceed the limits of bearability. Other border guards in the company performed similar tasks. The investigation did not confirm any cases of harassment and ethnic differences were entirely ruled out.

The case was discussed at a meeting with all the commanders of the border and security units on 27 February 1973, highlighting the deficiencies found in the unit during the investigation. The brigade commander punished the commander of the Javoří Pila Company with a severe reprimand for poor implementation of individual educational work, for improper handling of border guards and for weak influence on

organizational and management work in the application and processing of the state border protection plan.

Conclusion

The communist regime tried to present the deceased Border Guards as victims of constant skirmishes with Western intelligence agents and other armed intruders. Armed clashes did indeed take place at the state border, but mainly in the period from 1945 to 1951, when the state border was still relatively easy to penetrate and its protection was carried out only by means of patrols. After 1951 and the switch to military methods of border protection, only four border guards died in clashes with intruders. The other deaths were mostly due to traffic accidents, suicides, accidents, accidental gunshots, etc. However, a large part of the cases were not related to the performance of border guard duty, as they occurred during outings and on periods of leave. In the five border brigades stationed on the Czech-Bavarian border, a total of 211 border guards died in connection with their duties between 1951 and 1991. Suicide was the most frequent cause of death, with 70 soldiers opting for it. Traffic accidents claimed 42 victims. The accidental discharge of a second border guard's weapon killed 24 men, and 20 others were killed by the means of technical engineering, specifically a mine explosion or electrocution. Of the 211 cases in total, one in three was a suicide. The majority of these were soldiers on basic duty who decided to end their lives by shooting themselves. The most common motives for the act were difficulties in relationships with partners, financial debts, conflicts with other border guards, dissatisfaction with military service and mental and health problems. An analysis of suicide rates by decade found that the number of cases in the 1950s and 1960s was identical. In both these decades, 23 soldiers committed suicide. In the 1970s, there was only a slight decrease to a total of 19 cases. The only exception was the 1980s, when only four border guards decided to end their lives. We can therefore say that suicides occurred at the same rate in different time periods, except in the 1980s, when the number of cases dropped significantly. Detailed descriptions of individual cases, among other things, give a closer view of the actual situation and environment at the border company and thus provide a picture of the actual functioning of the Border Guard units, which did not always coincide with what was presented by official sources.

Annex 1: Causes of death

CAUSE OF DEATH	NUMBER OF DEATHS
suicide	70
traffic accident	42
accidental discharge of another border guard's weapon	24
electrocution	12
mine explosion	8
drowning	6
murdered by another boarder guard	5
accident during construction work	5
mistaken armed encounter between border patrols	5
accidental discharge of own weapon	4
railway accident	3
gunshot wounds	3
grenade explosion	3
explosives blast	2
air accident	2
poisonous gases	2
lightning strike	2
fall from an observation tower	2
shot in an armed encounter with a military defector	2
shot by a deserting border guard	2
shot by a border patrol in an unsuccessful attempt to defect to Bavaria	1
freezing to death	1
injury in a football game	1
kicked by a horse	1
as a result of burns	1
consequences of an inept prank	1
injuries during engineering blasting work	1
TOTAL NUMBER OF DEATHS	**211**

Annex 2: Suicide numbers

	Cheb	Planá	Domažlice	Sušice	Volary	TOTAL
1950s	4	5	3	8	4	**23**
1960s	6	5	5	4	2	**23**
1970s	1	7	7	4	0	**19**
1980s	1	0	0	3	0	**4**
1990s	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
TOTAL	**13**	**17**	**15**	**19**	**6**	**70**