

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BERLIN WALL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE STATE SECURITY

Daniela Münkel

Fifty years ago, during one night, a wall was erected in the middle of Berlin that became a symbol of the Cold War and of a world divided into free and totalitarian zones. Naturally, everything took place under the watchful eye of the East German state security, the Stasi. German historian Daniela Münkel maps in detail the actions of the East German secret police during the division of Berlin into east and west. The author quotes from Stasi reports and describes the whole range of activities that the East German security forces had to carry out in order to separate the totalitarian and free zones.

OPERATION „SELB“ The StB's Response to the „Freedom Train“

Slavomír Michálek

On August 11, 1951, train no. 3717 passed through the station in Aš. It had been meant to come to a halt there but instead continued at full speed, at 15:10 crossing the border with Germany in the direction of the town of Selb. The train consisted of a locomotive, a coal wagon, a freight carriage and three passenger carriages. There were 111 people on board. This escape, from which 40 or so passengers did not return, received great attention in Czechoslovakia, where it was presented as an act of American gangsterism, and in the West, where journalists depicted it as an expression of an unconquerable desire for freedom. The StB immediately started making arrests and in the framework of the subsequent operation Selb sent dozens of people to prison. No such escape occurred again.

PRESIDENT EDVARD BENEŠ THROUGH THE EYE OF A CAMERA

Jaroslav and Miroslav Čvančara

Immediately after his death, the second president of the Czechoslovak Republic was ranked among the controversial figures of the country's

history. Later he even came to be seen as an out-and-out enemy. The Communists forbade people from discussing, writing about or conducting unbiased research about Edvard Beneš. He became the leading representative of the “traitorous Czechoslovak bourgeoisie” and for the next 40 years his work and democratic legacy was trashed. Only after November 1989 was some film footage of Beneš, which had been kept hidden for decades, made accessible to Czech viewers.

THIRTEEN YEARS BEHIND BARBED WIRE The Tragic Fate and Death of Josef Bryks, Prisoner of Two Totalitarian Regimes

Ladislav Kudrna

Josef Bryks, a Czechoslovak fighter pilot who served with the RAF, was shot down in June 1941 over German-occupied territory and was arrested soon afterwards. He spent the rest of the war in German detention camps and prisons, from which he constantly tried to escape by all manner of means. He survived the war with the reputation of a “chronic escapee” and returned to England, from where he eventually took his wife Trudie to Czechoslovakia. Bryks's military career was interrupted by the Communist takeover of 1948. In May 1948 he was arrested and in February 1949 he was sentenced to 10 years hard labour. He passed through several camps and prisons, causing trouble wherever he went, which led to his original sentence being lengthened. In the end he had become a Communist slave. He died of a severe heart attack in the Rovnost labour camp in August 1957. He was 41 years old. The widow of this prisoner of two totalitarian regimes, Trudie Bryks, fought long and hard for his rehabilitation after 1989. Only in 2009 was she able to place flowers on her husband's grave.

JOURNEY TO AN ARTS SEMINAR

Petr Slinták

The life story of the painter Radoslav Kutra reflects the complicated fates

of many Czech artists confronted by the societal changes that followed WWII. For some of the generation of artists inspired by the manifold artistic currents of the interwar period, 1948 represented a real dividing line. The creative liberalism of the avant-garde was replaced by aesthetic dictate and artists were faced with a personal dilemma. The need to make a living forced many to make compromises, though the desire for free expression put them in conflict with the structures of official culture. For the likes of Radoslav Kutra – a religiously oriented artist attempting to synthesise modern art theory with a personal conception of faith – the two-decade period after the war was difficult. However, in the 1960s in particular he experienced many moments of joy. No era is black and white, and even the period in question represents a picture with various shades. This makes the experiences which exile in Switzerland brought the painter all the more surprising; we find dark tinges of his confrontation with another cultural environment and social system where we would not expect to.

BY WATER TO FREEDOM Several Moments in the Life of Josef Novák, or On Possible Paths to an Anti-Communist Resistance

Martin Tichý

February 1948 led to a wave of departures into exile. The fugitives knew that they faced detention, arrest, conviction and further persecution. They did their best therefore to find routes out and the necessary contacts to take them, and as safely as possible. We know many tragic stories of aborted departures (either dreamt of or forced by circumstances) for futures abroad. However, the majority thankfully ended well, in part thanks to people smugglers who are today unknown. One such smuggler was Josef Novák, who carried many refugees across the River Elbe to Germany on his tug boat. Among them were the important politician Ladislav Feierabend and his entire family. 