

A Firearm as a Basis for Historical Research of the Period 1945–1989

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Abstract. *This paper highlights the lack of satisfactory research on the history of Czechoslovak arms production after 1945, particularly with regards to small arms, which were one of the dominant products of the Czechoslovak arms industry in this period. The author notes that this is due to a gap between the perspectives of historians of economy and military, and specialists in armaments technology. The second part of the paper discusses new research trends, while the third part uses the ČZ 247 (015) submachine gun from the late 1940s as an example of the wide range of research possibilities when starting from qualified information on the origin, production, delivery, and use of a particular model.*

Keywords

1945–1989; Czechoslovakia; arms production and export; economic history; military history.

1. Introduction

Czechoslovak arms production after 1945 is a topic of great importance in historical research, but its treatments have been marked by a predominant focus on only certain segments and/or aspects of this vast issue. The limited interconnectedness of research approaches and publications from different fields of historiography also plays a negative role.

This is especially true in the case of the production of small arms, which were one of the dominant products of the Czechoslovak arms industry after 1945. At the same time, this was an area in which Czechoslovakia retained an unusually high degree of autonomy within the Eastern Bloc after 1948.

For historians focusing on the economy and the military, it is usually only an imaginary small piece of a much larger historical mosaic. The tricky part of this approach is that it is usually not based on archival research and therefore requires skilled selection and mining of existing literature. This is all too often not done, resulting

in incomplete and inaccurate generalizations. Also typical is the neglect of the extensive post-war Czechoslovak civilian arms production, which was closely linked to the military in terms of capacity. [1] [2]

On the opposite pole there is a relatively large number of articles and books on individual types or models of small arms. A fundamental shortcoming of most of them is the neglect of the broader context, which is necessary for a thorough understanding of the phenomena and processes of the period of state socialism. [3]

So far, there are not many works that manage to bridge this gap. Among the most successful ones are the chapter by Vladimír Karlický in the synthesis *Czech Firearms and Ammunition* (1995), which is in some respects still unsurpassed, and Martin Dubánek's 2008 monograph on the light machine guns vz. 52 and vz. 52/57. [4] [5]

Even these high-quality works, however, have not used all the methodological and interpretative possibilities that are available in researching the history of Czechoslovak arms production in the second half of the 20th century. I present an outline of some of them in the third part of this paper, trying to take into account new research trends.

2. New Approaches to Research on the History of Small Arms

Over the past few decades, many new perspectives, methods, and interpretations have been applied, or at least tested, in the study of the design, manufacture, sale, use, and cultural meanings of small arms. Of course, not all of them can be used meaningfully in research on Czechoslovak arms production after 1945.

Among the particularly interesting works is a book by the American journalist C. J. Chivers from 2010 on the phenomenon of the 'avtomat Kalashnikova', which is a largely successful example of the use of the 'story' of one model for interpretation the history of the second half of the 20th century. The themes discussed are given by the fact that the subject of interest is a mass-produced, mass-exported and globally used military firearm of Soviet origin. [6]

This publication is particularly inspiring for its basic concept and some insights. However, it is also useful to note its shortcomings. I consider the most serious to be the author's lack of primary sources of Soviet provenance. Instead, he was forced to use existing literature that contained incomplete, distorted, and sometimes contradictory information. Chivers was aware of this, and therefore gave due attention to the issues of secrecy, censorship, and mythmaking; however, some of his conclusions ceased to be valid as a result of the subsequent Russian information boom on the subject, which culminated in a detailed 'technicist' history of the development of the AK-47 in 2021 [7].

An excellent example of a highly informed approach is the work by British academic Matthew Ford on infantry weapons innovation by Western armies in the second half of the 20th century. Ford's topics are admittedly applicable to the conditions of Czechoslovakia during the period of state socialism only to a very limited extent due to the significantly different status of the arms industry and armed forces in the West and the East during the Cold War; however, it is certainly worth paying attention to how thorough knowledge of the history and characteristics of each model helped this author to pose and answer new research questions. [8]

Special mention should be made of Ford's successful application of the concept of 'anti-essentialist theory of technology' according to the publication *The Machine at Work* by Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar (1997). This approach draws attention to the different interpretations of the same artefact by different social groups involved in its creation and use, defines the capabilities of a weapon as a social process in which representatives of these groups convince (or ignore) each other in various ways while insisting on the truth of their perspective, and encourages reflection on the causes of such contradictions.

These phenomena, despite the many differences in the position and motivation of the actors involved, were of course also present in Czechoslovak arms production.

Also of interest for our purposes are the research questions posed by Scottish historian Rosamund Johnston in her current project *Comrades in Arms: A Global History of Czechoslovakia's Weapons Industry, 1954–1994*, at the University of Vienna. Based on the information published so far, she, among other things, uses the oral history method and relies on the concept of more-than-human history, and examines how the history of the Czechoslovak arms industry was shaped by non-human actors – by which she seems to mean mainly the arms themselves. [9]

3. One Firearm, Many Roles: ČZ 247 (15) submachine gun

The ČZ 247 submachine gun, also referred to by the factory code 015, serves us as an outline of research and interpretation possibilities that can open up informed information about a particular model. Atypical fate of thus

firearms lends itself to the analysis of a range of phenomena, mechanisms and processes – and also to a reminder that weapons, by the nature of their unique primary purpose, often become symbols with changing meanings.

In this paper I limit myself to a brief characterization of selected 'roles' in which the ČZ 247 (015) submachine gun has found itself during its existence, with suggestions for research topics. It is necessary to emphasize that I am based on the current state of knowledge, which, especially in the last two decades, has made significant progress, but still has many reserves. [10] [11] [12]

3.1 Not the most modern submachine gun for the Czechoslovak Army

The ČZ 247 9mm Parabellum submachine gun was designed in 1947 in the nationalized Česká zbrojovka arms factory in Strakonice during a competition of domestic arms companies run by the Military Technical Institute of the Czechoslovak Army.

It was a technologically simple, traditionally conceived model with some innovative features, the most important of which was the ability to easily move the magazine (together with the whole receiver) from the vertical to the horizontal position and vice versa. This originally met the requirement to minimize the silhouette of the shooter in all positions.

Czechoslovak Army tested the prototypes until the beginning of 1948, but already by the autumn of 1947 they began to be overshadowed by much more modern models. The ČZ 247 platform was then used to test alternative cartridges, including highly advanced cartridgeless ammunition.

This stage of the 'story' of the ČZ 247 model can serve especially for the analysis of a remarkable arms tender, which in the conditions of 'economic democracy' in Czechoslovakia after WWII took the form of a fierce competition between the arms factories in Strakonice and Brno, and whose results fundamentally influenced the further development of the Czechoslovak arms industry.

3.2 A mass-produced export model that (almost) didn't sell

Already in October 1947, the Strakonice arms factory was given permission to offer the ČZ 247 model abroad. The most serious bidder soon became Egypt, which after the WWII was trying to break away from its dependence on Great Britain in the military sphere. In April 1948, the preparation of serial production for this country began at the Česká zbrojovka subsidiary plant in Uherský Brod. However, the very first partial delivery was stopped in May 1948 due to Moscow's request to end Czechoslovak military support to Egypt.

Nevertheless, production continued until the following year and exceeded 10,800 units. Egypt continued

to show interest, joined by several other countries (even Israel briefly); however, due to the change of attitude towards arms exports, only very limited sales to Bolivia were made (at the end of 1949 and – not confirmed yet – in 1950).

The ‘story’ of this weapon is an excellent starting point for an analysis of the hitherto little described approach of the Third Czechoslovak Republic to arms exports and the changes in this area after February 1948. Another relevant topic is the management of Czechoslovak arms production during the two-year economic plan.

The fact that the US Central Intelligence Agency was accurately informed about the production volume of the ČZ 247 submachine gun and its export character in February 1950 is also worth further analysis. [13]

3.3 A firearm and symbol of the People’s Militia (Lidové milice)

The ‘armed fist of the working class’ began to use the ČZ 247 submachine guns at the latest in 1950, but then only directly in the Uherský Brod factory where these weapons were stored. [14] The change was brought about by an instruction of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1952 to hand over all unissued military small arms to the Czechoslovak Army, which provided some of them to other armed forces. In the records of the People’s Militia, ČZ 247 submachine guns were found in large numbers in the autumn of 1954. [15] They were returned to army stores (along with other obsolete models) in the first half of the 1960s after rearmament with vzor 58 submachine guns.

The perspective of ČZ 247 model can be used in analyses of some of the strategies of the communist regime and allows for a more accurate description of the process of arming, training and deployment of ‘workers’ combat units’. [16]

The fact that this submachine gun became one of the widely reproduced pictorial symbols of the People’s Militia also deserves proper interpretation [17].

3.4 A training tool (not only) for better border security of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic

Since the 1960s, ČZ 247 submachine guns were also used for training purposes of the Civil Defence (Civilní obrana) and Border Guard (Pohraniční stráž). However, we have little information about this so far. According to one recollection, the exemplars for Border Guard were modified exclusively for firing with training ammunition. [18]

In the research of these topics, it will be appropriate to combine archival research with oral history methods.

3.5 A tricky export item

The new main ‘role’ of the ČZ 247 machine gun after the rearmament of the People’s Militia was, however, to return to its original purpose: export. During the 1960s, new conflicts, especially in Africa, created a demand for older small arms. At that time, Czechoslovakia began to emphasize the economic aspect of arms export instead of the previously preferred political aspect, and the country’s communist leadership allowed the sale of military equipment to private companies from non-communist countries.

The ČZ 247 submachine guns under the designation type 015 were sold in large numbers to Nigeria in 1967 along with a number of other Czechoslovak weapons. However, thanks to numerous pictures taken by Western photojournalists, it soon became common knowledge that the final destination was the separatist province of Biafra, which Moscow decided not to support.

At the end of 1969, 2,490 ČZ 247 submachine guns were available for offering abroad. Their only other export is documented in 1977, when Czechoslovakia supported the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia with a partially free supply of military material, which included a yet unspecified number of these weapons. [19] [20] [21]

This stage of the ‘story’ of the ČZ 247 submachine gun is particularly useful for analysing the changes and strategies of Czechoslovak arms exports in the 1960s and 1970s.

3.6 A movie gun

Finally, we would like to remind one more specific role of the ČZ 247 submachine gun, this time without the quotation marks: in 1971, several of these weapons – it is quite likely that in the modification for Border Guard training, because they shoot a lot on the screen – were used in the film *Oasis*, directed by Zbyněk Brynych, about seven Czechoslovaks fleeing the Foreign Legion in the Sahara in 1943. [22]

In this case, the methods used by historian Petr Kopal would be particularly useful for interpretation. [23]

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