In the historical culture of my country, the Slovak Republic, there are two main topics that might be linked to the theme of our conference. The first is the colonialism, especially its 19th century form, and the second theme is the post-1945 decolonization.

Frankly, neither themes are part of the mainstream historical discourse. East European countries and nations (incl. Czechs and Slovaks) did not use to be big actors in the history of the colonialism. In the general or public discourse as well as in the history schoolbooks, the “classical” 19th century colonialism is something that concerns West Europe, namely Great Britain, Portugal, France, Holland, Belgium, and partially (just before the IWW) Imperial Germany. I agree with the statement that classical colonialism has deeply influenced West European self understanding by structuring the idea of a European or Western identity, and I also agree that it had often been combined with a sense of superiority.

Thus, I could easily stop here, stating that from a Slovakian point of view, the colonialism and any heavy historical burden that it carries on its back, including the post-colonial historical debate, is a sort of a westerner “business”.

And yet, regarding colonialism and post-1945 decolonization, there are some topics in the history of Czecho/Slovakia that can be linked to our scientific issue. From these, let me just deal with one topic in this paper, i.e. with the topic how did the Czechoslovak Communist Party in the first half of the Cold War handle the issue of the decolonization. As we will see, the communists-led Czechoslovak state used a very hypocritical way. In the one hand, it consciously spread a wide ranging jovial media propaganda in favour of the decolonsed countries, while in the other hand it made huge weapon businesses with them, of course in total secrecy.

In the early days of the Cold War, international relations of the communist countries were pretty much limited to the relations with each other. Their previous and traditional international contacts were either re-directed, or were simply cut off, or their contacts were strictly frozen on a low diplomatic level. In fact, Czechoslovakia’s most valuable western links began to be established only around the late 1960s, and especially after the year 1975, when the country re-launched its international relations via the Helsinki process.

In 1975, Czechoslovakia had some kind of diplomatic relation with 102 countries of the globe (52% of the total 194 countries in 1975); from these, only 24 were European countries. (In 1975, there were 35 European countries, so we had official diplomatic contats with 68% of the European countries.) The vast majority of these relations were with the so called “Third World”: 30 Asian, 32 African countries, 14 countries from the American continent, plus...
Australia and New Zealand. It might be surprising but it is true, that the country had better diplomatic contacts with remote exotic islands, than with its closest European neighbours. E.g. Czechoslovakia sent an ambassador to the Republic of Cape Verde in the same year (October 1975) as it sent an ambassador to its capitalist neighbour, Austria. With Austria, Czechoslovakia raised its relation to the highest diplomatic level only in May 1975, when the countries officially exchanged ambassadors, whereas it sent a serving ambassador to the Cape Verde Islands nearly immediately when this former colony gained final independence from Portugal on July 5, 1975.

For a communist party led country like Czechoslovakia, the decolonization movement on a global scale was a unique opportunity for two reasons. One, it was good way-out from a rather isolated position on the international stage, and two, it meant a fruitful business, hidden underneath a jovial “smile” diplomacy.

Let us focus on the earliest cases, i.e. how Czechoslovakia supplied Guatemala and Cuba with weapons in the 1950s and 1960s. As we know it from recently published sources, Fidel Castro’s revolutionary July 26th Movement turned to the Czechoslovak government with a request of purchase of arms in mid-1958. From then on throughout the 1960s, Czechoslovakia was the biggest conventional weapon deliverer to Cuba (of course, except for the Cuban missile crisis in 1962). The Czechoslovak link was extremely important for the success of the Cuban revolutionary movement, because from 1959 till 1965/1966, Cuban anti-communist insurgents fought a six-year rebellion in the Escambray Mountains against the Castro government. Indeed, Czechoslovak weapons were needed for the “War Against the Bandits”, as F. Castro called the insurgents.

The Politburo of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, discussed in detail and finally agreed upon a resolution, i.e. approved sending military supplies to Havana in September 1959. The Cuban side had asked for the following items: 50 000 pieces of 9mm guns (of Czechoslovak type 23/25), plus a corresponding amount of ammunition/cartridges. On the Czechoslovak side, members of the highest political establishment were explicitly involved, commencing with president of the republic A. Novotný, through half of the government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of National Defence, ending with the Head of the State Planning Commission. Curiously enough, in the documents there was a weird wording: what the Spanish language calls “materiales de guerra”, it was euphemistically described in the Czech documents as “special technical supplies” or “supplies of specialized technology”.

According to the contract, the total cost of the transaction was valued to 32 million Czechoslovak Krows (Kčs), of which 50 000 guns were worth of about 14 000 million, and 80 million cartridges of 18 million. Technically and financially, the whole transaction went through a Swiss private firm of Mr. Philip Fridlander and through the “Schweizerische Bankgessellschaft Zurich”. The seemingly neutral mediator was necessary because, as the document stated, “The purchase of these goods could only be made by way of a third country.

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1 Open Society Archives, Budapest. HU OSA 300-30-6, Box 76, Folder: 1502/Foreign Relations CS Diplomatic Services 1975.
2 On Cuban-Czechoslovak arms sales, see Woodrow Wilson Center’s Cold War History Project’s Bulletin, Issue 17/18 Fall 2012. I especially mean the collection of documents which were obtained by Oldřich Tuma and edited by James G. Hershberg, see pp. 349-400.
otherwise direct supplies from Czechoslovakia could be politically manipulated by the United States, as in the case of Guatemala.”

Having been the closest political ally of the Soviet Union, of course, these actions were “preliminary consulted” and approved by the “Soviet representatives”. In fact, Czechoslovakia was selected by Moscow to be a spearhead in the relations with the Third World. Later on, Czechoslovakia widened its fruitful relations with Cuba. Among others, it supplied telephone switchboards and aircraft belongings; Czech military personnel and technical advisors flew to Cuba along with Soviet specialists; Cuban air force personnel was receiving training in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia also contributed to the preparation of trustful Cuban communist cadres, and the country participated in a highly secret international project called Manuel, a project which was aimed at training trustful personnel from Latin America, and dispatching them throughout the world in the 1960s.

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Someone might ask here: What is the point in all this? Many countries, incl. the USA, Great Britain, France, China etc. supported decolonized countries, they all gave economic and/or military help in return for some kind of political loyalty, didn’t they?

Well, Czechoslovakia’s situation had been slightly different. First of all, because the economic strength of the world powers simply could not be compared to Czechoslovakia’s staggering economy. Beyond the fiasco of the first and the second Five-Year-Plan, and without counting too many figures, let me give you just one example. Czechoslovakia was not able to provide enough tropical fruits to the shops, not even around Christmas, not even in the 1980s. The country had a very week economy, yet it insisted on large international weapon sales.

In fact, the Cuban weapon requests were itself a big problem. In 1958, the Czechoslovak Army simply did not have enough (50 000 pieces) 9mm guns. They could cover this demand only from the military supplies of the Technical Division of the Ministry of International Trade, in two installments, allowing first to release 20 000 guns in 1959, and further more 30 000 guns in 1960. The cartridges were a problem, too. As the Czechoslovak officials stated in their interim report to the competent ministry, the number of “500 million [9 mm] cartridges is disproportionally high when compared with the number of requested guns”, so they recommended to reduce this number to 80 million.

Just to show you the extent of cynicism on the side of the sellers, let us have a quote written by a contemporary ministerial official: “The realization of this transaction would have a series

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3 There was a shipment of 2000 tons of Soviet-made armaments from Czechoslovakia to Guatemala in May 1954. See https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/v44i5a05/html/v44i5a05p.htm Accessed Aug 25, 2013


5 Just one example from the American side is that during the Ronald Reagan years the USA had delivered ‘Stinger’ rockets to the Afghan Islamic insurgents, commencing from April 1986. See O’Sullivan, John: Az elnök, a pápa és a miniszterelnök. Helikon-Heti Válasz, 2010, 264.
of advantages [for us]. Above all, it would be the first supply of ‘specialised technology’ for use in the support of an anti-imperialist movement in the Central American region […] Furthermore, it would be a useful way to utilize guns already put out of commission, because old ammunition manufactured in the years 1946/1951 would be sold.” To sum up all advantages of the deal, the Czechoslovak Politburo resolution stated: “Considering that practically all of these supplied materials are of a second category, the Czech delegation will refuse any request to provide a guarantee on the supplied goods.”6

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Czechoslovakia’s weapon business with decolonized countries took place, of course, in total secrecy. The pragmatic goal (i.e. selling weapons) was hidden undeneath a massive media propaganda – which was not too difficult to do since all press and media were strictly centralised under the censorship of the Central Committee of the CPCS.

For the domestic public, Czecho-Slovakia seemed a peace-loving country which was determined to support the decolonization and deliberation movement beyond its possibilities in the name of the world-peace. At the same time, Czecho-Slovakia (with a Slovak weapon industry in it) was keen to exploit any need for guns and military equipment whenever and wherever there was need for it, throughout the whole period of the Cold War. Thus the communist Czecho-Slovakia was an example of a hypocritical country, as far as decolonization was concerned.

This was the most obvious and the strongest public feature of the decolonization in the former Czechoslovakia. Any newspaper reader or any TV watcher could easily understand that it was nothing else but Marxism or Socialism that meant the only way out from the colonial dependency. Newspaper slogans read: “Socialism helps colonized nations to get rid of the imperialist yoke”, and “It was the social revolution that has opened the door for the decolonization”. In the 1960s, this happened almost every day, and in all newspapers, beginning with national newspapers ending in local ones. And today, these liar, hypocritical, and primitive slogans are those that are still vivid in the minds of many Slovakian adults beyond age 30. It was a sheer fooling of people, overstressing the idyllic and humanistic side of our relations with the decolonized countries, without a single referenc to the real economic nature of the relations.

Let there be no mistake about the centralised propaganda aims of the communist system. In the Soviet Union, a separate department called “International Information Department” (IID) was set up as a tool for disseminating Soviet propaganda under the supervision of the Communist Party, right under the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the CPSU Central Committee, led by a very high ranking politician, Boris Nikolajevich Ponomaryov.7 The IID set up a cover international organization, called Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), established in 1957. The principal function of the AAPSO was to serve “as a channel for Soviet influence in the Third World”, and among its aims we literally

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6 Woodrow Wilson Center’s Cold War History Project’s Bulletin, Issue 17/18 Fall 2012. Collection of documents which were obtained by Oldřich Tuma and edited by James G. Hershberg, p. 349-400.
find the expression “exploiting the developing third world”. Following this Soviet pattern, the Czech and Slovak comrades at the Czechoslovak Department No 8 (i.e. Disinformation Dept. of the Czech Intelligence Service) stated as their aim: “We should focus on the Third World, and on the American relations with these new nations. The objective of the Czech disinformation is to cause rifts, and to discredite US policies and programmes in the third world.”

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Someone could ask here again: What is the point? Many countries, incl. the USA, Great Britain, France, China etc. sold weaponry, often out-of-date weaponry, didn’t they? And they also made their military businesses secret, covered in plain propaganda slogans, didn’t they?

Yes, it is true. But more often than not, Western large scale military businesses were at least escorted by genuine and generous aids of different kind. If we look at Czechoslovakia’s historical time-line, and ask which was first, the arm sales or the willingness to help citizens of the decolonized countries, than it is rather clear that Czechoslovakia started selling military equipment to international crisis zones earlier than any other East European communist country. I would like to point out that Guatemala and Cuba were the earliest weapon sales to any Third World country from any East European state, two or three years earlier than the first Soviet weapon sale to Cuba took place in 1961. Beyond this, Czechoslovakia already in January 1948 delivered 200 machine guns, 4500 rifles and over 50 million rounds of ammunition to the Jewish Agency (later to become the Israeli government). Most of these were German weapons, captured by the Czechoslovak army on its territory at the end of the WWII.

As to the escorting aid projects: well, those never happened in the 1960s, only started to appear in the late 1970s, when Czechoslovakia launched certain aid projects to some decolonized countries, included sending engineers, doctors as well as hardware and medical assistance to Iraq, Lybia, Angola, etc.

Communist-led Czechoslovakia had never launched any genuine (cross-cultural) project for creating true relationship between its citizens and the citizens of the decolonized countries. One might not forget that Czechoslovakia did not have nearly any experience with free migration from outside Europe; in fact, free move of people was hardly possible even between the friendly communist states. Put it very simply, during the Cold War times, East Europeans did not have a chance to learn neither accepting the otherness of people coming from Africa or Asia, nor their cultural diversity. Not to mention potential cross-religion relations between them, which might have sounded in an officially atheist country as a sheer absurdity.

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Moreover, while selling weapons to decolonized countries, Czechoslovakia routinely and consciously violated contemporary arms-sale-standards. Of course, many countries sold weaponry in the Cold War times, however, most of them kept themselves to certain written international rules, from which we have to mention the most important three, i.e. no sale for human rights abuser; no weapon sales to conflict zones; no sales to place where there is a suspicion that weapons might be diverted to unauthorized destination.

After 1945, Czechoslovakia was in a very exceptional position. It not only had a strong and intact tradition of arms manufacturing (inherited from the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, and boosted in the mid-war period), but the country was a WWII winner too (unlike other East European countries like Hungary or Romania). Yet, Czechoslovakia misused its position. The country consciously undermined routine arms export standards in certain regions where it sold weaponry, namely to Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen, Angola. Czechoslovakia regularly violated embargoes issued by the United Nations, or the European Union or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It was particularly violating the rule that military equipment was not supposed to be transferred/diverted to unreliable actors, which was extremely dangerous. It is quite well known that Czechoslovakia manufactured a type of a highly explosive plastic material, one of the sad favourites of some terrorist groups of the 1970s, including the IRA. By the way, just to point out briefly to a very special and perhaps unexpected link between the IRA and the decolonization: Czechoslovak newspapers often praised IRA for its “anticolonial position”¹¹.

Czechoslovakia’s unreliability in the field of the arms sales, more precisely its insufficiently controlled weapon sales to third world countries, became a political issue after 1989, and it was at stake even during the European accession negotiations. As the Cold War framework was gone, Czechoslovakia’s military export fell in deep crisis. Its arms export to third world countries was about 8 billion US dollars in 1986, which figure had dropped to 1 billion US dollars in 1991. (So it plummeted to one-eighth of its value between 1988 and 1991.) Yet, in 1991 Czech/Slovakia still sold 300 pieces of T 72 type tanks to Syria and Iran, most of them manufactured in Slovakia. Czechoslovakia, and especially its Slovak third, where the two biggest arms factories in the country had been situated, was very reluctant to abandon its fruitful business after 1989. We don’t know too many details, but as we know it from recently revealed documents, even around 2004/2006 the Embassy of the USA in Bratislava held a strict control over the Slovakian weapon sales aimed to Libya, Cameroon, Yemen, and Afghanistan.¹²

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By having seen both sides of the coin, Czechoslovakia’s weapon sales to Cuba as well as its wide-ranging pro-decolonization media machinery, only thus it is possible to see both sides of Czechoslovakia’s true attitude toward the decolonization movement. Recent historiography proved deep discrepancy between the contemporary propaganda and the historical reality. It is proven that there were pragmatic economic interests behind the presentation and the well-sounding political slogans of the post-1945 decolonization in Czechoslovakia.

And what is the final evaluation, especially as far as its public notion/public discourse and the school teaching of this topic is concerned?

Well, in my understanding too many Czechs and Slovaks have a totally false perception of the post-1945 decolonization. The combination of two different factors (overstressed jovial propaganda in the one hand, and the lack of knowledge about the secret processes on the other) created a weird historical notion in our peoples minds. It is also possible that (wrongly enough) Czecho/Slovakia has chosen deep silence about its doubtful role played during the decolonization, rather than looking straight and sincerely into the eye of the history.

And I regard the outcomes for the teaching of the decolonization even more tragic. The theme of our conference is a shop-window example how difficult it is to apply/assert/put across up-to-date historical research in history teaching. In fact, recent scientific research is not mirrored in our history schoolbooks at all. This is what Joanna Wojdon call a “succumbing historical research to educational needs”13. There we can still find nothing about Czechoslovakia’s “contribution” to the post-1945 decolonization (better option), or we can find a hypocritically idyllic picture of it (worse option), like “classical decolonization themes” such as Gandhi’s movement, that are still prevailing in our history schoolbooks. Historical research has revealed that Est European countries had much more on stake in the decolonization than ideology. Yet, these chapters are completely missing from both the history teaching and general historical consciousness. And I am asking how long will this naïve, false and primitive reading of the decolonization prevail in our history schoolbooks?

Literature: