

## **External Review: Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Czech Republic**

23 February 2020

The Institutional Review Committee (IRC), consisting of seven historians from academic institutions in seven countries (Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia, and the United States) was invited by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (USTR) to conduct a site visit on November 20, 2019. In addition, Commission members reviewed documents provided by the Institute, both before the site visit and subsequently. We were asked to evaluate the quality of research output, the impact and visibility of Institute activities, and the vitality and sustainability of the Institute in its current configuration, and to provide guidance for the future.

We wish to begin by warmly acknowledging the Institute leadership's bold decision to seek evaluation in this manner. This statement is not meant to soften the blow of its critique, but rather to acknowledge that institutional review is too often limited to mere quantitative measurement, rather than the qualitative analysis that is the gold standard in the international academic community. We hope that our recommendations will serve the Institute's leadership and research staff as they seek to fulfill their mission.

### **Summary description**

The Institute was founded by the Czech government in 2007, and given three tasks: to produce scholarship, to provide educational programming, and to popularize knowledge. From the beginning, the focus of the Institute has been the period 1939-1989, and thus the era of the Nazi control of the Czech lands (Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia), followed by the era of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. At present, the Institute employs over 150 people, of whom roughly one-half work in one of the research or education sections.

Any discussion of the Institute's work invariably touches on the change in leadership in 2013 and the subsequent transformation of the Institute's character. As it is described today, this consisted of a turn away from engagement in contemporary politics and from a discourse of revealing the truth through mere documentation. We are unable to evaluate that change—indeed, it is a matter that awaits its historian. However, Commission members were in general agreement on the value of an approach that emphasizes high-quality scholarship, based upon the most current methodologies and in conversation with the international academic community. We will address details of the approach below.

### **Research productivity and impact**

In Phase I of the External Review, a Panel of five scholars, assisted by no fewer than 93 reviewers from around the world, assessed the quality of 127 Institute publications produced in the years 2008-2018. Reviewers assigned scores of 1-5, with 1 signifying research that is “world-

leading in ... originality, significance, and rigor.” It must be said that the scale was, in our opinion, poorly constructed, since the larger question of how work in Czech that deals exclusively with Czech and Czechoslovak History can be considered to have “world-leading” significance or be “recognized internationally” was not grappled with. Categories like “of significance to scholars of non-Czech history” and “of significance for Czech historiography” would have been more meaningful. The overall average of 2.7 is also somewhat misleading, since the rating of 1 appeared far more often than that of 5 (used only once). Nevertheless, the reviewers identified a great deal of research that meets international scholarly norms and would have the potential to engender broad scholarly interest if it were more accessible. Though a correlation of scores and year of publication was not carried out, it does seem that the ratings have climbed somewhat over the decade represented.

An examination of the topic areas, as well as of the research programs currently underway, raises some questions. First, document anthologies or other factual compendia still make up a significant proportion of the Institute’s work. Such research tends to involve many researchers, and yet not all of this output will engage scholars outside the Institute or be of broad interest to the public. Such research runs counter to the effort by many USTR researchers to make use of cutting-edge methodology in their work. We recommend that the Institute leadership develop a set of qualitative criteria necessary for the undertaking of any documentary work. Each such project should:

- be consonant with the research objectives of USTR;
- meet contemporary international standards for edited document collections, and make use of relevant innovations in the digital humanities approach;
- be shown to be necessary if not indispensable for the scientific community and for the wider public; and
- advance strategic cooperation with institutional partners both in the Czech Republic and abroad.

A second common type of research at USTR is studies limited either to one locality or to one individual subject. Many examples of this work received low (4) scores from the Phase I reviewers. The problem is not the narrow focus itself, as microhistorians have produced some of the most innovative work of the last half-century. For the most part, however, these works did not seek to engage any broader historiography and thus fail to make substantive contributions to our knowledge of the local and regional workings of dictatorship and authoritarian rule in 20<sup>th</sup> c. Europe. Similarly, IRC members were puzzled by a focus on aspects of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. While the study of faith communities and clergy in authoritarian regimes is a rich field internationally, the work produced by USTR researchers appears largely to be descriptive in nature and does not engage that historiography at all.

Institute researchers should be actively encouraged to develop their ability to engage with the historiography on authoritarian regimes and to take advantage of the methodological

innovations that historians elsewhere are applying. However, the purpose of such endeavors should lead researchers to engage in dialogue with contrasting—even contradictory—interpretations of history. This may run counter to the Institute’s origins in the pursuit of unambiguous truth, but is central to the work of historians. Scholarly dialogue is essential in the context of ongoing battles over historical truth currently waged in Central Europe, in which state-founded institutions deploy history to bolster nationalism. USTR has a responsibility to rise above these battles by recognizing the ways in which history is used and misused. The concept of “totalitarian rule” has been widely challenged by alternative approaches to the historical analysis of dictatorships, and we recommend that an institute such as USTR should participate actively in this international and interdisciplinary debate rather than abstain from it.

In evaluating the research plan as a whole, we consider it to be much too broad. The materials provided to the Commission list nearly 50 research projects, some of exceedingly wide scope. Some are quite narrow and isolated, while others are quite ambitious. As will be discussed later, the Institute needs to think about how it relates to other historical institutes in the Czech Republic and abroad, and develop a clearer mission that can guide its researchers’ work, taking into consideration the advantages and limitations that it has in comparison with other institutes of historical research in the Czech Republic. Notably, its institutional relationship with the Security Services Archives gives USTR the potential to serve as a hub for critical evaluation of national security archival practices and politics.

### **Educational and Research Sections**

The Commission met with the heads of the four main research and education sections, and was asked to assess those units in terms of quality, relevance, and vitality. We note that the Institute’s Coordination Board expected that we would address each section in greater detail. There are two reasons why we do not so. First, we met each section head for a very brief time, and simply could not explore each section as thoroughly as we would have liked. More important, we reached the conclusion that the distinctions between sections are somewhat arbitrary. The sections are meant to function both as organizational units and as research teams. We saw much less of the latter, however: the research pursued in each is largely dependent upon individual interests and not upon a well-developed research agenda. We recommend that the Institute consider establishing strong working groups focused on key research themes.

The work of the Education Section received the highest overall ratings from the reviewers in Phase I. The section has been extremely active in developing materials for and reaching out to the Czech public, through schools, libraries, and museums. Indeed, the necessity of connecting with the public has required the section to be attuned to contemporary pedagogical methods, including the use of digital media. The section’s growth—the staff has more than quadrupled in size over the decade—is indicative of the increased importance

placed on dissemination. But quality is as important as quantity, and we note the attentiveness of the section to problems of impact and readership.

Given the well-known challenges of interpreting 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, the Education Section is of central importance to the Institute's mission. We recommend that the section be understood as serving the research sections as well as the general public. Its goal should be to foster critical historical literacy through dissemination of scholarly findings and interpretations. In this way, the section can achieve its aim of contributing to the goal of building an informed citizenship based upon pluralist understandings of the past. The Commission is less enthusiastic about the Education Section's commitment to contributing to scholarship on pedagogy. While contribution to internationally-recognized journals in this field is of course admirable, and could further contact with scholars outside the country, it is debatable whether this approach alone would further the Institute's main goals or instead detract from them. Any system of quality evaluation should differentiate between the work of the Education Section and that of the research sections. Contributions to education-focused journals should be only one part of this section's international strategy.

The quality of the research sections is more uneven, both across and within sections. Commission members learned that the section on the history of the wartime experience is in the midst of a substantial change, under a new head whose time is split with another academic institution. We strongly recommend that all section heads be able to focus their energies on developing the strategic direction of their section, and to developing a clear research agenda. This does not, however, preclude permanent affiliation with university departments within the reasonable limits of secondary employment.

Study of wartime repression, resistance, and collaboration has changed greatly in the last two decades around the world, as scholars have both gained access to archives and developed new perspectives. Research produced by this section should be of the highest quality and be fully engaged with the international scholarship. At the moment, the record is spotty: a few scholars are producing work that incorporates historiographical innovations and is recognized and read beyond the Czech Republic, while others, the reviewers in Phase I found, are not. As long as section researchers maintain a dichotomous view of the war and occupation, according to which all who are not perpetrators are victims or resisters, there can be little hope of genuine international impact.

The two sections focused on the Communist era posed the greatest conundrum for the IRC. The second research group was created in 2017; externally, this division has been justified on the basis of size. Indeed, the two groups presently have 17 and 18 members, placing them between the Education unit (24 members, most of whom have partial appointments) and the 1939-1945 group (12 members). Beyond this organizational logic, however, there is no scholarly reason to have divided the groups. They are not divided by chronology, or by subject matter, though there are more scholars engaged in social and cultural topics in the latter group.

Informally, we gathered that methodological and personal differences, intertwined, led to the necessity of a breakup, with a justification being sought *post hoc*. Indeed, we gained the impression that an unsupportably duplicative system had been left for the IRC to sort out.

We recommend that the two sections agree on a clear division of labor. There are two obvious ways to do this. One is to focus the second section on social, cultural, and perhaps economic history. This would be fully legible to European institutions, as there are a number of departments of social and economic history, particularly in German and Austrian universities. This division would allow for more methodological innovation in both groups while giving researchers free rein over the entire Communist period. The other approach would be to divide chronologically, at 1968. This division is less ideal, as it could limit some research projects, and could also lead to a perception that some kinds of history are more appropriate for one period than another (e.g. study of repression in the first period, study of popular culture in the second). Leaving the decision to the Institute leadership, we emphasize that steps must be taken to improve the vitality and sustainability of these units. The result, we believe, could be to situate the Institute at the cutting edge of scholarship on the Cold War experience in Europe.

### **The Institute and its partners**

As it enters its second decade, the Institute has grown substantially, whether measured by budget, number of researchers, and scholarly output. It has arguably achieved a measure of stability under its current leadership. Soon, renovations of its offices will be completed. This is a good time to think about the Institute's relationship to academic institutions within the Czech Republic and internationally. The Commission sees great potential that is currently hampered by several factors that have been alluded to earlier in this report.

First, the Institute should focus and build upon its strengths. It has an organizational relationship to the Security Services Archives, and a mandate to study the period of Nazi and Communist rule. On the one hand, therefore, USTR is ideally situated to conduct documentary work, and some of its largest research projects are of this nature. Yet at the same time, researchers should be encouraged to maintain a critical distance to their subjects. Questions like "What does resistance or collaboration mean?" or "Why do we call these regimes totalitarian?" or "What were the limits of political power?" should accompany all research. We encourage researchers to think critically about the Institute itself, to think about why their research is conducted at such an institution and how it relates to the research conducted at Czech universities or the Academy of Sciences.

Two areas of research raised some questions. The first is that of the "Third Resistance," a term used for the most part uncritically by Institute leadership. The term situates the Communist era on a continuum with the Habsburg and Nazi periods. Of course, it is obvious that the nature of state power, and thus of resistance, varied greatly among these three. More important, though, is that the term suggests that Czechoslovak citizens were once again, as in

those prior eras, ruled from a foreign capital and were united by a common national response. This is not true, as work by Institute researchers has shown. Moreover, the term has implications for research agendas: any acts of violence can be presumed to be ‘resistance’ in this schema, while conflict within society, or political indifference, can be underplayed. The Institute’s researchers should be leaders in critical assessment of the term; otherwise, the Institute will be perceived by potential partners as serving political needs, and thus of less scholarly value.

The members of the IRC were more divided on a second research area, that of memory. The study of memory has certainly burgeoned over the last quarter-century, becoming a major field in its own right. Yet members pointed out that other institutions in the Czech Republic—most notably the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences—have extensive expertise in oral history, and many have expertise in the study of memory. USTR, in turn, is more properly suited for archival-based research, and should not attempt to duplicate the profiles of very different institutions. On the other hand, an institution that studies “totalitarian regimes” cannot ignore ongoing debates about the dictatorial past of the society and nation whose history it explores because these discourses themselves were and still are shaped by that past. Thorough reflection on the interdependency between scholarship and the memory cultures surrounding (and sponsoring) it is essential for any critical research on totalitarianism. In particular, the popularity of authoritarian tendencies in Central Europe today, where national exclusivity both constructs and draws upon a nostalgia for the stability of the late Communist era, can properly lie within the Institute’s mandate. Thus, USTR is an appropriate location for critical reflection on trends in the study of the recent past.

Were the Institute to sharpen its mission by developing a critical perspective on Czechoslovak History 1939-89, by encouraging all scholars to use new methodologies to illuminate competing perspectives on the past, and by clarifying the mandate of its research sections, it would create the basis both for more productive relations with domestic institutions and for cooperation with international institutions. We would like to point out that the Institute already has a means to deepen its international and domestic networks and to ensure that its profile corresponds to contemporary methods and perspectives: the Academic Council. We urge the Institute to make this body much more active, drawing upon the substantial cultural capital of its members to advance the Institute’s goals.

There are also concrete steps that the Institute could take. First, the Institute relies to a great degree on researchers with partial appointments: from one-quarter to one-third of all researchers work also at another institution. We recognize that this circumstance arises partly out of necessity (on the part of the researchers themselves, as well as of the Institute). But it can also be a strength: just as a university research center might boast of its scholars’ ties to other institutions, so too USTR should be making the case that its researchers are actively connected to institutions across the Czech Republic (and beyond), using those connections to

build formal and informal ties. The Institute's goal should be to increase the number of external allies through shared projects, grants to outside researchers, and more.

We lamented the inaccessibility of the Institute's work in languages other than Czech. Its scholarly journal, *Securitas imperii*, has recently published an issue in English, and it is hoped this practice will continue. A survey of the publications that reviewers rated highly (with a '1' or '2') shows that most of these are not available in English or German. The Institute certainly possesses the resources to embark upon a regular translation program, via competitive grants, that would make significant books or articles available to a broader range of scholars who may be interested in the history of Nazi and Communist rule only in comparison to other cases. The Institute should also assist its researchers in publishing original work in internationally-known journals, and increase support for researchers applying for international grants. A good beginning would be to invite historians who have edited relevant journals to Prague for a hands-on workshop.

### **Functioning of the Institute**

We wish to emphasize that we came away from the site visit quite impressed by the commitment, on the part of Institute leadership and researchers, to producing high-quality scholarship and to disseminating knowledge to the public. The Institute has the potential to make a significant impact, domestically and internationally, on the study of the regimes that controlled Central Europe for half a century. Furthermore, we are, again, greatly encouraged by the decision to embark upon a comprehensive review. We offer several recommendations intended to make the Institute better able to support its researchers.

The reorganization and invigoration of research units, as discussed above, is the highest priority. At the same time, the Institute should seek ways to develop the flexibility of the units. Scholars in every unit should be encouraged to create cross-unit thematic working groups that have a semi-formal but temporally limited structure. This could be accomplished through competitive internal grants allowing such working groups to bring in visiting scholars or to hold workshops. Institutional support would ensure that other USTR researchers would develop a habit of attending the presentations of other working groups.

The Institute is missing a significant opportunity to both raise its profile and to encourage innovation: open competitions for section heads. If these are filled for fixed periods (for example, five years), the Institute will be able to bring in new perspectives—whether from outside or from among current researchers—on a regular basis.

We strongly recommend sustained attention to diversity among the research staff in particular. Diversity is essential in any knowledge enterprise, because research has shown that it greatly increases the variety of perspectives and thus the potential for innovation. We were assured during our visit that inequality is not a problem at USTR; that may be so, and yet the fact remains that women are significantly underrepresented among researchers, and especially

among senior researchers. We understand further that there are no minorities (e.g. Roma or Vietnamese) among the researchers. We therefore recommend that the Institute create the position of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Officer. This person would:

- develop strategies to achieve gender equality which should be laid down in a formal, binding document on hiring and promotion and requiring periodical reporting;
- develop training programs on gender/ethnic diversity awareness;
- gather data on the gender pay gap at USTR;
- and promote strategies to foster historical awareness (and thus, perhaps, future historians) among ethnic minorities.

The outcome would be a more dynamic, productive Institute; this effort would considerably improve the image of the Institute as a workplace marked by open-mindedness and a tolerant company culture.

The Institute leadership has indicated it is quite aware of the shortcomings in academic credentials among researchers. A substantial number of researchers lack a PhD; some but not all of these are working towards the doctorate. Beyond this, any scholarly institute needs to pay attention also to the needs of mid-career researchers who may require support to get their research to the next level. As already noted, not all scholarship produced by the Institute shows familiarity and facility with foreign-language sources and with contemporary methodologies. Stating priorities (such as that all researchers have doctorates) is insufficient. The Institute should encourage researchers to take advantage of opportunities for career development at all levels: the journals workshop mentioned above is an example, as are English (or German) language courses and grant support. Overall, the Institute should implement a transparent, consistent mentoring program, so that all junior researchers receive regular advice from successful senior colleagues inside or outside the Institute.

## **Conclusion**

Until now, the Institute has achieved modest success in finding its place in the landscape of Czech historical study. Its focus on the Nazi and Communist regimes distinguishes it from other historical institutions, and has attracted a growing roster of the next generation of scholars. Most importantly, it has developed a substantial presence in public history, bringing educational materials to schools, libraries, and museums in the Czech Republic. We believe that the Institute can achieve much more, as it outgrows the old, rigid model—a legacy of its founding amidst political expectations—to become a true international institution, a partner and leader in historical debates and explorations.



## **Summary recommendations:**

### **Research:**

1. Develop a strategy and guidelines for evaluating potential and ongoing documentary projects.
2. Promote the expectation that all research, including that of a local nature, identify and engage with broader historiographical questions.
3. Develop clear research profiles and priorities for each unit through workshops, summer schools, and collaborative grants.
4. Articulate a clear balance, in the work of the Education Section, between contributions to pedagogical research and service to the community.
5. Develop a compelling and clear rationale for the two sections focused on the Communist era, with one section pursuing research on political subjects and the other on social, cultural and economic questions.
6. Promote a culture of critical self-reflection on the role of the Institute itself as a product of and participant in political debates, including concepts of totalitarianism, national victimhood, resistance, and the use and misuse of history.
7. The Academic Council should adopt an active role in the evaluation and monitoring of the Institute's progress toward the goals outlined above.

### **Organization and administration**

1. Transform sections into research teams guided by coherent, agreed-upon research agendas.
2. Section heads should have 100% appointments; leadership positions should be fixed-term (e.g. five years), to allow the institute to attract new leadership.
3. Use partial and joint appointments to increase cooperation with other institutions engaged in historical scholarship in the Czech Republic.
4. Expand efforts to jointly pursue domestic and international grants, and create opportunities for senior scholars outside the Institute to contribute to the work of the Institute.
5. Develop a comprehensive effort to bring Institute scholarship to an international audience, through translations into English and German; research support for international grants and publications; proofreading; and language tutorials.
6. Encourage the development of flexible, semi-formal topic-focused groups within and among sections.
7. Appoint an Equal Opportunity and Diversity Officer; develop a system of periodic review of achievement of goals in this area.
8. Support the effort of Institute scholars to achieve the doctoral degree and habilitation; develop a mentoring program for junior scholars.

### **Members of the Institutional Review Committee**

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