

Oral History Narrators in Czech Military Reenactment

An Epistemological Case Study

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Abstract. Between 2022 and 2024, a large-scale oral history research project was conducted in the Czech Republic, covering, for the first time, the culture and contemporary history of military reenactment. A total of 140 oral history interviews were recorded in a community that had no written history. The project's findings, particularly concerning the production of historical meaning by certain reenactors, have already been published. Nevertheless, one research problem has emerged with the benefit of hindsight: the epistemological status of the project's narrators, who, in many cases, constructed their identities as historical connoisseurs who often claim to 'know better than professional historians.' This article analyses various strategies adopted by some narrators who frame themselves as historical connoisseurs to present their knowledge as superior, enabling them to take various value-laden stances. Authoritative reenactment studies have mostly emphasised the classic concept of embodied knowledge, symbolised especially by the 'period rush' phenomenon, a subjective time-travel kind of experience. However, the project narrators employed more varied strategies, e.g., authoritative witnessing, claims of symbiosis with non-human actors, or so-called 'miasmic connection'.

Keywords: oral history, post-positivist concepts, military reenactment, epistemology, historical knowledge

Introduction

Between 2022 and 2024, a large-scale oral history-based research project was conducted in the Czech lands, aiming to provide an interpretive exploration of the contemporary history and culture of local military reenactment.¹ The very first academic

1 It was a project, sponsored by Czech Science Foundation (GAČR), No. 22-07058S, "Soudobý vojenský re-enactment v českých zemích: jeho dějiny a kultura v interdisciplinární perspektivě", implemented at Charles University, Faculty of Humanities. The author of the article was a principal investigator of the project. Team researchers included Přemysl Vacek, Lenka Hadarová and Jiří Hlaváček.

undertaking of its kind within the Czech context produced a number of papers, and through researching the historical military reenactment scene in various historically contested border regions (e.g., Hlučínsko / Kraj hulczyński or Těšínsko / Śląsk Cieszyński), for instance, established an inspirational connection with reenactment studies and oral history milieu in Poland.² This connection generated several theoretical impulses, discussed during the September 2024 International Oral History Association (IOHA) conference in Krakow, Poland. These included the problem of doing oral history research among narrators of the ‘historical connoisseur’ type, claiming to possess a profound knowledge of history.³ The analysis of this problem in relation to the military reenactment milieu, especially concerning their subjective and opaque ways of constructing and asserting their historical knowledge (their epistemic strategies), proved to be a productive and critical impetus for the afterlife of the above-mentioned research project. Its primary output, the *Vojáci věčné války* (*Soldiers of the Eternal War*) 2024 collective monograph, touched on the subject of historical connoisseurship in relation to military reenactors active in the Czech lands, but did not develop it further, since it was primarily concerned with reenactors using their experience to form specific interpretations of history and use them to take various value-laden stances, including those potentially bordering with revisionism or alt-right politics.⁴ The following text aims to critically review and reevaluate the original research project’s findings on a more abstract level and from a different angle: through the analytical category of historical connoisseurship, with the goal of uncovering new ways to deepen our understanding of the military historical reenactment and its culture in Czechia and beyond, as well as the inner workings of its production of historical meaning.

Theory and methodology

For the project in question, 140 oral history interviews were conducted with narrators,⁵ active Czech military historical reenactors, in both life-story and semi-structured formats, in addition to numerous fieldwork sessions and the study of

2 Materialised, for instance, in Wohlmuth, “Veterans’ Day celebration in a Hulczyn village,” 1–17 and Wohlmuth, “National Indifference Concept and Contemporary WWII Military Reenactment in Czech Lands,” 223–50.

3 See IOHA congress session No. 56, chaired by Marta Kurkowska-Budzan. The author of the article delivered a presentation for this session, see Wohlmuth, *The Challenges and Dangers of Oral History Research among German Second World War Military Re-enactors*, Re-Thinking Oral History, the 23rd International Oral History Conference, International Oral History Association (IOHA), Jagellonian University in Krakow, Polish Oral History Association.

4 Wohlmuth, ed., *Vojáci věčné války*.

5 The term narrator points out post-positivist (does not exactly equal ‘postmodern’) concepts in oral history, see Kurkowska-Budzan, “Informator, świadek historii, narrator,” 25–28.

documents. The project followed the paradigm of post-positivist oral history, which understands this brand of historical science as an interdisciplinary concept situated between historical anthropology, microhistory, ethnology, and memory studies. Sometimes dubbed oral history after the ‘cultural’ or ‘theoretical’ turn(s),⁶ post-positivism understands newly recorded memory narratives not as references towards past historical ‘reality’, but rather as intersubjectively produced representations of the self,⁷ based on the current cultural context, and referring towards wider categories of culture, in this case, the culture of military historical reenactment in the Czech lands. Oral history interviews are not conceptualised in this way as products of ‘witnessing’ but primarily as expressions of how narrators understand and position themselves in history.⁸

The narrators were selected according to the post-positivist concept of culture as a field of ‘shared possibilities’, pioneered by Alessandro Portelli,⁹ with the goal of first interpretatively discover outer segments of this culture by doing research primarily with fringe actors: those who have been marginalised and sidelined within the practice. This methodological strategy ultimately led the research team to address the proverbial elephant in the room: to record narratives of those who selected the World War II Axis Germany armed forces as their reenacted subject, and who had been frequently considered controversial and suspected of political extremism.¹⁰ Access to these narrators proved to be extremely challenging, but eventually, almost thirty interviews were recorded within this sub-community.¹¹ The topic of reenactors as connoisseurs will be analysed in this article primarily through the example of these narrators, as their narratives are rich in complex meanings, and their epistemic strategies display a strong connoisseur-like structure.

6 Shopes, “Insights and Oversights,” 257–68; Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, 126; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 8.

7 Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, 238.

8 For the recent introduction to post-positivism within Czech context, see Wohlmuth, “Tři dialogy. Úvod do teorie a praxe postpozitivistické orální historie,” 50–84. For more detailed and transnationally respected introduction, see Abrams, *Oral History Theory*. Thompson and Bornat emphasise that in this sense oral history enables individuals to assert their sense of self as a “crucial source of identity”. Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, 239.

9 “Oral history, then, offers less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined.” Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, 88.

10 There had been only two texts, touching the subject. See Baraniecka-Olszewska, *World War II Historical Reenactment in Poland*; Zurné, “Women at the Front.”

11 Reasons for this unexpected success are complex. Most probably the key was the value-neutral non-judgemental approach, inspired by the Weberian tradition, and also the fact that researchers devoted great deal of time to get acquainted with military historical context, including knowledge of military equipment and operational histories.

Concepts from the field of reenactment studies, applied both during the project, and also in this text, are based on the analytic approach to the study of reenactment as an activity, producing embodied, affective knowledge by utilising reenactors' bodies as walking experimental tools and archives. For this text, the definition of affect, dominant in current reenactment studies, is followed, which considers affect a non-verbal phenomenon based on a culturally mediated "physical reaction to an external stimulus," with terms such as emotions and feelings used interchangeably.¹² The affectively produced knowledge (e.g., during reenactment performances), then, frequently serves to produce historical meaning, as reenactors are usually convinced that their embodied understanding of history is superior to that of historians and other academics. There is a consensus that a central affect of historical reenactment practice is nostalgia, a longing for the loss that occurred in the past, which causes reenactors to view history as a list of scores waiting to be settled.

Historical reenactors and connoisseurs: the connection

The current academic literature on reenactment studies devotes a great deal of attention to reflexive debates about the ways in which reenactors claim authority over historical knowledge,¹³ especially in terms of how historical reenactors produce 'bodily' or rather 'embodied' forms of 'affective history'.¹⁴ In this paper, the term 'historical connoisseur' is used as the central analytical category in an attempt to improve understanding of historical reenactors. The term 'connoisseur' has been used predominantly by art historians in relation to 'art connoisseurs'. It denotes someone who declares to possess expert knowledge (in our case, in the fields of art, history, culture, etc.), while remaining outside of academic circles, but exercising a certain degree of influence over related scholarly debates. Nevertheless, at the same time, connoisseurs are often frowned upon by academics.¹⁵ A connoisseur is someone who, in a situation characterised by the lack of 'hard facts',¹⁶ dares to make "fine distinctions between... things with a view to determining their authenticity, identity, or quality" and "value".¹⁷ The connoisseurs rarely possess any distinctive and pre-defined methodology, and

12 Brauer and Lücke, "Emotion," 53. More generally in Agnew, "History's affective turn," 299–312.

13 Magelssen, "Production of historical meaning," 191–94.

14 Card, "Body and Embodiment," 30–33.

15 See e.g., Heyder mentioning profound disrespect expressed by Aby Warburg towards famous art connoisseurs of his period. Heyder, "Same, similar, semblable," 1.

16 Heyder, "Same, similar, semblable," 2.

17 Bycroft and Wragge-Morley, "Introduction: Science and connoisseurship in the European Enlightenment," 440.

the knowledge produced remains intuitive and subjective, which cannot be strictly “represented in rational or scientific terms.”¹⁸

Reenactment studies and reflections on connoisseurship notably intersect in recognising the crucial importance of affectivity for both groups (reenactors and connoisseurs) and the resulting passing of subjective judgments based on affect as a central source of their knowledge. Art connoisseurs, in this sense, produce mostly stylistic judgements. At the same time, reenactors claim that their own affects, experienced during reenactment events, are equivalent to the affects of historical figures, and thus enable reenactors themselves to acquire profound historical knowledge. Moreover, Gapps argues, there is even a much stronger, albeit somewhat forgotten, connection between the two groups. Historical reenactors were during the 1930s to the 1950s often employed as ‘living history’ performers at various museums, which were financed by philanthropists in Europe or the USA. There, they received training from an ‘authenticating authority’ comprising mostly academic, specialists. These specialists passed judgement on issues such as the authenticity of an eighteenth-century artisan workshop being re-staged and similar sets. Gradually, two generations of reenactors, through extensive advisory, acquired specific competences of their own and finally began appropriating the authority to pass their own judgements. This change occurred during the 1970s, when the historical reenactment scene was seeing significant growth and diversification. Some reenactors even acquired degrees—for instance, in archaeology—and felt they no longer needed outsider expertise: they had become connoisseurs themselves.¹⁹ Over time, the memory of this process, which transformed many historical reenactors into explicit historical connoisseurs, has largely faded, and scholars simply label historical reenactors as those who made the authority for authentication in their own field more democratic.

Art connoisseurship has evolved over time into what is known as ‘technical connoisseurship’, utilising various techniques developed by the natural sciences and gaining limited acceptance among art and history scholars. The connoisseur-like production of the affective knowledge within the historical reenactment, on the other hand, has not progressed comparably, at least not in terms of its underlying theory and methodology. Moreover, reenactment studies scholars recently shifted their research interest into other areas, especially towards various uses and mis-uses of authenticity concepts, primarily for the purposes of production of historical meaning by the reenactors; or extended the term ‘historical reenactment’ also to

18 Bycroft and Wragge-Morley, “Introduction: Science and connoisseurship in the European Enlightenment,” 441.

19 Gapps argues that during 1990s the reenactment scene reached such a level of sophistication that their performances and material replicas today frequently reach a museum-like quality. Gapps, “Practices of authenticity,” 185.

audiovisual curves, which opened new avenues of research.²⁰ Today, it is argued that historical reenactors have for long mostly adhered to the ‘authority-based’ concept of authenticity, where a particular senior actor *de facto* fulfils the role of historical connoisseur by passing verdicts, a subjective and opaque process not based on any rational methodology.²¹

In this paper, I will attempt to develop the analysis of the historical reenactors as historical connoisseurs. I will draw predominantly on the published scholarly texts, produced by the above-mentioned project, with the central research question: What are the various connoisseur-like, opaque, and unexplained epistemological strategies employed by the narrators–historical reenactors to construct their own understanding of history? Can these strategies be grouped more generally into ideal types? The second research question asks whether any sort of ‘technical affective history’, produced by historical reenactors, is conceivable (in parallel to what happened in the field of art connoisseurship)? Hopefully, answers to these questions will demonstrate value in terms of methodology and further research in the fields of historical reenactment and oral history.

“We know better”

In 2020, I had already been involved in an epistemic debate involving a military reenactor who certainly counts as a historical connoisseur, but at the same time works as an academic researcher in the field of social history. During a defence of a Historical Anthropology MA thesis, examining the representations of military culture in seventeenth-century war diaries,²² the reader, who is a historian and an experienced Thirty Years War infantry military reenactor, criticised certain interpretations, arguing at one point that she has a deep affective experiential knowledge of the period soldier’s affects, because she had acted a long time as an officer, commanding the body of seventeenth century pikemen and musketeer reenactors. At the time, nobody present was versed in reenactment studies well enough to respond appropriately, but this episode can serve as a representative example of an encounter with the epistemology of historical connoisseurship, based on the making of fine-grained subjective judgment.²³ ‘I know better,’ the reader summed up assertively back then.

The reader expressed what I argue is an example of the first ideal type of epistemic strategy, deployed by our narrators many times during our 2022–2024

20 See recent authoritative anthology, Agnew and Tomann, eds, *Reenactment Case Studies*.

21 For the crucial distinction see Agnew and Tomann, “Authenticity,” 20–24.

22 Vodička, “Tváře běsu.”

23 Heyder, “Same, similar, sembable,” 2.

project. Heyder claims that connoisseurship “had and still has a certain recurring vocabulary”,²⁴ and this first strategy can be labelled as a ‘time-travel’ type of affective authority. Reenactment studies have long shown that there is a central affect typical of military reenactment. It is called various names, mostly ‘period rush’ or ‘wargasm’, an *Erlebnis* type of intensive, “more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience.”²⁵ It was narrated many times during our interview sessions, usually in a relatively uniform manner: in certain moments, reenactors said that they at least once experienced such a potent combination of various affects during the reenacted battle or similar scenario, that they felt like being out of time and place, like being ‘there’, back in history, with them labelling the feeling as ‘real’. The above-quoted academic-reenactor explicitly referred to this sort of affective moment, without ever using the vocabulary of reenactment studies.

Such period rush narratives have been considered in the literature as rather unique phenomena, but it gradually became clear that there are plentiful representations of such affects in several dozens of interviews recorded during the above-mentioned project. One of the very first narrators, Johann, a veteran Seven Years War reenactor of the Habsburg line infantry, was talking about his most memorable reenactment events and moments, mostly triggered by the phenomena of sensory overload on the reenacting battlefield (caused by roaring of field guns, rattling of the musket salvos, shouting and screaming etc.), and suddenly related an experience of ‘period rush’ from the grand reenactment of the 1805 Austerlitz battle, when he felt as out of time and place, being an anonymous soldier in a large crowd (the Austerlitz event draws reenactors in the thousands), surrounded by enemies, panicking and now knowing what happens next.²⁶ The strong, overwhelming intensity of the period rush is then presented by reenactors as a ‘proof’ of the authenticity and cognitive power of such an affect.

There exists also interview-based evidence of a more advanced ‘collective’ epistemic strategy, involving the period rush: a reenactor mentions an example of a period rush, and then others follow suit, confirming it in their narratives or adding similar moments of their own. It was possible only during the post-interview analysis to gradually figure out that the interviewer had witnessed what Heyder calls an attempt at the classic connoisseur ‘trick’ of collective “transmission from assumption to fact”, through a chain of seemingly independent actors (in our case, narrators). One of them usually made the initial mention, and the others followed up with their utterances, carrying an identical meaning, claiming to ‘confirm’ the

24 Heyder, “Same, similar, sembable,” 3–4. Heyder considers this vocabulary to essentially be an arsenal of various rhetoric ‘tricks’.

25 Daugbjerg, “Patchworking the past,” 727.

26 Wohlmuth, “»Nakažlivá láska«,” 346.

original story. The clearest example is the experience of such ‘period rush’, felt by a group of narrators, belonging to a Czech Military History Club (MHC). The narrators were referencing their earlier participations in the World War II reenactment event in the Estonian town of Valga.²⁷ These reenactors, who for many complicated reasons chose World War II Estonian SS soldiers as their topic,²⁸ remembered an odd, repulsive and almost shocking affect of the ‘time travel’ type, when during the final parade, their unit, performing as the 20th Waffen SS Grenadier Division (1st Estonian), was in 2018 enthusiastically cheered on by Estonian and Latvian locals, with a couple of senior ladies even greeting reenactors with a Sieg Heil salute, which the narrators considered stomach-turning, forcing them to question their practice as a whole.²⁹

The performance of all five, who shared this particular story (named Jorg, Siegfried, Carl, Paul, and Anton), correspondingly changed. It was especially the case with Jorg, who broke eye contact with the interviewer and adopted a distant stare, quietly speaking in a calm, concentrated manner. After initially recording Jorg, the interviewer had the same experience with the rest. All of them, who already knew that the interview with Jorg went well,³⁰ came back, variously, to memories of the Valga incident and supported the veracity of their narrative by discreetly mentioning that other MHC members had also narrated experiencing this affect. Within the methodological context of oral history, we refer to this phenomenon as an application of a ‘narrative script’ (in this case, based on the shared content of collective memory), which is often difficult to notice, especially when conducting primary research in a community without a written history.³¹

Finally, there is a further sub-variant of this first ideal type, based on the claim of affective knowledge and authority through ‘time-travel’ experiences, which is based on suffering hardships and/or outright injuries typical of the reenacted period. This variant was represented in several interviews conducted by the team

27 International Military History Festival, <https://visitvalgavalka.com/class/xv-international-valga-military-history-festival/>, accessed: 20 December 2025.

28 Only partially analysed in Wohlmuth, “Triad of Resistance, Defeat and Reconciliation,” 3–18.

29 Wohlmuth, “Nevyřízený účet z krvavého léta 1945,” 138.

30 Establishing productive intersubjectivity with these narrators was difficult and it took the interviewer more than six months to start recording after the initial contact. Wohlmuth, “Nevyřízený účet z krvavého léta 1945,” 6.

31 A key cultural influence affecting their epistemic choice can be found in the agency of their friend, an important Polish military reenactor. A veteran of Estonian military reenactment in Central Europe, he graduated from the University of Tartu. Fluent in Estonian, he serves as an intermediary and e.g., was able to mediate contacts with World War II Estonian SS veterans, who have had a mesmerising effect on our narrators. Explained in more detail in Wohlmuth, “Triad of Resistance, Defeat and Reconciliation,” 3–18.

member Přemysl Vacek, who recorded narratives of early medieval military reenactors, mostly performing as Viking or Khazar warriors.³² One of their hard-core groups regularly organises an invitation-only event, where the only limitation is that period cold steel weapons must not have sharpened edges or tips. Otherwise, they can be freely employed. Injuries are common during this event, and reenactors involved suffer them with pride.

Within the recorded life-stories, these narrators mostly interpreted their injuries as direct references to the past reality, having a “deep symbolic meaning”,³³ understanding their battle scars as a *signum indelebile*, hauntingly present on their bodies. Great care is taken by them, for instance, to ensure that a light slashing wound is not treated by a professional surgeon. For that purpose, reenactors carry with them special period medical kits and those having (rudimentary) knowledge of battlefield medicine, sew up the less serious wounds on the spot.³⁴ Walking around with an injury, suffered this way, is then considered as an undeniable ‘proof’ of having been partially present in the past, of experiencing multiple temporalities. Schwarz argues in this regard that for reenactors in general, “only through hardship, it seems, can the veracity gap between history and its reenactment be overcome and the past rendered knowable.”³⁵

Second and third ideal types: secondary witnessing and martyrdom

The second ideal type of the connoisseur-like epistemic position of historical reenactors can be labelled as ‘secondary witnessing’. It takes the form of claiming authoritative knowledge, acquired through direct exposure to the wartime memory narratives of a prominent participant in a historical armed conflict, and usually involves prolonged personal contact between participant and reenactor. Once again, the narratives of Czech World War II Axis military reenactors offer an example. During 2022–2023, twelve oral history interviews for the project with members of two specific Northern Moravia MHCs were conducted.³⁶ They both concentrate on reenacting the formerly Czechoslovak citizens from the regions of Hlučínsko and Těšínsko (Polish: Kraj hulczyński and Śląsk Cieszyński), who were forced to enlist

32 Vacek, “Czech Historical Reenactment of the Early Middle Ages,” 19–29.

33 Hlaváček, “Kultura zbraní v militárním reenactmentu,” 421.

34 Hlaváček, “Kultura zbraní v militárním reenactmentu,” 421. For a more detailed interpretation see Vacek, “Znovuoživit tisíciletého bojovníka,” 250–97.

35 Schwarz, “Experience,” 65.

36 Wohlmuth, “Nevyřízený účet z krvavého léta 1945,” 125–29. Also Wohlmuth, “Veterans’ Day Celebration in a Hulczyn Village,” 5–17 and Wohlmuth, “National Indifference Concept and Contemporary WWII Military Reenactment in Czech Lands,” 233–49.

into the Wehrmacht and other Nazi armed forces after the March 1939 breakup of Czechoslovakia and the September 1939 partition of Poland. They gradually established a cordial, long-term relationship with Jan Gomola (1916–2021), a well-known and outspoken veteran of the Großdeutschland Division, born in the Silesian town of Dolní Lomná (Polish: Łomna Dolna), and author of the famous wartime memoir.³⁷ They frequently visited him in the local care home, listening to his stories and conveying them symbolically through their reenactment events.

What is relevant for the analysis here is the epistemic status assigned by all five narrators (named as Siegfried, Karl, Feldmann, Verner, and Richter) to Jan Gomola's memory narratives. They all consider them an unquestionably reliable source, containing references to firsthand 'raw' wartime experiences, told by Gomola in the first person in a strongly impactful, affective manner. In this context, the reenactors had seen themselves as proverbial disciples, who were present when an authoritative person, a 'master', claiming that he is the one 'who was there', was not simply telling stories, but first and above all fulfilling his role of the 'witness'.³⁸

The third ideal type is based on the concept of acquiring authoritative knowledge through direct, haptic, and bodily contact with representations of historical (again, wartime) martyrdom, interpreted within a culturally constructed 'just cause'. The best example within the framework of the project is the still relatively unknown case of the final days of the famous Estonian 20th SS division regimental commander Paul Maitla (1913–1945), who surrendered with scattered remnants of his unit in Central Bohemia in May 1945 and was subsequently captured, tortured, and extrajudicially executed by Czech revolutionary paramilitary men in the town of Nymburk.³⁹ A number of our narrators displayed in their interviews very intense affectivity in connection with their quest to discover and finally visit in person the place where Maitla and several of his comrades in arms were shot. They took great care to explain various traces and clues, which led to the triangulation of the location, and some of them requested off-the-record meetings to protect the information.⁴⁰

37 Gomola, *Objevil jsem Katyň*.

38 From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that all five of these narrators were most likely culturally conditioned to adopt this epistemic strategy due to significant exposure to the communicative memory of their grandfathers (Siegfried and Karl), as well as other older relatives (especially Verner), who were involuntarily drafted into the armed forces of Axis Germany and served during World War II. Their interest in military historical reenactment can be attributed to this trans-generational influence, which they regard as epiphanic. Wohlmuth, *Vojáci věčné války*, 120–22.

39 Plavec and Rosenthal, "Nymburská poprava," 64–70.

40 Wohlmuth, field notes, 26 November 2022. One narrator even cancelled the interview but allowed the interviewer to take handwritten notes.

The inconspicuous green meadow, where the place of the execution is nowadays marked only by a tree stump, became a symbolic place of worship, and from time to time, lit graveyard candles keep appearing there: a practice most probably incomprehensible to locals, but meaningful and essential for the reenactors. Their community has thus been gradually defined as a community of those who are affectively bound to the Maitla's grave. After the whereabouts of his death were discovered in 2006,⁴¹ Maitla was honoured by a splendid cenotaph in one of the country's central churches, St Paul's in Tartu. Still, our narrators have not ceased to consider arranging a (re)burial for Maitla, this time with military honours, which is not without a precedent in contemporary Estonian history.⁴² Regarding our central research question, what is most important is that the narrators in their role of 'pilgrims' have claimed a strong, repeated, and long-term affective connection to what they consider as the place of Maitla's martyrdom. This connection affirms, in their eyes, that they are undoubtedly 'connected with the past'⁴³ and possess authoritative knowledge of its period context one of the most haunting episodes of Czech contemporary history: the so-called Bloody Summer of 1945. This episode represented a wave of brutal collective violence enacted as revenge and exacted on German prisoners of war and civilians. It still constitutes a highly controversial issue among both Czech historians and the general public.

Fourth ideal type: a non-human symbiotic knowledge

The fourth kind of strategy can be labelled as claiming symbiotic knowledge, deriving from interaction with non-human actors. During the project, the team managed to secure several interviews also with Terezín-based reenactors of the eighteenth-century Prussian Husaren-Regiment Nr. 5 (von Ruesch, the *Totenkopf* Hussars), who also happen to practice breeding prestigious Black Kladruber (*Equus bohemicus*) warhorses. Von Ruesch reenactors have been in high demand by organisers of reenactment shows and are considered by many to be of the elite components of the

41 As the study by Plavec and Rosenthal has Czech and Estonian co-authors, the knowledge spread very quickly in Estonia, even before their Czech-language paper was published. See Rosenthal and Plavec, *Major Paul Maitla surm*, "Eeesti Ekspress," <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/artikkel/69073469/major-paul-maitla-surm>, accessed: 19 October 2025.

42 In 2014, another Estonian soldier of the World War II 20th (SS) division, Harald Nugiseks, decorated by the Nazi highest gallantry award, the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross, was accorded a state funeral with full military honours. Kaitselit, *Captain (Ret) Harald Nugiseks laid to rest*, <https://kaitseliit.ee/en/captain-ret-harald-nugiseks-laid-to-rest/>, accessed: 20 December 2025.

43 Baraniecka-Olszewska, "Pilgrimage," 175.

community.⁴⁴ Both reenactors, who became the narrators for the project, included in the stories of their experience representations of acquiring an intimate knowledge of what it was like being a cavalryman during the long eighteenth century. They emphasised that exercising cavalrymanship during military reenactment and acquiring the associated profound embodied knowledge is possible only through establishing a special ‘symbiotic’ relationship with their warhorses. Reenactors meant that they share an agency with their horses, which involves both rational and intentional human behaviour, and the performance of various instinctive behavioural patterns representing the animal’s input. Reenactors claim that, after prolonged socialisation with their warhorses, they are able to recognise and share various non-discursive sensations and affects, acting in unison.⁴⁵

This problem has not been thoroughly explored within the field of reenactment studies yet. It remains a puzzle even in terms of Animal Studies. Řičář noted two challenging, but central issues here: first, cavalry narrators obviously diminish in their stories of symbiosis the dimension of violence and disciplinary practices involved in training warhorses, and then there is a second, glaring problem of “being able to access the perspective of horses only intermediated by the human perspective.”⁴⁶ Řičář points out that when Sandra Swart, one of the authorities in the field, attempted to create ideal-typical horse stories, she ultimately came to the critical conclusion that the resulting text represents more a form of imaginative prose than a rigorous, problem-analytic, structured study.⁴⁷ Within the Czech military historical context, historian Barbora Hunčovská has explored equestrianism, ensuring that this extremely complex issue is not abandoned altogether.⁴⁸

Fifth ideal type: a miasmic connection

The fifth and final type can be understood as affective detection, with the term ‘miasma’ describing an unusual ability, claimed by some of our narrators, to sense a presence of certain contagious power or agent, as if they were breathing some ‘corrupted air’.⁴⁹ It is the most elusive one, still unrepresented in any scholarly text.

44 Many aspects of this military reenactment association were analysed from the conceptual viewpoint of the animal studies in a recent text, see Řičář, “Drahé vybavení a autonomní aktéři,” 75–97.

45 Řičář, “Drahé vybavení a autonomní aktéři,” 77–78.

46 Řičář, “Drahé vybavení a autonomní aktéři,” 79.

47 Swart, “The World the Horses Made,” 257.

48 Hunčovská, “»Dohodli jsme se, že budeme přátelé«,” 467–89.

49 Kinzelbach, “Infection, Contagion, and Public Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern German Imperial Towns,” 370.

During the analysis of several interviews, some of the narrators identified as proper and authentic places for military reenactment events those settings that still let out an evil 'odour'. Veteran reenactor Roman, who lives in the fortress town of Terezín, constructed his interpretation of the place (infamous because of a Jewish ghetto and a transit camp there during 1941–1945), around his own sensory overload, caused by the "...negativity, hanging out here in the air. It is what it is. I can smell it."⁵⁰ Roman even envisaged a proverbial underground lake, overflowing with stinking liquid, causing an unbearable stench, emanating occasionally from the town sewers.⁵¹

It was as if the outdated early modern miasmic theory would resurface as a cognitive tool in the arsenal of a reenactor, attempting to trace their intensive and strange feeling of evil 'infection' or 'contagion'.⁵² It is something which could be further analysed through the concept of hauntology. For the narrators, the presence of the past was so intense in these cases that it made them go through a "disquieting experience, full of eerie feelings," an experience of "profundity or significance of something from the past," of sensations, subjectively understood by narrators as physical and real.⁵³ In their memory, their 'battlefields' and other places of historical collective violence keep emanating specific odours, which translates to difficult-to-describe affects, told primarily through the narrator's claims to possess special sensitivity to detect and feel the miasma of wartime evil.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the project, it was expected that the reenactors-narrators interviewed would primarily focus on conveying historical meaning and sharing at least certain concepts from the humanities with the researchers. It was thought that there would be at least some overlap, and as Katherine M. Johnson noted, that reenactors could attempt to "complement their embodied knowledge with hermeneutic analysis" to understand more "how embodied and cultural experiences parallel and how they diverge."⁵⁴ This was not the case as our narrators were not interested in any

50 Wohlmuth, "Pevnost, kde skončil svět," 290.

51 Wohlmuth, "Pevnost, kde skončil svět," 293. The Roman's epistemological foundation has undoubtedly been influenced by his extensive practical experience and intensive, almost intimate haptic contact with historical artefacts and matter, stemming from his current profession as an artistic blacksmith and his previous employment as a battlefield archaeologist, having experience e.g., with uncovering war mass graves.

52 For the 'miasma' and 'contagion' understanding, see Kinzelbach, "Infection, Contagion, and Public Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern German Imperial Towns," 369–70.

53 Tanner, "Hauntology," 227.

54 Johnson, "Rethinking (re)doing," 203.

dialogue with the humanities. While many revealed that they have degrees in subjects such as history, cultural studies, archaeology, or library and information studies, their epistemological strategies for understanding history could not have been more different from the interpretative frameworks that the researchers employed. They remained historical connoisseurs who always put reenactment first. The great majority of our narrators⁵⁵ consider themselves faithful witnesses to history and engage in the production of historical meaning from this subjective vantage point. Their epistemic strategies revolve around non-discursive phenomena that are almost closed to rational exploration, such as the various period rush moments, secondary witnessing, knowledge claimed from haptic contact with representations of historical martyrdom, non-human symbiotic knowledge, or finally, the so-called miasmic connection. The inability or unwillingness to conduct rigorous analysis of the reenactors' subjective epistemologies has long been an issue for re-enactment studies, with no discernible methodology having been developed or suggested thus far.

As for the first research question, the definition of ideal types of reenactors' epistemic strategies means that further research can now move forward, using most probably with types 4 (non-human symbiotic knowledge) and 5 (miasmic connection), since they are established concepts (animal studies and hauntology). Type 3 (affective contact with martyrdom) can be analysed through its central form of pilgrimage. As for types 1 and 2, they are already covered by the oral history's concept of narrative script, a useful methodological concept that enables us to understand how and why certain narrative content is shared within a group.

Answering the second research question, however, is considerably more difficult. The only way the community-based production of historical knowledge during reenactments could be enhanced in terms of veracity would involve 'scripts' co-created or thoroughly vetted by academic and scholarly specialists. This, however, disregards the key observation made in this paper about the virtual impossibility of achieving this.

The current, generally dominant, understanding within the field of reenactment studies emphasises the subjective and unexplained (or even inexplicable) nature of the production of (affective and embodied) historical knowledge as perceived by reenactors, without researchers attempting to rigorously dissect their epistemic strategies. Currently, most authors get around the problem by stating that what reenactors achieve is merely an approximation, based on an epistemologically unreliable 'immersive self-referentiality',⁵⁶ providing merely a set of 'propositions

55 In total, only three of eighty-seven project narrators (whose narratives were recorded by Přemysl Vacek) displayed signs of sceptical and critical reasoning and were not fully immersed in one of the arcane and subjective epistemic strategies, typical of historical reenactment. Vacek, "Znovuoživit tisíciletého bojovníka", 283–85.

56 Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann, "Introduction," 8.

about the past.⁵⁷ A solution to the problem could perhaps be found in adopting a longitudinal and attentive approach to the reenactment community. Such an approach actually corresponds to one of the core principles of oral history, and recognising this could make the discipline a more popular choice among reenactment studies scholars. While it was very difficult to win the trust of the reenactors during the project, after a very long period of building intersubjectivity, the researchers of the project managed, during the third and final year, to record interviews that contained truly complex meanings. These enabled a deeper understanding of the native point of view of reenactors. What made this possible was that reenactment studies had slowly moved away from a previously dominant ethnographic methodology towards one culled from historiography. This shift reflects the increasing frequency with which the production of historical meaning by actors has been addressed as a research problem within the discipline. In order to investigate meaning-making processes, new tools are required to deepen our understanding of how “the historical consciousness of a particular group or society” is formed and how specific social groups “conceive of the relationship between the past, present and future”. In this regard, oral history can play an important role.⁵⁸

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the impetus provided by the 2024 Krakow IOHA congress panel remains important, because it showed a way to continue and deepen the existing research. As the project demonstrated, military historical reenactment in the Czech lands (and more broadly in Central Europe) is not fundamentally different from its counterparts in other societies and cultures. It would be productive for new scholarship to take on the challenge and test the options for the productive use of the analytical category of ‘historical connoisseurship’ in other cases, as well.

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