

The first of September is not just any date. Even small children know this, as it marks the beginning of their obligations, not only at school, but also at preschool. And so it continues as they grow older. Often, this is also the day they start their first job. The first of September can therefore be a sad day for some, but a happy one for others. In any case, it often represents a certain intervention in life and sometimes even a significant change. And in the days when military service was still compulsory, it was not unusual to start basic military service on this day.

This was also the case with our hero Havlík. Not that he wanted to be there, not at all. Like most men, he didn't like discipline and various restrictions, and even less so when someone yelled at him. But he took it as a fact of life.

After all, our ancestors are to blame for such unpleasant things. It is simply one of the legacies they left us. For example, Emperor Joseph II introduced military service in 1781 for the poorest or for those who wanted to join, as they said at the time, in their own interest. Of course, people can have different interests, and sometimes one wonders about them. If someone enlisted in the army, it was for life. Havlík couldn't understand why anyone would volunteer, except perhaps the poorest, but the others? To be maimed or killed? It probably had some advantages, such as money, plenty of food and drink, decent accommodation, access to doctors, and perhaps easier access to women. However, 1868 was a disaster, as it marked the end of voluntary service and the introduction of universal conscription and compulsory military service, which applied to most of the male population and lasted for three years. Three years is quite a long time. The Habsburgs really gave us a hard time! And in 1912, regular conscription twice a year was introduced.

And when we finally liberated ourselves and got rid of the hated Habsburgs, things did improve. In 1920, a military service law was enacted, including universal conscription with a service period of only 14 months, fortunately. Unfortunately, this did not last long, as in 1924 it was extended to 18 months. And after February 1948, perhaps in connection with the deterioration of the international situation and the beginning of the Cold War, a new military service law was passed in 1949, which set the length of basic military service at 24 months. Well, that's no joke.

In the mid-1950s, our generals even toyed with the idea of extending military service from two to three years. Well, generals often have strange ideas, to put it mildly. This was apparently influenced by weak conscription years caused by the deep economic crisis in the mid-1930s, as well as war losses and post-February emigration. It was also said that there were certain disagreements between the army leadership, which insisted on extending military service, and the party and government leadership, which needed more and more labor for its rapidly developing industry. Gradually, the prescribed number of military positions was reduced, and with it, of course, the number of conscripts. The army command considered this unacceptable. Therefore, it again demanded that basic military service be extended to three years. Fortunately, this did not happen, because analysis showed that as a result of the extension of basic military service, the national economy would have significantly fewer workers than if two-year service had been maintained and the number of armed forces reduced. The proposal was abandoned, partly in view of the protests that would surely follow. However, there was still a danger that it could be extended to three years. Disputes between the state leadership and the army leadership are not uncommon; there are many such cases in world history. Often, they even ended in a coup d'état. It seemed that something like this was not possible in our country. But who knows, even in the Warsaw Pact such things happened. The relatively liberal leader of the Soviet Communists, Nikita Khrushchev, was overthrown with the help of the army, and

his successor, Leonid Brezhnev, was rumored to be very afraid of the army, lest he suffer the same fate as his predecessor.

Over time, it became clear that we were no exception; anything was possible in our country too. It was rumored that the president of the republic and first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Antonín Novotný, wanted to use the army to prevent his overthrow and remain in office. But under the influence of conflicts with the Slovaks, part of the army turned against him. For example, the commander of the Eastern Military District, General Kodaj, declared that if an attempt were made to arrest certain members of the Presidium of the Slovak Communist Party, the district would mobilize and defend the comrades in danger by force.

Well, sometimes there can be a combination where the political leadership of one country does not trust the political leadership of another country, so it joins forces with its army to exert appropriate pressure on it. Something like this allegedly happened in the late 1960s, when the head of the German Communists, Walter Ulbricht, was dissatisfied with developments in Czechoslovakia and demanded military intervention there. To this end, he joined forces with the marshals of the Soviet Union, because he allegedly considered part of the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party to be revisionist. Well, we all know very well how that turned out.

But our disagreements in the mid-1950s were not significant enough to lead to such things. The military service was extended by two months in the early 1960s, but only for a short period due to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Havlík, as already mentioned, did not have a positive attitude towards the military at all. In this respect, he differed greatly from some men who, as children, longed for toys such as tanks, soldiers, and airplanes, and fought various battles with them at home, and later longed for green uniforms and enjoyed marching, perhaps thinking that they would become great military leaders. In his early childhood, he had a friend at the cottage who visited him with tanks and various tin soldiers and rode them down a hill of clay, saying that they were Soviet tanks fighting the enemy. Well, it was the 1950s. When Havlík's mother heard this, she urged him not to say anything to the neighbor, to agree with him in everything, otherwise they might even arrest us. Havlík was afraid of this, so he preferred to lose most of the battles, unless he was playing a Soviet soldier. At that time, there were also a huge number of military films showing in cinemas. They were mostly Soviet, about World War II, the Great October Socialist Revolution, or the Civil War. They were extremely long. Many years later, he occasionally saw a pornographic film, which he found interesting for about five minutes, but then it just repeated itself over and over again and was terribly boring. At the time, it reminded him a little of those war films, where tanks drove back and forth for the entire three-hour film, planes flew overhead, and in between, soldiers ran around shooting at each other. But that wasn't all. The school also took them to the theater to see excessively long Soviet war plays. The children didn't have the patience for this, so they started talking among themselves, simply disrupting the performance with school talk. This led to the theater director interrupting the performance, coming out on stage, and scolding the children, telling them that they shouldn't be misbehaving during such a beautiful and moving play, but should watch the action with excitement. He then gave the signal for the performance to continue. Both the films and the plays showed heroism on the one hand and a lot of death on the other, and he was afraid of death. There were lots of dead people, and Havlík was still a child, so it was depressing for him, and he certainly did not want to die young. Later, he never went to see another war film or watched them on television.