

SLOVENE CULTURE BETWEEN NATIONAL AND SUPRANATIONAL

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The thesis that the Slovene nation was created by its cultural and scholarly elite is part of Slovenia's national self-image. It has penetrated national consciousness since the Slovene cultural image began to take shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although frequently challenged in the last decades, this thesis has never been threatened as one of the fundamental values of Slovenism in the mind of the average Slovene. Slovene culture (especially literature, theater, and music) and scholarship (linguistics and history, in particular) were viewed through the prism of national emancipation and as indicators of national maturity, and less from the viewpoint of professional criteria.¹

Authors dealing with theater history in Slovenia, for example, have mostly limited themselves to works in Slovene. The period when the Ljubljana Theater exclusively staged plays in German (as in France Prešeren's days) was considered one of stagnation (see, e.g., Predan 1996, Vevar 1998). "In a Foreign Shelter" was the title of a chapter in an analysis of Slovene journalism at a time when there were still no regular Slovene newspapers in Ljubljana (Vatovec 1961: 224). A similar pattern of thinking—that everything non-Slovene was "alien" to Slovenes—was conveyed to readers through various history books about the Slovene people or literature, and was inculcated among students.

One open issue in the formation of the "Slovene cultural syndrome" is whether a national culture can be created independently from the wider environment to which a nation has been inseparably tied throughout history. The authors defending the thesis that the Slovene nation was almost exclusively determined by its language and culture never attempted to answer this question. This aspect of the formation of the Slovene nation should therefore be given greater attention. By looking at a wider context, it should also be established whether entrenchment of Slovene culture in Slovenism after the foundation of central cultural and scholarly institutions was justified at all. Were the Slovenes, in an attempt to create an emancipated image of Slovenism, really "compelled" to seek assistance from the very culture they had declaratively expelled? Can the culture of a nation as small as Slovenia really afford to barricade itself and pretend to have little in common with its neighbors?

¹ For related topics, see Vodopivec (2006) and Dović (2007).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Slovene intellectuals were still very much caught up between two cultural worlds—Slovene and German. German was the main language in schools, newspapers, and plays. However, many studied Slovene as an additional subject in high school and started reading Slovene newspapers when they became more regular after the 1870s and after the foundation of reading and cultural societies, such as the Saint Hermagoras Society (*Družba svetega Mohorja*, in 1853), the Slovene Society (*Slovenska matica*, 1864) the Drama Society (*Dramatično društvo*, 1866), and the Music Society (*Glasbena matica*, 1872). Consequently, reading of Slovene books and attendance of performances in Slovene increased.

Jakob Alešovec, one of the first Slovene humorists, was born in 1842 and therefore attended high school a full decade before any relevant cultural societies were founded in Slovenia. Like most of his Slovene contemporaries, he only used German in social circles and had practically no contact with Slovene culture at school; his first encounter with it came as a shock. One summer he visited the parish priest Lovro Pintar, who asked him, “Do you speak German better and more readily than Slovene?” Alešovec was quite embarrassed by his ignorance of Slovene literature, scant though it was. This visit, in fact, gave him the first opportunity to become acquainted with a literature different from what he had studied in school. “What did I know before about Slavs, let alone Slovene poets and writers?” he later wrote. “I was so embarrassed when the parish priest asked me if I knew anything about this or that one, and I was unable to say anything” (Alešovec 1973: 201–202).

In the following decades, during serious ethnic tensions between Slovenes and Germans, the lines were sharply drawn between national (Slovene) and non-national (mostly German) culture. All who failed openly to express their affiliation to Slovene culture were branded waverers. Such overt and plain manifestation of association with a single cultural circle was demanded as an external sign of belonging to one nation, at the same time excluding anything different, especially the culture of political opponents. There was little room for expression of association with the cultural values of different nations (i.e., multiculturalism). Such a person, Slovene or German, would have been regarded as a national renegade or apostate (Grdina 1996: 66). In Ljubljana, Slovenes were expected to primarily attend plays staged by the Slovene Theater and concerts organized by the Music Society. Similarly, Germans were supposed to attend the German Theater and the Philharmonic Society, and read German books. Although the historical literature of past periods suggests otherwise, such clear-cut division was actually rare.

In 1875 and 1876, France Prešeren’s daughter Ernestina Jelovšek wrote memoirs about her father—in German. In 1903, when the Slovene

translation of her *Spomini na Prešerna* (Memories of Prešeren) was published, she explained:

I think no compatriot will be surprised that I wrote in German then, considering that I attended German schools, left my native town at fourteen, and ever since communicated only in German. Besides, I lived only among Germans and had plenty of German literature at my disposal. Unfortunately, it was twenty years before I laid hands on a Slovene book. Today, however, I can also write in my mother tongue. (Jelovškova 1903: v)

The best indicator of the swift development in Slovene cultural creativity was publishing output in Slovene. Literacy increased rapidly among the Slovenes, reaching ninety percent just before the First World War and creating a growing demand for books. At the time, the Saint Hermagoras Society, whose publications targeted the general public, boasted a record 90,000 members (i.e., annual book collection subscribers). The Slovene Society sought to satisfy more demanding readers, and the magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* became a mirror of achievements in all spheres of national culture. As the library network expanded to smaller settlements, Slovene books became increasingly available to ordinary Slovenes. Publishers sought to issue as many original Slovene works as possible and their programs included translated works. Production in other cultural areas was less overtly nationalist in orientation. The Slovene Theater (i.e., the Drama Society) sought to stage plays in Slovene and publish a collection of plays to encourage the development of Slovene drama. However, translations of German and Czech comedies and operettas initially prevailed over Slovene works, whose share grew only gradually. Although the Slovene Theater offered a more demanding program in 1892, after moving to the new provincial theater building, works from other languages still prevailed. Reliance on foreign sources was even more obvious in the Music Society, where prominent roles long continued to be played by Czech artists.

Determination to establish a single culture was a matter of course for the Slovene intelligentsia before the First World War. The distinction between German and Slovene culture grew sharper as the war drew closer, culminating with its outbreak. Some significant cultural institutions in Slovenia had ceased operating even before the war due to ideological and political conflicts between the clericalists and liberals, and the Austrian authorities temporarily abolished others at the beginning of the war for being “Slavophile.” Although most Slovenes identified with the Slovene language and cultural institutions using it, they were not unaware of or out of touch with cultural production in other languages, especially the “hated” German culture.

The cultural image of Ljubljana and other major Slovene cities was shaped by both German and Slovene cultural societies. In Ljubljana, the German Theater operated alongside the Slovene, and it was mainly thanks to the Philharmonic Society that the voice of Ljubljana and Carniola was heard in the European musical world. In education, which was dominated by German especially at the higher level, Slovene was granted only a few concessions following loud demands by Slovene intellectuals. Even those prominent personalities that might not have been prejudiced against Slovene culture were unfamiliar with it. Emperor Franz Joseph himself was surprised when Matija Murko, a professor of Slavic languages, informed him that the first Slovene Bible translation dated back to the same century as the German (Murko 1951: 130).

Frictions between Slovenes and Germans and their cultural institutions continued after the First World War, except that in the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes the Slovenes had the last word in Slovene-Austrian relations. The first postwar years were marked by Slovenization of the school system, in which German and Slovene exchanged roles, and transfer of German cultural institutions (theaters, the Philharmonic Society, etc.) into Slovene hands (cf. also Dolenc 2004).

The program selection was to be a further indicator of who the new master of the house was. In February 1919, the former *Kaiser Franz Joseph Jubiläumstheater* (Ljubljana's German theater) reopened with the Slovene play *Tugomer* by Josip Jurčič, depicting the fate of the Polabian Slavs, who had been subjugated by Germans in the tenth century. Hinko Nučič, the director of the play (which had been banned in Austria), wrote that "the fact that its first staging took place in this theater, which has until now been used by *Tugomer's* persecutors for the Germanization of Slovenes, made it even more attractive" (Nučič 1964: 74). Commenting on the abolition of the Philharmonic Society in the first year after the war, Hans Gerstner, its last German musical director, wrote that one of the arguments for preventing its further operation was "that the society simply shared the fate of the Music Society, which had been previously abolished by the Austrian government" (Kuret 2006: 446). One of the most intolerant statements regarding German culture, rejecting everything German, came from Anton Lajovic, who had been responsible for liquidating the Philharmonic Society. In his opinion, such an institution was redundant because "the music of Beethoven and Bach was poison for Slovenes" (Kuret 2006: 451).

Nonetheless, settling scores with German cultural institutions did not lead to the isolation of the Slovene cultural arena and failed to shake off foreign influences. In shaping a new Slovene cultural image, it was impossible to rely (exclusively) on original Slovene works because these were simply too few to dominate any publishing program or theatrical and

musical repertoire. Cultural exchange focused on seeking links elsewhere in Yugoslavia and beyond, especially with French and English culture.

However, Slovenes could not avoid German cultural influences. The decision by the Ministry of Education in Belgrade to replace German with French in the high-school curriculum provoked considerable discontent among Slovenes, in part because most technical literature in Slovene libraries was in German. Slovenia's first thorough statistical readership analysis, carried out by the Library of the Chamber of Labor in Ljubljana in 1931, showed that the coexistence of cultural influences that had developed over the centuries could not be annihilated through political intervention. The analysis suggested that, although German was still the most read language, Slovene was successfully catching up—thanks to an ever growing number of original Slovene works and translations of foreign bestsellers—and it was only a matter of years until Slovenes would have most of what interested them available in their native language. Works in Serbo-Croatian were less popular in Slovenia, mainly due to the unfamiliar Cyrillic orthography. The most popular foreign authors included Edgar Wallace, Zane Grey, Jack London, Karl May, Knut Hamsun, and John Galsworthy—most of whose works the Slovenes read in German! The most popular genres in Slovenia were therefore thrillers and adventure novels, although, considering the number of titles borrowed, humorous works by authors such as Jaroslav Hašek and George Bernard Shaw were not far behind (*Poročilo* 1931: 14–18).

Slovene culture thus never actually locked itself behind its national boundaries. Only under extremely tense political circumstances were there cases of reliance on specific influences without, however, isolation from all external influences. A new crisis in cultural cooperation with the German world occurred before the Second World War, when Slovenes had already felt the pressure of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. France Koblar, an editor at Radio Ljubljana (which began broadcasting in 1928), wrote in his memoirs that the station had eliminated all German and Italian music from its program and that only Slovene, French, and English continued to be aired (Koblar 1976: 162).

Pronounced, one-sided cultural influences were the result of a political dominance of one ideology and were usually short-lived. This was the case during the world wars, when cultural activity in Slovene had to give way to German and Italian. In peacetime, the cultural influence of a single nation (Russian) and reliance on it was most strongly felt immediately after the Second World War.

This reliance on the cultural influence of a single nation, the whirlwind of war and post-war events, and political pressure were best reflected in theater repertoire. After the occupation and dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the Second World War, cultural institutions in Slovenia could

operate only in the Italian-occupied area. Consequently, the National Theater in Ljubljana opened its 1941–42 season with an Italian work. In that season, seven Italian works were staged as well as ten Slovene ones. In the 1942/43 season, out of thirty-two works, eleven were by Italians and twelve by Slovenes. For the 1943–44 season, several works by Italian authors were planned, but were dropped from the repertoire after the capitulation of Italy (Gabrič 1989: 393). In the first postwar years, modern Soviet plays prevailed in Slovene theaters. The 1947/48 repertoire of Ljubljana's Slovene National Theater (Slovensko narodno gledališče), for example, consisted of seven Slovene and six Russian plays. There was also one from another Yugoslav nation and four classical plays (Gabrič 1988: 950–51).

Similar one-sidedness was also felt in publishing. Out of the 283 works translated into Slovene between 1945 and 1947, 184 (sixty-five per cent) were from Russian and fifty-nine (twenty-one per cent) from other Slavic languages. The remaining thirty-seven works (thirteen per cent) were Western (Gabrič 1988: 951). The publishing policy changed after the Cominform conflict. This was reflected in the program of foreign literature to be translated in 1950. The Communist Party decided that too many translations from Russian had been published, and not enough from other languages. It thus decreed that “programs must distinguish between the following criteria: domestic and foreign writers, and not western, Soviet, and domestic” (*Poročila* 1949).

Imposed copying of the Soviet system was also evident in the foreign language selection in schools. Before the war, German and French prevailed in the high-school curriculum in Slovenia; German had a longer tradition because of centuries-long links with the Germanic world, whereas French had been progressively introduced after the First World War, prompted by close relations between the French and the Belgrade intelligentsia. In 1945, Russian was introduced at all educational levels as a compulsory foreign language despite an acute lack of qualified teachers.

After 1950, foreign languages became more equally available in Slovene high schools. Students could choose between English, German, French, Russian, and (in the Littoral) Italian. In the 1960s, English, which had become increasingly popular in elementary schools, caught up with German, hitherto the main foreign language (Šifrer 1960: 10–12). In the 1990s, Slovene schools expanded their selection of languages. Knowledge of foreign languages was also dictated by cultural exchanges with individual nations. Despite the “Americanization” of popular culture, this was more variegated than ever before, and links with various cultures enhanced the selection at Slovene cultural institutions. Although it was embedded in the Yugoslav framework, Slovenia's cultural links were not primarily directed towards other Yugoslav peoples and those whom they cooperated with. Data on translated foreign literature alone indicate that the politically

desirable reliance on the East was very weak in Slovenia and that Slovene culture sought its spiritual place in the traditional areas of Central and Western Europe as well as the English-speaking world. In Slovenia, publishers showed great interest in translations of German literature, unlike their colleagues elsewhere in Yugoslavia, who deemed this literature less important than that of other nations (table 1). For anyone familiar with the traditional cultural links between the Slovenes and Central Europe, as well as the German cultural pulse in Slovenia, this is unsurprising.

Table 1: Number and ranking of translated literary works in Yugoslavia and Slovenia, 1945–84 (V Jugoslaviji 1987: 472).

Literature	Yugoslavia		Slovenia	
	Translations	Ranking	Translations	Ranking
Soviet	3837	1	509	5
French	3627	2	645	4
American	3023	3	753	2
British	2730	4	686	3
German	2332	5	795	1

Today, despite occasionally strained political relations between Slovenia and various neighbors, calls to boycott cultural cooperation are no longer heard. Selective cultural cooperation and attempts at isolation from the outside world are hopefully things of the past. Experience from the twentieth century shows that such attempts were barren and short-lived. A good example of an attempt at shaping a “one-sided” national identity was the Koper Museum, founded in 1911 under Austria-Hungary. In the interwar period, when Koper was under Italy, the museum emphasized the nationalist aspirations of Istrian Italians and their struggle for annexation to Italy. After the Second World War, however, when Koper came under Yugoslavia/Slovenia, and up to its formal annexation in 1954, the museum shifted its focus to the nationalist awakening of Istrian Slovenes and their activities.

Slovene language and culture are the bonding elements that have always determined the identity of Slovenes and distinguished them from other nations. Those that contributed to shaping Slovene national identity from “above” were its intelligentsia and bourgeois elite. “Below,” however, it was the expansion of literacy after the nineteenth century, as well as availability of education in Slovene, that raised people’s cultural awareness (Vodopivec 2006: 56–57). Politically undesirable cultural influences, such as German, reappeared in the cultural arena soon after both world wars, whereas the politically recommended (and even prescribed) ones, such as Russian, failed to grow deeper roots after the Second World War. The same

applied to “Americanization,” which has never been particularly desired or politically advocated, and yet is a factor in Slovene culture that cannot be ignored. All attempts at isolation within narrow national frameworks or engagement in selective cultural cooperation have proved a failure and have not contributed to shaping the Slovene cultural image. Cultural activity expressed in Slovene was therefore not clad in impenetrable nationalistic armor, isolated from all foreign influences, but has developed under both local and global cultural influences. Barricading culture behind national boundaries would, in fact, have been impossible. Slovene theaters have often complained about a lack of Slovene contemporary plays, reiterating their desires to stage more such works if only they were available. With the increase in translated literature in the mid-twentieth century, reading in German became a thing of the past. By the end of the century, English had effectively become the second language of the young generation of Slovenes. Those too impatient to wait for the Slovene translation of the latest installment of Harry Potter can now simply read it in its original language.

A small nation, however culturally developed, cannot isolate itself in its own national framework, but must remain open to enriching foreign influences. Apart from these, the cultural image of the Slovene territory has also been shaped by various cultural assets and institutions that did not carry out their mission in Slovene. The image of the national cultural past will lose none of its Slovene character by acknowledging all those factors that helped broaden Slovenia’s cultural horizons, including those that were omitted from numerous works on Slovene history in past decades for the mere fact that they were foreign.

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