

Slovak Ethnology in the Post-Socialist Era

David Scheffel

Volume 21, numéro 2, 1999

Ethnographie postsocialiste
Post-Socialist Ethnography

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087806ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087806ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Scheffel, D. (1999). Slovak Ethnology in the Post-Socialist Era. *Ethnologies*, 21(2), 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087806ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse les développements de l'ethnologie slovaque à la suite de l'effondrement du communisme et de la déclaration d'indépendance slovaque. En dépit de sa petitesse et de l'érosion du financement public, la discipline a réussi à soutenir deux périodiques et un nombre considérable de publications. Tandis que l'intérêt traditionnel pour la culture populaire slovaque se maintient, un intérêt marqué pour les thèmes anthropologiques et sociologiques émerge chez la jeune génération. Le problème des relations ethniques, particulièrement en ce qui concerne la « question hongroise », est un sujet de recherche contemporain très prisé.

SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY IN THE POST-SOCIALIST ERA¹

David Scheffel

University College of the Cariboo

Historical background

Slovak ethnology began to unfold in the early nineteenth century as a form of native studies. Comprising folklore, ethnography, musicology and literary studies, the discipline arose during the Slovak “national awakening,” when leading intellectuals, such as Pavol Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861) and Ján Kollár (1793-1852), sought to strengthen political demands for self-determination with the findings of scholarship. Understood as a branch of Slavic studies, *národopis* played the dominant part in the codification and protection of Slovak folk culture. Its first institution, the patriotic civic association *Matica slovenská*, was founded in 1863 as an expression of resistance to the policy of Magyarization pursued by Hungary. Shut down in 1875, *Matica* resurged in 1918, this time to defend Slovak national culture against the Czechs.

It was in the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) that Slovak ethnology attained full institutionalization and academic credibility. In 1921, Bratislava’s newly established Komenský University set up a department of ethnography which offered Czechoslovakia’s first program of studies in general ethnology (Podolák 1991). Although the faculty consisted almost exclusively of Czech academics, both teaching and research emphasized Slovak folk culture (Podolák 1991). The appointment in 1936 of the Russian semiotician Piotr Bogatyrev as docent gave the new department its first — and last — internationally known personality (Leščák 1991c).

The Slovak students trained in ethnology during the inter-war years eventually carried out the discipline’s complete Slovakization. This era began

1. I wish to express my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous support of the research which led to the collection of material used in this article.

with the establishment of the proto-fascist Slovak State in 1939, an event that coincided with the inception of the first Slovak ethnography journal, *Národopisný sborník*. The process of Slovakization continued after the war with the founding in 1946 of an Ethnographic Institute within the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Arts — renamed the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 1953. The first Slovak docent of ethnology was habilitated at Komenský University in 1947 (Podolák 1991).

Within the academic division of labour that prevailed in post-WWII Czechoslovakia, Slovak ethnologists continued their traditional specialization in Slovak folk culture and Slavic studies. In 1953, a new journal, *Slovenský národopis*, replaced *Národopisný sborník* as the main outlet for research concerned with Slovak subjects. Slavic ethnology received its own journal with the establishment in 1969 of *Ethnologia slavica* as a forum for authors writing for an international audience in non-Slavic languages (Podolák 1992-93).

In terms of its orientation, Slovak ethnology of the socialist era remained faithful to its nineteenth century origins as a discipline concerned primarily with description and codification, and secondarily with demonstrating the relevance of folk culture as a measure of social awareness. Like their bourgeois predecessors, Slovak socialist ethnologists paid most of their attention to material culture, narratives, and folk music. More sociological topics, such as social organization and cosmology, remained now as then outside the realm of the discipline.

Perhaps the most significant innovation adopted during the socialist era was the emergence of research based on teamwork. Unlike their bourgeois predecessors and western contemporaries, Slovak ethnologists came to rely increasingly on collaborative projects which de-emphasized individual contributors. Although articles and books authored by individuals continued to be published, their size and significance came to be overshadowed by mega-projects carried out by teams of specialists.

The first example of collaborative research comprises ethnographic monographs depicting specific communities and culture areas. Initiated in 1956 by the Academy of Sciences, these regional works constitute the empirical backbone of Slovak ethnology. More than a dozen of them were published in the 1970s and 1980s alone (Kiliánová 1993).

In 1970 the Academy of Sciences approved the concept of a truly monumental research project, the Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia. For the

next twenty years, a team of fifty ethnologists painstakingly collated a vast array of material drawn from 250 rural communities representing all of the country's culture areas. Praised as one of the most important contributions made by Slovak ethnologists (Leščák 1992: 393), the atlas received the 1992 National Prize of the Slovak Republic.

No less monumental in scope is the recently released *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska* [*Encyclopedia of Slovakia's Folk Culture*], a massive and beautifully designed handbook of "who's who" and "what's what" in the study of almost every conceivable topic pertaining to folk culture. Edited by a team of twelve subject specialists and based on the expertise of 140 contributors, the nine hundred pages of entries consumed close to ten years of intensive work before they appeared in print in 1995.

The post-communist era

The first official acknowledgment of the disintegration of state socialism and its impact on Slovak ethnology was made in a short editorial note in *Slovenský národopis* in early 1991. It announced a change in editorship while simultaneously stressing the nonpolitical character of the change (Leščák 1991a: 5). The same issue contained a "state of the discipline" overview in which the new editor stressed continuity (Leščák 1991b: 67). The emphasis on continuity surfaced again a year later in the editor's celebration of the journal's fortieth anniversary. The article, written in English, claims that communist-era Slovak ethnology "was trying not to succumb to the vulgar and political pressure of Marxist-Leninist ideology...., looking [instead] towards an objective perception of Slovak folk culture" (Leščák 1992: 389). "Soviet impulses" are said to have remained "on the proclamative level" (1992: 390).

This benign view of the past did not go unchallenged. The editor of Slovakia's second major ethnology journal, *Ethnologia slavica*, described demotions of teaching staff and politically motivated curricular changes during the 1970s and 1980s when working conditions at Komenský University were "unusually difficult" (Podolák 1991: 232). On the eve of the "Velvet Revolution", ethnology students apparently joined others to protest against ideological constraints and to criticize "the work of certain teachers" (1991: 238).

This is about as far as any Slovak ethnologist would go in a public assessment of the impact of socialism on the discipline. Sharing the reluctance

of their Czech colleagues (see Scheffel and Kandert 1994), Slovak ethnologists appear unwilling to delve into their own recent past. This reluctance extends all the way to the canonical Encyclopedia of Slovakia's Folk Culture mentioned above. Published five years after the end of the socialist era, it discusses the role of functionalism and a host of other minor theoretical orientations in Slovak ethnology yet fails to even mention Marxism or historical materialism. This absurd omission flies in the face of the results of a survey undertaken in January 1990 in which more than one half of the members of the Academy's Institute of Ethnology defended Marxist models as a viable methodology (Leščák 1991b: 67).

Using *Slovenský národopis* as a gauge of the discipline's post-socialist direction, an attentive reader discerns many innovations. The journal received a new, pleasant-looking cover and an improved design. Starting in 1991 the sequence of abstracts written in foreign languages changed from Russian, German, English to English, German, Russian. In 1992 Russian abstracts vanished altogether, and occasional articles written entirely in English began to appear. Around the same time the official designation of Czechoslovakia came to be replaced by the less Czech-centrist Czecho-Slovakia.

The content of the journal reflects the changes in layout. A new feature introduced in 1991 was interviews with prominent Slovak and Czech ethnologists living in exile. Appropriately, Peter Skalník — a Czech social anthropologist expelled from Komenský University in 1976 — came first, followed by Ladislav Holý, Ernest Gellner, Milan Stuchlík and others. Interesting articles addressing the Soviet ethnos theory (Skalník 1991), political jokes (Klímová 1991), ethnic tolerance and intolerance (Salner 1993), collectivization of agriculture (Slavkovský 1993), Jewish-Slovak (Jelinek 1993) and Slovak-Magyar relations (Botíková et al 1994), and a host of other topics demonstrate quite conclusively the willingness and ability of Slovak ethnologists to address concerns which could not be dealt with openly in previous years.

But the new openness is also selective. In the summer of 1990, the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences prepared a multi-year agenda covering five thematic areas selected by its members for future research (Leščák 1991b: 76). In view of the growing importance attached to ethnic factors, it comes as no surprise that the topic of ethnic minorities dominated two of the five research clusters. It is striking, however, how little attention was to be given to Slovakia's second largest minority, the Gypsies or, to use the preferred self-designation, the Roma. In spite of their size and under-

representation in communist-era research agendas, the Roma have received surprisingly little interest from post-socialist ethnologists. To this day, they have not produced a single ethnographic monograph devoted to one of the hundreds of Romani rural settlements which dot the Slovak landscape. Some interesting topical studies have been published in recent years (Mann 1992; Dubayová 1994; Kumanová 1994, 1997; Krekovičová 1995), but none amounts to a comprehensive ethnography. In the pages of post-1989 *Slovenský národopis* the Roma have commanded about as much analytical attention as the incomparably smaller Rusyns. The authoritative Encyclopedia devotes a single entry to the historically, culturally and ethnically diverse category of Cigáni. The no less authoritative Ethnographic Atlas, a work bearing “the most rigorous of scientific criteria” (Leščák 1992: 393), even denies them the status of a separate ethnolinguistic entity.

Most of the attention paid by Slovak ethnologists to ethnic studies follows well-established historical patterns. For centuries, the Slovaks have had an uneasy relationship with the Magyars, and the current political climate has not changed that. It follows that Magyar-Slovak relations in Slovakia as well as in Hungary (which has a long-established Slovak minority) continue to evoke a great deal of scholarly interest. For example, a compilation of research essays edited by Ján Podolák — the editor of *Ethnologia slavica* and a presidential advisor on interethnic issues — examines from several angles the puzzling growth of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Unlike the Slovak minority in Hungary which has dwindled since 1918 to an insignificant 10,000 members, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia has increased quite dramatically to well over half a million (Podolák 1992: 6).

The studies conducted in this area are refreshingly factual and, for the most part, free of nationalistic bias (Divičanová 1994; Krekovičová 1996). In the in-house publication of the Institute of Ethnology, one can, however, encounter views which reflect the emotional investment in this topic. Thus one of Slovakia’s leading ethnologists accuses unnamed “historians of the Magyar minority in Slovakia” of spreading lies about certain controversial issues (Kal’avský 1993: 93). *Ethnologia slavica*, in 1992 renamed *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica*, published a number of articles on Slovak autochthony and ethnic continuity which could be seen as veiled attacks on Magyar “expansionism” (Kučera 1991; Habovštiak 1992-93). But these ideologically tinged essays were written by historians and historical linguists rather than ethnologists. The latter seem more inclined to take up critical positions,

debunking rather than invoking any particular brand of politicized scholarship (Gašparíková 1992-93; Urbancová 1992-93).

A similar situation prevails in the ethnological attention given to a previously neglected and sensitive topic, the history of Slovak Jews. On the one hand, there is a clear tendency to treat this subject openly and without the interference of preconceived ideas (Kovačevičová 1991; Bitušiková 1996; Salner 1995). But the newfound scholarly detachment seems to break down when the discussion turns to the explosive question of responsibility for the near extermination of the Jewish community in the early 1940s. An example of this may be found in an interesting article published in *Slovenský národopis* in 1993 by an Israeli author of Czechoslovak origin. The writer came to the conclusion that “Slovak nationalism saw in Jews a foreign and unwelcome element,” which meant that the moment Slovak nationalism seized power (with the establishment of the independent Slovak State in 1939), “Jews were physically lost” (Jelinek 1993: 289, my translation and emphasis). When the essay appeared in print, the first page carried a highly unusual editorial comment which disputed the author’s main conclusion and assigned blame not to Slovak nationalism but to “totalitarian fascism” and Slovakia’s dependence on Nazi Germany.

The “velvet divorce”

Within five short years Slovakia experienced two cataclysmic changes: the disintegration of state socialism in 1989 and the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Both have had far-reaching consequences for the organization of academic activities. In ethnology, long-standing networks uniting Slovaks and Czechs and linking them to Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian and Hungarian scholars have been shattered. International research projects concerned with ethnographic cartography, folk architecture, ethnomusicology and other subjects have been disrupted or entirely abandoned. The so-called “velvet divorce”, which ended the strained Czecho-Slovak coexistence, completed the Slovakization of the discipline.

A survey of the books reviewed in *Slovenský národopis* between 1989 and 1997 provides a way of assessing where Slovak ethnologists have looked for new reference points. The following trends, based on a total of 386 book reviews, can be observed. The proportion of publications written in Slavic languages other than Slovak and Czech has declined sharply from around

20% between 1989 and 1991 to below 10% in recent years. Books written in Hungarian, which used to account for up to 10% of all reviews in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have ceased attracting any attention at all. The status of German-language books has not changed significantly. They continue to command slightly more than 10% of the total space allocated to reviews. Works written in English experienced a sharp rise in popularity during the early 1990s (reaching 20% by 1993), but recent years have seen a gradual decline again. The clearest trend can be observed in the degree of interest given to books written in Slovak. Their proportion has risen from a low of 25% between 1989 and 1991 (with the lowest figure of 17% reached in 1990) to unprecedented levels of 45%-55% in recent years.

It would be tempting to interpret these figures as a logical correlate of the Slovakization of the discipline and to argue that its practitioners have become more interested in their own accomplishments than in impulses from abroad. But this conclusion proves untenable as soon as we examine the composition of the suddenly so popular Slovak books which are reviewed by local ethnologists. More than a third of this category consists of translations from other languages, predominantly English. The same applies to reviews of Czech-language books, which, though less frequent than in the late 1980s, continue to account for around 20% of all reviews. All of this means that in terms of their own interests, Slovak ethnologists have clearly begun to reorient themselves from Slavic/East European studies towards scholarly impulses emanating from western Europe and North America.

While Slovak ethnologists appear to be increasingly interested in western scholarship, the books they read and review do not fall into easily definable categories. On the contrary. The reading preferences are eclectic, as they range all the way from traditional Central European folk culture studies to postmodern cultural subjectivism currently in vogue in North American anthropology. What may be an attempt at catching up and compensating for the "splendid isolation" imposed by state socialism can also be detected in the wide range of topics encountered in recent publications. For example, the 1997 volume of *Slovenský národopis* contains articles dealing with folk healing, rural poverty, songs and dances performed at village weddings, socio-linguistics, folk art and professional art, pagan goddesses, Central European vegetarianism, non-traditional religious communities, and historical demography.

It is clear that while some of the traditional folkloric and ethnographic orientations of the socialist era have been retained, contemporary Slovak ethnologists have already developed a taste for the increasingly de-canonized and interdisciplinary approaches characteristic of modern western social sciences. This newfound tolerance of diversity has undisputed advantages. For example, one of Slovakia's most senior folklorists has applied her knowledge of folk narrative to the analysis of ethnic stereotypes found in traditional riddles, proverbs and folk songs (Krekovičová 1995). But however appealing the casting off of previous constraints may appear, the diversification within the discipline harbours new dangers. These derive in the first place from the exceedingly small institutional arena within which Slovak ethnologists operate. At the very beginning of Slovakia's independence, in the spring of 1993, the personnel of the Academy of Sciences was cut down from 6000 to 3000. The Institute of Ethnology escaped relatively unscathed, laying off nine technical staff members but retaining all of its eighteen researchers (Dušan Ratica, personal communication). At the Komenský University of Bratislava, independence was greeted with a sombre message from the rector, announcing that the institution was "on the brink of [financial] collapse" (Švec 1993: 1, my translation).

Although the last three years have brought a measure of financial stability, the modest resources allocated to post-secondary education and research are not likely to expand significantly. Slovak ethnology remains a very small discipline confined essentially to one university department and one research institute. Given the fact that the number of professionally trained ethnologists active in research barely exceeds thirty, one wonders how much specialization can be sustained within such limits. As it is, most of the established subfields are monopolized by tiny clusters of scholars, which by necessity impairs a full evaluation of new ideas. The opening up to new trends and impulses presents Slovak ethnologists with a new dilemma. Should they concentrate their limited resources in a few well-defined areas of expertise, or should they attempt to branch out and run the danger of excessive fragmentation and shallowness?

In spite of dark predictions of a massive loss of young academics to more lucrative occupations (Švec 1993), Slovak ethnology does not seem to be hovering on the brink of extinction. Recent publications in *Slovenský národopis* attest to the presence and growing influence of a new generation of ethnologists whose outlook has been shaped by the post-communist era. It will be up to this generation to furnish the discipline with a new identity.

References

- Bitušková, Alexandra. 1996. A Brief History of the Jewish Community in Banská Bystrica. *Slovenský národopis* [Slovak ethnography], 44: 202-211.
- Botíková, M., L. Navrátil, L. Öllös, L. Vegh. 1994. Madarsko-slovenské interetnické vzťahy v Samoríne [Madyar-Slovak interethnic relations in Samorin]. *Slovenský národopis*, 42: 73-94.
- Divičanová, Anna. 1994. Etnokultúrne zmeny na slovenských jazykových ostrovoch v Maďarsku [Ethnocultural changes in Slovak language isolates in Hungary]. *Slovenský národopis*, 42: 264-282, 385-401.
- Dubayová, Mária. 1994. Rómská rodina na Slovensku [Romani family in Slovakia]. *Slovenský národopis*, 42: 129- 138.
- Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska* [Encyclopedia of Slovak folk culture]. 1995. Bratislava: Slovenská Akadémia Vied.
- Etnografický atlas Slovenska* [Slovak ethnographic atlas]. 1990. Bratislava: Slovenská Akadémia Vied.
- Gašparíková, Viera. 1992-93. Slawistische Aspekte beim Studium der slowakischen Volksmärchen [Slavic aspects in the study of Slovak folk tales]. *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica* [Slovak and slavic ethnology], 24-25: 273-294.
- Habovštiak, Anton. 1992-93. Ethnogenesis of the Slovaks from the Linguistic Aspect. *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica*, 24-25: 13-30.
- Jelinek, Yeshayahu. 1993. Židia na Slovensku v 19. storočí: poznámky k dejinám [Jews in nineteenth century Slovakia: Remarks about history]. *Slovenský národopis*, 41: 271-296.
- Kal'avský, Michal. 1993. Administratívne rozdelenie Slovenskej krajiny z hľadiska etnického v období Republiky Československej [Administrative division of Slovakia from the perspective of ethnicity during the era of the Czechoslovak Republic]. *Národopisné informácie* [Ethnographic informations], 2: 93- 119.
- Kiliánová, Gabriela. 1993. Volkskunde in der Slowakei. Ein Überblick [Folklore in Slovakia: An overview]. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 47/ 96: 1-16.
- Klímová, Dagmar. 1991. Česká politická anekdota v kontextu střední Evropy [Czech political jokes in the context of Central Europe]. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 32-36.
- Kovačevičová, Soňa. 1991. Migračné a emigračné cesty Židov na Slovensku [Migratory and emigratory journeys of Jews in Slovakia]. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 288-302.

- Krekovičová, Eva. 1995. Das Bild der Zigeuner und seine Reflexion in der slowakischen Folklore [The image of Gypsies and its reflection in Slovak folklore]. *Slovenský národopis*, 43: 348-364.
- . 1996. Koexistencia etnik versus akulturácia v spevnosti Slovákov v Madarsku [The coexistence of ethnic groups versus acculturation in the songs of Slovaks in Hungary]. *Slovenský národopis*, 44: 74-78.
- Kučera, Matúš. 1991. Zur Ethnogenese der Slowaken [About the ethnogenesis of Slovaks]. *Ethnologia slavica*, 22: 191-204.
- Kumanová, Zuzana. 1994. Projekt výskumu rómskeho etnika v Karpatskej kotline [The Romani research project in Carpathia]. *Slovenský národopis*, 42: 233-234.
- . 1997. Demografický výskum rómskej rodiny v Plaveckom Štvrtku [Demographic research of Romani family in Plavecky Stvrtok]. *Slovenský národopis*, 45: 87-106.
- Leščák, Milan. 1991a. Úvod [Introduction]. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 5.
- . 1991b. Začiatok užitočných dialógov? [The beginning of useful dialogues?]. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 67-76.
- . 1991c. The beginnings of functional structuralism in Slovak ethnology. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 336-347.
- . 1992. The Periodical "Slovak Ethnology" and its Role in the Development of Slovak Ethnology. *Slovenský národopis*, 40: 388-395
- Mann, Arne (ed.). 1992. *Neznámi Rómovia* [Unknown Roma]. Bratislava: Ister Science Press.
- Podolák, Ján. 1991. Seventy Years of Ethnology at Comenius University. *Ethnologia slavica*, 23: 221-241.
- . 1992. Výskum etnokultúrneho vývoja v okrese Komárno [The research of ethnocultural developments in the Komarno district]. In *Etnokultúrny vývoj na južnom Slovensku* [Ethnocultural development in southern Slovakia], ed. Ján Podolák: 5-12. Bratislava: Katedra etnologie FF UK.
- . 1992-93. Preface. *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica*, 24-25: 7-12.
- Salner, Peter. 1993. Tolerancia a intolerancia vo veľkých mestách Strednej Európy (model Bratislava) [Tolerance and intolerance in large cities of Eastern Europe (the model of Bratislava)]. *Slovenský národopis*, 41: 3-15
- . (ed.). 1995. *Židovská identita včera, dnes a zajtra* [Jewish identity yesterday, today and tomorrow]. Bratislava: Zing Print.
- Scheffel, David, and Josef Kandert. 1994. Politics and Culture in Czech Ethnography. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 67 (1): 15-23.

- Skalník, Peter. 1991. Sovietska etnografia a národnostná otázka [Soviet ethnography and the nationalities question]. *Slovenský národopis*, 39: 26-31.
- Slavkovský, Peter. 1993. Historia jedného družstva [The history of an agricultural cooperative]. *Slovenský národopis*, 41: 69-79.
- Svec, Juraj. 1993. Do nového školského roku s obavami i nádejou [Into a new school year with concerns as well as hope]. *Naša univerzita [Our university]*, 40 (1): 1-2.
- Urbancová, Viera. 1992-93. Slawistische Aspekte in der Ethnographie und Mythologie der slowakischen Wiedergeburt [Slavic aspects in the ethnography and mythology of the Slovak revival]. *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica*, 24-25: 245-262.