

The book has four useful appendices, namely a list of dynasties in medieval Europe, list of rulers ascending the throne in childhood, list of female rulers and family trees of Aragon and Scotland. Robert Barlett's attempt to explain the importance of royal blood is rather good. There are a few slight errors and perhaps some matters were omitted. In this form however the book is approachable for students of history and might help as a perfect guide to the medieval world of royal families.

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RUSINOVÁ, Zora. *SÚDRUŽKA MOJA VLASTĚ. Vizuálna kultúra obdobia stalinizmu na Slovensku*. [MY COMRADE MOTHERLAND. *Visual culture of the Stalinist period in Slovakia*.]. Kraków: Filozofická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity v Trnave in Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2015, 691 pages. ISBN 9788374905428.

KUSÁ, Alexandra. *PRERUŠENÁ PIESEŇ. Výtvarné umenie v časoch stalinovej kultúrnej praxe 1948 – 1956*. [AN INTERRUPTED SONG. *Visual art during in the era of Stalinist cultural praxis 1948–1956*]. Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2019, 642 pages. ISBN 9788080592189.

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A growing number of publications, in which the visual culture of the Stalinist period is thematized, reflects a certain return of this topic into the scope of both scientific and popular interest. This change can be partly attributed to new “reading” habits, related to the development of electronic media, which easily makes the image a focal point, not just an additional historical source.

Another reason is rooted in the growing time lag, which weakens the personal connection of authors and audiences with the period under study. It also helps not to directly associate plain scientific interest with political sympathies anymore. The authors leave the long-established primary position of political history and reconfigure the accented position of political victims.

From a historian's point of view, art history books of this type are both a welcome product of a close discipline and in a way also a mirror of our own production. Places and themes where their historical contextualization may seem unnecessarily superficial or obsolete, can signal weaker points in our argumentation but also gaps in making recent historiography available to the wider professional public.

The book of Zora Rusinová, who combines her research with university teaching practice, will serve future researchers as evidence of what an experienced teacher finds – already – necessary to explain as an unknown phenomenon or concept to today's reader at the students' age. The book is divided into four major chapters. In the first one, entitled *From Heroic Utopia to Totalitarian Regime*, she briefly introduces the concept of the new socialist man within the framework of the political history of the researched period – through the rapid satellitization of political and economic life by the Soviet Union from 1948 to the phase-delayed de-Stalinization of the late 1950s. An explanation of the

creation and functioning of ideological apparatuses and their pervasive action follows. The author explores various forms of propaganda, agitation and educational work. This chapter concludes with a text on the written and visual content of contemporary media, documenting the control and reformatting of the existing periodicals. It includes the binary image of the builder and the enemy in their national and international form and the development of a new calendar cycle of public rituals to which the media were thematically linked.

The second chapter focuses on the actors of the “world of absolute values”, mediated through subchapters on the dynamics of Stalin’s cult of personality and its local counterparts involving K. Gottwald and V. Široký, as well as on other unifying motifs (from Slavism to the proletarian masses and the peace camp, the army, the idealization of youth and the image of women in contemporary propaganda).

In the third chapter attention is brought to the institutional background of the regime’s struggle in the field of culture. It guides the reader through conventions, declarations, tasks, commitments and formation of new control and management institutions. It provides a brief introduction to the local history of socialist realism as a period imperative in the field of art. In a special subchapter it captures the influence of political impulses on filmmaking.

The final chapter reflects the daily presence of contemporary patterns of culture policy in workplaces and schools as well as in households, with special attention to the “socialist family”, leisure activities (especially sports) and the permanently problematic relationship between the regime and fashion.

After a long period of arduous relationship between recent scientific analysis and the then art production aimed at the “masses”, it must be appreciated that the author has consciously abandoned the criteria of quality of artistic performance in favour of effectiveness – regardless of the occurrence of kitschy features (p. 19).

The author was well aware of the sources aimed at creating the impression of “indivisible unity”, and was prepared to capture diversity of contemporary thought (see, for example, her short outline of developments and debates in Marxist thought during this period (p. 35)). She also brought a number of long forgotten periodicals and brochures of temporary circulation to public attention, aimed at cultural management of local cultural institutions (such as *Pracovní námety*). The book is also valuable thanks to its wide and thus very representative choice of contemporary texts, covering all types of propagandist messages, up to the model “letter of a soldier to his mother”.

Overall, as a reader, I very much appreciated the presented visual material. Instead of attempting to narrate political history, I would certainly welcome if the text was more centred around the analysis of sources specific for art historians. In places, the author yields to the language of the propaganda sources or forgets to give readers a clue as for the meaning of the language of the period. To give an example (p. 56), it claims that “*To support the revival of the economy, in January 1949 a free market was opened, with exclusion of the private sector.*” Today, the notion of “*free market*” omitting the private sector does not make much sense, even more, if the success of the state is promoted by “*repeated governmental decisions on reduction of prices*”. The phrase has been used in relation to abolition of the post-war coupon-based rationing system.

Also, occasionally the text gets overpowered by particular propagandist messages or by witness's hearsay. For example, the cult of the machine is linked exclusively to the USSR although it had strong American counterparts (p. 57). The image of the "woman-miner" or woman tractor driver (p. 289) became a symbol of a new and assumedly ill-conceived regimist emancipation drive, but in comparison with the traditional work of a washerwoman or peasant woman, not to speak about unqualified women's work in chemical and ammunition factories, mining could be equivalently dangerous and physically demanding but far better paid. Moreover, except for some unique cases reported in the media as a short-lived curiosity, women employed in the mining industry worked only on the surface.

The obligatory civil marriage preceding the church ritual (p. 562) was no "communist novelty", since it was introduced by law in the territory of Slovakia in 1894 as a part of secularizing trends in the Kingdom of Hungary and only re-introduced after 1948. Students and teachers became the main targets of the regime bullying with regards to churchgoing (p. 79, 99), but not party members as such. Participation in religious life was generally tolerated in those social groups from which the party derived its authority – workers and peasants.

The students of the Žižka cadet schools (p. 233) were expected to be the "*boys with excellent marks from the primary schools*", but in reality active recruitment was organized to meet their prescribed numbers. On the other hand, "Bolshevik" forced separation of children from their mothers resonated as an element of anti-regime moral panic (p. 257), but in reality kindergartens were scarce and the regime was far from meeting the public demand for places. The menacing mention of kindergartens working "*for twelve hours per day*" did not mean that the children were expected to spend the whole day there, but that both mothers from morning and afternoon shifts could leave their children there. Schools could be expected to "*become an ideal place for regulated education towards collective feeling, systematic suppression of individuality and adaptation to the needs of the collective*", but this does not mean they became such a place. For the whole time the schools remained places where the individual was introduced by his or her peers to free markets (via the cult of hobby collections), to unsanctioned information and censored literature (inherited and circulated books on the Wild West or romance), and so on. The author's claim that "*the proletarian youth did not develop its own counterculture and remained mostly passive in comparison with university youth*" (p. 278) can be challenged by shifting the definition of "passivity" – since it was mainly apprentices who were most active in such escapist and totally regime-incompatible cultural activities such as tramping (which developed its own fashion, rituals and folklore). Moreover, a large number of those who tried to cross the borders illegally were apprentices.

Generally, some of the questionable claims are rooted in the poor reflection of particular political (mostly ethno-nationalist) agendas in recent political historiography. For instance, discussions about women at the beginning of the 20th century tend to be limited to the picture of the Slovak nationalist middle class (p. 283), while at the time, debates were held on a state-wide level and also comprised social-democratic and other agendas. The claim that "*in Slovakia, the genre of grandiose historical painting spirited by pathos of celebration of national history was missing*" (p. 442) omits a frequent display of

pieces of this kind of art representing competing nationalist agendas, which accustomed the public eye to the perception of these kind of objects (for example, paintings and sculptures related to the “millennium celebrations” of 1896, or other kinds of memorial paintings displayed in diverse places, from ecclesiastical edifices such as churches and also in secular buildings such as casinos).

Similarly to Kusá’s writing discussed below, the narrative of the communist movement in Slovakia is derived here from both Moscow and Prague influences, but does not fully consider the strong war-time experience with the local variant of national socialism, which actually included even the introduction of a “party greeting” into the civil life. The same way as “*Honour to Work*” was required at schools and offices after 1948 (p. 524), “*On guard!*” was enforced by the ruling People’s Party in Slovakia from 1939, while such practices were unknown within the Soviet Union itself. Forced labour camps for the intelligentsia copied not only “*camps for antisocial elements*” (p. 99) but detention camps for political prisoners such as the one at Ilava had opened already in March 1939 to host a professor of sociology and a handful of journalists and senior senators as its first detainees. Contrary to the claim of lacking local tradition (p. 192), a look back to 1939 confirms that there indeed was some tradition of mummification and mausoleum building for political leaders. This is true with regard to the Czech situation as supported by quoted literature, but in Slovakia, the fact is that Andrej Hlinka had been mummified and publicly displayed in 1939.

Alexandra Kusá specifically concentrates on the changes in culture policies in the field of visual arts and their relevance to particular artistic practices. The book is structured chronologically and is amended with edited selection of written sources, such as period speeches and minutes from artists’ meetings, and with a rich picture appendix enriched with cuts from related contemporary critiques.

In the opening chapter, the author, who has been the head of the Slovak National Gallery since 2010, shares her experience with two related exhibitions: *An interrupted song of 2012 and February 1948 of 2018*. The book then outlines Stalinist interwar influence on Russian and local cultural and intellectual life, and continues through the early post-war period to the rapid reception of Soviet organizational structures in Czechoslovak cultural life after the communist takeover of 1948. The chapter on “*the golden age of socialist realism*” is further split into analyses of mechanisms for voicing the “*new public request*” and case studies of their influence on different genres, such as landscape, representative portrait, everyday heroes or visual canonization of selected historical events. The outcomes of mechanisms such as Task actions with their committees including working-class nominees are described (p. 147) as often resulting in “*a mixture of revolutionary romanticism, dilettantism and overacting*”. The closing chapters centre around cultural campaigns linked to gradual political thaw and strategies of return or non-return of selected artists into the officially delineated mainstream.

While Kusá collected an impressive selection of period paintings, her main aim was to outline the circumstances of their creation, to follow changes in public request, to research how their production was regulated, financed and presented and in how the cultural framework was worked out through a series of congresses, declarations, exhibitions,

etc. Regarding human resources she pays attention to purging and silencing of artists as well as to gradual administrative processes and discursive strategies of their frequent returns. Her working questions include those on possible local (Slovak) features of socialist realism and on criteria of their identification and classification. This brings up the question of the diversity of the social realist paintings (p. 346), which differed both among themselves and from their soviet model works. Within the local production, Kusá outlines the “*renaissance*“, “*naïve-insit*” and “*rudimentary*” manifestations of socialist realism as an artistic style (p. 356).

In the cases of a few canonical themes (such as the tragic hunger rebellion in Kropachy of 1921) the rich collection of included paintings enables the reader to compare handling of the same topic by different artists. The critiques quoted in the appendix also document the presence of diverse and mutually conflicting evaluations of particular pieces of art during the era of assumedly *una-voce* public views. Kusá reminds us (p. 317) that in those turbulent times, when overnight former heroes were labelled enemies, critique was formulated in ways allowing for speedy withdrawal from accusations of praising unworthy pieces of art: “*paradoxically no piece was accepted without reservations (as if for the sake of safety)*”. On the other hand, a number of questionable paintings were finally passed as acceptable, just “*to meet the production plan*” (p. 482).

The text is well-structured and smoothly written, with only occasional minor defects. Some inconvenience is caused by dual or triple repetition of selected motifs or quotes, to which the author returns in different contexts. For example, Medvecká’s painting of Handing of contingents is mentioned on p. 198 and 327; a quote plus author’s comment on conference resolution is repeated on p. 157 and 253, etc. An appropriate footnote linking of such repeated occurrences would spare the reader of an awkward feeling that he has already read the page. On p. 612 this practice of multiple linking to one source (p. 187) even resulted in an unedited merging of the author’s commentary “*cardboard-like quality of Gottwald’s portraits might be caused also by the model, since the first workers’ president wasn’t an impressive figure in any way*” directly into the original quote from 1952.

A timely review by a political historian could probably also correct a claim (p. 65) about the name, rank and death of the head of the Soviet diplomatic mission in Prague, envoy S. S. Alexandrovsky accused of espionage and executed in 1943 (who was neither an “*ambassador*”, nor “*Alexandrijský*”, or “*executed in 1938*”). This figure evidently blended with his predecessors – plenipotentiaries Pavel Mostovenko (executed in March 1938), and Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko and Alexander Arosev (both executed on the same day in February 1938). Antonov-Ovseyenko was the host of the opulent evenings Novomeský referred to in his “*Vila Tereza*” poem. Similarly, Étienne Manac’h was not an advisor at the embassy (p. 79), but the embassy secretary in Prague and then consul general in Bratislava. His interesting report on the 1948 events in Slovakia was published in 2006 by Pavol Petruf.

Regarding the wider frameworks of political history, Kusá too adopts some clichés petrified in ethnicized, mostly reformist national-communist historiographical narratives. The quoted expression of minister Kopecký (p. 77) that if he would be a Slovak (after 1948) he would commit suicide, might be a radical but factually correct reflection

on a number of people in Slovakia who considered themselves losers after the communist accession to power. President E. Beneš is labelled as the one who did not pardon J. Tiso (p. 90), while it were the members of the Slovak National Council who did not pass a possible recommendation of mercy which the president promised to respect. Also, the death penalty for the aforementioned war criminal caused tensions primarily within Slovak society itself, not “*in the relations between the Slovaks and Czechs*”.

A politician who agrees to be sent to an occupied territory during the war, then makes a top political career in the communist-run state and manages to die in bed is presented here as unsuccessful and dumb (p. 87, V. Široký), while an activist who keeps friendly contacts with prominent pro-Nazi politicians until 1943 and neither first-hand experience with the Bolshevik reign of terror in Hungary of 1919 nor the loss of personal friends in the 1937 purges makes him doubt communism, “*retains high political-artistic credit*” (p. 77, L. Novomeský) just because of his continuous ethno-nationalist agenda and friendly approach to its other promoters.

In places, giving a few specific personal details would help to refine analyses of career trajectories and survival strategies, namely in cases of longstanding political artistic engagement. For Ivan Kovačević, editing of the proceedings on the Slovak National Uprising in 1954 (p. 917) could serve as an official pardon for his participation in propagandist film making during the war. The “*conciliatory approaches*” (p. 135) of Štefan Bednár as a member of purging committees could be somehow linked to his own previous “*staining*” engagements such as portraying the prime minister Vojtech Tuka for the Gardista newspaper in 1939. A stronger link to the fresh pre-history would also show not only the Soviet pattern, but the Nazi models being adopted and reused in Slovakia again after the Communist accession to power. The local artists were already used to being driven into centralized (p. 125) and controlled artistic unions, namely Chambers of arts, the agenda of politically enforced fights against culture “*foreign to the people*” was holding ground, and the attacks on the “*unreliable*” intelligentsia (p. 108) compared to loyal workers and peasants were permanently present in the war-time Slovak press.

These objections and reservations notwithstanding, both books offer a well-researched, sophisticated analysis of the visual culture and its management during the Stalinist era in Slovakia. The two publications are valuable contributions to our understanding of non-democratic regimes from the perspective of visual and symbolic politics and their conclusions are relevant for similar research regarding other countries of the former Eastern block. In addition, both books are worth reading for scholars dealing with propaganda in dictatorships, and not only those that existed in 20th century Central and Eastern Europe.

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