

## Behind the Iron Curtain: Slovak translations of American philosophy prior to 1989

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DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2026.18.1.9

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### Behind the Iron Curtain: Slovak translations of American philosophy prior to 1989

American philosophy. Translation. Slovak language. Czechoslovakia. Communist rule.

The article investigates the translation and reception of American philosophical works in Slovakia from the early 20th century to the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Although translation has played a crucial role in the development of philosophy, Slovak translation studies has focused primarily on literary translation, leaving philosophical translation relatively understudied. Using a quantitative bibliographical approach, the study maps Slovak translations of books by American philosophers based on data from major national library databases and the philosophical journal *Filozofia*. The analysis identifies seven Slovak translations published before 1989, comprising five monographs and two anthologies. Most appeared during the 1960s, a brief period of political and cultural liberalization in Czechoslovakia. The findings demonstrate that the translation and reception of American philosophy in Slovakia were strongly shaped by political and ideological factors, particularly during the communist period, which significantly influenced both the selection and interpretation of translated works.

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract no. APVV-21-0198.

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Philosophy and translation are commonly regarded as two of the oldest forms of human intellectual practice. In the past, many scholars possessed sufficient linguistic knowledge to engage with philosophical texts written in languages other than their own. As Jonathan Rée observes, the connection between philosophy and translation runs deeper, as “European philosophy has always been written with several languages in mind; and it has to be read, and translated, with multilingual eyes as well” (2001, 231). In the 19th century, when the modern social sciences began to emerge, educated Slovaks frequently pursued higher education abroad. Many were polyglots, proficient in reading and writing in several foreign languages, including Hungarian, German, Czech, and Latin. Consequently, there was little need to translate scholarly or philosophical texts into Slovak. The absence of an officially standardized Slovak language further constrained translation activity, as Slovak was codified relatively late, in 1843, and only thereafter became the basis for national communication and literature. It was only in the early 20th century, particularly after the founding of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, that multilingualism gradually gave way to bilingualism, primarily Czech and Slovak. As a result, by the second half of the 20th century, the reception of foreign-language philosophy had become heavily dependent on translation.

At the same time, modern translation theory began to emerge, when a number of works addressing both theoretical and practical dimensions of translation appeared, including James Holmes’ article “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” (1972). Since then, the relationship between philosophy and translation has been discussed (see Berman 1992 and Venuti 1998), and the need to establish the mutual dialogue between the fields (Rawling and Wilson 2019). As Rosemary Arrojo (2010) further argues, Western philosophy lacks attention to the practice of translation as well as the philosophical questions it raises. While in the last decade of the 20th century a number of scholars discussed the isolation of linguistic and philosophical studies on translation (Barnstone 1993), an increasing number of relevant publications since the beginning of the 21st century have bridged the gap between these fields (Rawling and Wilson 2019).

Modern Czech and Slovak theories of translation also began to develop in the second half of the 20th century, notably through the works of Jiří Levý, *Umění překladu* (1963; Eng. trans. *The Art of Translation*, 2011); Anton Popovič, *Teória umeleckého prekladu* (Theory of artistic translation, 1975); and Ján Ferenčík, *Kontexty prekladu* (Contexts of translation, 1982), who primarily focused on literary translation. As a result, studies on the translation of non-literary texts were scarce, leaving a significant gap in the theory of translating philosophical works. One of the earliest attempts to map non-literary translations in Slovakia was Jana Rakšányiová’s research paper “K dejinám odborného prekladu na Slovensku” (History of non-literary translation in Slovakia, 1978). Summarizing non-literary book translations published before 1945, Rakšányiová identified a total of 22 philosophical translations from various world languages published over a period of three centuries: 12 translations between 1630 and 1918 and ten translations between 1918 and 1945. As is evident, the number of philosophy translations was very low.

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, scholarly engagement with the analysis and translation of philosophical texts in Slovakia remained relatively limited. Contributors to this field include Emma Nežinská (1993) on the poetics and translation of philosophical discourse; Jozef Sivák (2013) on Slovak translations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's works; and Katarína Bednárová (2018) on the work and translations of Anton Vantuch. Two works of contemporary scholarship on the translation of philosophical texts are particularly noteworthy. The first is Bednárová's article "Neúplné poznámky k teórii a praxi prekladu filozofickej literatúry (na Slovensku)" (Partial notes on the theory and practice of translating philosophical literature [in Slovakia], 2020), which examines the distinctive features of philosophical texts and the challenges they pose for translation, situating philosophical writing between literary and non-literary genres. It analyzes the relationship between the philosophical language of the source text and its translation, and considers the role of translation traditions and the reception of philosophical literature in the Slovak context. The second major contribution is *Slovník prekladateľiek a prekladateľov: vedy o človeku a kultúre* (The dictionary of Slovak translators in the humanities and social sciences, 2024), edited by Katarína Bednárová, Mária Kusá, and Silvia Rybárová, which offers an extensive overview of nearly 100 translators of philosophical, sociological, historical, literary, and art-related texts published in Slovakia from the interwar period to the early 21st century. It also documents contributions to the reception and development of socio-humanistic literature, including translations of philosophy.

The 20th century saw major political shifts that shaped cultural production and translation practices. Czechoslovak–American relations, initially cordial after Czechoslovakia's founding in 1918, deteriorated sharply following the 1948 communist coup. During the communist period, the United States was systematically depicted as emblematic of Western capitalist decadence. Such changing perceptions presumably influenced the translation and reception of American philosophy among Slovak scholars. The aim of this article is therefore to map these translations and identify the works that were made available, situating them within the broader social, cultural, and political contexts from the early decades of the 20th century up to 1989. To achieve this, the research addresses the following questions: How many works by American philosophers were translated into Slovak before 1989? Which branches or schools of American philosophy were accessible to Slovak readers during this period? Who were the translators, and which publishing institutions were responsible for producing and disseminating these works? What factors influenced the selection of works for translation, and how did Slovak scholars engage with them?

## DEFINING THE CORPUS AND RESEARCH METHOD

The nature and development of Slovak philosophy have always been significantly influenced by foreign philosophical scholars and their work; hence the translation of philosophical texts has had an irreplaceable position in the development of the discipline. Although a few theoretical sources touch on aspects related to Slovak translations of philosophy, existing research remains limited and only partially relevant, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of the actual scope and char-

acteristics of the translated corpus. Philosophy is inherently a multicultural and multilingual discipline, encompassing a wide array of subfields. Many philosophers have also been writers and scientists, producing a diverse corpus of literature that ranges from highly technical, terminology-rich articles to literary works marked by figurative language and elaborate vocabulary. Considering the breadth of philosophical literature, the discussion below focuses only on monographs by individual authors and edited anthologies.

In this context, a quantitative approach becomes especially important as an initial step, providing the empirical foundation necessary to determine what has been translated, how frequently, by whom, and under what conditions. Without such systematic mapping, subsequent qualitative or comparative translation analyses would lack a reliable basis and risk relying on selective or incomplete evidence. As a result, the research draws on the archives and databases of the Slovak National Library, the National Library of the Czech Republic, and the Central Library of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, chosen for the breadth of their collections and their reliability as national repositories. Additional data on book translations are taken from the Slovak philosophical journal *Filozofia* (Philosophy), published from the mid-20th century to the present.<sup>1</sup> The journal features philosophical articles and essays, as well as reviews of Czech, Slovak, and translated works by foreign thinkers. While library databases have inherent limitations, such as incomplete or inconsistent metadata, consulting multiple institutions alongside the journal allowed for cross-checking and improved the reliability of the data.

In approaching this topic, it was essential also to define American philosophy and the scope of the philosophers included. American philosophy encompasses a diverse and evolving body of thought shaped by the cultural, social, and political contexts of the United States. It is pluralistic rather than doctrinaire, with pragmatism as its dominant tradition, founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, who emphasized the practical consequences and experimental verification of ideas (Audi 1999). Beyond pragmatism, American philosophy includes transcendentalism (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau), naturalism (George Santayana), personalism (Borden Parker Bowne), and philosophy of science (Thomas Kuhn), as well as feminist, African American, and Indigenous philosophies (Waters 2004). The intellectual landscape was also shaped by European émigré scholars fleeing Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, including Erich Fromm and Rudolf Carnap, who became American citizens and integrated European intellectual traditions into the American academic environment, leaving lasting contributions that enriched 20th-century American philosophy.

### INTERWAR PERIOD: 1918–1939

The beginnings of Slovak professional translation date back to the 18th century, but the translation of philosophical literature came to the fore only in the 20th century (Bednárová 2024, 350). During the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic, particularly from the late 1930s onward, there emerged a growing demand for translations of texts in the modern social sciences, and this interest led to a growing

number of non-literary translations published in both books and journals. However, within the scope of this study, only one work was translated into Slovak during this period: a summary of John Dewey's work released under the title *Filozofia, veda a výchova* (Philosophy, science, and education, 1924), by Jozef Schützner, a translator and a distinguished polyglot fluent in several languages who specialized in translating foreign-language literature, with a particular emphasis on philosophy and legal studies (Kaščák 2020, 70). However, the text does not constitute a translation of a specific original work, but rather a concise seven-page summary of Dewey's philosophy. As indicated in the header of the first page, it originally appeared as a special issue of the magazine *Ruch filozofický* (Philosophical stir), with the translator noting that the text was selected from Dewey's philosophical work. His principles of philosophy, science, and education and their intersections are summarized, with emphasis on the importance of restructuring philosophy and education in response to societal changes linked to advances in science, industry, and the development of democracy (Dewey 1924, 7).

### **FROM THE WARTIME SLOVAK REPUBLIC TO EARLY POSTWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA: 1939–1949**

The period of the First Slovak Republic (1939–1945) remains one of the most controversial in Slovak history due to the regime's non-democratic, fascist character. During World War II, Czechoslovakia disappeared from the European map, and soon after its re-establishment in 1945, it came under Soviet influence, which imposed ideological and political constraints on science, literature, and translation. In February 1948, Czechoslovakia became a satellite of the Soviet Union, and centralized governance under Communist Party leadership was instituted. The doctrines of Marxism-Leninism and socialist realism permeated cultural and intellectual life, including Czech and Slovak translation production; as Vladimír Biloveský explains, "No other literature had as much space in editorial plans as Russian literature. No other literature was published in such a high number of titles and editions as this one. There were even special editions oriented towards Soviet literature in several publishing houses" (2023, 132). One of the consequences of these political and socio-cultural changes was that no Slovak translations of American philosophy were published during that period.

### **BUILDING OF SOCIALIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA: 1949–1970**

Following the 1948 coup, the press fell under strict state and party control, serving as a tool of propaganda reinforced by legal measures. During the 1950s, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia extended its purges beyond politics into religion and culture. Intellectual life more broadly was also narrowed, since, as Marian Városová (2016) noted, philosophy ceased to exist as a discipline and was subsumed under ideological imperatives. Translation practices mirrored this tendency, as "from the 1950s onwards, the majority of translation activity in the field of philosophy was concentrated in the Pravda publishing house, which specialized in the translation of political literature and the systematic publication of translations of Marxist and

Leninist philosophy” (Bednárová 2024, 354). In this regard, Itamar Even-Zohar’s concept of culture planning (2008) is particularly relevant. It refers to deliberate efforts by authorities to shape a society’s cultural repertoire by promoting selected texts, artworks, and norms to strengthen group cohesion and collective identity, often at the national level. Translation had long been one of the central tools in this process, especially when directed by the state.

The translation of works by American thinkers was similarly subject to political scrutiny during the communist period. In the 1950s, no Slovak translations were produced, with the notable exception of V. S. Ševkin’s *Pedagogika J. Deweyho v službách americkej reakcie* (The pedagogy of J. Dewey in the service of American reactionism, 1955), translated from Russian by Oľga Pavlovičová and published in Bratislava by Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo. The work presents a critical examination of Dewey’s pedagogical ideas, framing them as instruments of American political ideology. The reception of Dewey’s philosophy in Czech and Slovak scholarship illustrates how political context shaped interpretations of his educational theory. In 1947, a year before the Communist coup, the Slovak philosopher and educator Ľudovít Bakoš reviewed the Czech translation *O pramenech vychovateľské vědy* (1947) of Dewey’s *The Sources of a Science of Education* (1929) in the philosophical magazine *Philosophica Slovaca*, praising Dewey’s profound knowledge of the theory of science, solid understanding, extensive pedagogical expertise, and broad experience in educational practice (Bakoš 1947, 294). By contrast, in the 1955 Slovak translation of Ševkin’s metatext, Dewey is presented as a zealous supporter of American monopolist interests, promoting bourgeois ideology and endorsing the contentious view that education alone could resolve systemic social and economic problems, despite the widespread hardships experienced by the working class in capitalist societies (71).<sup>2</sup> These contrasting interpretations demonstrate the considerable impact of political circumstances on the reception and framing of Dewey’s philosophy. Bednárová describes the practice of “indoctrination and taming” as a central feature of socialist cultural policy, particularly visible in the ways translations of American literature were mediated for readers. Translated works were frequently accompanied by Soviet-authored paratexts that functioned not merely as protective camouflage enabling the publication of Western texts, but were often created with full ideological seriousness, particularly during the 1950s (2024, 348). The visible shift in scholars’ approach to Dewey’s ideas and works during the communist era in Czechoslovakia may be linked to his critical stance toward both Soviet and American Communism and his defense of Leon Trotsky’s right to a fair trial, despite disagreeing with Trotsky’s rigid ideology (Hickman 2012, 19). Moreover, in 1937 he served as chair of an international commission established to examine Joseph Stalin’s charges against Trotsky, which concluded that the accused was innocent (Hickman 2012, 20–24).

In the early 1960s, processes of political and economic liberalization began to emerge in response to growing public dissatisfaction with existing restrictions. As a result, publishing policies became more flexible, contributing to a gradual easing of controls and censorship within the cultural sphere. The literary community played

a key role in articulating cultural opposition, helping to pave the way for the broader liberalization of 1968, known as the Prague Spring, and fostering a simultaneous flourishing of literature and translation. Within the domain of American philosophy, three notable works were rendered into Slovak. The 18th-century American political philosopher Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) were translated by Lev Soudek as *Práva človeka: Odpoveď na útok pána Burka proti Francúzskej revolúcii* (1959). Two works by the German-American psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm also appeared in Slovak, namely *Umenie milovať* (1966; *The Art of Loving*, 1956), translated by Slavomíra Krížiková, and *Sny a mýty: Symbolika snov, rozprávok a mýtov* (1970; *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths*, 1951), translated by Ivan Šipoš.

As Bednárová (2024, 354) observes, the translation of philosophical texts in Slovakia became more systematic in the late 1960s, when philosopher Igor Hrušovský initiated the ten-volume *Antológia z diel filozofov* (Anthology of the works of philosophers) to address the acute shortage of Slovak translations of European philosophical works. Published between 1966 and 1977 under Hrušovský's editorship, the series presents a representative selection of Western philosophical thought, spanning antiquity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and extending to the first half of the 20th century. Of the total ten volumes, only two comprise works of American philosophy. Volume IX, *Logický empirizmus a filozofia prírodných vied* (Logical empiricism and the philosophy of the natural sciences), published by Vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry in Bratislava in 1968, includes a selection of works by Rudolf Carnap, the German-American philosopher, translated by Augustín Riška, a former member of the Slovak Philosophical Society and of the editorial board of the journal *Filozofia*. In 1967, Riška undertook a study visit to West Germany, and in 1969 he relocated to the United States, where he chose to remain in light of the unfavorable political developments in Czechoslovakia during the early normalization period. He continued his philosophical work at St. John's University in New York. Consequently, from the early 1970s, Riška was placed on the list of forbidden authors, and his remaining translations were lost (Cmorej 1990, 641). In 1969, Volume VIII, *Pragmatizmus, realizmus, fenomenológia, existencializmus* (Pragmatism, realism, phenomenology, existentialism), was published by the Epona publishing house in Bratislava. The volume presents a selection of works by leading thinkers of the late 19th and 20th centuries, including American philosophers William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana, translated by Slovak scholars Viktor Thieben, Ján Bodnár, Irma Knezlová and Evelína Bodnárová. The publication of the aforementioned anthology marked a significant cultural milestone, signaling an openness to the wider world and to Western philosophy during the brief period of the Prague Spring.

### THE PERIOD OF CONSOLIDATION AND NORMALIZATION UNTIL THE VELVET REVOLUTION: 1970–1989

The cultural revitalization of the late 1960s was abruptly curtailed by the Soviet-led invasion in August 1968, which reinstated strict controls over intellectual and artistic life. Under Gustáv Husák (the Slovak First Secretary of the Communist

Party of Czechoslovakia between 1969–1987), extensive purges severely weakened Czechoslovak cultural and intellectual spheres. This impact was evident in the field of philosophy as well, as no Slovak translations of works by American scholars appeared during the 1970s. By the late 1980s, the situation regarding Slovak translations of American philosophy began to improve. Notably, Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), one of the most influential works in the philosophy of science of the 20th century, was translated as *Štruktúra vedeckých revolúcií* (1982) by Ľubica Valentová and published in Bratislava by Pravda. As Milan Zigo (2009, 990) explains, the translation of this work was prepared on the basis of the revised and expanded second edition, and it was published in the former Czechoslovakia almost two decades after the first edition of the book had appeared in the United States. This translation was issued as part of the *Filozofické odkazy* (Philosophical legacy) series, which replaced the Anthologies of the works of philosophers during the era of strict normalization. The series was conceived as comprising three distinct sections: (A) pre-Marxist philosophy, (B) contemporary non-Marxist philosophy, and (C) Marxist philosophy. As Zigo further adds, at that time, Section B undoubtedly represented one of the most significant phenomena in publishing policy in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic within the field of philosophical literature: “What is crucial is that the works published within the series enabled the maintenance of at least minimal engagement with emerging currents in Western non-Marxist thought – engagement that was essential for the development of philosophy in Slovakia, irrespective of whether it aspired to be Marxist”<sup>3</sup> (2009, 991). Finally, despite decades of repression, intellectual resistance persisted, ultimately contributing to the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and reshaping the cultural landscape of post-communist Czechoslovakia. As Bednářová clarifies, “the translation space opened up immediately after 1989 and brought a significantly increased intensity of translation activity, making up for the loss caused by ideological manipulation and restriction” (2024, 347).

## CONCLUSION

As outlined in the introduction, the central research question addressed by this study concerns how many works by American philosophers were translated into Slovak prior to 1989. The results of the quantitative analysis indicate the existence of seven Slovak translations. In terms of publication type, these consist of five Slovak monographs, as well as two Slovak anthologies containing works by American philosophers translated from English. The most productive period was the 1960s, corresponding to a brief era of political, social, and cultural liberalization. During this time, three Slovak translations were published as monographs, accompanied by two Slovak anthologies containing works by American philosophers in translation.<sup>4</sup>

The second research question examined which branches of American philosophy were accessible to Slovak readers. Slovak translations were highly limited and included only a few works: one by John Dewey representing pragmatism, one by Thomas Paine from the Enlightenment tradition, two by Erich Fromm, and Thomas S. Kuhn's influential contribution to the philosophy of science. This scarcity was only partially mitigated by two anthologies published by the late 1970s, which

featured works by Rudolf Carnap, Wiliam James, and George Santayana. Although more translations of socialist and Marxist American philosophers might have been expected, no dedicated publications have been identified. A notable exception is Ján Bodnár's work written in Slovak *O súčasnej filozofii v USA* (On contemporary philosophy in the USA, 1956), published by Slovenské vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry, which discusses several socialist and Marxist American thinkers (Joseph Weydemeyer, Friedrich Adolph Sorge, William Zebulon Foster, John Sommerville, Howard Selsam).

The third research question examined the translators of the books and anthologies, all of whom were highly qualified, with Lev Soudek, Jozef Schützner, Lubi-ca Valentová, and Irma Klezlová proficient in languages, and Slavomíra Křížiková, Ivan Šipoš, Ján Bodnár, Augustín Riška, Viktor Thieben, and Evelína Bodnárová recognized scholars in philosophy or psychology. In most cases, only limited information is available about their translation work prior to 1989, which may suggest that their contributions to translating American philosophical works for Slovak readers were relatively overlooked before the Velvet Revolution. Moreover, the third research question addressed the publishers of the Slovak translations, too. Translations of works by Paine and Fromm were issued by the Osveta publishing house, which was later partially restructured into the Obzor publishing house in Bratislava. Obzor primarily published popular, educational, legal, artistic, and regional literature, as well as works for the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship (Kusá 2024, 382). The translation of Kuhn's work was published by the Pravda publishing house, which primarily specialized in political literature, producing Marxist and Leninist texts and later expanding into ancient, historical, and modern non-Marxist philosophy. As Mária Kusá (2024, 382) notes, from the 1950s onward most philosophical translation activity was concentrated in Pravda, founded in 1945 as the dedicated publishing house of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The final research question considers the factors shaping the selection of works for translation and the ways in which Slovak scholars engaged with them. The issues of center versus periphery, dominance versus subordination, and Western versus non-Western perspectives, which have been central to recent translation studies (Saldanha and O'Brien 2014, 4), are particularly pertinent here. Decades of suppression of Western philosophy in Czechoslovakia marginalized interest in American philosophical works under the prevailing Communist doctrine. Although earlier translations existed, it was only after 1989 that American philosophical works began to receive greater attention in terms of translation and publication. Political considerations, especially following the Communist Party's consolidation of power in 1948, not only influenced the selection of works for translation but also shaped their reception and interpretation by Slovak scholars. Due to space constraints, only a limited number of examples are discussed here; however, a separate study examining this question in greater depth through relevant paratexts and metatexts is planned.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It has been published since the mid-20th century under successive titles: *Philosophica Slovaca* (1946–1949), *Filozofický zborník* (1950–1952), *Filozofický časopis* (1953–1955), *Slovenský filozofický časopis* (1956–1960), *Otázky marxistickej filozofie* (1961–1965), and *Filozofia* (1966–present).
- <sup>2</sup> The definitions of metatext and paratext adopted here are based on Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality (1992, 1997). Genette defines metatextuality as the critical relationship through which a text comments explicitly or implicitly on another text or on itself. Paratextuality refers to the relationship between a text and its paratextual elements – such as titles, prefaces, footnotes, and illustrations – which frame and mediate the reception of the main text.
- <sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are made by the present author.
- <sup>4</sup> The lack of Slovak translations was often compensated for by the availability of Czech translations, since the close relationship between the two languages allowed Slovak readers to understand Czech texts without significant difficulty. Owing to space constraints, however, this study could not address the issue of Czech translations of philosophical works.

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