

Editorial: Skating on Thin Ice

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To study the history of ethnology or folkloristics poses a special challenge for the researcher. It is not that the ethnologist or folklorist is deeply immersed in the immediate context of their discipline, which prevents them from seeing things of significance that an outsider would be quick to point out to. This is quite a common predicament of all who decide to study their own community or society. The challenge lies in the fact that whatever one writes has an intimate bearing on one's immediate colleagues. This requires more elaboration when it comes to the foundations of Central and Eastern European (CEE) ethnology and folkloristics.

The emergence and development of ethnological projects and folklore studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been intimately connected to nation-building, which went even as far as to help the political representation to draw ethnic boundaries during the post-WW1 settlements (Bahenská et al., 2024: 77). In the early 20th century, the role of ethnologist was not that of a detached observer of vernacular cultures; their role was that of the custodian of the national tradition. After the Second World War, ethnology and folkloristics in CEE remained closely connected to nationalism. The nascent socialist regimes denounced chauvinist nationalism (represented foremost by German Nazism) and promoted internationalist orientation instead. Soviet perspectives and methods served as a model to follow, but

some forms of nationalist expressions were allowed to gain public support and to legitimize the regimes. As Saarlo (2018) suggests, the process of sovietisation of research, rather than radically transforming the study of folk culture, may have contributed to preservation of folkloristics in a conservative form. This was partly due to a mismatch between official ideological expectations and the available cultural material: when politically suitable folk expressions were scarce or absent, researchers often defaulted to already established topics of study. Given the limited freedom to explore folk culture through alternative conceptual or methodological lenses, scholars tended to reinforce existing, often national paradigms. The end of socialism, again, did little to change the broader national-oriented disciplinary framework. Despite the abundant recent research that deals reflexively with the disciplinary history (e.g. Eggmann, Johler, Kuhn, Puchberger, *Eds.*, 2019; Kuutma, Jaago, 2005), it is important to continue subjecting the nationalist framework to critical inquiry. Ethnologists of the past are often celebrated as important figures in the processes of nation-building and cultural preservation. For this reason, critical scrutiny of their work can challenge widely held cultural or national sentiments.

The other part of the story is related to a distinct connection between the state and civil society that developed under the Nazi and the Soviet rule, two eminently oppressive political regimes. Especially the latter one left a significant footprint on the region. Although we shun the concept of totalitarianism and while the contributions in this issue focus on the latter rule here (for the former see e.g. Gingrich in Barth et al., 2005; Panczová, Kiliánová, Kubisa, 2023), it cannot be denied that these regimes utilised many specific measures that created specific bonds of dependence between the state and its citizens and among the citizens. Promoting one's academic career could be achieved by exploiting these bonds with the result of grave consequences for the losing party. We do not claim that these things do not happen in the context of democratic academia (Price, 2004, 2016), but we surmise that these regimes generally offered more opportunities to such action and often with more severe consequences.

Had it not been for the fall of socialism, many of the “embarrassing secrets” would have remained under the blanket of oblivion. However, the liberal-democratic regimes that replaced state socialism in the region based their legitimacy on a moral settlement with the past (Eyal, Szélényi, Townsley, 1998: 107–112). This led to establishing various memory initiatives such as museums, civic initiatives, or research institutes, and led to opening of archives that would show who collaborated with the totalitarian regimes of the past (Pehe, 2018). Everyone who had become involved with the oppressive regimes as a collaborator should be brought before the tribunal of history. While these initiatives usually had instant repercussions in the realm of politics, it would take decades to influence less prominent social segments, including academia.

Czech ethnology offers a revealing case study. In the early 1990s, ethnologists often drew a clear distinction between the communist regime and the ethnological community, promoting a narrative of “islands of freedom” – the idea that, despite the

regime's repressive nature, it remained possible to conduct rigorous and meaningful ethnological research. This narrative provided a sense of closure and has tended to discourage critical reflection or engagement with more difficult questions necessary for a deeper understanding of the discipline's entanglement with Nazism and Communism in the past. A decade ago, one Czech ethnologist tried to dig deeper in the activities of Antonín Václavík (1891–1959) during the Nazi occupation (Soukupová, 2016a, 2018). While Václavík, a prominent Moravian ethnologist and specialist on folk culture who is today hailed as the founder of the ethnology school in Brno, was not depicted as an active collaborator or supporter of the occupation, it became clear that his research activities had benefitted from being close to a wartime collaboration organisation. This provoked considerable controversy and prompted upset reaction from ethnologists in Brno (Altman, 2016; Jančář 2016; Pracovníci Ústavu evropské etnologie Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity, 2016; Soukupová, 2016b).

The controversy surrounding Václavík demonstrates that it is indeed possible to undertake critical and potentially contentious research within the relatively small field of Czech ethnology. At the same time, it highlights the reasons why ethnologists may hesitate to pursue such inquiries or to pose uncomfortable questions. Critically re-evaluating the legacy of a prominent disciplinary forebear, proposing alternative narratives of the field's past, or uncovering Cold War-era compromises involving one's academic mentors are all endeavours fraught with professional risk. While controversial research in any field can have career implications, the stakes are particularly acute in ethnology, where disciplinary figures – unlike subjects such as pastoralists or folk artists – may serve as thesis supervisors, examiners, project evaluators, or gatekeepers of employment opportunities. Engaging with those “uncomfortable relics”, as Leonia Brzozowska aptly describes them in her contribution in this issue, can feel akin to skating on thin ice. Many of the individuals involved remain active within the academic community. Even when long deceased, their influence persists – often reinforced by the fact that their intellectual legacy is maintained, and sometimes even safeguarded, by their descendants who continue to shape the field. Such a situation favours trouble-free and hagiographic engagements with the past.

For these reasons, we as guest editors are well aware that to rake over the past is not an easy thing to do as it is loaded with many methodological and ethical uncertainties. We wanted to address exactly these issues to break a new path that would set us apart from the ever-growing number of contributions on the history of Cold War ethnology and anthropology in our region (Bošković, Hann, *Eds.*, 2013; Hann, Sárkány, Skalník, *Eds.*, 2005; Hann et al., 2007; Kencis, Bronner, Seljamaa, *Eds.*, 2024; Mihăilescu, Naumović, Iliev, *Eds.*, 2008; Sadhana, 2019; Skalník, *Ed.*, 2002). This was the original idea of our panel “Skating on thin ice” at the 16th SIEF Congress in Brno in 2023. The current issue of *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* builds on the panel, but expands its scope, including contributions not presented at the conference.

What does our special issue offer to its readers? Without losing sight of the specificities of the socialist era, the individual contributions give priority to diverse ethical and methodological questions that connect to the uncertainties of exploring the disciplinary history. The central concern is how we approach the disciplinary past which continues to have significant implications for the present. What does it mean to speak about the past discipline's involvement in political projects? What does it mean to speak about the secrets of significant figures in ethnology? The issue wants to explicitly address these facts. Our inquiry indirectly addresses one of the weighty issues of contemporary social sciences. Are researchers equipped with tools that allow them to understand the social reality better than the subjects immersed in it and, hence, allow an improved understanding? And if so, is the researcher allowed to uncover the points of view that were forgotten, repressed or deliberately omitted from the subject's accounts? While we do not pretend to have clear answers, we believe that this tension is highly productive.

Two contributions, by Judit Gulyás and Monika Golonka-Czajkowska, exceed the usual length of major articles in *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology*. A common difficulty in writing about disciplinary history for an international audience lies not only in presenting the case at hand but also in contextualizing it appropriately. Political, social, and cultural details familiar to local readers must be at least sketched for those unfamiliar with the context. The typical length constraints of journal articles make it difficult to include adequate theoretical and methodological discussion. Moreover, monographs on disciplinary history are often directed at local readers and published in national languages (Bahenská et al., 2024; Beňušková, Jágerová, Nádaská, 2013; Ducháček et al., 2023; Ķencis, 2019) which can limit broader international dialogue. We are therefore pleased that *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* has made space for these extended articles, allowing proper contextualization and methodological reflection.

The issue opens with *The Secret Diary and the Frozen Oeuvre of Gyula Ortutay* by Judit Gulyás. The article discusses the life and work of a Grand Old Man of Hungarian folklore studies and ethnology Gyula Ortutay, based on his posthumously published diaries and their reception. Ortutay's career, wedding scholarship and top-tier politics, can be likened to figures of similar standing such as Alexander Fol in Bulgaria or Zdeněk Nejedlý in Czechoslovakia. Though not all ethnologists or scholars from adjacent fields can claim similar political influence, many ethnologists were involved in politics of local communist parties. Gulyás's sensitive and reflexive study offers a meditation on ethical and methodological issues related to the use of personal diaries as a source for historical research. These dimensions are even more important because scholars tend to develop "cultic rhetoric", as she calls it, around individuals of merit. Yet as she shows, this rhetoric fell quickly apart after the publication of the diaries, leading promptly to Ortutay's dismissal. The problem is that neither praise nor dismissal help us in better understanding of Ortutay-like figures, and we can only hope that Gulyás's work will help to pave the way for more analytically sensitive works.

The second article by Monika Golonka-Czajkowska, *In and Against the System. Research Conducted by the Chair of Slavic Ethnography of the Jagiellonian University in Spisz (Spiš) in the Light of Archival Documentation* takes us from Hungary to Poland. Her article examines how researchers from a single institution approached fieldwork in one region over a period of more than a quarter of a century. The study highlights how anthropological research in politically sensitive, nationally mixed regions was subject to scrutiny and how researchers adapted their strategies as the political climate evolved. She focuses on methodological tactics such as strategic omissions, silences, and careful topic selection, showing how these approaches enabled researchers to navigate ideological expectations and surveillance under socialism. Drawing on her case studies, Monika Golonka-Czajkowska argues convincingly that it is necessary for anthropologists themselves to engage with the archival materials about their disciplinary history to ensure that the broader historical, situational and biographical context is taken into account.

Leonia Brzozowska in her article *The Researcher's Dilemmas. The Political Entanglement of Folk Art in The People's Republic of Poland* shows how remembering and interpreting the past related to one folk art area is ideologically loaded. She shows how ties to ethnologists enhanced creative authority of folk artists, legitimizing certain forms of folk expression while marginalizing others – paralleling Gulyás's discussion of the beneficiary role of Ortutay. Importantly, Brzozowska offers a reflexive account of her own role as a researcher, critically examining the dynamics of memory culture in Poland and power relations in academia. Her methodological reflections underscore the need for sensitivity in interpreting nostalgic or ambivalent recollections, recognizing that such narratives may express genuine longing, pragmatic adaptation, and critical engagement with the past.

Disciplinary history of folkloristics and ethnology has been usually analysed by using methods that are in the tool set for historians like close reading of archival texts, source criticism, and oral history. However, some research questions are better answered statistically, digital methods enable seeing the big picture and statistical overview of textual occurrences of some phrases might expose stereotypes and biases that have been circling about past research. Andrej Gogora's article *The Language of Compliance, The Practice of Resistance: A Data-Driven Study of Declarative Ideological Terminology in Slovak Ethnographic Research (1953–1973)* displays a promising approach to archival metadata. His analysis of the Collection of Research Reports housed at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology Slovak Academy of Sciences show how, when and where ideologically charged phrases are used in the descriptions of documents: combination of statistically advanced analysis with archival research offers innovative insights to the understanding of how ideology was embedded in research and archival practices. Gogora operationalizes the concept of declarative expression (the strategic, often superficial use of Marxist-Leninist terminology in ethnographic reports) through advanced statistical analysis of metadata. His work highlights both the potential and the limitations of distant

reading methodologies: while statistical models can identify patterns of terminology use, interpreting these patterns in relation to individual agency and institutional pressures remains a task that requires integration with historical and contextual knowledge.

Lastly, the special issue includes a review essay from Jaroslava Panáková titled *What the Field Needs: On Arrested Epistemologies and the Ethics of Engagement*. It takes as its subject the recently published book *An Ethnographic Chieftdom: Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989)* by Nikola Balaš (Balaš, 2025). In addition to providing a review of the book, Panáková discusses the concept of “epistemic arrest” and shows its applicability to Slovak ethnology in the socialist era (which is only marginally discussed in the reviewed book). Panáková discusses the relationship between the relative autonomy of the Slovak ethnological field and the reception of Soviet ethnographers. Contrary to expectations, she argues that “[w]hile one might assume that alignment with Soviet institutional models would have incentivised engagement with Soviet theorists, particularly insofar as such recognition could confer symbolic capital within the domestic academic field, the historical record suggests a more ambivalent, even dismissive, relationship.” In doing so, Panáková offers an interventionist mode of engagement with disciplinary history that would be perceptive both to ethical and methodological challenges of researching disciplinary history.

The five articles display reception of research and researchers in different political contexts. The first three articles show links between ethnology and politics in socialist states were ever-present: cases show how these can be manifested in the work of particular researchers, but also on their impact on communities. Jaroslava Panáková’s essay extends the methodological discussion to a meta-theoretical level, while Andrej Gogora shows the usability of statistical analysis for large amounts of archival documents. The last contribution in this issue is off-topic and focuses on a relatively new phenomenon that has so far been little studied in post-socialist countries. In her article titled *Women-only WWII Military Re-enactment Associations in Czechia: Between Authenticity and Emancipation*, Lenka Hadarová examines through oral history narratives how Czech women engage in popular re-enactments of historical military events in the last years and what this brings to them in their private lives and social interactions.

The articles that relate to the core topic of the issue invite a critical examination of the relationship between research methods, ideological constraints, and the ethics of scholarly inquiry both in historical practice and in contemporary analysis. What unites these contributions is their shared concern with the methodological entanglements of ethnological knowledge and political ideology. All studies demonstrate that methods are never neutral: whether through the choice of statistical models, the ethics of oral history, or the selection of archival sources. Research practices are embedded in, and shaped by, broader social and political frameworks. These articles further illustrate that reflexivity – regarding both past and present

research practices – is indispensable to the responsible interpretation of ethnographic and cultural data from politically charged contexts.

We are aware that all our contributors cover only three countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia) and that we as the guest editors are acquainted with two others (Estonia, Czechia). This is significant because even in the former Eastern Europe critical differences existed among the national ethnologies. However, we believe that the methodological and ethical questions raised here resonate well beyond these national borders and may assist other researchers in keeping their balance on the slippery surface of disciplinary history – where each critical step must be carefully placed, yet can lead to important new directions. Revisiting disciplinary history in politically charged contexts is never a purely academic task; it involves navigating personal relationships and entrenched narratives. By highlighting the complex intersections of disciplinary practice, ideological constraint, and scholarly agency, the authors of the articles worked toward transforming the uncertainties of the past into productive resources for the future of ethnology and folkloristics. Reflexive studies can open space for more inclusive, accountable, and dynamic disciplinary futures.

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