

COURAGE

Cultural Opposition: Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries

Country Reports



SLOVAKIA

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1. Introduction

In 2018 Slovakia and the Czech Republic commemorate 100 years since the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic. In addition to the projects of various smaller institutions (non-profit organizations, museums) and individuals, a large Czechoslovak exhibition¹ was prepared by the National Museums of both countries. A successful interactive exhibition focused mainly on pupils and students also included the period of socialism.

The remembrance of the communist period in Slovakia is connected mainly with the anniversary of the entry of the Warsaw Pact troops (August 21, 1968), the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution (November 17, 1989), and the anniversary of the Candle Demonstration (March 25, 1988). On these anniversaries, discussions, film screenings, photo exhibitions, and interviews with dissidents take place. Prevailing forms of reflection on the past relate to a nostalgic recall of a sense of security and cheaper food. In the grocery stores, retro-weekends are organized, where food with packaging from before 1989 is on offer, and people believe that it tasted better then. Gradually, a narrative emerges that life was better during communism.

On a more positive note, we are still looking for **new forms of remembering and the recollection of our past**. One example of this can be seen in the successful interactive project of three women (filmmaker Barbora Berezňáková, graphic designer Pavlína Morháčová and PR manager Eva Vozárová) based on oral history. The project's title is Ask your family.² The core of the project is the questions posed to respondents (and their family members, neighbors, friends) about what they were doing on August 21, 1968, and how the dramatic events affected their lives and those of their families. Responses to the questions can be made in the form of photos, video, written text, or audio, and these are then posted on the website. This project has shown that changing the way of communicating commemorative events is essential.

Thus, the representation of the previous regime is contradictory. In post-1989 Slovakia the period of the Second World War and the history of the Slovak Republic (1939-1945) were the most visible themes rather than the communist period. Even though socialism is considered by law to be a criminal regime in Slovakia, the institutions that would investigate the persecutors and persecuted in our country emerged significantly later compared to other states.³ This may be partly due to the fact that Slovakia was provincial in comparison with the capital, Prague, where repression and control was more extreme. One institution that deals with the communist past in Slovakia is the **Nation's Memory Institute**⁴ (Ústav pamäti národa - NMI), the public-law institution founded by the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. 553/2002 Coll. on Disclosure of Documents Regarding the Activity of State Security Authorities from 1939 to 1989 and on the Founding of the Nation's Memory Institute and on

¹ More on the exhibition can be found at its website: accessed November 6, 2018, <https://cesko-slovensko.eu/en/home-3/>

² For more on the project see its website: accessed November 6, 2018 <https://spytajsavasich.sk/>

³ See Kovanic, "Institutes of Memory" and Sniegon, "Implementing Post-Communist National Memory," 97-124.

⁴ See their website: accessed November 6, 2018, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/en/mission/>

Amending Certain Acts. There were attempts to establish this institution since the fall of the communist regime in November 1989, but the political and social will for it was found only in 2002.

The NMI is a good example for the topic of **coping with the past in Slovakia**. After the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovakia coped with the past mostly "in silence" when compared with Czech society. The establishment of the NMI was accompanied by marked political disinterest, but it deserves to be recognised as the first significant act that interrupted the silence about the past. Its founding is due mainly to Ján Langoš,⁵ the first President of the Board of Directors.

Coping with the communist past in Slovakia moves slowly over long periods of time. Since the 1970s the artist Peter Kalmus has been an original actor in the underground scene in Košice. He also organized the first democratic demonstration in Košice in 1989. In February 2016, together with Ľuboš Lorenz, he doused the monument of the communist official Vasil Biľak with red paint and wrote "swine" on it. The monument was erected by the Slovak Communist Party in Biľak's native village in Eastern Slovakia only a few days before. Biľak was one of the politicians who invited the Soviets to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. This event is significant because it shows that opinion about the communist past is still divided in Slovakia. Whereas Kalmus was obviously critical of the monument to Biľak, the mayor of the village allowed the monument to be installed, the prosecutors and judges of Kalmus showed little sympathy for the artist, and social media overwhelmingly condemned Kalmus. Thus, the political elite in the village, the courts, and social media all took positions against Kalmus and, by implication, in support of the monument to a communist figure. Kalmus was in the headlines again in August 2016: he was accused of having chiselled off the hammer and sickle symbols from the Košice memorial monument to Soviet soldiers who died during the liberation of Košice in 1945 (the symbols had been chiselled off already so many times previously that now there are just plastic replicas in place of the bronze originals). Kalmus argues that he did so in 1989 for the last time, although he agrees with people who continue to remove communist symbols from the monument of "innocent young men who lost their lives in the war and should not be identified with the cruel communist dictatorship".⁶ He was sentenced conditionally to four months in prison.⁷

2. Background and framework

⁵ Ján Langoš (1946-2006) was dissident and samizdat publisher in the 1980s and became involved in politics after 1989.

⁶ See the article in the Slovak daily paper *Sme*: <https://kultura.sme.sk/c/20613967/vytvarnik-peter-kalmus-moze-skoncit-za-mrezami.html> (accessed 23.11.2018).

⁷ See the article in *The Slovak Spectator*: accessed November 6, 2018, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20658107/artist-gets-conditional-sentence-for-damaging-communist-memorial.html>

Access to archive documents is regulated by the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic no. 395/2002 Coll. on archives and registers and the Decree of the Ministry of the Interior no. 628/2002 Coll., which implements certain provisions of the Act. The Slovak National Archive allows access to archive documents by making write-offs, extracts, confirmations and copies of archival documents. According to the Archive, access to archive documents shall be subject to a written request. The applicant shall indicate in his application his or her personal data, data on the required archival document which are known to him/her and the purpose of the use. Access to archival materials pertaining to state socialism is officially open, however, the archive has the right to restrict access to archival documents if this would jeopardize the security of the state, threaten the rights and the legitimate protected interests of the living person, if the archival documents would be damaged if the applicant violated the rules of inquiry and if the restriction of access is determined by the conditions under which they were imposed by the archive.⁸

The lack of the material processing, the lack of digitization, communication via Internet or social networks, etc., are real barriers to exploring materials from the period before 1989 in Slovak archives. This seems to be specific to Slovakia: compared to Czechia, Hungary, and Poland, those who believe it important to study and learn from history have less power to influence the functioning of archives; as a result, there is less money and support for institutions dealing with socialist history, and there is limited presence of such topics in the media. Another obstacle is the short opening hours of archives and the poor physical condition of the buildings and technical equipment. Archives, which fall under the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, are listed on the Ministry's website, but the website is unclear and incomplete. The websites are mostly in Slovak and often not updated. Due to the lack of digitization, any users must wait for the documents for a long time. Moreover, due to the missing catalogs⁹ on the Internet, the researchers must order the documents directly in the archive, wait several days until they are prepared, and then return to study them. For a variety of operations, a fee, mostly in cash, is payable. Sometimes it is necessary to meet employees who are willing to help if one wants to successfully study the documents. Fortunately, there are some employees willing to help.

Archives in Slovakia do not process **archive material focused thematically on cultural opposition**. There are collections of institutions, personalities, and organizations, for example, where opposition and period material not relevant to opposition are often mixed. The above-mentioned Nation's Memory Institute (NMI) is one of the main public, state-run institutions that is devoted to the periods of political oppression between 1939 and 1989, and it stores also security documents of the communist state. Research on the socialist period is also conducted by the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, as well as history departments in universities; these other institutions outmatch the production of the NMI in both quality and quantity. With respect to the NMI, the principal task of the Institute in the

⁸ See the Minister's website: accessed November 6, 2018, <https://www.minv.sk/?pristup-k-dokumentom-8>

⁹ For Slovak collections there are printed catalogues (5) and online catalogues (3) available. In one case there is no catalogue.

present time, among its multitude of duties prescribed by § 8 of Act No. 553/2002 Coll., is to make available to individual applicants any documents about the persecutions carried out by Nazi or communist security agencies. To meet this challenge, the structure of the Institute has been adjusted appropriately.

The First Section is the Archive of the NMI; other sections handle Disclosure, Documentation, Registers, Scientific Research, Audiovisual Work, and Information Technologies. Delimitation of archival documents and holdings started in 2003. The NMI Archive successively took over archival material from State bodies and natural persons corresponding to 1.800 metres. The most coherent and extensive file that was acquired contained agency, operation, and investigation files of the communist State Security amounting to 62.000 items. Aside from paper documents, the archive stores 70.961 microfiches, equivalent to approximately 2 million pages of documents as well as 466 promotional and educational films. In all, the archive manages documents of nearly 12.5 million pages. The archive currently administers 638 archival holdings and collections. The archive's research premises are used by historians, archivists, journalists and the general public from Slovakia and from abroad.

The main task of the Section of Disclosure is, upon receiving the individual requests, to disclose the state security agencies' records, created in 1939-1989, to the applicants. The NMI fulfils the task of publishing information on persecutors and their activities and prompting criminal prosecution of crimes and criminal offences. Namely, it reconstructs personal and organisational structures of the State Security network. This task correlates with further acquisition of archival documents, especially personal files of State Security personnel.

The Institute creates and processes registers from data contained in the acquired materials produced by security authorities. Concurrently, it fills in data from other information sources, e.g. from materials of other repressive authorities, which are located in State archives. It also focuses on research on the political background that was necessary for activities of repressive authorities. It thus allows for a more complex review of the activities of non-democratic regimes. In addition to this, the NMI produces and edits video recordings which depict stories of people who lost their lives during war or during the communist regime.

The NMI has been conducting systematic historical research of the period of oppression within its dedicated section since 2007. Scientific researchers focus on the activities of State authorities, the repressive framework of Security authorities, and the persecution of citizens by non-democratic regimes. They attend to mapping the activities of State Security authorities with special attention. They try to enrich our knowledge of the State Security and its repressive apparatus in the framework of a non-democratic state. Researchers of the Institute represent the NMI at domestic and international scientific conferences and present their results in monographs, collective publications, scientific and academic studies published in many domestic and international academic periodicals. The NMI also organises scientific conferences, seminars, training and exhibitions. Scientific workers extend the NMI's publication portfolio by writing publications and by compiling document editions and conference anthologies. They also give expert counsel to external authors and they present

their expert standpoint representing the Institute in scientific discussions with the media. In the field of scientific research NMI cooperates with partner scientific institutions, as well as with universities and higher education institutions, where it presents topics relevant to the Institute by giving lectures or teaching specialised courses.¹⁰ There is no other such specialised public institution in Slovakia. However, as mentioned, research in this area is also taking place at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, especially at the Institute of History, in the Department of Contemporary History.¹¹

3. Collections in the COURAGE Registry

3.1 Basic aggregate information

The aim of the Slovak team was to include the widest possible representation of topics important for Slovakia in the Registry. Both private and public collections are represented, from the smallest private collections to extensive collections in state institutions. They cover a diversity of themes: student movements, popular culture, samizdat, religious movements, minority movements, folk culture, democratic opposition and censorship. The following collections have been published so far:

[First Slovak Investment Group's collection](#)

[Bratislavské listy Editorial Office Archive](#)

[Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers' Cultural Association \(CSEMADOK\) Archive](#)

[József Gyönyör Legacy](#)

[László A. Arany Papers](#)

[Michal Šufliarsky Collection](#)

[Printer Krumpholtz](#)

[Public Against Violence](#)

[Rezső Szabó Personal Collection](#)

[Slovak Office for Press and Information](#)

[Slovak Samizdat Online Collection](#)

¹⁰ Information can be found at their website: accessed November 6, 2018, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/en/organizational-structure/>

¹¹ See their website: accessed November 6, 2018, <http://www.history.sav.sk/indexenglish.php?id=department-of-contemporary-history>

Public¹² and private collections on the territory of Slovakia are predominantly located in Bratislava and its surroundings, copying the archives of major institutions. These collections showcase a number of important categories and types of collections of cultural opposition: some of these collections are owned and organized by public institutions, others were created by private initiatives and are owned privately.

But there was, of course, cultural opposition also outside of the capital city – and collection initiatives as well. Accordingly, while 25 collections are located in Bratislava, 5 were included from other parts of the country. It should be emphasized that some topics related to cultural opposition in Slovakia can be also found in the territory of today's Czech Republic and vice versa.

3.2 Background of collections

The content of the collections in Slovakia consists mainly of publications or samizdats and grey literature, manuscripts (legal or financial), graphics, music (or voice) recordings and photos. A variety of samizdat was published in Slovakia. For example, since 1973, a philosophical-theological samizdat called *Orientácia* [Orientation] was published. Later František Mikloško, Ján Čarnogurský and Vladimír Jukl initiated *Náboženstvo a súčasnosť* [Religion and Present]. Other known samizdats were, for example, *Bratislavské listy* [Bratislava Papers], *Katolícky mesačník* [Catholic monthly], *ZrNO* etc.¹³ Liberal journals were *Kontakt* [Contact] (1980-1985), *Altamíra* (1985-1987) and in 1988-1989, *Fragment K*.¹⁴ The most famous samizdat coming from Slovakia was the *Bratislava/nahlas* [Bratislava/aloud] brochure, published in 1987 by Slovak dissident Ján Budaj, which drew attention to the catastrophic situation of the environment. The publication inspired a considerable response. Approximately 30,000 brochures were circulating in the form of copies, and the State Security police were unable to effectively prevent their spread.¹⁵

The most prominent collections of cultural opposition connected with samizdats are in the NMI, including “The Collection of Samizdat and Exile Literature”, “The Independent Culture Collection”, “Printer Krumpholtz” and “*Bratislavské Listy* Editorial Office Archive”¹⁶, a Christian-political samizdat that was created between 1988 and 1989.

The strong **religious activism in Slovakia**, which went hand-in-hand with the production of samizdat, can be seen in the online collection, samizdat.sk.¹⁷ The collection began its activity in 2016 and its contents are the reproductions of dozens of Slovak Catholic samizdats from

¹² Public means that collections are in the state-run institution such as an archive, gallery or museum.

¹³ Šimulčík, *Svetlo z podzemia*, 15-26.

¹⁴ Čarnogurský, “Zárodky otvorenej spoločnosti,” 113-117.

¹⁵ See *Bratislava/nahlas*.

¹⁶ See the collection [Bratislavské listy Editorial Office Archive](#).

¹⁷ See the collection [Slovak Samizdat Online Collection](#).

1982-1989, which are freely accessible. Religious activities are also related to the creation of songs that have been created gradually and their authors are mostly anonymous. This so-called gospel music had its origins in Slovakia in the 1970s¹⁸. It began with the preparation of tapes with prayers and music, later with spiritual songs. The tradition of these songs continues to this day. Examples can be seen in a collection of the “University Library of the Catholic University in Ružomberok”¹⁹ or the “Collection of gospel music”²⁰ at the Music Museum of the Slovak National Museum. In addition to institutional collections, we also record private collections of people active in this gospel-music sphere, such as in the “Anton Fabian Collection”.²¹

In Slovakia, there is still a significant amount of **private collections**. Private collections have their own rules. While some find it uncomfortable to make their collections available to the public or for research purposes and exhibitions, others are happy to share their memories and opinions. Owners of the private collections usually do not have a systematic approach or written records about their collections because they often do not see the collections as an archivist would. They see it as a part of their memories kept in objects, recordings, papers, or photos. On the other hand, there are individuals who see value in their collection, whether financial or historical. Owners constantly finance their own collections, but often they cannot estimate the total budget for the collection.²²

After the fall of the communist regime, many collectors of materials documenting Slovak cultural opposition before 1989 got rid of their collections for various reasons, including lack of awareness of the importance of their materials, lack of resources, or lack of space. Others handed over their collections to **public institutions or non-governmental organizations**. An example of such a well functioning non-profit public non-governmental organization in Slovakia is the Forum Minority Research Institute²³, founded in 1996. Its mission is to research national minorities living in Slovakia, and to document their history, culture, and related monuments. In its archive we can study collections of personalities, such as “Rezső Szabó Personal Collection”²⁴, “László A. Arany Papers”²⁵, “József Gyönyör Legacy”²⁶ and “Sándor Varga”. There is also the “Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers’ Cultural Association (CSEMADOK) Archive”²⁷, which contains various documents from the provenance of the largest cultural organization of Hungarians in Slovakia.

The collections that provide a picture of the period of communism from the point of view of the regime and have great importance for researchers are the “Fund of the Central Committee

¹⁸ Kajanová, *Gospel music*.

¹⁹ Collection of the University Library of the Catholic University in Ružomberok, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n12736> (forthcoming)

²⁰ Collection of Gospel Music, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n6302> (forthcoming)

²¹ Anton Fabian Collection, <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n20123> (forthcoming)

²² See for example the [Michal Šufliarsky Collection](#).

²³ Information is available at: accessed November 6, 2018, <http://foruminst.sk>

²⁴ See the [Rezső Szabó Personal Collection](#).

²⁵ Collection of the [László A. Arany Papers](#).

²⁶ Collection of the [József Gyönyör Legacy](#).

²⁷ Collection of the *Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers’ Cultural Association Archive*.

of the Communist Party of Slovakia” and the “Fund of the Slovak Press and Information Office, which are examples of the mixed collections that contain some artifacts of opposition”²⁸. On the other hand, the Slovak National Archive offers samizdat collections of significant importance, such as “Collection of Vladimír Jukl samizdats”. The “Public Against Violence Collection” contains correspondence that can be used to find the personal testimonies and life stories of people who declared their belonging to opposition or cultural opposition before 1989.²⁹ Documents related to the cultural opposition can be found also in the archives of other state institutions, such as the archive of the Slovak Radio, Slovak Television, the National Film Institute, the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic, the Theater Institute, the Slovak National Museum, the Bratislava City Museum, the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising, or in the libraries.

Public collections are funded mainly by the state. It is difficult to quantify the exact **budget** for a specific collection, because such information is not kept by Slovak institutions. Archives keep a budget for the entire workplace. For example, for the Slovak National Archive, it was difficult to ascertain the total budget of the institution, as this information was not provided to us even after our request. During the dissemination of collections through exhibitions or publications, archives receive money from sponsorship, grants, or advertising too.

The main **user groups** in Slovakia (to the extent that we are aware) are young professionals, academics and others. It is difficult to know the exact numbers of users, since the institutions record the total number of researchers in a research room, and not for the individual collections.

When it comes to **making historical documents available online**, the Slovak National Gallery has been a pioneer. In 2010 it launched the website *Web umenia* (“Web of Art”),³⁰ an on-line catalogue of artworks from the collections of Slovak galleries registered in the *Centrálny katalóg diel* (Central Register of Artworks),³¹ with precise information about the artworks including the copyright. Also the project samizdat.sk (cf. p. 9) is one of the recent painstaking and successful attempts to make historical documents available online.

Another important project, which is fundamental for the **networking** of most important cultural institutions, stakeholders of collections of art, and of other historical cultural documents from the territory of today’s Slovakia is “Slovakiana – Cultural Heritage of Slovakia”.³² Launched in November 2015 by *Národné osvetové centrum* (“The National Cultural Centre”), Department of Informatization, it makes the results of digitization of Slovak cultural heritage available to both experts and the general public. The portal forms a part of a network of European culture portals led by the Europeana portal. The content of the portal

²⁸ Accessed November 6, 2018. <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n28131>

²⁹ Accessed November 6, 2018. <http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n5779>; See also Abaffyová, “Dopisovanie s revolúciou.”

³⁰ Accessed November 6, 2018, <https://www.webumenia.sk/en/informacie>

³¹ Accessed November 6, 2018. <https://www.sng.sk/en/collections/central-catalogue>

³² Accessed November 6, 2018. <https://www.slovakiana.sk/>

will be continuously updated in line with the progress of the digitisation of documents of cultural heritage.

4. Best practice and recommendations

While there has been real progress achieved in online documentation in selected areas in the most recent decade, the **public archives in Slovakia**, which remain the main source of historical documents and knowledge, are stagnating and are at a clearly insufficient level. They are extremely underfinanced and their superordinate authority, the Ministry of Interior, shows very little interest in their development. The scientific activities of archivists, including research and necessary business trips to other archives, have been hardly supported by the Ministry during the past decade. The public presence of public archives and their communication to the public should be intensified and the archive catalogues should be made accessible online as soon as possible.

The Nation's Memory Institute (NMI), and other public institutions dealing with the communist past, should be given **more resources and support**. This has not been the case to date, and also the location of the NMI does not reflect its importance. This might be related to the fact that there are still former communists and even communist secret police agents among politicians in Slovakia, as well as supporters of the wartime Slovak Republic. Slovak laws condemn totalitarian regimes and ban totalitarian ideologies, but there is obviously still no consensus of opinion about the communist past and sympathy for it is still widespread among the public and political elite.

If the economical and personal situation of public archives and research institutes would improve, they could also make more **effort to take over valuable private collections**, which are threatened by the changing situation of their owners, lack of interest among their heirs, and other challenges.

Summary

A short list of recommendations of primary importance:

1. The public sphere – the government, public institutions, public mass media – should strongly support initiatives and projects contributing to the history of Slovakia, especially concerning the periods of communist rule. Independent teams of researchers have proven to be very effective in oral history, in collecting digitized documents and making them available online, but also in reinterpreting the historical material using methods of modern historiography, and communicating current research findings to the broad public.

2. The public archives, the NMI, and research institutes should gain much more support from the government, partly related to individual projects, but also relating to necessary long-term competence development of the staff, and to individual research.
3. The public archives and the Nation's Memory Institute should be enabled and motivated to take over valuable private collections including collections of cultural opposition, and to make them available to researchers.
4. Public discussion on the communist past of the country, the opposition against non-democratic regimes, but also collaborationism, should be enhanced. Sometimes it would seem enough to find inspiration in efforts made by institutions and media (public television) in the Czech Republic, which have been much more positive and successful.
5. Collections and their stakeholders in general should give more effort to reach out to the research community, including students at universities.

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Appendix

List of Collections Described

1. Anton Fabian Collection (forthcoming)
2. Benčuriková, Martina. *Bratislavské listy Editorial Office Archive*. Accessed November 6, 2018. <http://sk.cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?search=Nation%2527s%20memory&lang=sk&uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n1964&type=collections>
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List of Operating Institutions and Owners

- Catholic University in Ružomberok
- Dominican Book Institute
- First Slovak Investment Group
- Forum Minority Research Institute
- Gyönyör, Józse
- J&T Group
- Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic
- Nation's Memory Institute, Slovakia
- Post Bellum
- Sikora, Rudolf
- Slovak National Gallery
- Slovak National Museum
- Šimečková, Eva
- Šimečka, Martin Milan
- Šimulčík, Ján
- Šufliarsky, Michal
- The Slovak National Archive
- TZ SEVERKA

List of Persons Researched

- Akimjak, Amantius
- Arany, Adalbert László
- Bartošová, Zuzana

- Čarnogurský, Ján
- Duray, Miklós
- Endel, Marek
- Gyönyör, József
- Koller, Július
- Mikloško, František
- Sikora, Rudolf
- Šimečková, Eva
- Šimečka, Martin Milan
- Šimečka, Milan
- Šimulčík, Ján
- Šufliarsky, Michal
- Varga, Sándor
- Végh, László