

The background of the cover is a light-colored, marbled paper with grey and white veins. A prominent, dark, irregular diagonal line, resembling a crack or a tear, runs from the top right corner towards the bottom left corner, bisecting the cover.

**CRITICAL THINKING  
IN SLOVAKIA**

**AFTER SOCIALISM**

**JONATHAN L. LARSON**

# CRITICAL THINKING IN SLOVAKIA AFTER SOCIALISM

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CRITICAL THINKING IN  
SLOVAKIA AFTER SOCIALISM

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For Deborah

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. . . . It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

—Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher”

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## PREFACE

While this book is a study of public and civic criticism, it was born from a curiosity regarding critical thinking as a social phenomenon.

During the first decade of the new millennium, goals of critical thinking have been increasingly prominent in US educational institutions. Miami University of Ohio, for instance, has prominently featured critical thinking as a principle of its Miami Plan for Liberal Education. As of 2006 the SUNY system required that students meet a basic competency in critical thinking. As a graduate-student instructor in anthropology at the University of Michigan, I took a workshop on encouraging critical thinking, just a few years after the College of Arts and Sciences had prompted faculty to address critical thinking in their syllabi. Employees of any US college or university could perform a search of their institution's website and likely find numerous documents claiming to address it. Much as literary theorist Michael Warner has noted a popular consensus on the virtues of critical reading, we might ask: what isn't there to like about critical thinking?<sup>1</sup>

Before I started teaching college students full-time in the United States, perhaps it was easier for me to miss such rhetoric. Yet before I began to hear and see it in the United States, from 1999 to 2001 I heard it and saw it used to describe a widespread social problem in post-Communist Slovakia, where I was conducting research. Critical thinking seemed to some Westerners there offering their expertise, particularly in matters of education, an apt term to describe patterns of thought that they were not perceiving in Slovak students, patterns crucial for making a democratic society take hold. Peace Corps projects promised to cultivate it. Other educational projects, particularly those that George Soros's Open Society Foundation sponsored, were sprinkled with claims to how they would advance it along with Slovakia's transition from state socialism.

One example was the Orava Foundation for Democratic Education, which spawned the international organization Reading and Writing

for Critical Thinking. Founded in 1991, in May 2002 the organization described its mission in the following way on its web page. It asked, “Why promote active learning and critical thinking?” An answer accompanied the question:

There are two reasons for promoting active learning and critical thinking in the schools of any part of the world. The first is political: active learning and critical thinking promote and sustain democratic citizenship and aid in the transition to open societies because schools that value these practices turn out citizens who think for themselves and can cooperate with others, even others different from themselves. The second is economic: active learning and critical thinking prepare people to be creative problem solvers, people who can contribute to their own well-being and thrive in jobs and workplaces that are just emerging or are still unforeseen.<sup>2</sup>

This statement was quite explicit in arguing that the socialization process taking place in schools has direct impact on the conduct of politics outside them. “Think[ing] for themselves” and an ability to “cooperate with others” were two measures given for the practice of “critical thinking” and “democratic citizenship” deemed necessary to facilitate Slovaks’ successful transition to parliamentary, liberal democracy and a market economy. By implication, Slovaks were missing these qualities.

Explicit or implicit, notions of thinking for oneself and cooperative engagement were circulating beyond this web page as elements of Slovaks’ discourses on themselves and of other observers’ discourses on Slovakia. Perhaps coinciding with the expansion of my social networks into the Slovak NGO and educational community, I began to notice foreigners from the educational, nonprofit, and governmental sectors using these phrases in conversation to summarize the challenge of Slovakia’s transition. By the time my interest was piqued sufficiently to want to write down this commentary on critical thinking, my use of the phrase as a question for Slovakia’s transition elicited interesting responses from the foreigners with whom I had contact. For instance, echoing one portion of the Orava Project’s statement, in the fall of 2002 one high-ranking representative of the US embassy lamented the Slovaks’ seeming inability to market their wines: Why couldn’t they make their labels more enticing? Why couldn’t they diversify their types of grapes? A few years later in 2005 I struck up a conversation at a church coffee hour in Bratislava with a middle-aged European American male who was teaching secondary school in the city. When I told him I was in Slovakia to study critical thinking and Slovakia’s transition to democracy, he replied, “I’m at the evangelical faculty and, boy, no one there knows how to think critically.”

After a brief pause, he continued, “Other than two people, that is, no one knows what critical thinking is. They have ‘the facts’ [putting his fingers up indicating quotation marks in the air], and they never stop to question the interpretation or where the facts are coming from. They just list these facts, and that’s it.”

These gentlemen were surely in part attempting to make agreeable, friendly conversation with me. But interestingly, rather than ask about my own framing of the topic, they presupposed that a quest to explain an absence of critical thinking must have motivated my interest in it. Their own suggestions of what was wrong, along with those of organizations like the Orava Project, reveal several suppositions about critical thought as a social phenomenon. First, democracy seemed systemically or functionally tied to cultivating critical thinking, just as the lingering of Slovakia’s undemocratic past in the present seemed a significant obstacle to overcoming an uncritical collective mentality. Second, what transpires in classrooms seemed directly productive of the country’s political order, be it democratic or something else. Third, to illustrate the absence of critical thought in Slovakia, these actors pointed to discursive practices, such as tendencies for students to excel at memorizing and recapitulating facts, but not knowing how to express their own views.

On the surface, the contours of this explication might seem obvious to many of my North American and Western European readers. After all, hadn’t the various national projects of state socialism across the region generally produced a party state that seemed to have either smothered critical discourse through the inculcation of fear or dulled critical thought through the control of information and dissemination of propaganda? While other details of life there might have been lesser known to Western observers, didn’t it make sense that the reproduction of such an alienating and hierarchical system would have been centered in pedagogical practices of discouraging students’ opinions and encouraging a regimentation of thought? Aren’t democratic states more likely to welcome critical thought as enriching the lives of their subjects?

While this diagnosis seemed intuitively right to me in some ways, in several others it was puzzling. I had never given much thought to what critical thinking was supposed to mean. Something about the term struck me as slippery and ill-defined in such lay usage. Moreover, I had actually taught at a secondary school in Slovakia from 1994 to 1996. While my personal journal from that period reveals my own perception that the school where I taught did not empower students to take initiative with their own projects, my students had impressed me with one type of criticality: they were well informed about current events within Slovakia and

beyond it and interrogated the doings of their political leaders and news media. Would US students and adults really demonstrate more critical thought, I wondered, at least in this one sense?

My skepticism toward these claims about critical thinking was bolstered by my training in linguistic anthropology and Eastern European studies that I had been undergoing as a graduate student, as well as a deeper intellectual interest in how the past influences the present. These claims of a widespread lack of critical thinking in Slovakia, after all, were grounded in perceptions of language use and notions of history. Yet studies in practices and ideologies of language in classrooms and public spheres had been arguing for years that interpretations of types of thought based on readings of others' language use are often problematic. Indeed, a closer look at Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking's and the European American gentleman's claims regarding critical thinking reveals a pattern that Judith Irvine and Susan Gal have argued underlies language ideologies of social difference.<sup>3</sup> First, these statements take discursive production or display as iconic of cognitive potential: they seem to assume that what students say or write represents the kinds of thought they are capable of producing. Second, these statements assume a tight recursive projection that the structure of speech events in classrooms has a direct effect on speaker roles in society; in other words, those students who only regurgitate their teachers' discourse will not later in life take initiative or engage in dialogue within public spheres. Third, and finally, these statements reflect a kind of view of classroom practice—common to pundits—from above: they erase factors that might both explain contextual behavior and potential structural similarities with their own implied point of comparison of schools in the United States.

Furthermore, emerging work on socialist Central Eastern Europe was revealing consistent evidence that the practice of voicing an opinion or criticizing something had not been influenced by politically stunted cognitive development, but by a complicated mix of sociocultural values regarding the utility of public criticism. For instance, recent historical scholarship on the Soviet Union during the Stalin period has documented how individual relationships to the state and party ideology, in a time and place that many Westerners equivocate with sheer political terror, were actually quite complex. Subjects of socialist states did not always disagree with the region's Communist parties over what they wanted for their lives.

It is also now clear from the triumphal proclamations of an "end of history" that followed the demise of state socialism that the West had defined

and still wanted to define itself structurally in opposition to a socialist or “totalitarian” East.<sup>4</sup> Western mobilization against Communism had relied on a fear of the totalitarian Other on the opposite side of the iron curtain. The use of such a binary opposition for self-definition was nothing new: “Western” Europe defined itself in relation to an “Eastern” half as far back as the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Western binary divisions of “civilized” versus “savage” societies are well-known in anthropological literature; early anthropologists themselves contributed to such discourses through the theoretical categories with which they organized their work. Attempts to locate civilizational difference in some kind of cultural essence or divine fate include more recent attempts to explain industrialized versus nonindustrialized societies in blanket terms of modernity or even orality and literacy. Discourses on critical thinking as a marker of a type of society can be bound intimately with such evolutionary schemata. After all, several twentieth-century theories of critical thinking (ones that inform the work of the NGOs I have mentioned) attempted to theorize practices of individual thought that contribute explicitly to democracy and thwart totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup>

All of these thoughts led to my deep skepticism toward using the term “critical thinking” to describe what a whole society, in this case post-socialist Slovakia, might lack. When I returned to Slovakia for fieldwork in September 2002, I expected to examine the role of Western agencies in promoting projects of critical thinking around the country and their criteria for the performance of critical thought in classrooms. I quickly discovered, however, that agencies such as the Peace Corps had pulled up their stakes, and others, such as the British Council or the Open Society Foundation, had reduced their presence. In *de facto* declarations of “mission accomplished,” they had left to toss seeds of democracy in fields of former Soviet central Asia less cultivated by the West. Yet Slovak laments of a national lack of critical thinking lingered, certainly in partial dialogue with foreign interlocutors, but also drawing on deeper ties to pan-European discourses. Those Slovak diagnoses, even if not always explicitly tagged as about critical thinking, pointed not only to discursive practices in classrooms but also more richly to patterns of public culture. That whole unexpected turn of events, a kind well-known in the annals of anthropological fieldwork, led me not to a study of development and technology transfer to Slovakia but to a deeper exploration of how socio-cultural dynamics form, empower, and limit knowledge and discursive acts critical of society.

This book, therefore, while launched by a curiosity in the social or public practice of critical thinking, is a study of the interrelationship

between politics, history, acts of criticism and voicing an opinion, socialization, and sociocultural knowledge. I hope that readers will agree with the broader relevance of this study in the anthropology of knowledge set in East Central Europe for how we conceptualize critical thinking as a social political practice in that imagined point of reference so present in Slovak social life during this period—the United States.

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Vlado, Zuzka, Ivana, Dana, and Vlasto provided and have kept providing just that during my visits to Bratislava. I thank Marta, Michal, Katka, and Martina for their roles in this larger Slovak family of mine. So many of these relationships predated my research, but they have supported it in essential ways. In all, there are too many individuals in the Slovak and Czech Republic to thank who have engaged with me along the way, most of whom I keep anonymous, as I do throughout the book. Many conversations, interviews, observations, and experiences did not make it into the final manuscript, but that does not mean that they did not inform my thinking in crucial ways. I can only hope that the publication of this book also brings these friends, colleagues, and consultants a sense of reward and of invitation to continue our conversations.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Domino</i>	<i>Domino fórum: Kritický týždenník pre politiku, ekonomiku, civilizáciu a kultúru</i> (Domino forum: Critical weekly for politics, economics, civilization, and culture)
<i>K&amp;K</i>	<i>Kritika &amp; Kontext: Časopis kritického myslenia</i> (Criticism and context: Journal of critical thinking)
KSČ	Komunistická strana Československa (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia)
KSS	Komunistická strana Slovenska (Communist Party of Slovakia)
<i>KŽ</i>	<i>Kultúrny život</i> (Cultural life)
<i>LT</i>	<i>Literárny týždenník</i> (Literary weekly)
OF	Občanské fórum (Civic Forum)
OS	<i>OS: Fórum občianskej spoločnosti</i> (OS: Forum of civil society)
OSS	Obec slovenských spisovateľov (Community of Slovak Writers)
<i>Poučenie</i>	<i>Poučenie z krízového vývoja v strane a spoločnosti</i> (Lessons from the dangerous developments in the party and society)
SNK	Slovenská národná knižnica (Slovak National Library)
<i>SP</i>	<i>Slovenské pohľady</i> (Slovak views)
SSS	Spolok slovenských spisovateľov (Club of Slovak Writers)
ŠtB	Štátna bezpečnosť (State Security)

STV	Slovenská televízia (Slovak Television)
VPN	Verejnost' proti násili (Public against Violence)
VVS	Výberový vzdelavací spolok (Society for Higher Learning)
ZSS	Zväz slovenských spisovateľov (Union of Slovak Writers)

## INTRODUCTION

It was a hot Saturday morning when I set off from Bratislava's central bus station with Elena and Karol for a hike. Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, is well connected by bus to outlying villages nestled in the Small Carpathian Mountains, the range that flows gently into the center of the city from its start several dozen kilometers to the north. After meeting up that morning in the station, these two new acquaintances in their midtwenties suggested a route whereby we would hop on a line to one village, hike up into the mountains, and come down either in another village or in a part of Bratislava and take a different bus back. By the time our bus had made several stops before the city limits, it was already full. The tightly packed interior radiated heat from every angle, despite the open windows. Elena, Karol, and I had been standing in the aisle since the station. Still more passengers boarded at the front, paying the driver. Those of us without seats increasingly resisted the driver's calls that we squeeze still closer together.

We swayed back and forth against one another's sticky bodies as the bus bounced up to the first village stop. Almost no passengers got off; instead, several more people waited outside to get on. The driver glanced up into his mirror and again barked several times for us to make room. This time Karol shouted back from our position at the rear that there was no room and that we, the passengers, should not suffer from the bus company's shortage of buses along that route. A pensioner standing in the steps by the door at the middle of the bus lifted his head and half-scolded, half-wailed in response: *Ticho!* (Quiet!) Karol fired back, "YOU be quiet! YOU have a discount!" A few passengers around us chuckled, but the triumph of humor was short-lived: the driver opened the side door to let the new passengers board from the middle, crushing those of us in the aisle even tighter together. The bus wobbled away from the stop, with those of us standing glowering in sweaty silence and those seated looking out the window as if trying

to ignore the commotion. When we burst out of the door at our stop about twenty minutes later, Karol was furious: “People are content to keep their heads down and shut up about these problems! It’s they who ride that bus every day, not us! They should be complaining to the dispatcher or bus company about sending more buses!”

## Buses, Complaints, and Public Citizenship

What makes us sense that something in society warrants critique? What role do our interactions with members of communities play in that? These are the basic questions that countless theories of political action seek to answer. They also capture part of the political zeitgeist throughout East Central Europe after the collapse of Communist rule. The historical moment of that fall—and the political, economic, social, and cultural transition that followed—haunted the episode in the summer of 2001 just recounted. Karol and Elena worked for a Slovak nongovernmental organization (NGO) that sought to cultivate civil society through education and to overcome various legacies of the socialist past. Indeed, the reticence of the pensioner and other passengers—to not complain, to not engage in public critical thinking—exemplifies the kind of political ethic that countless theorists, foreign advisors, local activists such as Karol and Elena, and lay observers all thought Slovakia and the rest of Eastern Europe must overcome to build a democratic society. What image from Communist Eastern Europe said more to Western pundits about a totalitarian mindset than this disciplined, silent crowd, such as one waiting in line for bread outside a grocery store?

The postwar Communist leadership had collapsed throughout East Central Europe, but in the former Czechoslovakia a new utopian project rose from the rubble. Its cornerstones were public discourse and notions of a critical citizen-subject. This book explores debates over and shifting practices entailed in this new postsocialist critical subjectivity. It examines how social criticism has been learned, practiced, perceived, and interpreted in public culture and institutional settings in Slovakia over the past half century. To understand the sociocultural beliefs governing this civic criticism we have to investigate their local semiotics emergent through rich histories of public and private interpersonal interactions. This study, in the end, is a historical and ethnographic inquiry into why various discursive ideologies of liberalism were introduced to postsocialist Slovakia and how a richer understanding of the

encounter with that milieu enriches our understanding of liberalism's practical limitations.

### *Slovakia as a Postsocialist Critical Society*

The encounter on the bus and my interpretation of its significance should resonate with many readers already knowledgeable about post-Communist East Central Europe. But I hope that not all of those who have gotten this far in the book fit that category. Moreover, even for those well versed in recent East Central European history there may be curiosity regarding what I found interesting about it and why. As an introduction to this book, I elaborate on that moment and my interpretation of it in several ways. First, what made a country such as Slovakia, after a Communist-led experiment with state socialism, a place that could evoke such laments on civic criticism and critical thinking?<sup>1</sup> What was particularly postsocialist about that aspect of life in Slovakia at that moment, and what about Slovakia offered a particularly revealing perspective on a postsocialist experience? Second, how was I viewing that event and others like it as worthy of deeper analysis of subjectivity, sociocultural beliefs, semiotics, and interpersonal interactions? What do those terms mean to me and why? Third, and relatedly, what made me particularly qualified to write about civic criticism and critical thinking as a social phenomenon there? What is my evidential basis? Following my answers to these several questions, I summarize the structure and arguments of the chapters that make up the study. The introduction as a whole outlines perspectives that this book brings to bear on political liberalism in the region as a subject of historical and ethnographic inquiry with greater global relevance.

As we stood by the side of the road behind the departing bus that day, Karol's lament over an absence of civic criticism—the public critique of society aimed at its improvement—echoed commentary that others in Slovak society were voicing. Sometimes this commentary focused on a particular problem with forming and expressing opinions. At other moments, it characterized the issue as the absence of critical thinking.

Slovakia might seem a curious location for a study of critical thinking and the practice of civic criticism. Indeed, for many readers Slovakia is unlikely to evoke any images at all, let alone the loss of a tradition of rigorous public thought and discourse that anyone might notice. I first noticed a discourse on critical thinking in the late 1990s, not among Slovaks but among Western agents of democratization and educational development, such as state and nonstate agencies from the Peace Corps and US Embassy,

to Soros Foundation debate clubs, the USAID, and the Soros-funded Orava Project and Orava Association for Democratic Education. Critical thinking seemed a Western diagnosis for the condition of a former enemy after the Cold War, one that deployed particular models of the role of public language and education in civil society. Unlike the broad ways with which, for instance, US colleges and universities at the turn of the millennium have been claiming to promote critical thinking, the concept in East Central Europe after the Cold War seemed inseparable from one thing: public expression.<sup>2</sup> To think critically without giving voice to or acting on these thoughts within certain public fields was considered irrelevant. But this particular diagnosis of critical thinking as a problem of public expression pointed to and emerged from educational contexts as well.

While meeting Slovak educators at a range of institutions from 2002 to 2003, I heard this inseparable pairing repeated often. When I asked these educators for a definition of *kritické myslenie* (critical thinking) as part of educational reform, their responses invariably included versions of *vytvoriť a vyjadriť svoj vlastný názor* (forming and expressing one's own opinion). The Slovak director of the Orava Association for Democratic Education told me that an important part of cultivating critical thinking in schools is helping students *vytvoriť a komunikovať svoj názor* (form and communicate their opinions). An employee of the Ministry of Education responsible for secondary schools asserted that it is essentially *tvorivosť plus vlastný názor* (creativity plus one's own opinion). An administrator and lecturer at a semiprivate college replied that it is *myslieť samostatný a tvoriť vlastný názor* (to think independently and to form one's own opinion).

If spectators from outside Slovakia were to wonder why this concern with critical thinking and expressing opinions was appearing at this particular historical moment, they would need look no further than the involvement of some of the Western agencies mentioned earlier. Various agencies of the US government, the British Council, the Soros Foundation, and others were all seeking to influence a transition from Communist rule to ostensibly more pluralistic and internally competitive political systems by intervening in the education of Slovakia's youth.<sup>3</sup> Young Slovaks would need different practices of public thought and language and different beliefs about its value, these agencies believed, if Slovakia (like its postsocialist neighbors) were to overcome successfully the cultural legacy of Communist rule. The repression of certain kinds of public discourse—its widespread censoring—had succeeded at limiting the kinds of thinking and action that democracies need: a healthy distrust of sources of information, a careful assembling of alternative theories, and the ability to think outside of parameters of permitted discourse.

As we shall see in this book, many Slovaks agreed with this assessment. Indeed, it has been a powerful one in various corners of the North Atlantic since the first theories of totalitarianism were developed to explain Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (and more recently transferred to theorizing political behavior within fundamentalist Islam). For much of the twentieth century, they were the best analyses that mainstream social science could provide. Yet other Slovaks toward the end of the twentieth century pointed out an important distinction in the relationship between public thought and public discourse: rather than having trouble forming independent opinions under Communist rule, they claimed, the greater challenges were the social and cultural obstacles to *expressing* them. In other words, they argued, public thought was not measurable in or dependent on public expression. For instance, one joke from the 1970s and 1980s that made it into a 1991 retrospective collection of socialist-era humor ran:

Kohn was asked at his hearing:  
 What's your opinion about the situation in the world?  
 The same as the KSČ!  
 And about domestic conditions?  
 The same as the KSČ!  
 And don't you have your own opinion?  
 I do, but I don't agree with it!<sup>4</sup>

In this joke, the fictional character Kohn responded consistently to his interrogator that his opinion was the same as that of the KSČ, or *Komunistická strana Československa* (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). But in the end he admitted that he did have his own opinion differing from that of the KSČ, but he did not believe that it was appropriate to agree with it in answer to the questions.<sup>5</sup>

A few years later, the following painted slogan, echoing the Kohn joke, appeared in a Bratislavan street during the Velvet Revolution of 1989:

*Nám netreba myslieť po novom,  
 my to, čo sme si vždy mysleli,  
 chceme povedať nahlas*  
 [We don't need to think in a new way,  
 we want to say aloud what we were always thinking]<sup>6</sup>

The slogan from the wall asserted that what should mark a new era was not necessarily *thinking* differently, but *speaking* differently—saying out loud what people had already known.

Such socialist-era jokes and political graffiti from events surrounding the collapse of Communist rule in 1989 point to a few problems with inferring opinion, as if it were thought, from audible or visible discursive production. The statements “I have my own opinion, but I don’t agree with it” and “We want to say aloud what we were always thinking” show that in recent history some Slovaks insisted that what they said or wrote was not necessarily coterminous with what they thought or expressed as opinions. If certain views were not being enunciated publicly, the inference here was that they were not being repressed by overt force but rather withdrawn as self-censorship informed by suppositions of what could be or was worth being expressed. This begs an important question of what, then, the perceived social forces or interactional rules were that discouraged the expression or publication of an opinion contradicting accepted orthodoxy.

Among assertions that Slovaks had not been stupid, simply silenced, this slogan *did* plea for the virtue of more open public discourse. Even for those who did not find that the population’s critical capacities had been cropped by Communist rule, many believed that greater opportunity for public self-expression *would* somehow contribute to a better society. But to get to that promised land of more dynamic public debate, what established practices or institutions needed to be eradicated and how deep did their roots run? Here we see a further splintering of views, all pointing toward a problem of history.

For those readers who are not familiar with Slovakia, it is a mountainous territory of about five million people, lying by some measures at the heart of Europe between the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, and Austria.

Today the state comprises nationalities identifying as Slovak, Hungarian, Romani, Czech, Rusyn, and German. In 1993 it split peacefully from the Czech Republic, with which it had formed the state of Czechoslovakia since 1918, except for a brief separation during World War II. Previously it had no status as a political entity of that name, having served as the region of Upper Hungary for a thousand years, first as part of a sovereign Hungarian kingdom, then within the Empire of Austria-Hungary (commonly referred to colloquially as the Habsburg Empire). Moreover, the ethnic designation “Slovak,” like that of other nationalities in the region, was not universally used before or even after 1918; such a national consciousness was not widespread. People were predominantly scattered in villages, earning a living through agriculture, the timber industry, and mining. Only during the twentieth century did its cities grow and industrialize rapidly.