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CENTRAL EUROPEAN ENTANGLEMENTS AND WOMEN'S HISTORY: A CASE STUDY

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This paper examines the intellectual and political entanglements of Alžbeta Göllnerová-Gwerková (1905–1944), a Slovak scholar, translator, and activist whose work exemplifies the intersections of gender, culture, and politics in interwar Czechoslovakia. Positioned as both a supporter of Czechoslovakism and a mediator of Hungarian culture, Göllnerová-Gwerková consciously inserted herself into academic discourse as a political actor. Her writings reveal a dual commitment: on the one hand, to democratic and liberal ideals that sought to transform estate society into civic society; on the other, to the promotion of Czechoslovak unity as a cultural and political project. The paper highlights how her feminist awareness, which started to take shape in the mid-1930s, intersected with her scholarly endeavors and with her marginal position in academia. By revisiting her intellectual biography, the study foregrounds the political dimension of her scholarship and argues for her reintegration into the history of Central European humanities. The paper also seeks to demonstrate that Slovak feminine identities are deeply entangled in the cultural dynamics of a small, non-dominant nation – an entanglement that shapes women's biographies and influences their intellectual work.

Keywords: Alžbeta Göllnerová-Gwerková, Czechoslovakism, interwar culture, humanities, women's studies.

ЦЕНТРАЛНОЕВРОПСКИТЕ ПРЕПЛЕТУВАЊА И ЖЕНСКАТА ИСТОРИЈА: СТУДИЈА НА СЛУЧАЈ

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Оваа студија ја истражува интелектуалната и политичката вклученост на Алжбета Гелнерова-Гверкова (1905–1944), словачка научничка, преведувачка и активистка, чиешто дело го прикажува преплетувањето на родот, културата и политиката во Чехословачка, во периодот помеѓу двете светски војни. Позиционирана и како поддржувач на чехословакизмот и како медијатор на унгарската култура, Гелнерова-Гверкова свесно се впуштила во академскиот дискурс како политичка фигура. Нејзините дела откриваат двојна посветеност: на демократските и либералните идеали, кои се стремеле да го трансформираат општеството поделено на сталежи, во граѓанско општество, како и на промоцијата на чехословачкото единство, како културен и политички проект. Во трудот се истражува како нејзината феминистичка позиција, која се развивала во средината на 30-тите години на 20 век, се вкрстува со нејзините научни напори и со нејзината маргинална позиција во академската средина. Со повторно исчитување на нејзината интелектуална биографија, студијата ја става во преден план политичката димензија на нејзините академски достигнувања и се залага за нејзино реинтегрирање во историјата на централноевропските хуманистички идеи. Целта на овој труд е, исто така, да покаже дека словачките женски идентитети се длабоко испреплетени со културата на една мала, недоминантна нација – една испреплетеност која ги обликувала биографиите на жените и влијаела врз нивната интелектуална работа.

Клучни зборови: Алжбета Гелнерова-Гверкова, чехословакизам, меѓувоена култура, хуманистички науки, женски студии.

In contemporary Slovak culture, the protagonist of this paper, Alžbeta Göllnerová-Gwerková (1905–1944), functions as a convenient social artefact - an emblem of an urban middle class committed to democratic and liberal values (Grusková 2022; Žena novej doby 2022). The key terms that dominate current discourse about her include democracy, the struggle for women's rights, progress, modernity, citizenship and anti-fascism. In 2022, she was posthumously awarded the Order of Eudovít Štúr, First Class by the head of state for her contributions to democracy and its development, as well as for her work in defending human rights and freedoms. There are also other descriptors – those that carry less emotional weight in the collective imagination-linger in the background: translator, Hungarian studies scholar, researcher, historian, and literary scholar. Her status as a woman occupying these roles is certainly relevant to contemporary discussions of Slovak women's history.

In this paper, I will attempt to unravel a certain entanglement, one that by its diffuseness seems to some extent typical of our part of Europe. I will discuss Göllnerová-Gwerková's entanglement in various contexts – as a Czechoslovakist, a Slovak woman, and at the same time a researcher and popularizer of Hungarian culture. I will look at the category of *politicity*, which in itself is relational and can be defined by reference to phenomena that do not formally belong to politics (Kuziak 2017). Writing about the politicity of the humanities, the Polish scholar Michał Kuziak mentions "the desire to influence the reader – his or her beliefs and attitudes related to community life in the broad sense" (Kuziak 2017: 255). In this way, he stresses the importance of how academics write and compose their statements, what topics they address, and what research goals they pursue. Using selected texts by Göllnerová-Gwerková, I will reflect on the relationship between the (female) researcher and the object and thus return to the history of this strand of the humanities that had the ambition to create collective action and identity. I will situate Göllnerová-Gwerková in the context of academia, not to construct another image of her, but to refer to the values she clearly identified with in the 1930s and early 1940s. At the end of the war, as a member of the Banská Štiavnica Revolutionary National Committee, she took part in the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising. In November 1944, she was arrested and imprisoned in Banská Bystrica, and in December 1944, at the age of 39, she was executed in Kremnička¹.

The main argument of my paper is that Göllnerová-Gwerková consciously took a political position in the academic discourse as a supporter of Czechoslovakism, and that this aspect deserves more attention in her engagement with democracy and women's issues. I argue that this was precisely the aspect that made the memory of Göllnerová-Gwerková fade significantly after 1948, during the communist regime. The political element of her intellectual biography is absent from today's narrative. However, it is precisely this hitherto undescribed entanglement that places Göllnerová-Gwerková on the map of interwar culture and science in Central Europe. The purpose of the above text, moreover, is to draw attention to the impossibility of treating Central European culture and writing about its members in essentialist terms, while simultaneously focusing on its diffuse and mosaic-like, kaleidoscopic internal structure. Slovak culture, from a historical perspective, comprises many diverse elements that dynamically change its configurations. Highlighting individual biographies at specific points in history, therefore, is one of the possible ways to describe and define it.

² The recent gesture of "bringing her out of silence," though serving a good cause, has introduced Göllnerová-Gwerková into the realm of interpretive shortcuts, which have a popularizing value.

¹ "Kremnička" refers to a site near the town of Banská Bystrica in Slovakia, which during World War II was the location of mass executions. It is most known as a site where members of the anti-fascist resistance, political prisoners, and other perceived opponents of the regime were executed by the Slovak State in collaboration with Nazi authorities.

Interwar Czechoslovakism and the idea of social change

In her endeavors, Göllnerová-Gwerková not only demonstrated the zeal of a social activist, but she also acted with an attitude typical of modernity: "enthusiasm, optimism, the need to engage with the present, and be responsible for one's own epoch" (Leśniak 2018: 92). This outlook intertwined in her intellectual biography with Czechoslovakism, a political concept that never fully materialized in social reality. After 1918, Czechoslovakism was deliberately promoted in the new republic across diverse areas of human activity, not only in politics but also in culture and science: linguistics, sociology, ethnography, anthropology and philology (Hudek, A., Kopeček, M. and Mervart, J. 2022). In Göllnerová-Gwerková's work, it went hand in hand with democratic ideals and a desire to bring about a profound mental change within the social structure - to transform estate Czech and Slovak society into civic society and introduce ideals of equality; in other words, to reconstruct the reality.

Milan Ducháček was correct in stating that, after 1918, science was tasked with specific functions: "scientific arguments were regarded as a premise for taking those political steps that led to the stabilization of social relations in the new state. In the spirit of Masaryk's and especially Beneš's concepts, politics was understood as 'true science', i.e., a practical application of sociology, that draws on rational, scientific analysis to help manage the society" (Ducháček 2019: 151). Integrating Czechs and Slovaks into one political nation required rewriting history and finding the beginning of a new narrative. The discourse of the supporters of Czechoslovakism therefore had its own poetics, using anti-Hungarian or anti-German tropes during the interwar period and positioning itself within an 'us and them' antagonism, not least with the intention to 'mentally separate Slovaks from the Magyarorszag' (ibid). Its adherents wanted to control the past to project the future and to correct, referring to the diagnosis of the 'state builders' - the deformations in the social fabric, especially those caused by Magyarization⁴.

However, the Czechoslovak identity project, a subject of intense discussion and polemics, needed to convince both Slovaks and Czechs to establish footholds for a collective existential practice and evoke positive emotions in those social strata that did not identify with a project imposed "from on high". Czechoslovakism, which in the 1920s often exploited Slovakophile rhetoric in the spirit of the schemes proposed by figures such as the Czech educator and writer Karel Kálal (1860–1930; with his ideas of the Czech civilizing mission to the "East"), quickly encountered resistance and resentment, including from young graduates of democratic Czechoslovak schools. As early as 1932, this was poignantly expressed by the Slovak young left-wing critic Michal Chorváth (1910–1982), who highlighted the cognitive gap between what the Czechoslovak school offered and the reality in which young Slovaks were growing up: "In the beginning we were disappointed by science. We read our big new books, day and night. There was nothing new in them, we had already heard everything. Only the methods by which the conclusions were drawn were new (...). Browsing through the final pages, something broke inside us" (Chorváth 1932: 85).

Göllnerová-Gwerková was only five years senior to Chorváth and, like him, spent her student years in interwar Prague. They belonged to virtually the same generation, united by shared experiences and the opportunity to receive their education at a Czechoslovak, democratic school. In 1930, Göllnerová-Gwerková defended her doctoral thesis, The Beginnings of the Reformation in Banská Bystrica, at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University in Prague. She earned her doctorate in Czech and general history rather than in Hungarian studies, and immediately after graduating sought employment as an archivist, with a view to researching, writing and having access to sources [the archives in the Slovak part of the republic were virtually being built from scratch

³ Kingdom of Hungary.

⁴ The goal was to extend the influence of Hungarian language, culture and identity among ethnic minorities, such as Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, Croats, and others.

after 1918, also thanks to the organizational efforts of Václav Chaloupecký (1882–1951), a historian with a Czechoslovak orientation, who had been a professor of history at Comenius University in Bratislava since 1922]. Göllnerová-Gwerková carried out her research as an independent scholar, without tenure at the university or a stable position in the academic milieu. From this perspective, her commitment to science was remarkable, a sign of the strength of her will. Yet she did not get a post in the archives; between 1930 and 1944, she worked as a teacher in state institutions: secondary schools in Spišská Nová Ves, Rimavská Sobota, Bratislava, and Banská Štiavnica.

While teaching, she sought to bridge cultural divides and promote mutual understanding between Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians: "I explain to Hungarian children," she wrote in one of her letters, referring to the youngest members of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, "that they have a great life in the republic. Besides that, I read Ady⁵ and work on an article for Bratislava⁶" (Göllnerová 1932). From her student days, Göllnerová-Gwerková was well acquainted with Slovak Ján Igor Hamaliar (1905–1931), literary critic and declared Czechoslovak, author of the then-famous book Hlasy nášho východu (Voices of Our East). Together, they were working on a publication dedicated to Slovak scholar Pavel Bujnák (1882–1933), who, especially as a professor of Hungarian studies, played a significant role in her intellectual life. Alžbeta Göllnerová-Gwerková regarded herself as his disciple and wanted to continue his scholarly legacy by further developing Hungarian studies in Czechoslovakia. The collective volume Pavlovi Bujnákovi: ctitelia, priatelia, žiaci (To Pavel Bujnák: admirers, friends, students) was published by the Academia Publishing House in 1933 in Prague, shortly after the professor's death. Co-editor, Ján Igor Hamaliar, had also died two years earlier. The book was reviewed in the pages of Slovak journal Elán by the aforementioned Michal Chorváth holding different political views, and he reached a rather tart conclusion: "With all due respect to him [Bujnák], however, one cannot agree with the opinion of the editor [Göllnerová-Gwerková] that it was the level of his education that determined his Czechoslovak orientation" (Chorváth 1934: 5).

While the ideal of Czechoslovak unity was waning in the social space, Göllnerová-Gwerková steadily upheld it. As a member of the Štefániková československá spoločnosť, she signed a letter addressed to Slovak politician Vavro Šrobár in 1937 which declared: "our organisation wants to show and prove that Czechoslovak national unity is neither an illusion, nor a past or a pipe dream, but an abundant source of inspiration for work for the benefit of our Czechoslovak nation and state" (Göllnerová 1937). However, this was the swan song of those who championed Czechoslovakism in its inter-war, already somewhat tattered, form, which by the end of the 1930s had turned from a potential tool of social change into idle rhetoric.

Hungarian culture and the Czechoslovak worldview

However, it is time now to return to entanglements, in particular to her works in the field of Hungarian studies. The question I ask myself at this point is: how did Göllnerová-Gwerková, a Slovak adherent of Czechoslovakism, react to the culture of a nation with which Slovaks once shared a common state and thus had, as Rudo Uhlár wrote in 1932, "common friends and enemies: Turks, Tatars, and sometimes Vienna and the imperial court"? (Uhlár 1932: 142). To a certain extent, Slovaks and Hungarians were also united by the older Hungarian literary tradition and its protagonists: Matúš Trenčiansky, Mikuláš Šubić Zrinsky, and Juraj Rákoci. But why did

⁵ Endre Ady (1877–1919) was a Hungarian poet and journalist.

⁶ Czechoslovak scientific revue.

⁷ In 1929 he was appointed associate professor at Charles University, where he taught and developed research in Hungarian studies and comparative philology until his death in 1933.

Göllnerová-Gwerková attach so much importance to the, as it was called, "mental separation of Slovaks from the Magyarorszag"?

Aside from minor articles and literary translations (it is worth noting that she translated contemporary authors such as Dezső Szabó, Zsigmond Móricz, and Dezső Kosztolányi), Göllnerová-Gwerková authored a monograph on József Eötvös (originally her habilitation thesis), which was published in the 1937 issue of *Spisy Filozofické fakulty Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave*, edited by, among others, Czech historian Václav Chaloupecký, with whom her academic paths crossed more than once. She had already made her debut as a scholar of Hungarian literature with the paper *Zemani a ľud v diele Kálmana Mikszátha*⁸ (1933), which she included in the volume mentioned above dedicated to Professor Bujnák.

It is worth asking, however, what literature was to Göllnerova-Gwerkova? What methodological assumptions guided her writing? In this context, it is perhaps fair to mention the head of the Czechoslovak state, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), who regarded the literary text as one of the possible sources of knowledge about people and the world. Literature, in line with the tenets of realism, documents reality and the complexity of human experience. For there was no single "truth"; the truth was always relational, contextual, dependent on the perspective of the speaking subject and his or her social position. In this sense, in line with Masaryk's view, Göllnerova-Gwerková's approach was not only humanistic but also sociological. In *Zemani a ľud v diele Kálmana Mikszátha* she aimed her criticism not so much at his writing as at the literary representation of the social class to which Mikszáth belonged: the Hungarian landed gentry. Göllnerová-Gwerková saw the customs and mentality of the gentry as being at the root of moral decay and social decadence in the monarchy. She regarded Mikszáth's texts as "one of the best sources for studying the social situation of the Kingdom of Hungary in the second half of the 19th century" (Göllnerová 1933: 61).

Below I present those most evocative, and at the same time political, passages from her paper on Mikszáth, in which she describes the landed gentry as a mental condition, a specific state of mind: "In the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Hungary, the development of social strata progressed at a snail's pace and along the beaten path. Deeply rooted feudalism, which could not be shaken even by the French Revolution, refused to give way to a new understanding of life that came from outside, from abroad" (Göllnerová 1933: 63); "The philosophy of life of the Hungarian landed gentry was: to live as quietly as possible, not to strain oneself either mentally or physically, and to make yourself as comfortable as you can" (Göllnerová 1933: 65); "[The landed gentry] argued about the glorious past, but did not understand the present" (Göllnerová 1933: 68); "They did not care about the offices; local administration was asleep. Something exceptional had to happen for them to become active, for otherwise, as Mikszáth says, they turned over onto the other side and slept on, caring for nothing" (Göllnerová 1933: 68); "They were all at least friends, if not relatives. They understood each other very well, especially on one point: they knew how to have a great time, often at someone else's expense and preferably with public money" (Göllnerová 1933: 68); and finally: "The Mikszáth era was so rotten and by its decline so clearly cried to heaven for vengeance that the decay of this unhealthy society accelerated as if spontaneously" (Göllnerová 1933: 71).

Göllnerová-Gwerková subjected the past to a generalizing criticism in order to portray it as an antithesis of the present (Kingdom of Hungary vs. interwar Czechoslovakia). Her commitment to "state-building" included efforts to nurture positive attitudes towards the republic, so her text relies heavily on drawing contrasts. She favored Masaryk's ideal of grassroots work, pitting it against the "lordly" mentality. She was not a revolutionary type, preferring to believe in progress by evolution. Like Albert Pražák, a Czechoslovak Czech scholar (to give at least one example), she supposed that the realization of the ideal of a Czech-Slovak community was hampered by deeply ingrained mental

⁸ Mikszáth is considered one of Hungary's greatest 19th-century writers. His works often combined realism with humor and satire, focusing on the lives of peasants, small nobility, and provincial gentry.

patterns molded in the Kingdom of Hungary (Pražák wrote about "Slovak peculiarity", which he considered an amalgam of "alleged" differences that arose as a result of Magyarization; Pražák 1926). Göllnerová-Gwerková sought a break with what was "old", especially anything associated with the once-privileged classes, and to fill the gaps in social substance through upbringing and education. As she saw it, the experience of Magyarization not only resulted in a loss of national identity, but it also perpetuated divisions within society and disrupted the continuity of social development: "In times of political and cultural oppression", she wrote, "numerous capable and educated individuals drifted away from the nation, especially in the last pre-war generation. The nation did feel their absence" (Göllnerová 1939: 41). She associates the attempt to stabilize social relations in the new state with a black-and-white critique of social relations in the bygone era, the age of the feudal (not democratic) Kingdom of Hungary.

Her interpretations of Hungarian culture and literature were selective, dictated by the contemporary context. "The fact that there is a large Hungarian minority in our country," she wrote in the introduction to her monograph on Eötvös, "obliges us to properly understand and appreciate important elements of Hungarian culture" (Göllnerová 1937: 6). As a result of this specific intersection of ideological assumptions, in the early 1930s Göllnerová-Gwerková found these "important elements", among others, in the thinking of Dezső Szabó. Not only did she translate his texts [the novel Pomoc! (Help), together with Czech friend and tutor Jarmila Zigmundová (1893-?)], but she also commented on them in Czech and Slovak scholarly papers and journals (*Panorama*, Prúdy, and Slovenské smery umelecké a kritické). Göllnerová-Gwerková looked for positive models and modern solutions to social relations in Szabó's works, and especially in his political thought. Of particular interest to her was his criticism of feudalism and the acknowledgement of a special historical role of those at the lower end of the social ladder, the peasants and workers. She explained her interpretative and translational choices as follows: "Democracy is the only remedy to unify the Hungarian nation. Szabó's life story, which he incorporated into the story of the protagonist of his novel Pomoc, is extremely instructive in the Hungarian context..." (Göllnerová and Zikmundová 1930–1931: 14). And further: "His ideas are particularly close to those of President Masaryk" (ibid). What she probably had in mind was the idea of equal rights for all social classes, although it eluded her that for Szabó it was not a matter of inclusion but of the exclusion of those outside the national community.

3 Czechoslovakism as an existential project

One may speculate about the motivations behind Göllnerová-Gwerková's commitment to Czechoslovakism, an idea that was intrinsically political. How did it come about that the "building of the republic" became the driving force behind her activities, including those in academia? Can her enthusiasm be described more accurately as passion, and how did she fit into the "new times" as a Slovak woman? Göllnerová-Gwerková published her first scholarly text, *The Beginnings of the Reformation in Banská Bystrica*, in Czech in 1930, the same year she published a Czech translation of Szabó's novel *Pomoc!*. Her Czechoslovak path was not free of internal tensions, as so often happens with a commitment that turns into an "existential project" and thus becomes "a process, often spread out over years, a movement that can hardly be defined as uniform, rectilinear" (Mrozik 2019: 255). Göllnerová-Gwerková sought to incorporate democratism and egalitarianism into the ideal of a Czechoslovak community; she opposed the translation of Slovak books into Czech and vice versa, with the ideal of the Slovak and Czech languages holding identical status in a democratic Czechoslovakia. However, her enthusiasm and social activism entwined with her arduous daily duties; the idealism clashed with reality. In a letter to Jarmila Zigmundová in 1933, she wrote bitterly: "Chaloupecký told me that I must not lag behind, that I had to be more flexible, in order to

understand, I might add, his Catholic ideas" (Göllnerová-Gwerková was closer to Protestantism; in a burst of emotion, she alludes, in Chaloupecký's case not necessarily correctly, to the Protestant-Catholic tensions persistent in the culture of the time – M. B.). I realized that I actually had nothing to look for among these people. I would be making an effort, but I wouldn't be able to do anything anyway. I graduated from the University of Prague, and if I don't sing the way Chaloupecký wants me to, I won't get into that university at all (referring to a full-time position at Comenius University in Bratislava – M. B.). And what is the situation there? Vilíkovský [Jan] has always been interested in Latin, and now he has suddenly habilitated in Old Czech literature. He is a Czech, thus restricting young Slovaks from getting tenure" (Göllnerová 1938).

This bitterness is often echoed in her private correspondence. Göllnerová-Gwerková complains about quotas, academic and political clientelism. She is, however, somewhat torn, and makes attempts to avoid mixing the private with the political in her publications. It is not until 1938, in the article *Žena vedkyňa* (Woman researcher), that she blames (although still not explicitly) her difficulties in finding a stable place in academia not only on her nationality, but also on her gender. It is at that time, incidentally, in the late 1930s, that she first emerges as an author with a feminist consciousness.

4 Final remarks

Göllnerová-Gwerková's position was therefore not politically neutral. Her worldview aligned with the views of the Czechoslovak interwar state-forming intelligentsia, which accepted and developed a republican-liberal-rationalist ethos. This intellectual orientation placed a strong emphasis on democratic participation, secular education, and the primacy of reason over tradition or dogma. It was nourished by Enlightenment legacies and adapted to the specific historical experience of Czechoslovakia as a newly established state after 1918.

However, her individual biography and political engagement show how Central European intellectual history as well as women's history is marked by a complex web of political, cultural, and social entanglements, from shifting empires and borderlands to the intermingling of ethnic and religious groups. Göllnerová-Gwerková was ultimately vulnerable when the Czechoslovak democratic framework collapsed under external pressures. The values she defended – democracy, enlightened humanism and republican civic virtue – were precisely those undermined first by the regime of the Slovak Republic (1939–1945). In this sense, her intellectual and personal trajectory mirrored the fate of a generation of Central European intellectuals whose commitment to democracy was put to the severest of tests. Their involvement was also part of a broader modernization process, in which the multinational, interwar Czechoslovak Republic – with its Czechoslovakism as an official ideology – sought to present itself as a progressive and democratic state.

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