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## American Studies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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### Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/518>  
DOI : 10.4000/ejas.518  
ISSN : 1991-9336

### Éditeur

European Association for American Studies

### Référence électronique

Josef Jařab, « American Studies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia », *European journal of American studies* [En ligne], 1-1 | 2006, document 4, mis en ligne le 20 janvier 2006, consulté le 11 juillet 2021.  
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/518> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.518>

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# American Studies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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- 1 Czech and Slovak scholars concerned with American studies have traditionally worked together in the times of Czechoslovakia, but this fruitful cooperation has also continued after 1993, when the two nations separated into two independent countries. So that the existence of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies (CSAAS) is certainly more than a symbolic confirmation of mutual closeness. What is truly encouraging is the fact that especially the younger generations and some of the newly founded centers in the field, also outside the two capitals, Prague and Bratislava, find it natural and useful to seek new opportunities for collaboration—in personal and institutional contacts, in organizing a number of seminars and conferences as well as various publication projects.
- 2 For decades Czechs and Slovaks shared a common historical experience, and in the more recent common past, namely after the Communist takeover in 1948, they, understandably, had to cope with similar difficulties. Under the totalitarian regime scholarship dealing with American topics was hardly allowed a fuller development; the confined and cramped state of American studies was a result of the political isolation of the country from the freer world and, consequently, of a limited access to valuable information. The official propaganda, in the ideological wrestle with the “political adversary” in the Cold War, was based on dogmatic interpretations of everything American. On the other hand, however, against and despite the expectations of the regime authorities, things American, and above all American culture, served to many as alternative politics providing strong inspiration for independent thought.
- 3 Although the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies could formally be established only after the “velvet revolution” and the collapse of the Communist regime of 1989, it achieved membership in the European Association for American Studies shortly after, in the early nineties. In the years of the dramatic transformation of the whole society which was characterized by enthusiasm for the newly gained liberties and by, sometimes rather hasty, implementation of principles of democracy, free market and the rule of law, chances were opened for new concepts of cultural and academic projects, including programs of American Studies. With the assistance of the

Fulbright Commission, and a number of other exchange schemes involving American and European educational and cultural institutions, a few multidisciplinary study programs were founded, most often on the basis of departments of English philology. Student and teacher exchange trips, newly available to unprecedented number of individuals, was of vital importance for providing a wider acquisition of first-hand knowledge of American culture and social reality, which served as an important correction to the rather simplistic white-and-black or black-and-white visions of America inherited from the decades of totalitarianism.

- 4 The new political situation, and the rapid computerization of institutions and the whole country, made it possible for information of all sorts to be more freely and widely available. But the growing access to the contents of the web, frequently lacking assurance of reliability and accountability of the provided information, together with some irresponsible, frequently hardly qualified, attempts to “catch up with the world” in publishing ventures (purely profit-driven and in poor translations), also raised serious doubts. The early ardor accompanied with the belief that all possible hardships would be over after the fall of Communism then had to be followed also by a call for caution and concern. Although censorship was indeed gone and so was the straightjacket of the dogmatic ideology, the removal thereof in itself was obviously no guarantee of good quality of work, which indeed had been one of the meaningful weapons in the continuous struggle with the old regime’s stupidity before the political change arrived, be it in inventive and daring editorial ideas, in intelligently coded critical and essayistic performance, or in excellent translations. And it was the new atmosphere of freedom that proved an encouragement to fully publicize and publish what could not have passed the censorship in the past. But it was also a certain necessity, urged by a degree of pride, to take stock of the results achieved by groups and individuals who, for long years, had been striving against acceptance of a total separation from the luckier world outside the “iron curtain”.
- 5 The popular fiction writer Josef Škvorecký who, over the dark decades, had been offering interesting news on America and American culture from his Canadian exile on the frequencies of the Voice of America (news then not accessible in the Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia) could finally bring into his homeland country the harvest of his and his wife’s painstaking efforts, namely about three hundred books they had published in their private Toronto Sixty-Eight publishing house, books that could only be boldly smuggled into the country before 1989. It was Škvorecký who also let the free world know of the activities and persecution of various dissident groups in Czechoslovakia, including the Charter 77 and the Jazz Section. True and full information could suddenly be provided by the actors themselves. The Jazz Section, which had been publishing “for members only” in thousands of copies various documents and texts on jazz and rock music but also on western culture in general, had a chance to give an account on what was really their story and history. An anthology of translated modern American poetry (*Child on Top of a Greenhouse*) which had been in preparation for years by Josef Jařab and Jaroslav Kořán in the Jazz Section publishing program, and which was captured and destroyed by the police a year prior to the November 1989 events, could finally be printed and reach its readers in that revolutionary year.
- 6 Martin Hilský and Jan Zelenka, as editors, decided to collect into one volume prefaces and afterwords accompanying translated works of American fiction over a few decades

from more than a dozen authors and thus provide a sort of a substitute for a nonexistent and badly needed Czech or Slovak history of the American novel and short story (*From Poe to Postmodernism*, 1993). A group of scholars translated *A History of American Literature: From Puritanism to Postmodernism* by Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury and brought its message even closer to the Czech readers, having included a long essay on the reception of American letters in the Czech Lands and having provided a bibliography of translations of American works written by authors mentioned in the pages of the book.

- 7 In the year 2000, a monumental tribute to generations of Czech translators of American literature from 1798 to 1997 appeared in print—a three-volume *Bibliography of American Literature in Czech Translation*, compiled by Marcel Arbeit and Eva Vacca; the collected data covered translations of “books, non-periodical publications, periodicals with up to twelve issues a year, samizdat and exile periodicals and franazines.” Besides manifesting the literary popularity of individual authors over the decades and suggesting literary vogues among the readers, the bibliography also provided valuable information on true authorships of translations that had to be signed by someone else willing to be a substitute for colleagues whose names could not appear officially on any publication. Among such “hidden translators” there could be excellent writers and scholars whose names were blacklisted by the regime and to whom translations gave chance to be productive and to make a living.
- 8 One project that deserves a nostalgic mention is the literary review *Světová literatura* which proved to be a link to the world outside the isolated country from the mid-fifties for the following decades up to the mid-nineties. Besides writers of other nationalities, modern and contemporary American authors did appear there before their books could be published (Josef Škvorecký was editor in the early stage of the journal). Whole anthologies of verse, of short stories or essays and informative as well as critical surveys were offered to anxious readers. The history of the changing periods of rigidity and political “thaws” in the country is reflected in the contents and the measure of attractiveness of the review (similarly in Slovakia in the *Revue svetovej literatury*). The mere fact, however, that the periodical survived even the occupation of Czechoslovakia of 1968 but could not find enough support (either from readers or sponsors) in the mid-nineties is a rather sad and telling piece of news; not even the courageous and self-sacrificing effort of Anna Kareninová as editor-in-chief could save the journal, and its extinction is an eloquent comment on the change of general atmosphere in the society, including a rather rapid change of the value system guiding the population. Anna Kareninová, herself a brilliant translator, moved into another uneasy project of translating the works of Ezra Pound, from *ABC of Reading* to the *Cantos*, and in professional terms is doing admirably well. At present a few older (*Host*) and newly founded journals (*Aluze*, *Svět literatury*) compete in filling in the missing mission of informing on and evaluating world literature, including the literary production of America.
- 9 So here is one of the paradoxes we face: Although the number of students preoccupied with English and American studies at present is undoubtedly many times bigger than it used to be before 1989 there is hardly a corresponding proportion to be found within the student body of individuals with deeper, academic, interests. And so the programs themselves strive to be accommodated rather to the more generally shared objectives of the studies, i.e., they try to comply with the requirements emphasizing clearly

pragmatic aspects. Thus, for instance, the fashionable interdisciplinarity of American studies could be a desirable enrichment of scope but also a tendency to bypass depth of investigation into rather superficial surveys. One assessment of the current situation is that a thorough revision of the curricula is still a task unfinished—a revision that would, besides other objectives, also provide a possibility for a bifurcation of programs for students with more practical interests and those with more scholarly ones, and yet keep alive in both lines the cultivation of critical thinking. Not an easy goal to be achieved but worth the effort.

- 10 The membership of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies should and, possibly, even could be more numerous after we can deal with some of the educational and systemic problems of the field more convincingly and successfully. One task involves the very nature, and consequently the contents and orientation, of American studies in our two countries. After spontaneously emulating the development of American Studies in the United States (which was quite natural after we opened ourselves to the freer world again in the aftermath of November 1989) more of a national and European perspective in the study of America should be applied and employed. Such an approach shall prove to be not just more useful for us but also more interesting for the American side, for our American counterparts. This is how the U.S. co-founders of the EAAS, half a century ago in Salzburg, saw the role of European Americanists, and there is hardly a good reason to introduce a change in such a vision, especially when the original concept has never been fully embraced and elaborated on.
- 11 What indeed is happening in American studies in Czechia and Slovakia, where are the active, and therefore important, sites, what are the research projects involved in, what aims are being pursued, and with what results?
- 12 Since the early 1990s, Olomouc has claimed to be the home site and center of the CSAAS. The post-revolutionary Rector of Palacký University, Josef Jařab, became the first president of the association and the Department of English and American Studies continues to provide most of the elected officers, currently Marcel Arbeit, Michal Peprník and Roman Trušník (the vice-president's position has so far been reserved for Slovak representatives, presently Alena Smiešková). Ten years ago, the idea of the Olomouc international colloquia was born—an opportunity for participants from all parts of Europe and from the United States (and even some other places) to involve in week-long discussions (in early September) on various topics which are usually formulated as a question or a dilemma. From the recent five colloquia, volumes of contributions have been prepared for print and published; the titles are self-revelatory—*Spirituality and Religion in American Culture*, *(Mis)understanding Postmodernism*, *Fiction of Politics and Politics of Fiction*, *Popular Culture and Democracy*, *America: Home of the Brave*. The most recent colloquium dealt with "Cult Fiction, Cult Films and Happenings" and the one planned for September 2006 will be on "New York—Cradle of America's Cultural Plurality".
- 13 A research grant in the latter nineties gave birth to the Center for Comparative Cultural Studies which has, together with the CSAAS, co-organized the annual colloquia but has also helped to shape the basic lines of research which, in most general terms, are concerned with the plurality and pluralism of America and American culture. A new research project for the immediate future will deal with the theme of "Pluralism of Culture and Democracy." Within the general orientation and in addition to it, individual scholars at Olomouc pursue their own research activities: Josef Jařab's fields

are primarily African-American literature, American specificities in modernism, and modern American poetry, Marcel Arbeit is focused on literature of the American South (he is preparing an international conference on the topic in Olomouc for 2007, and has completed, with Jakub Guziur, an anthology : *Narrators of the American South*), Michal Peprník is involved in studying literary theories and in researching classical American literature (he has just published a book on *The Topos of the Forest in American Literature* in Czech), Jiří Flajšar's interests concentrate on contemporary American poetry. The doyen of American studies, Jaroslav Peprník, has been responsible for an important shift from the traditional "Life and Institution" approach to documenting our understanding of America and evaluating the influence American reality has had on Czech life (*America in Czech Literature*, in Czech).

- 14 The doctoral program at Olomouc University has over the recent decade graduated more than a dozen PhDs who are active in the field of American studies at the universities of Brno, Ostrava and Pardubice in the Czech Republic, and in Trnava and Banská Bystrica in Slovakia.
- 15 At Ostrava University Stanislav Kolář continues in his study of American Jewish literature and its European roots (the title of his new book is *Seven Responses to the Holocaust in American Fiction*, 2004), at Masaryk University, Brno, Tomáš Pospíšil investigates the impact of American popular culture, above all in the development of film as art and industry (his recent publication in Czech covers images of African Americans in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American film production), Irena Přibyllová writes on American music and produced an interesting dissertation on the bluegrass singer Bill Monroe. Initial attempts to find a niche and specific angle in the studies of America have been registered also in new universities at Pardubice, Hradec Králové (Bohuslav Mánek is an eminent expert in 19<sup>th</sup> -century American literature), Plzeň, where Štěpánka Magstadt develops her interest in ethnic minorities in the U.S. and the phenomenon of immigration.
- 16 At Charles University in Prague, the American Studies Institute, directed by Martin Procházka, can boast of a long and rich history. At present the group of scholars deals with the issues of multiculturalism in American culture and literature. Members of the team regularly publish results of their research—Justin Quinn on modern poetry, Hana Ulmanová on modern fiction. Another American Studies Department at Charles University is part of the Institute of International Studies—the head of the unit, Miloš Calda is a political scientist who has done fruitful work on the history of the American Left. The cooperation between Charles University and Georgetown University under the auspices of The Fund for American Studies in Washington gives participants of summer schools organized in Prague attractive academic and social opportunities, as do other exchange programs in Prague and other places.
- 17 The two most active sites of American studies in Slovakia are the universities of Prešov and Nitra, despite the fact that the Department of American Studies at Comenius University in Bratislava may be the largest one, and is definitely the one with the longest and richest history. Nina Vietorová (postmodern American literature, metafiction) and Štefan Baštín (anti-war novel) who best represent the Bratislava Americanists are still being unsuccessfully lured into a more direct participation within the framework of the CSAAS and EAAS. Jaroslav Kušnír from Prešov University continues to write on Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme and postmodernism in American fiction; recently he has been enlarging his scope of studies by taking in

relations and links between sciences and literature. The team at Nitra University explores theory and popular culture (Alena Smiešková) and critically examines the potential of structuralist and poststructuralist theories in the interpretation of classical American literature (Anton Pokrivčák, author of *Literature and Being*, 1997, and *American Imagination*, 2005, both in Slovak language). Katarína Feřková from the University of Banská Bystrica represents a strong voice in feminist criticism (*Motherhood and Sisterhood in Toni Morrison*, dissertation in Slovak).

- 18 Last April, Charles University and Prague became the venue of the EAAS Biennial Conference and, besides being a good professional gathering, the event also became a celebration of American studies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia—which was confirmed by the presence and active participation of great numbers of researchers, teachers, and students not only from Prague but from the whole territory stretching from Prešov to Plzeň. It could also be perceived and appreciated as a tribute to the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies whose former but also first president, Josef Jařab, was completing his four successful years in the office of president of the EAAS. So the conference confirmed it was not just an individual but also a collective dream come true, an encouragement for good work in the years to come.

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## INDEX

**Keywords :** Fulbright, popular culture, interdisciplinarity, Poetry, multiculturalism, Postmodernism, Feminism, minorities, American literature, African-American literature, modernism, American South, music, political science, metafiction, immigration