

# The Humanities and the Historical and Cultural Context of Central and Eastern Europe in the XXth Century: Academics, Translators and Other Literati Facing Wars, Revolutions, Regimes



Two monographic volumes, published as the current issues of two journals with a comparative and international focus — *Slovo a smysl* (Charles University) and *România Orientale* (Sapienza University of Rome) —, present the first results of the international interdisciplinary research project *The Humanities and the historical and cultural context of Central and Eastern Europe in the XXth century*. The project focuses on unpublished texts by scholars and translators, as well as writers in the broader sense, concerning topics and problems specific to the cultures of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century.

This was a century shaped by war, revolution, and the ascent of anti-democratic regimes, all of which had a decisive influence on the scholarly environment in which historians, philologists, and translators carried out their work. With an aim to better understand this often overlooked historical context, the articles here focus on scholars who may not have been at liberty to choose their object of study, translators who were not always able to choose which books to translate — that is, on an extra-literary context, political and social, that exerted a pronounced influence on scholarly work broadly speaking, whether through explicit restrictions (ideological censorship, for instance) or through other forms of psychological conditioning. In order to reconstruct the true history of various disciplines and their protagonists, it is therefore useful to understand the practical motivations which shaped scholarly careers within this historical context.

Given that bibliographies (including commented bibliographies) and other descriptive materials are already available, the primary objective of research was to collect and analyse unpublished documents related to concrete working conditions in this context. The research group therefore worked mainly in public and private archives holding documents, correspondence, memoirs, diaries, and other unpublished manuscripts. Unfortunately, this phase of research, which began in 2019, was delayed and in some cases prevented altogether by measures put in place to address the ongoing pandemic. This made it impossible to carry out some of the research originally planned for the project. Our hope, however, is that the initial work carried out here can be further expanded and elaborated in the future.

The group of Sapienza University researchers who originally proposed the project were later joined by researchers from universities in Prague, Cluj, Moscow, Florence, Padua, Udine, and the Tor Vergata University of Rome.



The contributions that make up these two volumes are arranged primarily in chronological order, with texts published in *Slovo a smysl* offering the international perspective, and those in *România Orientale* focusing to a greater extent on the relationship between Italian and other European cultures.

With the rise of dictatorial regimes in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, the relationship between culture and power assumed a different dynamic, as we see in the individual paths of important literary figures of the period. This is especially evident in the case of the novelist and playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936, Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934), and his adherence to fascism — an issue that is often (surprisingly) overlooked. The issue is analysed in ‘Luigi Pirandello’s Concept of Life and His Way to Fascism’ by three Florentine scholars, Luciana Brandi, Ubaldo Ceccoli, and Clotilde Barbarulli (University of Florence and National Research Council of Italy), who reconstruct the political dynamics of Pirandello’s support for the fascist regime based on letters, essays, and press articles, as well as careful analysis of the main themes and ideological contents of the novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*). What the co-authors discover is a profound consonance between Pirandello’s worldview as expressed in and by the novel and the evolution of Italian society during the first decades of the 20th century.

In her essay ‘An Infatuation with the Leader: The Fascination with Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and the Construction of a Male Subjectivity in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s Writing and Career’, Ayşe Saraçgil (University of Florence) traces the vicissitudes of a single career — one, however, that sheds light on a phenomenon of far-reaching social significance. What Saraçgil presents is a lucid portrait of the fascination of power in the figure of Mustafa Kemal, and his influence on the life and poetics of Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974). This influence is the root phenomenon, Saraçgil argues, from which we may trace the evolution of various other dynamics, giving us essential insight into the profound transformation that took place in Turkish society between the liberal revolution of 1908 and the late 1930s.

The majority of essays featured in these two volumes focus on cultural mediators. Two essays by Alessandro Catalano (University of Padua), ‘Taulero Zulberti and the Reception of Czech Culture in 1920s Italy’ and ‘The Short Career of Riccardo Selvi as Translator of Czech Poetry in the Early 1930s’, reconstruct the work of two translators and cultural mediators, all but forgotten today, who worked in the 1920s and 1930s. Through a careful analysis of both unpublished documents and articles published during the period, Catalano brings to light Zulberti’s remarkable contributions to the understanding of Czech culture in Italy, as well as Selvi’s claim to being the first Italian translator of Karel Hynel Mácha celebrated poem *Máj* (1836; published in Italy as *Maggio* in 1934). If the story of Taulero Zulberti as an ‘atypical’ intellectual is one of enormous self-sacrifice and personal commitment, that of Riccardo Selvi — which is more episodic but just as atypical — testifies to the important role played by Czechoslovak institutions in providing support for the diffusion of culture abroad, in spite of widely differing political orientations in the case of fascist Italy (Czechoslovakia remained a beacon of democracy in the interwar period, even as it was surrounded on all sides by dictatorial regimes).

Giacomo Prampolini (1898–1975), the indefatigable polyglot, translator, and cultural mediator of various — primarily minor — European literatures, is the subject

of two essays by scholars at Sapienza University: ‘Giacomo Prampolini as a Literary Translator and Cultural Mediator of Dutch Literature’ by Francesca Terrenato, and ‘Giacomo Prampolini as a Literary Translator and Cultural Mediator of Scandinavian Literature’ by Andrea Berardini. Based on materials from Prampolini’s personal archive, the articles examine his work as critic, translator, and consulting editor, his personal relationships with authors he was interested in publishing, and certain constraints arising from the political context in Italy that shaped his career. The result is a portrait not only of the character of Prampolini’s work before and after WWII, but also of the relevant aspects of Dutch and Scandinavian literatures that prevailed in Italian culture at that time.

The work of two other cultural mediators, Enrico Rocca (1895–1944) and Aloisio Rendi (1927–1979), makes up the subject of the article ‘The Fields of German-speaking Literature: Practices of Cultural Recognition in Italy’ by Stefania De Lucia and Camilla Miglio (Sapienza University). Taking into account certain continuities that link one generation to the next, effectively bridging WWII and the schism it brought about in European cultural history, De Lucia and Miglio examine the varying political contexts of these two figures. Their aim is to better understand the impact these scholars had on the cultural dynamics of the various fields where the competition of languages and literature took place (in the case of German literature, the co-authors also take the ‘national’ pluralism of the Central European context into account). Focusing on the most decisive episodes in their lives and works, De Lucia and Miglio provide precise historical-cultural contextualisation, tracing the essential history of German studies in Italy (vigorously promoted under the Fascist regime), and identifying key moments and figures for further study in the field.

In his article ‘Italian studies in 20th-century Poland’, Piotr Salwa (Polish Academy of Science) investigates the study of Italian literature in Poland during the 20th century, drawing particular attention to literary criticism. Retracing the shifting political landscape of Italy and Poland during the 20th century, Salwa underscores the persistent and avid interest in Italian culture throughout this period on the part of Polish scholars and intellectuals.

Many of the European literary figures who made their names in the first half of the 20th century would be swept away in the conflagration of WWII. Such is the case with Anny E. Popp, a brilliant scholar and art historian of the Vienna school founded by Max Dvořák. Born in Ostrava in 1891, Popp was active throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, publishing original and astute studies in the European debate on art — and not only that of the Italian Renaissance, to which she had dedicated her doctoral dissertation. Yet in 1936, not long after the publication of her essay ‘Two torsì by Michelangelo’ in London’s *Burlington Magazine*, she seems to have disappeared without a trace. In his insightful article, ‘Anny E. Popp, Art Historian of the Vienna School: Disappeared and Forgotten?’, Josef Vojvodík (Charles University) takes a close look at Popp’s articles on Cézanne, Donatello, and Leonardo da Vinci, thus recovering a cultural heritage that, if not entirely unknown, has hitherto been only partially investigated or assessed on account of the singular destiny of the scholar.

If WWII was the watershed moment of the 20th century, the period that followed, characterised by the rise of anti-democratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, marks an historical and political transition that would have profound consequences





for both existential and creative contexts. In her essay '*Sburătorul* after *Sburătorul*: Survivors of E. Lovinescu's Literary Circle after 1947', Ligia Tudurachi (Romanian Academy of Science) retraces the story of the writers, poets, and intellectuals affiliated with the *Sburătorul* circle in the years after 1947 — literary figures who, at first compelled to give up the aesthetic regime they had forged during the interwar period, never succeeded in recovering it, even during the 'thaw' of the late post-war period.

In the essay that follows, 'Georgij Brejtburd: Translator, Author, and Official (1921-1976). The First Step of Archive Studies (1954-1957)', Ol'ga Gurevič (Russian State University for the Humanities) examines the critical role played by cultural mediation in the period of the Cold War. Georgij Brejtburd, the literary figure at the centre of Gurevič's essay, was a translator of Italian literature in the Soviet Union, as well as a literary critic and consultant for the Union of Soviet Writers for more than twenty years. As archival documents demonstrate, Brejtburd also played a key role in facilitating personal relationships between intellectuals of the two countries.

The prison poetry of Ivan M. Jirous (1944-2011), a dissident Czech poet, powerfully conveys not only the oppressive conditions of imprisonment, painful and troubling in themselves, but also the frustration of facing a particularly unjust punishment as a result of purely ideological motivations and abuses of power. If writing poetry in the prison context might be understood as a coping mechanism, it may also serve as a form of denunciation and rebellion, as co-authors Jan Wiendl (Charles University) and Annalisa Cosentino (Sapienza University) argue in their essay 'The Poet in a State of Emergency: Ivan M. Jirous'.

In 'Italian Scholars of Modern Greek as Political-Cultural Mediators during the First Years of Censorship by the Greek Junta, 1967-1971', Christos Bintoudis (Sapienza University) recounts an episode from the second half of the 20th century. The article demonstrates how the work of Italian translators and scholars of new Greek literature played an active role not only in bringing public attention in Italy to contemporary Greek culture (which was censored in its native country), but also in giving support to dissidents of the dictatorial regime established in Greece at the end of the 1960s.

'About Truth and Possible Worlds: Pavel Tichý and His Logical and Philosophical Research' by Anna Maria Perissutti (University of Udine) gives an overview of the life and work of Pavel Tichý (1936-1994), a scholar of logic and the philosophy of language who emigrated to New Zealand in 1970 during the early years of 'normalisation' in Czechoslovakia — the period following Prague Spring, characterised by an even more oppressive return to state-imposed ideology — and committed suicide shortly before his return to Prague. Tichý's 'Transparent Intensional Logic', a concept still relatively unknown due to the troubled personal life of the scholar, advances a number of concepts that are highly relevant today across a variety of fields, including artificial intelligence and related disciplines.

We briefly interrupt the chronological organisation to present a series of contributions that touch not only on the same general topic of research but on the same subject: namely the work of Italian scholars who were active, at least for a significant part of their careers, at Sapienza University of Rome.

In 'Italo-Romanian Academic Relations in the Communist Period: The Example of Rosa Del Conte', co-authors Ioana Bot (Babeş-Bolyai University) and Angela Tar-



antino (Sapienza University) turn their attention to the figure of Rosa Del Conte (1907–2011), Professor of Language and Romanian literature at Sapienza University, 1958–1977, with an aim to better understand her interactions with officials in the Romanian Communist regime, and with intellectuals in whom the internationally renowned scholar took an interest. Looking specifically at her correspondence with representatives of Romanian and Italian academic and governmental institutions, the co-authors draw attention to telling aspect of Del Conte’s relationships — both personal and ‘official’ — that were only apparently straightforward and unproblematic. In reality, argue Bot and Tarantino, they were deeply conditioned by the context of a Romanian society under the domination of a totalitarian regime.

In ‘Imagines Agentes: The “Old Professor” as Archive and Place of Memory, or Sante Graciotti and “Celeste Zofia”’, Luigi Marinelli (Sapienza University) takes inspiration from the figure of Sante Graciotti (born in Osimo in 1923), a professor of Slavic philology first at Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and then (since 1972) at Sapienza University. Marinelli retraces the stages of Polish studies in Italy, specifically in Rome, emphasising the value of the scholar’s personal experience. It is an experience made up not only of writings, but also of people (including officials of the Communist regime), so that we should think of it rather as an irreplaceable repository of history. While documents and other written traces represent essential scholarly materials, Marinelli argues, they can only be accurately interpreted thanks to the role of personal experience as a ‘corrective’, one that is best served by the individual rather than collective memory. He therefore proposes some working hypotheses for building a reliable history of the humanities, starting naturally from Italian Polonistics.

The unpublished travel notebooks of Angelo Maria Ripellino (1923–1978), who joined Sapienza University in 1961 as professor of Russian, Czech, and Slovak literature, are the subject of ‘Writing for the Self: Ripellino’s Notebooks from the Sapienza Archive’ by Barbara Ronchetti (Sapienza University). Ronchetti focuses in particular on Ripellino’s notes from his trips to Soviet Russia from 1957 to the mid-1970s, examining various fragments concerning places, texts, and people. With analysis from the perspective of different styles and themes, Ronchetti offers a concise but illuminating glimpse at Ripellino’s fertile poetic imagination captured at its most intimate moment, and an apt example of the author’s ‘life writing’.

‘Angelo Maria Ripellino and Czech culture: Letters and Other Exchanges’ identifies the models underlying Ripellino’s essays and critical writings, and is written by Annalisa Cosentino (Sapienza University), who recently edited “*Do vlasti české*”. *Z korespondence Angela M. Ripellina* (2018), a critical edition of Ripellino’s correspondence with Czech artists and intellectuals that draws in large part on materials from Sapienza University’s 20th Century Archive. The relationships conveyed by the correspondence reveal an important intersection between literature and politics in post-war Czechoslovakia. But they also allow us to reconstruct the ‘avant-garde’ inspiration of Ripellino’s critical writings, arising from his contact with the Prague cultural scene of the late 1940s, and remaining at the centre of all his subsequent work up to the ‘essay-novel’ *Praga magica* (*Magic Prague*, 1973) and beyond.

The issue of *România Orientale* closes with an accurate bibliography of the works of Enrico Damiani (1882–1953), who taught at Sapienza University and University



of Naples 'L'Orientale'. Compiled by Gabriele Mazzitelli (Tor Vergata University of Rome), 'Humanism and Culture: The Teaching of Enrico Damiani (a Bibliography)' highlights Damiani's multifaceted career in Slavistics, including works on Russian, Polish, and Bulgarian literature, with forays into other Slavic traditions.

Finally, the two volumes are closed by an appendix of documents and images (in *Romània Orientale*), and a precious testimony to the importance of personal stories, arising under very specific historical circumstances, in determining the path of study and research. 'In Search of Truth: An Interview with Helen Epstein' is based on an interview conducted by Annalisa Cosentino with the American writer and scholar Helen Epstein. Born in Prague in 1947, Epstein later moved to New York with her parents, both survivors of Nazi concentration camps, who felt compelled to emigrate from Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the 1948 coup that marked the rise of the Communist regime. A pioneer of second generation trauma studies (*Children of the Holocaust*, 1979), Epstein is the author of several richly documented biographies and an expert in 'life writing', offering an original interpretation of how academics, translators, and other literati in the 20th century faced wars, revolutions, and regimes.

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