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Introduction to the Aesthetic Aspects of the Slovak Left-Wing Revue DAV

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This paper provides an encyclopaedic introduction to the presented topic, which will be expanded upon in the forthcoming book about DAV.

ABSTRACT

DAV (based on the initials of the first names of Daniel Okáli, Andrej Sirácky, and Vladimr Clementis) was a leftist journal produced by the group *Davisti* (young, left-wing Czecho-Slovak intellectuals) in Prague and Bratislava between 1924 and 1937, with intervals. DAV journal's concept combines avant-garde aesthetics with political lines. The DAV group in itself was not a writers' club but rather a free association of scholars who rejected Nazism during World War II. The Davists, through the DAV Journal, influenced the development of Marxism in Slovakia. The DAV group often discussed art, philosophy, literature, criticism, and politics. The DAV had a significant impact on the definition of philosophical and political concepts in Slovakia, as well as left-wing politics and modernist trends in the country's visual art and literature. The presented text expands on the short encyclopaedia article "DAV (The Crowd) – Slovak left-wing avant-garde group of the interwar period" (2021) and puts it into aesthetic contexts. This work used the context of Slovak aesthetician J. Migaová's work (a study on the influence of the New Objectivity and artistic modernity on socially critical art in interwar Slovakia) and M. Habaj's aesthetical analysis to analyse the first two issues of the DAV journal. This study primarily concentrated on the DAV journal's first two issues' representations of typical Slovak artistic modernism.

Keywords: Avant-garde art; modernity; left-wing periodicals; Slovak left-wing.

INTRODUCTION

“Avant-garde” is primarily a modernist term for a movement in art, culture, and politics that is at the forefront of ideas regarding their manner of expression and societal influence on daily life (Dewsbury, 2009). As a phrase, “Avant-garde” originates in the renaissance, when it was used to denote an advanced position in the arts. The particular objective of the “avant-garde” is to undermine and replace the current order. This is attempted through contrast, challenge, conflict, and self-assuredness (Pritzker & Runco, 2011).

During the French Revolution, “Avant-garde” association with Jacobin politics gave it the connotation of an attack against authority and institutions (Dewsbury, 2009). As it is usually understood in contemporary era, postmodernism is a movement that challenges and surpasses established frameworks for analysing the relationships between art, culture, and politics (Zilliaccus, 2022). Simultaneously, the “avant-garde” is heterogeneous because it joins organisations with diverse backgrounds, contrasting with the moment’s homogeneous dominant stance or status quo. Typically, an “avant-garde” group consists of a small number of individuals with diverse backgrounds and talents who collaborate just for the length of the innovative event or project that brought them together in the first place.

The DAV (avant-garde group; 1924–1937) was a Slovak leftist revue (journal) about art, philosophy, literature, and politics. In 1922, Daniel Okáli, Vladimír Clementis, and Ján Ponian launched the “Free Association of Students-Socialists from Slovakia” initiative, which led to the formation of the DAV (in Prague) (Baer, 2017). The DAV was greatly influenced by the Prague left-wing avant-garde (interaction with the Czech left-wing intelligence) (Perný, 2021). During the two World Wars, Prague’s left-wing avant-garde authors dismantled the barrier between elite literary language and the vernacular and resorted to spoken language, substandard forms, daily sources like newspapers and detective narratives, and aspects of popular entertainment like the circus and the cabaret (Strožek, 2021).

The first issue of DAV journal appeared in 1924 with a cover designed by Mikuláš Galanda. It was a quarterly periodical described as an artistic and political publication. The DAV presented modernist architecture and design, the Slovak form of surrealism (nadrealizmus – Rudolf Fábry), left-wing art criticism and Marxist aesthetics. DAV thematised social, political, but also ideological problems of interwar society. Important members of DAV were writers, poets, lawyers, critics, playwrights, scientists, composers, and politicians: Daniel Okáli, Ján Rob Poničan, Andrej Siracký, Ladislav Novomeský, Ladislav Szántó, Vladimír Clementis, Peter Jilemnický, Eduard Urx, Jozef Tomášik-Dumín, Jarko Elen, Jozef Zindra; later, Gustáv Husák, Alexander Matuška, Michal Chorváth, Jozef Rybák, and Andrej Bagar, and others. The Czech avant-garde interwar scene strongly influenced DAV authors in visual arts and poetry – art groups like Devětsil and journal Pásmo, or other journals like *Host* or *Avantgarda*.

This work attempts to expose the DAV revue’s representations of typical Slovak artistic modernism.

THE DAV REVUE AND SLOVAK ARTISTIC MODERNITY

According to Gasparec (1970), the DAV queries contain comments and observations on Slovakia’s cultural orientation, the possibilities of developing Slovak revolutionary and communist literature, the Slovak national theatre, and similar topics incisive sociological comments as well as observations. The topic of DAV was systematically studied by authors

such as Š. Drug (Drug, 1964; Drug, 1965a; Drug 1965b; Drug, 1976; Drug, 1990), V. Plevza (Plevza, 1965), K. Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum, 1976), J. Rozner (Rozner, 1966), L. Knežek (Knežek, 1974), K. Csiba (Csiba, 2017), P. Kerecman (Kerecman, 2016) and M. Habaj (Habaj 2017). Some books, studies, texts and the DAV issues and books by DAV authors are digitized and available online (<https://monoskop.org/DAV> and <https://davdva.sk/odporucame/>).

When discussing the aesthetic component (visual dimension of the DAV revue design), the international context that connects it must not be overlooked:

1. The influence between Prague and Slovakia-Bratislava; with Hungary (texts of avant-garde theorist and poet Lajos Kassák published in DAV),
2. Feedback with French culture (paintings by Frans Masereel in the first issue of DAV; controversy with French poetry),
3. with Russian avantgarde (Okali's appeal to Mayakovsky in the DAV 1924; mentions of Mejerchold, Mayakovsky, Erenburg in DAV 1925/1),
4. with German avantgarde (especially art of the New Objectivity – aesthetics of experience with urban culture in the form of satirical and social-critical images based on aestheticization of visibility of – bourgeois entertainment, nightlife, social periphery and poverty, prostitution, murders, political criticism (paintings by Otto Dix, Georg Grosz – published in DAV revue) (See more: Migašová, Habán, 2019).

The most significant evidence of Slovak modernism was the non-academic type of school – in a relation to the Bauhaus (See more: Susanne, 1998; Mojžišová, 1987; Mojžišová, 2013) represented by M. Galanda and L. Fulla (School of Arts and Crafts, 1928–1939) (See photos 1 and 2) in Bratislava and Eugen Krón on the other hand (Košice Modernism and Krón's drawing school, 1921–1927) in Košice (See more: Bartošová, Lešková, 2013; Kiss, Szemán, 2010; Lešková, 2013).

J. Migašová emphasizes that even though Slovakia was on the periphery of centres of artistic modernity (such as Munich, Berlin, Budapest, and Paris), elements and manifestations of European avant-garde can be found in two centres of Slovak culture – Košice and Bratislava – where these manifestations had their own, autonomous development (Migašová, Habán, 2019). The author of the cover of the DAV revue was M. Galanda (with the alias La Ganda) (See photo: 4), who, together with L. Fulla created the artistic identity of the DAV revue. They collaborated with DAV members through books, posters, and bulletins; for example, Fulla illustrated a book by Ján Rob Poničan before the formation of the DAV and Galanda created drawings for Novomeský's debut poetry book. The Revue also contains the first Slovak attempt at modernist typography, the equivalent of which can be found in the Czech avant-garde (*Host, Pásmo*).

The DAV was part of the manifestations of Slovak modernism, which was closely connected with Prague. The DAV was created by authors from Slovakia (partially living in Prague) and the first issue was published in Prague. The first issue was to declare a clear, aesthetically and ideologically oriented revue of the Slovak revolutionary avant-garde. The DAV replaced the magazines *Mladé Slovensko* (Young Slovakia) and *Spartakus*. Furthermore, Habaj (2017) writes,

The aesthetic efforts of the DAV always have a social and political character, they do not limit their impact to the literary and artistic context. (...) DAV defines itself aesthetically (new art vs traditionalism) and politically (communism vs conservatism and bourgeois outlook, internationalism vs. nationalism). The original and translated poetry and prose production as

well as fine art build on the context of European avant-garde (Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism) and Proletarian poetry. The core of the DAV's avant-garde stance is most clearly revealed within cultural journalism in its political attacks and provocations aimed at cultural tradition, bourgeois conservatism and bourgeois society... (p. 269).

D. Okáli's text – with the motto “Not an artistic program! An artistic act!” – represents a pamphlet article of the DAV on social-revolutionary art. Ideologically, (D. Okáli) finds the function of art and culture in the revolutionary rebirth of society, a radical split with tradition (criticism of bourgeois ideology, clericalism, capitalism, and individualism), referring to Trotsky (art as a means of changing the economic establishment and helping to achieve political power). These attitudes were later modified in the DAV community toward a revolutionary left-wing patriotism by Novomeský (Marx and Slovak nation), Clementis (Slovdom then and now), Husák (The Revolution Generation), Púll (120 years of grand tradition) and Šefránek (Štúr's work must be defended) (Drug, 1990; Sojková, 2008).

Okáli considers art to be a “sociological manifestation” (which refers to the intended purpose of social policies, procedures, or acts that are intentionally and deliberately meant to be positive in their influence on society). Okáli demands class and social expediency from art. However, this should not be applied by the intellect; on the contrary, it must be of authentic origin, “experienced” and “felt”. Okáli further calls for “... *an effort for an artistic synthesis, which will be formed from constructivist elements and linked into a living and socially effective whole by revolutionary ideology*” (1925, p. 6).

Other studies (in the second issue of the DAV revue) are also devoted to the theory of art: an article by M. Klimanov titled “Definition of proletarian art” and another text by B. Tilkovszky titled “The World Crisis of Art.” The political line (in the first issue of the DAV revue) – as Habaj summarises – is represented by Clementis's studies (on the national question and the ideology of the agrarian party), A. Križka's article titled “Fighting for Freedom of Speech”, A. Kojnok's article about law and social classes, Obtulovič's analysis of the economic crisis in Slovakia, Poničan's article about the relationship between intelligence and the proletariat, and the pamphlet *Fighting for crowds in Slovakia* signed by the collective brand – “DAV”.

Individual authorship in the avant-garde context transforms into the principle of revolutionary collectivism, as M. Habaj (2017) emphasises; this is reflected in articles by authors such as Okáli and Sirack, anonymous articles (the authors used pseudonyms), and collective articles or poetry (For example, texts like *Pamphlet, Annoying speech, Flag of the Himalayas*) – signed as DAV (THE CROWD). This collectivism—according to J. Migašová—is based on reflections on collective art by L. Kassák, and also under the influence of J. Wolker, K. Teige (Teige redefined the concept of folk art) and early Devětstil (Migašová, 2021). The avant-garde form of aesthetics manifests itself primarily in poetry—experimental typography, Cubo-futuristic form (an avant-garde art movement that arose in the 1910s as an outgrowth of European Futurism and Cubism), expressionist imagery, artworks of New Objectivity and proletarian ideas. According to Habaj (2017):

The revolutionary poem, using elements of collage and montage, with striking, slogan-like verses expressing cries, appeals and commands, is set in various typefaces and represents a productive experiment typographically and on the level of expression and form... As a whole, it

represents a hybrid poetics combining cubo-futuristic form, expressionist imagery and a proletarian idea...” (p. 275) (Authors translation from *Slovak* to English).

The authors also respond to theatre, film, and architecture. The aesthetic dimension of the DAV revue magazine also consists of critical and analytical articles on art theory. The publication of non-Slovak authors also shows the international dimension of the DAV revue:

1. The Czech poet and literary critic J. Hora,
2. The German-speaking writer from Prague, F. C. Weiskopf,
3. The Hungarian writer and theoretician of the avant-garde, L. Kassák.

The avant-garde connection included not only articles and poetic creation, typography, graphics, and the design of the DAV revue (See photo 8), but also, as, Migašová points out, the use of paintings by the authors Dix and Grosz.

German authors' works were complemented by Slovak authors (Fulla, Galanda) and painters like Masereel or Chagall. In Grosz's work, *Urx* (1925) identifies “revolutionary drawing in a kind of negative sense” (p. 32). Habaj (2017) also notes:

The second issue is illustrated by drawings by Georg Gross and Otto Dix depicting the urban space of Berlin and the social reality of the Weimar Republic of the 1920s with motifs of prostitution, poverty and hunger, skilled soldiers, unbridled debauchery and sexual orgies, corpulent bankers, escaping the lord and the impoverished proletariat (p. 278).

Migašová justifies the presentation of the paintings by Dix and Gross in the DAV revue with the need to declare an artistic paradigm and revolutionary proletarian discourse (Migašová, 2018) (See photos: 5, 6, 7). Václavek also finds German influence in terminology, the inclusion of expressionism, cubism, and purism (Václavek, 1972). The DAV revue focused mostly on German, Russian, and Hungarian avant-garde artists. During its early years, the revue DAV focused on avant-garde left-wing art and cultural politics, later expanding its attention to broader political, social, economic, and ideological issues. According to Drug (1965a), the once literary-artistic magazine transformed into a cultural-political and then blatantly political publication.

The first issues of DAV journal (DAV 1/1924, 2/1925, and 3/1926) were characterised by a strong artistic expression, while the numbers after the interruption of publishing (1929) represented a new form (from revue to magazine). The DAV began to be published again only in 1931 in a new form (the political dimension dominated). While the first numbers of the DAV revue were oriented mainly towards the Western avant-garde, later years tended towards open sympathy for the Soviet Union (as Csiba and Drug notice) (Csiba, 2017) – inquiry about the cultural orientation of Slovakia, Erenburg's articles, reports from the Soviet Union, and the inquiry with Slovak writers (Tido J. Gašpar, Ivan Horváth, Emil B. Lukáč, Dušan Makovický, Milo Urban) about the Soviet Union. The sympathy for the Soviet Union is also documented by Clementis (1931) quote: “*The USSR has set out to build a new world, that societies are at a historic boundary and before the demise of capitalism that everyone wants, albeit for various reasons.*” (p. 10). In later years (Drug recalls that in 1931), there was also a split (within the DAV) in opinions about relations to the position of Slovakia between the Slovak and Czech parts of Czechoslovakia (the controversy between *Urx* and Poničan) (Csiba, 2017).

The topic of the right of nations to self-determination comes to the fore, which will later influence the further development of DAV members in the history of Czechoslovakia

(Olbracht, 1931; Clementis, 1933; Clementis, 1935). There is also a reassessment of the tradition of originally radical anti-traditionalist attitudes to the search for revolutionary continuity in the national movements of the 19th century (Novomeský, Clementis, Husák, Púll, Šefránek). Csiba also discovers a diversity of attitudes toward literature in the later development of DAV, which he analyzes, for example, in an article on F. X. Šalca. Later DAV issues (DAV III/1, IV/8, 11; VI/1, 2) also include entire passages of texts by or about Hegel, Stalin, Marx, Engels, and Lenin. In the 1930s, DAV was also dominated by a robust antifascist motive (anti-militarist and antifascist articles; antifascist cartoons and collages; articles against antisemitism, organization of a congress of writers against fascism by DAV members with Slovak writers; involvement in the Spanish Civil War (Issues DAV III/1, 4-5, IV/11, V 1, 2-3; DAV V/6, 7, 11).

The DAV (Issues DAV IV/5-6, 7) also responds to the social situation in Czechoslovakia after the economic crisis (the strike in Košúty or sociological reports on the situation in Czechoslovakia). The aesthetic dimension of late DAV has been greatly simplified, but interestingly, later issues were often used satirically as collages, responding to the political situation, photographs with social themes (especially from reports); parodying of Slovak clericals, militarism, fascism, and right-wing politicians (see photo 9; some cartoons and photos have been censored; see photo 10). The authors' experimentation with different fonts, designs, text wrapping, underlined passages, alternative advertisements, and posters for left-wing literature and politics continues. The DAV disappeared in the 1930s. Later, the writers organise the Slovak National Uprising in the underground.

Kněžek (1974) averred that during the war the members of DAV prepared an armed national uprising-Jilemnický and Urx in illegal work in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, F. Král in the Bratislava underground communist movement, Novomeský and Husák at the head of the V. illegal leadership of the communist party, and Clementis in exile (where he called for resistance on the radio and fought a political struggle for the future post-war arrangement of Czechoslovakia).

CONCLUSION

The presented text in encyclopaedic brief represents, on the one hand, the aesthetic dimension of the periodical DAV and, on the other hand, the ideological and political development of the whole project. DAV has significantly influenced the development of Slovak culture, art, and politics, so regardless of political views and attitudes, it is necessary to recall its importance to Slovak culture. The task of the presented text was not only to present the DAV to the world audience but also to point out the high artistic expression of this project.

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