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Educated Elites in Slovene Regions before WWI – between National Aspirations and Social and Political Conservatism

In the 19th century, the Austrian provinces populated by Slovene-speaking population experienced a relatively slow social and economic development, but at the same time a significant cultural change characterized by rapidly increasing literacy. While according to the estimates of the Slovene historians more than 92% of the population was still illiterate at the end of the 18th century, the rate of literacy increased to 80% and in some areas even to over 85% over the next 100 years, i.e. by the end of the 19th century. Before the WWI, Slovenes were thus ranked just behind Germans, Czechs and Italians in terms of literacy rate within the Habsburg Monarchy.¹ The rapid growth of literacy in the second half of the 19th century was a result of modernization of the primary school education since the 1869 school reform and the increasing number of primary schools using Slovene language as the language of instruction. By expanding literacy and education, also the culture of reading spread. This is also seen from the increasing number of copies of the publications by a catholic Družba sv. Mohorja publishing house, which printed books in Slovene for less educated and peasantry readers. Even back in 1875, some of its books were already printed in 25.000 copies, in 1890 in around 50.000 copies, and just before the end of world war the print-run rose to as many as 90.000 copies.

The number of high school graduates, however, grew much slower. In the fifty years from the introduction of high-school graduation exam (“matura” exam) in the Austrian half of the Monarchy in the 1850s, there were 4513 graduates in the high schools on the territory of today’s Slovenia (all of them were boys); in the period 1901-1910, there were another 2404 high-school graduates (7 of them were girls), and in the period 1911-1920, this number rose to 3613 (of whom,

¹ Ferdo Gestrin – Vasilij Melik, *Slovenska zgodovina od konca osemnajstega stoletja do 1918 (Slovene History from the End of 18th Century to 1918)* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1966), p. 261.

84 girls).² Around 1900, Slovenes lagged behind Czechs, Poles and Croats in the Monarchy in terms of the number of high-school graduates. In the opinion of Slovene historians, this was an inevitable consequence of the poor status of Slovene language in high schools, particularly in “gymnasiums”. Only a few of them were bilingual (only in the lower classes), while the instruction in the majority of them and in all higher classes was in German or Italian (in the Littoral area). The first entirely Slovene “gymnasium” was a private Episcopal “gymnasium” founded in Šentvid near Ljubljana in 1905, and the only Slovene state “gymnasium” in the Habsburg Monarchy was founded in Gorizia in 1913. Lessons in Slovene also took place in some technical and vocational schools; the first female vocational and secondary schools were founded towards the end of the 19th century.

Although demands for a Slovene university had been an element of the Slovene political program since 1848, the Austrian authorities paid it no heed until the end of the Monarchy in 1918. The movement to establish a Slovene university – either in Ljubljana or Trieste, where also the Italians were demanding their own university – gained new momentum at the start of the 20th century, but again to no avail. Slovene students therefore mainly studied at the universities in Vienna and Graz and since the end of the 19th century also in Prague and Krakow. By far fewer students, however, went to the University of Zagreb, since its degrees were treated as foreign in Cisleithania, due to the differences in the education and legislation systems of the two halves of the Monarchy. At the beginning of the 20th century, some liberal-thinking students also grasped the idea that the Slovene educated classes could go west, to Paris if possible, and experience new ideas there, if they wanted to expand their horizons and escape the *forma mentis* of the German and Austrian universities. But in reality only few individuals turned towards the non-German Europe and the Western European university centres before the WWI. Until the end of the Monarchy, the great majority of Slovene students studied at the Austrian universities and higher education colleges; their number rose from around 350 in 1880 to more than 1000 per year in 1914. According to the data based on the Austrian statistics published by Vasilij Melik in 1986, the following number of Slovene students was enrolled at Austrian Universities, high- and higher-education colleges in the period 1876-1913:³

- 2 Janez Kmet, “Nekaj podatkov o razvoju naše gimnazije” (*Some Data on the Development of our “Gymnasium”*), *Prikazi in študije*, III, No. 9, 1957, p. 24; Mateja Ribarič, “Od mature do mature”, *Od mature do mature, Zgodovinski razvoj mature na Slovenskem 1849/50 – 1994-95 (From Graduation to Graduation, Historical Development of Graduation on Slovene Territory 1849/50 – 1994-95)*, Razstavni katalog 62, Ljubljana: Slovenski šolski muzej 1998, p. 19.
- 3 Vasilij Melik – Peter Vodopivec, “Slovenski izobraženci in avstrijske visoke šole” (*Slovene Educated Men and Austrian Colleges 1848 – 1918*), *Zgodovinski časopis*, 40, 1986, No. 3, p. 272. The year 1876 denotes the study year 1875/76, the year 1886 – study year 1885/86, and the same all through to 1913, which denotes the study year 1912/13. In the last study year, another 30 Slovene students of the Export Academy in Vienna and the Higher College of Commerce Revoltella in Trieste should be added to the total of 926 Slovene students, as well as 11 students of the Art Academies and 5 students of the Academy of Music and Fine Arts in Vienna. Thus,

Slovene students at Austrian universities (Vienna, Graz, Prague, Krakow)

| Year | Theol. | Law. | Med. | Phil. | Tech. | Bodenkultur | Mining | Veterinary Med. | Together |
|------|--------|------|------|-------|-------|-------------|--------|--------------------|----------|
| 1876 | 139 | 80 | 9 | 89 | 72 | 0 | 3 | | 392 |
| 1886 | 180 | 128 | 28 | 12 | 20 | 1 | 3 | | 352 |
| 1896 | 262 | 147 | 73 | 49 | 34 | 5 | 3 | | 568 |
| 1900 | 244 | 246 | 58 | 69 | 29 | 5 | 1 | | 652 |
| 1910 | 176 | 388 | 74 | 71 | 102 | 27 | 9 | 24 | 871 |
| 1913 | 221 | 309 | 90 | 93 | 120 | 42 | 8 | 43 | 926 |

Two thirds of all Slovene university students studied in Vienna. Until around 1900, the majority of students of Slovene origin studied theology, if we refer to the statistical data which include also the regional Episcopal colleges. After that, the number of the law students prevailed. There were also more and more students of philosophy, medicine and technical sciences (the number of the latter grew since 1860, at first slowly and since 1900 faster – so that after 1910 their number even exceeded the number of medicine and philosophy students). The first Slovene women to attend the University in Vienna enrolled medicine and philosophy at the outset of the 20th century. In the period 1897-1918, there were 43 women – all from the Carniola province, who studied medicine and philosophy at the Vienna University.⁴ Before the WWI, only the most optimistical Slovene political leaders were of the opinion that Slovene educated elites already had the professional structure needed for the most vital interests of national existence as well as the experts for the majority of areas that could influence further Slovene national development and formation.

Obviously, such assessments were rather exaggerated: according to the above-mentioned data, in 1914 there were around 5000 persons living and working on the territory of today's Slovenia (of whom perhaps 10 or slightly more women) with high school graduation ("matura exam") in the period from early 1980s to the WWI, i.e. a mere 0.3 % or 0.4 % of total population.⁵ There were even much fewer university, high or higher education graduates. Although no

the total number of Slovene students at the Austrian universities, high and higher-education colleges was 972. See also: Alojz Cindrič, *Študenti s Kranjske na dunajski univerzi 1848 – 1918 (Students from Carniola at the Vienna University 1848 – 1918)*, (Univerza v Ljubljani, 2009), pp. 28–29.

⁴ Cindrič, *Študenti s Kranjske na dunajski univerzi*, pp. 565–568.

⁵ According to the estimates in the Slovene historiography, around 1,411,700 people lived on the territory of today's Slovenia in 1914. See: *Slovenska novejša zgodovina 1848–1992 (Slovene Contemporary History)* (ed. by Jasna Fischer et al., Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino (Institute for Contemporary History) and Mladinska knjiga, 2005), p. 19. I would like to thank my colleague Branko Šuštar for drawing my attention to the low percentage of high-school graduates among the Slovene population.

detailed data is available on the university graduates in terms of professions, the share of university students and graduates of Slovene origin was certainly much lower than that of Austrian Germans, Poles and Czechs. This was, according to prevailing opinion in the historiography, a consequence of the development level and social structure of the Slovene population.⁶ Most students of Slovene origin at the Austrian universities came from peasantry or lower to middle class urban population, whereas there were very few students coming from more wealthy urban population or *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* in the period 1848-1918.⁷

The layer of Slovene middle class elites which became the most important actors of Slovene political and cultural movement in the Habsburg Monarchy in the second half of the 19th century was thus very thin. However, they were largely formed thanks to education. In a little more than seven decades from about 1840 to the WWI, which is over three and a half generations, a sizable enough layer of educated people was formed, and it became an indispensable dynamic factor of the Slovene national mobilization and politics. Socially, it mainly originated from the peasantry and partly from the lower class urban social groups (civil servants, tradesmen and craftsmen). Its leaders and spokesman were lay intellectuals and the catholic clergy; wealthy entrepreneurs, tradesmen, land owners and officials only slowly joined them since the 1880s and 1890s. Since 1848 and in particular since the beginning of the constitutional era in 1861, nationality was the central issue of their politics. The guiding national-political principle referred to by the liberal and conservative Slovene leaders was a demand for the federalization of the Monarchy and the unification of the territory populated by the Slovene-speaking population in an autonomous unit within the Habsburg State. In practical political life, however, they strove for the equality of Slovene language in schools and offices and for establishing of Slovene cultural and educational institutions. At the end of the 19th century, when the tense national relations in the Monarchy required the Slovene political elites to modernize and broaden their national political ideas and horizons, they added the Yugoslav dimension to their traditional demands; the conservatives were looking for an alliance with Croatian parties and the liberals and social democrats also with Serbian political groups, as well as Serbs and even Bulgarians outside the Monarchy.

Both Slovene middle class parties that were eventually formed in the 1890s – the catholic and the liberal – were thus primarily based on national-political ideology.

6 Melik – Vodopivec, "Slovenski izobraženci in avstrijske visoke šole", p. 273.

7 Cindrič, *Študenti s Kranjske na dunajski univerzi*, p. 368. In his comprehensive work based on the documents from the Vienna university archive, the author in general asserts that students of urban origin strongly prevailed (more than 60 %) among the students from Carniola (i.e. Slovenes and Germans) at the Vienna Alma Mater Rudolphini in the years 1848–1918, whereas only a solid fifth (21.9 %) of the students were of the peasantry origin. He, however, points out that students from urban areas mostly came from lower middle classes and *Bildungsbürgertum*, whereas there were only a very few students (a mere 1.8%) who came from *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*.

The differences among them were mainly dogmatic and political, depending on the views of potentials and prospects of the Slovene national movement as well as the role of the church and clergy in it, but they did not express conflicting social interests. It is true that catholic leaders appealed in the first place to the peasants and adjusted their political language to their demands. The liberal spokesmen and leaders, however, referred to the rising middle class and tried to reflect its aspirations and ambitions. They were more or less all educated men (mainly lawyers, some of them graduates of philosophy and others doctors), graduated at the same or similar universities and in a majority poorly (or not at all) involved in economic or business activities. Their ideas about social and economic as well as political change and modernization were thus – despite the political and ideological differences – much more similar than they were ready to admit or even than it might seem at the first sight.⁸

The central figure of the Slovene politics and movement in the 1860s and 1870s was a veterinary surgeon Janez Bleiweis. He was a true conservative, but also an adherent of reforms and a realistic, practical man, brought up in the enlightenment and rationalist spirit, who persistently maintained that national prosperity and national autonomy could not be achieved without a firm social and economic basis. He was, however, at the same time persuaded that the territory with the Slovene speaking population should only slowly change its social and economic structure and in this sense only gradually industrialize because of the prevailing and modernized agriculture. He based this standpoint on the one side on the physiocratic image of a peasant (farmer) as the most important of the “productive states” and an indispensable element of social stability, and on the other side on quite a realistic fact that Slovenes, lacking capital and extended trade and industrial network, had little potential for their own industrial development. Thus, opening to foreign capital and faster economic and social change would accelerate Germanization and become a dangerous threat to the process of Slovene national emancipation.

In Bleiweis’ opinion, economic and social processes should run simultaneously with the process of nation building and nationalization of the Slovene speaking population, maintaining the balance between different social and different ethnic groups, while the government and the State were supposed to keep watch over them and provide protection for the more vulnerable (in economic, social or national sense). Although since the 1860s he and his adherents agreed that the economy should get rid of the “old, traditional” chains and that liberal competition was an important incentive to economic development, they rejected the Austrian government’s flirtation with liberal economic policy and accused

⁸ Peter Vodopivec, “Slovene Intellectuals’ Response to Political and Social Modernisation in the Nineteenth and at the Beginning of the Twentieth Centuries”, *Journal of the Society for Slovene Studies*, 23, 2001, No. 1-2, (published in October 2003), pp. 6-7.

the governments in Vienna of detrimentally supporting “large factory owners, large merchants and large capital.”⁹

Bleiweis’ liberal opponents loudly criticized his political and cultural conservatism, but at the same time shared his mistrust of a more radical social and economic change. They also maintained that “simple national-economic conditions” in the provinces populated by Slovene speaking population should be changed as soon as possible. In their opinion, this could be done in the first place by raising “national culture” and by providing “material assistance to the nation”. Nevertheless, their social vision and ideas were no more modern than those of Bleiweis and his adherents, since they did not seek the future of Slovene society in a capitalist middle class transformation, but in the preservation of tradition, peasantry, and a slow-down of the impending social and economic changes. A writer, linguist and journalist Fran Levstik was a notorious free thinker and democrat owing to his national radicalism, his critical attitude towards the clergy, and his opposition to the opportunistic authoritarianism of the conservatives. However, he saw the Slovene future “in the brotherhood of Slavic nations” purified of any foreign element, in which there would be no room for an “example of a more developed and technologically more progressive (German) environment”; it would be based on the rural tradition and “a sort of primordial Slavic community” rooted in the language and the literature.¹⁰ A poet and writer Josip Stritar was also a determined opponent of Bleiweis and Slovene conservatives, but in his social views, he was also their adherent. His unfinished story *The Ninth Country*, which was the first Slovene social utopia, features (partly ironically and partly seriously) an ideal Slovene society as a Slavic-Slovene rural collectivist democracy governed by solidarity and founded on the common ethnic origin and national harmony. Stritar’s Slovene Ninth Country is thus an island surrounded only by sea and with no neighbours. It is an orderly landscape where farmers work during the day and sit to converse and read journals and books at night. They speak and write literary Slovene, adopt important decisions by a majority of adult (male) votes, and tolerantly and self critically solve mutual disagreements.¹¹

An intermingling of liberal-progressive and conservative beliefs can also be found in the views of most other Slovene liberal politicians and educated men.¹² Since the 1860s – following the Czech model – they strived for systematic

9 Peter Vodopivec, “Socialni in gospodarski nazori Bleiweisovega kroga” (Social and Economic Views of the Bleiweis Circle), *O gospodarskih in socialnih nazorih na Slovenskem v 19. stoletju* (*On Economic and Social Views on Slovene Territory in the 19th Century*) (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2006), pp. 131-150.

10 Dimitrij Rupel, *Svobodne besede* (*Free Words*), Koper: Lipa, 1976, p. 219.

11 Josip Stritar, “Deveta dežela” (*The Ninth Country*), *Zbrano delo 4*, (ed. France Koblar, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1954), pp. 305-38.

12 The question of how liberal Slovene liberals really were is of course a problem in itself. I use the designation as generally used in the Slovene historiography, although one may ask how justified it really was. The replacement of »liberals« with »freethinkers« or »progressives« seems even less persuasive.

establishing of local savings banks and Schulze-Delitsch type cooperatives, whose main purpose was to help small producers (craftsmen, tradesmen and bigger farmers) to get out of debts and to promote the “productivity of Slovene regions through all types of national efforts”, as they put it. But they persistently rejected liberal capitalism and modern industrialization. In the 1870s and partly also in the 1880s, some of them even argued that the Slavs and Slovenes, if they wished to avoid the decay of their economies and social tensions caused by liberal capitalism and individualism, should take a different route to development than the Western Europe. In this respect, they idealized the Russian and South Slav agricultural collectivism and Russian craft cooperatives. They claimed that social tensions which followed the introduction of capitalist production in the rapidly developing Austrian provinces and the European West could be alleviated by stimulating an awareness of common interests, by forming family and craft cooperatives and even by “social ownership of people’s labour, producing in the same areas of the economy”, as Josip Sernec, a lawyer by profession and one of the founders of the liberal savings banks, put it in 1874.¹³ Josip Vošnjak, another prominent liberal leader and a practicing doctor by profession, was a little more realistic, clearly rejecting the ideas that Russian and South Slav cooperatives could serve as a model for solving the problems of the indebted Slovene farmers. He proposed the indivisibility of the farmers’ lands within the scope of a permanent farmer’s home, which was supposed to ensure survival of the farming families. But in the mid-1880s, Vošnjak was also of the opinion that the so called progress and the 19th century technical inventions had not increased general prosperity and “happiness”, which was mostly due to liberal capitalism, which enabled the “unlimited accumulation of wealth” by individuals and caused the poverty in which “the present human race is writhing and moaning”.¹⁴

As elsewhere in Cisleithania, the economic collapse of 1873 led to several years of stagnation also in the provinces populated by the Slovene speaking population. It was, however, not followed by a long-term depression or a more radical economic halt, which would influence to a greater extent the economic trends or deeply interfere with the existing socio-economic structure. In this sense, the crisis of 1873 had more tangible political, ideological and psychological than economic and social consequences also in Slovene regions, like elsewhere in the Monarchy. It strengthened the anti-liberal disposition on all sides, but simultaneously it reinforced the conviction that social and economic changes were inevitable and that the economy had to follow more decisively the path of modernization. While Bleiweis’ views that physiocratically modernized agriculture and the peasantry should remain the economic and social basis of the

¹³ Josip Sernec, *Der Matreialismus und das Slaventhum*, Marburg 1874, pp. 24-25, 32-42.

¹⁴ Dr. Josip Vošnjak, “Ob agrarnem vprašanju” (Besides the Agrarian Issue), *Letopis Matice Slovenske za leto 1984* (*Yearbook of Matica Slovenska for 1984*), (Ljubljana: Matica Slovenska, 1885), pp. 72-81.

Slovene development still had numerous adherents in the Slovene political and educated elites even in the 1880s and 1890s, voices raised after the crisis arguing that capitalism and “large factories” were inevitably also the Slovene future, unless the Slovenes wanted to lag even more behind the faster developing Austrian and Western European regions.

The ideas of what should be done in practice were, however, unclear and uncertain. The widespread net of Catholic Raiffeisen type cooperatives, established at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, was of major significance, as they helped prevent the break-up of agriculture and the peasantry burdened with debts. At the same time, the mobilized personal savings for investment in agriculture and business provided useful economic education and trained the farmers and small producers in organizational and managerial skills. But its main goal was still modernization in the frames of the existing social and economic structure and not its gradual change. The first successful Slovene commercial bank investing to a greater extent into business and industry was founded only in 1900 on the initiative of the liberal leader Ivan Hribar. As it was established with the backing from the Czech *Živnostenska banka*, its leading banking staff was Czech. Also Slovene students studying in Prague were under the strong influence of the Czech and Masaryk's ideas. At the beginning of the 20th century, they claimed that the main task of the nationally conscious educated classes was to broaden the cultural horizons and social conditions of the population. Some of them founded a Business Party in 1906, which however folded two years later as it failed to find an adequate political and social support.

Several generations of Slovene students of law, philosophy, medicine, natural and technical sciences who studied at the Austrian universities in the second half of the 19th century and before the WWI, mentioned in their correspondences, memoirs and autobiographies various professors who had permanently influenced their professional orientations and work. Although there has so far been no systematic overview or any detailed historiography assessment of these influences, some conclusions can be made on the basis of the existing data. Apparently, under the influence of the experience gained during their studies at Austrian university centres and their contacts with the prominent representatives of the Austrian scientific and cultural milieu, young Slovene educated elites formed not only their own political and literary ideologies, but also Slovene scientific literature and terminology. In the area of civics and national economy, they were mainly influenced by Lorenz Stein, Albert Schäffle and the representatives of the Vienna school of history. The social reformists – from a more liberal Josip Vošnjak to a Christian socialist Janez Evangelist Krek – were under the influence of Karl von Vogelsang. The foundations of Slovene natural sciences were laid by a generation of Slovene students who studied at the Alma mater Rudolphina. Art historians were particularly affected by Max Dvorak, whereas Slovene architects Jože Plečnik, Maks Fabiani and Ivan Jager were all students of Otto Wagner.

And finally, at the beginning of the 20th century, a circle of young educated men prospered in Slovene politics, who embraced the ideas of Massaryk and his circle during their studies in Prague and who tried to implement these ideas also in the Slovene political life.

In the second half of the 19th century, Slovene educated elites thus succeeded in establishing the most important cultural institutions, newspapers, scientific and cultural journals, societies and a widely used literary language with its own technical and scientific terminology. Slovene cultural development advanced substantially and the cultural activities and institutions became the central dynamic factor of the nation building process. Thanks to the spread of literacy and education, also reading became a popular pastime, which by increasing number of people turning to Slovene newspapers and books accelerated the process of nationalization and national integration. By the end of the 19th century, Modernism had – despite the opposition of the conservatives – made its way into Slovene art, architecture and also literature, which continued to be the dominant form of artistic expression. In the scientific work, there were more opportunities in history, linguistics, law and social sciences than in natural sciences, medicine and technical studies, mostly because of the lack of adequate institutions and university. Nevertheless, the cultural changes experienced by the Slovene speaking population in the second half of the 19th century and before the WWI were much more fundamental and far-reaching than the social and economic ones. National aspirations of the educated elites and their pragmatic focusing on the nationality, which had doubtlessly a positive, stimulating impact on cultural development, became a troubling obstacle to a faster social and economic change. Although the falling number of people recorded as Slovene speaking in Styria and Carinthia by the Austrian statistics was understood as a dangerous threat, it was at the same time used by political and educated elites as an argument against faster social and economic change and liberal ideas of the German and Italian speaking middle classes.

Before the WWI, the Slovene educated elites were thus much more successful in their national emancipation endeavours than in creating a more favourable and adequate environment for a faster social and economic change and modernization. They were in this sense – according to the Austrian and German social historians – not much different from the educated elites elsewhere in the Central Europe and the German Empire. “The educated middle classes focusing on a career in public service were in the Central Europe a unique functional elite (*Funktionselite*),” maintained a German social historian Hans Ulrich Wehler, “different from the union of the nobility, the city and Oxbridge in Great Britain and different from the union of the great bourgeoisie, nobility and the graduates of Grand Ecoles in France”.¹⁵ Without doubt, schools, educational institutions

¹⁵ Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Wie bürgerlich war das Deutsche Kaiserreich?, Aus der Geschichte lernen?* (München: C.H. Beck, 1988), p. 184.

and universities had a central role in the process of the formation of the Slovene educated middle classes (*Bildungsbürgerthum*) and consequently the process of the Slovene nation building in the second half of the 19th century. What was still missing was stronger middle class economic elite which would be able more resolutely to part with tradition and pave the way for modernity. In the Slovene case, the latter could only take place after the radical change of the political, national, cultural and economic environment after 1918 and the formation of the Yugoslav state.