

Lányok, asszonyok Szlovákiában és Magyarországon (1955–1989).  
Ahogy két etnológus nő látta / Dievčatá, ženy na Slovensku a  
v Maďarsku (1955–1989). Očami dvoch etnologičiek [Girls and  
Women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955–1989): Through the Eyes  
of Two Female Ethnologists]. By Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky.  
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In the first half of the 1990s, directly after the complex system changes in the ex-Soviet-bloc countries, women's everyday life, social status, and personal experiences under state socialism were favored subjects of authors analysing processes of transition. The books concerned were mostly by foreign authors, namely women who came from western democracies to East and Central Europe to do research after the political openings. The question they most often raised was whether women's position was better or worse under state socialism than after the transitions. What were the gains and the painful losses for women as a social group in the newly forming political democracies and market economies?<sup>1</sup> These studies often contained an evaluation of women's position and gender relations under state socialism. The inquiry was frequently based on sociological studies but often applied interdisciplinary approaches. Their characteristic perspective was gender equality. Women were discussed in the framework of gender relations, within the state socialist legal system and institutional settings. These characteristic studies on transitionology examined women's position in comparison with men's, with the expectation that equality should be guaranteed in most social arenas, such as the labor market, education, political representation, leadership positions, in the household, and in caring responsibilities. Women within the gender relations of national contexts were observed according to such factors as, for example, paid work, domestic work,

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1 See, for example, the referred works in the literature by the authors: Bútorová, et al., *She and He in Slovakia*; Corrin, *Magyar Women*; Funk and Mueller, eds, *Gender Politics*; Gal and Kligman, eds, *The Politics of Gender*; Griffin, ed., *Women's Employment*; Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market*; Gray, *Soviet Women*.

family considerations, social policy developments, health care, attitudes and images towards gender relations, and images of women in culture.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are certain overlaps in themes. *Girls and Women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955–1989): Through the Eyes of Two Female Ethnologists*, the recent book by two ethnologist women, Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky, is only loosely connected to the former series of works. The authors themselves claim that they do not intend to relate to recent women's history projects and do not intend to re-evaluate<sup>3</sup> the epoch of state-socialism.<sup>4</sup> Botiková and Deáky follow a different path. The genre is in fact a genuine initiative, that even they themselves label as 'unusual'. They describe the way they present their findings as similar to the fragmented vision in a kaleidoscope. Indeed, the book is multi-colored and is related to different research fields supplemented by a personal, subjective tone, consciously reflected by the authors. (In fact, even the period they cover is defined on a personal basis, i.e., beginning with the two authors' birth year). The book is outstanding also because of its comparative methodology. Comparative studies concerning women in Soviet bloc societies are also rather unique. The few examples of such undertakings include, for example, the research of the young scholar, Hajnalka Magyari, Kovácsné, who examines women under state socialism in Romania and Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the field of science that Botiková and Deáky employ, the book is primarily based on ethnography and ethnology studies in a historical perspective.<sup>6</sup> This approach includes elements of classical folk culture research, ethnography, understood as a systematic study of particular cultures, involving the examination of participants' behavior in a given social sphere. At the same time, ethnology is an academic field that concentrates more on comparing different social groups (e.g., ethnicities) and analysing characteristics of different peoples and their relationships. A primary methodological tool of an ethnographic study is participant observation, which involves that the researcher should be present in the everyday life of the people examined. The researcher documents what she/he experiences in the community, for example, the repeated patterns of social interactions and habits. The authors apply the ethnology approach with historical perspectives, i.e., they aim to follow and describe the changes in these communities over the forty years of

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2 See, for example, the themes of Corrin's book, *Magyar Women*.

3 As an example, for an evaluative and analytical study of gender relations during state socialism, see Zimmermann, "A gender-rezsim."

4 Botiková and Deáky, *Lányok asszonyok*, 14.

5 Kovácsné Magyari, "Női szerepek."

6 The ethnography approach combined with the social history approach was defined as historical ethnography by János Bali in his presentation at the book launch (December 2022, Eötvös Loránd University).

state socialist rule. They collect the data and mostly rely on results of their previous research in the field.

Ethnography, on the other hand, could also imply the use of quantitative data. The book rarely includes quantitative data, and individual personal interviews as such can hardly be found in source references. In addition to references to previous data collections in the field and an overview of the secondary literature, the authors' interdisciplinary approach could have allowed the inclusion of more of these types of sources.

Botiková and Deáky both come from an ethnology background. They emphasize the importance of the comparative feature of their work. Their main aim, as outlined in the Introduction to the book, is to "search for similarities and parallels between the history of the two countries" that have been separate since 1918. They argue that we do not have sufficient knowledge about and mutual interest in the two different cultures and countries. They find that the increasing awareness of similarities might help to strengthen bonds between the two communities. Although before 1993 Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia, the book discusses it as a separate unit, though in certain cases, there are no separate statistical data for Slovakia during state socialism, but only for the entire country. By discussing Slovakia separately, the book might contribute to the formation of national identities. There is another justification for dealing with Slovakia rather than the entire (previous) country including the Czechs. The Slovak and the Hungarian communities live next to each other, and their interactions have always been more common and significant. The people living on the two sides of the Hungarian and Slovak border are linked together in many ways, including frequent family ties.

However, the book does not discuss the national identities of ethnic minorities, not even the fact that there are significant Hungarian speaking populations in Slovakia, and Slovakian minorities in Hungary. The authors consciously decided not to elaborate this question. Apart from a few examples, like Hungarian journals that were available in Slovakia, cases of mixed marriages, or dual language epitaphs, they fail to address the issues of multiple language usage and other significant aspects of the situation of ethnic minorities.

The key motives the studies are centered around is the dynamism of the prevalence of traditions and the ways of accommodation to the (often forced) new circumstances defining citizens' everyday life during state socialism. The question they aim to answer is how the changes affected women, particularly in their daily routines. The authors' presupposition is that the state socialism established in these countries by the soviet regime after World War II and led by the oppressive dictatorship of communist parties should be assessed as coercion, as the violent imposition of the new rule on the population, especially in the 1950s. The system change penetrated people's lives. The authors argue that in Slovakia and Hungary the population did not necessarily

interiorize Stalinist values and ideology. Instead, they developed strategies of resilience, of silent (personal) resistance, and created 'hybrid' solutions to accommodate the new circumstances. Most typically, this meant that certain traditional elements of culture or behaviors survived and were continued. People did not change, for example, their festivities, the celebration of religious holidays, or the habit of baptizing newborns.

In Slovakia and Hungary of the 1960s, some 80–85 percent of babies were still christened.<sup>7</sup> The authors counterpoint this cherished religious tradition with a detailed description of the forced/expected celebration of public 'name giving' celebrations that suited the ideology of the soviet system. On such public occasions, several mothers were holding their babies, usually with a relatively high number of participants, mostly colleagues, attending. At this artificial inaugural ceremony, mothers and their infants were greeted with pioneers' songs and speeches by communist functionaries. Afterwards, the parents were offered a modest treat, such as sandwiches, sweets, and refreshments. Although people attended such events (because they were expected to do so and were monitored at their workplaces), they did not necessarily interiorize the values they mediated. The book discusses these celebrations as part of the presentation of individuals' entire life cycle from birth to death, together with the customs and habits that prevailed, as well as the ones that had been modified or replaced by new forms.

As a rule, people's views and traditional beliefs were not explicitly declared to the outside world but were kept in the family or the private sphere. A type of 'double-speak' was developed: one language and mentality was kept for the family and one's private life, and another for the outside world. The authors argue that traces of these strategies could be documented in both the Hungarian and the Slovakian population. The main feature of resilience strategies was 'inner resistance'. This meant trying to save one's mind and opinion, that is, maintaining the 'inner' freedom of thought, manners, and values within the private sphere in contrast to the coercive outside world of the public. Although statements about the population are often formulated as generalisations, the authors are aware of the fact that the communist rule did not have the same meaning for all individuals in society. Some interpreted it more as coercion, while others tended to accept and acknowledge the system as it was.

The authors construct their argument through the documentation of everyday life, the habits, and lifestyles in the dynamism of giving answers to challenges of structural and institutional changes. State celebrations and private holidays are one of the best terrains to demonstrate these dynamics. The authors describe and analyse the elements and the features of state celebrations and discuss what red letter days may have meant to the population, and what they did not mediate. For instance,

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7 Botiková and Deáky, *Lányok asszonyok*, 210.

1<sup>st</sup> May, the official 'Labor Day' is described as a pertinent example of fulfilling the expectations of the soviet system (with the obligatory huge marches of employees from all workplaces in front of the communist leaders posing on the top of tribunes) while being a festive day with picnics, beer drinking, and having fun outdoors.

In the case of the church or religious holidays like Christmas and Easter, the authorities made an effort to annihilate their religious content, giving the feasts new names and new meanings. Botiková and Deáky describe how people both in Slovakia and Hungary kept these celebrations in the private sphere and tried to maintain their original meanings. In terms of how women related to customs, the authors show that women continued to be fully responsible for household duties not only in everyday life but also concerning these feasts. The preparations, making the food, cleaning the house, inviting guests, ensuring the special festive attires and the right clothes for everyone in the family were all women's duties. In fact, this relates to the general prevalence of traditional norms concerning gender relations in both societies, even at a time when women were already in employment. This 'double burden' on women's shoulders was identical not only in these two countries but all through the ex-soviet bloc.

International Women's Day is discussed among the official holidays. Yet, compared to the descriptions of other official holidays, the motives and ways of celebrating it would deserve deeper analysis. It would be intriguing to get the reasons for why, unlike 8<sup>th</sup> March for women in western democracies, it mostly remained an official, compulsory and, at the same time, mostly alienated celebration for women in this region. (It seems rather unfortunate that the short historical overview of Women's Day is given no more than a footnote. This paragraph could have been part of the main text, in the same way as descriptions of other official holidays.)

The manifest similarities in the dynamics of demographic changes and family relations are presented by showing that in certain tendencies there were only some periodical differences between Slovakia and Hungary. The authors' main objective is to demonstrate the changes in family structures during state socialist rule: for example, the time of the first marriage, childbirth, the diversification of family forms, divorce, birth control, the changing functions and disappearance of multi-generational families, the effects of commuting and new housing estates on the core of family life. It remains an open question though, as it is not very convincingly elaborated, whether all the changes could be interpreted as the impact of the state socialist system. A short look at tendencies in the modern world outside the region might have given the alternative explanation that, in other parts of the world as well, changes in family relations were an integral part of modernisation processes, industrialisation, and women's emancipation. Nevertheless, it is still worth investigating further differences between ex-Soviet bloc countries.

The two countries' political establishments, legal systems, economies, and the institutions in the given period are referred to in their effects on specific themes but are not analysed in depth. Yet, some of the institutions, such as the generally available health care system or schooling and education would have deserved more attention, as these were fundamental in women's life in Slovakia and Hungary. It has to be admitted though that the medicalisation of childbirth as a major change and the system of childcare institutions are discussed in the contexts of both countries.

The book thoroughly describes particular elements of everyday life in state socialism. In their approach, the descriptions are strongly connected to the ethnographic overview of a given culture. Thus, for example, there are chapters devoted to nutrition, clothing, hygiene, and holidays (as noted already). The chapters usually begin with a general introduction to the theme, for example, by providing a definition of the notion of 'nutrition'. These rather general introductory definitions and descriptions give the flavour of a textbook. Therefore, it might serve as useful reading for future students of ethnography or anthropology. It seems however that the folklore-centered approach provides more emphasis to the description of rural communities than to urban life.

There might be a risk in providing numerous details concerning people's everyday habits, customs, and even their utility items in the household, namely that 'you do not always see the wood for the trees'—as the proverb goes. That is, the overreaching descriptions of details of everyday life may alter and shift the focus from women themselves, their experiences, and their particular point of view. I am aware that this remark sounds as if formulated outside the scholarly realm of ethnography and ethnology. Indeed, it originates much more from the approach of interdisciplinary fields of women's and gender studies. The question still remains whether it may be the task of an ethnographic undertaking to discuss the meanings of the features of everyday life for the people involved. If yes, it would be valuable to investigate more the meanings behind structural changes and to identify how they were reflected in women's individual life experiences.

The book is richly illustrated by photos from unique collections, individual heritages and public archives or parts of earlier field research. They depict primarily women in the most diverse places and surroundings: for example, at their workplaces, in fields of agricultural cooperatives, on holiday, at public events with colleagues, friends, and their company, and in their family circle. However, since illustrations are valuable visual representations of the subject, it would have been exciting and informative if the authors had given more detailed analyses of individual photos. At least in the case of certain special examples, the story behind the illustrations would have given more insight into individual cases. Such descriptions could have balanced the general approach in the narrative. The authors are most

probably aware of numerous personal life stories and events (although few examples are cited in the book) that could strengthen the discussions of general tendencies.

The book, in its genre of historical ethnography, is unique and enlightening especially for readers who did not live under state socialist rule because they are too young or they speak no Slovak or Hungarian. If the book is translated, for foreign readers, it will be a treasure box full of stimulating details of women's lives and thoughtful descriptions of the world of Slovakia and Hungary in the forty years leading to the regime change.

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