

WORKSHOP
BUILDING CULTURAL NATIONS
THE MATICA AND EQUIVALENT INTERMEDIARY STRUCTURES IN EUROPE
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Theme

National thought as it emerged in the nineteenth century was not merely a political ideology, it also had an important cultural component. One of the most important sources of inspiration for nascent nationalism was philological research into the nation's cultural 'roots' and rootedness. During the 19th century cultural institutions sprung up all over Europe to coordinate these endeavours.

In nineteenth century Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe especially, national movements perceived the nation above all as a community defined by language, culture and history. They were consequently, at the stage of national agitation, focused on (re)constructing and improving their cultures. Above all they tried to further literature and scientific texts, written in newly codified and modernized national languages, and to present it to the public in printed form (books and journals).

To support that aim, new institutions were formed. Within the Slavic national movements, a particular kind of society established itself: following the example of the first of them – the Matica srpska (founded in 1826 by Hungarian Serbs in Pest) – they adopted the name of 'matica', a vague term which had positive connotations above all with 'mother' (as diminutive), but could also mean 'queen-bee'. The Serbian matica was followed by Czech (1831), Illirian (1838/43, renamed Croatian in 1853), (Lusatia-) Sorbian (1847), Galician-Ruthenian (in Lviv, 1848), Moravian (1852), Dalmatian (1862), Slovak (1863) and Slovenian (1864) matice. All of them had in common that their task was to support and organise the printing of books (poetry, fiction, dictionaries, learned studies) and journals, which without their financial and intellectual support would not have been published. Some of them also organised the collecting of folklore and old prints, they established libraries, initiated linguistic codification and language reform, and later on, during the so-called constitutional stage, participated in public and political life. They inspired each other, but the structure of their activities differed in time and space. They differed also in their social background and in the way they gained financial support.

Later, with the national movement developing into a mass movement, the name matica was given to new, specialised institutions, for example in the cause of developing national musical culture (e.g. the Glasbena Matica Ljubljana, 1871) or for supporting (minority) schools (e.g. the Matice školská in Bohemia). On the other hand, we know of cultural institutions and societies that also strived for the improvement and dissemination of national literature and language, but did not call themselves 'matice'. Other institutions developed from matice losing the name in the process (e.g. the Ukrainian Shevchenko Scientific Society in Galicia) or appeared earlier, influencing the matica project (for instance the Ossolineum – Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, founded for the Polish nation in 1817 and opening ten years later in Habsburgian Lemberg). They all had turbulent histories but are in many cases still in operation.

In most cases, the matice received considerable attention in the context of each national historiography. However, that knowledge about singular cases is not only impaired by being in different languages, it also says very little about the specificity or commonality of their characteristics. Before the workshop, comparative studies of these institutions were indeed very rare and/or neglected (e.g. Stanley Kimball, *The Austro-Slav revival: a study of nineteenth-century literary foundations*, Philadelphia, 1973) or were limited in scope and language (for instance, see the proceedings of an international conference: *Kulturno-politički pokreti naroda Habsburške Monarhije u XIX. veku*, Novi Sad, 1983). Very limited was also our knowledge of the social and financial aspects of their organisation and activities. They were moreover sometimes concerned with the regional application of national goals (Moravian, Dalmatian, Ruthenian), thus not always fitting easily into the national projects which later became

dominant and therefore remaining in some cases part of a contested legacy; so, the historical representation of matice often remains controversial.

Moreover, national movements and their cultural goals and means were not limited to the Habsburg Empire. The workshop was the first concerted attempt to identify institutions analogue to the matice in the other parts of Europe. As these institutions played a key role in the early stages of the national revival in Europe, such a comparative study was long overdue.