

www.forumhistoriae.sk



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



© 2022 The Author(s)  
© 2022 Institute of History,  
Slovak Academy of Sciences

## The Normativity of a Nation: A Case Study of Slovene Historians in Early Post-socialism

Tjaša Konovšek

### Keywords

nation, historians, post-socialism, Slovenia, conceptual history

### DOI

10.31577/forhist.2022.16.1.8

### Author

Tjaša Konovšek  
Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, Ljubljana  
Privoz 11  
SI – 1000 Ljubljana  
Slovenia  
Email: [tjasa.konovsek@inz.si](mailto:tjasa.konovsek@inz.si)  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8872-692X

### Cite

KONOVŠEK, Tjaša. The Normativity of a Nation: A Case Study of Slovene Historians in Early Post-socialism. In *Forum Historiae*, 2022, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 123–137, doi: 10.31577/forhist.2022.16.1.8

### Abstract

KONOVŠEK, Tjaša. The Normativity of a Nation: A Case Study of Slovene Historians in Early Post-socialism.

This paper focuses on an issue many would consider a minor episode in Slovene historiography. A public discussion took place on the pages of *Delo*, one of the central Slovene newspapers in 1993, where some of the most prominent historians debated the relationship between the nation, politics and history, eventually roughly establishing two different world-views: one connected to past experiences and the other focused on the unknown of the future. Within the framework of conceptual history, this paper tackles the concept of “nation” as it was understood by these debaters themselves, establishing an understanding within the specific historical circumstances to which it belonged, thus historicizing the debate itself. While the question of 1989 as a break has generally already been well-researched with regard to politics, economy and memory, much less is known about the connections between the break, historiography and politics. Uncovering more than superficial disagreements within a community of historians, this paper aims not to be solely a contribution to the understanding of nationalism in post-socialism between a small group of people, but rather, to underline the link between a radically different view of the past among professional historians and the establishment of a new political and social order after 1989. Some historians involved realized the opportunity to directly channel their views into political and state-related activities, such as a bilateral commission and the educational system.

A basic understanding of the concept of “nation” as set by Benedict Anderson is that of the nation as an idea of an imagined community based on the shared experience of a synchronized time, enjoying roughly the same formative experience from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. However, at the same time, the concept of “nation” itself as used in other contexts includes a number of radical asynchronicities, between and within different communities, such as political, generational, ethnic, professional and others.<sup>1</sup> One such instance is Helge Jordheim’s case of the European nation states and their own temporalities when meeting in the common European space in light of European economic and political integration. The other is, on

---

The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0281).

- 1 ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London : Verso, 1991; JORDHEIM, Helge. Europe at Different Speeds: Asynchronicities and Multiple Times in European Conceptual History. In STEINMETZ, Willibald – FREEDEN, Michael – FERNÁNDEZ-SEBASTIÁN, Javier (eds.) *Conceptual History in the European Space*. New York; Oxford : Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 53–54.

a much smaller scale, the debate under examination here. During the aforementioned disagreement between Slovene historians in 1993, the concept of “nation” emerged as an expression of asynchronized time and experience among the participants, having lived through the same events but subjectively experiencing them fundamentally differently. In their individual thinking, some parts of the historical narrative were pulled together while others pushed further away. Divisions within the historical community revealed the concept of “nation” as being infused with different temporal structures and experiences by, in this case, historians in order to achieve different ends.

By analysing and charting the meaning of “nation” in Janko Prunk’s work, *Slovenski narodni vzpon* (The Slovene national ascent),<sup>2</sup> as well as his fellow historians’ reactions to the work, a certain understanding of “nation” will be shown to have had telling consequences in the newly established Slovene nation-state. Such a debate was indeed carried out in the years immediately after a profound mobilization of national sentiment in Slovenia. Historians included actively participated in consolidation of the political and social change of early post-socialism beyond the narrow academic world, such as being active in politics, state commissions, minority protection, writing primary school textbooks and crafting entries in new, post-communist Slovene encyclopaedias and lexicons.

Unlike in the 1993 debate, however, questions about the historical events of the last few centuries will take a secondary role. Instead, the understanding of the concept of “nation” will unfold in the same way the discussion participants used it. Drawing from the field of conceptual history, meanings hidden within the idea of “nation” will be examined and the concept itself connected to the political and social circumstances that were entrenched in the debate, which in turn, influenced the individual actions of the historians involved, in this way taking into account the reciprocity between historical circumstances and individual agency evident in the public discussion occurring in *Delo*’s literature section which followed the publication of *Slovenski narodni vzpon*.<sup>3</sup>

The main actors in the debate were all prominent, publicly recognized Slovene historians. Janko Prunk, author of the book that kindled the discussion, obtained his doctoral degree in history at the University of Ljubljana in 1976.<sup>4</sup> In later years, he became a researcher and visiting professor at the University of Freiburg (1984–1985 and 1994–1995) and the University of Cologne (1988–1989), all the while staying in touch with the Slovene academic circles. From 1966 to 1995, he was on the staff of the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University

2 PRUNK, Janko. *Slovenski narodni vzpon. Narodna politika (1768–1992)*. Ljubljana : Državna založba Slovenije, 1993.

3 KOSELLECK, Reinhart. *Futures past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 75–76.

4 PRUNK, Janko. *Pot krščanskih socialistov v Osvobodilno fronto slovenskega naroda: razvoj 1918–1941*. Doctoral dissertation. Ljubljana : University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, 1976.

of Ljubljana.<sup>5</sup> Within the setting of the early post-socialism, the Institute of Contemporary History and the University of Ljubljana were the leading institutions in historiographical research of the post-1918 period in Slovenia.<sup>6</sup>

The first historian to respond to Prunk's work, Peter Vodopivec, likewise obtained his doctoral degree at the University of Ljubljana only two years after Prunk, in 1978.<sup>7</sup> Like Prunk, Vodopivec also spent considerable time abroad continuing his studies in Paris (1978–1979) and the United States of America (1982), and was a visiting professor in Klagenfurt (1987), Cleveland (1991), Graz (1993) and Budapest (1995–1996). Also similar to Prunk, he maintained a professional position in Slovenia, employed at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana from 1979 to 1999, and from 1999 to 2012, as a researcher at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana.<sup>8</sup>

While both career trajectories feature many similarities, their historical perspectives developed through the early post-socialism years proved different in many ways. Vodopivec was credited particularly for bringing new approaches to Slovene historiography in the mid-80s through a professorship at the Faculty of Arts. His teaching helped prompt a new generation of Slovene historians to practice more innovative ways of writing history in the 1990s, including economic and cultural history, the history of everyday life, and the history of ideas in the traditionally tough and somewhat rigid field of political history. Many of his students, such as Igor Grdina and Janez Cvirn (both employed at the Faculty of Arts in 1993), were involved in the discussion that followed the release of Prunk's *Slovenski narodni vzpon* and Vodopivec's reaction to it.<sup>9</sup>

### The Book: *Slovenski narodni vzpon*

The many-sided unpredictable work, interests, and duties which the new time has brought since the fall of 1989 prolonged my writing of the book more than I planned. Still, I hope that with the gestation of both the time in Slovenia as well as the views on Slovene history, I have also matured myself and all that was in favour of the book. If nothing else, while writing this book I lived through the end-period of the long Slovene national development, the break of the state unity of the Yugoslav nations, and the creation of the independent Republic of Slovenia along with its international recognition. This fact alone allows and demands a considerably different view on the Slovene national path travelled in the past.<sup>10</sup>

Janko Prunk

Early in the winter of 1993, the Slovene public was introduced to one of the first research studies concerning Slovene political history, produced after the tumultuous years of 1989–1992. The manuscript, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*.

5 GUŠTIN, Damijan. Janko Prunk, sedemdesetletnik. In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2012, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 295–299.

6 DOLENC, Ervin. Slovensko zgodovino pisje o obdobju 1918–1991 po razpadu Jugoslavije. In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2004, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 113–129.

7 VODOPIVEC, Peter. Socialni in gospodarski nazori v slovenskih in sosednjih pokrajinah v predmarčni dobi. Doctoral dissertation. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, 1978.

8 LAZAREVIĆ, Žarko – GODEŠA, Bojan. Peter Vodopivec – ob 70. obletnici. In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2016, vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 205–207.

9 DOLENC 2004, pp. 115–116.

10 PRUNK 1993, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, pp. 8–9.

*Narodna politika (1768–1992)* (The Slovene national ascent. National politics, 1768–1992), was authored by well-known Slovene historian Janko Prunk. His newly published work illustrated the two and a half century long process of political development of a land that had only recently become an independent Republic of Slovenia. The approach he chose and the conclusions he drew soon turned out to be much more controversial for his historian colleagues than Prunk anticipated. While the introduction expressed gratitude to co-workers, colleagues and associates for their advice, collaboration, and support, many of the Slovene historians soon publicly expressed their opposition to the work, both for the way it was written as well as the conclusions it drew.

Starting in 1768, the book positioned the presumed beginning of the Slovene national existence into the time and space of the “European era of enlightenment,” within the frame of the Habsburg monarchy as a central European empire that offered sufficient civilizational ground for a “Slovene national rebirth.”<sup>11</sup> Maintaining a primordialist position, Prunk followed an purported linear path of the tiny Slovene nation through the hardships of the 19<sup>th</sup> and especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards national independence. With their own hands, so Prunk’s narration went, Slovenes liberated themselves thrice. First, from the chains of the Habsburg monarchy whose existence, despite its potential for enlightenment, was in opposition to the natural tendencies of the Slovene nation to operate its own state. Second, liberation from the occupation of fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and their ally Hungary, only to be faced with a third enemy, communism, which forced Slovenes back into a Yugoslav state and curtailed their national potential for decades. It was the final supposed liberation, the fall of socialism and Yugoslavia, that the author lived through while writing the book and that he interpreted as fair and just reparations for the long and gruesome history the Slovene nation has had to endure. Prunk used the fact that at the time of the book’s publication, Slovenes indeed lived in an independent, internationally recognized nation state, as supreme evidence for justification of his historical interpretation, which covered two and a half centuries in a little more than four hundred pages.

In late January 1993, the first public response to Prunk’s account was published in one of the most widely read Slovene newspapers, *Delo*. It was a short article written by an anonymous journalist who described a great number of visitors at the book’s launch, and praised the non-ideological affiliation of the celebrated author, the clear connection he drew between Slovene national history and European values and the complete assurance that this seminal work will become a fundamental, canonical work in the field of Slovene history and broader Slovene historiography.<sup>12</sup> As it transpired a few weeks later, not everybody shared the same enthusiasm in assessing Prunk’s interpretation. One of the author’s colleagues, Peter Vodopivec, took on the book’s eschatological reasoning in early March 1993, writing a sharp critique in *Delo*’s own book

11 Original: “evropska prosvetljenska doba” and “slovenski narodni preporod.” PRUNK 1993, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, p. 15.

12 M. Z. Slovenski narodni vzpon zgodovinarja Janka Prunka. In *Delo*, 23 January 1993, p. 5.



review.<sup>13</sup> Vodopivec's straight-forward and well-argued recension opened the door to a months long public debate among Slovene historians. They passionately discussed the place of socialism, World War II and recent democratic changes in Slovene history along with historical methodology through the lens that Prunk himself had established: the nation.<sup>14</sup>

### Context: Politics, History and Historiography

In 1993 Slovenia, the time was ripe for a debate on historical change and academic records. The events between 1989 and 1992 enabled a sudden, birds-eye perspective on what was only recently a living reality; with the end of state socialism, the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century suddenly seemed to come to a close, offering the opportunity for a different understanding of not only the present and the future, but also of the past.<sup>15</sup> Nineteen eighty-nine did bring crucial changes on the level of reshaping the Slovene political space, most notably changes of the republics' constitutions, even if the consequences became visible only in the next two years. Historiography—or more accurately, historians—did not exhibit any immediate reaction to the changes, but still, the end of socialism offered a unique backdrop for Prunk's 1993 book and the ensuing discussion.<sup>16</sup>

After decades-long and only partly effective debates within the Yugoslav Federation on whether to further centralize or decentralize its structure, individual Yugoslav Republics began changing their constitutions on their own accords. After the Federal Republic of Serbia arbitrarily altered its constitution in March 1989 to diminish the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina in its favour, Slovene political leadership responded with a similar move, passing amendments to the Slovene constitution in September and December 1989. Under pressure from a well-organized Slovene civil society and supported by the general public, the republic's socialist political elite enabled the registration of political parties and created conditions for democratic elections that took place in April 1990.<sup>17</sup>

In the two years following the election, Slovenia's political leadership was comprised of a group of newly established political parties joined in a coalition

- 
- 13 VODOPIVEC, Peter. Zamujena priložnost. Kako je obravnavana tema, ki je 'že dolgo vabila pisca'. In *Delo*, 4 March 1993, p. 14.
- 14 Most of the Slovene historians included in the 1993 debate knew or still know each other personally. Even if that sociological aspect is not at the forefront of this paper, it is still a factor that played into the way the debate proceeded. The relatively small Slovene social space meant that debaters were in some cases co-workers, or at the very least, familiar with each other's professional and political views and activities.
- 15 HOBBSAWM, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991*. London : Abacus, 1994, pp. 1–17; TRAVERSO, Enzo. *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 2; LUTHAR, Oto. Post-Socialist Historiography Between Democratization and New Exclusionist Politics of History. In LUTHAR, Oto (ed.) *Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits. Post-Communist Historiography Between Democratization and New Politics of History*. Budapest; New York : CEU Press, 2017, pp. 188–193.
- 16 HOZIĆ, Aida A. It happened elsewhere. Remembering 1989 in the former Yugoslavia. In BERNAHRD, Michael – KUBIK, Jan (eds.) *Twenty Years after Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 233.
- 17 MARK, James et al. 1989. *A Global History of Eastern Europe*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 12–20; REPE, Božo. *Jutri je nov dan. Slovenci in razpad Jugoslavije*. Ljubljana : Modrijan, 2002, pp. 177–183.

called “Demos”. Under their administration and in close cooperation with the former socialist elites, Slovenia continued with political and economic reforms, exited the Yugoslav Federation which was accompanied by ten days of armed conflict, accepted a new constitution and gained international recognition.<sup>18</sup> As elsewhere in the region, parliamentarism became the preferred form of government.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, after the first Slovene post-socialist coalition, Demos, lost its majority in the national assembly, a second election followed in December 1992. By 1993, the political space had reached a certain level of stability. With a convincing election win, control was handed to former socialist youth organization turned political party, the Liberal democratic party.<sup>20</sup>

The last decade of state socialism in Slovenia was closely tied to the national aspirations of the political and intellectual elite, who mainly expressed such wishes through encouraging the right of the people to determine their own form of statehood, more commonly known as the right to self-determination as it was formally stated in the constitution of 1974, through advocating broader use of the Slovene language in regard to the federation<sup>21</sup> and an intention to conserve the extensive study of Slovene literature in primary schools. Many instances that involved use of the Slovene language instead of Serbo-Croatian from the Yugoslav Federation, such as legal procedures and debates in the assembly, became opportunities to demonstrate support for Slovene anti-centralist politics.<sup>22</sup>

In the last decade of Yugoslavia's existence, the question of Slovene nationality surfaced among some of the most critical intellectuals of the time as a vital, unanswered question that held the key to the end of the Yugoslav political, social and economic crisis. Much of the criticism in the second half of the 1980s against the federation and socialist regime was articulated in terms of national freedom and independence, and to a lesser extent, other perceived European values. One such notable example was the 57<sup>th</sup> issue of *Nova revija* published in 1987 with the subheading *Prispevki za slovenski nacionalni program* (Contributions to the Slovene National Program). In it, a group of sixteen intellectuals, mostly prominent Slovene philosophers and sociologists, published their thoughts on issues such as the nation, Slovene statehood, use of the Slovene language, civil society, education and Slovenes

18 VILLA, Carlos Gonzáles. *Nova država za nov svetovni red: mednarodni vidiki osamosvojitve Slovenije*. Ljubljana : Založba/\*cf., 2017, pp. 181–237.

19 GAŠPARIČ, Jure. Change and Continuity: Implementing Parliamentary Democracy in Eastern Europe After 1989 with a Focus on Slovenia. In AERTS, Remieg et al. (eds.) *The Ideal of Parliament in Europe since 1800*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 239–254.

20 ZAJC, Marko. Pragmatični, skeptični, drobnjakarski: ideološka in programska izhodišča ZSMS/ZSMS-LS v letih 1989–90. In PEROVŠEK, Jurij – ŠORN, Mojca (eds.) *Narod – politika – država. Idejnopolični značaj strank na Slovenskem od konca 19. do začetka 21. stoletja*. Ljubljana : Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2020, pp. 243–266.

21 The most notable example that fuelled national sentiment was the trial of Janez Janša, Ivan Borštner, Franci Zavrl and David Tasić, who in 1988 were charged with leaking classified military information to the public in the magazine *Mladina*. Their trial was held in a military court and in Serbo-Croatian language. RAMET, Sabrina Petra. Slovenia's Road to Democracy. In *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5, 1993, pp. 870.

22 GABRIČ, Aleš. Uveljavljanje slovenščine kot uradnega jezika po drugi svetovni vojni. In ČEPIČ, Zdenko (ed.) *Slovenija v Jugoslaviji*. Ljubljana : Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2015, pp. 213–240.

living abroad.<sup>23</sup> As the editorial of this special issue specified, prompted by the crisis of Slovenes in Yugoslavia which manifested as despondency, emigration and the rising number of suicides in Slovenia, the contributors decided to publicly introduce options the Slovene state and its inhabitants had available when facing possible challenges within the Yugoslav federation in the near future.<sup>24</sup>

Stating an effort to minimize self-censorship, the editors of *Prispevki* reserved their decision to discuss the Slovene national, linguistic and state aspirations openly in the moment, when the topic became “hot and contentious.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this was a time when many Slovene intellectuals began to address the national question and by doing so, to openly represent different segments of society. As the editors of *Prispevki* explained, one of the most influential was none other than Janko Prunk’s paper in *Revija 2000*, a journal that covered “Christianity and culture.” When his book, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, was later published in 1993, he was already widely recognized not only as an esteemed fellow historian by his colleagues, but also clearly publicly profiled as an important influence and advocate of the nascent Slovene conservative political movement.

In return, Prunk primarily based the last chapter of *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, concerning the era and demise of state-socialism, on the works of authors who were published in the 57<sup>th</sup> issue of *Nova revija*, most notably Dimitrij Rupel, Ivan Urbančič, Tine Hribar and Spomenka Hribar.<sup>26</sup> His appropriated diagnosis of the Yugoslav crisis of 1980s was a direct reflection of this. The fault, according to Prunk, was in the socialist system itself, which had “a specific ideological blindness for the laws of nationalism,” suggesting that the crisis was an indicator of an overexerted self-management system that could offer no further possibilities for development. In its stead, the non-communist thinkers, with a direct focus on the nation, were the only ones that could offer a path forward.<sup>27</sup>

At this point, a distinction needs to be made between the relatively limited activity of certain groups of intellectuals and politicians in comparison with the general Slovene public, who mostly lived outside the capital and had only second-hand experience with the events that resonated among the political and intellectual elite. While the national sentiment in regard to the possible creation of an independent nation-state entered the minds of the broader Slovene public very late in the Yugoslav disintegration process, “nationality” was already the main focus of many publicly active intellectuals in the second half of the 1980s. The use of language, the national sentiment, and the ambition to create an independent Slovene state were all passionately debated within the Slovene public and political space, though, a clear distinc-

23 GABRIČ, Aleš. Zaostrenost mednacionalnih odnosov. In FIŠER, Jasna et al. (eds.) *Slovenska novejša zgodovina. Od programa Zedinjena Slovenija do mednarodnega priznanja Republike Slovenije 1848–1992*. Ljubljana : Mladinska knjiga, 2005, pp. 1171–1174.

24 GRAFENAUER, Niko (ed.) *Prispevki za slovenski nacionalni program*. Ljubljana : Cankarjeva založba, 1987, p. 1.

25 GRAFENAUER 1987, p. 2.

26 PRUNK 1993, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, pp. 403–427.

27 PRUNK 1993, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, pp. 412–418.

tion existed between the political and intellectual elite on one side and the general public on the other. While these issues came together to fuel political and economic change in the years between 1989 and 1992, the majority of Slovene citizens explicitly and repeatedly expressed their opinions in numerous public surveys, clearly framing their horizon of expectation within the Yugoslav Federation.<sup>28</sup>

## Setting the Stage

The break of 1989, the contested use of language and the aspirations of the Slovene political and intellectual elite for an independent nation state emerging in late Yugoslav socialism directly affected the analyses in Prunk's book, as well as the subsequent pointed reactions to it. Both Prunk and his fellow debaters were part of the intellectual, and in some cases political, elite that was actively involved in the conception and discussion of ideas that shaped the political and social development of the period between 1989 and 1992. In this view, *Slovenski narodni vzpon* was intrinsically tied to the early transition years and arrived as a final chapter, not only of Prunk's assumed development of the Slovene nation, but also of the political change of the last three years. A return to Europe, as Prunk suggested:

The Slovene nation decided to return to the modern European civilizational and integrational processes alone, independently, without a mediator, without the federal Yugoslav form. With this, Slovenes have returned to the civilizational environment that allowed us to become a modern national entity before the First World War (i.e. the central European environment of the Habsburg monarchy).<sup>29</sup>

The idea of “the return to Europe” was not, by far, a uniquely Slovene phenomenon of the time, it was more or less visible in all post-socialist countries, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where even specific political language was formed around it.<sup>30</sup> In the same vein, *Slovenski narodni vzpon* was presented to the public as a methodologically innovative synthesis that would support the independent Slovene state as a direct realization of the self-confidence and humanism of the Slovene national rebirth a couple of centuries ago.<sup>31</sup>

This overreaching theme became one of the first and central points of criticism that Vodopivec offered in his initial review, published at the beginning of March 1993. The national logic of a linear development heavily neglected the context and the reasoning of historical development and, as Vodopivec argued, presupposed a claim not supported by any convincing evidence of the “Slovene nation thinking about its complete state sovereignty in the last 200 years of the political development.” On the contrary, Vodopivec continued,

28 TOŠ, Niko (ed.) *Vrednote v prehodu I. Slovensko javno mnenje 1968–1990*. Ljubljana : Fakulteta za družbene vede, 1997, pp. xi–xii.

29 PRUNK, Janko. Sedanji narodni trenutek, perspektive. In *Sobotna priloga*, 7 August 1993, p. 21.

30 IVANČIČ, Matej. State of Grace: A Probe into Understanding Democratic Trust and Legitimacy Through the Eyes of the VPN (The Public Against Violence). In *Forum Historiae*, 2021, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 136, <https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2021.15.2.9>; TULMETS, Elsa. *East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective. Back to Europe and the EU's Neighbourhood*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 1–24.

31 PRUNK 1993, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, p. 427.



the latest political development—the emergence of the sovereign Slovene nation state—represents a complete break from traditional political thinking in the broader Slovene space that has, as Prunk himself unintentionally showed in *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, always been inclined to form connections with its neighbouring entities or find political solutions within existing state framework. As such, the latest political developments can and should only be sufficiently defined as an unrepeatable historical event with a concrete, albeit complex, chain of causality and consequence.<sup>32</sup>

A reply to Vodopivec's critique came from Prunk in the next edition of the *Delo* book review. The author marked the criticism as neither fair nor accurate and even more, he claimed the manner in which the commentary was delivered was reminiscent of public criticism from the socialism era, when public discussion aimed to discipline scholars and influence their work. The style of writing, Prunk explained further, was not as outdated as Vodopivec described, a method he defended as a classical way of researching the history of a nation. In Prunk's view, Slovenes became a nation later than other developed European nations, which is why the book emerged later, but still uses the same methodology as other works describing the history of a nation. In Europe, Prunk concluded, such a synthesis was perceived as superior in comparison to simple case-studies.<sup>33</sup>

The initial debate, first the book review by Vodopivec and then Prunk's response to it, signalled a division in understanding; the use of the concept of "nation" suggested two different approaches. The first, as explained by Prunk in his manuscript and response, was a "nation" joining the present and the past. In this view, the Slovene nation was a latecomer to the modern stage, but nonetheless had its roots in past European civilizations, a part of the nations of the now victorious democratic West, in comparison to, from Prunk's point of view, defeated anational socialism and communism.<sup>34</sup> This "nation" was an ancient and fixed type, while Vodopivec on the other hand, viewed the Slovene nation and its own nation state as a radical break from the past tradition of Slovene political thought and action, and as such, a distinct element of the yet unknown future. Expressed in Koselleckian terms, Prunk's concept of "nation" drew, with both temporal and spatial dimensions, from the alleged space of experience within the Habsburg monarchy, where the essence of the Slovene nation was reactivated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while Vodopivec's understanding belonged to a new, yet-to-be normality with unknown potential in the European space, and thus represented one of many points on the horizon of expectations.

This schism became an underlying theme for the majority of subsequent contributions to the debate. In the context of late-socialist and early post-socialist Slovenia, the "nation" became attractive and politically potent capital.

32 VODOPIVEC 1993, Zamujena priložnost, p. 14.

33 PRUNK, Janko. Za poštenost v znanstvenem razpravljanju. In *Delo*, 11 March 1993, p. 14.

34 BERGER, Stefan. Western Europe. In MISHKOVA, Diana – TRENCSÉNYI, Balázs (eds.) *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*. New York : Berghahn, 2017, p. 23.

For historians, the question of how to frame the idea belonged to the field of academic expertise as well as to the wider social and political background.<sup>35</sup> As the debate evolved, a part of the understanding of “nation” developed in real time. While the individual debaters were all highly educated historians, many were familiar with the foreign historiographical and wider academic perspective during their prior work or study, the field of Slovene historiography, similar to other post-socialist situations, was only beginning to take shape outside the framework of socialism. Thus, it was not a coincidence that the discussion took place on the grounds of a widely read newspaper rather than any scholarly journals of the time. The understanding of “nation” was in early post-socialist Slovenia, a matter of public interest. The question of the debate thus also became, by extension, whether or not to leave the category of “nation” to conservative political discourse and the practice of the time supported by well-chosen but poorly advocated episodes from the past, or to place it within the realm of the profane, emotionally less charged category of civil existence.<sup>36</sup> While the first option was closer to Prunk’s arguments in the debate as well as his political activity, the second point came closer to Vodopivec’s views, which was soon supported by many of his colleagues.

### Contesting the Concept

By the middle of March 1993, the ongoing debate exceeded the limits of dialogue and grew into a polyphony.<sup>37</sup> Vodopivec wrote another column defending himself from Prunk’s accusations of a scarce bibliography and lack of professional experience and Janez Cvirn, a history professor at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, joined in with an extensive piece criticizing Prunk, in turn supporting Vodopivec.<sup>38</sup> Cvirn especially urged Prunk to discard the notion of consistent progress throughout history in his further research of the Slovene political history.<sup>39</sup> This triggered a fierce rebuttal from Prunk, who maintained that despite many obstacles, he firmly believes that the Slovene

35 Prunk himself was a member of Social Democratic Party of Slovenia (Socialdemokratska stranka Slovenije, SDSS) from 1990 until 2008. SDSS was one of the members of Demos coalition between 1990 and 1992, led first by Jože Pučnik, and, since 1993, by Janez Janša. Peter Vodopivec has been one of the founding members of Slovene Democratic Union (Slovenska demokratična zveza, SDZ), also a member of Demos; and one of the editors of *Nova revija* since 1982. GUŠTIN 2012, pp. 295–299; LAZAREVIĆ – GODEŠA 2016, pp. 205–207; HADALIN, Jurij. Kaj bi rekel Henrik Tuma? Od socialdemokratske stranke Slovenije do Slovenske demokratske stranke. In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2021, vol. 61, no. 3, pp. 237–261.

36 ANTOHI, Sorin. Narratives Unbound. A Brief Introduction to Post-Communist Historical Studies. ANTOHI, Sorin – TRENCSENYI, Balázs – APOR, Péter (eds.) *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*. Budapest; New York : CEU Press, 2007, pp. ix–xxiii. This roughly corresponds to the attitudes the different political currents in post-socialist Slovenia took regarding the past, especially World War II and socialism. While conservative parties, including the Social Democratic Party of Slovenia, opted for a more transcendent notion of the nation, left-leaning parties maintained a position tying “nation” to the cosmopolitan view. For one such example, see the history of the idea of national reconciliation: CMREČNJAK, Sašo. Slovenska sprava: zgodovinski pregled. In *Historical review*, 2016, vol. 70, no. 3–4, pp. 382–436.

37 VODOPIVEC, Peter. Še zmerom: neproblemsko nizanje citatov. In *Delo*, 18 March 1993, p. 14; CVIRN, Janez. Prunkov slovenski narodni vzpon – v monografiji. In *Delo*, 18 March 1993, p. 14.

38 Janez Cvirn was a professor of history at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. STUDEN, Andrej. Prof. dr. Janez Cvirn (22. april 1960 – 7. avgust 2013). In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2013, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 197–199.

39 CVIRN 1993, Prunkov slovenski narodni vzpon, p. 14.

national ascent was, in its essence, a constant national solidification and rise. “The Slovene people feel this way. Therefore, you are the one who will have to make an effort to prove otherwise. Europe and those European historians, that know such [national] developments assess it in the same way,” Prunk answered Cvirn.<sup>40</sup>

In the following weeks of arguments, Prunk expounded upon his understanding of the “nation” and in parallel, its political implications on the present. The people who “awakened the nation” in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Prunk claimed, were great people; educated in Europe, self-reliant and full of love and faith towards their own nation, in short, just the kind of people that are victorious in the present. Through their work, Prunk further argued, “national awakeners” of the past centuries initiated a historical process that has direct consequences in shaping the modern Europe and its values, to which Slovenia now, after the end of state socialism, also belongs.<sup>41</sup> This resonated heavily within the general Slovene political atmosphere, where aligning the political and economic spaces to the perceived European standards was widely supported by all parliamentary parties, even if they did not agree on how.

These expected European standards that Slovene politics strived towards in the years of post-socialism were simultaneously normative and yet flexible enough to be represented as a common political goal.<sup>42</sup> Not unlike the European norms of the 1990s, Prunk’s understanding of the nation was on the surface, schematic; flexible enough to fit the current political and social mentality yet sturdy enough to be an analytical tool and an object of historical research. The “nation” became, for Prunk, the central axis along which history itself developed. Though he disagreed with the accepted Hegelian notion of historical—and national—progress itself, he maintained, despite rising criticism from fellow historians, the central understanding of Slovene national development as a sequence of phases which made the nation even stronger.<sup>43</sup>

Prunk found his strongest defender in prominent Slovene academic Janko Pleterški,<sup>44</sup> who urged others to see history as a pool of past experience from which to draw and in which to seek the “golden age” of the nation in the past two centuries of modernity. For Pleterški, an *ex post* assessment was what gave every community, in this case the Slovene nation, meaning to its existence. Pleterški defended nationalism as key for the past and present struggle for universal human rights, something that again resonated with the political idea of Slovenia’s future in Europe. He further asserted that the resignation of ideological anti-positions, i.e., antifascism, has been declared and should be accepted as the European norm of decent political behaviour. Historiography was, with political changes, put to a test; no ideological position, i.e., Marxism, was enough

40 PRUNK, Janko. Ta teden mi je odgovoriti gospodu Janezu Cvirnu. In *Delo*, 25 March 1993, p. 14.

41 PRUNK 1993, Ta teden mi je odgovoriti, p. 14.

42 ERIKSEN, ERIK O. *The Normativity of the European Union*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 44–59.

43 PRUNK, Janko. Za filozofsko zgodovinsko konceptualno razhajanje gre. In *Delo*, 8. 4. 1993, p. 14.

44 PEROVŠEK, Jurij. Janko Pleterški – devetdesetletnik. In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 2013, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 187–195.

anymore to defend historical writing. However, he did not problematize nationalism as one of the ideological positions that influences historiography.<sup>45</sup>

In line with the spirit of the time, disposing with Marxism became one of the few points of agreement among Slovene historians of the entire debate. Arguments that deserved to be rebutted were often labelled in pejorative terms as “vulgar and Marxist.”<sup>46</sup> While none of the historians involved in the *Delo* debate cited scholars too closely connected to Marxism in strengthening their arguments, there were no hesitations towards building claims with the help of those who were perceived to be at the pinnacle of the European historical scholarship. In doing so, another division appeared; while some historians found connections in their explanations to past historians and philosophers as well as current institutions from the German-speaking space (Prunk, Pleterski), others, most notably Cvirn and Igor Grdina, heavily referenced French authors. In the first case, quotes from Heidegger and places such as Köln (Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung), Freiburg, Tübingen, Münster and München were all used to argue in favour of the nationally set understanding of history and the European search for identity,<sup>47</sup> while, in the second, authors such as Jacques le Goff, Georges Duby, Fernand Braudel and the broader Annales school formed the frame of reasoning, often mentioned in connection to historical anthropology in the Slovene academic space.<sup>48</sup>

The central disagreement among the group of historians has, however, raised much less methodological and epistemological questions, even in professional journals, than the role of the book itself. Was it enough to present a work, including such factographic mistakes and interpretative implausibility pointed out by critics of Prunk's, as relevant only because of the moment in which it was produced? Was it enough that the book was a “nice cultural act with special meaning for our time,” as one reviewer stated in the concluding weeks of the debate?<sup>49</sup> Was *Slovenski narodni vzpon* sufficient as “a contribution to the present day self-awareness and self-esteem of the Slovene nation,” as another said?<sup>50</sup>

In the wider, popular and state supported history of the Slovene nation, the post-socialist period brought part of the answer to the question. All the contributors to the debate maintained their positions within the academic community and Prunk's *Slovenski narodni vzpon* became one of the fundamental works cited mainly by professors—including Prunk himself—and former students of the Faculty of Social Science where he lectured. On the other hand, the community of historians remained ambivalent. In 2007, Vodopivec published

45 PLETERSKI, Janko. Po burji še beseda, izrečena že ob predstavitvi knjige. In *Delo*, 3 June 1993, p. 6.

46 CVIRN 1993, Prunkov slovenski narodni vzpon, p. 14; PRUNK 1993, Za poštenost, p. 14.

47 PRUNK 1993, Slovenski narodni vzpon, p. 8; PLETERSKI 1993, p. 6.

48 CVIRN, Janez. Ta teden se mi je spet zoperstaviti Janku Prunku. In *Delo*, 1 April 1993, p. 14; GRDINA, Igor. Čez teden dni bo g. dr. Prunku morda spet treba odgovoriti. In *Delo*, 1 April 1993, p. 14; GRDINA, Igor. Ni mi bilo v veselje pisati vseh teh vrstic – a treba je bilo. In *Delo*, 15 April 1993, p. 14.

49 VIDOVIČ-MIKLAVČIČ, Anka. Janko Prunk: Slovenski narodni vzpon. Narodna politika (1768–1992). In *Contributions to Contemporary History*, 1993, vol. 33, no. 1–2, pp. 227–231.

50 PEROVŠEK, Jurij. Janko Prunk, Slovenski narodni vzpon. Narodna politika 1768–1992. In *Historical Review*, 1993, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 330–334.



a study covering roughly the same time period and topics as Prunk's contested work, *Od Pohlinove slovnice do samostojne države: slovenska zgodovina od konca 18. stoletja do konca 20. stoletja* (From Pohlin's Grammar to the independent state: Slovene history from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Since then, both Prunk's and Vodopivec's works are often mentioned as reference literature.<sup>51</sup>

## Extensions of the Historians' Debate

Some historians that were central actors in the debate were at the time of the discussion, or in the years following, in positions that allowed them to assert their vision of nation, national history and historiography in general. However, due to extensive activity, it is almost impossible to comprehend the entire opus and subsequent influence. Some accomplishments do stand out as cornerstones forming the canonical frame of the newly established Slovene political, social and academic realm. Many members of the debate were included in major Slovene historiographic and other projects, and each provided a wealth of expertise.

One such example is the inclusion of historians, in this case I. Grdina and J. Prunk, in producing texts for lexicons and encyclopaedias. Grdina, who was also involved in the 1993 debate, became a member of the editorial board and an author publishing the *Novi slovenski biografski leksikon* (New Slovene biographical lexicon),<sup>52</sup> while Prunk authored some entries of the *Enciklopedija Slovenije* (Encyclopaedia of Slovenia), including *Narod* (the nation) and *Narodno vprašanje* (the national question). While Grdina's pieces reflect less his notion of the nation due to the nature of the bibliographic lexicon's entries, Prunk's encyclopaedic contributions gave him an opportunity for a more extensive passage, enabling a more expressive analysis.

In his two entries, Prunk and his two co-authors displayed a similar understanding of "nation" as expressed both in the book, *Slovenski narodni vzpon*, and in the debate; in differentiating between "narod" and "nacija" with regard to the presence or absence of an "own" state. If the nation did not have its own state, then it was a "narod," if it did, it was a "nacija." Thus, Slovenes have always been a *narod*, but only recently have they become a *nacija* with their own state. Although the entry recommended the work of Benedict Anderson as further reading, the basic narrative of national progress was repeated.<sup>53</sup> Even more than sub verbo *Nation*, Prunk's influence was visible in the entry entitled *The National Question*, whose content was outlined as a "cluster of cultural, territorial, economic and political questions that concern facts, obstacles or dilemmas of a development and existence of a nation. The national question includes preserving, developing and asserting the basic elements

51 VODOPIVEC, Peter. *Od Pohlinove slovnice do samostojne države: slovenska zgodovina od konca 18. stoletja do konca 20. stoletja*. Ljubljana : Modrijan, 2007.

52 Novi Slovenski biografski leksikon. Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Slovene Academy of Science and Arts. <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/kolofon/nsbl/>.

53 GRAFENAUER, Bogo – PRUNK, Janko. S.v. narod. In JAVORNIK, Marjan (ed.) *Enciklopedija Slovenije*. Ljubljana : Mladinska knjiga, 1997, pp. 295–297.

of a nation.”<sup>54</sup> Here, the view of the rebirth of the national sentiment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the presently victorious Slovene nation follows the same linear narrative of progress and determinism. Vodopivec’s entry in the same encyclopaedia stands in stark contrast. Along with some others, he contributed a passage about the *Narodni prerod* (national rebirth), showing that the primordialist notion of a nation being born again in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was not only Prunk’s understanding of the past. Nonetheless, true to the preferences he displayed during the debate, Vodopivec set the understanding of national rebirth as the first stage of a newly emerging national movement, followed by a laborious and uncertain historical development.<sup>55</sup>

Prunk and Vodopivec continued to further their contradictory understandings of “nation” by writing history textbooks for primary schools and by joining historical and other commissions established by the state. Prunk first published a textbook as a co-author in 1993, the same year as *Slovenski narodni vzpon* was published,<sup>56</sup> while Vodopivec co-published his own textbook two years later.<sup>57</sup> With regard to state-related activity, both Prunk and Vodopivec were also active. Prunk became a minister for Slovenians abroad in Janez Drnovšek’s government between 1992 and 1993 and later, in 2005, he became leader of the Slovene part of the joint Slovene-Croatian commission assigned to suggest a state policy concerning relations between the states as well as their border disputes. Though the commission itself failed to produce a final report, it nonetheless helped in forming the official position of the Slovene Republic.<sup>58</sup>

Vodopivec engaged in somewhat different state activities. In the 1990s, he focused on the reform of history teaching in schools,<sup>59</sup> leading a commission that prepared a new school syllabus in 1998.<sup>60</sup> Together with university professorships, public and professional writing as well as other public appearances, Prunk and Vodopivec, as well as many other historians engaged in the well-known discussion of the relationship between state, nation, and history, were able to promote and actualize at least a part of their understanding within the realm of politics, society and in the end, history.

## Conclusion

The concept of “nation” carried with itself a general synchronicity. While it meant sharing a part of historical development that produced a nation from a non-national entity, within the 1993 disagreement among Slovene historians

54 PRUNK, Janko – KOMAC, Miran. S. v. narodno vprašanje. In JAVORNIK 1997, pp. 335–337.

55 VODOPIVEC, Peter. S. v. narodni prerod. In JAVORNIK 1997, pp. 313–314.

56 NEŠOVIČ, Branimir – PRUNK, Janko. *20. stoletje. Zgodovina za 8. razred osnovne šole*. Ljubljana : Državna založba Slovenije, 1993.

57 ŽVANUT, Maja – VODOPIVEC, Peter. *Vzpon meščanstva: zgodovina za 7. razred osnovne šole*. Ljubljana : Mihelač in Nešovič, 1995.

58 GUŠTIN 2012, p. 299.

59 VODOPIVEC, Peter. Politics of History Education in Slovenia and Slovene History Textbooks since 1990. In DIMOU, Augusta. *“Transition” and the politics of history education in southeast Europe*. Göttingen : V&R unipress, 2009, pp. 45–69.

60 LAZAREVIČ – GODEŠA 2016, pp. 207.

“nation” also became a prism, reflecting a partial break from the temporal experience. Even if, at first glance, it may seem like the discussion among historians could only be a personal or ideological disagreement, it was indeed much more than that: it was a disagreement on the nature of history and the way it connects to the discussants’ lived reality. This is visible through (at least) two different understandings of the “nation,” since the discussants divided themselves roughly in two groups, those who more and less agreed with Prunk and those who more or less disagreed with Prunk (and in turn supported Vodopivec). Thus, the debate reveals a deeper difference in comprehending historical experience.

On one hand, Janko Prunk and Janko Pleterški most notably shared a view of the “nation” connected to past experience. The sole fact that Slovenes in 1993 lived in a nation-state meant that much of the history of the last two centuries needed to be rewritten. The “nation”, they argued, now proved to be the central notion around which historical development revolves. On the other hand, a group of historians including Peter Vodopivec, Igor Grdina, and Janez Cvirn, advocated an understanding of “nation” combined with the newly emerged Slovene nation-state as a radical and unexpected episode in the political development of the wider Slovene area that was, by no means, a historical necessity but rather a break with the traditional political views of the past. While the former understanding primarily sought legitimation in the past, the latter accepted the newly established environment of a nation state as a yet-unknown entity, unpredictable and thus intrinsically an element of the future for which only a limited amount can be learned about the Slovene political past. Both views have eventually found legitimacy, making their way into state institutions like schools and commissions, basic bibliographic writings, lexicons and encyclopaedias.