



The Habsburg monarchy in the long nineteenth century: new directions in censorship research

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The first phase of research on censorship in the Habsburg monarchy can be located in the decades around 1900. Major archival documents were edited, for example material on theater censorship by Karl Glossy. The researchers of the early phase were for the most part declared opponents of all censorship; one need only recall the polemical writings of Heinrich Hubert Houben. If one disregards the work of the outstanding censorship researcher Julius Marx and a few other individual studies of merit, interest in censorship subsequently waned¹. It is only in the last two decades that a breath of fresh air has been felt again in the field. This may be related to the recently renewed discussion of censorship and censorship-like processes concerning printed works, but above all the internet in various parts of the world. Likewise, disputes about language regulations and taboos concerning supposedly discriminating expressions up to the so-called Cancel culture are on the agenda.

As far as the study of censorship in the Habsburg monarchy is concerned, new questions can now be asked and new perspectives opened up on the basis of the pool of facts that is already at hand as a result of preliminary studies. This collection of essays, compiled by Marijan Dović, following a panel discussion at the conference of the European Society of Comparative Literature in Rome in September 2022, bears witness to this. First of all, it should be noted that until a few years ago, censorship research focused strongly on individual cases of prominent authors and works, on the one hand, and on Vienna, and thus on the headquarters of the monarchy, on the other. However, the monarchy consisted of numerous lands and administrative units,² a number of which had national and literary languages other than German.

¹The older studies are cited and listed in (Bachleitner, 2022).

²The total number of lands fluctuated considerably during the long 19th century. The 1910 census distinguished fifteen lands in Cisleithania, to which were added Hungary as well as Croatia and Slavonia, and

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This circumstance alone made it necessary to involve experts on the local situation of literature and the scientific disciplines. The fact that censorship was partly carried out by local authorities was well known from the start. However, the knowledge about the organization of the authorities in the lands, their responsibilities and the impact on censorship, remained very vague. To some extent, it is still vague. But recently, at least for some lands, research has been done to shed light on censorship in the provinces. For the most part, the relevant studies are cited in the essays collected here and mentioned in the reference sections. Nevertheless, we would like to highlight, without claiming to be exhaustive, for Bohemia Wögerbauer et al. (2015), for Slovenia Vidmar (2020), Dović (2023), and the collection of essays in English edited by Dović and Vidmar (2021), for Lombardo-Venetia Syrový (2021), for Croatia and Dalmatia Pederin (2008), for Hungary—awaiting a fundamental publication—Lipták (2005). It is no coincidence that the aforementioned lands, with the exception of Bohemia, are also the focus of attention here; the greatest need for research probably exists with regard to peripheral areas such as Galicia, and to Hungary.

Censorship and its many varieties are difficult to sum up. Although often discussed, views diverge on the effects of censorship interventions in literary life. Clearly, they prevent, if not the creation, at least the printing or reading of certain texts, or they curtail them by prescribing changes and deletions. In contrast, however, the productive role that censorship can play in the formation of a literary culture has recently been increasingly emphasized. Already during the reign of Maria Theresia and Joseph, censorship tried not so much to prevent than to positively reinforce the Enlightenment. Later, literary quality began to play a certain role, for example in the screening of the popular novels that proliferated around 1800. In these cases, censorship shows a similarity to literary criticism. In both institutions, it is not so much the question of politics, religion or morality that is negotiated, but philological and aesthetic points of view. Especially in emerging literatures, a critical review of textual production can be helpful and productive.

Thus, in his essay, Daniel Syrový analyzes early nineteenth-century censorship reports from Lombardy-Venetia concerning, among other works, Schiller's famous poem "Die Glocke" (The Bell), James Thomson's no less famous poem "The Seasons," and a historical novel by Jane Porter in Italian translation (*I Capi Scozzesi*). These reports read in part like literary reviews, concentrating on discussing poetological issues, although the works passed censorship without a hitch. In the case of Schiller's poem, the translation style was found to lack elegance. Thomson's poem was "corrected" by the translator in accordance with previous remonstrances forwarded by English critics. The censor approved of such rewriting, still he considered this version of "The Seasons" inappropriate for Italian readers' refined taste. Finally, Jane Porter's novel was admitted with some corrections and deletions in Venice, but the censor from Lombardy discussed the historical accuracy and the textual quality of the novel, i.e. he raised classical questions of literary criticism.

In a similar vein, Marina Protrka Štimec shows that censors sometimes act as organizers in the literary field. However, she adds that the role of censorship may change easily and become repressive. This happened in Croatia in the first half of

the 19th century: in the first decades, censorship encouraged the so-called Illyrism, a pan-south-Slavic movement that aimed at the unity of the Slavic ethnicities, at least with regard to language and culture. In the 1840s, the wind changed, and censors even banned the use of the term Illyrism, not to mention pro-Illyric propaganda. Moreover, Protrka Štimec refers to another “productive” aspect of repressive censorship, namely the deviation of authors into the field of Aesopian language. Her example is an epic poem of the democrat pre-March writer Ivan Mažuranić entitled *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (The Death of Smail-Aga Čengić). In this poem, Mažuranić characterizes the former governor of the Ottoman Empire in Bosnia as a despot suppressing the rebellious Montenegrins but losing his power in the course of history. A parallel between this historical constellation and the situation of the peoples in the contemporary Habsburg monarchy could easily be drawn, but censors seem to have been deceived by the author’s use of camouflage techniques.

Marko Juvan also devotes his contribution to the “productive” aspect of censorship in the form of Aesopian modes of writing that in his case are irony and allegorical disguise. With the disputes within the “Slovenian alphabet war” between two groups led by the prominent philologist and censor Jernej Kopitar and the no less prominent nationalist author France Prešeren, respectively, the intertwining of censorship and disputes between positions in the literary field of the 1830s is revealed. The strategy of following folk language and literature collided here with the insistence on developing an autonomous literature and poetic language. Social and political diversity between representatives of the state and the church (the censors) and the secular bourgeoisie (Prešeren) coincided and mingled with aesthetic controversy.

Marijan Dovič explains the difficulties of establishing press organs in Carniola in the pre-March period. Until 1848, it was hardly possible to obtain permission for a periodical in Slovenian. Since the 1820s, various projects were launched, they were either not approved from the beginning or quickly disappeared from the scene. An example of this is the attempt to establish the journal *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* (Agricultural and Handicraft News). Such papers were suspected, not entirely without reason, of promoting Slovenian nationalism which was often conveyed by means of poetry. In addition to the skepticism of the Viennese censors, the reports obtained from local confidants such as the governor, the bishop of Ljubljana and, of course, higher police officials served to prevent the press from flourishing.

When discussing the role of censorship in her essay, Orsolya Rákai goes even further than Syrový and Protrka Štimec: she all but equates literary criticism and censorship, since they pursue the same targets. The development of society from a fixed system of estates to a dynamic community of individuals, the emergence of social systems and especially the emergence of literature as an autonomous art form that is not bridled by political, religious or moral standards anymore, make its control necessary. Thus, censorship appears as a medium of inter-systemic communication, in particular between literature, law and economy. In the eyes of the authorities, autonomy makes literature ‘dangerous’ because it has become unpredictable, contingent, and immersive, potentially leading immature readers astray into fantastic fictional worlds. It is true, the discourse of censorship as documented in various Austrian regulations and guidelines uses the same arguments as conservative literary criticism. Both are afraid of the reading mania (*Lesewut*) and argue that reading literature will

not only do harm to the souls of readers but also to their bodies; according to Rákai, both make use of the rhetorical figure of metalepsis. Moreover, she draws parallels between censorship discourse and aesthetic theory, starting with Plato and Aristotle up to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aestheticians such as Ferenc Verseghy and his *Usus aestheticus linguae Hungaricae* (1817), all of them warning against uncontrolled reading. Rákai's essay touches on important general questions of the theory of censorship but we should not forget that even in the second half of the 19th and in early 20th century the Habsburg monarchy only made first tentative steps into the direction of a modern society of individual citizens.

A rather general topic is also discussed by Luka Vidmar. As is well known, the second half of the 18th century saw the process of secularization of censorship. Secular scholars of various disciplines replaced the representatives of the Catholic church and the Jesuits in the censorship commission, even if theological works had to be censored. Since Maria Theresia and Joseph's understanding of true religion, the so-called Reform Catholicism, included the erasure of superstition, the secular censorship of this era has often been considered a positive force that acted in the name of progress. At the same time, with the Great Revolution approaching, political matters moved into the focus of the censors. Vidmar draws on the Roman index for comparison, which was most likely the model for the Austrian indices that were collected and printed from 1754 onward. Interestingly the Roman index was of much smaller scope than the Viennese, and it was less often updated. We learn that the Roman index in a hundred years comprised only 1.600 banned titles, whereas in the three decades from 1751 to 1780 the Austrian index accumulated almost thrice as many titles. The 1790s saw a reactionary backlash with a much more severe censorship. Again, we observe that the goals and orientations of a censorship regime may change very quickly.

Last but not least, Péter Hajdu highlights the censorship discourse in the press of the year 1898. Fifty years after the last revolution, that seems to have been more important for Hungary than for the other lands of the Habsburg monarchy, the Agrarian movement—an initiative dedicated to the goal of improving the situation of the agricultural laborers—was considered by conservatives as subversive. They argued that censorship should inhibit propaganda for this movement, the more so because it was deemed to be a purely socialist project prone to provoke riots. The supporters of the movement defended the freedom of the press in almost religious terms, and finally they prevailed. A very special element of the discussions are the interpretations of an allegorical story, which is almost a fable, of the honeybees in Australia. But this story shall not be revealed here. Fortunately, censorship history is sometimes hilarious, too.

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