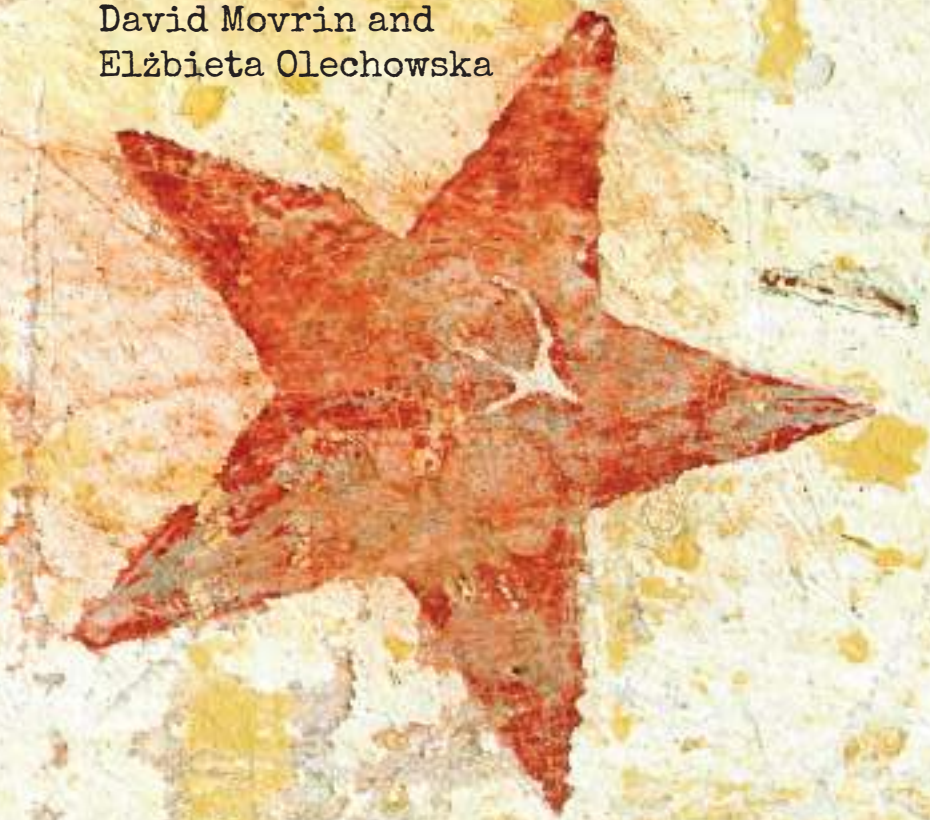
CLASSICS AND CLASS

Greek and Latin Classics and Communism at School

Edited by
David Movrin and
Elżbieta Olechowska



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Preface

One could argue that the Homeric opening lines of the poem written by Friedrich Engels when he was sixteen years old fittingly describe the atmosphere created by the recent scholarly interest in the topic to which this book is dedicated. Indeed, why are hordes of classicists currently marching towards the history of communism? And how come that from every part of the discipline "people with white shields and in shining armour are moving along high walls"?[1]

The present book is the second volume in the *Classics & Communism* series launched in 2013. Research on the topic began four years earlier with the creation of an international network of scholars led by the University of Warsaw Faculty of "Artes Liberales" and the now defunct Collegium Budapest. Professors Jerzy Axer, György Karsai, and Gábor Klaniczay initiated in 2009 the project *Gnôthi Seauton! – Classics and Communism: The History of Studies on Antiquity in the Context of the Local Classical Tradition; Socialist Countries 1944/45–1989/90*, which was financed until 2010 by a grant from Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

1 Barry Baldwin, "A Greek Poem by Friedrich Engels," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 33, no. 3 (1989): 51–63: Τίπτε μὲν ἄστυ κάτα κρατερῶν μέγα Καδμειώνων / Ἑλλήνων χωροῦσι λόχοι καὶ ὠκέες ἵπποι; / Τίπτε δὲ πανταχόθεν πεδίου λευκάσπιδες ἄνδρες / τείχεα μακρὰ πέρι ξεστοῖς κίνυνται ἐν ὅπλοις; The Homeric attempt of the budding poet has no less than 80 verses; for more about Engels the classicist, see the article by Johannes Irmscher, "Friedrich Engels studiert Altertumswissenschaft," in *Eirene* 2 (1964) 7–42.

The network met in Warsaw in 2009 and in Budapest in 2010; Collegium Budapest published in its *Workshop Series* a volume of papers from the meeting in Hungary.[2] A significantly revised edition[3] of these and other papers on the same topic was published by the University of Ljubljana, the University of Warsaw, and Collegium Budapest. The two universities assumed the leadership of the network in 2011, following the regrettable closure of Collegium Budapest; they organized a conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2013, and another conference in 2015 in Warsaw, Poland.

With each subsequent conference and changing focus, the network and its membership evolve: new scholars join and the involvement of students becomes a rule. While the present volume reflects the scholarly meeting held from 25 to 28 September 2013, in Ljubljana, under the title *Classics & Class: Teaching Latin and Greek behind the Iron Curtain*, it is not a standard publication of conference proceedings. More than half of the chapters included in the book were produced after the conference in order to flesh out topics we came to consider in our discussions as vital and illuminating for a deeper understanding of the main topic – how communist ideology affected the teaching of classical tradition and languages in the twentieth-century.

Three cataclysmic events changed the shape of Europe during the last century – the two World Wars and the fall of

2 *Gnôthi Seauton! – Classics and Communism: The History of the Studies on Antiquity in the Context of the Local Classical Tradition; Socialist Countries 1944/45–1989/90*, ed. by György Karsai and Gabor Klaniczay, Workshop Series 19 (Budapest: Collegium Budapest, [s.d.]).

3 *Classics and Communism: Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain*, ed. by György Karsai, Gábor Klaniczay, David Movrin, and Elżbieta Olechowska (Ljubljana – Budapest – Warsaw: Ljubljana University Press, Collegium Budapest, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at the University of Warsaw, 2013). By October 2015, six extensive reviews of the book were published – one in Russia, two in the Czech Republic, one in Slovakia, one in Slovenia, and one in Poland. The reviewers mentioned the scope and depth of treatment of the topic; each of the reviews naturally focused on the sections close to home. See Nina V. Braginskaya, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 129, no. 5 (2014); Eva Stehlíková, *Listy filologické* 138, no. 1-2 (2015): 198-201; Jana Nehutová, *Graeco Latina Brunensia* 20, no. 1 (2015): 178-201; Marcela Andoková, *Graecolatina et Orientalia* (Comenius University) 36-37 (2014): 156-160; Živa Borak, *Primerjalna književnost* 37, no. 1 (2014): 280-284; Sylwester Dworacki, *Eos* 101, no. 2 (2014): 354-357.

the Soviet Union. It may be useful now, a hundred years after the outbreak of the first of these upheavals, to reflect briefly upon what happened. World War I led to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Tsarist, Ottoman, and German empires, and to the creation of a number of newly independent states. Some of them, like Poland, regained their sovereignty after almost one-hundred-and-fifty years of foreign rule; others, like Czechoslovakia, were new to statehood. The War also precipitated the revolution in Russia and its direct consequence, the establishment of a new, dynamic political system based on Soviet communism, a Victorian economic theory blended with utopian aspirations to social equality and a ruthlessly cynical totalitarian rule.

The period between the two World Wars was marked not only by the need to rebuild what was ruined and lost, but also by the drive to industrialize and modernize. This in turn produced a tendency to disregard classical tradition as a phenomenon looking towards the past instead of towards the future. This attitude towards classics brought back in earnest the dispute over the educational advantages of the humanities versus sciences, begun in the nineteenth century but now made urgent in the name of rapid economic, technological, and social progress.

The end of the World War II brought an entirely changed political configuration. The borders were redrawn, with Central and Eastern Europe under full political and ideological Soviet domination, enjoying marginally more independence than the Soviet republics. This new Europe was not homogenous. The situation of classics evolved in a variety of ways depending on each country's cultural and historical affinity to classical antiquity – and on the harshness of the local regime in exercising its control over education and intellectual life. Regional differences run parallel to the evolution of the local communist regimes and their own high and low periods. Official attitudes towards classics ranged from fostering ideologically promising fields of research and publication while practically banning others, to prescribing detailed school curricula, specific selections of authors, texts, and grammar exercises toeing the party-line,

and treating classics with benign neglect, as quaint, irrelevant, and doomed to oblivion.

The third cataclysmic event, the fall of communism, led to the dismantling of the Soviet Bloc in 1989. It paved the way for a return to sovereignty for all "people's democracies" and new statehood for many nations, until then belonging to federative states, like Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union itself. In the aftermath of the often tragically traumatic breakdown, classical tradition was not a priority within the educational reform deemed necessary after half a century of imposed ideology. Yet for classical scholars and Latin teachers it was a matter of great urgency and fervent hope that, after the collapse of communism, their discipline would be provided with a new opportunity. Many got involved in the process of reform and creation of new curricula, with varying success. The economy was at the brink of failure, technologically lagging far behind the West; inefficient heavy industry, bloated administration, a lack of modern know-how – all of this predictably tipped the scales towards promoting disciplines of perceived practical value and away from championing cultural goals and traditions.

As none of these milestones can be adequately explained in isolation, we decided to go beyond the time frame of Soviet post-war domination and start the volume with an analysis of the little-known and sometimes forgotten influence of the Bolshevik Revolution and Communism on the classical tradition in Great Britain, during the period between the two World Wars. Edith Hall and Henry Stead of King's College London run the project *Classics & Class*, studying and collecting "class-conscious classical encounters" in Britain across the last four hundred years. They wrote the first chapter, "Between the Party and the Ivory Tower: Classics and Communism in 1930s Britain."

From the politically marginal British Communist Party the focus passes to its financial benefactor, the massive and all-powerful Communist Party of the Soviet Union, unfailingly generous to all communist and leftist groups in the West. The CPSU's attitude towards classics is first analysed from a Russian perspective by four scholars, Nina Braginskaya, Nataliya Nikolaeva, Olga Budaragina, and Vladimir Fayer. A Ukrainian scholar, Andrii

Yasinovskyi, supplements the scene with insights from Lviv, a city that was incorporated into the Soviet Union along with the Western part of Ukraine only after World War II.

The core of the volume is devoted to the main topic of the Ljubljana conference, namely the teaching of classical languages in schools and universities. As it became clear from the outset of our research into the fate of classics under communism, the situation was different in each of the countries under the Soviet domination, and even in each Soviet republic. The common denominator – communist ideology – ensured only a shared general direction; national realities and factors, such as tradition, history, educational systems, affinity with Greco-Roman antiquity, and religion, were decisive in shaping widely divergent features and attitudes.

Lubor Kysučan interprets the situation of classics in Czechoslovakia in an article entitled "Classical Languages as the Barometer of Political Change in Communist Czechoslovakia." Wilfried Stroh's "*Vitae parallelae*" narrate the tale of two German states. David Movrin discusses "Classics in Postwar Secondary Education: Personal Perspectives of Slovenian Principals." Nada Zečević in her paper on teaching Latin in Bosnia & Herzegovina provides a much-needed complementary perspective from this area of the former Yugoslavia. Neven Jovanovič on the other hand focuses on Croatia and the fascinating phenomenon of twentieth-century writers who use Latin for reaching nationalistic and subversive goals. Finally, Nevena Panova describes "The Foundation of the National Gymnasium for Ancient Languages and Civilisations in Sofia between Tradition and Ideology," the story of an exemplary school in Bulgaria and its intriguing connection to Lyudmila Zhivkova, the flamboyant daughter of the Bulgarian Communist leader.

How to explain the significant difference of high-school classics in Poland as compared to other European people's democracies? What may help to answer this question is a brief look at how this country, having regained its sovereignty after the First World War, dealt with the legacy of three separate systems and educational policies – Russian, Prussian, and Austrian – and created a single, coherent teaching model during the

two interbellum decades. Here again, we decided to go beyond the 1945–1989 time frame and offer the reader a glimpse into the inter-war Polish classics. Barbara Brzuska and Grażyna Czetwertyńska present two school reforms in communist and post-communist Poland. Brzuska focusses on the sixties in her "Polish School Reform in the 1960s: Latin and Awareness of Classical Antiquity in Disputes and Discussions about School Curriculum." Czetwertyńska centres on the early nineties, dealing with the aspirations of the classicist community after the fall of communism, providing a thoughtful *post scriptum* to the discussion in her "Expectations and Disappointments – Latin and Antiquity as Components of the Education System in Poland at the Beginning of the 1990s."

Judith Hallett and Dorota Dutsch provide in the next chapter an occasionally personal, if not outright autobiographic description of the fate of a large number of Central and Eastern European classicists who left their countries during communism for a variety of reasons, influencing and enriching many North American centres of learning.

A number of profiles of eminent personalities connected to classics – such as exceptional high school teachers, popular writers about antiquity, or artists inspired by ancient literary masterpieces – fill the last section of the book. Barbara Brzuska profiles Adam Trybus, Latin teacher and hero of the Polish underground; Jerzy Axer remembers Stefania Światłowska, a dedicated and beloved educator; Elżbieta Olechowska presents Aleksander Krawczuk, ancient historian, popular writer, television personality, and politician; Katarzyna Marciniak writes about Jacek Bocheński, author of novels on Caesar and Ovid, and his problems with Communist censorship. Finally, Jure Mikuž analyses Marij Pregelj and his striking illustrations for Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* from 1949–1951, a ground-breaking masterpiece published in a crucial period when his country was in transition after the Tito-Stalin split.

In January 2015, our network met in Warsaw at another conference in the cycle, *Classics and Communism in Theatre*, with a volume to be published next year. A rather extraordinary contribution was made by a group of Classics students from the

University of Ljubljana, who came to Warsaw and staged Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* to the delight of the public.[4] A companion book[5] was also designed and edited within a research-learning project at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw to coincide with the conference and to offer its participants insight into ancient plays staged in Poland during communism, as well as into Polish playwrights inspired by classical antiquity. There are other unexplored topics related to classics and communism that the scholars active in the network intend to research and present at future meetings – the question of translations of Greek and Roman literature, literature inspired by antiquity, or the role of communist ideology in broadening the scope and changing the focus of classical scholarship. These are topics that are sometimes painful to research and are frequently difficult to discuss with those who themselves witnessed the events described in the following chapters. But, as a classicist once remarked, pain insists upon being attended to. Or, to return to Engels from the beginning of this preface, without ancient slavery there would be no modern socialism; and without the latter, there would be no need for this book.[6]

4 The actors were Tinkara Jecl, Rok Kuntner, Klara Keršič, Matej Prevc, Lara Potočnik, Aleksander Rant, Maja Rotter, Ivan Šokić, and Simon Veselič.

5 *Classical Antiquity on the Communist Stage in Poland: Ancient Theatre as an Ideological Medium; A Critical Review*, ed. by Elżbieta Olechowska (Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales," 2015).

6 For the remark in *Anti-Dühring*, see Ugo Piacentini and Botho Wiele, "Ohne antike Sklaverei kein moderner Sozialismus (Engels)," in: *Altertum* 11 (1965) 235-238. For its wider context and bibliography, see Hans Kloft, "Sozialismus," *Der Neue Pauly* 15.3 (2003), 92–101; for the commotion it caused among the Yugoslav communists, see *Classics and Communism,* 305–306.