

Figure 1 - Ladislav Čemický, 1949, photographer: Cich, (News Agency of the Slovak Republic)

Admitting Totality

The Individual Approach of Ladislav Čemický to Stalinist Socialist Realism (1949-1956)

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Summary

This thesis examines the approach of Ladislav Čemický towards the socialist realism which was a method of artistic creation created in the USSR and forcefully applied to the countries within the sphere of Soviet influence around the middle of the 20th century. Ladislav Čemický was one of the very few Slovak artists who actively supported the onset of socialist realism in Slovakia, but because this field remains largely under-researched, the conclusions regarding his identity and attitudes towards the method consist of a few brief generalized notions lacking complex and critical analysis.

Today, Ladislav Čemický is mostly known for his modernist pre-totalitarian art before 1948 and is considered the “father of the modern Slovak watercolour”. His monographists, all publishing before 1989, left out the era of the Stalinist socialist realism (1949-1956) without the needed critical evaluation; they all however admitted his support of the method. In 2019, for the first time, in the scope of the first general overview of the Slovak Stalinist socialist realist fine arts, Alexandra Kusá very briefly critically evaluated his art of the era, concluding that he was a successful socialist realist artist. The Stalinist socialist realism thus presents a big gap in the life and work of Ladislav Čemický, and it can be assumed that it truly played an important role but because it was disregarded in 1956 and proclaimed a mistake, it was doomed to be forgotten and never admitted.

This thesis aims to re-claim this period of Čemický’s endeavours and answer the two-fold question regarding Čemický’s approach to the foreign method: What were the attitudes of Ladislav Čemický towards socialist realism and how did he translate the method to both his theoretical and practical artistic identity during the era of Stalinism in Slovakia (1949-1956)? I closely analyse all Čemický’s activity in the period of the Stalinist socialist realism based on the critical study of the primary written and visual sources and their contextualisation in the Slovak art historical scope as well as in relation to the Soviet model which was set as an example to be followed. I study Čemický’s attitudes within his institutional involvement, his nuanced attitudes in the support, enforcement, and application of the method, as well as his individual artistic identity based on the theoretical and practical legacy. By positioning Čemický’s attitudes and artistic identity in relation to both his peers and the Soviet model, I not only show to what extent he managed to successfully understand and apply the desired Soviet example, but I also change the ever-present centre (USSR) and periphery (Slovakia) narrative. By positioning Čemický into the centre, I come to more complex findings and also uncover his interplay and modification of the Soviet method which presents Čemický in a different, more complete light than was known until this point; supporting the fidelity to oneself, to reality, and a degree of creative artistry even in the age of totality.

By critically re-claiming this period in Čemický’s life, it can be concluded that he was much more than a follower of the Party-line propaganda and rather he was an honest, patient, helpful, and realistic enforcer of the method, attempting to make the process of transition from modernism to socialist realism as successful and smooth as possible. He did not blindly copy the Soviet model but rather showcased a notable degree of its accommodation, proving that he stayed true to his interests and reality even in the era of political control. Throughout the era, Čemický was a socialist ideological artist, but did not give in to the empty, completely fabricated Party propaganda.

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Introduction



Figure 2 - Ladislav Čemický, *Portrét Stalina* (Portrait of Stalin), 1949, Slovak National Gallery

The monumental socialist realist portrait of Josip Vissarionovich Stalin (1949) (fig. 2) painted by Ladislav Čemický (1909-2000) hung at the exhibition dedicated to the artist in the Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery just a few days prior to the finishing of this thesis. *Generalissimo*, looking into the distance – into the bright future, was one of the first paintings the visitor encountered upon entering the hall. Because the painting was positioned on a bright red panel, the attention was brought to it even more so. Although in the museal context, this painting most definitely made the atmosphere in the hall heavier. The display of the most brutal communist dictator hanging in a gallery of a post-Communist Slovakia, the one who is not talked about, the one who caused the world so much hardship. Around this portrait, there were a few more socialist realist paintings hanging on the bright red panels suggesting that this is where the

attention of the visitor is meant to be placed... but why? The curator and the team failed to provide an answer to this innovative concept of the exhibition and an explanation as to what do these paintings represent and why did Čemický paint them.

The exhibition *Ladislav Čemický – maliar, učiteľ, funkcionár*¹ was the first larger monographic exhibition dedicated to this artist since 1989. According to the description on the official website of the gallery, the exhibition was supposed to provide a complete overview of the work of Ladislav Čemický from the 1920s to the 50s, although a few later works were featured as well.² It was the first monographic exhibition which openly included socialist realist paintings as a part of the artist's oeuvre and even pointed more attention to them. It might have been an attempt to critically reclaim this period and include it among other works; and, perhaps, it might have worked out, only if there were texts explaining the context of the paintings present. The only explanation offered were a few short sentences in the leaflet which stated that the artist

¹ translated: Ladislav Čemický: Painter, Teacher, Functionary. The exhibition curated by Mgr. Veronika Vaculová-Repová was on view in the Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery, Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia from December 14, 2021, to April 30, 2022 (the exhibition was prolonged until June 4, 2022)

² It is debatable as to what extent the curator succeeded. The exhibition was limited by a relatively small space, and it made it that much more difficult to provide a more complex overview. Most exhibited paintings come from the era before the 1948, mostly from the 30s. Read more: <https://www.galeriadm.sk/vystavy/archiv-vystav-2021/ladislav-cemicky-maliar-ucitel-funkcionar/>

In many ways, this exhibition was generally a good concept, but to the attentive eye, many small errors became apparent. Many of the paintings were wrongly dated. For some, I had to find the correct dating in the original catalogues, but for some, it was clear from the inscription that they were not created in the year which was claimed in the leaflet. This incorrect dating would then result in the incorrect information in the catalogue itself. Additionally, bigger degree of research punctuality and critical evaluation of the existing secondary sources needs to be in place. For these reasons, it was also this exhibition which worked as a stimulus for the choice of my thesis topic.

was a keen supporter of the socialist realism, the method of artistic creation³ accepted in the era of Stalinism. The official website stated that a two-language catalogue was published for the purposes of this exhibition; however, it has not been published to this day⁴ and thus, even after the completion of the exhibition, the visitors were left wondering what did these work represent.⁵

Stalinism is and forever will be engraved in a big red letters in the history of Russia, former Soviet republics, the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, and in the history of the whole world, as it influenced and defined many important historical moments and the development after its end in 1956. For arts, Stalinism is characterized by the very disregarded and overlooked Stalinist socialist realism. In the USSR, the new socialist art had a longer history which started after the October Revolution in 1917. At first, the avant-gardes took over the art world and only around 1922 the realist art began to be preferred by the political authorities.⁶ Socialist realism - this official art of the USSR was first defined in the 1934 as an artistic method of creation built on strong ideological and theoretical principles which were originally created for literature but were to be applied to all arts from literature, through film, all the way to fine arts⁷. Socialist realism was the only allowed art at the time (from 1934) and because the totalitarian State controlled everything, arts and culture became important means of propaganda. Stalinist art thus became a very political matter and because the notion that it was forced (which, in majority of cases, is true), some scholars even question whether the works created under this regime are art at all.⁸

With the spread of the Soviet power after the World War II, many countries were drawn into sphere of its influence. Slovakia, as a part of the re-established Czechoslovakia, was not an exception and just like the economic and political organization of society, socialist realism was pushed through as well. The Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia (1948-1956) and also the Stalinist socialist realism present a visibly traumatic experience to this day and thus the field remains largely under researched.

³ The socialist realist theorists and critics made it a strong point that the socialist realism was a method of artistic creation and not a forced style. See for example: Városová, Marian. *Slovenská výtvarná prítomnosť*, Bratislava : Tvar, 1953, pp. 21-22

⁴ Information actual for the date of the submission of this thesis: June 15, 2022

⁵ I contacted the curator of the exhibition and had a few meetings with her. She informed me that the catalogue will be published in August 2022, thus a few months after the end of the exhibition. She was kind enough to provide me with the manuscript even before the official publication. The part dedicated to the socialist realist period is rather brief and based on the summary of secondary sources – thus no novel knowledge is produced. I will cite Vaculová-Repová on other novel knowledge/ideas accordingly.

⁶ In 1922, the AKhRR Group (Association of Artists of the Revolution) was established, and State immediately started supporting their production at the expense of the avant-gardes. Coincidentally, Stalin was appointed the General Secretary of the Communist Party in the same year.

⁷ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist realist painting*. New Haven & London : Yale University Press, 1998, p. 140

⁸ Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť, vizuálna kultúra obdobia Stalinizmu na Slovensku*, Filozofická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity v Trnave, 2015, p. 423 (further as: Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*)

Aims of the Thesis and Relevance

This thesis aims to investigate the way the Slovak artist Ladislav Čemický approached the onset of socialist realism; his attitudes and individual interaction with what was essentially a foreign concept applied to the Slovak art world in the beginning of the Stalinist era. Before the official acceptance of socialist realism, Ladislav Čemický was a modernist artist and since in the socialist theory, modern art⁹ stood in the opposition to socialist realism, the acceptance of the method supposedly presented a quite substantial leap for the artist.¹⁰ Based on the very general overview of Čemický's activity during this era, it is easy to proclaim that he was a supporter of the method and "successfully" applied it to his work, but that would only be a very generalized claim made in the contemporary literature.¹¹ Apart from the general claim that he was a supporter, what were his nuanced attitudes? How did he approach the enforcement of the method? Did his attitudes change over time? Did the artist just blindly copy the Soviet model of socialist realism, or did he modify it? How did he approach the Party propaganda so characteristic for this era and how was it reflected in his work? What was his artistic identity during this era? Was this era truly a disruption in his artistic development where he accommodated to all of the political expectations? Because this era has been generally dismissed, the picture remains incomplete. Viewing Čemický as a sort of a puppet blindly following political orders would mean discrediting his artistry. The aim of this thesis therefore is to answer the following question: *What were the attitudes of Ladislav Čemický towards socialist realism and how did he translate the method to both his theoretical and practical artistic identity during the era of Stalinism in Slovakia (1949-1956)?* Altogether, this thesis will also present the first detailed, complete, and critical analysis of the primary sources in relation to Čemický and the critical overview of his activities and legacy during this era.

Today, Ladislav Čemický is generally known as the father of the Slovak modern watercolour and a member of the first Slovak modernist generation – so-called Generation 1909.¹² This abbreviated notion resulted from the disinterest in researching Čemický's ideologically

⁹ I will be referring to the modern art/modernism throughout this work as socialist realism took a very strong stand in opposition to it. By modern art/modernism I mean (mostly!) Western art from after Gustav Courbet, art which experimented with shape, colour, composition, etc., art that was to a large extent in opposition to the academic tradition and the conservative values. An interesting interview with the art historian Dmitrii V. Sarab'yanov who studied art history in Moscow in the 40s-60s showed that not even impressionism was taught and only from the late 50s (post-Stalinism) the avant-gardes were slowly introduced. Read: Bowlt, John E., and Dmitrii Sarab'yanov. "Keepers of the Flame: An Exchange on Art and Western Cultural Influences in the USSR after World War II.", in: *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 81–87. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925160>

¹⁰ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň, výtvarné umenie v časoch stalinistickej praxe, 1948-1956*, Slovak National Gallery, 2019. pp. 330-335 (further as: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*)

¹¹ See for example: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 330-335

¹² The concept of Generation 1909 was coined by the first official director of the Slovak National Gallery – Karol Vaculík (together with his partner – art historian Ľudmila Peterajová). Generally, this concept was created to establish a kind of an art historical continuity after the Stalinist socialist realism ended as well as to "repay the debt" to these artists who were supposed to artistically peak during the era of Stalinism but due to the political totality could have not done so. According to the creators of the concept, the Generation 1909 was the first Slovak modernist generation (although they did not have a common program). Read more: Peterajová, Ľudmila. Vaculík, Karol. *Generácia 1909 – Svedomie doby*. Bratislava : Slovak National Gallery, 1964, exhibition catalogue and Homolová, Andrea. Kusá, Alexandra. *909,76 – Výstava, Pojem, Interpretácia*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2020

affiliated art. A considerable scholarly attention has been given to the era preceding the onset of socialist realism¹³ but very little to his involvement and personal attitudes in the totalitarian era which followed – especially to the era of Stalinism. His monographists Vojtech Tilkovský (1962)¹⁴ and Oliver Bakoš (1982)¹⁵ generally brushed off this era, very briefly stating that he was the straightforward supporter of the acceptance of the method. Oliver Bakoš dedicated a chapter to Čemický's ideological background in an attempt to provide an explanation and probably even the defence for the “realist art”¹⁶ in Čemický's work, but it is unfortunately still very general. When the author arrived at the beginning of totality in his analysis, he only generally explained that the artist was a supporter of the acceptance¹⁷; no deeper and more critical evaluation of the sources was provided. Since 1982, only Ján Mackovjak dedicated his master thesis to the life of Čemický with the focus on his institutional involvement, but majority of that work is – once again – a general overview of his overall artistic activity without a more critical approach.^{18s}

The only contemporary publication which dedicated more space to Čemický and his connection to socialist realism is the first and only critical general overview of the Slovak Stalinist socialist realist fine arts by the current director of the Slovak National Gallery – Alexandra Kusá.¹⁹ In the end of book *Prerušená pieseň* (Interrupted Song), the author dedicated five pages to the brief evaluation of Čemický's activity during Stalinism and came to the conclusion that he was a rather successful artist of this time as he managed to mimic the Soviet examples.²⁰ Kusá also mentioned the artist throughout the book recalling him as an example of a supportive artist; the issue, however, is that although her general notion is correct, due to the nature of this book, it was not her main objective to neither research this artist specifically, nor provide a detailed and critical analysis of the primary sources connected to and created by Čemický. Her argumentation regarding him is thus rather vague. She used some of his works – taken out of his personal context – and used them to illustrate the main narrative of her publication, which then resulted in an incorrect (and incomplete) interpretation, at least in some instances.

This thesis will not only try to fill in this existing research gap but will also try to change the perspective not only on the artist, but also on the era as a whole. Although the outcome of this work will provide more information on the artist himself, it is without a doubt that some general

¹³ Ábelovský, Ján. *Ladislav Čemický národný umelec, tvorba rokov 1926-1948*, Gallery of Peter M. Bohúň Liptovský Mikuláš (May-June 1989), Slovak National Gallery (November-December 1898)

¹⁴ Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*. Bratislava : Vydavateľstvo Slovenského fondu výtvarných umení, 1962

¹⁵ Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, Bratislava : Tatran, 1982

¹⁶ See the chapter: Bakoš, Oliver. “Ideové základy realistickej tvorby a obhajoba realizmu” (The Ideological ground for realism), in *Ladislav Čemický*, pp. 14-21

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

¹⁸ Mackovjak, Ján. *Ladislav Čemický s prihliadnutím na jeho organizačnú činnosť*. Master's thesis, Comenius University, Bratislava, 2016. Even in the short chapter on Čemický's institutional involvement, Mackovjak relied on secondary publications rather than archival documents which resulted in incomplete conclusion.

¹⁹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. This book is largely based on Kusá's dissertation thesis written in 2004 which was not officially published. Although it is not admitted in the book, large parts of the works correspond with each other. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the 2019 publication and will only credit the dissertation thesis in ideas which are not published in the SNG publication. For the dissertation thesis see: Kusá, Alexandra. *Sorela – slovenský variant? Stratégie a podoby výtvarného umenia socialistického realizmu 1948-1956 na Slovensku*. Dissertation thesis, Comenius University Bratislava, 2004

²⁰ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 195 and pp. 330-335

claims about the Slovak socialist realism in the literature will be countered and, perhaps, some novel knowledge will be provided too. In my thesis, I will look at the era from the point of the view of an individual rather than of the collective, but, more importantly, I will attempt to switch the power narrative largely presented in the literature which is based on the centre and periphery concept. Because socialist realism originated in Russia and was later pushed on the artists in other countries, it appears as natural to position Russia in the centre and Slovakia (and Slovak artists) in the periphery. This approach, however, does not provide a complete picture. Describing to what degree Čemický succeeded in the dogmatic application of the Soviet socialist realism is only a part of the picture – important, but still partial. In this work, I will also focus on how Čemický interacted with the method and how his ideas, interests, and background changed the Soviet-defined method. By positioning Slovakia, and more specifically Čemický, in the centre, I shall be able to come into more complete, and perhaps also more interesting findings.

Structure and Sources

To successfully uncover the nature of Čemický's attitudes and his interplay with socialist realism (and thus his artistic identity), I will consider all his activities based on a close study of a variety of primary sources, their critical evaluation, and contextualisation in the Slovak art historical scope and in relation to the Soviet model.

The structure of the thesis will follow these different key, identity-defining activities; it will elaborate of Čemický's attitudes and activities within the newly established institutional scope, his written legacy²¹ – both the general nature of it as well as the analysis of Čemický's approach to the theoretical rendering of the method which will point to his nuanced attitudes towards the acceptance and enforcement of the method as well as the interplay on the theoretical level, and his painted oeuvre focused on oil paintings²² which will show the translation of theoretical principles into practice and the degree of similarity/innovation in comparison to the desired Soviet model. Last but not least, by providing a brief analysis of the pre- and post-socialist realist art of Čemický, the Stalinist socialist realist period will be embedded in a larger scope of artist's legacy and the importance of it within the whole artistic endeavours will be more clear.

Although the Czechoslovak Stalinist period is defined by years 1948-1956 and the secondary literature dates the Stalinist socialist realism era accordingly,²³ the socialist realism was officially accepted in 1949 in Czechoslovakia. I thus define the official Stalinist socialist realist period by the years 1949-1956 and it will be reflected in this thesis accordingly.

²¹ Čemický's published magazine articles and transcribed speeches

²² Ladislav Čemický experimented with a lot of different mediums in his early work, but the watercolour together with the oil paintings became the most prominent. Socialist realism was characteristic for monumental oil paintings which were dominant in the artist's socialist realist oeuvre. That is what I will focus my analysis on this group.

²³ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlast'*

I will be using the original Slovak versions of the names of works and institutions apart from the still operating ones such as the Slovak National Gallery or the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design. This is due to the lack of English literature on the Slovak arts and thus lack of unified official translation. I will provide my own translation together with the original, so the reader understands, yet the original formulation and meaning is still preserved. If a translation from Czech is in place, I will notify the reader, otherwise all the translations are from Slovak.

Limitations

When in 1956 Nikita Khrushchev decided to end the cult of Stalin, relatively quickly, the era of de-Stalinization began. Similarly, in Slovakia, many sources (especially archival documents) have been completely destroyed in hopes that Stalinism would fall into oblivion and the horrors of it would be forgotten. It is this lack of primary sources that makes it especially hard to find concrete information and consequently provide a complete in-depth analysis. Because the official institutions (ministries, schools, etc.) were housing a lot of the original paintings, after 1956 (and consequently 1989), many of them, together with the textual documentation, were destroyed, or simply put into the attics without any proper documentation and are forgotten to this day.²⁴

The hope that Stalinism would fall into the oblivion became a reality to a certain degree. Even after 1989 the general public and the scholarly community showed very little interest in mapping this period of the Slovak history which resulted in the lack of secondary sources. Only in 2004, socialist realism became the subject of interest to Alexandra Kusá, who dedicated the aforementioned dissertation thesis to the fine arts of this era.²⁵ In 2012, she curated the very first (and to this day the only) exhibition on the topic of Slovak socialist realist fine arts²⁶ and only in 2019, the first comprehensive publication based on her dissertation thesis was published – *Prerušená pieseň* (Interrupted Song).²⁷ Kusá is the only Slovak art historian who dedicated concise efforts to mapping this era; however, from her position of the general director of the Slovak National Gallery, the research efforts are largely limited by other directorship activities.

Current State of the Research

The two monographies on Ladislav Čemický by Vojtech Tilkovský²⁸ and Oliver Bakoš²⁹ were both written before the year 1989. This is a part of the reason why the era of Stalinism was generally omitted in them, and any critical evaluation is – naturally – missing.

²⁴ A similar situation is in place in galleries. Because of the decades of disinterest in those paintings, the documentation regarding those is poor. They are often forgotten in the depositaries without needed research and restoration attention.

²⁵ Kusá, Alexandra. *Sorela – slovenský variant? Stratégie a podoby výtvarného umenia socialistického realizmu 1948-1956 na Slovensku*, Comenius University

²⁶ For more see: https://www.sng.sk/sk/vystavy/62_prerusena-piesen-umenie-socialistickeho-realizmu-1948-1956, the catalogue is accessible online in the link.

²⁷ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*

²⁸ Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*

²⁹ Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*

Although I am being rather critical of some specific arguments or notions in Alexandra Kusá's work at some points in my thesis, this work owes a great deal to her research. On top of the aforementioned publication *Prerušená pieseň* (2019), she wrote a number of more focused articles on the organisation of the Stalinist art world. It is her book *Prerušená pieseň* which I will recall most often in this work. *Prerušená pieseň* provides a great groundwork for researchers interested in the Slovak socialist realism, but because of the nature of the publication, which is essentially a general critical overview of the era in Slovakia, there are many generalized statements deserving further attention. Kusá generally described the development of attitudes, organisation of the art world, and also the art, but because the book is a general overview, a more nuanced analysis of the art in close comparison with the Soviet examples, which would establish the specific "Slovak variant" more detailly, is yet to take place. In the very end, after she named three successful artists (Čemický was one of them), she claimed that every artist had a different way applying the dogma to practice, but she did not elaborate on how different it was nor did she name any common characteristics for Slovak socialist realism other than it was a "sadder version" compared to Soviets or even to Czechs.³⁰ She was also one of the first scholars to generally admit and prove that a lot the Slovak artists were supportive of the acceptance of the "socialist realism" in the very beginning, although they expected to go their own way which was essentially different from the Soviet example.³¹

The second publication dedicated to the socialist realism in Slovakia was written by the art historian Zora Rusinová in 2015. In *Súdržka moja vlasť* (Comrade my Homeland, 2015),³² she also provided an overview of the period but expanded her scope to the general visual culture. In many ways, those two books overlap and repeat the general historical context knowledge on the era. Only one chapter is dedicated to the fine arts and in it the author analysed the iconography of the arts and how it was connected to the political ideology and propaganda. Just as Kusá, she did not explore the actual interplay with the Soviet model to describe a specific Slovak variant.³³

Because this thesis aims to analyse the relationship of the Slovak artist Ladislav Čemický to the Soviet dogma, the research of Matthew Cullerne Bown proved very useful for this purpose. The book *The Socialist Realist Painting* (1998)³⁴ is the first critical overview of the Soviet socialist realist painting in its development from the post-revolutionary era until the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Cullerne Bown generally only focused on the "original" socialist realism in Russia.³⁵

³⁰ For the statement see: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušná pieseň*, pp. 346-347; on the following pages, she mentioned a few artists and their individual version of socialist realism (e.g. Ladislav Guderna or Štefan Bednár). The author did ask the question "What did the Slovak variant of socialist realism look like?" on the very last pages of her book but answered it only briefly. See: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 342-345

³¹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušná pieseň*, p. 347. An important reminder is in place: Kusá named Ladislav Čemický an artist who was a successful socialist realist artist (see pp.330-335) as he mimicked the Soviet examples (see p. 195), and she did not include him in the group of those artists who showcased an innovative approach to the method (see pp. 347-358).

³² Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*, 2015

³³ See: Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*. pp. 423-465

³⁴ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, 1998

³⁵ The way in which the former Soviet republics accommodated the dogma is presented in the book only very briefly. See: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, pp. 287-294

There are, of course, more publications which contributed to this thesis, but it is impossible to mention them all namely here. I will reference them accordingly throughout the text and they will all be listed in the complete bibliography at the end.

Chapter 1 – Before the Totality

Studies and Ideological Background

Ladislav Čemický was born in 1909 in a small, picturesque village in the picturesque northern part of Slovakia – Čemice. Because his parents were not able to afford a good quality education, he completed his studies in Budapest with his wealthier relatives, where he began with his education as a high school student. In 1928, he first applied to the Economics University in Budapest but after the first year, he soon found out that it is not a good choice for him and decided to fulfil his goal of becoming an artist. According to his own words, he started to study economics for its practicality however, a part of the reason why he left this programme was the “snobbish environment” full of rich aristocracy and bourgeoisie which he condemned.³⁶ He completed his art education at the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts under three different professors, but only one truly influenced his viewpoint on painting. Professor István Csók was a Hungarian impressionist painter, but most importantly, it was his leftist ideological affiliation which resonated with ideas of Čemický.³⁷ It was also because of those ideas that Csók was forced to leave the Academy under the strict Horthy’s rightist politics.³⁸

It was in Budapest that Čemický’s affiliation to the leftist ideology strengthened. Coming from a relatively poor family and region into the rich bourgeoisie society, he felt strong need to seek people with similar ideological background and entered an illegal communist group in the beginning of the 30s – the most strict era of Horthy’s regime³⁹; in 1932, he completed a secret Marxist training.⁴⁰

Return Home



Figure 3 - Ladislav Čemický, *Pri zemiakoch* (With Potatoes), 1935-36, Slovak National Gallery

Čemický finished his studies at the academy in 1934 and returned to his home in Čemice but did not stay for too long. In spring 1935, he left for Vienna on a scholarship and there he encountered a broader selection of modern European art. According to Tilkovský, the artist began to appreciate artists such as Courbet, Goya, or Daumier for their focus on social problems of the ordinary people.⁴¹ In 1935, Čemický spent a year in Paris where he did not paint a lot, but rather visited galleries and grew

³⁶ Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 11

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19

fascinated by the French social classes so much so that in 1936 he took part in the May Day Procession of Workers.⁴²

Upon his return to Čemice in 1936, the artist began to shape his artistic identity according to his interests and focused on the life of the ordinary people amidst the economic crisis. Many of his artworks from the second half of the 1930s depict people, their work, ordinary situations, but also feelings of despair, suffering, etc. The artist accommodated his colour palette to those depictions and the dark, muddy tones only support the notion of suffering, injustice, and difficulties presented. In a series of figural paintings (fig. 3), Čemický presented toiled people in a way which is comparable to the concept of the early paintings of Vincent van Gogh depicting the low-class life. Formally, these were executed in a very flat manner in which flat areas are bounded by black lines.

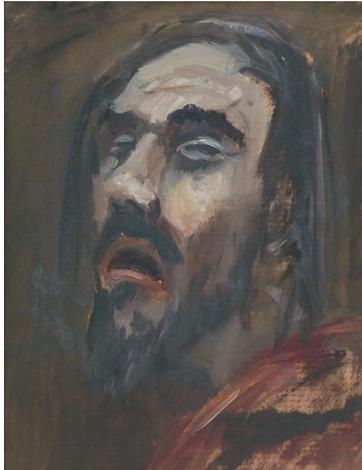


Figure 4 - Ladislav Čemický, *Utrpenie (Suffering)*, 1936, Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery

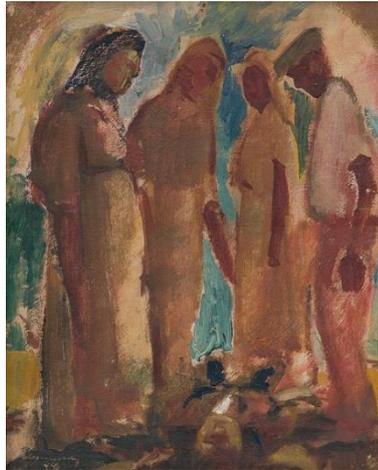


Figure 5 - Ladislav Čemický, *Vražda v Paríži (The Murder in Paris)*, 1936, Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery

This formal approach to the painting in combination with the dark and earthy colours was not developed further.

Čemický also produced a big number of rather dynamically painted works (fig. 4 and fig. 5) which are characterized by expressive brushstrokes with a more lively colour palette. This style is more characteristic for his work as it was more or less present throughout his life.

Second Visit to Paris and the World War II

In 1937, Čemický became an official member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC), however, during this time the nationalist rightist pressure grew in Slovakia with the changing political situation. The artist moved to Bratislava where he hosted secret communist meetings in his atelier.⁴³ In 1938, Čemický left for Paris again as the World War II dawned on Europe. This time, he was not only an observer but dedicated a lot of effort to painting. Later on in 1938, Čemický had to travel back to Slovakia to make money on portrait commissions as his finances grew tight in Paris. During this time, the nationalists took over, mobilisation took place, and he was forced to stay. Because of this unplanned turn of events, all of his works from this era were left behind in Paris and are thus unknown.⁴⁴ From his work after the return, it is clear that this time he was influenced by the Parisian avant-gardes, art of Picasso and cubism, but also Chirico, Carrá, or Kupka who he grew close with.⁴⁵ Čemický did experiment with those

⁴² Ibid., p. 21

⁴³ Ibid., p.27

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

but he never became an abstract artist and always focused on the figurative motives connected to the people and their lives.

World War II presented an especially difficult era. The geopolitical layout of Europe changed quickly under the effect of many agreements and treaties, Czechoslovakia was dissolved, and the Fascist Slovak State was established in 1939. It was also due to his ideological affiliation



Figure 6 - Ladislav Čemický, *Proti prúdu (Against the Stream)*, 1941, Slovak National Gallery



Figure 7 - Ladislav Čemický, *Vojna (War)*, 1944, Slovak National Gallery

that Čemický felt strong opposition not just to war but also to the ideas and politics of the ideology within the new state. Consequently, apart from the still socially oriented works, the war also became a big objective of Čemický's work. The paintings presenting the opposition to the current situation were painted in an extremely dynamic and expressive manner. The characteristic works *Proti prúdu* (Against the Stream, 1941) (fig. 6) or *Vojna* (War, 1944) (fig. 7) depict the terrors and growing anxieties but also the need to stand up to the regime and German occupation.

During war, Čemický continued being a part of the illegal leftist communist groups. In 1944 he got married, but shortly after this joyful event, on August 29, 1944 the Slovak National Uprising (*SNP*) against the German occupation began. Čemický and his wife Ľudmila took an active part in supporting the uprising efforts by sending food to the hills in which the resistance took cover, or by hiding the involved in their home.⁴⁶

Post-War art and Involvement 1946-1948 – Modernism and Ľudovít Fulla

After World War II ended, the re-established Czechoslovakia was quite literally placed between the East and the West. Although the state now appeared in the Soviet sphere of influence with elected Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*KSČ*) in the head of the government, the pre-war Czechoslovakia acted and presented itself as a culturally pro-Western country.⁴⁷ Naturally, now there was a rather political inclination towards socialist realism from the East on one hand, with

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 74

the pre-war affiliation to the West and modern art in the opposition. The debates about the forms and orientation of the new socialist art and culture of Czechoslovakia begun.

The very highest political authorities in Prague were understandably generally inclined towards the East in these questions. In 1947, the Exhibition of the Soviet National Artists took place in Prague.⁴⁸ Almost all of the important Communists (politicians) visited the exhibition, manifesting not only their political affiliation but probably also which direction they would like to see the Czechoslovak culture follow. Meanwhile the Czech part of the government started to slowly push through socialist realism, the Slovak cultural politicians with Ladislav Novomeský (the Commissioner for Education and Culture and the famous avant-garde poet) advocated for the freedom of development of the Slovak art reasoning that the previous Slovak artistic development was specific compared to other countries and only artists themselves could decide on how to progress further.⁴⁹

The Slovak artists took upon the new organisation of the artistic institutional frame and groups such as *Blok výtvarných umelcov* (Block of Slovak Artists) – the main organisational force was established. Ladislav Čemický was one of the co-founders of the *Skupina výtvarných umelcov 29. Augusta* (Group of Artists of August 29)⁵⁰. This group was based on the ideas flowing from the Slovak National Uprising (hence the name) and connected leftist artists in the quest for making art accessible to the wider public.⁵¹ Upon the end of the war, Čemický was involved in the organisation of the re-established Communist Party in Martin, Slovakia.

At this time, majority of the artists continued to showcase a lot of interest in the Western modernism and avant-gardes and very little to no interest in the Eastern socialist realism; but majority of them supported leftist politics as it presented more stability and support. This was largely due to the connection with the Western artworld they were establishing strongly. Many were enjoying travel scholarships to different Western European countries from France through Switzerland to the Netherlands.⁵² The Czech and Slovak artists truly did establish themselves on the Western artistic scene, the Exhibition of the Young Czechoslovak Artists which exhibited contemporary Czechoslovak art took place in Paris in 1946.⁵³ Ladislav Čemický was a part of this Slovak modernist generation (Generation 1909)⁵⁴ out of which many were inspired by the French avant-gardes.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 82

⁴⁹ Novomeský, Ladislav. “Dnešné posavenie vedy a umenia. In: Sborník umeleckej a vedeckej rady”, ÚVR, Bratislava 1949, pp. 26-32. Originally a speech from June 16, 1947. Read more about the cultural politics of Novomeský in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 76-80, 89-94, and 113-115.

⁵⁰ This group was a very important and big group at the time. Majority of the artists active during the artistic totality were a part of it (even the ones not supporting socialist realism).

⁵¹ It needs to be noted, that majority of the artists at the time were leftists and in support of socialism. I am not aware of a single artist active in the post-war era which would publicly claim to be rightist.

⁵² Many of the travelogues can be found in the magazine *Umelecký mesačník*, especially in the issues from 1946.

⁵³ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 80-81

⁵⁴ See note 12

⁵⁵ The “French School” of modern painting (especially Picasso) was a leading influence on the Slovak art at the time. Read for example: Városov, Marian, “Francúzska škola a slovenská maľba”, in: *Kultúrny mesačník*, 4, 1947, pp. 95-96

The critical analysis of the concept of the Generation 1909 rightfully noted that although Čemický too was a modernist artist and his inspiration also laid in French art to some extent, his modernist legacy was more conservative in comparison to many of his peers.⁵⁶ Čemický continued to paint in the expressive style even after the World War II, however he began to develop another style which preserved deep into 1948 and became the most characteristic for this era. Ludmila Peterajová, one of the leading art historians on the Generation 1909 and the co-creator of the concept, briefly defined this period in Čemický's work as the "Fulla period".⁵⁷ Rightfully so, the post-war art style of Čemický began to refer to the art of Ľudovít Fulla, one of the leading Slovak modernists at the time. In the monography, Tilkovský mentioned a heightened contact between those two artists after the war.⁵⁸



Figure 8 - Ladislav Čemický, *Pastieri (Shepherds)*, 1947, Slovak National Gallery

At the *III. celoslovenská výstava* (III. Annual Slovak Exhibition), in the end of 1947, Čemický exhibited the work *Pastieri* (Shepherds, 1947) (fig. 8). *Pastieri* depicts three resting shepherds dressed in the Slovak folk garments surrounded by nature. This painting presents the embodiment of the idyllic life in the Slovak countryside. The celebration of the simple life and Slovak countryside is supported by the vivid optimistic colours and two miniature landscapes of the hills and machined

field embedded in the bottom edge of the frame. The flat simplified shapes, darker outline, as well as the colour scheme truly do showcase a strong influence by Fulla even to the untrained eye.

1948 and Totality

Even after the February coup in 1948 and the establishment of the one-party Communist government, Ladislav Novomeský together with other Slovak politicians continued to support artistic freedom. In 1948, the *Sjezd národní kultury* (from Czech: The Congress of the National Culture) took place in July in Prague as the Czech and Slovak cultural figures (politicians, artists, etc.) met to further discuss the direction of culture. Since the KSCĚ had the power in their hands after the coup, the debate reflected this accordingly. Meanwhile the most important political figures from the Czech part already focused on socialist realism⁵⁹, the Slovak Communists presented the Manifesto of the Socialist Humanism in which they argued for the

⁵⁶ Peterajová, Ludmila. Vaculík, Karol. *Generácia 1909 – Svedomie doby*, exhibition catalogue, p. 7, Ábelovský, Ján. Bajcurová, Katarína. *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska*, Bratislava : Slovart, Vydavateľstvo Peter Popelka, 1997, p. 461

⁵⁷ Peterajová, Ludmila. Vaculík, Karol. *Generácia 1909 – Svedomie doby*

⁵⁸ Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 33

⁵⁹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 110-112

democracy and freedom of the many ways which might lead to the new socialist art.⁶⁰ This manifesto was disregarded, but it showed the disparity between the Czech and Slovak ideas about the orientation of the culture on the political level even after the coup.



Figure 9 - Ladislav Čemický, *Na Jána (On the Day of St. John)*, 1948, Slovak National Gallery

The change of the political situation and the entry into totality in 1948 did not result in Čemický turning to the more formally conservative approach to art. Although many paintings from this time are missing, based on the exhibitions⁶¹ Čemický took part in during this year, his artistic identity can be reconstructed to at least some extent. The exhibited works were executed in a style which was clearly developed from the earlier Fulla period. In the works *Na Jána (On the Day of St. John)*, 1948) (fig. 9), *Slovenská*

balada (Slovak Ballad, 1947)⁶², and the *Jánošíkovský motív* (Jánošík Motive, 1948)⁶³, the reduction of the objects to flat monochromatic shapes bounded by thick black lines, absolute abolishment of shading and depth, and the heightened use of the symbols representing the Slovak traditions prove my earlier claim. It seems that the onset of the totality did not automatically mean his re-orientation to the socialist realism even though he was a devout Communist himself.

The interest in the Slovak traditions and identity is very apparent from these works (even the ones from the “Fulla era”). Čemický retrospectively pointed to his interest in the expression of the Slovak folk life during the post-war era.⁶⁴ This interest in the specific national tradition and regional characteristics of Slovakia is clear from one of his writings which he wrote about his travels to Bulgaria.⁶⁵ According to this travelogue, he was keen on seeing and exploring the most traditional manifestations of Bulgarian nationality. He found this specificity in the small villages and museums of archaeology and anthropology where he directly encountered the life of the ordinary people, and the traditional embroideries, fabrics, and other objects so connected to people. He admitted to those being a great inspiration for his work and concluded the travelogue saying that one can understand his own culture and tradition better in the appreciation of other national cultures.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 113-115

⁶¹ Contemporary Slovak Art in Ostrava, Czechia, March – April, 1948; Exhibition of the *Blok slovenských výtvarných umelcov*, Bratislava, October 1948

⁶² Find a high-quality digital reproduction at the Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/en/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_2279

⁶³ Find a high-quality digital reproduction at the Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_1918

⁶⁴ Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 33

⁶⁵ Čemický, Ladislav. “Maliar objavuje Bulharsko”, in: *Nové slovo*, Christmas, 1948, pp. 805-806

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Democratic Debates

Although the outcome of the debates on the orientation of arts and culture was more or less sealed because of the total power the KSCĽ held, the democratic debates continued in the Slovak press to at least some extent up until the official acceptance of socialist realism in March 1949. Ester Šimerová-Martinčeková, the only Slovak artist at the time who completed her artistic education in Paris at the Académie de l'art moderne, published an article on the defence of the modern art in the most important Slovak cultural magazine of the time – *Kultúrny život* (Cultural life).⁶⁷ She was very clear in her stand explaining that the geometric shape is inherent to reality and not detached from it.⁶⁸ Although her article was an isolated example of a public presentation of such ideas at the time (as the totalitarian atmosphere grew heavier), it shows the ongoing interest of the artistic community in the modernist art. The fact that such article was published at the time speaks volumes as well.

Within the still relatively free discussion discourse in the Slovak part of the stated, Ladislav Čemický published one article in the end on 1948 in which he hinted to his possible affiliation.⁶⁹ In the closing paragraph of the article, he made a critical remark saying, “Slovak art is following the right path when making its way through the national form and international content.”⁷⁰ The original phrase “national in form and socialist in content” was attributed to Stalin himself⁷¹ and was most often used as the definition of the socialist



Figure 10 - on the left: Ľudovít Fulla, *Zemplínske dievča* (Girl from Zemplín), 1946 (?), work is lost today. On the right: Ladislav Čemický, *Bulharské dievča* (Bulgarian Girl), 1949, work is lost today. The reproduction is featured in the *Kultúrny život*, no. 10, 1949.



Figure 11 - Ladislav Čemický, *Bulharské dievča* (Bulgarian Girl), 1949, original work lost, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer unknown

⁶⁷ Šimerová, Ester. “Je tzv. abstraktný tvar v umení úpadkovým zjavom?”, in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 1-3, 1949

⁶⁸ One of the reasons why the socialist realist theorists condemned modern art was its seeming complete detachment from reality, life, and the person. Šimerová-Martinčeková argued otherwise.

⁶⁹ Čemický, Ladislav. “Maliar objavuje Bulharsko”, pp. 805-806

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 806

⁷¹ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, The Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China*. London, New York, 1990, p. 84 (further as: Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*)

realism. Even president Klement Gottwald used the variation of it in at least one of his speeches when he called for the Slovak science, culture, and arts to be “national in form, democratic and socialist in content”.⁷² Čemický did not directly mention the socialist realism but certainly pointed to it by this ever-repeated mantra. The travelogue was published on the pages on of one of the biggest magazines at the time – *Nové slovo* (New Word) – which was not solely focused on art and culture and thus had a bigger audience. Although it is questionable to what extent the non-artistic reader understood this in the connection to the Soviet method, it is certain that the artists and the political authorities understood this affiliation very well. To them, the Čemický’s connection to socialist realism must have been clear.

Together with this first hint, his art began to slightly turn away from the very modern and highly geometrized style. The work *Bulharské dievča* (Bulgarian Girl, 1948) (fig. 10 and fig. 11), which must have been created in the second half of the 1948 either during or after his visit to Bulgaria (September-October 1948), still manifests a large degree of similarity to the work of Fulla⁷³ but compared to for example *Na Jána* (1948) (fig. 9), the turn to the more classical and even realistic rendering can be noted.

⁷² Gottwald was most definitely referring to the socialist realism. See: Speech by Klement Gottwald directed to the delegation of the Slovak cultural workers in July 1948 featured in: *Sborník umeleckej a vedeckej rady*, ÚVR, Bratislava 1949

⁷³ This work is lost today and I discovered it in one of the period magazines thanks to the article in which Čemický was accused of copying earlier work by Ľudovít Fulla and where the two paintings were printed side by side. See in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 10, 29 May 1949, p. 9. (see fig. 10)

Chapter 2 – Entering the Era of Socialist Realism

The 1949 and the Reorganization of the Art World⁷⁴

The 1949 was a deciding year and put an end to even the slightest hints of democratic debates on art. The IX. Congress of the KSC (25-29 May, Prague) was the first congress of the Party after the February coup and it became especially important as the program of the General Line of Socialism was accepted.⁷⁵ As is apparent from its name, it determined the development of the Czechoslovak society for the years to come and a part of this program was the official acceptance of socialist realism as the only acceptable method of artistic creation. This resulted from the list of suggestions delivered to the highest Czechoslovak authorities from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to consolidate the Soviet power in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc.⁷⁶ Those suggestions were also focused on the cultural life, as “some of its intelligentsia was still under the Western bourgeoisie influence”.⁷⁷ Since the artists were considered a part of intelligentsia, the application of socialist realism presented a good way to oversee the production.

The Slovak artistic community took this leap a few weeks earlier at the First Congress of the Slovak Painters, Sculptors, Graphic Designers, Architects, and Theorists (13-14 March, 1949). It is unknown which artists and to what extent supported this decision, but from some of the later texts by Čemický, it becomes clear that the acceptance of the method was “kindly suggested” by the Party itself.⁷⁸ It is thus impossible to establish then to what extent the artists decided freely on this matter and to what extent it was already decided for them.

The official acceptance of the method was just the tip of the iceberg. Because art and culture began to play a key role in the propaganda, complete control had to be established. The State needed to come up with a new politically overlooked organisational structure. Kusá wrote that this new organisation of the art world appeared quite early on as a very necessary result of the bureaucratization of culture by the State.⁷⁹ The cultural institutions were positioned directly under different ministries (mostly those of Culture and Education) which closely overlooked the activities. One of the most important and defining institution with the most widespread powers was the *Zváz československých výtvarných umelcov* (The Union of the Czechoslovak artists) which was established in 1949. Within the Czechoslovak *Zváz*, the Slovak artists had their own Slovak section and could delegate their matters more or less independently. *Zváz*

⁷⁴ The most complex studies on the organisation of the Slovak art world have been conducted by Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň* and Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlast'*

⁷⁵ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 116-117, see short clips from the IX. Congress here: <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10116288585-archiv-ct24/213411058210018/cast/260163/>

⁷⁶ Originally in: Volokitina, Tatjana Viktorovna (ed.). *Vostočnaja Jevropa v dokumentach rossijskich archivov. Tom II. 1944-1953*. Moskva Novosibirsk : Sibirskij chronograf, 1997, p. 36-43, retrieved from: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. note no. 45, p. 116

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Čemický, Ladislav in the introduction to the Catalogue of the IV. Annual Slovak Exhibition, October-November 1949.

⁷⁹ Kusá, Alexandra. “Podiel inštitúcií na formovaní umenia socialistického realizmu v 50. rokoch 20. Storočia”. In: *Slovak National Gallery Yearbook 2007-2008*. p. 24, accessible online: <https://issuu.com/sng.sk/docs/rocnka-2007-2008/22>

connected all the artists over one roof and provided an economic and social structure and support. Every artist who wanted to continue in their artistic vocation needed to become a member of *Zväz*.

Zväz, together with the purely economic umbrella for artists – *Družstvo Tvar* (Association *Tvar* established in 1949), mediated State commissions to artists, bought paintings from artists, and announced and controlled big scale commissions; the independent artistic activity outside of them was not possible.⁸⁰ It was through those that the artists could sell their works to potential buyers. Since being an artist now meant a switch from relying on the free art market and a very partial support from the state to now working for the State which represented the needs of the people, the State became the official employer of the artists. The art market/economy within the era of socialist realism has not been a subject to a thorough study yet and it is thus unknown who was allowed to buy those works that were not commissioned.⁸¹

Zväz and *Tvar* also overlooked the phenomenon of *úlohové akcie*⁸² – a large scale State commissions where a list of topics was published, and the artists could choose from. If the initial design was successful, the committee signed an agreement with the artist and the work was commissioned. Throughout the work process, the committee visited artists and gave them pointers based on which they edited their work. If the process was going smoothly and the outcomes were desirable, the artist was getting a monthly allowance.⁸³ Those works were then exhibited at the major *celoslovenské výstavy* (Annual Slovak Exhibitions)⁸⁴ or different smaller exhibitions.

Although the general structure was created to control the art production and other art matters which resulted in a very constrained situation for the artists, credit needs to be given where its due and I need to point to some of the very positive outcomes resulting from the socialist cultural politics. This new structure provided a certain stability for the artists as it was a more stable income that the artists could now rely on (on the presumption that they were willing to submit to the new needs and requirements), however the State support went past beyond that. Because the State realized the importance and power of culture within the new society, it dedicated a significant amount of financial support to it. At the times of the Stalinist Slovakia

⁸⁰ Read more: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 123-124

⁸¹ One of the institutions was the Slovak National Gallery, bigger institutions were also able to purchase paintings, but it is unknown to what extent was the private property allowed and who were the chosen people to do so. Since the spirit of socialism went against the privatisation of wealth it is unlikely that ordinary people were allowed to buy original artworks. *Družstvo Tvar* also owned rights to all original artworks and could mediate reproductions, which were quite common during the age.

⁸² Roughly translated as task actions

⁸³ Read more information about *úlohová akcia* in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 159-179. Partial documentation was preserved at the Slovak National Archive in Bratislava, Fond Povereníctva školstva, box no. 549

⁸⁴ The *Celoslovenské výstavy* (Annual Slovak Exhibitions) were a tradition established after the war to support the art and also bring art closer to the people. (read in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 97-98). They took place in the end of the year and presented the yearly efforts of the Slovak artistic community. Only the best works were supposed to be exhibited. This tradition continued after the February coup. Taking part in *úlohová akcia* was not a perquisition to exhibit at the exhibitions.

the cultural sphere received 3% of the State budget.⁸⁵ Within this financial support system, for the first time, Slovakia was able to establish its own major cultural institutions which function to this day. The Slovak National Gallery was established in 1948, the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design was established in 1949⁸⁶, the East Slovak Gallery was established in 1951, The Institute of Art Theory and Art History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences was established in 1953, the Liptov Gallery of Peter Michal Bohúň was established in 1955, and many others followed. To this day, these institutions present the majority of the most important Slovak institutions focusing on fine arts.

Attitudes and Role of Ladislav Čemický in New Institutional Structure Zväz

Ladislav Čemický was the first elected head of the Slovak section of *Zväz* which was one of the most important positions in the art world at the time. He preserved in this position until May 1950 and after that he became the vice-president.⁸⁷ From this position he very clearly supported the onset of socialist realism from as early as the first Congress of the Slovak Artists in March 1949⁸⁸ and began to take further steps in organisation of the art world. Due to the documents regarding this position being completely unpreserved or are inaccessible⁸⁹, there is not a lot of detailed information about his activities and more nuanced attitudes within this institution. However, based on one of his speeches presented in March 1950 the First Czechoslovak Conference of Czechoslovak Art Delegates in Prague, we can learn about the steps taken under his directorship.⁹⁰

The measures were very dogmatic in their connection to the socialist ideology. First and foremost, Čemický stressed the need of political education of the artists so they are able to present the socialist (“correct”) ideology in their art and thus contribute to the construction of the new society. The author also promoted painting on site and direct contact with the workers

⁸⁵ The current state budget for culture in Slovakia is less than 1%. Read more in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. p. 128, note no. 78. In 2019 it was 0.54%, see: <https://www.mfsr.sk/en/finance/value-money/spending-reviews/culture-2019/>

⁸⁶ The establishment of the Slovak National Gallery and the Academy of Fine Arts and Design came out of the post-war initiative of Ladislav Novomeský, the Slovak Commissioner for Education and Culture. They could only be established after the coup thanks to the generous financial support. Read in: Kusá, Alexandra. “Podiel inštitúcií na formovaní umenia socialistického realizmu v 50. rokoch 20. storočia”, p. 24, accessible online: <https://issuu.com/sng.sk/docs/rocenka-2007-2008/22>

⁸⁷ Juricová, Emília. *Môj život s výtvarníkmi*, Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michal Vaška, 2000. pp. 59-60

⁸⁸ This speech was reprinted in the original and edited version in the most important cultural and also noncultural magazines at the time such as *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life) or *Nové slovo* (New Word). See: Čemický, Ladislav. “Socrealizmus vo výtvarníctve”, in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 6, 3. April 1949, p. 7 and Čemický, Ladislav. “Výtvarník účtuje s formalizmom”, in: *Nové slovo*, no. 11, 18 March 1949

⁸⁹ At the Slovak National Archive in Bratislava, there is an unprocessed fond regarding arts of the Slovak Stalinist era, but because it is unprocessed, it is inaccessible. I have attempted to get permission to access this fond, but I was unsuccessful. I only know about its existence from the publication of Kusá who was able to access the fond either from her position as a general director of the Slovak National Gallery, or way too long ago when the institution probably still allowed exceptions. It is possible that it includes some documents that could be helpful for finding answers regarding the function of *Zväz* in its early years.

⁹⁰ This report was later printed in *Nové slovo* in April 1950. Read: Čemický, Ladislav. Slovenský koreferát prednesený na I. celoštátnej konferencii delegátov československých výtvarných umelcov, 29-31 March 1950, Prague, published as: “Výtvarníci k ďalším úspechom”, in: *Nové slovo*, 14 April, 1950, pp. 238-239

to experience the “enthusiastic spirit” to portray it in their works. Yet, there were two other truly dogmatic and extremely radical measures that Čemický spoke about. Those were the liquidation of individual artistic groups and associations and the banishment of solo exhibitions as they not only went against the ideology of socialism but also did not allow for the complete control of the State over artistic matters.

All of those measures were carried out⁹¹ and it can truly be seen how those resulted in radical and very dogmatic changes. Čemický’s reputation is connected to this dogmatism especially because he was the head of the responsible institution at the time. However, it is uncertain to what extent he was personally responsible for the radical changes. Since the State did everything in their power to establish total control, especially in the early years when the organisation of the society was just being established, it is most likely that it was them who originated those ideas and pushed them through. Although, due to this lack of evidence Čemický cannot be directly accused of being responsible, this connection most definitely translated to his ever-repeated reputation as a very militant and harsh enforcer of ideology.

Academy of Fine Arts and Design

The Academy was established on June 9, 1949 and the first academic year was opened in September of the same year, thus the organisation and the curriculum had to be established fast and underwent changes in the following years. From the very beginning the positions were filled with high-quality artists, majority of which were at the time the oldest very much productive generation – Generation 1909.⁹²

Ladislav Čemický was officially admitted to the Advisory Board on October 10, 1949 as a representative of the *Zväz*⁹³ however, he was present at the organisation meetings from as early as June 1949 and ended his board activity in June 1950.⁹⁴ The artist started teaching as early as the first year opened. In the first academic year of 1949/1950, he was the head of the **class called *Večerný akt (Evening Nude)*** which was compulsory for all of the students from the

⁹¹ The banishment of solo exhibitions was active from May 1950 to 1952, the liquidation of art groups was active from May 1950 until the very end of the Stalinist era in 1956.

Alexandra Kusá wrote that the banishment of solo exhibition took place as early as 1949 but that is not the case as some artists were still exhibiting in this format (e.g. Ladislav Guderna exhibited in 1949 in the Cabinet of F. Borový, etc.). The fact that Čemický presented the speech in 1950 and still called for the banishment of those supports this fact. The practice of monographic exhibitions resumed after 1952 which Kusá stated as well. Read more: Kusá, Alexandra. *Stratégia veľkých výstav a ich podiel na formovaní umenia sorely*, in: *ARS*, 1, 40, 2007, p. 70

⁹² The establishment and organisation of the Academy in the first half of 1950s was considered the only major achievement of this generation in the Stalinist era by the literature which attempted to validate or later redeem these artists (as was hinted to in note no. 51). For example read in: Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav (ed.), *Slovenské výtvarné umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu*, Bratislava : Tvar, 1950, or Peterajová, Ľudmila. Vaculík, Karol. *Generácia 1909 – Svedomie doby*

⁹³ Slovak National Archive, Fond Povereníctvo školstva, box no. 369 a), folder VŠVU A1, Transcription of the Meeting of the Advisory Board of the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts from October 10, 1949, p. 2

⁹⁴ This is apparent from the attendance records and transcriptions from the meetings in: Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond of the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box no. 7, meeting transcriptions from June 1949 (academic year 1949/1950 and prior to that). The last record of Čemický in the Advisory Board is from the late June 1950. See: Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond of the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design, box no. 7, meeting transcriptions from June 1950.

painting, sculpture, and design faculties. This evening class was compulsory throughout the era of Stalinism and was dedicated to the basics of the technique of drawing from life.⁹⁵ After Čemický's position as a head of the Slovak Section in *Zväz* ended, he was employed as a full-time teacher at the Academy. From the academic year 1950/1951 he was responsible for leading the **first year** at the faculty of painting which was called *Prípravka (Preparatory)* on top of still teaching the *Večerný akt*.⁹⁶ According to the syllabus, during this year, the students were supposed to learn all the very basics of drawing which was "the perquisition for the realistic painting".⁹⁷ Čemický stayed in this position for two academic years and in the academic year of 1952/1953 he appeared in the head of *Všeobecná škola maliarstva (The General School of Painting)* which was the name for the second year at the Faculty of Painting. This year presented a follow-up curriculum from the learning objectives introduced in the preparatory year and after its successful completion, the students were divided into more focused departments – figural painting, landscape painting, or monumental painting which allowed them for more freedom in artistic expression. Čemický spent the academic year 1955/1956 on an unpaid leave and after his return, he functioned as a head of the preparatory year again. He stayed in this position up until the very last year at the Academy in 1970s. At the Academy, he was responsible for teaching students the technical basics of the drawing and painting and mastering those skills before they were specialised in the later years of their study throughout his career.

In the preserved Academy's archival documents, it can be learned that in February 1951, a group of students complained about the involvement (or the lack of) of Ladislav Čemický at the seminars.⁹⁸ According to them, the artist was rarely present in the class and gave them little to no feedback on their work. At the meeting on February 26, 1951, this matter is being discussed further. According to the assistant Peter Matejka, Čemický was leading the class in an ideological way and was lecturing on the theory and ideology rather than on the technical matters of drawing.⁹⁹ A part of this document records Čemický's defence in which he confirmed the statement made and continued to explain that it is the ideology and the principles which were crucial for the artists to understand to be able to develop their artistic identity and skill in a correct manner. He believed that it is the job of the assistant to lead the class on the technical matters and the duty of the head teacher to provide ideological ground.¹⁰⁰ His peers (especially the rector of the Academy and the head of the Faculty of Painting at the time – Ján Mudroch)

⁹⁵ The years I-III. had compulsory 6 hours a week dedicated to the "Evening Nude" class which is quite a substantial amount. See in: Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box no. 62, študijné osnovy 1950

⁹⁶ See in: Slovak State Archive Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box no. 62, študijné osnovy 1950

⁹⁷ The syllabus included drawing objects, portraits, and landscape; in the first semester they were relying on the plaster models and in the second semester they were drawing from real life. For the syllabus of the "Preparatory Year", see: Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box. no. 62

⁹⁸ The original letter was delivered to the Faculty on February 7, 1951. The original is preserved and accessible in: Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box. no. 33

⁹⁹ Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box. no. 33, transcription of the meeting from February 26, 1951

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

set the record straight noting that for such ideological groundwork, the students attended not only theoretical subjects, but also the compulsory subjects on socialist ideology.¹⁰¹ This recorded incident shows how important socialist realism and its ideology was for the artist. Čemický saw his responsibility as the duty to lead the students to the correct understanding of the theoretical and ideological principles in the preparatory years which were supposed to be dedicated to the basic technical skill of drawing.

The institutional involvement played a crucial role in Čemický's career at the time and its critical analysis confirms the reputation presented in the literature – as a rather dogmatic enforcer and supporter of the socialist realism. However, because of the lack of documentation, this only provides a partial picture about his attitudes and approach to the method and further analysis of his written and painted legacy has to be carried out to establish the nuanced attitudes with which Čemický approached the onset of the dogma.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Chapter 3 - Writings

Mass media is not only one of the means to spread propaganda, but as Jacques Ellul in his book on propaganda wrote – it is also a key prerequisite for its very existence, for forming an opinion of the masses.¹⁰² Especially in totalitarian political systems, diverse forms of such media, strongly controlled by the upper political levels spread ideas to masses, influencing and unifying opinions of them. It is thus not surprising that in Slovakia a heightened production of such controlled media appeared in the beginning of the Stalinist era.¹⁰³ It was mainly radio and newspapers which played an important role. In this chapter, I will be analysing Čemický's published texts which contributed to the discourse, and which play a key role in understanding his approach to the dogma – his nuanced attitudes and interplay with the soviet model.

Between the years 1949-1956, Ladislav Čemický authored at least ten magazine articles and co-authored at least one larger text. Majority of them were published in the magazines such as *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life)¹⁰⁴ the only Slovak magazine solely focused on culture, and *Nové slovo* (New Word)¹⁰⁵ the political, economic, and cultural weekly magazine. Apart from shorter articles, Čemický co-edited a larger publication *Slovenské umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu* (Slovak Art on the Way to Socialist Realism, 1950)¹⁰⁶ together with his closest friend and artist Štefan Bednár, which featured articles from different authors on different topics considering Slovak art. This book is thought to be one of the key Slovak socialist realist publications and the fact that Čemický co-edited it usually serves as an argument for his generally claimed devoted and dogmatic support of the method. Interestingly, Ladislav Čemický wrote and published articles from after the acceptance of the method in March 1949 until the end of 1950.¹⁰⁷ It is not known why he stopped writing after.¹⁰⁸

The Nuanced Attitudes of Ladislav Čemický – The Nature of Čemický's Writings

The absolute devotion and loyalty to the method was present throughout his writings until the very last one published in December 1950. This is not too peculiar as the magazine articles were only supportive of socialist realism from March 1949 and even more so after May 1949 because of the strict political control.¹⁰⁹ Though, within this highly ideological narrative present in the press, the degree of Čemický's supportive attitudes towards the method can be still established as he was definitely one of the most productive contributors at the time. The only

¹⁰² Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda – The Formation of Men's Opinion*. Vintage Books Edition, 1973, pp. 88-104

¹⁰³ Read more about mass media in Slovakia in the era of Stalinism in: Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*, pp. 141-161

¹⁰⁴ Published bi-weekly until 1950 and weekly after that

¹⁰⁵ Discontinued in 1952 and supplemented by the magazine *Pod zástavou socializmu* (Under the Pledge of Socialism)

¹⁰⁶ Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav (ed.). *Slovenské umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu*, Bratislava : Tvar, 1950

¹⁰⁷ He wrote at least one article in 1948 which was the aforementioned Bulgarian travelogue

¹⁰⁸ His position in the head of the Slovak section of *Zväz* (March 1949 to May 1950) does not match this period

¹⁰⁹ Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*. pp. 141-166

artist who published more articles, especially between 1949-1950, was Čemický's best friend Štefan Bednár. Although many other artists too mentioned support of the method and of the socialism itself on the pages of the period magazines, many of them focused the very few articles they wrote on topics that did not primarily focus on the celebration of the method. For example Ján Mudroch only wrote two articles dedicated to the establishment and organisation of the newly founded Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design from the position of its rector and the establishment of the Slovak National Gallery.¹¹⁰ Čemický made socialist realism the main element in all of his numerous articles.

Although the mass media was filled with the celebration and glorification of socialism (and socialist realism), it was not just the number of articles published, themes picked but also the language used which helps to uncover the nuanced nature of these positive attitudes. The skilful use of language was a crucial element of the propaganda and there was of course a difference between the Party-line propaganda and more honest efforts in enforcing the method.

From the position of the director of the Slovak section of *Zväz*, Čemický delivered a speech at the First Congress of the Slovak Artists in March 1949 to the closed artistic (and to some degree also probably political) community. This speech was later reprinted in the original wording as well as an amplified version not only in *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life), *Nové slovo* (New Word), but also in the larger publication co-edited by the artist. Thus, it was not only meant for the knowledgeable artistic community, but it was also later read by a larger audience even outside of the cultural sphere. Here Čemický expressed his absolute support to the method of socialist realism. Again, bearing in mind his high position at the time, it is highly likely that the support of socialist realism was "advised" by the Party to at least a certain extent but considering the earlier indications of positive attitudes towards socialist realism featured in his travelogue, it is also likely that Čemický did not need much convincing. The nature of the speech is highly agitational. The later reprinted edited versions too still appear as an advertisement for the method. In the text, Čemický first described the problem which the artists faced – the orientation of the art in the new society, the challenges and requirements resulting from the economic and political change. Further, he presented the method of socialist realism as the answer to the question and proceeded to elaborate on why. He introduced the method as an object of desire, as an answer to a pressing question and rendered the method as something the artists need, as a solution to the problem.¹¹¹

The nature of the speech and the edited reproductions is rather emotional especially due to the main arguments used. As the linguist Phillip C. Boardman wrote – since the propagandist (/agitator) wanted to persuade people, it was much easier to do this based on emotional appeal rather than on rational arguments.¹¹² Although Čemický tried to explain why the method was an answer to the pressing question and why it was the correct solution, his explanation consisted of empty phrases and strong statements such as: "it is not true that the form is the initiator of

¹¹⁰ Mudroch, Ján. *Vysoká škola výtvarných umení*, in: *Nové slovo*, October 1949, p. 659 and Mudroch, Ján. "Slovenská národná galéria", in: *Nové slovo*, March 1950

¹¹¹ Read more on the language of advertisement in: Džanić, Mirza. "The semiotics of contemporary advertising messages: Decoding visuals", in: *Jezikoslovlje*, Vol. 14, No. 2-3, 2013, pp. 475-485

¹¹² Read more in: Boardman, Phillip C. "BEWARE THE SEMANTIC TRAP': Language and Propaganda." in: *A Review of General Semantics* 35, no. 1, 1978: 78–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42575308>

the content, but the form follows from content” or “it is not true that the progressiveness and revolutionary spirit can only be manifested by the modern form”.¹¹³ In general, there were two main and also emotion-based arguments. Firstly, socialist realism being connected to people which the leftist artists naturally had to agree with, and which is connected to their love for people/State/nation. And secondly, the argument of socialist realism being in opposition to modern Western art which was characteristic for the exploitative capitalist systems, and which is related to the contempt for such system and its ideology.

These two arguments together with the lack of rational explanation and emotional language were the most characteristic feature in the propaganda writings on socialist realism, especially in writings by the high political authorities. For example, the very highest political authority on culture in Czechoslovakia – Václav Kopecký, the Czechoslovak Minister of Information and Culture published an article on the front page of the magazine *Kultúrny život* in June 1949.¹¹⁴ Although writing about literature, the author provided the very same arguments, even in the same order. First he described the connection of socialist realist art to the people and secondly he put it into the opposition to the repulsive capitalist avant-gardes.

As can be seen, Čemický was openly agitating for the acceptance and application of socialist realism using argumentation comparable to the harsh political propaganda. Although this analysis clearly and rightfully presents him as a supporter of the onset of the method, it does so in a somewhat passive way – as if he was just following the general Party line, just copying the political way of arguing and writing. By zooming in on the individual attitudes of the artist, a key difference between the general political line of promoting socialist realism (especially after March/May 1949) and Čemický’s writings becomes apparent.

Presenting Difficulty

Meanwhile in the political articles, the method was always presented as ideal, a very natural and thus effortless development, Čemický expressed the understanding for the difficulty this task posed which went against the seemingly perfect Party politics.¹¹⁵ Although he did so with a socialist building optimism characteristic for the propaganda, this still is an important difference from the political propaganda texts. In the very end of the speech, he dedicated a significant portion to the direct appeal on the artists because as one of them, he could understand the real struggle posed by this big and radical change.

This early text was not the only time when Čemický expressed the truth about the difficulties in the process of accepting the method. As the linguist Magda Stroińska wrote, the Communists, upon coming to the power, realized that it was much easier to proclaim the world as already

¹¹³ Čemický, Ladislav. “Výtvarník účtuje s formalizmom”, p. 170, or Čemický, Ladislav. “Socrealizmus vo výtvarníctve”, in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 6, 3 April, 1949, p. 7

¹¹⁴ Kopecký, Václav. “Socialistický realizmus a tvorba”, In: *Kultúrny život*, no. 11, June 12, 1949

¹¹⁵ Čemický, Ladislav. “Výtvarník účtuje s formalizmom”, p. 170, or Čemický, Ladislav. “Socrealizmus vo výtvarníctve”, p. 7

changed¹¹⁶ - the case of arts and culture happened to be the same. The politicians, with Kopecký in the lead, presented the method shortly after May 1949 as already successfully accepted and applied by many eager artists.¹¹⁷ This also worked in their favour because by presenting the method as successful they also presented their politics as successful. Čemický on the other hand described the gradual acceptance and the problems encountered in the process. When comparing his texts analysing the *IV. celoslovenská výstava* (IV. Annual Slovak Exhibition, October-November, 1949)¹¹⁸ and the *V. celoslovenská výstava* (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition, November-December, 1950)¹¹⁹, it can clearly be seen that he described the rather slow and gradual progress which presumed difficulties and definitely did not present the socialist realism as already accepted and perfectly applied to practice. He even went as far as saying that during the process of the acceptance of the method a worse quality work which attempted to apply socialist realism and adhere to the ideology was better than the well mastered formalist artwork.¹²⁰ Even within the inexorable world of the empty-worded State propaganda, Čemický did keep honesty, perhaps in the true belief of the success the method could bring.

Patient and Helpful Enforcer

Although in his early speech, despite the patience and honesty about the difficulties, Čemický still presented a considerable degree of empty phrases and formulas, he soon changed this emptiness to sustain the notion of being an actually helpful and patient enforcer of the method.¹²¹ This change works in the favour of the claim that he perhaps truly cared about the success of the method and was not just agitating in the favour of the Party line politics, their power struggle, and their false promises. In the spirit of helping the artists, he published a text in which he explained the theoretical principles of socialist realism as well as provided answers to possible further questions about the method.¹²² This text was published in the *Umenie* (Art) magazine which solely focused on fine arts and thus the audience was also narrowed accordingly. By doing so, Čemický distinguished himself more from the general Party propaganda and provided the first elaboration on the socialist realist theory in the Slovak art world as an artist. It cannot be said that this text was a great theoretical tract, but his efforts were most likely appreciated by the community as the method in theory was truly confusing and the empty phrases often used lacked explanation.

¹¹⁶ Strojniska, Magda. "Forbidden Reality: the Language and functions of Propaganda", in: Lloyd, Fran, O'Brien, Catherine (ed.), *Secret Spaces, Forbidden Places: Rethinking Culture*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2001, pp. 122-123

¹¹⁷ Read: Kopecký, Václav. "Socialistický realizmus a tvorba", in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 11, June 12, 1949

¹¹⁸ Čemický, Ladislav. Introduction to the catalogue for the IV. Annual Slovak Exhibition, 1949

¹¹⁹ Čemický, Ladislav. "Bližšie k socialistickému realizmu, V. celoslovenská výstava", in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 24, 17. December, 1950, p. 5

¹²⁰ Čemický, Ladislav. "Na postupe k socialistickému realizmu", in: *Nové slovo*, no. 19, 13 May, 1949, pp. 289-290

¹²¹ The "conciliatory attitude" of Čemický was also noticed by Kusá, but she only referred to one Čemický's text from 1949; apparently these attitudes changed (in general) from conciliatory to harsh and demanding in 1950, but that was not the case for Čemický as is seen in my analysis. He kept his honest supportive attitudes up until the late 1950 when he stopped publishing. In: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 134-135

¹²² Čemický, Ladislav. "Čo je socialistický realizmus?", in: *Umenie*, no. 1-3, April 1949, pp. 73-75

In the end of 1950, Čemický also provided additional practical advice for the artists within the evaluation of the *V. celoslovenská výstava* (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition, November-December 1950).¹²³ In this text, Čemický highlighted and appreciated the turn the artists made towards the working person but stressed the need for a more optimistic depiction as the workers are no longer exploited within the new society. The author also mentioned the genre of landscape because, voicing the opinion of the public, it was not represented enough. According to Čemický, the nature too was changing thanks to the hard work of the men and thus the way it is newly perceived needs to be included in arts. He asked the artistic community to keep this in mind and portray such socialist nature in the future.

From his nature of a honest and helpful supporter, Čemický stressed the absolute need for patience with the artists in the process of the acceptance of the method.¹²⁴ On top of acknowledging the difficulty of the turn to socialist realism, in none of his articles did he mention concrete names when pointing to the incorrect understanding and application of the method or when pillorizing groups of artists who rejected the method and persisted within the old formalist artistic mode of thinking and creating. Čemický militarily rejected formalism and condemned it in all of his articles, yet he never denoted any specific artists as formalist. Being labelled “a formalist artist” was one of the worst, if not the very harshest accusation an artist could receive at the time. For example, in July 1951, the artist Ľudovít Kudlák denoted a considerable number of Slovak artists as formalists.¹²⁵ From the earlier inspiration of Čemický Ľudovít Fulla, through Alexander Bazovský, Rudolf Pribiš, to Jozef Kostka, Kudlák was very harsh in his accusation.¹²⁶ Formalism was considered almost a swear word and being repeatedly accused of it usually meant lack off appreciation and problems in one’s career.¹²⁷

Čemický only mentioned specific artists in connection to formalism in the article *Súčasnú slovenské umenie* (Contemporary Slovak Art, 1950) which he co-authored with Štefan Bednár.¹²⁸ In the article, Čemický and Bednár, in attempt to describe the current situation in the Slovak art world, divided the artistic community into smaller groups based on their previous artistic style. Naturally, since majority of the pre-totalitarian Slovak art was at this time considered formalist for its affiliation to the modern European (Western) painting, Čemický

¹²³ Čemický, Ladislav. “Bližšie k socialistickému realizmu, V. celoslovenská výstava”, p. 5

¹²⁴ Čemický, Ladislav. “Na postupe k socialistickému realizmu”, pp. 289-290

¹²⁵ Kudlák, Ľudovít. Report presented at the general meeting of the Slovak Section of the Union of the Czechoslovak Artists, July 15, 1951, originally in the personal archive of prof. Ľudmila Peterajová which I did not have access to, but this report is reproduced in the book *Prerušená pieseň* by Alexandra Kusá. See: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 369-391

¹²⁶ All artists in the high positions at the Slovak academy (apart from Bazovský)

¹²⁷ For example, Ľudovít Fulla could not get a professorship at the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts as he was repeatedly accused of formalism although he most definitely deserved it for his achievements. He later left the Academy himself as this political pressure was too strong and he did not agree with it. Read more in: Paštrňáková Dejevová, Iva. *Archívna správa o stave Vysokej školy výtvarných umení 1949-1989*, Bratislava : Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, 2019, pp. 40-45. Read about the dismissal of Ján Mudroch from the position of the Academy rector: Paštrňáková Dejevová, Iva. *Archívna správa o stave Vysokej školy výtvarných umení 1949-1989*, pp. 47-51

¹²⁸ Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav. “Súčasnú slovenské výtvarné umenie”, in: Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav (ed.). *Slovenské výtvarné umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu*, Bratislava : Tvar, 1950, pp. 60-92 – majority of the page count consists of reproductions of artworks, the text itself is much shorter.

and Bednár had to label one group as “formerly formalist”.¹²⁹ This was not done in a negative dismissal, rather they praised this group for being able to free themselves from empty formalist art and for being the most active and most mature group from them all. Further on in the article, the authors did criticize the current formalists who refused to conform to the new situation, but again, did not mention any names.

Although Čemický’s attitudes were most definitely supportive, his agitational line differed from the empty political propaganda. He showcased considerable degree of an honest belief in the success of the method, degree of patience in the process of the enforcement of the method. He never denoted any artist publicly which largely differed from the period critique and his writings manifest author’s desire to be helpful.

The First Theorist of Socialist Realism in Slovakia – Beginnings of Čemický’s Interplay with the Method

The base – the theoretical concept of socialist realism was created behind the closed doors within a close circle of a few selected, highly influential people (politicians and writers). Igor Golomstock wrote that the core principles of the socialist realism “matured somewhere in the upper region of the Soviet Party apparatus, were explained to the selected group of the creative intelligentsia at closed briefings, and only then, in measured doses, appeared in print.”¹³⁰ It is generally stated that the basic principles were created during the secret meeting of writers in Gorki’s flat on October 26, 1932 in the company of Stalin himself.¹³¹ It is unknown to what extent the leader himself contributed to the creation of the method, but some of the most memorable and repeated formulas were attributed to the leader, such as artists as the “engineers of the human soul”¹³² or the already mentioned definition of socialist realism as “national in form, socialist in content”.¹³³

The method was supposed to be applied to all the arts, but since it was originally fitted for literature,¹³⁴ it was especially difficult for the visual artists to understand the method and translate it into practice. Initially, those theoretical texts never gave detailed directions in regard to art style apart from the basic principle of realism.¹³⁵ The core principles debated in private materialized in the essay by Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov at the first All-Union Congress of

¹²⁹ They included artists such as Ján Mudroch, Dezider Milly, Július Nemčík, Bedrich Hoffstadter, Ján Želibský, Koloman Sokol (who was also denounced as formalist by Ľudovít Kudlák in his aforementioned report), etc., as well as themselves (Čemický and Bednár), see more: Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav. “Súčasnú slovenské výtvarné umenie”, p. 70

¹³⁰ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, p. 84

¹³¹ Ibid. This meeting is more closely described in the article by Terst, Abram. “The literary process in Russia”, in: *Kontinent*, No. 1, 1974, pp. 180-181

¹³² Golomstock made a point that the formula was nothing more than the paraphrase of the avant-garde idea of the artist being a “psycho-engineer” formulated by Sergei Tretiakov who died in the labour camps founded by Stalin. Read more: Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, p. 85.

¹³³ Cullerne Bown. Matthew, *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 84. The origin of this formula goes as far as May 1925

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 140

¹³⁵ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian*, p. 85

Soviet writers in August 1934.¹³⁶ Over the time, three different essays by Zhdanov joined the first one and together they served as a base for art theory and definition of socialist realism.¹³⁷

Čemický was the first Slovak artist who elaborated on the art theory of socialist realism at the time. He did so even before the defining essays by Zhdanov were published in Czech and Slovak in 1950. Innovatively, Čemický created a list of guiding principles and included it as early as in his March 1949 speech. This list was then repeated in all the reprints and editions of the speech on top of which the artist also dedicated one whole article to explaining them.¹³⁸ As it is a crucial characteristic of his activity during this time and as it elaborates further on the method of artistic creation and Čemický's interplay with it, I will analyse his approach to the theory, the degree of similarity with the Soviet examples to establish the accommodation of the method according to the artist.

Defining the Principles of Socialist Realism

The first overarching principle of the method was the primacy of the **content over the form**. This very base came from the opposition of socialist realist art to formalism of the modernist art which apparently only focused on the artistic (read formal) side of the work and seriously neglected the content or the idea that gives the art meaning and function. Andrei Zhdanov wrote that formalism was alien to Soviet art as it rejected idea and service to the people, and it rather served the tastes of a small group of high-class aesthetes.¹³⁹ Formalism was characteristic for the Art for Art's Sake ideas so widespread in the West and it apparently completely deprived art of any deeper meaning and important function of education and propaganda in society.¹⁴⁰ Čemický too stressed this principle and explained that formalism, so typical for capitalist countries, diminished content so much, that for example the abstract works of the American painters were no longer connected to reality, to life.¹⁴¹

The argument against formalism was also based on the presumption that it was disconnected from the **people** and that is why they did not understand it. Zhdanov wrote that formalism "disowned people"¹⁴² as it did not focus on them anymore. Čemický made clear that since the end of the World War II, it had been the sole focus of the artists to bring more people to the exhibitions because they were trying to create for them¹⁴³ but they did not succeed because the people did not understand the art and because art did not reflect their lives and struggles.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁶ Zhdanov, Andrei Alexandrovich. *Essays on Literature, Music, and Philosophy*. Delivered between 1934 and 1947, collected and published around 1950 in the USSR but also in the whole of the former Eastern Bloc. In Czechoslovakia see: Zhdanov, Andrei Alexandrovich. *O umení*, Bratislava : Pravda, 1950. English translations available online: https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/zhdanov/lit-music-philosophy.htm I will cite the essays in their English-translated names for better comprehensibility.

¹³⁷ The last speech (On Philosophy) was delivered on 24 June 1947

¹³⁸ In the article: Čemický, Ladislav. "Čo je socialistický realizmus?", in: *Umenie*, pp. 73-75

¹³⁹ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, On Music, 1948

¹⁴⁰ Zhdanov, Andrei Alexandrovic, Report on the Journals Zvezda and Leningrad, 1947

¹⁴¹ Čemický, Ladislav. "Čo je socialistický realizmus?", p. 74

¹⁴² Zhdanov, Andrei Alexandrovic, Report on the Journals Zvezda and Leningrad, 1947

¹⁴³ Čemický, Ladislav. "Výtvárník účtuje s formalizmom", p. 170

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Socialist realism however was the correct method because it positioned the **working person into the centre** and also reflected the needs of the new socialist society.

Within the new order, the art now needed to contribute to the building of the new socialist society by receiving new **educational and propaganda function**.¹⁴⁵ However, educating the masses in the socialist ideology presupposed not only the turn to the people and the comprehensibility of art, but also the affiliation with the Party ideology. According to Čemický, art could help achieve the necessary ideological unity of the people which was needed for the society to prosper.¹⁴⁶

Party Tendency and Ideological Affiliation

Being in one line with the ideology of socialism best represented by the Party itself, the “**party-mindedness**” as Cullerne Bown named this principle, was at the very core of the socialist realism.¹⁴⁷ Zhdanov claimed that the Party represented the interests of the people,¹⁴⁸ so by being affiliated with the ideology, the artist was automatically putting the interests of the people into the centre as they should. Čemický too positioned this at the very top of his list of the socialist realist principles and explained that it was the idea of Lenin himself that the art needed to be as tendentious as possible to fulfil the role of education as well as propaganda.¹⁴⁹

Socialist Romanticism and Optimism

Optimism, so inherent to the socialist ideology played a big role in the socialist realism. Zhdanov wrote about the need to educate (!) young people to be optimistic, to have confidence in their own strength and to fear no difficulties.¹⁵⁰ According to him, the optimistic revolutionary spirit was necessary in order to bring up young people as eager builders and not “in the spirit of do-nothing and do not-care”.¹⁵¹ The optimism in Soviet art (in this case literature) was not based on an inner feeling, but it rather sprung from the new cause it served – the enthusiastic socialist construction.¹⁵² Zhdanov further spoke about romanticism, but only shortly when he described it as revolutionary which was based on a firm materialist basis and not on non-existent life and non-existent heroes.¹⁵³

Although Čemický started his explanation of this principle with describing romanticism of socialist art similarly to Zhdanov – as non-utopian, he further continued to refer to the ideas of George Lukács, a Hungarian literary critic and theorist who made a name for himself in

¹⁴⁵ Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74. For secondary sources see for example: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 120

¹⁴⁶ Čemický, Ladislav. “Socrealizmus vo výtvarníctve”, in: *Kultúrny život*, no. 6, 3 April 1949, p. 7, Čemický, Ladislav. “Výtvarník účtuje s formalizmom”, p. 170

¹⁴⁷ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, pp. 141-142

¹⁴⁸ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, *On Music*, 1948

¹⁴⁹ Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74

¹⁵⁰ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, *Report on the Journals Zvezda and Leningrad*, 1947

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, *Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers*, 1934

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

Moscow.¹⁵⁴ By doing so, he connected the principle of romanticism and optimism when he explained that the revolutionary romanticism was inherent to the transition to communism and optimism naturally flowed from it. Interestingly, in the end of the definition, Čemický said that the “looking into the socialist future naturally eliminated pessimistic feelings.”¹⁵⁵ By this, he suggested that socialist romanticism could mean the vision of the bright future which awaits, and which needs to be enthusiastically (read optimistically) built. The socialist realist art needed to see the communist tomorrow reflected in the present which is not utopian as the way to it is carefully planned and already happening.¹⁵⁶

Socialist Typification and Characteristic

Ladislav Čemický named the principle of socialist typification a key element in the definition/ of socialist realism.¹⁵⁷ Socialist realist method presumed the artist’s ability to pick from reality the characters (i.e. types) characteristic for their socialist tendency.¹⁵⁸ This way, the artists could avoid naturalism in art by the nature of which they would just literally copy the reality. In short, not the true reality should be depicted, but the desired socialist/communist reality. The artist would not be idealizing the reality though as they would be depicting already existing types¹⁵⁹ and characters which might not be too widespread yet but eventually will be as the society progresses.

The mention of the principle of typification can be also found in the essays by Zhdanov although in a less elaborate way than Čemický explained it. He wrote about the new type of person (men and women workers, engineers, pioneers, collective farmers, etc. that the art needed to be focused on and which were so typical for the socialist society. Cullerne Bown wrote that this principle was derived from a letter authored by Engels which supposedly surfaced in 1930s in which Engels called for “typical characters in typical situations”.¹⁶⁰ For Zhdanov, optimism was inseparable from the typically socialist.¹⁶¹

Socialist Historicism

The explanation of the socialist historicism by Čemický seems to be a continuation of the idea from the previous principle.¹⁶² Čemický explained that the concrete reality can only be depicted in its historical development and thus he emphasised the need to view the history of the world

¹⁵⁴ Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74, read more about Lukács ideas on socialist romanticism and how he connects it to the Marxist theory here: Breines, Paul. “Marxism, Romanticism, and the Case of Georg Lukács: Notes on Some Recent Sources and Situations.” In: *Studies in Romanticism* 16, no. 4, 1977, pp. 473–89

¹⁵⁵ Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74,

¹⁵⁶ Zhdanov did make a similar claim to Lukács in: Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934

¹⁵⁷ Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 166

¹⁶¹ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934

¹⁶² Čemický, Ladislav. “Čo je socialistický realizmus?”, p. 74

and the history of one's own nation in the dialectic understanding.¹⁶³ The exact same thing is claimed by Zhdanov and in addition he explained that: "The truthfulness and historical exactitude of the artistic image must be linked with the task of ideological transformation, of the education of the working people in the spirit of socialism".¹⁶⁴ The socialist realism thus needed to depict the transformation of society according to the planned progress.

*Nationality*¹⁶⁵

Čemický also included patriotism, nationality, and internationality between the key principles of socialist realism. He positioned it on the second place, right after the "Partymindedness" which suggests its importance in Čemický's definition. He based this principle on a quote from Zhdanov's work: "Internationalism in art does not spring from the depletion and impoverishment of national art; on the contrary, internationalism grows where national culture flourishes."¹⁶⁶ Internationality was being pointed to in the general socialist realist theory as an important principle which was inherent for the socialist art as it connected all the people in the fight for the better future and presented ideology which is coherent throughout many countries and cultures.¹⁶⁷ However, the main focus of this broader principle in Čemický's writing was one's specific nationality and its manifestation in art. It was defined quite clearly as the "regional characteristics of specific nations based on tradition, climate, geopolitical position, etc."¹⁶⁸ This interest in the specific national tradition and regional characteristics of Čemický can be encountered even before the onset of socialist realism in his travelogue from 1948¹⁶⁹ as well as it characterizes his art of the period of 1946-1948.

To better establish Čemický's interplay with the Soviet model of socialist realism, an important remark considering the translation of the terms "national" needs to be addressed. The Slovak adjective *národný* (used in Čemický's essays) can be translated to English as **national**. In Russian, the word most used in the connection to socialist realism was *narod/narodny* which was also used in the general definition as "*narodna forma*" (national form). As Cullerne Bown wrote, the word *narod* in the original wording referred to people and the *narodna forma* thus meant the "people form".¹⁷⁰ "Peopleness", as Cullerne Bown named this principle, became the very key element of the socialist realism. The principle of *peopleness* was also the base for the principle of internationalism as the focus on people generally connected all the socialist countries. The focus on people was a key principle in Čemický's writings as well, however, he

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934

¹⁶⁵ I first pointed to the "nationality" in the Slovak socialist realist art theory in my internship essay "Artistic Values of the Slovak Socialist Realism through the Period Documents" at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in February 2022. However, the analysis present in the essay was very general and brief and used text by Marian Városov from 1953 as the main example. Since then, I was able to discover additional sources and because this thesis is also more focused, here I provide much more complete and focused conclusion very specific for the case of Čemický.

¹⁶⁶ Original see: Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich, On Music, 1948

¹⁶⁷ Čemický, Ladislav. "Čo je socialistický realizmus", pp. 73-75

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Čemický, Ladislav. "Maliar objavuje Bulharsko", pp. 805-806

¹⁷⁰ Cullerne Bown. Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 133 and pp. 144-145

understood this specific principle of nationality and patriotism in a way that would have a more nationally specific meaning.

In the essay on music, Zhdanov dedicated a section to the “national music” where the quote on the principle of nationality used in Čemický’s definition came from.¹⁷¹ In this part, the word is “*natsionalny*” and not “*narodny*” and it refers to the specific (in Zhdanov’s case Russian) national tradition. When read by a non-Russian person, this statement by Zhdanov presupposed the appreciation of other nations and their traditions in art.¹⁷² Golomstock made a crucial argument regarding the concept of nationality (*natsionalnost*) in the Soviet Union and the turn it took in the second half of 1940s.¹⁷³ According to him, the concept of the relation between internationality and nationality as well as the understanding of nationality itself changed. Up until then, the “national” provided a room for different nationalities within the Soviet Union to express a certain degree of national character in their work.¹⁷⁴ In 1948, in the speech by Zhdanov, the very sentence which was interpreted by Čemický as the free pass to display the Slovak nationality in art, was a part of a bigger scale campaign against cosmopolitanism.¹⁷⁵ Zhdanov further continued: “... internationalism grows where national culture flourishes. To forget this is to lose one’s individuality and become a cosmopolitan without a country.”¹⁷⁶ But this Party directive was supposed to work in favour of the reconsideration of the Russian national heritage and highlight the importance of Russian artistic tradition in opposition to the cosmopolitans who celebrated the art of the West and its internationalism.¹⁷⁷ To further support this Russian national artistic tradition, the Academy was established in 1947 whose goal was to assert the superiority and popular spirit of the Russian art in this struggle against cosmopolitanism.¹⁷⁸ In this context, the “national” thus meant Russian and the suppression of the specific national character of other nations in favour of Russian academic tradition within the USSR became apparent.¹⁷⁹

Since Czechoslovakia was not a part of the Soviet Union and was “only” within the sphere of its influence, it is unknown if this need for adherence to the Russian tradition was also enforced in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. It is possible that there were some kinds of directives regarding this from Kremlin to the satellite states which would not be surprising, but I was not able to retrieve this information as those were not well documented and usually destroyed in the first waves in the de-Stalinization processes. Since Čemický did not write after 1950, it is not possible to establish how this interest developed further from his writings. This principle appeared again in the later theoretical text by Marian Városov from 1953, where the principle of the appreciation of specific nationalities was still a part of the brief definition the theorist

¹⁷¹ Zhdanov, Andrej Alexandrovich. *On Music*, 1948

¹⁷² Understandably, still within the scope of socialist countries.

¹⁷³ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, pp. 140-147

¹⁷⁴ Golomstock used the example of Armenian art of this era as being much more vivid in colours, see: Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, p. 147, more distinctions are made by Cullerne Bown in: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, pp. 287-194

¹⁷⁵ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, p. 142

¹⁷⁶ Zhdanov, Alexander. *On Music*, 1948

¹⁷⁷ Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*, p. 141

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147. Cullerne Bown also dedicated a brief subchapter to this problematic in his work. See: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, pp. 287-289

provided.¹⁸⁰ I will return to this concept in the next chapter to see how Čemický translated this innovative understanding of the principle into practice and how his views might have changed over time.

Although Čemický based his definition on the Soviet model, he did not simply copy the theory from the defining Zhdanov essays. He showcased his interest and knowledge in the matter by compiling ideas of other socialist thinkers and thus provided a more complex explanation. His innovative approach to the explanation of socialist realism involved the creation of the list of principles and their explanation and when compared to the Soviet example, it becomes clear that the author did accommodate the dogma to his interests by putting heightened emphasis on a principle of specific nationality which was understood differently in its original context.

¹⁸⁰ Városov, Marian. *Slovenská výtvarná prítomnosť*, pp. 21-22

Chapter 4 - Paintings

Based on the analysis of theoretical principles and the written definition, it is very clear that fine arts (just like other forms of art) became a very strong tool of propaganda, having to be in line with the ideology of the Party, presenting the socialist “reality” with optimism and romanticism. Inevitably, what was requested was the display of strongly idealized or completely fabricated depictions of the present (and past in narrative-fitting historical moments) as a window to the bright future the society was striving for.¹⁸¹ In most cases, it was even indistinguishable if the painting was meant to present the present or the vision of the future, that is how high the degree of propaganda in the most popular and appreciated paintings was.¹⁸² Cullerne Bown provided a very fitting description of this phenomena: “This requirement for artists, in documenting the present, to find in it those elements that foreshadow the dazzling future of communist paradise-on-earth, is the pivotal tenet of socialist realism, because it is the concept of linking the antagonistic requirements of party-obedience on one hand, and truthfulness on the other.”¹⁸³

Alexandra Kusá claimed that the only general statement which can be made about the Slovak art created within this era is its “stylistic diversity”.¹⁸⁴ Within this diversity, she dedicated a subchapter to the very few successful artists of the era (only three) and named Čemický as one of them.¹⁸⁵ She based her argument on Čemický’s mimicking of the Soviet examples, an apparently positive critique Čemický received, and the repetitive exhibiting of some of his work at different exhibitions.¹⁸⁶ As she wrote, the success can most likely be based on the fact that the artist “attempted to work according to his theorems”.¹⁸⁷ In the following chapter, I will closely analyse Čemický’s painted legacy from 1949-1956 to explore his attitudes and their development as well as define his own version of socialist realism. Apart from the comparison to the Soviet models and the work of his peers, I will also focus on the degree of idealization and propaganda in his work which will add to the overall picture of his artistic identity at the time.

Before I start the evaluation, it is important to make a few remarks on the impulses behind Čemický’s work. Because of the establishment of the new organisational structure overlooking every matter, the production was highly controlled and individual entrepreneurship was not allowed. This however did not mean that the stimulus for art was State-commissioned all the time. Apart from the official portraits, it seems that Čemický created most of his work out of his own initiative. Although the lack of preserved documentation does not allow me to claim this with complete certainty, from the documentation of the *úlohová akcia* from 1952, the biggest State commission, it is clear that the artist did not take part in it although over 60 of his

¹⁸¹ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. pp. 140-143

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 142

¹⁸⁴ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 346 for more context read Ibid., pp. 342-347

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 330-335

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 195 and pp. 330-335

¹⁸⁷ Meaning the translation of the definition into practice. Read more: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 330-335

peers did.¹⁸⁸ Those works were exhibited at the *VII. celoslovenská výstava* (VII. Annual Slovak Exhibition) in late 1952 and even though Čemický did not take part in the ultimate State commission, he did take part in the exhibition anyhow. It seems like Čemický was so confident in his ideological affiliation, his understanding, and execution of those works that he was brave enough to work outside of the official commissions unless directly asked.

Because of the lack of documentation, it is also not known who purchased Čemický's paintings and which remained in his possession. Some of the works were bought by the Slovak National Gallery¹⁸⁹ and based on the catalogues, it is known that the two portraits which are claimed to be the most successful works of Čemický within this era (*Robotník* (Worker, 1950)¹⁹⁰, and *Rolník* (Farmer, 1950, work completely lost) were bought by the Ministry of Agriculture (possibly in Prague) sometime in the late 1950 and early 1951.¹⁹¹ Although the detailed information about commissioners and buyers of Čemický's work will most likely remain unknown, the economic structure and the art market within the socialist Czechoslovakia definitely deserve further attention.

Carrying Modernism into Totality?

The more visible turn in Čemický's work took place in 1949 after the official acceptance of the method in Slovakia. True to his written words, Čemický accommodated to the new requests, but this year can be considered a transitional year – an intermezzo. Although the artist dedicated all his works to the socialist content, the form was somewhere mid-way to the classical rendering requested by the original dogma. These paintings are very dynamic, full of movement, gestures, and revolutionary spirit, however the expressivity of the composition and especially the brushstrokes – a continuation from his previous work, were in the way of his art being truly socialist realist. It seems as if he primarily focused on the primacy of content



Figure 12 - Ladislav Čemický, *Vítězný pochod* (Victory March), 1949, Slovak National Gallery

principle and needed more time to transition into the more clean realistic form.

For example, the works *Vítězný pochod* (Victory March, 1949) (fig. 12) and *Veselica* (Celebration, 1949) (fig. 13) are very similar in many ways. Depicting the mass of anonymous people/collective

¹⁸⁸ Slovak National Archive, Fond Povereníctvo školstva a kultúry, box no. 594

¹⁸⁹ For example: *Starý želiar* (see fig. 37) was bought in 1955, *Mierová mlatba na ŠM v Čemiciach* (see fig. 18) was also bought in 1955. Some were bought later but I was not successful in retrieving the information regarding the seller.

¹⁹⁰ The reproduction from the catalogue is featured below in the subchapter New Person (fig. 31)

¹⁹¹ In the catalogue of the *V. celoslovenská výstava* (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition) (November-December 1950) it can be seen that those works were exhibited together with *Matka s dieťaťom* (Mother with Child, 1950 – unpreserved). The latter was listed as “not for sale”, but the two portraits did not feature any such note. In the catalogue of the *Výtvarná úroda* exhibition (roughly translated as Artistic Harvest, December 1950 – January 1951, Prague) – the first Czechoslovak exhibition organized by *Zväz československých umelcov* (Union of the Czechoslovak Artists), those works were re-exhibited but were already listed as the property of the Ministry of Agriculture.

participating in the socialist celebrations; a high degree of dynamic movement is captured with the use of expressive brushstrokes. Consequently the detail was omitted from his work which went against the needed degree of accuracy within the socialist realist paintings.



Figure 13 - Ladislav Čemický, *Veselica (Celebration)*, 1949, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer: Pavel Styk

Paintings of a large mass of people were popular in the Soviet socialist realism especially after the World War II.¹⁹² It was necessary for them to be painted in a high degree of detail and as Cullerne Bown wrote – each face in the mass had to be painted from life in order to achieve this.¹⁹³ In the USSR, the high finish painting began to be requested in the post-war era which arrived hand in hand with the re-establishment of Academy in 1947.¹⁹⁴ This photographic-like finish heightened the sense of the “completeness” of the work and a true

mastery considered to be the “best of the best”.¹⁹⁵ It is unknown to what degree was this requirement known in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and more specifically in Czechoslovakia. The reproductions on Soviet works in the magazines varied greatly and even the exhibition of the National Russian Artists which took place in Prague and Bratislava in 1947 presented earlier socialist realist works which showcased a level of freer and lighter hand. Čemický never really achieved the high finish but eventually concretized his form.



Figure 14 - Ladislav Čemický, *Oslobodenie (Liberation)*, 1950, Ernest Zmeták Gallery

This turn became notable in 1950 as Čemický produced neatly organized paintings with a cleaner finish. For example the drawing *Oslobodenie (Liberation, 1950)* (fig. 14) depicts a Liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army in 1945¹⁹⁶ and is executed with a high degree of detail presented in the concrete form. Although there are noticeable anatomical errors, such as

¹⁹² Cullerne Bown. Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. pp. 269-271

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 279-280

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ This drawing was most likely a study for a larger scale painting. In an article in the daily magazine *Pravda*, in the article about artists preparing the decoration for the IX. Congress of the Slovak Communist Party, the anonymous author mentioned that Ladislav Čemický was working on a large-scale painting depicting the Liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army in 1945. (Read more: “Výtvarníci zjazdu”, in: *Pravda*, 6.5.1950 p. 6). A very similar depiction of the event was later done by Ján Hála and the result was exhibited at the VII. celoslovenská výstava (VII. Annual Slovak Exhibition) in 1952 see:

https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_2983

<https://vtedy.tasr.sk/zoom/398137/view?page=1&p=separate&tool=info>

the length of arms of the central female figure with her back turned to the viewer and the whole composition with figures reminds one of a children's book illustration, the desired clean and neat form was strengthened immensely. *Oslobodenie* appears unnaturally staged, almost as if we were looking at a play, but this stiffness too gradually disappeared from his work and his painterly expression became much more natural.

1950-1955 - Themes

The principle of the primacy of content over the form naturally led to a very logical phenomenon of the categorization of the genres of painting.¹⁹⁷ This division was not only used in the contemporary literature when evaluating and analysing the socialist realist paintings (or fine arts in general),¹⁹⁸ but it was also already present during the era itself.¹⁹⁹ Some genres were more popular and requested than others, but the general aim of *Zväz* and *Tvar* was to cover the whole spectrum from still life to historical painting.²⁰⁰ In the following section, I will follow this structure and analyse Čemický's socialist realist paintings divided into themes. This division allows for the most complete, multi-layered analysis. I will focus on the formal aspects, degree of propaganda, and comparison to both the Soviet model as well as some of his peers for better understanding of his innovation and individuality. This analysis will provide a detailed evaluation of Čemický's artistic identity in the era of politically forced art.

Work and Building

In general, within socialist realism, the most common theme was the work and building of the new socialist society. Naturally so, it was the worker who was supposed to be the centre of this society and of art too. This theme also became common because of the State politics and the planned economy. In the USSR, especially after the World War II, the pressure on production grew as the losses in war needed to be re-gained.²⁰¹ Because the goals set within the five-year plan economy were unattainable, a degree of unrest occurred which made the pressure even stronger.²⁰² The toil and collectivization, lack of food (especially in the rural farm areas) were the reality and the State propaganda used art to either "motivate" the farmers, or to show the people in the cities that the farmers were happy and adequately appreciated.

¹⁹⁷ See: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Paintings*, p. 228. This also probably had to do with the establishment of the creation of the new USSR Academy of Arts in 1947 – the division of genres in painting is especially characteristic for academic art and its tradition.

¹⁹⁸ See: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Paintings*, pp. 228-278, Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 178-209, Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlast'*, chapter: "Ikonografia a symboly "nového umenia"", pp. 423-465

¹⁹⁹ See for example: Városov, Marian. *Slovenská výtvarná prítomnosť*. pp. 39-57

²⁰⁰ This is apparent from the list of themes in the ultimate *úlohová akcia*, 1952. See in: Slovak National Archive, Fond Povereníctvo školstva a kultúry, box no. 594

²⁰¹ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. pp. 229-230

²⁰² Ibid.

Each and every Soviet painting depicting the theme of work had to be rendered in the spirit of socialist optimism.²⁰³ Usually, the very centre of attention were the collective farms or collectives of happy workers collaborating on a bigger task which was rendered as a key element of socialism.²⁰⁴ Usually depicted in a sunny fields or in impressive factories, not even the slightest sign of hardship or toil was allowed.²⁰⁵ Overall, the emphasis on abundance and the liberation of the worker from the exploiting capitalism was obvious.



Figure 15 - Ladislav Čemický, *Kábllová továreň (Cable Factory)*, 1950, original work is lost, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer unknown

The earliest Čemický's "work" painting from this era only available as a black and white reproduction dated to 1950 depicts an interior of a cable factory (fig 15). Sadly, we do not know more about the colour scheme and thus cannot establish the overall feel of the work, however this is the only preserved work by Čemický that depicts an industrial motive. Upon a closer look, a table of production can be seen in the

back with a Soviet flag which would have been red and thus draw more attention towards what is the main motive of the work. The very central theme of this painting is the exceeded production norm of the happy worker – a Stakhanov – who most likely just received the evaluation report and is celebrating. His achievement is the very key element of this painting

as it shows an "example" worthy of being followed. However, the composition does not do the motive justice. Instead of the primary focus being on the celebrated worker, he is rather overpowered by the monumental machines towering over him.



Figure 16 - Ladislav Čemický, *Nastali nové časy (New Times Have Arrived)*, 1951, Slovak National Gallery

The worker became the main focus in the work *Nastali nové časy* (The New Times Have Arrived, 1951) (fig. 16). Embedded in the flood of light-yellow wheat, surrounded by the idyllic nature a discussion takes place between the new worker backed up by the

²⁰³ Ibid., pp. 229-233

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 230

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

technology and the previous generation relying on the manual labour. It is most likely that Čemický wanted to depict the friendly encounter in which the “new time” is about to lift the heavy weight of the laborious work of the previous generation of the workers oppressed by the capitalist system. The new times (and the State) are offering not only better technology, but also the security and thus a better life. However, no matter how bright the colours are, how idyllic the nature is, the overall feeling of the work seems to be more confrontational than inviting. Almost as if the socialist worker with the frowning face and hand gesture did not invite the second figure to take a part in the building of the socialist society but suggested that there is not a place for him in this world.

This hint of a conflict that the artist might have not even aimed to portray would not have been allowed in the Soviet exemplary case of socialist realism. The “Theory of Conflictlessness” was created in 1946 and was based on the premise that the Soviet society officially entered the era of classlessness and thus did not produce any conflicts.²⁰⁶ Cullerne Bown argued that it was established out of fear as the post-war society became more strict and everyone was afraid to point out even the slightest imperfection.²⁰⁷ It is unknown whether Čemický knew about this or not, but he did not include it in his theoretical writings. Anyhow, as was stated, it is unlikely that Čemický aimed to portray this conflict in his painting and it could have been the result of the unwillingness to depict overly positive fabricated propaganda.



Figure 17 - Mária Medvecká, *Odovzdávanie kontingentu na hornej Orave* (Handing in of the Contingent at the Upper Orava), 1951, Orava Gallery

The static nature of the work together with the above-described attributes of a conflicting nature go against the overall positive feeling of the painting. Compared to perhaps the most famous and the most successful Slovak socialist realist work – *Odovzdávanie kontingentu na hornej Orave* by Mária Medvecká (Handing in of the Contingent at Upper Orava, 1951) (fig. 17), it is clear that Čemický’s famous work did not meet the standards of propaganda like Medvecká did. On the other hand,

Medvecká’s work shows a completely fabricated propaganda, which was possibly supposed to work as an example worthy of being followed, when she depicted the collectivization of produce in a highly idealized and optimistic manner.²⁰⁸ In reality, the collectivization was nowhere near happy and optimistic.

²⁰⁶ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 228

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Typification in practice then did not really mean the depiction of the most socialist characteristics which were still true, but in most cases it really meant the complete idealization/fabrication of the motive. The artwork could then serve as the instruction or recipe for people to show how one should act.

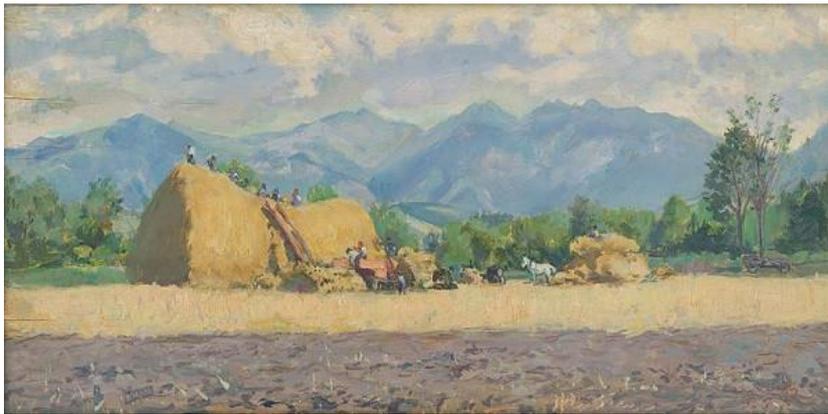


Figure 18 - Ladislav Čemický, *Mierová mlatba na štátnom majetku v Čemiciach* (Peace Threshing at the State Property in Čemice), 1954, Slovak National Gallery

The depiction of a collective farm – the biggest socialist symbol, was not omitted in the work of Čemický. *Mierová mlatba na ŠM v Čemiciach* (Peace Threshing on the State Property in Čemice, 1954) (fig. 18) depicts the collective effort in conquering a difficult task which was again an important socialist idea –

the collective working together for the greater good (represented by the state property) and thus selflessly contributing to the socialist society. The collective conquest of a “difficult” task presented by the surplus of harvest is possibly an idealized depiction, but this work cannot be considered a made-up propaganda. Because we cannot see the faces of the workers, Čemický depicted the possibly only slightly idealized but still real (true to life) efforts at the collective farm.

Historical Painting

Establishing total power also meant the re-evaluation and re-writing of the history. Since art was supposed to have an educational character, it was only natural that the historical motives appeared in fine arts, especially painting, and were valued greatly. Nonetheless, it was not just the rewriting of the history, but also the heroization of the right historical events. In the USSR, this can especially be followed after the World War II, when in painting, the very clear heroization of the fights in favour of the Soviets took place.²⁰⁹ Similarly, only the fitting Russian historical figures were heroized and so were the correct historical event representing the lineage of fight for socialism.²¹⁰ Very dynamic and monumental depictions of the battlefields with an overflow of figures were immensely popular for their impressive nature.

Meanwhile the USSR and even The Czech part of Czechoslovakia had a much longer history richer in the number of narrative fitting events, Slovakia was not so lucky. There were three historical events that were put forward and celebrated not just in art but in general – the Liberation by the Red Army in 1945, the Slovak National Uprising, and the Krompachy Uprising.²¹¹

The Liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army in 1945 depicted on the drawing *Oslobodenie* (Liberation, 1950) (fig.14) can be considered a breaking point in the history of Slovakia as it

²⁰⁹ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. p. 230 and pp. 251-253

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ The Krompachy Uprising was an insignificant historical moment of the workers standing up against the oppressive superiors. Read more about the theme of the Slovak National Uprising in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 202-209

brought the country in the Soviet sphere of influence and was thus represented with the utmost importance. This drawing can be considered a highly idealized depiction as it depicts a real event which was possibly joyful in real time, but the true reality of the Liberation also carried negative side of progressing soldiers looting stores and homes of their most prized possessions. Čemický rendered this moment in a very crowded composition with Russian soldiers being celebrated by the people. The celebrations provide an overall positive and optimistic notion but because it is only a drawing, much more cannot be said.

The Slovak National Uprising (*SNP*) became a very important theme within the scope of the Slovak Stalinist socialist realist art. It became the symbol of not only the Slovak resistance to the Nazi Germany (and Nazism in general) but also the symbol of the Slovak collaboration with the USSR in this resistance. Since many artists took active part in it this theme became popular in the late 40s and the first half of the 50s and was quickly appropriated by the State. The popularity and importance of this theme materialized in the major exhibition dedicated to the theme in 1955.²¹²



12. Ladislav Čemický: *Oslobodená zem*, náčrt, 1950, olej

Figure 19 - Ladislav Čemický, *Oslobodená zem (Liberated Land)*, 1949, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the publication: Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav. *Slovenské umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu*, Tvar, 1950, p. 38

The very early historical painting by Čemický – *Oslobodená zem* (Liberated Land, 1949) (fig. 19) depicts a victorious scene set in the hilly forests in the northern Slovakia. Highly idealized central figure dressed in the national dress dynamically announces the possible partial victory within the whole uprising. Here, the accommodation of the history as well as the optimistic portrayal takes place very visibly – the *SNP* was suppressed in the end. The romantic nature of the work is presented by the partisan dressed in the national dress holding a rifle. This idealised portrayal gave the already Slovak-specific theme even more Slovak nature.

²¹² Matuščík, Radislav. Vaculík, Karol. Városov, Marian. *Slovenské národné povstanie vo výtvarnom umení*, Bratislava: SVKL, 1955

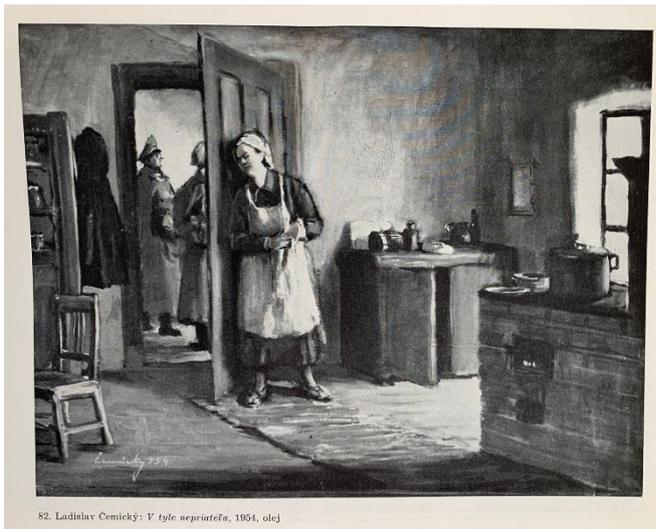


Figure 20 - Ladislav Čemický, *V tyle nepriateľa* (In the Rear of the Enemy), 1954, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the publication accompanying the Slovak National Uprising in Art Exhibition in 1955 (Váross, Marian. Vaculík, Karol. Slovenské národné povstanie vo výtvarnom umení, Bratislava: SVKL, 1955

woman; this emotionality of the depiction heightens the significance of the historical moment. In it the depicted woman becomes a true hero of the people as she is also contributing to the right cause.



Figure 21 - Ladislav Čemický, *Návrat* (Return), 1955, in the collection of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic (Ministry of Defence), photographed by Kristína Ostatníková, exhibited at the Ladislav Čemický – maliar, učiteľ, funkcionár exhibition in the Peter M. Bohúň Gallery (December 2021-June 2022)

does not appear as positive in comparison with Čemický. Čemický's painting almost works as a snapshot of a moment as the depiction of the embrace is dynamic. The earthy tones contrast the whiteness of the dress worn by the embraced female figure in the front, drawing the attention

There are two later paintings dedicated to the Uprising from the year 1955. Firstly, *V tyle nepriateľa* (In the Rear of the Enemy, 1954) (fig. 20) depicts a woman whose house is being searched by the German officers as she was either possibly hiding partisans in her own home or was helping the Uprising in other ways. Secondly, it is *Návrat* (The Return) (fig. 21) currently in the collections of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic which was painted in 1955 (although on the documents created by the institution it is faultily dated to 1950)²¹³ which depicts the return of the son or a partner from the fight. The former presents a very heightened emotion of the fear of the

Návrat (The Return, 1955) proves the development of the application of the socialist realism by Čemický as it meets the formal and theoretical requirements of the method. Personally, I consider this work the peak of the efforts Čemický during this era. The overall extremely optimistic theme of the work presents a soldier returning home which was not an uncommon theme of the socialist realist art. Similar Soviet works can be found quite easily; for example the work *The Return* by the Ukrainian artists Vladimir N. Kostetski depicts the emotionally charged embrace of the partners after the soldier returns home alive and well.²¹⁴

The work by Koteski is rather dark and

²¹³ The signature on the painting clearly states 1955 and not 1950

²¹⁴ It is difficult to establish if Čemický was able to encounter this work, but the possibility is quite high considering that the work was so popular that it was reproduced on a post stamp.

to the very core motive of the painting. The optimistic and romantic are the key principles of this work yet the author applied them to a historical theme, depicted a positive (read: typically socialist) hero and a happy end. This work has socialist realism written all over it, yet, although it presents an idealized moment, it cannot be said that it was completely fabricated.

Compared to the drawing *Oslobodenie* (Liberation, 1950) (fig. 14), one can truly see the development from the very stiff and staged depiction of a historical event (even if idealized) to the more natural use of the means to express the emotionality of the past which the viewer can relate to more. None of Čemický's historical paintings are quite as monumental as the Soviet model, that could be due to the small number of fitting and grand historical events in Slovakia.

Children – The Hope and the Bright Future

Children and youth were quite a popular theme in the Soviet socialist realism.²¹⁵ As the symbol of hope and builders of the bright future, they were usually depicted in such context that would support this notion. Commonly indulged in education, building, games, etc., or even accompanying the leader which presented him in a very loving and peaceful way. The children and the youth, as Rusinová wrote, were the generation which was less influenced by the ideology of the past and was thus more susceptible to change, to re-education.²¹⁶ The schooling system was designed in a way which would reduce the contact with the parent and the time for education could be fully used by the State.²¹⁷ It was also the extracurricular activities the children and the youth took part in which limited their time outside of direct State influence. The monumental socialist project *Trat' mládeže* (The Youth Railway) is a great example of this kind of enthusiasm of the youth where volunteers (usually aged 16-20) volunteered to manually build over 20 kilometres of a railway track in a rocky and hilly environment. Over 45 thousand youth workers participated on this construction in 18 months and the track was inaugurated in October 1949.²¹⁸

This emphasis on the hope presented in the youth and children naturally reflected in art as well. In the Slovak art, it was mostly children who earned more focused attention, the youth was displayed in more overarching narratives (e.g. the building of the railway track, yet the paintings usually focused more on the building than on the youth). It was majorly female painters who indulged in this topic²¹⁹ but this was not a rule. There were a few artists who occasionally produced a work (usually a portrait) of a child²²⁰ or incorporated it in a multifigure narrative

²¹⁵ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 254

²¹⁶ Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*, p. 253

²¹⁷ Read more about the education system in: Rusinová, Zora. *Súdržka moja vlasť*, pp. 253-281

²¹⁸ Šípová, Darina. "PRÍBEHY Z OCELOVÝCH ROVNOBEŽIEK: TRAT' MLÁDEŽE, Od vybudovania legendárneho diela uplynie už 73 rokov", in: *Bibliotheca Universitatis*, 17, no 2, 2021/2022, pp. 33-37, accessible online: <https://ojs.umb.sk/index.php/bu/article/view/641/576>

²¹⁹ Marian Városov dedicated a separate section to those motives in the evaluation of the *VII. celoslovenská výstava* (VII. Annual Slovak Exhibition, 1952) where two female painters exhibited works focused on children. Those were the works by Mária Medvecká – *Deti mieru* (Children of Peace, 1952) (fig. 23) and Edita Spannerová – *Mičurinský krúžok* (Michurin club, 1952) which depicts older children. Both artists produced more work focused on children.

²²⁰ For example see: Andrej Doboš – *Pionierka* (Pioneer, 1954). A high-quality reproduction available on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_1610

painting as a symbol of hope.²²¹ Apart from Ladislav Čemický, there was only one male Slovak painter who focused on the topic of children more and that was Ladislav Guderna.²²²



Figure 22 - Ladislav Čemický, *Hra s bublinou* (Game with a Bubble), 1953, Slovak National Gallery

Čemický had one daughter at the time of the Stalinist socialist realism. His oldest daughter Katarína was born in 1946²²³ and by the time the socialist realism was applied, Čemický made her an object of many of his paintings (mainly portraits). Not just her, but also her friends and the children's world charmed him to a certain extent as he produced a few works dedicated to their sensible and idyllic world.

Hra s bublinou (Game with the Bubble, 1953) (fig. 22) depicts five children²²⁴ indulged in a game in which a boy is blowing soap bubbles. This work was interpreted by Kusá as the proof of artist's contempt for the socialist realism which apparently begun together with the loosening in the art world after the death of Stalin in 1953.²²⁵ She built her argument on the motive being "without an added value" as it does not represent eager young

workers, the children being dressed in diverse clothes for no deeper reason, and the bubble representing the "bursting bubble" of the method itself.²²⁶ According to her, this was the last realistic painting Čemický created.²²⁷ I consider it very important to provide a different

²²¹ For example see: Július Balogh : *Nástup do Slovenského národného povstania* (Joining the Slovak National Uprising, 1952) which depicts a young girl in the foreground gifting a flower to a soldier. A high-quality reproduction accessible on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_2245

²²² Ladislav Guderna is rightfully considered an "unsuccessful" socialist realist artist. Within the era, he found his own style which was translated into his financial situation. In 1953, he wrote a letter to the Slovak National Gallery asking them to buy one of his works as he and his family were starving due to lack of funds (the letter is preserved in the Personal Fond of Ladislav Guderna in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery). It seems as if he did not know how to get rid of his modernist tendencies (or perhaps did not want to), his work from this era is very distinguishable and was not very well received (especially by the critics as he was usually called out for formalism). His works dedicated to children usually consist of portraits of children behind the table, or holding a teddy bear, however the overall feel of the work is always very gloomy, the children are never smiling, they are extremely static, the colours are rather dark and muddy. Although these works were created during this era, they cannot be called socialist realist.

²²³ Her younger sister Anna Čemická was born in 1958

²²⁴ All were friends of Katarína Čemická. In our conversation, she was able to name all the children by name and shared that it was painted in the atelier (most likely in Liptov and not Bratislava). It then works as an idyllic work but based on real people.

²²⁵ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 311, Stalin and Gottwald both died in 1953. According to Kusá, this year manifested the very first loosening within the art world. Read: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 246-306

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

interpretation of the painting as it is crucial for establishing the attitudes of Čemický during the presumed decline of the Stalinist socialist realism in 1953.



Figure 23 - Mária Medvecká, *Deti mieru* (Children of Peace), 1952, Orava Gallery

Hra s bublinou was created in 1953, the year after the VII. celoslovenská výstava (VII. Annual Slovak Exhibition) which also presented the work by Mária Medvecká – *Deti mieru* (Children of Peace, 1952) (fig. 23). Medvecká's painting received an extraordinarily positive critique which was a literal exception from the critique at the time.²²⁸ Usually, each and every artist was criticized for something, no matter how “correct” the artwork was, but Marian Városov raised this work even above her previous most popular, already mentioned work

Odozdávanie kontingentu na hornej Orave (Handing on of the Contingent at Upper Orava, 1951) (fig. 17).²²⁹ It is most likely that Čemický wanted to learn from her success and produced a work that carries notable similarities. Both paintings present kids dressed in different clothes possibly presenting different societal roles (pioneer, farmer, etc.) but this is even more distinguished in *Hra s bublinou*. Kusá herself mentioned the similarity of the girl in the right bottom corner in Čemický's painting to some of Medvecká's works.²³⁰ Although Čemický's painting does not appear as optimistic as the work of Medvecká, it cannot be stated that it does not present a socialist idea. The little boy “workers” together with a schoolgirl/*Michurin* girl, and the farmer girl on Čemický's painting could represent a friendly relation of different groups of workers within a socialist collective, which was inherently a socialist thought. These various children playing together could then present not only the idyllic world of children but also the bright future which relies heavily on the collective and cooperation of many people contributing with their talents and work. Needless to say, Kusá was mistaken when she deemed *Hra s bublinou* to be the last (socialist) realist work by Čemický in the era of Stalinism. I have already raised a few which were created later and can be very much considered socialist realist (e.g. *Návrat* – The Return, 1955). The notion she created of Čemický being repulsed by socialist realism as early as 1953 is thus very likely to be incorrect.

²²⁸ I was not able to find any negative socialist realist critique regarding this work which is certainly extraordinary

²²⁹ Városov, Marian. *Slovenská výtvarná prítomnosť*. p. 48

²³⁰ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 311



Figure 24 - Ladislav Čemický, *Katka v žltom klobúku* (*Katka in a Yellow Hat*), 1954, Slovak National Gallery



Figure 25 - Ladislav Čemický, *Chlapec s gumipuškou* (*Boy with a Slingshot*), 1952, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer: R. Kedro

Katka v žltom klobúku (*Katka in a Yellow Hat*, 1954) (fig. 24) presents the eldest daughter of Čemický sitting in the sun. This simple and relatively small in scale portrait ravel with colour. The soft tones of the dress, pale skin, rosy cheeks, and the hat is complemented by the red chair and green and blue background. “Optimistic” is definitely a fit description of the work even though Katka’s smile is not too apparent at the first glance. The portrait is filled with light which is one of the most socialist realist symbols and important formal aspects. Cullerne Bown described light in the socialist realist painting as a metaphor for happiness and bright future.²³¹ In some of the Soviet works this metaphor was taken into an almost literal sense when Stalin was metaphorically presented as the rising sun.²³² The symbolism of a child combined with the metaphor of light (and also the psychological effects light has) allows to interpret this work not just as an optimistic portrait of the artist’s daughter, but also as her being the “bright future of socialism”.

Considering his socialist realist oeuvre, the bright sunlight appeared in Čemický’s work somewhere around 1952. In the unpreserved work *Chlapec s gumipuškou* (*Boy with the Slingshot*, 1952) (fig. 25) the strong shadows can be seen even on a black and white reproduction. In this case the metaphor of a bright future is even more apparent as the boy is not only looking into the sun but is also aiming at it. With a focused look, sturdy hands, and determination, this

²³¹ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist realist painting*, p. 180

²³² See for example the work that was also reproduced in the Slovak magazines: Fyodor Shurpin – *The Morning of Our Motherland* (1948) where Stalin is depicted in the soft light of the sunrise, yet the name of the painting suggests the leader himself being the “morning”, the rising sun. Cullerne Bown mentioned this painting as an exemplary case of amazing metaphorical rendering of ideology as well. Read: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 237, the painting is featured on page 238 as plate no. 247

young man bathing in the light is the representation of the future, hope, and resolution.

In these paintings, Čemický did display socialist ideology in a very metaphorical and naturally



Figure 26 - Ladislav Čemický, *V nedelju pri Váhu* (At the River Váh on Sunday), 1952, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the digital archive of the News Agency of the Slovak Republic, photographer: Roller

rendered sense, but these works cannot be considered propaganda in the very literal sense. Compared to the epitome of Slovak socialist realism – Medvecká, his work is less theatrical and staged, much more intimate and subtle, as well as believable.

The bright light as a positive element appears in multi-figure compositions too. The work *Návrat* (The Return, 1955) (fig. 21) with the main protagonist in the dazzling light strengthens the happiness of the theme depicted. Painting *V nedelju pri Váhu* (At the River Váh on Sunday, 1952) (fig. 26) depicts moments of rest near the river on the Sunday afternoon. Although this work was also lost and it is only known from the black and white photograph, the strong shadows on the ground suggest the sunny nature of it. The socialist romantic

nature of this painting is very apparent in the blissful moments of well-deserved rest for the workers and their families. The socialist ideology presents the no longer exploited worker, but rather celebrated men who can provide for their families as well as enjoy the security and benefits provided by the State.

Landscapes

The landscape and still lifes did not escape the accommodation to the new principles. The still lifes were not a very popular motive and Čemický did not produce any during this era.²³³ The landscapes appeared more often in the Slovak art. Generally, the Soviet socialist realist landscapes were characterized by a degree of monumentality but also by the change inflicted on it by the work of men.²³⁴ The nature and land were either presented as changed by the working men or as serving the socialist society.²³⁵ Kusá wrote that in the Slovak art world, landscapes were painted by those who wanted to avoid painting the highly ideological themes and thus used landscape as a safe refuge.²³⁶ Aside from the popular landscapes picturing the

²³³ If he did they were neither preserved, nor is there any written mention about them.

²³⁴ Read more about socialist realist landscapes in: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. pp. 256-259

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 179

heavy industrialisation of the country, there were also works depicting the Slovak nature in a celebratory and monumentalized way.²³⁷



Figure 27 - Ladislav Čemický, *Kvačianske vrchy* (Kvačany Hills), 1954, Slovak National Gallery

Čemický dedicated his watercolour painting to the Slovak landscapes but as was already pointed out, he mainly focused on larger scale oil painting during the Stalinist socialist realism era. There are a few watercolour examples from this time that showcase how he handled this genre. In 1954, a small series of watercolour landscapes was created depicting the fields and hills of the northern Slovakia. Just as *Kvačianske vrchy* (The Kvačany Hills, 1954) (fig.27) the paintings depict the work that has been done

in the end of the summer when the wheat was already harvested, and the hay was drying on the racks. Artist thus managed to portray the landscape as marked by the work of the human hands.

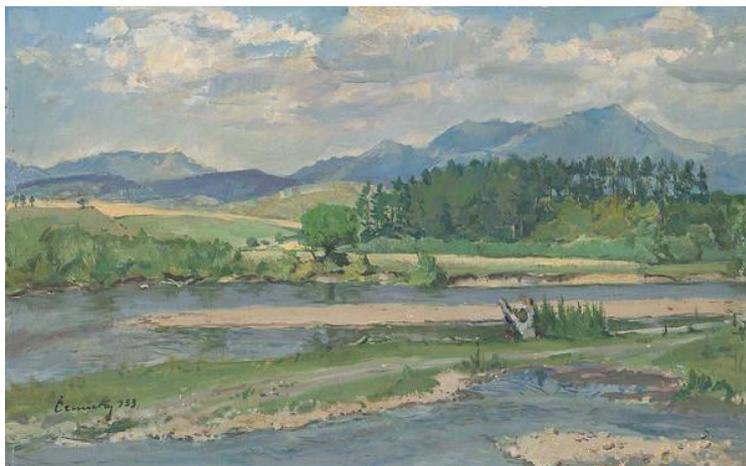


Figure 28 - Ladislav Čemický, *Pri Váhu* (At River Váh), 1953, Slovak National Gallery

The call for more landscapes which Čemický made in the evaluation of the *V. celoslovenská výstava* (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition) in December 1950²³⁸ was never fulfilled on his part in this period. There is one preserved oil painting *Pri Váhu* (At Váh River, 1953) (fig. 28) which depicts the Liptov nature. This work is not significantly socialist realist. There is no sign of human work, the riverbed is

not modified by humans in any way in which it could be beneficial, and the hills in the background are not as monumental as desired. This work is a regular landscape with a slight intimate impressionist undertone. The lack of detail and heavy brushstrokes combined with Čemický's love for the region suggest that this was truly his impression of the moment. It is

²³⁷ Július Nemčík produced a few landscapes of a process of a heavy industrialisation. See for example: *Most na východ* (Bridge to the East, 1953) or *Industrializácia nášho kraja* (Industrialisation of Our Land, 1951, a high-quality reproduction available on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_461). The work appreciated by critics was by Bedrich Hoffstädter – *Liptovské hole* (Liptov Hills, 1951, a high-quality reproduction available on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_553) which depicts villages in the north part of Slovakia with symbols of industrialization/workers – smoking chimneys of factories, surrounded by monumental mountains.

²³⁸ Čemický, Ladislav. "Bližšie k socialistickému realizmu, V. celoslovenská výstava", p. 5

possible that it was painted as an exercise or out of the love author had for the region and it was not meant to be displayed publicly or sold via *Tvar*.²³⁹

Landscape also gained importance within different themes.²⁴⁰ This is indeed the case for Čemický too, as he paid attention to the nature more in a few works. The depiction of a restful Sunday afternoon in *V nedelju pri Váhu* (1952) (fig. 26) does mainly focus on the figures; however, the scene is embedded in the surrounding nature. This work portrays the nature as serving the worker. The river provides a light pleasant breeze on a sunny afternoon and a different kind of treat for the fisherman positioned in the very central point of the canvas. The monumentality of the tree is highlighted in its practicality as it provides shadow from the hot sun and of course – a factory is portrayed in the background. Compared to the previous painting this one really showcases the socialist relationship between the men and nature in an almost ideal way.

Portraiture

Ladislav Čemický was a portraitist throughout his life and naturally, he continued to paint portraits in this period as well. The concrete number of portraits painted is not known, as many of the paintings were destroyed, lost, or are in private ownership without any documentation, but even without the concrete statistics, it is safe to say that this genre represents the richest group within his oeuvre from this era. His portraits can be further divided into the groups of official portrait, typical portrait or “effigy”, portrait of a concrete individual, and self-portraits.

Official Portraiture

The official portraits of rulers represented power and were often idealized to support this notion of a powerful and influential leader.²⁴¹ Naturally, this genre became immensely important during Stalinism (and other totalitarian regimes).²⁴² Portraits of the most important politicians were common but the most common of them all was the portrait of Stalin in a variety of forms. Stalin’s active building of his cult naturally projected not only painted portraiture, but every form of the visual representation. Today, the degree of photo editing in the Stalinist era as means of propaganda is well known as interesting research efforts have been conducted.²⁴³ A common practice was the beautifying of Stalin himself which would present him as a flawless, healthy, and capable leader. While a certain degree of actual likeness was required, the idealization of the almighty leader himself was a key element of the propaganda of official portrait.²⁴⁴ In the Soviet art, he was often depicted as a planner of cities, war-leader, visiting museums, presenting

²³⁹ I did not retrieve any information regarding the exhibiting of this work. It supports the fact that the work was most likely not exhibited; yet it is still uncertain as not all the catalogues are preserved in their completeness or not preserved at all.

²⁴⁰ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 258

²⁴¹ West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2004

²⁴² Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian art*. Pp. 225-234

²⁴³ For example see one of the newest additions: Skopin, Denis. *Photography and Political Representation in Stalin’s Russia, Defacing the Enemy*. Routledge : New York, London, 2022

²⁴⁴ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 159

speeches, etc., presenting the type of a perfect leader engaged in a variety of important roles. His powers and abilities were represented by his physical features as well. Usually tall, with broad shoulders, big strong hands, thick hair, and an impressive moustache, clear skin, and always wearing the neat and perfectly clean marshal uniform.²⁴⁵

Ladislav Čemický painted at least one official portrait during the socialist realism era and that is the portrait of Stalin (1949) (fig. 2, see p. 6). This portrait was widely reproduced and became a part of the everyday life, hanging in the offices²⁴⁶ and decorating postcards.²⁴⁷ The very earthy colours contrasted with the hints of red details support the seriousness and importance of the depiction, but it certainly lacks the desired degree of monumentality. The leader's uniform looks a little too large, his nose is too big on his face, the moustache too small. His back looks



Figure 29 - film negative of four of the most important political authorities for the Slovak context (V. I. Lenin, J. V. Stalin, K. Gottwald, V. Široký) featured in the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photo by Kristína Ostatníková

hunched down, his posture is not confident enough, his shoulders are somehow not broad enough. Although the leader is looking into the bright future, wears a medal on his chest, and is clothed in his typical marshal uniform which were the very basic prerequisites, this portrait is not idealized. Yet, because it was so widely reproduced, it can be assumed that it was still appreciated by the State.

Kusá argued that due to the stiffness of depicted Stalin, it is possible that Čemický painted it based on other official portraits, especially the Soviet examples.²⁴⁸ I dare to disagree as in his personal fond at the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, there are many photographs of the socialist leaders preserved. There is not just Stalin, but also Lenin, Gottwald, and Široký²⁴⁹ (fig. 29), together with photographs of anonymous men posing holding a book and a closeup on the book which probably

served as a guide as the leaders rarely posed for official portraits.²⁵⁰ Čemický was clearly officially commissioned to paint other official portraits, sadly they were either never executed or lost. Because of this finding and the lack of idealization (on contrary to the official Soviet portraits), it is obvious that Čemický did not paint the portrait based on the most popular Soviet paintings and took his own turn at it which resulted in this more true to life painting rather than blatant fabricated propaganda.

²⁴⁵ Read more about official portraiture and representation of Stalin in arts: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. pp. 157-161 and 234-238 and Golomstock, Igor. *Totalitarian Art*. Pp. 225-234

²⁴⁶ See more: Alexandra Kusá, *Prerušená pieseň*, image attachment, section on Ladislav Čemický – a photograph depicting the reproduction hanging on the wall in the Slovak National Gallery office.

²⁴⁷ One of those was preserved in: Personal Fond of Ladislav Čemický, Archive of Fine Arts, Slovak National Gallery

²⁴⁸ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 185

²⁴⁹ The Chairman of the Slovak Communist Party (KSS)

²⁵⁰ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 234

*Portraits, Effigies, and the Concept of New Person*²⁵¹

Apart from the official portraiture, there are many different forms and functions of portraits, but they can generally be divided into two groups. This dualism was described by Erwin Panofsky as follows: one kind aims at depicting the individual in all the ways they differs from the rest of humanity – presenting their individuality, context in which they are depicted, objects that possibly surround them, etc.; and the other kind as a depiction of everything that the sitter has in common with the rest of the humanity (or a specific group of people) – creating a type.²⁵² Bernard Berenson too made this distinction and called the former “portrait” and the latter “effigy”.²⁵³ Both of those can be found in Čemický’s socialist realist oeuvre.

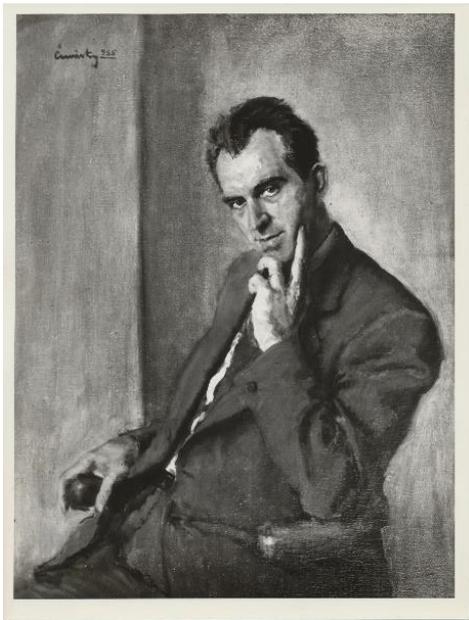


Figure 30 - Ladislav Čemický, *Architekt Svetlák* (Portrait of Architect Svetlák), ca. 1950-1954, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer unknown

Viewing the “portrait” in the context of the Stalinist era, it is truly peculiar why this genre was a part of the artist’s oeuvre as it quite radically does not correspond with the basic ideology of socialism. The commission or execution of individual portraits was very characteristic for the bourgeoisie class in the modern era²⁵⁴ and getting one’s portrait painted was often perceived as means of showing off status, wealth, etc. It is not needed to elaborate on how the socialist society was strictly against everything the bourgeoisie society represented. In socialism and socialist realism, the collective was always positioned over the individual. There was no room for individual feelings, individual persona, individual interest; everything was subordinated to the happy collective and to the State which represented the collective. These paintings by Čemický display the individual as a specific person in a neutral but somewhat intimate setting with individualized and not idealized features which do certainly not present a type. For example the portrait of the architect Svetlák (fig. 30) does not even present him as an architect, but as Svetlák – the person, a simple man in quite an intimate nature which suggests that this painting was possibly intended for personal display. Those paintings were rarely if ever exhibited and it is possible that the artist just painted them as a way of artistic exercise. Looking at the photographic reproductions of some of Čemický’s paintings present in his archival fond at the Slovak National Gallery, this group consisted of a

²⁵¹ Very little scholarship has been done on portraiture in the era of socialist realism outside of the official portrait. I will thus have to turn to the more general literature and contextualize it in the specific situation that the totalitarian era was

²⁵² Panofsky, Erwin. *Early Netherlandish Painting*, New York and London, 1971, p. 194, retrieved from: West, Shearer. *Portraiture*, p. 24

²⁵³ Berenson, Bernard. *Aesthetics and History*, The University Press Glasgow, 1948, pp. 188-189

²⁵⁴ West, Shearer. *Portraiture*, pp. 81-87

relatively big number but also relatively small compared to the “effigies” that follow. If Čemický gifted them or sold them to the sitter is unknown.²⁵⁵

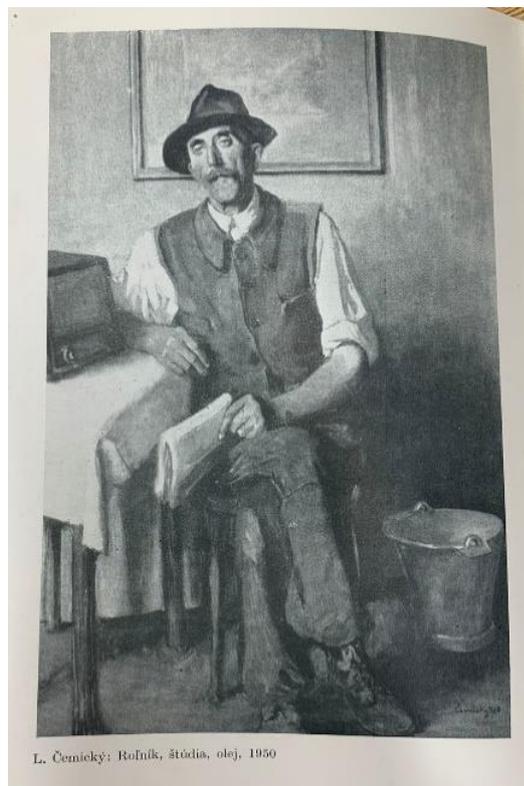


Figure 31 - Ladislav Čemický, *Robotník (Worker)*, 1950, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the catalogue of V. celoslovenská výstava (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition), retrieved from the Slovak National Gallery Library

In the socialist realist oeuvre of Čemický, there are a few portraits which present the worker as the generalized and universal type. For example, the work *Robotník* (The Worker, 1950) (fig. 31) preserved only as a reproduction in the catalogue of the V. celoslovenská výstava (V. Annual Slovak Exhibition)²⁶¹, depicts an older worker sitting at home. It is clear that this person is a worker from the name of the painting, from his attire, his large strong hands carrying signs of

The “effigy” presents a more important part of Čemický’s oeuvre as it relates to the concept of the “New Socialist Person” characteristic for the socialist realism.²⁵⁶ This socialist concept was an important part of propaganda and created the new type of hero of socialism by presenting the very “typical” that the socialist society had to offer. The new hero was usually a Stakhanovite, eager worker, farmer, sportsman, political activist, scientist, etc.²⁵⁷, was rarely a specific individual but rather a “collective universal hero” in which each person could see themselves and would be motivated by the example set.²⁵⁸ The New Person was portrayed as a beautiful, physically well build, and mentally capable; this human striving for perfection (and more) was obviously highly idealised.²⁵⁹ Alexandra Kusá too described this idealized universal hero type in her work and mentioned a few of Čemický’s portraits in the chapter as examples.²⁶⁰ A closer analysis is necessary to further define the nature of Čemický’s effigies.

²⁵⁵ There are portraits of friends of Čemický – it is obvious from the familiar names used, but also people who probably were not so familiar with the artist (such as a clerk lady dressed in a considerably nice clothes, or the portrait of architect Svetlík, etc.). It is possible that those were commissioned by the portrayed based on the fact that since portraits took a long time to paint, it is more “unnatural” to paint someone who you do not spend a lot of time with already and would have to agree on a sitting in advance – not just paint it over a quick cup of coffee. But this is just an assumption not backed up by enough evidence.

²⁵⁶ Read more about the socialist concept of the „New Person“ in: Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 133 and pp. 166-176 or the whole publication: Nečasová, Denisa. *Nový socialistický člověk, Československo 1948-1956*, Host: Brno, 2018

²⁵⁷ Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Socialist Realist Painting*. p. 166

²⁵⁸ Bakoš, Ján. *Umelec v klietke*, Bratislava : Sorosovo centrum súčasného umenia, 1999, Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 189-191

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 168

²⁶⁰ She listed three portraits of three different workers painted by Čemický. See more: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 191

²⁶¹ Catalogue, V. Annual Slovak Exhibition, November-December 1950, accessible in the Slovak National Gallery Library

toil, possibly even the face which shows signs of long exposure to sun or hardship. Even if he is depicted resting at home, in the process of catching up on the information from the newspaper and radio (mass media!) and not amidst work, this portrait represents a typified anonymous worker to whom any other worker can relate to. However, comparing this painting to the concept of the New Person and its visualisation (especially in the Soviet model), it quickly becomes clear that Čemický did not idealize his portrait subjects. The artist did not render the New Person who was in a certain way de-humanized off of his emotions and was a socialist machine solely focused on the progress and performance. He presented their psychological side as well when he displayed them as tired and tested by the hard work. Yet, even the test of hard labour strengthened the person and made them a little more human. Čemický did not fabricate the empty propaganda that was the non-existent type of the New Person machine, but he celebrated the real workers for who they were and for the real and valuable contribution to the new society. Just like in his writings, Čemický did not aim to sugar coat the reality but presented it in its true colours.

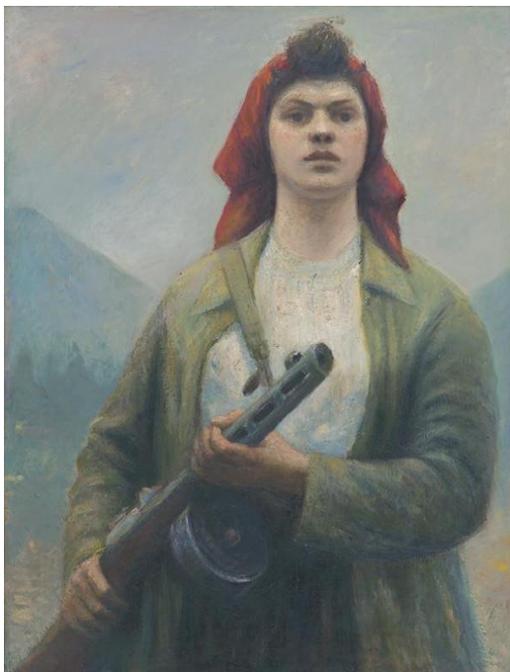


Figure 32 - Ján Mudroch, , *Partizánka na Stráži pod Rozsutcom* (*Partisan Woman on Guard under Rozsutec*), 1954, Slovak National Gallery

The concept of the New Person was most definitely present in the Slovak art of socialist realism. The young partisan woman painted by Ján Mudroch (also a member of the Generation 1909) *Mladá partizánka na stráži pod Rozsutcom* (Young Partisan on the Watch under Rozsutec, 1954) (fig. 32) is a perfect example of this highly idealised new hero. The woman with the look of determination on her face, holding a machine gun, ready to protect her country in the Slovak National Uprising carries idealized features. The work does not depict a concrete person, rather a generalized and idealized hero who set an example to be followed. There are also other Slovak examples which could be named that really produced a perfect universal socialist hero – e.g. *Hlava robotníka* (Head of a Worker, around 1950)²⁶² by Milan Gašpar, *Žena v červenom* (Woman in Red, 1955)²⁶³ by Ján Mudroch, etc. In those, no signs of hardship or any other negative connotations are visible

on the portrayed idealized types. Even the partisan woman painted by Mudroch facing the enemy in the foggy hills of Slovakia is the epitome of beautiful heroism where fear is not known.

The fact that Čemický did understand the concept of the idealized universal hero is apparent from at least one work preserved only as a reproduction (fig. 33). The work in question does not have a name and is thought to be dated to around 1950 although a precise dating is not

²⁶² See a high-quality digital reproduction of this work on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_6499

²⁶³ See a high-quality digital reproduction of this work on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SNG.O_1042

known. The portrait depicts a young anonymous idealized man standing firmly, hand effortlessly positioned on his hip, in a clean uniform that fits him. Being young (and idealized), his face or body is not marked by the signs of the toil as Čemický's other worker portraits.



original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer: Štefan Tomáš

Similarly, in his teaching at the Academy, Čemický did appreciate the concept of the New Person and valued it higher over other realistic portraits. In the summer of 1952, some of the Academy's student works were exhibited for the public to see. Those were usually the highest graded works and one of them was a drawing (portrait) by the first-year student Ján Ilavský (fig. 34). Meanwhile the majority of other works exhibited were portrait studies focused on a realistic (in this meaning actually true to life) depictions of the subject, this one depicts the universal New Person, a young girl looking into the distance with a determined expression on her face, dressed in the typical worker's uniform, ready to contribute to the building of the new society. This work was awarded by Čemický as the best student work that year and received scholarship.²⁶⁴

The typification of a socialist hero is also apparent beyond the genre of portrait. In Čemický's work, the anonymous hero can be found in *Nastali nové časy* (New Times Have Arrived, 1951) (fig. 16) as the worker of the new age dressed in clean uniform backed up by the machine in the background. Although he is meant to be the representative of the new and better times, this depiction was not in the line with the Party politics propaganda. The worker carries all the signs of hard labour and although they are still presented in a relatively positive way, the figure cannot be deemed idealized.



Figure 34 - Ján Ilavský, *Untitled* (student work exhibited in 1952 in Bratislava supervised by Ladislav Čemický), reproduction retrieved from the digital archive of the News Agency of the Slovak Republic, photographer: Roller

While in these "effigies", the typification and anonymization, which allowed for a sense of relatedness, were definitely a big part of the artist's socialist realist oeuvre and present the socialist ideology, the fabrication which was a key element of propaganda was not a part of his artistic identity. Čemický's art honestly celebrated the beauty of life in its reality and did not made-up propaganda to

²⁶⁴ Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, Fond Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, Bratislava), box. no. 33

provide a false goal the people should be motivated by. Čemický provided a type of a socialist worker who makes honourable sacrifices for the society and progress.

Concept of Nationality (*Natsionalnost*)

The concept of the “national” so often mentioned in Čemický’s writing deserves further attention in this section of the thesis. Because Čemický was definitely primarily an artist, it is critical to see how he translated this concept into practice in order to understand how he further customised the method to his preferences.

In 1949, the Slovak nationality was present in Čemický’s art in a very recognisable, symbol-like manner. The romanticized version of Slovak nationality of figures dressed in the Slovak traditional costumes from Čemický’s earlier work, especially from the Fulla era (fig. 8 – fig. 11), is apparent in the paintings from 1949 as well. In the work *Vítězný pochod* (Victorious March, 1949) (fig. 12), the crowd of revolutionaries carrying red flags and banners with socialist slogans is led by a man in such folk dress riding on a white horse. Not only is he positioned in the literal centre of the canvas, but also leading the crowd, suggesting his important role within the theme. Similarly, the work *Oslobodená zem* (Liberated Land, 1949) (fig. 19) dedicated to the theme of the Slovak National Uprising, the leading role was given to the figure in the forefront – a man with a rifle, yet again dressed in the folk garments. At this point in time, very little people actually wore such clothes on an everyday basis as they were quite impractical, heavy, and frankly too elaborate. They were mostly used on special occasions and only in the small villages where people still honoured traditions. The fact that Čemický included such element in his socialist realist works in a more symbolical way could point to the fact that he truly attempted to accommodate the socialist realist art to the Slovak situation. It most definitely manifests his desire to further explore the “slovakness” even in this era.

The artist did not stop reflecting on this interest of his in the art until the end of the Stalinism. Although it became less frequent, it can still be found in his later work which proves the ongoing interest. With the progressing time, the symbolic nature of the Slovak nationality disappeared, and it became more naturally incorporated into the paintings. For example, in *Návrat* (The Return, 1955) (fig. 21), the painting might look very ordinarily socialist realist at the first glance, there are even soldiers wearing the Russian *ushanka*, however, upon closer look it can be seen that the scene is embedded in a traditional Slovak village in the mountains, where the ordinary people still lived in the wooden houses *drevenice*. The lady with her back turned to the viewer dressed in a folk dress is not a symbol anymore but a rather natural component of the narrative.

The question arises if Čemický displayed this quest for Slovak nationality in his most prevalent genre – the portraiture. Mapping one’s nationality through portraiture would not have been an isolated case as it became quite popular in the first half of the 20th century in connection to photography. In Germany, the artists such as Erna Lindwai Dircksen, Kleine Rassenkunde, or August Sanders attempted to map the German people, which was later appropriated by the Nazi

politics (especially in the case of Dircksen).²⁶⁵ A similar case, although of a foreign person documenting a different race, was the case of Edward Curtis' documentation of the Indigenous People of North America.²⁶⁶

In her efforts, Erna Lindwai Dircksen attempted to provide an overview of the most typical faces in different German regions.²⁶⁷ By anonymizing the portrayed individual together with an explanation as to why their face features were typical for the region concerned, she created a type.²⁶⁸ August Sanders broadened his scope from portraits focused on the closeup of the face and facial features and provided an overview of German people based on their vocation which again resulted in typification of the German nation and its people.²⁶⁹ Čemický too showcased a high degree of typification in his portraiture but never proclaimed it to be typically Slovak. Rather, he typified the socialist worker with no obvious Slovak connotations or intentions.



Figure 35 - Ladislav Čemický, *Jenička z Čemíc* (*Jenička from Čemice*), 1951, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer: Magdaléna Robinsonová

On the other hand, there is least one portrait which was preserved as a reproduction which hints at the Slovak nationality. *Jenička z Čemíc* (*Jenička from Čemice*, 1951) (fig. 35) presents a portrait of an old woman who Čemický certainly knew and painted from life, who is wearing a more traditional Slovak headpiece. It is difficult to establish whether this portrait is generating a type of an old typically Slovak woman, or if by the inclusion of the name and place in the name of the painting this is a portrait of an acquaintance of the artist with the focus on her individuality. In any case, this portrait too showcases the interest and a big degree of appreciation Čemický had for the ordinary people in connection to their national heritage.

Perception of Čemický's Work in the Period Critique

The art critique of exhibited works was very often published in various cultural and non-cultural magazines at the time. Since critique (and self-critique) was an important tool for the improvement in the age this is only understandable.

²⁶⁵ Read more about mapping German nationality: Weiss, Matthias. "Vermessen - fotografische »Menscheninventare« vor und aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus", in: Reichle, Ingeborg. Siegel, Steffen (ed.): *Maßlose Bilder Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression*, Munich : Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009, pp. 359-377

²⁶⁶ Read more: Zamir, Shamoan. *The gift of the face: portraiture and time in Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian*, 2020

²⁶⁷ Weiss, Matthias. "Vermessen - fotografische »Menscheninventare« vor und aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus", pp. 368-371

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Weiss, Matthias. "Vermessen - fotografische »Menscheninventare« vor und aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus", and West, Shearer. *Portraiture*, p. 27



Figure 36 - Ladislav Čemický, *Krmíč Staroň (Feeder Staroň)*, 1952, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the digital archive of the News Agency of the Slovak Republic, photographer: Roller



Figure 37 - Ladislav Čemický, *Starý želiar (Old Pauper)*, 1952, Slovak National Gallery

After all, Čemický published an exhibition critique as well.²⁷⁰ These were also important for the artists as due to the complicated theoretical explanation of socialist realism they had to turn to practical examples (and such critique provided good examples) they could rely on in their next works.²⁷¹ The public critique however also created a reputation for the artist. A few critiques mentioning Čemický's work were preserved and in the following section I will briefly analyse the period perception of his work to see how his innovation was accepted.

His portraiture efforts were raised above all by all the critics.²⁷² Some of them saw his portraits as the very best the major exhibitions had to offer. Authors valued Čemický's honest striving for realistic art and even for the "New Socialist Person" which was apparently visible in *Krmíč Staroň* (Feeder Staroň, 1952) (fig. 36).²⁷³ It would not be a true socialist critique if the authors did not point out mistakes as there was always something that could be better. Regarding portraiture, for Čemický it was the remains of naturalism. Considering Čemický's portraiture, this is certainly understandable as from its nature, it clearly meant that the portrayed was depicted a little too truthfully and not enough idealized.

Marián Vároš, the leading critic of the era, also highlighted Čemický's portraiture when he praised his work *Starý želiar* (Old Pauper, 1952) (fig. 37)²⁷⁴ in which the artist brilliantly showcased the suffering under the old capitalist regime within the Austria-Hungaria.²⁷⁵ The fact that Čemický depicted an old man who has suffering written all

²⁷⁰ Čemický, Ladislav. "Bližšie k socialistickému realizmu, V. celoslovenská výstava", p. 5

²⁷¹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 117-119

²⁷² Fodor, Pavol. "K celoslovenskej výtvarnej výstave", in: *Pravda* 1.1.1952 p. 9, PA, "O maľbách na výtvarnej úrode", in: *Pravda*, 25.1.1952 p. 5, R.M. "Jarná výstava slovenských výtvarníkov", in: *Pravda* 24.6.1952 p. 7

²⁷³ Fodor, Pavol. "K celoslovenskej výtvarnej výstave", p. 9

²⁷⁴ Roughly translated as "Old Cotter(?)". Želiar was a member of the poorest and most abused social class in the imperialist capitalist society

²⁷⁵ Vároš, Marian. *Slovenské výtvarné umenie 1950-1952*, Tvar : Bratislava, 1954, p. 9, also mentioned by Alexandra Kusá in: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 524

over him was acceptable in this very case as the artist did not primarily aim to portray the success of socialism, but rather the exploitation of capitalism.

As for the thematical narrative paintings, I have been able to retrieve two critiques. *Nastali nové časy* (New Times Have Arrived, 1951) (fig. 16) was criticized for the artist's failure to understand the socialist idea as the worker seems to be forbidding the older man in the foreground to use his scythe.²⁷⁶ This has been already put forward in my analysis and the relevancy of this claim can be understood well.

Marian Vároš also provided a short critique regarding the work *V nedeľu pri Váhu* (On Sunday at River Váh, 1952) (fig. 26). Vároš categorized this work in the group of paintings attempting to portray the conquest of the State provided for the people to enjoy.²⁷⁷ Čemický apparently tried hard to highlight the fact that the main focus of the painting were the workers that he lost sight of the aesthetic qualities and portrayed them as unattractive and unpleasant.²⁷⁸ He further stated that although Čemický was a good portraitist he did not yet have enough knowledge to paint from memory.²⁷⁹ What Vároš really said in this case is that Ladislav Čemický depicted the workers as too true to life, as too much of simple workers and not as the idealized versions of socialist heroes. This supports the claim I made earlier of Čemický directing his focus on the true people rather than the idealized versions of them.

What is crucial in those critiques is that Čemický was never publicly denoted as a formalist. This was a big and important success in the era. It was maybe due to his political affiliation but also perhaps to his honest efforts in understanding the socialist realism and presenting the socialist ideology in practice that he was "safe" from such accusations. Although many of his peers, especially from the Generation 1909, which Čemický called the most productive group and former formalists in 1950²⁸⁰, were diminished as incorrigible and then also dangerous or unbeneficial for the State, Čemický remained unmarked by this unimaginable sin. This alone makes him one of the very few successful artists of the era even if the official critiques provided mixed opinion about his work due to the degree of accommodation of the dogma to his liking.

Breakthrough Year? The End of Stalinist Socialist Realism

In the literature, it has been put forward that Ladislav Čemický mostly supported socialist realism in the early years and then stopped as he found it exhausted. The newest publication claims that he began to really reject and despise the method in around 1953 based on the interpretation of the painting *Hra s bublinou*²⁸¹ (Game with a Bubble, 1953) (fig. 22) which was re-interpreted earlier in this thesis.

In the academic year 1955/1956 (from June 1955 to August 1956) Čemický took a year of an unpaid leave at the Academy and moved from Bratislava to Čemice. Although the literature

²⁷⁶ Fodor, Pavol. "K celoslovenskej výtvarnej výstave", p. 9

²⁷⁷ Vároš, Marian. *Slovenská výtvarná prítomnosť*, p. 4

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Bednár, Štefan. Čemický, Ladislav. "Súčasnú slovenské umenie"

²⁸¹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 311

claimed Čemický left on this vacation because he grew exhausted of the method²⁸², the true reason for his departure remains unknown.²⁸³ Early in the second semester of 1955, Čemický asked the board of the Slovak Academy of Fine Arts and Design for a year of vacation.²⁸⁴ The long vacation was not completely uncommon, but also did not happen too often. Yearly leaves were suggested for artists who had many obligations, the pressure was too high, and they needed some rest before continuing duties.²⁸⁵ Čemický however asked for the vacation himself. Whether it was because he was generally tired from the hustle of the capital and missed the carefreeness of the countryside or he really started to grow frustrated of the method itself, the only person who probably truly knew was he himself. However, I believe that somewhere during this year the artist did undergo a breaking personal crisis connected to his ideological affiliation. This is best observed on the self-portraits Čemický painted in 1955 and 1956.

In 1955 Čemický created two larger scale self-portraits out of which one is lost today. Because the sitter merges with the artist, self-portraiture directly engages with the question of the artistic identity of the author and can represent a lot when viewed in historical context.²⁸⁶ In this genre, the artist has a unique opportunity to explore their self or fashion their own public image and reputation.²⁸⁷ These self-portraits thus present a great opportunity to look inside of Čemický's attitudes towards the socialist realism and socialism in general in the end of the Stalinist era.

²⁸² In the earliest monography, Tilkovský named the reason behind this yearly leave as being too busy with the teaching duties and thus little time for his art was left. Read more: Tilkovský, Vojtech. *Ladislav Čemický*, p.36. Oliver Bakoš, in the second monography, explained that the reason behind Čemický's leave was the "need to implement his own creative ideas", hinting to the constraints of socialist realism. See: Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 13. The clearest claims of Čemický and his disgust towards the method were made by the contemporary scholar Alexandra Kusá. Read: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 311

²⁸³ Alexandra Kusá wrote that after 1953 Čemický did not create any socialist realist works and disgusted, he retreated to the countryside. His apparently dismissive opinion regarding socialist realism was only sealed when the Liptovská mara (another big socialist construction – a dam with a power station for the creation of which 13 of the small villages had to be flooded) flooded his birthplace Čemice (see: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 311). The immediacy of his departure after 1953 presented in this analysis is false as Kusá did not take into the account the 2 years Čemický spent in Bratislava before his departure. The dating of the dam flooding his birth village also does not fit this narrative. The dam was built in 1965-1975 and the flooding began to take place in 1975, almost 20 years after his yearly vacation in Liptov. See period photographs and more information here: <https://www.vtedy.sk/liptovska-mara-priehrada-napustanie>

²⁸⁴ Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, fond of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, box no. 7, transcription of the meeting from May 4, 1953, p. 153

²⁸⁵ For example, when after a brief time in the function of rector at the Academy Dezider Milly handed in his resignation arguing it is too much pressure and he grows sick and tired plus he has no time for his work, his colleague suggested he takes a year-long vacation so he could continue in this position after the return. Slovak State Archive, Bratislava, fond of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, box no. 7, transcription of the meeting from June 6, 1952, p. 32

²⁸⁶ West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. pp.165-166

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-181

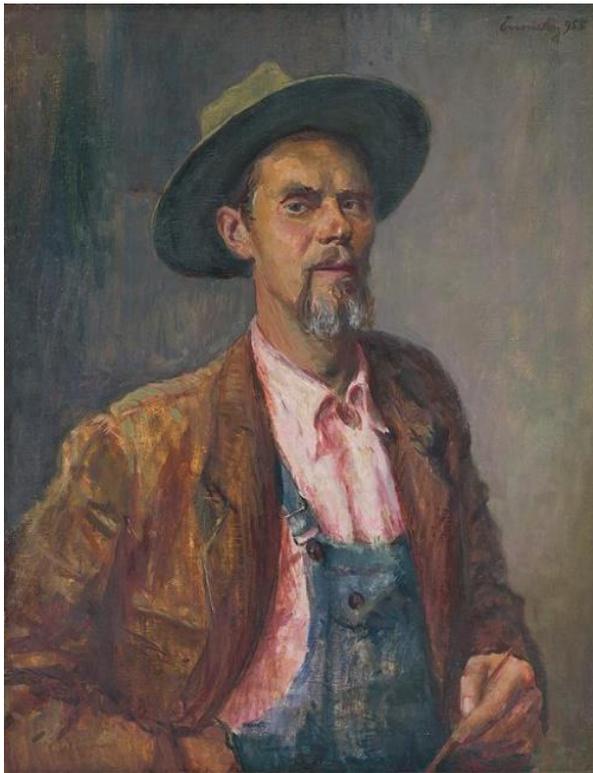


Figure 38 - Ladislav Čemický, *Autoportrét (Self-portrait)*, 1955, Slovak National Gallery

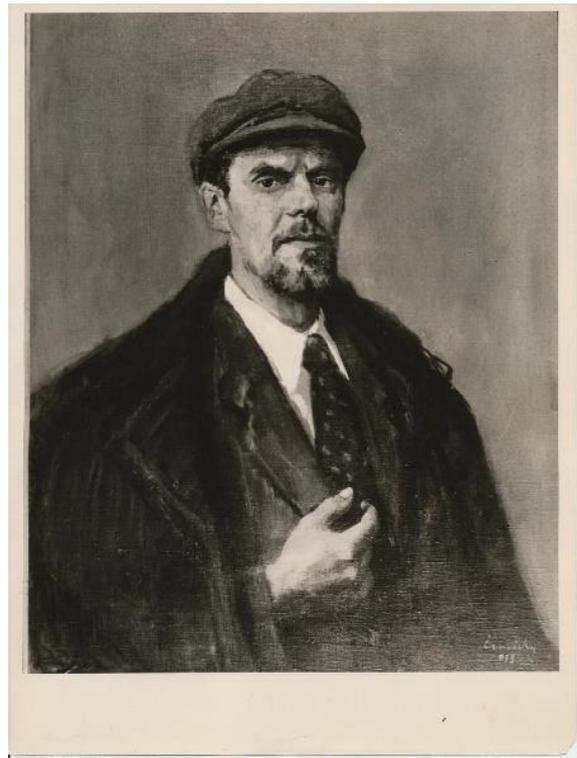


Figure 39 - Ladislav Čemický, *Autoportrét (Self-portrait)*, 1955, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the personal fond of Ladislav Čemický in the Archive of the Slovak National Gallery, photographer unknown

The first self-portrait (fig. 38) is quite large in scale, only a little smaller than the portrait of Stalin painted in 1949 (fig. 2) and is thus generally more similar in scale to the socialist realist paintings. The artist depicted himself as an artist – worker. With the new role of art in the socialist society, with the stress on its contribution in the process of enthusiastic building, the artists too gained a new role. As Čemický himself pointed to in his texts, the artists were no longer a part of the higher class serving the bourgeoisie taste, but they now needed to contribute to the progress.²⁸⁸ Alexandra Kusá made this important distinction too as she described the change of status and the new description of art as “work”.²⁸⁹ The glorification of work and the change of the artist’s status resulted in the difference in the self-portrayal of Čemický as the builder of the bright future. To a certain degree, he monumentalized his own depiction in the spirit of the “New Socialist Person” in the clothes typical for the workers at the time (even popular in the every-day fashion of the time).²⁹⁰

The second self-portrait from 1955 (fig. 39) is unpreserved and is only accessible as a black and white photograph in his personal fond in the Slovak National Gallery Archive. The exact parameters are not known, but based on the comparison with the previous one, similarity in size can be assumed. This portrait is truly striking as the resemblance of Čemický to Lenin cannot go unnoticed.²⁹¹ So much so, that Kusá even thought that this painting was a portrait of the

²⁸⁸ See for example: Čemický, Ladislav. “Výtvarník účtuje s formalizmom”, p. 170

²⁸⁹ Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, pp. 142-145

²⁹⁰ Originally in Peterajová, Ľudmila. *Pamäti*, Petrus : Bratislava, 2011, p. 116, also pointed out by Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*, p. 143

²⁹¹ I believe this similarity was first pointed out by Ján Mackovjak in his master’s thesis. See: Mackovjak, Ján. *Ladislav Čemický s prihliadnutím na jeho organizačnú činnosť*, pp. 33-34



Figure 40 - Ladislav Čemický, *Autoportrét (Self-Portrait)*, 1956, private collection, photo by Kristína Ostatníková, work exhibited at the Ladislav Čemický – maliar, učiteľ, funkcionár exhibition in the Peter M. Bohúň Gallery (December 2021 – June 2022)



Figure 41 - Ladislav Čemický, *Autoportrét s bradou (Self-portrait with Beard)*, 1956, Peter M. Bohúň Gallery

Russian revolutionary himself.²⁹² In his master's thesis, Ján Mackovjak pointed out the hat as commonly worn by Lenin and nicknamed *leninovka*, as well as the coat tossed over the shoulders which supports the monumentality of the portrayed person.²⁹³

In both of the self-portraits from 1955, the affiliation to socialism and socialist realism is clear. In the first portrait Čemický fashioned himself as the true worker and builder of socialism and in the second as the great socialist revolutionary and thinker. This reflected greatly on his identity when viewed in correlation with his paintings and writings. Those roles Čemický presented himself in describe his own vision of identity at the time – as a loyal socialist.

During the following year, a sharp turn was taken. In a group of self-portraits, from which at least three are preserved, the artist presented himself in much more diverse roles not in a positive or affirmative correlation with the socialist ideology. While these self-portraits are formally very similar to the self-portraits from the previous year, they are a lot smaller in scale and only focus on the closeup of Čemický's face depicted in the $\frac{3}{4}$ angle rather than a half figure.

Shearer West wrote that depicting oneself in many different roles was not uncommon in the history of arts.²⁹⁴ Depending on the historical context these are viewed in, they can be of self-exploring, experimental, theatrical, revealing, or probing nature.²⁹⁵ Because of the way Čemický fashioned himself on some of them, I believe that the artist underwent a serious crisis of identity in relation to his ideological beliefs. In one of the portraits (fig. 40), he depicted himself dressed in the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army uniform which was the sole manifestation of the imperial capitalism that

²⁹² In the place where she named this painting to be the portrait of Lenin she even used the dating 1953 which is incorrect according to the signature in the bottom right corner. In the image attachment within the same work she then correctly dated the painting to 1955 and claimed it to be a self-portrait. See: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. p. 183 for the incorrect dating and description and the image attachment for the correct version. I strongly believe this is a self-portrait not only based on the striking similarity of those two (and the similarity to the artist himself) but the fact that the photographic reproduction has it written on the back (most likely by the artist himself) only supports the claim.

²⁹³ Mackovjak, Ján. *Ladislav Čemický s prihliadnutím na jeho organizačnú činnosť*, pp. 33-34

²⁹⁴ West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. p. 173

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

was so despised by the socialist ideology. In the second one (fig. 41), he presented himself as a bourgeoisie intelligentsia representative in a very clean suit, starched collar, fancy round hat, and the twisted pointy moustache which seems overall a little too groomed for a socialist worker.²⁹⁶ Such depictions of oneself would most definitely have not been allowed during the peak of the Stalinist socialist realism. Coincidentally, in 1956 Khrushchev put a definite end to the era of Stalinism and to the cult of Stalin's personality. Although the slow easing up (even in the art world) already began in 1953 after Stalin's death, the year 1956 marked the very uncovering of the truth. When viewing these self-portraits in this context, it becomes clear that Čemický did not simply see himself as a part of the bourgeoisie society, or soldier but he was questioning his previous identity characterized by the strong affiliation to the socialist ideology in the light of the new uncovering of Stalin's terror.

If this year-long vacation can really be considered a needed break from the socialist realism as author became tired of it remains unknown. There is not enough preserved documentation which would date the concrete paintings better and help us answer this question with certainty. Looking at the self-portraits of the artists, it can be claimed that 1956, together with the important historical event that was the Khrushchev's Secret Speech, did influence how he viewed himself and his strong connection to the ideology.

²⁹⁶ The second self-portrait depicting Čemický as a bourgeoisie intelligentsia shortly appears in his atelier in a document dedicated to the artist from the mid-1970s available online here: Ďurjak, Gejza, *Medailón o Ladislavovi Čemickom, Návraty*. 1976, available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY33q0mk0i4&t=143s>, time stamp around 1:20-1:24

Chapter 5 – Post-1956

Post-Socialist Realism

The era of de-Stalinisation followed the revelations presented by Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956. Quickly, the atmosphere changed and because the socialist realist method was strongly connected to the Soviet dictator, the attitudes towards it changed rapidly. All of the sudden, socialist realism was considered a deviation even by the political authorities, but the righteousness of the socialist ideology was never diminished – only the artistic method itself was proclaimed a mistake.²⁹⁷ In April and in June 1956, the writers were the first to start asking for the revision of the official art²⁹⁸, but the artists (painters, sculptors, graphics, etc.) were allowed to meet only in the end of October the same year.²⁹⁹ During this meeting, the new statutes were approved which for example allowed the establishment of individual artistic groups.³⁰⁰ In the conclusion of the conference, the artists even sent a greeting card to Pablo Picasso in which they wished him happy birthday and thus symbolically re-established the green light for avant-gardes and modernist art.³⁰¹

In late August or early September 1956, Ladislav Čemický returned to the capital city and entered this new situation. Soon after his return, he got the opportunity to open his first solo exhibition after the years of Stalinism. In February-March 1957, this larger scale monographic exhibition opened in Bratislava³⁰² and was curated by Marian Vároš. In the introduction to the catalogue, the curator briefly explained the central motive of the exhibition, which was to present the new art of Ladislav Čemický after the end of a difficult era.³⁰³ Exhibited works included Čemický's art from the years 1955 and 1956 and very few earlier paintings. While the focus was mostly on watercolour landscapes which Čemický produced during the year in his native Liptov, oil paintings was featured as well. Because Čemický was so closely affiliated with the socialist realism, which Vároš admitted in the catalogue³⁰⁴, this was a great opportunity for the artist to redeem himself in the light of the historical events.

²⁹⁷ Read more: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. p. 257

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Apparently out of fear that their meeting would become as turbulent as the Congress of the writers which happened earlier that year. Read: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 257-258

³⁰⁰ For more read: Kusá, Alexandra. *Prerušená pieseň*. pp. 257-258

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² The exhibition took place at the headquarters of the *Zväz* at Šafárikovo square 7 in Bratislava, 16 February - 10 March 1957

³⁰³ Vároš, Marian. Introduction to the exhibition Ladislav Čemický, *Zväz Československých výtvarných umelcov*, Bratislava, 1957, pp. 5-7

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

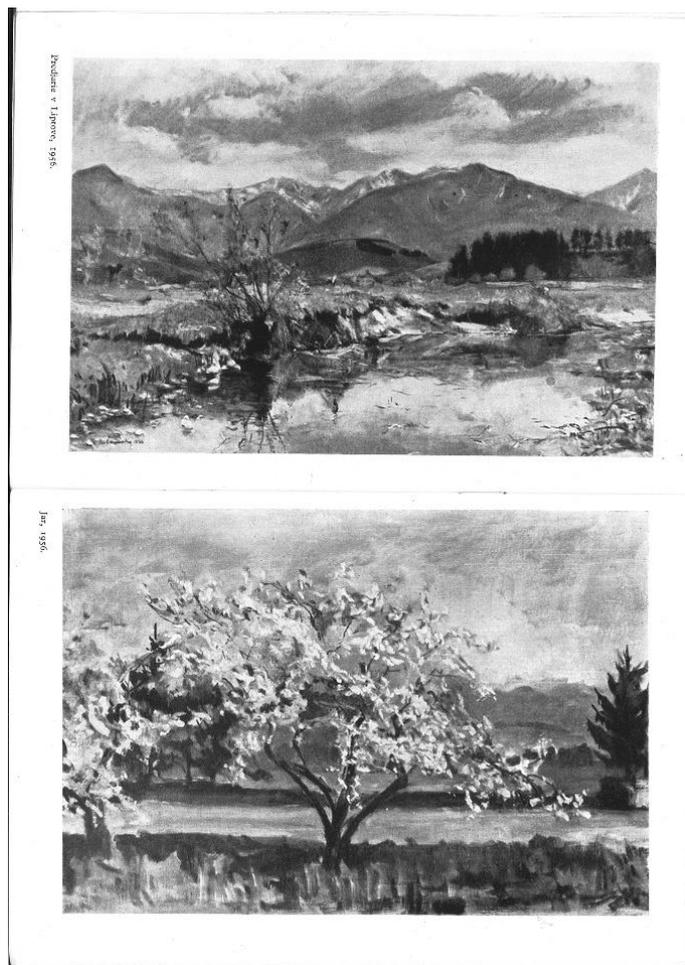


Figure 42 - on top: Ladislav Čemický, *Predjarie na Liptove* (Pre-Spring at Liptov), 1956, original work is lost today. On bottom: Ladislav Čemický, *Jar* (Spring), 1956, original work is lost today. Reproduction retrieved from the catalogue of the Ladislav Čemický 1957 monographic exhibition in Bratislava curated by M. Városov (Slovak National Gallery Library)

Apart from the watercolour landscapes, Városov pointed to the novelty in Čemický's work which were the landscapes in oil.³⁰⁵ Many of the featured paintings were lost or are inaccessible today, however from the few black and white catalogue reproductions (fig. 42) it can be seen that those were not much different from the oil landscape presented in the previous chapter. This motive did not present a degree of ideological affiliation in Čemický's work in the Stalinist era, and it did not present ideological degree now. The landscapes were not a safe haven for the artist during the extreme totality but became a safe haven after it ended. Čemický managed to heighten the sense of the very personal and intimate perception of the nature by slightly freer brushstrokes and composition. The nature is not idealized and although it shows the beauty of e.g. the blooming trees, it is executed in a very true to life manner.

What is more interesting and useful for the questions this thesis poses are the multifigure paintings exhibited.

Čemický dedicated a majority of those to the depictions of the life at the countryside in its ordinariness as well as its festivity. Clearly, those paintings were the continuous manifestation of Čemický's love for the simple people and the simple life in those parts of the country which could be considered a development of his interest in the ordinary people in general. The idyllic and almost carefree life presented a very neutral theme without any ideological background. Although there is no apparent strong ideology presented anymore, Čemický continued to explore his interest in the ordinariness and joyfulness of life. He continued to manifest his interest in ordinary people and their lives but did not return to the depictions of toiled people from the pre-totalitarian era and even totalitarian era. The overall motives of the paintings are the happiness, celebration of the people and life.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.



Figure 43 - Ladislav Čemický, *Dožinky*, 1956, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the catalogue of the Ladislav Čemický 1957 monographic exhibition in Bratislava curated by M. Városov (Slovak National Gallery Library)

uncommon theme in the Stalinist era. One of the most famous Soviet paintings depicting this motive is by the Russian national socialist realist painter Sergei Gerasimov *The Collective Farm Festival* (1937) or Arkadi Plastov *A Collective Farm Festival* (1937). The early Soviet socialist realist paintings literally show the fruits of the work and smiling workers and although Čemický's motive is also the celebration of the harvest, he focused on the national tradition – people dressed in folk dresses, performing rituals and dances in the celebration.



Figure 44 - Ladislav Čemický, *Tanec (Dance)*, 1956, Orava Gallery

As for the formal side of those figural oil paintings, they are still showcasing a degree of the realistic style from the earlier period. Many of the paintings (as for example the *Dožinky*) were executed in a way which could be formally considered a continuation of the socialist realist principles. Not only does the painting present rather detailed painted moment, but it also for example uses the strong sunlight which supports the overall positive nature. Although this cleaner realistic form became more frequent compared to his pre-totalitarian work, there are also other paintings executed in a much looser way. This way Čemický continued in his pre-totalitarian efforts and similarities can be found even with the more expressive paintings from 1949. The works *Tanec (Dance, 1956)* (gif. 44) or *Svadba (Wedding, 1956)*³⁰⁶ are a proof of this claim. Immediately after the socialist realism, Čemický

³⁰⁶ See a high-quality digital reproduction of this work on Web umenia: https://www.webumenia.sk/en/dielo/SVK:SNG:O_4757

developed his work in the now more common cleaner realist form or in the more expressive and dynamic manner, yet the paintings were dedicated to the optimism of the everyday life.

Tvorivá skupina Život (1960s)



Figure 45 - Ladislav Čemický, *Rodí sa mier* (Peace is Being Born), 1961, original work is lost today, reproduction retrieved from the catalogue of the Život art group exhibition (September – October 1963), p. 7 (Slovak National Gallery Library)

In the 1960s, Čemický, together with some of his friends and peers established the art group *Tvorivá skupina Život* (Creative Group *Život* – Life). The programme was quite clearly focused as it is obvious from the name. The primary source of inspiration for the artists was the life itself. According to Bakoš, the group presented fidelity to principles of realism and the hope in both the present and the future of the humankind.³⁰⁷

Alžbeta Guntherová wrote that the members were connected together not because of their

formal program but based on their emotional and moral attachment to the life and the tradition of the Slovak art.³⁰⁸ Guntherová continued writing that this new tradition was formed from the Slovak ethnicity and people present in the art of Fulla, Benka, and Bazovský.³⁰⁹ Unfortunately, there is not much concise research done on the *Život* art group. During this time, a new generation entered the Slovak art world and in the recently loosened conditions, the first post-Stalinist modernist group was established – The Mikuláš Galanda Group (1957-1968).³¹⁰ Because the Slovak art historical community to this day largely focuses on the modernist storyline and the unofficial art in the Slovak art history, not much space has been given to the official and more traditional art groups. According to Bakoš, this group became especially active in the years 1968-1970 – the years that represented the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring period and the growth of totalitarian pressure inside of the State again.³¹¹ From the few exhibition catalogues, it is obvious that during this era, Čemický focused primarily of the watercolour landscapes and dedicated less energy to the oil painting. Because the set of the known paintings is too small, it is impossible to provide more nuanced conclusions in the scope of this thesis.

³⁰⁷ Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 20

³⁰⁸ Guntherová, Alžbeta. "Výstava Tvorivej skupiny Život". In: *Pravda*, 13.10.1963, retrieved from: Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 20

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ The members of this group were newly graduated students from the Slovak academy of Fine Arts and design. One of the members – Milan Lалуha was one of the students who complained about Ladislav Čemický in 1951.

³¹¹ Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, pp. 46-47

Čemický the National Artist (1970s)



Figure 46 - M. Borodáčová, *Národný umelec Ladislav Čemický (Ladislav Čemický – National Artist)*, 1975, retrieved from the digital archive of the News Agency of Slovak Republic

In 1975, Čemický was awarded with the highest honour of the time – the National Artist Award.³¹² This was truly an extraordinary honour and only the very active and deserving artists were awarded with such a high degree State award. On this occasion, a photoshoot was done for publication purposes. A series of photographs (fig. 46) depicting Čemický in his studio can be found in the digital archive of the *TASR* – The News Agency of the Slovak Republic in which the artist poses surrounded by his paintings. Naturally, because this was such an important event, the portrait of Čemický must have been carefully thought through and prepared. These photographs

definitely do not present an effigy; it is a highly individualized portrait of the key and esteemed Slovak artist together with his artistic identity. The paintings displayed on the photographs must have been a result of a very precise consideration and thus present the literal artistic identity of Čemický at the time.

On the easel behind the painter, there is a large-scale canvas stylistically very similar to the work *Pastieri* (1947) (fig. 8) from the pre-socialist realist Fulla era.³¹³ In the centre of the frame there are two soldiers on the horses and a woman either welcoming them with open arms or handing them refreshments. It is clear that this scene represents the Liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army in 1945 which is not unknown in Čemický's socialist realist oeuvre. The very socialist and ideological nature of the work is also very apparent from the symbolism in the middle part of the top border where Čemický crowned the whole work with the symbol of scythe and hammer. Right in front of the artist, the painting in the foreground was most definitely staged to be photographed. Leaning on the easel in the middle of the room, the portrait of Lenin is almost in the very centre of attention. By positioning the portrait on the ground and not on the easel it seems as if the Russian revolutionary was looking at the artists which strengthens the notion of the bond present between the two. It is unknown as to when these two

³¹² Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 47

³¹³ The same artwork is present in the short film on Čemický from 1976 and because it is recorded in colour we see that the colour scheme was very socialist as well – the overwhelming red is a strong symbol. For more see: Ďurjak, Gejza, *Medailón o Ladislavovi Čemickom, Návraty*. 1976. Time stamp around 2:00, accessible online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY33q0mk0i4&t=88s>

paintings were painted.³¹⁴ It is also peculiar that Čemický was not displayed with any watercolours as the current gallery collections feature more of those than the oil paintings from this era.

In any case, these photographs displaying Čemický as the awarded Slovak National Artist point to his identity as being an ideological artist favouring the ideas of socialism. The artistic identity is presented in many positions here – as the more modernist artist by the large-scale canvas behind him, but also as a painter accepting and working with realist principles. Overall, the choice of paintings is very obviously manifesting his lifelong ideological affiliation and interests and presents Ladislav Čemický as a socialist artist.

³¹⁴ Oliver Bakoš mentioned a portrait of Lenin painted by Čemický in 1950, but that is not enough information to date this particular painting to that year. It is highly likely that Čemický painted more portraits of Lenin throughout his life. See: Bakoš, Oliver. *Ladislav Čemický*, p. 35

Conclusion

The monumental portrait of Stalin (fig. 2) no longer hangs in the Peter Michal Bohúň Gallery in Liptovský Mikuláš. In early June 2022, it was returned to its owner – the Slovak National Gallery and has been safely put back into the depositary. Who knows when this painting, or any other socialist realist painting for that matter, will see the light of the day again. Will the dismissal of the Stalinist socialist realism and its omission from the Slovak art history continue? Or will the new permanent exhibition of the Slovak National Gallery, which is currently in preparation, include these works and critically reclaim this traumatizing past?

It was because of this dismissal and the generalized, incorrect statements which presented Čemický in a rather negative and very incomplete way. The discrediting of socialist realism led to the creation of Čemický's reputation as an early supporter and a mere passive "translator" of the Soviet socialist realism to his work disregarding his artistry. Questioning the generalized brief claims presented in the literature, this thesis proposed a two-fold question regarding the way Čemický approached the onset of the Soviet-defined method. I was looking to establish both the attitudes of the artists towards the foreign method forced on the specific Slovak situation and his interaction with the Soviet model of the method with the focus on how this interplay translated to both his written and painted legacy. Positioning Čemický in the centre of the narrative, not dismissing this period as an invalid part of the individual past, together with the close critical examination of the primary sources, their contextualization, and comparison to his contemporaries and the Soviet example, the answer provides a complex picture of Čemický's identity between the years 1949-1956 and beyond. While Čemický demonstrated honest positive attitudes towards the method, its acceptance, application, and enforcement throughout the period and the Soviet socialist realism became the base for his artistic identity, the artist also displayed a notable degree of modification of the Soviet model based on his beliefs and interests and proved his lack of interest in the empty political propaganda in both his written and painted legacy. The era of Stalinist socialist realism proved to be a key element in his life based on the degree and nature of his activities and attitudes but also on his continuous ideological affiliation and interests. Approach of Ladislav Čemický to the socialist realism diminishes the general stereotypical outlook on the supportive artist of the Stalinist socialist realism as copier of the Soviet model with the lack of individual input and artistry. The period most definitely needs to be closely and critically studied further on other individual cases to see how other artists approached the method in order to complete the picture of Slovak socialist realism.

Attitudes

Considering the degree and nature of Čemický's activity, especially in comparison to his peers, Čemický was a key figure of the Stalinist socialist realism period in Slovakia. In the early years, he eagerly participated in the organisation of the new society, wrote extensively, and was one of the first artists to make the turn from modernism to socialist realism even in his painting. These positive attitudes are strongly connected to his identity as a supporter and enforcer of the

acceptation and application of the method, and even though through time his various activities became more focused on painting and teaching, the positive approach to the method preserved until the end of Stalinist era. Hand in hand with the acceptance of socialist realism in March 1949, he began to publish articles in which the support for the method was always the main element. Similarly, this support translated to his teaching principles when he saw his duty in the ideological training of the first-year students. Given this general nature of his written legacy and reputation achieved in the institutions, it appears almost clearly that he was a very dogmatic and uncompromising supporter and enforcer of the method. Upon the closer study of the nature of his articles, his more specific attitudes and approach are apparent. Although he did perceive the method as the only correct way of artistic creation, he enforced it with a noticeable degree of honesty, patience, and realism. Meanwhile his political contemporaries presented it as the most perfect and natural choice to make and a step to take (which was the Party-line propaganda), Čemický was not so resolute. He presented the method and its acceptance more realistically, admitting to the difficulties of this step and was prepared to “cut his peers some slack” while being patient and even helpful in explaining the principles to his peers in the period of transition from modernism to socialist realism. Čemický never fully succumbed to the use of fake and empty Party-line propaganda, neither in his written nor painted legacy, and showcased real honesty in his efforts as he truly believed in the ideas of socialism and thus this to be the right way to achieve progress to the new and better.

In 1953, after the death of Stalin and Gottwald, in the environment of slow loosening of the strict conditions, Čemický did not begin to showcase opposition to the socialist realism. Even in this loosened political and cultural situation, the change of attitudes is not apparent from his work. The re-interpretation of the *Hra s bublinou* (Game with a Bubble, 1953) (fig.22) and its contextualization together with his continuation in the creation of socialist realist paintings up until the 1955 dismiss the claim of his negative attitudes in the peak era of socialist realism in Slovakia. It can be stated, that from the beginning until the end, Ladislav Čemický did have positive attitudes towards the method and even though there might have been a change in the intensity of his support, from the analysis of the preserved sources it is apparent that the attitude changed only in 1956, when Stalin’s atrocities and crimes were uncovered. Only then Čemický doubted his highly ideologically based artistic identity and socialist realism itself. On top of this, an important fact which also signified his positive and supportive attitudes towards socialist realism was that he dedicated creative efforts to almost all the themes within the arts; especially the more ideological subjects (yet presented in a more truthful manner); he did not resort to the comfortable non-ideological genres, but neither to the empty political propaganda.

Čemický’s Version of Socialist Realism

Although it is clear that socialist realism became a significant part of Čemický’s identity and his attitudes towards it were positive throughout the time, it is important to understand how exactly he understood the method and how he translated it into practice. In short – what was *his version* of socialist realism. The second part of the research question thus aimed at uncovering this artistic identity in both the written and painted legacy, as well as the degree of the possible modification of the original Soviet model. The change of perspective by positioning Čemický

into the centre of the narrative – the post-colonial approach to the problematics, allowed me to come forward with not just updated, but novel knowledge on the socialist realist art of Ladislav Čemický. To answer this part of my research question, I provided a detailed critical analysis of his writings on the definition of socialist realism and his painted oeuvre in comparison to the Soviet model and his peers. Separating the analysis of writings and paintings allowed me to focus on the two parts separately but also in completion which resulted in more detailed outcomes.

Early on after the official acceptance of socialist realism as the only allowed method of artistic creation, Čemický, from his nature of patient and helpful enforcer, was the first one in Slovakia to explain and define socialist realism before all the defining Soviet publications were brought in and translated into Czech or Slovak language. Čemický showed he was not only interested in, supportive of, but also knowledgeable in the matter when he based his definition on the key essays by Zhdanov and expanded and strengthened the definition by recalling other important socialist thinkers. Innovatively, he compiled a list of the most important principles and explained them to the artists. Even though the principles were derived from the Soviet essays and ideas, Čemický already begun to interact with the Soviet model, which resulted in a slightly different understanding of it. The principle of appreciating one's specific nationality was innovatively positioned very high up on this list and by this definition Čemický continued his interest in the specific Slovak nationality. While this was a concept taken out from the essay by Zhdanov, Čemický gave it much larger importance in his definition and explained it differently than it was originally intended.

Naturally, the Soviet model became the base for Čemický's painting too. In 1949, the artist made the turn towards very ideologically based works, yet he still painted in a highly expressive manner. Čemický did not stagnate and his style progressed towards the clean realist form with more natural use of the socialist realist formal characteristics. As time progressed, he moved away from the very early more clearly fabricated and staged propaganda to a less apparent, more metaphorical, and subtle ideology. His socialist realist painterly expression became more natural compared to his earlier stiff staged works.

Upon close analysis of the paintings and in comparison with the Soviet model and examples, it became apparent that he did not meet all the norms and requirements of the Soviet model and accommodated the dogma to his own interests even more so than in his writings. When translating the theoretical principles into practice, the interest in national character was translated too. It is more obvious from his earlier socialist realist works but the rendering of specific Slovak nationality preserved throughout the period and later became more natural incorporated. Another deviation from the desired socialist realist art is the degree of idealization (or the lack thereof) which is especially visible on the case of portraiture and figural paintings. Instead of fabricating an idealized version of the *New Socialist Person*, Čemický painted people true to the reality, as real people marked by hard work, which can be considered his way of celebrating them for who they really were instead of the vision of who they were supposed to be. This way, Čemický's version of socialist realism can be defined as ideological with his interest in both a truthfully rendered "peopleness" and "slovakness", ordinary people and their

sacrifice to the vision of the future, fidelity to reality, and the disinterest in creating a fabricated empty propaganda requested by the Party.

Having this definition of Čemický's adaptation of the Soviet model, it is clear that this era was not a complete disruption of his artistic development and identity as is being claimed about socialist realism in general. Formally, the artist made quite a big leap from the pre-totalitarian art into the realist art of the first half of the 1950s, but this too was not without the intermediate step of the more expressive socialist art from 1949. Although it was not the main scope of this thesis and a more detailed analysis needs to be executed to further support this claim, it is apparent that the art style following 1956 shows the novel inclusion of more realistic paintings in artist's oeuvre. Before 1949, Čemický rarely executed paintings in such a high realist degree, but after 1956 they became more common. Because of the public denouncement of the method and such obvious propaganda in the light of the uncovering of Stalin's terror, it is only natural that Čemický stopped producing ideological art for some time. He focused on his continuing interest in *people*, their *real* life, and the Slovak *nationality* which was only sealed by the founding and his membership in the *Život* art group. Towards his later life, the artists returned to ideological motives painted in different styles manifesting his artistic identity as a socialist artist.

I believe that this thesis opens up doors to other questions which were impossible to answer in its scope. Apart from the post-Stalinist era and the official art, the most important question arises from the presented analysis – the question of specific Slovak nationality in the arts of Stalinist socialist realism. If Ladislav Čemický was the first one to call for the incorporation of Slovak nationality in the socialist realist art, it can be visibly traced in his work, and it was even preserved in other theoretical works (e.g. M. Városov, 1953), can this principle be traced in the works of other Slovak artists? Was socialist realism the period in which the Slovak national character (in art) flourished? If so, what characteristics does the Slovak national identity created in this era display? To what extent was such identity incorporated into fine arts? I find these questions very interesting also in the connection to the concept of nationality presented during the Slovak State (as a Fascist state and Hitler's vassal) just a few years before the Stalinism begun. Is there, perhaps, a similarity between those, or were they completely different? How was the quest for Slovak nationality in art appropriated by those two different totalitarian regimes?

Because of the change of perspective on the era in Čemický's life and work, it is clear that it presents a key element for understanding the artist as a whole and the era better. Its significance lays in the honest efforts of the artist in not only supporting and enforcing the method, but also actively seeking to make it a part of his identity, to fit it onto his own interests. Whether we like it or not, simply dismissing this era does not make it disappear. Understanding this traumatic past of the post-Communist countries is a critical step that needs to be taken, especially considering current historical events. Leaving the trauma of the past unaddressed could result in it being repeated in some similar fashion. Because, as Mark Twain would tell us, the history does not repeat itself – but it often rhymes.

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- Personal fond of Ladislav Čemický (2 boxes)
- Personal Fond of Štefan Bednár
- Other personal fonds with possible connection to Ladislav Čemický (e.g. Ján Mudroch, Ladislav Guderna)

Slovak National Archive

- Fond povereníctva školstva, boxes 590, 591, 594 and boxes no. 396a, 397
- Fond výtvarných umení Bratislava, Družstvo Tvar, boxes no. 1, 2, 3, and box no. 50
- Fond povereníctva kultúry a výbor pre veci umenia, box no. 3
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Slovak State Archive, Bratislava

- Fond VŠVU (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Bratislava)
 - o Filling logs, boxes no. 1-3
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Audio-Visual Sources

Conversation of Beata Jablonská and Ján Ábelovský on art historical writing and the importance of critique, May 2015, accessible online: <https://www.artdispecing.sk/tv-channel/dialogy/beata-jablonska-jan-abelovsky/>

Digital archive of the News Agency of Slovak Republic, accessible online: <https://vtedy.tasr.sk/browse>

Ďurjak, Gejza, Medailón o Ladislavovi Čemickom, Návraty. 1976, accessible online: part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY33q0mk0i4&t=120s>, part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzA5N4SZM2w>

Transcription of a discussion with Ladislav Čemický from the Gallery of Peter M. Bohúň which was part of the Ladislav Čemický solo exhibition in May-June exhibition curated by Ján Ábelovský, 1989. The original recording is a part of the gallery archive and the transcription was kindly provided by Veronika Vaculová-Repová.

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