

NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČESKÉ REPUBLIKY – SLOVANSKÁ KNIHOVNA  
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC – SLAVONIC LIBRARY

# **SLOVANSKÁ KNIHOVNA 1924–2024**

(Průvodce po dějinách, fondech a službách)

# **THE SLAVONIC LIBRARY, PRAGUE 1924–2024**

(A Guide to its History, Funds and Services)

Lukáš Babka



Praha / Prague  
2023

## KATALOGIZACE V KNIZE – NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČR

Babka, Lukáš, 1977-

Slovanská knihovna 1924–2024 : (průvodce po dějinách, fondech a službách) = The Slavonic Library, Prague 1924–2024 : (a guide to its history, funds and services) / Lukáš Babka ; překlad: Rita Lyons Kindlerová, Pat Lyons. -- První vydání. -- Praha : Národní knihovna České republiky - Slovanská knihovna, 2023. -- 333 stran. -- (Publikace Slovanské knihovny ; 88)

Souběžný anglický text, české a anglické resumé

Obsahuje bibliografie, bibliografické odkazy a rejstřík

ISBN 978-80-7050-792-6 (vázáno)

\* 027.021 \* 80(=16)+908(4) \* 026/027(091) \* 025 \* 024.5/.6 \* (437.311) \* (048.8) \* (082.2)

– Slovanská knihovna (Praha, Česko)

– 20.-21. století

– 1924-2024

– vědecké knihovny -- Česko -- 20.-21. století

– slavistika -- Česko -- 20.-21. století

– dějiny knihoven -- Česko -- 20.-21. století

– knihovní fondy -- Česko -- 20.-21. století

– knihovní služby -- Česko -- 20.-21. století

– Praha (Česko)

– monografie

– jubilejní publikace

027 - Univerzální knihovny. Veřejné knihovny. Soukromé knihovny [12]

Odborní recenzenti / **Reviewed by:**

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Vydání knihy finančně podpořil pan Richard J. Kneelely /

**The book was published with the financial support of Mr Richard J. Kneelely**

Knihla *Slovanská knihovna: 1924–2024 (Průvodce po dějinách, fondech a službách)* vznikla na základě institucionální podpory dlouhodobého koncepčního rozvoje výzkumné organizace poskytované Ministerstvem kultury.

**This book, *The Slavonic Library, Prague: 1924–2024 (A Guide to its History, Funds and Services)*, has been written with support from the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic for the purpose of developing the National Library of the Czech Republic as a research organization in the domain of Slavic Studies.**

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ISBN 978-80-7050-792-6

Tato kniha je věnována památce paní Mileny Klímové,  
ředitelky Slovanské knihovny v letech 1992–1999

This book is dedicated to the memory of Milena Klímová,  
Director of the Slavonic Library, 1992–1999



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# INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the Slavonic Library will celebrate the centenary of its foundation. Today, it is a respected institution frequently visited by Czech and foreign scholars and is firmly anchored in the environment of world Slavic librarianship. However, a long and often winding road has led to this position. Over the past century, the Slavonic Library has undergone a series of changes, sometimes for financial and organisational reasons, and sometimes for purely political and ideological ones. Dramatic developments, influenced by the political upheavals of the twentieth century, have also taken place in Slavistics regardless of whether it is conceived narrowly as a literary-philological discipline or more broadly as a subject exploring the socio-historical relations among Slavic peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Librarianship and access to information have also changed fundamentally.<sup>2</sup> There was the path from paper catalogues and the dispatching of documents from depositories to full-text electronic databases, digitised documents, electronic catalogues, and virtual data. What remains constant is the knowledge that only by learning about the social, political, cultural, and literary history of other nations, in our case Slavic ones, and entering into the richness of their Slavic languages and their cultural differences and its inherent critical interpretation we can understand not only these dissimilarities but also enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.



Pohled na astronomickou věž Klementina z oken tehdejší studovny Slovanské knihovny (ca 1946).

Zdroj: Slovanská knihovna. Speciální sbírky: T-O-4.

**View of the astronomical tower of the Klementinum from the windows of the former reading room of the Slavonic Library (ca 1946).**

Source: Slavonic Library. Special Collections Section: T-O-4.

- 1 In contrast to the interwar period which has been richly mapped out, the development of Czech and Slovak Slavic studies in the second half of the 20th century is described only selectively, and is still awaiting a comprehensive study. For a closer look at the history of the field during the period examined in this book, see: Milan Kudělka: *O pojetí slavistiky. Vývoj představ o jejím předmětu a podstatě*. Praha: Academia, 1984; Milan Kudělka – Zdeněk Šimeček – Vladislav Štátný – Radoslav Večerka: *Československá slavistika v letech 1918–1939*. Praha: Academia, 1977; Ivo Pospíšil: *Slavistika na křižovatce*. Brno: SVN Regiony, 2003; Eva Šlaufová – Karolína Skwarska – Václav Čermák (eds.): *Proměny české slavistiky po roce 1989*. Praha: Slovanský ústav AV ČR, 2020; Franz Görner (ed.): *Slawistik, Baltistik und Balkanologie in einem neuen Europa: 29. ABDOS-Tagung: Berlin, 29. Mai bis 1. Juni 2000: Referate und Beiträge*. Berlin: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2000; Vladimír Vavřínek (ed.): *Current State and Further Perspectives of Slavonic Studies in Central Europe: Proceedings of the International Workshop, Prague 11th–12th November 1998*. Praha: Slovanský ústav AV ČR; Euroslavica, 2000.
- 2 On the development of Czech (Czechoslovak) librarianship, see for example: Zdeněk Václav Tobolka et al.: *Československé knihovnictví*. Praha: Československý Kompas, 1925; Jiří Cejpek – Ivan Hlaváček – Pravoslav Kneidl: *Dějiny knihoven a knihovnictví v českých zemích a vybrané kapitoly z obecných dějin*. Praha: Karolinum, 1995; Vít Richter: *100 let knihoven ČR: minulost, současnost a budoucnost knihovnické profese*. Praha: Svaz knihovníků a informačních pracovníků, 2019. [Online, accessed on 20. 10. 2023]. Available at: [https://wayback.webarchiv.cz/wayback/20210923185848/https://www.skipcr.cz/dokumenty/Richter\\_ProfeseKnihovnaZmny2019.pdf](https://wayback.webarchiv.cz/wayback/20210923185848/https://www.skipcr.cz/dokumenty/Richter_ProfeseKnihovnaZmny2019.pdf). More generally, see: George S. Bobinski: *Libraries and Librarianship: Sixty Years of Challenge and Change, 1945–2005*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007; Mary Ellen Quinn: *Historical Dictionary of Librarianship*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

In 2024, it will also be sixty-six years since the Slavonic Library was incorporated into the structures of the National Library of the Czech Republic as an independent department. In the late 1950s, the National Library adopted Slavic studies as a specific priority of its librarian and research work. The National Library, through its continuous support of this specialisation openly subscribes to the legacy of the Czech Slavic Studies tradition. This represents an important international dimension to the National Library's activities and is something that sets it apart from other European national libraries: whose activities are often limited to a narrow national profile. Throughout all of its existence, the Slavonic Library has maintained a high degree of autonomy due to its specialisation.

This publication is by no means the first to describe the role of the Slavonic Library, its history, and the richness of its collections. The development of the library, the growth of its collection, and the transformation of its services have been evaluated by members of staff and independent researchers since the library's foundation, especially on the occasion of various anniversaries.

Particularly remembered was the fiftieth anniversary of the Slavonic Library's foundation. It is important to mention the proceedings of *50 let Slovanské knihovny v Praze* published in 1976. It included a comprehensive study which, in addition to describing the history and holdings of the library, focused on international cooperation, publishing and exhibition activities; and highlighted the services provided by the Slavonic Library to readers and researchers. The author of the text was Josef Strnadel, the then director of the library, who included in detail the testimonies of the last witnesses accounts of the founding period of the Slavonic Library. This book was followed in 1979 by an extensive bibliography of works linked with the Slavonic Library, and there was also a bibliography of library staff entitled *Slovanská knihovna a slavistika*. This was compiled jointly by Josef Strnadel and his long-time collaborator Margita Křepinská, a bibliographer.

The high point of previous efforts to write a history of the Slavonic Library is Jiří Vacek's memoir *Slovanská knihovna – můj osud* (2016). Thanks to his phenomenal memory, the former director managed to bring to life countless stories from the history of the Slavonic Library. He also described the fates of many, often forgotten, people associated with the library.

The Slavonic Library was founded hundred years ago for pragmatic and strategic reasons, determined by the foreign policy orientation of the newly founded Czechoslovakia. Generally speaking, as was the case with several other similarly oriented institutions that

were established at that time, the important task of the library was to collect information about Russia (the Soviet Union) and other Slavic countries in order to support Czechoslovak foreign policy. This orientation focused mainly on the Slavic states, was eventually unsuccessful. It failed partly because neither citizens nor elites understood the existential threat posed to the whole of Central Europe by an aggressive Soviet Union that was pursuing its own imperial ambitions under the guise of socialist reciprocity and cooperation. These Soviet ambitions were clearly evident in the Czech environment between 1945 and 1989, and one of the tasks of the Slavonic Library was to support the Slavic hegemon, in a disguised way, using banal phrases of Slavic reciprocity.

Since the events of November 1989 (the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia), the Slavonic Library has combined idealistic and pragmatic elements in its activities. The idealistic mission is to contribute to tolerance and mutual understanding between Slavic and non-Slavic peoples and countries. The pragmatic element lies in the continuous modernisation of the library services, in the connection with the international library environment, and in filling the gaps in its holdings that appeared during the totalitarian regime. Beyond this, the library continues to try to reassert its position in modern Slavic studies, which continue to struggle with the persistent privileging of Russia.

The book you are now holding in your hands is a continuation of previously published texts. This monograph attempts to present in a new way the history of the Slavonic Library and the fate of important individuals associated with it. Using the development of the Slavonic Library as an example, this book aims to show that Slavic studies in the 21st century is not an anachronism, and should not be perceived as an outdated science of the national awakening era. On the contrary, in line with contemporary trends in scholarship and events, Slavistics should not be viewed as a discipline that limits itself solely to Slavic topics. It aims to promote mutual cooperation between Slavic and other peoples, and seeks new links between different themes that transcend the narrow boundaries of language. More generally, modern Slavic studies aim to expand human knowledge and protect the cultural and scientific heritage left to us by our ancestors.

The turbulent developments in Eastern Europe in recent years also speak in favour of a critical study based on reading and interpretation of the primary sources freed from idealised Pan-Slavic fantasies. In this context – in combination with historical experience, contemporary events and their critical interpretation



– we have to search for answers to questions about the purpose and meaning of the Slavonic Library.

Despite the unquestionable advantages of modern technologies, this publication would like to draw attention of those interested in the mysteries hidden in library depositories that exist outside the virtual space of the Internet. Furthermore, this book would also like to promote the (re)discovery of previous generations' diligent research: results that have been unjustly forgotten. The library has a unique collection offering a truly deep and critical understanding of the subset of European countries that shaped the ideas of Slavism and Pan-Slavism in the 19th and 20th centuries. It allows us to compare how different nations have written 'their' and 'others' Slavic history over the last five centuries. Of course, this is not a new initiative. Many Czech and foreign researchers continue to do research using the library's holdings and have returned to the library repeatedly. One example is the British translator and philologist, Professor Patrick J. Corness who had the opportunity to study at the Slavonic Library for the first time in 1963 as a student. Since then, he has been a regular visitor and has made no secret of how much the library has influenced the direction of his research work.

Finally, the author would like to thank all his colleagues at the Slavonic Library who lent a helping hand in the preparation of this book. Special thanks are owed to Marta Hrabáková, Rita Lyons Kindlerová, Daniela Lehárová, and Michaela Řeháková who were the first readers of this manuscript. The basic framework of the text was supported by documents stored in both Czech and foreign archives. Specifically,

the author would like to express deep gratitude to the staff of the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, the National Archives, the Archives of the National Museum, the Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Archives of Charles University, and the Archives of the National Library of the Czech Republic (especially Kateřina Hekrdlová). Many thanks are also due to Václav Veber, a historian. It was he who first introduced the author to the Slavonic Library by bringing him to the library when he was a university student. The author is also grateful to the staff and supporters of the Slavonic Library who revealed unknown aspects of the library's history, and shaped the author's views about the Slavonic Library's position in the global system of Slavic librarianship. The author would also like to express special gratitude to the following: Františka Sokolová, Jiří Vacek, Anastasie Kopřivová, Vladimír Vavřínek, Vojtěch Balík, Vladimír Bystrov, Josef Vlášek, Edward Kasinec, Irina Poročkina, Mikuláš Mušinka, Mr and Mrs Zdražil, Mr and Mrs Mathauser, Dušan Karpatský, Tomáš Glanc, Jürgen Warmbrunn, Evgenii Sokolinskii, Lev Mnukhin, Liudmila Lapteva, Igor Zolotarev, Adolf Knoll, Michal Reiman, Galina Vaněčková, Oksana Pelenska, and Marija Magidová. Last, and by no means least, very special thanks are extended to Milena Klímová. This book is dedicated to her memory. A big thank you also goes to Richard J. Kneelely, a long-time friend and supporter of the library, without whose help this book would not appear.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

For the transcription of names and titles in this book, the transcription rules for the Czech language were implemented using: Nařízení vlády č. 594/2006 Sb. ze dne 12. prosince 2006 o přepisu znaků do podoby, ve které se zobrazují v informačních systémech veřejné správy. For citing sources in the footnotes, the transcription system used corresponds to the Library Recommendations for the Transcription of non-Latin Scripts into Latin Script (Doporučení pro přepis nelatinských písem do latinky) that is maintained by the Working Group on Name Processing coordinated by the National Library of the Czech Republic. In the case of English, the American Library Association – Library of Congress (ALA-LC) rules, developed jointly by the American Library Association and the Library of Congress, were used for transcription into Latin script. In both the Czech and English language versions of this book, the only exceptions from the above transcription rules are for (a) names where the established form is different, and (b) names of individuals well known in Anglophone and Czech societies where use is made of the usual English and Czech forms, e.g. Fedor Dostoevsky, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Ivan Savický, and Helena Musatová. In the bibliography, the transcription of names and titles has not been used as the sources and literature are listed in the original language and script.

All dates in this book are given in the Gregorian calendar dating system.

## SUMMARY

The Slavonic Library in Prague was founded in 1924 by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This library was tasked with two main goals: (a) creating the informational foundations for the newly established Institute of Slavonic Studies, and (b) collecting and making accessible documents for the diaspora from the Russian Empire. Many of these refugees, with different nationalities, found refuge in Czechoslovakia after 1918. The Slavonic Library since 1958 has been part of, what is today, the National Library of the Czech Republic. Thanks to the size and composition of its collections, the Slavonic Library is an internationally recognized centre of Slavic studies.

This book provides a detailed description of the history of the Slavonic Library over the last century. It introduces the reader to the library's collections, how they were created, and gives insights into the most valuable documents in the library. In addition to providing the usual information about those departments dealing with books, journals, and newspapers this monograph also highlights the Slavonic Library's unique historical, manuscript, and cartographic collections. Information about emigration from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, after 1917 is presented in a separate chapter. This is because on this migration topic the Slavonic Library's collection is of global importance. In addition, this volume also presents the library's special collections that include unique archives of documentary, visual, artistic, photographic, and numismatic materials.

Finally, this book provides an overview of the range of services provided by the Slavonic Library with practical information about the library's operations that will be welcomed by anyone interested in studying and using the Slavonic Library's services.

This book was published to mark the centenary of the library's foundation.



Publikace Slovanské knihovny – 88



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**THE SLAVONIC LIBRARY, PRAGUE  
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(A Guide to its History, Funds and Services)

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Odborní recenzenti / **Reviewed by:** PhDr. Milada K. Nedvědová, Ph.D., Mgr. Martin Sekera, Ph.D.

Překlad / **Translation:** Rita Lyons Kindlerová, Pat Lyons

Jazyková redakce / **Editors:** Daniela Lehárová, Rita Lyons Kindlerová

Grafický návrh a sazba / **Graphic design and typesetting:** Ondřej Huleš

Tisk / **Print:** Tiskárny Havlíčkův Brod a. s.

Distribuce / **Distribution:**

Národní knihovna ČR – Oddělení nakladatelství a výstavnictví

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První vydání / **First edition**

Praha / **Prague** 2023