Capturing the Ordinary?
Irena Blühová and photographic modernism in Slovakia 1926-1936

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Abstract
Irena Blühová was one of the first female Slovak photographers who came into prominence in the interwar years with socio-critical images, produced in connection with her activities for the Czechoslovak Communist Party. She also participated in the dissemination of a modernist photographic framework in Slovakia, which today has largely fallen into obscurity. By looking at the different stages in Blühová's short but prolific photographic career, this paper aims to reassess her work in light of the changes it underwent in the decades preceding the Second World War. Blühová's training at the Dessau Bauhaus is an important aspect of this, as is her engagement with gendered conventions of the photographic medium, which first emerges in her Bauhaus photographs and reappears in the years thereafter. Another hitherto untreated aspect of her work relates to the fact that Blühová's socio-political imagery underwent a change after the Bauhaus in what appears to be a slow move away from socio-critical images of manual workers und the disadvantaged towards much gentler depictions of Slovak life. Seeing her work as a document of political agitation within the socialist spectrum, as has tended to be the norm to date, does not cater for these changes. In an attempt to overhaul this, this paper assesses the reasons why Blühová could have taken the step to decrease the socio-political angling of her work in favour of more ethnographic motifs- despite the fact that she remained an important activist for the Communist Party in Slovakia. A consideration of iconophobia within communist circles and an assessment of the photographic currencies in Slovakia at the time provide potential answers for this, highlighting that Blühová was not just a political activist with a camera, but a modern photographer who knew how to critically document interwar Slovak identities.

Key words: interwar Central Europe, photography, communism, hybridity, Bauhaus

Imro Weiner-Král lies naked in a horizontal position on a futon, his knees bent and his arm supporting his head. (fig.1) The soft image focus contours his body against the dark background, his head faced towards the camera so the light does not catch his face apart from his nose tip, the rest remains in obscurity. Were it not for the title, the model would remain in complete anonymity in this posture, a naked body without a face. The prominent Slovak art historian Aurel Hrabušický defines *Imro Weiner-Král,* part of a series of male nudes, as a 'truly unique attempt' and approach to photography in Slovakia, which reverses traditional gender roles as the composition objectifies the male body in a photograph taken by a woman.[1] Photographed in Slovakia in 1933, the image forms part of Irena Blühová's oeuvre, a woman photographer who, though largely forgotten today, helped to put Slovak photography on the map of interwar photographic modernism. But who, then, was she? What were her contributions to the East-Central European modernity that stretched between the Bauhaus and Russian Constructivism? And how can her work be identified as 'Slovak' at a time when the avant-garde moved incessantly from one centre of modernity to the next?

Blühová was born in Banská Bystrica, today in central Slovakia, in 1904. Out of financial necessity, she started to work as a bank clerk as a teenager, and joined the newly founded Czechoslovak communist party (KSČ) at the tender age of 17 in 1921. In 1924, she obtained her first camera, a Görz-Tenax, and in so doing, as the art historian Iva Mojžišová suggests, 'was one of the first women [in Slovakia] who had the courage to take a camera into their

hands.'[2] At the time, Slovakia was part of the new Czechoslovak Republic, founded in 1918 after the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire, and, according to Hrabušický, local advances in photography were largely 'supported by a penetration of the more developed Czech culture, [throughout] the 1920s and 1930s.'[3] In this context, the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava (ŠUR), also called the 'Bratislava Bauhaus' is of special importance. As Mojžišová descibes, the school was the centre for a Slovak 'attempt to free itself of provincialism and to gain space within the central European and broader international context.'[4] While it was only founded in 1928 and so could not have had an impact on Blühová's earlier work, its strong presence and programme from 1928 onwards, including lectures by the Hungarian avant-gardist László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer (1889-1951),

Fig. 1: Blühová, I. *Imro Weiner-Král.* 1933. Black and white photograph. © Estate of I. Blühová

suggests that Blühová would have been aware of its activities, especially considering her connection to the art scene through her partner, the surrealist painter Imro Weiner-Král (1901-1978). However, while there was certainly a willingness to join a wider European modernity, supported by the links between Slovakia, the Czech Lands and abroad created by the ŠUR, the German art historian Thomas Strauss suggests that the predominantly rural topography of Slovakia, 'gave [it] a probably more or less unique position, even within the broader context of Central and Eastern

Europe.'[5] Moreover, in light of the needs of the emerging nation, Slovak photography started to respond specifically to the many deficiencies and drawbacks in the country with photography as a social document. Blühová would soon be recognised as the 'protagonist'[6] of this practice, in which photography was used to 'collect pictorial testimonies of the life of the socially weaker part of the population, [and was] supposed to work as [a tool] of a political fight,' especially within leftist circles.[7] Thus, Blühová's own works were soon used as part of socio-graphic investigations that uncovered the difficult circumstances of society's poorest and were published 'in the form of […] reports with photo-documentation,' which the KSČ employed to further their political cause.[8] Taking this into account, Blühová's work was firmly placed within a communist-realist framework from the beginning and in so doing bear witness to the photographer's social engagement since joining the party. Using these social concerns as a point of continuation throughout her work over the following decade, it is curious to see how it developed from the social realism of the mid-1920s towards the extraordinary nude study of Weiner-Král in 1933. What happened in between? In short, the answer may be a year of study at the Dessau Bauhaus in Germany from 1931 to 1932, but to elaborate the significance of this episode in Blühová's practice in more detail, it is necessary first to consider the foundations of her photographic work in the pre-Bauhaus period, where she closely combined aspects of socio-political and cultural developments in interwar Slovakia in her imagery, exemplified here by *The Basket Maker* from 1926. (fig. 2)

The photograph depicts a man weaving a basket, sitting on a small stool in the grass in front of a blurred background that outlines a wooden fence and a traditional farmhouse structure. The man seems oblivious to the camera, giving the impression that the photograph is an authentic record of working life, rather than a posed image. His hands are at the forefront of the picture plane, and a strand of willow bending towards the edge of the picture frames his concentrated, furrowed face. The image is shot at an angle so that the bending of the reeds is pronounced and the picture gains a sense of movement, which emphasises the fact that work is being done - and even though *The Basket Maker* was created at a time when Blühová had not yet received any formal photographic training, the diagonal angle used is reminiscent of practices in avant-garde photography at the time, where unusual angles were applied as a method of emphasising the qualities particular to the photographic medium. This indicates that Blühová was not only interested in using photography as a political tool, but also in the medium itself, two interests that had already been joined by a specific idea about photography at the time: the worker photography movement. Rooted in Germany in the mid-1920s, the movement was closely linked to socialist-communist politics and centred around two left-wing illustrated magazines, the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (*AIZ*) and *Der Arbeiter Fotograf*. It placed an emphasis on 'proletarian education of the visual organ,' referring to the idea that workers were to learn how to look beyond the gloss of bourgeois magazines and create 'objective' and 'realistic' photographic works.[9] Considering that the *AIZ* was the 'second-largest magazine in Germany and the largest international workers' journal,' it is likely that Blühová would have been aware of the magazine and its activities, especially considering her ties with the KSČ, which was

internationally connected through Moscow's Communist International that overlooked and linked communist movements worldwide.[10] Moreover, when the worker photography movement gained currency in Czechoslovakia as so-called 'social photography,' the prominent Czech avant-gardist Karel Teige (1900-1951) called upon local photographers to look at the practice of their Soviet counterparts, whom he saw to be 'very clearly aware of the tasks that photography has to accomplish: that is, documentary, reportorial, scientific, pedagogical, propaganda, and agitational tasks.'[11]

The Basket Maker fits within this idea of realistically portraying a worker in his environment, which is achieved within a modern compositional framework. Yet, the man depicted is not from the industrial worker-proletariat, but appears to be a rural craftsman. Blühová's choice of subject matter hence falls outwith the main concerns of worker photography, the industrial, urban proletariat. However, the photograph corresponds with the local aims of the communist party, which began to support the idea of national autonomy and the inclusion of the rural peasantry into the ideology of the proletariat after the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in

Fig. 2: Blühová, I. *The Basket Maker.* 1926. Black and white photograph. 40.2 x 30.4 cm. Private Collection.

1924.[12] The ideological incorporation of the rural population was particularly important for Slovakia, which had hardly any urban centres and a large agrarian peasantry due to the fact that the country had been subjected 'to the pressures of a government Magyarization[13] policy that closed Slovak schools and limited career advancement for all Slovaks who failed to assimilate' in the Habsburg Empire.[14] As a result of this repression, the Slovak population largely consisted of the rural peasantry, 'had no upper class, […] and their middle class was very small, being composed of no more than several hundred families.'[15] *The Basket Maker* thus not only records the work of a traditional craftsman, serving as a document of Slovak country life in the 1920s, but also articulates the challenges the KSČ faced in a country where the industrial proletariat was much less present than the agrarian proletariat. Moreover, the dynamic composition within which this motif is framed indicates Blühová's

awareness for the exchange of photographic styles and theories between Slovakia, the Czech Lands and other centres of avant-garde photography like the Weimar Republic before she was formally introduced to photography at the Bauhaus. This questions Mojžišová's assertion that 'it was in Dessau that [Blühová] became convinced of her concept that the social document is most forceful and effective when it is produced simultaneously with good photography.'[16] Rather, it appears that the photographer was aware of the effectiveness of combining social with 'good' photography before she went to Germany, and thus decided to further her education at the school.

Blühová arrived at the Dessau Bauhaus in early 1931 and left in 1932 shortly before the Nazi regime forcibly closed it with the argument that its teaching methods and worldview was 'too socialist.' While this development can only be condemned within the light of political developments in 1930s Germany, it is interesting to note that even though the school's links with the political left cannot be denied, Blühová herself vehemently denies that the Bauhaus was a Marxist institution, calling it 'a school that created humans, for becoming human' in her memories about the school.[17] Yet, considering the photographer's own commitment to the communist party and that she was also politically active during her year at the Bauhaus, the link between the school's ideology and her own politics is difficult to ignore.[18] This would suggest that the context Blühová worked in did not change to a great extent; however, what made a great difference to her practice in Slovakia was the fact that she attended, among other courses, her first formal photography classes, taught by the German photographer Walter Peterhans (1897-1980). Within the context of these classes, Blühová's interest in form and the process of photography itself moves to the foreground, while the social character of her work gains a different aspect. An especially intriguing example for this is *Experiment with two Negatives,* for which Blühová used portraits of Weiner-Král and herself to construct a double portrait from two negatives. (fig. 3) Both portraits used are shot close-up in front of a dark background so the composition focuses onto the faces, which is reminiscent of a portrait style

Fig. 3: Blühová, I. *Experiment with two Negatives at the Bauhaus.* 1931-1932. Black and white photograph. 23.5 x17.8 cm. © Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava

frequently used at the Bauhaus.[19] There are thus a number of features reflected in the work that differ from the photographer's pre-Bauhaus practice, which consists predominantly of social realist images, intersected by images from tourist trips in the Slovak countryside: Rather than taking a single shot, the image is a composition of two photographs, which indicates a drive to formal experimentation that is not evident in earlier works. *Experiment with two Negatives* is also the only composition that includes a self-portrait of the photographer, which emphasises Blühová's willingness to include new subject matter in her work. Moreover, the pairing of the self-portrait with Weiner-Král's image gives the photograph symbolic significance, adding a previously unseen complexity to the image.

Mojžišová argues that *Experiment with two Negatives* 'elucidates the bipolar existence of female and male principles,' which makes the photograph 'more than just a [formal] student experiment.'[20] While the author does not elaborate this any further, an argument can be built around her suggestion in consideration of Blühová as a woman photographer and Weiner-Král as a male photographic object: Blühová shows herself in a serious manner and with a determined view, while Weiner-Král's expression can be related to the 'particular refraction towards the amusing' that the art historian Andreas Haus defines as a typical feature of Bauhaus student photographs.[21] Thus, the photographer shows herself as thoughtful, quiet and serious, while Weiner-Král appears outgoing and loud in a manner that subverts traditional stereotypes of masculinity, especially in contrast to the way Blühová shows herself. In that sense, the opposing types the portraits are characterised by reverse traditional gender roles, showing Weiner-Král in a more emotional and expressive, even feminine, manner than Blühová. Seeing as Blühová took both photographs, the image represents an active woman versus a passive male, which highlights how the progressive formal language that Blühová learned at the Bauhaus not only became a means to articulate her social engagement, but also, in this case, her own position as a woman in a still male-dominated medium. At the same time, the two portraits in the image are combined into one, levelling them on the picture plane and balancing each other out, which creates a sophisticated pictorial argument about Blühová's rather modern relationship to Weiner-Král.[22] Considering that *Experiment with two Negatives* was created just a year or so before the nude portrait of Weiner-Král, the image indicates that a part of the Bauhaus legacy in Blühová's work was a drive to expanded her subject matter by playing with gender identity in relation to her own position as a woman photographer and that of the (nude) model in artistic practice. Thus, *Experiment with two Negatives* is not only indicative of Blühová's engagement with the photographic process as a whole, ending not with taking an image but with its development and experimentation with the end product, but also depicts a more complex subject matter compared to Blühová's earlier works.

However, while the fact that the Bauhaus 'added to [Blühová's] completion of photographic technique and rational awareness of formal principles' has already been acknowledged in studies of her work by Hrabušický, Mojžišová and

Škvarna to name a few, there is possibly another aspect to the influence Blühová was exposed to while studying in Germany, which to date has not been explored and relates to the tendency towards photomontage and collage techniques in 1920s and 1930s Germany, especially in the context of worker photography.[23] While Blühová did not actively use these techniques herself, *Experiment with two Negatives* shows that she was experimenting with different possibilities of using an image after it had been taken, which suggests that she also had some theoretical knowledge about the ways images could be manipulated. Moreover, as a communist who not only produced images for a political cause but also read publications like the Czech avant-garde magazine *ReD* and the *AIZ,* it can safely be assumed that Blühová was familiar with the power of the image in the public sphere.[24] During her time at the Bauhaus, the photographer was also affiliated with and active in the KOSTUFRA, the communist student organisation in the Weimar Republic, and, as can be taken from photographs, had connections to the *AIZ*, an environment where photomontage became increasingly favoured to realist photography.[25] According to the art historian Andrés Zervigon's article 'Persuading with the Unseen?' the tendency towards photomontage in the magazine from the mid-1920s onwards highlights the iconophobia pervading the German Communist Party at the time, which also affected their dealing with print media, as he describes:

> 'The leadership of this "ultra-radical" organization had earnestly read and reread Karl Marx's foundational texts. And in these dense German-language discourses, they perceived a sharp distinction between reality and appearance (*Sein und Schein*). This division was particularly strong in Marx's proposal that an alluring world of glimmering commodities and their exchange, the social "superstructure," overwhelmed and obscured the actual work put into these goods, the labour driven "base." The party's leadership obsessively cultivated this dialectic of reality and appearance into a deep distrust for all appearances.'[26]

Thus, in order to avoid the misinterpretation of photographs with the argument that 'political reality and, indeed, visible reality itself, [are] chimerical,' the party saw photomontage as an ideal method to control images.[27] Bearing in mind that Blühová was active in the party and had an interest in photography as 'an instrument for agitation and propaganda,'[28] it is likely that she was also aware of this discourse surrounding the problem of controlling content. Even though there are no images to suggest Blühová worked with photomontage herself as a consequence, it is evident from her Bauhaus photographs onwards that her work became increasingly depoliticised even though her political activities increased in other areas. A curious example for this is that, despite the fact that she certainly took photographs outside he classroom and lived in accommodation shared with workers of the Junkers airplane manufacture close to the Bauhaus schools, none of Blühová's works document the lives of the labourers employed there.[29] Considering that a large part of her pre-Bauhaus oeuvre is concerned with the lives of the proletariat, the communist discourse surrounding iconophobia during Blühová's time in Germany could provide an explanation for her sudden avoidance of political-activist photography. This would indicate that, apart from becoming a more technically advanced photographer, an awareness for the fallacies of photography as a realistic document was one of the most important ideas Blühová took away from her time in Dessau, especially because her post-Bauhaus work can largely not be markedly differentiated from earlier works in style, but rather in subject matter. Taking this into account, it appears that Blühová's Bauhaus period may not have impacted her work as straightforwardly as previously suggested.

Blühová was called back to Slovakia by the KSČ in 1932 with the assignment of opening the bookstore *Blüh* in Bratislava, which became not only a meeting point for the intelligentsia, but also served as a cover for the dissemination of prohibited communist articles and by the late 1930s, 'was one of the centres of international antifascist resistance,' connecting Bratislava, Brno, Vienna and Budapest.[30] Blühová also began to move in the photographic circles surrounding the ŠUR, which, according to Hrabušický, had developed into 'a powerful centre for socio-critical photo work;'[31] maintained contact with forerunners of the Czech photographic avant-garde teaching at the school, including Jaromír Funke (1896–1945) and Zdeněk Rossmann (1905–1984), who had also studied at the Bauhaus; helped to establish the social photography organisation *Sociophoto*;[32] and briefly studied film under the Czech cinematographer and folklorist Karol Plicka (1894-1987), 'who founded […] the first film school in Czechoslovakia' at the ŠUR in 1938.[33] While still producing images throughout the 1930s, Blühová became increasingly important in other areas of the party, and by the time the Second World War broke out she had almost entirely stopped photographing. Her post-Bauhaus images of the mid- to late 1930s thus form part of her final activities as a photographer, as even though she also took some photographs as late as in the 1970s, these were taken extremely sporadically with as much as a decade between them.[34] Moreover, there appears to be a fine, but significant change in subject matter following on from the Bauhaus, which creates new dimensions in a dialogue with old motifs in Blühová's oeuvre- the most significant of which is the nude study of Imro Weiner-Král. (fig.1)

The soft focus and lighting of this photograph indicate that Blühová based the composition on natural light shining through the window above the figure, according to which the image could be identified as a photographic nude study exploring the use of natural light with an intense chiaroscuro effect. Yet, it is the motif that makes the image extraordinary, considering that it challenges assumptions about the role of men and women in artistic production. In a sense, the photograph represents a continuation of the play with gender stereotypes contained in *Experiment with two Negatives* from Blühová's Bauhaus period, which places the photographer in a leading rather than supporting role

compared to her male counterpart. *Imro Weiner-Král* continues this assertion by subverting the traditional role of the woman as an object and the man as the active creator in a role reversal that particularly stands out in a traditional society as Slovakia still was at the time. Even though the photograph may not directly relate to any of the new photographic practices Blühová learned at the Bauhaus from a technical viewpoint, it serves as evidence that Blühová continued to explore the possibilities of the photographic medium in various ways after her return to Slovakia, and that she not only challenged social inequalities with thought-provoking imagery, but also traditional notions of gender roles. Unfortunately, many of Blühová's works were lost when she was prosecuted for her political activities during the Second World War and had to flee, so it is uncertain whether she created more works like *Imro Weiner-Král* – which makes it an all the more precious example for the way Central European women artists used modernist photography to defy the social conventions of the day.

At the time *Imro Weiner-Král* was produced, Blühová's social engagement with photography had not yet ceased either, and she produced a number of photographic cycles in 1935 and 1936 in the very eastern outskirts of Czechoslovakia, Carpathian Ruthenia. The images she produced there still adhere to the notion of social documentary photography as snapshots of life; however, they illustrate a definitive turn towards more traditional, ethnographic motifs. *Tobacco in Bloom,* for example, depicts a young woman in folk costume and with a headscarf sitting in a tobacco field. (fig. 4) As the large-leafed tobacco plants in the foreground obscure her hands and the lower part of her body, it is unclear exactly what she is doing, or whether she is working or not. The girl is positioned right at the image centre in sharper focus than the blurred plants surrounding her, and as the stark whiteness of her blouse is reflected in the tobacco blossoms in the

Fig. 4: Blühová, I. *Tobacco in Bloom*. 1936. Black and white photograph.17.5 x 23.5 cm.
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foreground and she is looking downward, we gain the impression that she is physically emerged in the field, completely unaware of being photographed in an untouched moment of country life. In comparison to other works by Blühová, the photograph's composition is remarkably conventional; especially considering the direct angle the image is shot from and the central positioning of the motif. There is, it seems, none of the movement and dynamism as in earlier images like *The Basket Maker*- it is a simple, even romantic, still image of a young girl surrounded by plants in bloom. (fig. 2) Taking this into account, a parallel can be drawn between *Tobacco in Bloom* and Plicka's idyllic depictions of Slovakia. According to the photographic historian Vladimir Birgus,

'Photography was […] central to the ethnographic research of Karol Plicka who recorded Slovak folklore and peasant traditions. His somewhat idealised pictures bolstered the nascent sense of national identity and pride and paved the way for photography as a tool of cultural anthropology.'[35]

Considering that Blühová was well connected with the photographic circles in Slovakia of her time and that she began to study film under Plicka only two years after taking *Tobacco in Bloom*, the rather conventional depiction of the girl could be placed within the tradition of a genre that Hrabušický called 'The quiet celebration of Slovakia,' or *krasnoslovenska fotografia*.[36] Plicka was a forerunner of this pictorialist manner of recording the people and folklore customs of the eastern Czechoslovak countryside, and his studies and village idylls animated many Czech artists to come to Slovakia, 'trying to find […] something like a Slav Tahiti, where one could experience the mythical time of [one's] ancestors.'[37] As *Tobacco in Bloom* also falls within this category of showing harmonious country life, the photograph contrasts the socially critical themes present in Blühová's earlier works, which directly confront the viewer with manual labour and poverty.

Yet, when considering the photograph within the context of the cycle it was produced in, titled 'Female tobacco growers,' a link to Blühová's more critical documentary practice can be detected: While on the surface *Tobacco*

Fig. 5: Blühová, I. *Threading Tobacco.* 1936. Black and white photograph. 23.4 x 17.7 cm. © Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava

in Bloom appears to be a simple, idyllic depiction of country life within a traditional compositional framework, it is only one image of a series that records the work of women in a remote area of the country, which had not yet been fully industrialised and farm work required hard manual labour. When complementing the scene with another one from the series, *Threading Tobacco, Tobacco in Bloom* becomes more than just an pleasant image of a young girl in a field: it indicates the first step of a laborious process of agricultural

production, managed by female workers of all ages. *Threading Tobacco* also shows a woman in folk costume in midst of a sea of tobacco leaves. (Fig. 5) However, in this image, the woman is much older and the tobacco has been harvested, ready to be threaded for drying. Thus, the images in comparison also contain an allegorical aspect with the young girl in a field of blossoming plants and the older woman next to the withered tobacco strands, indicating not only a progression in labour, but also in time. This carefully considered presentation of the labour process yet again suggests that Blühová took a more advanced manner of dealing with pictorial content away from the Bauhaus, subtly linking the images of the tobacco cycle. There is, however, also a difference in the manner the women are portrayed considering that *Threading Tobacco* reflects a more modern approach to composition, as the stacked tobacco leaves in the foreground evoke an impression of mass production. Additionally, the woman's lower half is almost entirely covered by leaves, which blurs the line between her body and the plants so that at first sight it almost appears as if she wore an elaborate robe. This visual complexity in *Threading Tobacco* displays that Blühová continued to employ modernist views in her later work, while leaning towards a more traditional approach to photography in the manner of Plicka's photography at the same time.

In conjunction, *Threading Tobacco* and *Tobacco in Bloom* form a document of tobacco farming in Carpathian Ruthenia and capture processes of manual labour in the region. As Blühová photographed only women in this series, it is not only a document of country life, but also, more specifically, a report about women working in a traditional environment. Accordingly, it appears that Blühová's documentary practice shifted, firstly, to a greater focus on Slovakia's traditions and culture, and, secondly, that it turned toward a more gendered viewpoint. The latter is both evident in the treatment of Weiner-Král's nude study as a reversion of gender roles within an artistic framework, and in the tobacco cycle, where a focus on women's labour highlights their position as active members of Slovak society. However, while the tobacco cycle photographs still have the potential to be politicised, they show a greater emphasis on the ethnographic rather than the socialist-political in that they appear, at least at first sight, much more idyllic with the motif of women in the landscape. Thus, their political potential is expressed much subtler than in earlier works. When looking at Blühová's post-Bauhaus images on the whole, it can be concluded that, even though she briefly continued to produce experimental images ahead of her time like *Imro Weiner-Král*, her general motif choice became much gentler in comparison to her documentary images from earlier years. This suggests a continuation within the assumption that Blühová not only adopted new photographic techniques at the Bauhaus, but potentially also realised the medium's limitations as a '"weapon" of agitation and propaganda.'[38] As her work increasingly falls within the realm of *krasnoslovenska fotografia* and her portrayal of societal outsiders recedes, Blühová appears to have adapted a manner of photography from the mid 1930s onwards, which still showed Slovakia and its people but gradually removed her work from the more explicit political contexts featured in her earlier photographs.

Even though Blühová's work so fittingly visualised the dialogue between tradition and innovation in the Slovak context, it fell into oblivion during the troubles that befell Slovakia after 1938, when the country gained independence as a Nazi puppet state.[39] During the war, Blühová was active in the resistance movement and helped political refugees until she was prosecuted herself and had to flee, when much of her work was lost. Using the cover Elena Fischerová she continued to be active underground for the remainder of the war. In the post-war era, Blühová held leading positions in publishing houses and worked as an educator, all of which testifies the social commitment that is also so strongly featured in her photographic work. Blühová supported the reforms to the communist system in Czechoslovakia under way during the Prague Spring in 1968, and thus came under scrutiny in the normalization period thereafter.[40] Yet, she was allowed to have several solo exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s, for example at the Bauhaus Archiv in Berlin in 1974, the Agrokomplex in Budapest in 1985 and the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne in 1987, which highlights the enduring suitability of her work for the communist context.[41] In the 1960s and 1970s, Blühová also participated in the Bauhaus revival and submitted a number of essays about her experience as a student there; however, they leave the questions why her political photographic engagement decreased, and why she subsequently stopped photographing unanswered.[42] Since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Blühová's work has barely been exhibited, and if, largely as part of thematic group exhibitions, for example in 'Fotografie am Bauhaus' at the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin in 1990, 'A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker Photography Movement 1926-1939' at the Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2011, and in 'Stern Light: Socially Conscious Photography in interwar Czechoslovakia' at the Leica Gallery in Prague in 2012. All of these exhibitions emphasised the socio-critical nature of Blühová's work, while the multifaceted nature of her photographs has been bypassed. Yet, the selected images that have been discussed here make apparent that each stage of Blühová's photographic career had its own features: In the pre-Bauhaus period, her work was the most political and socio-critical while already indicating Blühová's awareness for modernist photographic tendencies at the time. At the Bauhaus, the photographer's coursework shows that she experimented with negatives, photographic development and the impact of light on its production. Not at least, it has also been shown that Blühová's move away from social-realist photography may have stemmed from experiences made in Germany. Post-Bauhaus, the photographer continued to pay increasing attention to gender, while directing her documentary practice into a more ethnographic direction than before. The different stages in Blühová's photographic work certainly confirm that her socio-political environment was a crucial topic in her work and impacted it differently depending on where it was produced. Yet, what shines through this thorough application of political engagement again and again is Slovakia, its tradition and its culture as a consistent element throughout her work, leading to the

conclusion that overall, rather than being a socialist or Bauhaus photographer, Blühová was, first and foremost, a documenter of interwar Slovak life.

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[1] Hrabušický, A. 'Documents of the New Seeing' Hrabušický, A. and Macek, V. *Slovak Photography 1925-2000* Exh.cat. Slovenská Narodná Galeria (Bratislava, 2001): 71

[2] translation by author: 'bola jednou z prvých žien, čo mali odvahu vziat' do rúk fotoaparát' Mojžišová, Iva. 'Fotografka všedných dní Irena Blühová' *Knižnica,* Vol. 5, No. 4 (2004): 206

[3] Hrabušický, A. 'Introduction' in Hrabušický and Macek, 2001: 13

[4] Mojžišová, I. 'Avant-Garde Repercussions and the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava, 1928-1939' *Journal of Design History,* Vol. 5; No. 4 (1992): 273

[5] translation by author: 'verleiht der Slowakei wahrscheinlich eine mehr oder weniger einmalige Stellung, sogar in einem breiteren Kontext Mittel- und Osteuropas betrachtet.' Strauss, T. ,Das Handwerk, die Volkskunst und die Vorkriegsavantgarde' in Anna, S. (ed.) *Das Bauhaus im Osten: Slowakische und Tschechische Avantgarde 1928-1939* (Stuttgart, 1997): 40

[6] Mojžišová, 1992: 275

[7] Hrabušický, A. 'Social Photography' in Hrabušický and Macek, 2001: 41

[8] translation by author: 'in Form von […] Mitteilungen mit Fotodokumentation veröffentlicht'. Škvarna, D. 'Príbeh Ireny Blühovej' in Škvarna, D. et al *Irena Blühová* (Martin, 1992):13

[9] Stumberger, R. '*AIZ* and the German Worker Photographers' in Ribalta, J. (ed.) *The Worker Photography Movement (*Madrid, 2011): 89

[10] Stumberger, 2011: 81

[11] Teige, K. 'The Tasks of Modern Photography' in Ribalta, 2011: 269

[12] Olivová, V. 'The Czechoslovak Government and its ,disloyal' opposition, 1918-1938' in Morrison, J. (ed.) *The Czech and Slovak Experience.* (Basingstoke and London, 1992): 95

[13] 'Magyarization' defines the pressures applied by the Hungarian government onto non-Hungarians under their rule to assimilate. Kirschbaum, S. *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival.* (Basingstoke, 2005): 156

[14] Skalnik Leff, C. *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus state.* (Boulder and Oxford, 1996): 7

[15] Beneš, V. 'Democracy and its Problems, 1918-1920' in Mamatey, V. and Luža, R. (eds.) *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918-1948* (Princeton University Press, 1973): 44

[16] Mojžišová, 1992: 275

[17] 'Eine Schule der Gestaltung des Menschen, des Menschwerdens.' Trans. by author. Blühová quoted in Mojžíšová, I. 'Blühová a Bauhaus' in Škvarna et al, 1992: 35

[18] Blühová, I. "Bauhaus – očami bývalého študenta" *Ars.* Vol. 2, No.3 (1969): 129-130

[19] Haus, A. 'Photography at the Bauhaus: Discovery of a Medium' in Fiedler, Jeannine (ed.) *Photography at the Bauhaus.* Exh.cat. Bauhaus Archiv: Berlin, 1990: 127-137

[20] translation by author:'[verdeutlicht] die bipolare Anwesenheir des weiblichen und männlichen Prinzips' […] 'mehr als nur ein Studienexperiment'. Mojžíšová, 1992: 31

[21] Haus, 1990: 130

[22] Weiner-Král and Blühová were romantically linked for most of her life until Weiner-Král's death in 1978. Even though he painted her a number of times and she took a small number of photographs of him, her work stands out as markedly independent from his.

[23] translation by author: '[…] trug zur Vollendung ihrer fotografischen Technik bei und zur rationale Erkenntnis der Gestaltungsprinzipien die sie vorher nur ahnte.'. Mojžíšová, 1992: 35

[24] Mojžíšová, 1992: 29

[25] there are images showing Blühová at the AIZ post in Dessau, see Škvarna et al, 1992

[26] Zervigon, A. 'Persuading with the Unseen? *Die Arbeiter- Illustrierte-Zeitung*, Photography, and German Communism's Iconophobia' *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, Vol.26 No.2 (2010): 151

[27] Zervigon, 2010: 158

[28] translation by author: 'als „Gewehr" zur Agitation und Propaganda' trans. by author. Blühová, 1983: 195

[29] Mojžíšová, 1992: 31

[30] translation by author:'eines der Zentren des internationalen antifaschistischen Widerstands'. Škvarna, 1992: 13

[31] translation by author: ,ein mächtiges Zentrum der sozialkritischen Photoarbeit' trans. by author. Hrabušický, A. ,Der Photographenkreis um Irena Blühová und Jaromír Funke' in Anna, 1997: 140

[32] Blühová was part of a group founding *Sociofoto* in 1932. The organization had its first exhibition in Bratislava in 1933 and took part in social photography exhibitions in Prague (1933) and Brno (1934). Macek, V. 'Blühová – Fotografka' in Škvarna et al, 1992: 21-22

[33] Mojžišová, 1992: 274

[34] In these images, Blühová largely portrayed other Slovak artists, for example the potter Ferdiš Kostka (1878-1951) and the painter Willy Nowak (1886-1977), as can be taken from the joint online catalogue of the Slovak National Gallery, Oravská Gallery and the City Gallery of Bratislava http://www.webumenia.sk

[35] Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J. (eds.) *Tschechische Fotografie des 20. Jahrhunderts.* Exh. Cat. Kunst- Und Ausstellungshalle Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn (Bonn, 2009): 52

[36] Habušicky, A. "A quiet celebration of Slovakia" in Habušicky and Macek, 2001: 15

[37] Habušicky, 2001: 17

[38] translation by author: 'als "Gewehr" zur Agitation und Propaganda [...] zur Hilfe der Entwicklung der [kommunistischen] Partei' Blühová, I. ,Fragebogen einer ehemaligen Bauhaus-Schülerin oder Mein Weg zum Bauhaus' in Anna, 1997: 195

[39] Hoensch, J.K. 'The Slovak Republic' in Mamatey and Luža,1973: 271-275

[40] The Prague Spring was a more liberal period in Czechoslovakia during the communist regime, which advocated changes in the political system as well as producing more civil liberties for the population. The period ended with the occupation of the country by Soviet forces in August 1968. As a reaction to the Prague Spring, Soviet forces occupied Czechoslovakia, leading to a clampdown on previously increased civil liberties and changing the country to a neo-Stalinist state that restricted personal freedom and prosecuted dissidents after reinstating a conservative communist regime.

[41] A list of Blühová's group and solo exhibitions is included in her monograph. Škvarna et al, 1992: 104

[42] For example: Blühová, 1969: 125-135; Blühová, 1983: 7-9