

University of Kansas Libraries South Slavic & Balkan Collections



History of the South Slavic & Balkan Collections (1962-1994)

Michael Biggins; updated 2008 by Geoff Husic



When he joined the University in 1962 as its sole Slavic librarian, responsible for acquiring and cataloging materials in all Slavic languages, George Jerkovich also brought with him particular subject expertise in the South Slavic area. In addition to buying materials in the areas of strength established until then, Russian and Polish, Jerkovich was also responsible for the intensification

of the Library's Yugoslav acquisition efforts.

The greatest boon to the development of the collection was the Library's participation in the U.S. Public Law-480 (PL-480) program for Yugoslavia, which lasted from 1967 through early 1972 and provided KU with one copy of every current Yugoslav publication judged to have research value. The KU Library was one of twelve U.S. research libraries that were originally included in the program. During each of the PL-480 Yugoslav years, the Library received nearly 3,000 volumes in all three of the official Slavic languages of the multi-national Yugoslav state, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Macedonian. It was the great fortune of all participating libraries that PL-480 coincided with the most significant period of liberalization in Yugoslavia's postwar history; from 1967 to 1971 censorship abated, important older works were reissued, and seminal new works appeared. Thanks to the PL-480 program, all of these found their way into the Library's Slavic collection.

As KU's PL-480 experience began, Jerkovich also undertook the first of many book-buying trips to Southeastern Europe and the Soviet Union. His first trip, in May-June 1967, resulted in the purchase of 3,200 antiquarian Yugoslav titles of every provenance: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Slovenian and Macedonian. Many of the books and serials bought on this and subsequent trips were rare, historically important, and essential to provide a strong base for the growing South Slavic collection.

Throughout the late 1960s the Library received as many as 6,000 volumes of South Slavic materials each year, out of total Slavic and East European receipts numbering 10,000. Space in the Slavic Department was at a premium, and staff members had to wrestle with the ubiquitous stacks of books waiting to be processed.

After 1972 Yugoslav receipts declined sharply. The Library began to rely more heavily on some of its exchange contacts with Yugoslav partners, but it was impossible to allocate enough money to maintain the comprehensive coverage that PL-480 had provided at virtually no cost to KU. Much of what the Library acquired through the 1970s was purchased in the course of a half-dozen acquisitions trips to Eastern Europe.

Yugoslavia in the early and mid-1980s already began to undergo the political and social upheavals that were inevitable after the death of the country's longtime dictator Josip Broz Tito in 1980. The driving force behind change in Yugoslavia was the country's multi-national makeup; each of the federation's six republics at some point during the 1980s embarked on its own impassioned campaign for national self-realization. At the same time, the tenor of publishing underwent subtle modulations. Politically risqué topics were once again being raised in the press, periodicals, and separately published books. More and more established literati moonlighted as opposition statesmen. Beginning in Slovenia about 1982, writers banded together to launch new journals or remake old ones along more liberal or more particularist lines than had been countenanced till then. As an equal and opposite reaction to Slovenian rebelliousness, a similar trend soon took hold in Serbia, and then spread to Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Macedonia in reaction to Serbian recalcitrance.

At first isolated, unexpected, and understated, these societal shifts and the publishing activity that

either documented or helped propel them could easily have gone unnoticed by research libraries in the United States. It became especially important at that time for the Library to turn to diverse suppliers from Belgrade to Zagreb and Ljubljana to maintain a balance in its Yugoslav acquisitions; otherwise, as more than one major U.S. research library began to learn through experience, excessive reliance on centralized sources in Belgrade for nationwide coverage would result in shipment after shipment of materials skewed geographically and politically toward Yugoslav centralist ideology.

In the late 1980s the KU Library, which had modest exchange agreements of longstanding with institutions throughout Yugoslavia, began to expand those exchanges and turn to regional vendors in each of the Yugoslav republics. Book-buying trips by Slavic librarians in 1988, 1990, 1992 and 1994 included Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, Belgrade and Sarajevo in their itineraries, and helped the Library to identify and obtain many valuable and hard-to-get titles at relatively low prices. With the intensity of its South Slavic acquisitions activity during this period, the KU Library maintained its role as an important collector among North American libraries.

This most recent period of collection building has not been without its challenges and a crisis or two. The first critical juncture occurred in late 1989 when the Yugoslav federal government introduced a fiscal reform program intended to move the country toward a market economy. What became apparent only after the dissolution of Yugoslavia was that government agencies had sabotaged the reform from the start. The first signs of trouble appeared in 1990 as prices for monographs supplied by the main Yugoslav vendors began gradually creeping upward, eventually inflating to as much as four times their pre-1990 level. Throughout all of 1991 and part of 1992, the cost of collecting books and journals from Yugoslavia became prohibitive by any standards, and the KU Library, like its peers across the nation, had to scale back acquisitions drastically. By early 1992 the artificially overblown Yugoslav economy had finally burst, with positive results for the Library's collecting efforts. While we can once again afford to buy books from most regions of the former Yugoslavia, new challenges continually surface, as they inevitably must when the Library deals with a region wracked by war and economic instability. Serbian and Macedonian books have become difficult to obtain due to U.N. sanctions and blockades; Croatian and Slovenian materials, while obtainable, have once again started to rise substantially in price.

For the South Slavic area, the Library's primary focus in collecting is on languages, linguistics, and literature, to meet the University's most immediate curricular and research needs. Research-level collecting is conducted for Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Bosnian, and Bulgarian language and linguistics, with equal priority placed on collecting reference materials of all kinds to support general and specialized research. The corresponding literature collections are maintained at a slightly less intensive, graduate study level. Materials in history, political science, economics, and the fine arts are also acquired at a graduate study level, for although there has been no chair of Balkan history on the University faculty for nearly 20 years, the demand among Russian and East European faculty and students for materials pertaining to the present Balkan conflict remains high.

The University of Kansas, through its Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, can boast

strong and longstanding ties with key educational, research and cultural institutions throughout Southeastern Europe, including the University of Zagreb, the Croatian Matica, the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, the University of Ljubljana, and Kliment Ohridski University in Skopje. For many years, both senior and junior scholars from those institutions have been invited for semester- or year-long stays at KU to teach and conduct research in their areas of specialization. Their often astonished comments about the ability of the KU Library's collections to support their research and teaching thousands of miles from home have been one form of assurance that the Library is on-track in its efforts to serve its patrons.

Providing support for these areas of particular interest and sustaining the development of a strong overall South Slavic collection will be among the Library Slavic Department's challenges in the years to come.

Michael Biggins

South Slavic Collections 1989-1994

During the period of 1989-1994 the South Slavic collections were under the direction of Dr. Michael Biggins. Dr. Biggins, who has had numerous of his translations from Slovenian published, has had strong ties with Slovenia, the Slovene language and literature. Under his stewardship the Slovenian and other South Slavic collections at KU grew greatly in number and in prominence.

Geoff Husic



As of 2006, the University of Kansas Libraries' Slavic collection consists of over 300,000 monographic volumes and holds over 3000 periodicals titles, of which approximately 1250 are currently received. In addition KU patrons have access to hundreds of journals in electronic, full-text format. KU's Slavic collection is the major resource for scholars in the social sciences and humanities in the region. Slavic Librarians are available to assistant scholars and students on their research.
