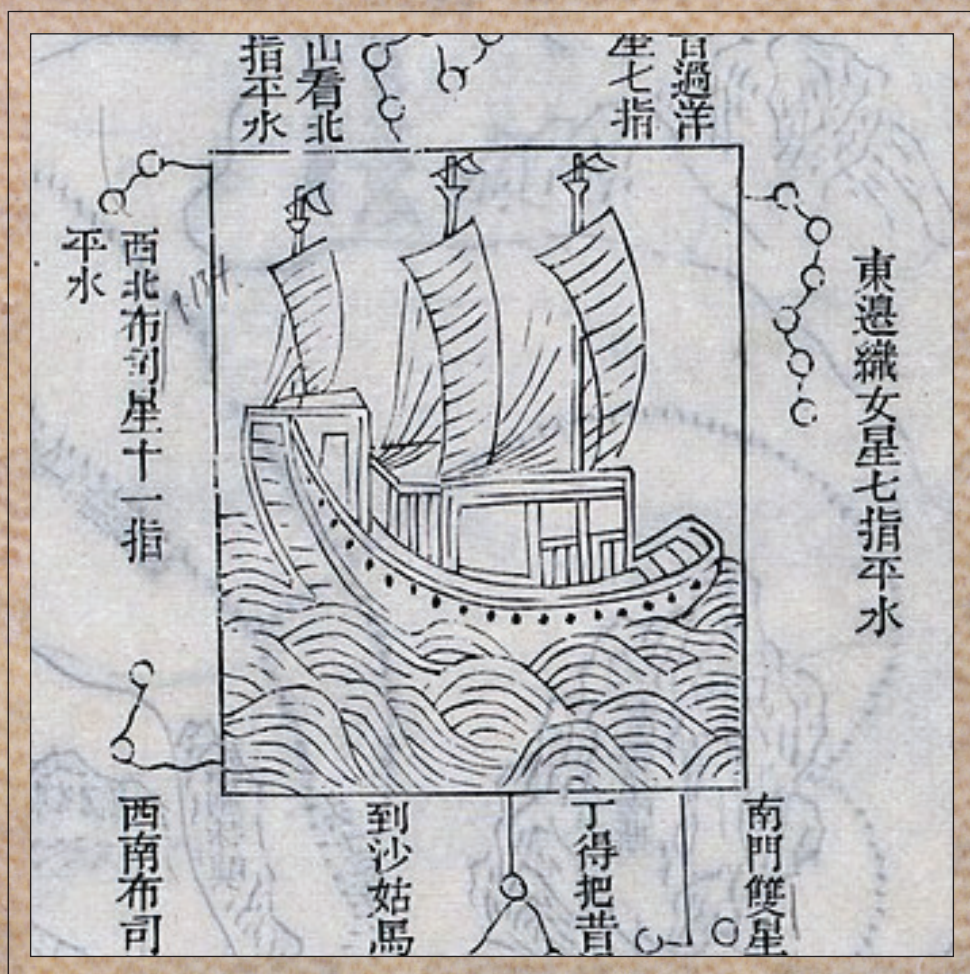




# ACTA HISTRIAE

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*Aleksej Kalc, Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik & Janja Žitnik Serafin:*  
DARING DREAMS OF THE FUTURE: SLOVENIAN MASS MIGRATIONS 1870–1945.  
Peter Lang, Berlin – Brussels – Chennai – Lausanne – New York – Oxford,  
2024, 460 pages

The international publishing house Peter Lang is a name that holds renown in the world of the humanities. In the context of this review, its cooperation with the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), dating back to 2014, bears special mentioning. It was in 2014 when the existing framework for publishing scientific studies focusing on present-day Slovenia and its neighboring regions was established. Content-wise, this includes a wide array of disciplines required for in-depth studies of social, cultural and linguistic topics, bringing together close collaboration of the two institutions on both the editorial and research level. The compendium *Thought, Society, Culture: Slovenian and South Eastern European Perspectives* recently saw the release of the English translation of *Velika doba migracij na Slovenskem* (2020), here in review. This book is the result of the labors of Aleksej Kalc, Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik and Janja Žitnik Serafin, each of whom brought a wealth of experience in the field of migration studies to the table.

The book represents a synthesis of findings in the field of migration history as accumulated by the three authors, all associates of the Slovenian Migration Institute of the ZRC SAZU. Since 1990, the Institute has been continuously active on the publishing front with the international scientific journal *Dve domovini / Two Homelands*. Initially, it covered topics related to emigrant history yet gradually expanded its editorial politics towards a more interdisciplinary approach of migration studies, all the while gaining international recognition. The Institute saw the release of over a hundred scientific publications exhibiting a panoply of approaches in terms of topics and disciplines, with the history of migration still retaining its central position. In recent years, the Institute published a series of works in the English language with the aim of presenting its findings to an international audience. Even though its primary mission remains that of science and research, its activities are also focused on bringing the topic of migration closer to a wider readership. Keeping the historical narrative attractive for the general public was an apparent lodestar during its creative process, demonstrating each author's stylistic flow and clarity. Despite its voluminousness, the book received ample attention from the domestic audience, was sold out swiftly, reprinted and published in an English-language edition in 2024.

*Daring Dreams of the Future*, a part of the book's English title, was not literally translated from the Slovenian original. Instead, it is the translation of a line by Oton Župančič (1878–1949), who counts amongst the most eminent literary names of Slovenian modernism. The very line "*smele sanje bodočnosti*" was translated into English by Slavic studies expert, literary historian and

translator Henry R. Cooper, Jr., and is without a doubt an appropriate choice. Namely, Oton Župančič himself lived through the period described in the book, while his place of birth, the mostly rural White Carniola (Bela Krajina), experienced a large degree of emigration. His patriotic poem *Duma* (1908) supplies the titular line and sets its sights on the relationship between home and abroad, underscoring the emigration that at the time left a lasting mark on Slovenian society. The book's poetic title succinctly puts forward the universal motivation of those who left their homes in hope of living a better life. The change of the title is not the only one, however. Comparing the English version with the Slovenian original reveals subtle differences in the content as well as linguistic choices. Along with the authors, the book's editor Martin Pogačar devised several changes in the content to bring the subject matter closer to international readers who are less acquainted with the past of the territory it discusses. In addition, the book was meticulously translated by playwright and translator Barbara Skubic, who herself counts issues of migration and gender among her research interests. The complex and voluminous text was thus brought into harmony with the English language.

Glancing over the index, the three-part structure of the book reveals itself, with each author signing their name under one of the sections. Aleksej Kalc, leaning upon his theoretical, methodological and empirical skillfulness, structurally elucidates on the complex migration processes in the area. His expansive chapter supported by abundant references is imbued with a fine-tuned astuteness with regard to the demographic, economic and social aspects of migration history of the modern age. A rather late onset of modernization and economic marginality for the period (1870–1945) is indicated in the studied area where population density was low and larger urban centers few and far between. Kalc, however, introduces his research topic based on recent findings within the field of migration history, which claim that the preliminary phase of the nineteenth-century mass migrations exhibited a high degree of mobility as well. He stresses that “migration did not emerge as a new phenomenon with modernization. Instead, it adjusted—in form, methods, and extent of movement—to the times and means and started happening with increasing speed in an expanding international and transcontinental realm” (p. 27). As the socioeconomic fields of the era intertwined the traditional with the modern, so bloomed the notions of a better life being possible abroad. A series of global and more localized social crises significantly added to a share of a population inclined toward emigration. Over 300,000 are thought to have left the territory of current-day Slovenia from the mid-nineteenth century up until World War I, decreasing demographic growth by a whopping 58%. In his synthesis, Kalc does not just focus on emigrating from the area (especially to the USA, Germany and France), but also takes into account the rich tapestry of internal migration indices. He thus underscores the notion that migration processes are shaped by both the global and the local environment, and that they

Aleksej Kalc,  
Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik, Janja Žitnik Serafin

## **Daring Dreams of the Future**

**Slovenian Mass Migration 1870–1945**

  
PETER LANG

exhibit temporal and spatial mutability. In addition, Kalc paints an impressive picture of the effects these migrations had on Slovenian society. He relays the reactions of the contemporary publicists with a certain plasticity as he describes the “draining” of the nation’s substance. Moreover, he explains the development of national migration policies, with World War I being defined as a clear tipping point with regard to the control of population mobility. To help better understand migration processes in an era when the rhythm of life

still intertwined more closely with nature, Kalc to a certain extent also takes into account natural factors that determined the population's livelihoods and influenced their migratory choices.

In the second part of the book, Janja Žitnik Serafin focuses on collective ways of preserving original identities, drawing on her long-standing knowledge of the cultural treasure trove shaped by Slovenian diaspora communities around the world. She provides a synthesis of cultural processes as well as the informative and educational activities related to those immigrants who had associated themselves chiefly with a Slovenian cultural milieu. Moreover, Žitnik Serafin presents how diverse activities of the Slovenian diasporic communities exhibited an interplay of different affiliations. They were not limited merely to the ethno-national level, but also included locale, region, religion, social status, affinities and professional concerns. Sources highlighting the collecting activities of Slovenian migrants with the aim of increasing social security and preserving language, values, norms and traditions have chiefly been preserved on ethno-national grounds. Yet Žitnik Serafin retains a sensitivity to other types of networking, especially in the broader (South) Slavic, Catholic, Socialist and other spheres, which often transcended ethnic boundaries. By far her broadest treatise is the one dedicated to the Slovenian community in the USA, a community that created a strong empirical foundation for a multitude of interpretational insights with their unsurpassed social and publishing activity. She also points out the activities of Slovenian emigrants from a myriad of different destinations in the Americas or elsewhere in Europe who banded together due to similar inclination. Žitnik Serafin's chapter offers a condensed look into the founding of an almost immeasurable number of supporting associations, newspapers and educational foundations, all the while placing them in their temporal and spatial contexts with ease while retaining empirical correctness. The concluding part is dedicated to literary production, a topic she had presented over 25 years ago in three comprehensive books as part of an anthology of Slovenian immigrant literature together with Helga Glušič. Within this highly encapsulated piece, she underlined that Slovenian literary production largely reflected "the group belonging to the new hybrid culture". Even though literary works often deal with highly specific fortunes of an individual, they paint a picture of a collective experience, a picture that reflects the multi-layered migrant identity.

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik's chapter provides six biographical narratives placed solidly within the historical context. These life stories, each with a migrant background, testify to the added interpretational value that arises when the observer's gaze is fixed on a single life story—instead of the nameless masses or the activities of diaspora communities. Biographical studies reveal the complexity of migratory processes in an organic manner. They elucidate on them more comprehensively than merely slapping on a label ever could, as the various authorities that oversee the migration process are wont to do.

As Milharčič Hladnik deftly illustrates in her case studies, reconstructions of an individual's life path challenge regular perceptions of migrants being caught in the structural norms, directives and prohibitions dictated by society in their country of arrival. They demonstrate how migrants can be pushed to the edge of the law and into difficult living conditions, yet still strive to better themselves, the lives of those closest to them, and even their (imagined) community. The cases lay out how an individual's identities, loyalties and social networks were (re)formed, how the migration processes were dictated by their original survival capabilities and how their positioning in society changed over time. They demonstrate the role of the family environment in an immigrant's life, their private aspirations, personal affinities, social intelligence and psychological resilience. Through the perspective of the individual, the wider social and cultural backdrop emerges clearly, regardless if through the lens of locale, economy, history, religion, ideology or ethnicity. It is hardly a coincidence that Milharčič Hladnik dedicates five of the six stories to female protagonists. The choice to explore women's migratory stories, that she follows throughout her career, speaks to the scientifically justified premise of migratory processes also being defined by gender. The focus on women's fates serves to balance out the insights on specific migration experiences, which are usually presented as masculine or gender neutral.

The tripartite structure of the book illustrates the three foundational perspectives employed in the observation of migration processes; the macro (structural and systemic), meso (community) and micro (individual) levels, which gained a strong impact in migration studies. Each of the three levels presented in its own chapter draws explanations from the other two. The authors thus chose the uniting principles of each of their syntheses without losing sight of the awareness that the subject matter of migration is so dynamic that framing it into one perspective alone would harm the interpretational options.

Even though the main focus of the book lasers in on the Slovenian ethnic territory, it also spills out across its borders as dictated by the population's migrations—as well as by the changes in political border demarcations. Each chapter provides a common thread, woven together by strong empirical support: migration processes do not only define demographic changes and the broader socio-political shifts that come with them. They also allow for the integration of spaces that the immigrants connect with their own agendas on political, economic, societal and cultural levels.

The territory of present-day Slovenia, despite being geographically small, exhibits an astounding degree of natural and cultural complexity. Within the European framework, it represents a form of cultural uniqueness, seeing how it is embedded within the four major cultural groups of modern-day Europe: Romance, Germanic, Ugric and Slavic lands. Historically, its socio-political dynamic was a turbulent one as well, making for an interesting vantage point for migration studies. It bears mentioning, of course, that the massive increase

in migrations from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century was not just limited to the studied area. The entirety of Europe and beyond set the stage for people seeking better living conditions. It happened against a backdrop of objective factors emerging in the modern era, such as the growing availability of information and technological advancements that multiplied population movements, as well as expedited them and extended their distance. Finally, this was accompanied by new service branches that sought to make money from these movements.

The importance of this book on the international level is exemplified by the fact that it is precisely this corner of Europe that at certain periods of time showed the most intense migration patterns within the entire European context. This is made all the clearer when comparative findings are put in series, particularly those in Kalc's chapter. The research efforts of three internationally acclaimed authors being available in the English language allows for a dissemination of their findings within the broader international context. Alongside an attractive historiographical narrative, illustrative maps and other forms of visual material, the stage is set for a wider readership to gain access to the research at hand.

**Urška Strle**