

AKTUALITA 1937–1938. ČESKOSLOVENSKÝ ZVUKOVÝ TYDENÍK / TSCHECHOSLOWAKISCHE TONBILDSCHAU / SLOVENSKÝ ZVUKOVÝ TYŽDENÍK

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Production of multiple language versions of films has generally been aimed at international audiences, rather than at domestic audiences made up of people who speak the language of a given version. In the attempt to create the best possible conditions for promoting a foreign language version of a film abroad, distributors, and at times competent government authorities, have adopted a variety of strategies. For example, a German language version of the British film *Atlantic* (1930, Ewald André Dupont) was sent to Czechoslovakia expecting that German would be accessible to more people. At that time, about 40% of the population in Czechoslovakia understood German. So the film was indeed accessible to more people, but the German language triggered a negative reaction that would not have been provoked by English. In addition, German versions were a way of avoiding, or at least mitigating, difficulties in the distribution of Hungarian films within Slovakia, where audiences responded with nationalist animosity to the Hungarian language. In 1938, the Ministry of Trade's *Filmový poradní sbor* (FPS, Film Advisory Board), the office responsible for the issue of import licenses, decided to give precedence to those Hungarian films that were available in a German version. In the relevant treaty with Hungary, it was settled that Czechoslovakia, which produced more films in German than Hungary, should "export all of our German language films to Hungary and import German language films of Hungarian origin in the same number that the [film production] monopoly produces, plus as many Hungarian language versions of Hungarian films as is necessary to make up the difference."¹ Therefore, under certain conditions, the language of the film was sometimes more central than was the film. Language had, and still has, its own symbolic dimension, and the fact *that one is communicating in a particular language* can at times be more important than *what one is communicating in that language*. This was especially the case in an atmosphere of high nationalist tension such as the one which undoubtedly existed in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s.

This aspect of multiple language versions forms the backdrop for the bilingual production of the Czechoslovakian film weekly, *Aktualita*. The main function of this documentary production can be summed up in three words: *news – promotion – propaganda*. If one is considering the issue of multiple language versions, *Aktualita* is a special case. The production of these films was not aimed abroad, at foreign countries, rather, it was exclusively domestic, intended for the multi-ethnic population of the Republic of Czechoslovakia.

First, some basic information about newsreels in Czechoslovakia. Newsreels produced by companies such as Fox, Paramount, Ufa and PDC dominated the Czechoslovakian market. Under a Ministry of Trade regulation, the Prague branches of

Československý zvukový týdeník

Aktualita

Historický den Slovenska
 Na sjezdu poslanců Slovenskej ľudovej strany v Žilinskej jednotnici se zástupci všech slovenských stran a vydali manifest, jímž byla ustavena slovenská autonomie

Minister pro Slovensko dr. Jozef Tiso, poslanci Sidor, Buday, Sivák a jiní na historické schůzi
 Minister dr. Tiso promluvil k veřejnosti v Žilíně

Amerika postavila největší dopravní letadlo
 První let s největším letounem světa nad mrakodrapy

Děti se radují ve stínu velkoměsta

Spuštění nového švédského křižáku

Státní žena
 Slavná americká krotitelka dravé zvěře předvádí své umění

Polský houslista a jeho devět kanárů

Československo má vzácné drahokamy
 Nalezitá českých drahokamů na vrchu Kozákové u Turnova
 Zkoušení vzácných kamenů ve výzkumném ústavě Broušení a řezání kamenů
 Šperky domácího původu jsou na trhy celého světa

Válečné lodi v bouři

Závod vyslůžilců
 V Americe uspořádali závody nejstarších automobilů

Prvo zabilil automobilů
 Čís. 42. A. — XIV. ročník

Aktualita

Historický den Slovenska
 Na sjezdu poslancov Slovenskej ľudovej strany Hlinkovej jednotnici sa zástupcovia všetkých slovenských strán a vydali manifest, ktorým sa uskutočnila slovenská autonómia

Minister pro Slovensko dr. Jozef Tiso, poslanci Sidor, dr. Buday, Sivák a iní na historickom sjezde
 Minister dr. Tiso prahovoril k verejnosti v Žiline

Amerika postavila najväčšie dopravné lietadlo
 Prvý let najväčšieho lietadla sveta nad mrakodrapmi

Nový švédsky križiak spustený na more
Deti sa radujú v tieni veľkomesta

Odvážna žena
 Slávna americká krotiteľka dravej zvere ukazuje svoje umenie

Polský virtuóz na husle s muzikálnymi kanárikmi

Československo má vzácné drahokamy
 Vrch Kozákov pri Turnova, kde sa nachádzajú české drahokamy
 Brúsenie kameňov
 Šperky domáceho pôvodu idú na trhy celého sveta

Vojenné lode v búrke

Preteký vyslůžilcov
 V Amerike usporiadali závody najstarších automobilov

Prvo vyhraden

ČESKOSLOVENSKÝ ZVUKOVÝ TÝDENÍK

these companies were required to add Czechoslovakian clips to each issue of their newsreels, corresponding to 20% of total footage. On the average, about ten copies of the newsreels of these companies were distributed over the territory of Czechoslovakia.

Among the Czech/Czechoslovakian periodicals, the only one to run continuously for a long time was *Elektajournal*, which was produced on an entrepreneurial and purely private basis from 1925, appearing from 1930 to 1937 under the title *Československý filmový týdeník* (Czechoslovakian Newsreel). Its market competitiveness was almost non-existent. Even during the sound era, it remained a silent newsreel, and it would be misleading to overrate the size of the audience reached by its two copies, circulated only in Prague, or its poor technical resources. But the name of its publisher, Karel Pečený, comes up again in the list of names of those who, on April 13, 1937, established the company registered under the name “Aktualita, komanditní společnost, Karel Pečený a spol. v Praze” (Aktualita, Limited Partnership, Karel Pečený and Co. in Prague) with the stated purpose of publishing a weekly sound newsreel. For our purposes, the participation of the state in this step is of primary interest: until this time, the government had not been in any way involved in the production and distribution of newsreels. When it did become involved, it was through the publishing firm Orbis, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a representative.² The “Československý filmový týdeník *Aktualita*” can be considered to have been a “state” newsreel in the sense that it presented the official policy of the state in a various arenas of public life. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also regularly set tasks for the film crew of *Aktualita*.³ In the 1930s,

many newsreels were already being produced under state supervision, not only in totalitarian regimes with centralized governments like those in Germany (Ufa), the Soviet Union (*Soyuzkinožurnal*) and Italy, but also in other countries, such as Austria (*Österreich in Bild und Ton*), Hungary (*Magyar Film Iroda*), and Poland (*P.A.T.*), as well as those in Romania and Bulgaria.⁴

Of course, the *Aktualita* newsreel also reflects the attitude of the state towards film propaganda in particular and towards propaganda in general. The late emergence of *Aktualita* can be put down to a general failure on the part of the Czechoslovakian government to fully recognize the possibilities that modern film propaganda had to offer. Right up until the dramatic events at the end of the 1930s, the Czechoslovakian authorities continued to hold steadfast to their conviction that a truly democratic state should not resort to the tools of propaganda, but rather, should persuade its citizens through a more rational approach. This attitude, incidentally, is documented by a brochure from as late as 1938 (!), *Propaganda v demokracii a diktaturách* (Propaganda in Democracy and Dictatorships) by Alfréd Fuchs, an official in the Press Division of the Office of the Czechoslovakian Government.

Aktualita first came out in August, 1937. At the time, fifteen copies of the Ufa newsreel, *Zvukový týdeník Ufy*, supplied from Berlin, and ten copies of the PDC *Zvukový týdeník* were in circulation in the Sudetenland.⁵ The mandatory 20% additional Czechoslovakian content was made up of harmless items relating to the country's history or geography. Nine copies of Paramount's newsreel, *Zvukový týdeník Paramountu*, and nine copies of Fox (i.e. *Fox Movietone News*) were also being circulated.

Aktualita was launched in August 1937, with 2 copies going out to 20 cinemas. The following autumn there were 10 copies (including one in German) in 250 cinemas (out of a total of 1850 cinemas), and in May, 1938, a total of 17 copies (including one in German) were in distribution. *Aktualita* reached the 25-copy mark in November, i.e., under the Second Republic, after the Munich agreement had been signed and then accepted by the Czechoslovakian government. This success therefore came after the effective separation of the Sudetenland which, among other things, resulted in the loss of 545 cinemas. A combination of several factors was responsible for this increase: the increase in nationalist sentiment among the Czech population of what remained of Czechoslovakia, the doubling of *Aktualita*, creating the A and B versions. The closing down of cinemas was also the result of the regulation making the screening of *Aktualita* mandatory and any manipulation of its content expressly illegal.⁶

In the threatening atmosphere of the country at that time, towards the end of the 1930s, interest in the official Czech film news reporting was obviously considerable. Interest in the German language version was a different matter entirely, as the disproportionate number of copies in circulation suggests. The German version of the official Czechoslovakian newsreel failed completely to gain a foothold in the Sudetenland. It came onto the scene at a time when the political situation had already progressed too far: in the border regions even Czech feature films (including German language versions) were already being boycotted by German cinemas. Whether these boycotts were due to pro-Hitler sympathy on the part of the cinema owners or to fear of violent demonstrations by the supporters of the Sudeten German Nazi politician Konrad Henlein, the final result was the same. Economic factors were also influential: cinemas were not only cultural institutions, they were also businesses that depended on audience numbers, which were, in turn, influenced not only by program selection but also

by the business' reputation and status in its community. Another aspect to consider is purely a practical one: cinemas had long-term contracts for the supply of newsreels and they didn't switch brands. We did some sample research: in the northern German city Jablonec nad Nisou (Gablonz), for example, not one of the five local cinemas switched newsreel brands at any time between August, 1937 to March, 1938. One cinema showed Ufa, another PDC, a third Paramount and the other two screened Fox. In August, 1938, production of the German edition of *Aktualita* was stopped, due to a total lack of interest from cinema owners in the German regions of the republic. By way of "substitution," *Aktualita*, as mentioned above, began to come out in two versions.

The misguided attempt of the governing Czech majority to use the film newsreel as a medium for communication with the German minority recalls the similarly inadequate exploitation of radio in this sense. Czechoslovakian radiojournal was airing regular broadcasts in German as early as 1925, but did not truly reflect the political, economic and cultural importance of the German minority in the Republic of Czechoslovakia.

We should mention at least two of the people involved in producing *Aktualita*. The editor-in-chief was the filmmaker Jan Kučera, also a noteworthy film critic and theorist with a structuralist bent. The German version of *Aktualita* was directed by Prague born Willy Haas, who had worked from 1920 to 1933 as a theatre, film, and literary critic in Berlin, where he published the famous journal *Die literarische Welt*. After Hitler came to power, the Jewish intellectual decided to return to Prague, where in April, 1934, he took over the film column in Prague's excellent German language daily, the *Prager Presse*.

Before we begin to compare the German and Czech versions of *Aktualita*, a few words about the source materials. The situation is a dismal one. Although *Aktualita* was issued every week from summer 1937 until spring 1945, only three complete issues have been preserved from the entire period. There remains also a rather large amount of individual episodes, which have been sorted and spliced together in thematic groups. No one knows when, by whom, or why the collection of episodes were put into this format, though it seems to have been done as early as the 1940s. It has made the material very difficult to work with. However, the possibility exists that someday we will be able to put some issues of *Aktualita* back together.

AKTUALITA	total number of episodes		number of preserved episodes	
	1937	1938	1937	1938
Czech edition	263	521	129	218
German edition	259	413	13	4

At any rate, all of the advertising material from *Aktualita* has been preserved, as have the texts of the commentary that were submitted to the censoring authorities (the commentary does not, however, include the transcripts of recorded speeches or interviews). So, our primary source of information consisted of written, not filmed materials. Using them, and the episodes preserved in pieces, it is possible to create a quite coherent picture of film news reporting as a whole in the years from 1937-1945.

The Czech and German editions of *Aktualita* both retained the title – *Aktualita* (Newsflash/Current News). Even in the German version, the newsreel had a Czech title, never *Aktualität*. In other respects, one can detect differences between the individual components of the two versions, some substantial and some minor, although not in

Československý zvukový týdeník

aktuAlita

KOMPLETNĚ 1157

Oslavy Antona Bernoláka v Trnavě,

za účasti ministerského předsedy dr. Hodži

●
President Roosevelt
o demokracii K

●
Zahájení výstavy „Dnešní Mánes“ K
Proslov ministra školství dr. Frankeho

VTEŘINY PŘED KAMEROU:

●
Rumunská národní hudba — Děti si hrají s draky — K
Mussoliniho syn v Hollywoodu

Autonomie Podkarpatské Rusi

●
Železné plíce proti dětské obrně K

VÁLKA V ČÍNĚ

●
Poslední snímky z Japonského vpádu K

SPORTY:

●
Concours hippiques ve Vídni K
Ženy se učí jiu-jitsu

●
Křest černochoů v moři

32

Čís. 12. — 42./XIII.

tschechoslowakische Tonbildschau



Die dritte
Jubiläumsausstellung
des Kunstvereins „Mánes“

●
Eine Repräsentant
der moderne Demokratie:
Franklin D. ROOSEVELT

●
Liane Hald in Prag 3893

●
AUGENBLICKE VOR DER KAMERA:

Rumänische Nationalmusik — Die Kinder lassen Drachen steigen —
Mussolinis Sohn in Hollywood

●
Karpathorussland wird autonom

●
Der Krieg in China:

Neueste Bilder vom japanischen Einfall in China

●
Eiserne Lungen gegen die spinale Kinderlähmung

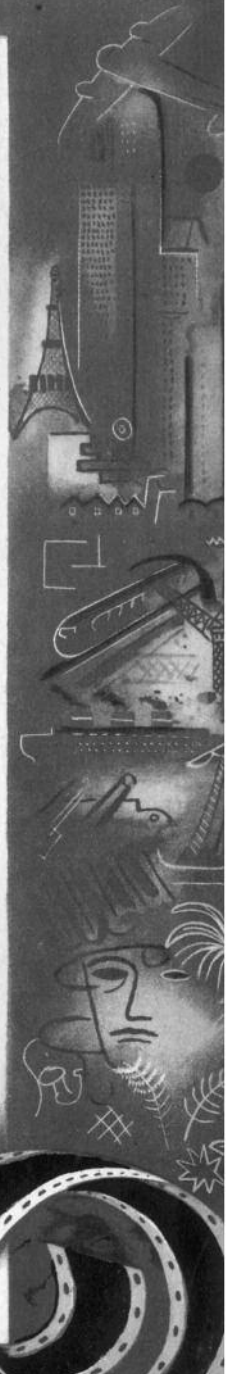
●
SPORT - AKTUALITÄTEN:

Concours hippiques in Wien
Mädchen lernen Jiu-Jitsu

●
Negertaufe im Meer

●
Fahrradkünstler aller Zeiten

●
No. 12. — 42./XIII.



every issue. The differences we have identified can be classified into five basic categories, but the absence of the actual film material makes it impossible to exclude the possibility that other categories exist.⁷

1) Change in the order of episodes.

As a rule, when ordering the different episodes, one tried to fill the first slot with an episode that was somehow significant or interesting to the target audience, and that would serve at the same time to localize the reporting.

2) Omission of an episode without a replacement.

Generally, the reasons behind such changes were, in our judgment, political in nature. Examples: no. 4/1938, episode *The President of the Republic among Students*; no. 21/1938, episode *Celebrations of the National Theatre*; no. 34/1938, episode *Do you want this?* (i.e., “Do you want our country to meet a similar fate?”), which followed an episode of the bombing of Canton.

3) Substitution of one episode for another.

a) To localize reporting.

This generally involved episodes about cultural events or sports, sometimes ones of a historical or geographical nature. Examples: no. 10/1938 – “Aktualita’s humorous sketch,” *Jára Kohout puts his son to sleep* from the Czech version was replaced in the German version with the episode, *Falkenau: Franz Heidler, Cheb’s Folk Songbird*; no. 14/1938 – the episode *Dr. h. c. Jan Bat’a* from the Czech edition was replaced in the German version with the episode *Traditional Artistic Craft in Reichenberg*.

b) To avoid undesirable political connotations.

A side effect of these changes was the emphasis of the localized character of the newsreel. Episode: no. 6/1938 – the clearly political episode *Five Years of the 3rd Reich* was replaced in the German edition with the cultural episode *On the 70th Anniversary of the Death of Adalbert Stifter*; no. 8/1938 – instead of the clearly political episode [Parliamentary] *Deputy Jaksch on Czech-German Understanding*, the German edition had a cultural episode apparently about some aspiring film starlet *The Next Film Generation: Christa Abbel*;⁸ no. 9/1938 – a episode dedicated to the Czechoslovakian Premier *Homage to Prime Minister Hodža* was replaced, in the German version, with the episode *Sudeten-German Sledding Championships on a Difficult Natural Track*.

In the above mentioned examples, the changes led to the omission of political subjects, but there were also changes in which political subject matter was added. Example: no. 4/1938 – in the place of the episode *Women’s Floor Exercises. Preparations for the 10th All-Sokol Rally*, in the German edition came *Reception of Diplomatic Corps in Berlin’s Reich Chancellery*.

In 1937, the German edition of *Aktualita* contained a total of 259 episodes, of which 32 didn’t appear in the Czech version and were acquired exclusively for the German edition (in exceptional cases from abroad). In 1938, there were 40 episodes as such, out of a total of 413.

4) Differences in commentary of an episode.

These tended to be politically motivated and in extreme cases bordered on misinterpretation.

a)

Czech version:

Od té doby stal se Adolf Hitler hlavou státu a pronesl letos v Krollově opeře vyčerpávající kritiku své pětileté vlády nad Třetí říší.

Při té příležitosti útočil nejostřeji na Anglii a jejího zahraničního ministra Antony Edena, který odstoupil.⁹

German version:

Inzwischen wurde Adolf Hitler selbst zum Staatsoberhaupt und trug dieses Jahr in der Krolloper eine Ausführliche Analyse seiner 5-jährigen Regierung vor.

Bei dieser Gelegenheit griff er England und seinem Außenminister Antony Eden an, der sein Portefeuille zurücklegte. Er sprach ferner über die Auslandsdeutschen.

b)

Czech version:

Dožínky, slavnost česko-německé spolupráce

[...]

Ministr Spina řekl: “Nejsme jenom sudetoněmeckými sedláky, jsme především občany tohoto státu.”

10.000 aktivistických Němců, kteří se zúčastnili krásné slavnosti, odmítlo nezodpovědnou politiku těch, kteří se ohlížejí za hranice tohoto státu.¹⁰

German version:

Erntefeier

[...]

Minister Dr. Spina sagte: “Wir sind nicht nur sudetendeutsche Bauern – wir sind vor allem sudetendeutsche Bürger dieses Staates.”

10.000 deutscher Bauern, die sich an der schönen Feier beteiligten, manifestieren ihren Willen zu loyaler Zusammenarbeit im Rahmen der Tschechoslowakischen Republik.

5) Various combinations of all of the preceding types.

From the differences that have been mentioned, we can conclude that the Czechoslovakian state chose to use film propaganda directed at the German minority in what was already an extremely tense situation. In the German edition of *Aktualita*, the state presented itself as one that noticed and was directly interested in the cultural, sporting, and social life of the German minority. It tried to avoid, or at least minimize, possible conflicts and potentially soothe inflamed tempers. For example, it avoided turning the political life of Sudeten Germans into subject matter, and carefully avoided truly explosive subjects in pictorial news reporting. In those pre-television times, these strategies had the character of a delayed pictorial illustration.

Aktualita began to be produced and distributed in the Slovakian edition in October,

1938. This was another misguided attempt to use Czechoslovakian film propaganda to help rescue the republic, this time by trying to strengthen the identification of the Slovakian population with the Czechoslovakian state instead of limiting its focus to Czechs. Thus, *Aktualita* was potentially designed to work counter to the efforts of Slovakian politicians to achieve autonomy. Once again, it declared that the state was interested in Slovakia, in its cultural life, and this time, also in its political life. Only three issues were produced, probably edited by the Slovakian journalist Ivan Kovačević. Publishing of the Slovakian version of *Aktualita* was stopped, not only due to competition from the Slovakian edition of Ufa, but also because of the interest clearly articulated by the newly established Slovakian government to have a Slovakian cinema that was far from the Czech. This was afterwards carried out at a legislative level. The case of Slovakia is an interesting example in Europe of the late emergence of a national cinema by order of the state.

- 1 Excerpt from the 137th meeting of the FPS, January 20, 1938, p. 9, Praha, Státní ústřední archiv v Praze (State Central Archives in Prague), Ministerstvo průmyslu, obchodu a živností (Ministry of Industry and Trade), Filmový poradní sbor (Film Advisory Board), box 2345.
- 2 Many years later one of the instigators of the *Aktualita* project would recall that the negotiations about starting the newsreel were complex and lengthy (beginning in February, 1936) and that the unreserved support of President Edvard Beneš contributed to their success.
- 3 See Archiv ministerstva zahraničních věcí (Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs), III. sekce (III. Division), box 403.
- 4 Jan Kučera, among others, mentions this, in his broadcast lecture of *Filmové žurnály*, broadcast September 11, 1935 on Radiojournal (headed *Jak se dělají filmové žurnály*). See also Jan Kučera, "Filmové žurnály," *Illuminace*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (1990), pp. 83-88.
- 5 Both were published in a German version, though up to now we don't know what proportion of the number of distributed copies were accounted to each of them. We hope that future archival research will be able to answer this question. From 1938, a Slovakian version of the Ufa newsreel was also published.
- 6 We have drawn this information from the available literature, as yet we have no archival source to corroborate it.
- 7 One could hypothesize, for example, that different musical accompaniment was used for the same episode, or certain shots were left out of a given episode, or put in a different order.
- 8 Wenzel Jaksch was a pro-Czechoslovakian, anti-Hiter deputy to the Czechoslovakian Parliament for the German Social Democracy's party.
- 9 Translator's note: "Since then, Adolf Hitler has become the head of state and this year at the Kroll Opera he gave an *exhaustive critique* of his five-year rule of the Third Reich. On this occasion his *sharpest* attack was directed to England and its foreign minister, Anthony Eden, who has stepped down."
- 10 Translator's note: "Harvest Celebration, a celebration of Czech-German cooperation. [...] Minister Spina said: 'We are not only Sudeten German farmers, we are above all citizens of this state.'
10 000 German activists who took part in the merry celebration rejected the irresponsible politics of those who are looking beyond the borders of this state. "