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This study examines how fabricated historical narratives and slow memory processes can shape nation-building efforts. We propose an expansion of Wüstenberg's (2023) slow memory framework, suggesting that the gradual accumulation of positive pseudohistorical accounts significantly influences collective remembrance. These processes cultivate what we term 'slow joy' – the gradual accumulation of positive emotions through sustained engagement with mythologized narratives of national greatness. Employing rhetoric performative discourse analysis, we explore performative actions and communication surrounding the medieval King Svätopluk I and the controversy over his statue erected at Bratislava Castle in 2010 to uncover how Slovak cultural organisations and governmental entities interweave historical facts with nationalistic lore for nation-building endeavours. Our findings reveal that these curated historical accounts, marked by a cherry-picked chronology and the elevation of particular historical icons like Svätopluk I, construct a continuous national identity with ancient origins. This paper contributes to memory studies by demonstrating the interaction of pseudohistory and slow memory in national identity formation, offering insights applicable beyond the Slovak context.

Keywords: national identity, pseudohistory, slow memory, discourse analysis, Slovakia, Matica slovenská

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Introduction

In the process of nation-building, the interaction between memory and history plays a crucial role in shaping national identity. This paper explores how pseudohistorical narratives, underpinned by the concept of slow memory, influence national identity construction. By examining pseudohistorical articulations of King Svätopluk I (hereafter Svätopluk) and the controversy over the statue of him erected at Bratislava castle in 2010, we uncover how pseudohistory and slow memory can articulate and sustain a specific version of national identity. Our theoretical framework combines insights from memory studies and discourse analysis, drawing particularly on the concept of slow memory: a mnemonic focus on the gradual and often subtle processes that alter the cultural and political fabric of a society (Wüstenberg, 2023). We propose that studying pseudohistory, often laden with conspiratorial (Pates, 2023), exclusionary (Išpanović, 2022), and politically ambitious undertones, can benefit from a slow memory approach, as it recognizes the often un-sited or multi-sited past events that memory studies often ignores (Wüstenberg, 2023: 62). The medieval figure Svätopluk illustrates these insights, having played a pivotal role in Slovak national discourse since the 19th century, blending history with national myths.

Collective Memory and National Identity: From Invented Traditions to Mythscapes

Collective memory, defined broadly following Halbwachs (2020) as a mutable form of the past that can be utilised in the present to affect the future, has undeniable power in creating, sustaining, and mobilising national identity (e.g. Molden, 2016). This connection between memory and identity is fundamental to nation-building, as shared remembrances provide a sense of common history and shared destiny that binds individuals into a collective (Malinova, 2021). The power of collective memory in shaping national identity lies in its ability to create a shared understanding of the past that resonates with and reinforces a group's present identity and future aspirations (Liu, Hilton, 2005). This process involves selecting, interpreting, and reimagining historical events and figures in ways that align with the nation's self-conception. As such, collective memory serves not just as a repository of past events, but as an active force in ongoing nation-building efforts and political actions (Wang, 2018).

In constructing national identities, scholars have emphasised the importance of 'national' elements pulled from an often mythical past. 'Invented traditions' (Hobsbawm, 2012: 1), for example, articulate a connection or continuity with a suitable, often distant past, although they may be recent creations. A 'governing myth' or hegemonic national narrative can emerge from a 'mythscape' (Bell, 2003), a discursive realm in which interplay and contestations between myths and living memories constantly

take place. Here, mnemonic interpretations of recent events feed into the national myths that emerge from the mythscape. Barthesian myths as 'pre-constituted discursive elements', then, 'help shape, filter and make sense of experience' (Bell, 2003: 72), thereby affecting memories. While we follow Halbwachs' broader conception of collective memory, Bell's distinction between collective memory, myth, and the 'governing myth', opens a discussion of what feeds into collective memory, including non-historical narratives.

Slovakia is a productive case study for examining nation-building processes. As a young nation that gained independence in 1993 following Czechoslovakia's dissolution, Slovakia has faced challenges in establishing and legitimising its national identity, and its political system is polarised and subject to tribalistic politics (Hartikainen, Szebeni, 2024). These challenges stem partly from Slovakia's complex history and limited experience as an independent political entity before the 20th century (Kirschbaum, 2005). Slovakia has mostly existed within larger political formations, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Czechoslovakia (Odlerová, Hýllová, 2019). Nations with no prior claim to independent statehood – such as Slovakia – find it more difficult to justify their aspirations for sovereignty (Hroch, 1993). The construction and promotion of historical narratives that support claims to nationhood and independence become crucial, often involving selectively interpreting the past and valorising certain historical figures and events (Malinova, 2021).

Within this complex landscape of memory and identity formation, the scientific and cultural organisation Matica slovenská (Matica) has played an important role in articulating Slovak history and thus shaping Slovak national identity since its founding in 1863. Matica has always been tied to the Slovak national movement, positioning itself as both a research institution and guardian of national memory (Priečko, 2015). Through numerous public-facing activities, it actively participates in constructing and disseminating Slovak national narratives (Klingová, 2017). Matica frames itself as both the 'intellectual property of the Slovak nation' (Matica slovenská, 2015) and a guardian of national identity, poised to defend it against any threats (e.g. Matica slovenská, 2023a). Matica can thus articulate any criticism of its historical narratives or actions as attacks on the Slovak nation itself. Matica's role reflects a broader regional pattern where cultural institutions actively shape national narratives. Across Eastern Europe, organisations from National Memory Institutes (Dujisin, 2024) to museums like Hungary's House of Terror (Laczó, 2022) construct historical memory through competing interpretations of both medieval and modern history. In Belarus (Rudling, 2014) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sokol, 2014), different institutions advance rival readings of mediaeval history to serve present nation-building needs.

Pseudohistory and Slow Memory: New Perspectives on Nation-Building

The relationship between collective memory and national identity formation involves complex interactions between various narrative forms including history, myth, and what we term pseudohistory. Rather than treating these as distinct categories, we examine how they intersect and inform each other, particularly in processes of nation-building. Lorenz (2008) highlights how both historical narratives and myths serve fundamental roles in constructing national identities, while others demonstrate historiography's inherent engagement with rhetorical and literary techniques (e.g. Řídký, 2019). Romantic thinkers even posited that myths might capture the essence of peoples and nations more profoundly than conventional historical analysis (Burke, 2012). Scholars (e.g. Berger, 2009) have challenged the traditional distinction between group-specific memory and universal history, showing how collective memory and historical writing are fundamentally interlinked. Historical accounts from both academic institutions and cultural organisations shape societal memory, influencing which past interpretations persist (Mukherjee, Adams, Molina, 2018). Within this landscape of historical narrative forms, we focus on what we term pseudohistory and its distinct role in nation-building processes.

We understand pseudohistory as a narrative construct that departs from currently accepted standards of historical scholarship (Välimäki, 2022), often serving present-day ideologies or political needs (Todorovic, 2019). However, what constitutes "proper" historical research itself has evolved over time, shaped by changing epistemological frameworks and institutional authorities. The privileging of certain forms of knowledge production over others reflects broader historical shifts in how societies establish and validate truth claims (Adams, Osman, Bechlivanidis, Meder, 2023). In other words, accepted historical scholarship in the past may be pseudohistorical now, reflecting the historically contingent nature of authoritative knowledge itself. The relationship between myth and pseudohistory is complex; while they may share similar content and forms, they differ in terms of the intent behind their propagation, the claims made about their veracity, and the way they are articulated (Fritze, 2022: 19–21). The case of King Arthur shows this dynamic: as a myth, King Arthur has fascinated generations of readers with myriad retellings of his story, and the character even helped articulate the British national identity in the 19th century (Barczewski, 2000). Contemporary pseudohistorical treatments, found on social media (e.g. the Facebook group "KING ARTHUR: MAN AND MYTH") and in published material (e.g. Phillips, 2016), however, make specific claims about Arthur's historical existence, often using alleged material evidence. Rather than dismissing these narratives as merely 'junk knowledge' (see e.g., Fritze, 2022: 14) we examine how they function within broader systems of meaning-making and identity formation. By shifting focus from the plausibility of pseudohistorical claims to their roles in cultural, national, and political discourse, we aim to uncover

the deeper implications these narratives hold for identity formation through collective memory.

To examine how pseudohistorical narratives function in identity formation, we can look to contemporary uses of medieval history in various right-wing milieu (e.g. Koch, 2017; Välimäki, Aali, 2022). 'Medieval history' covers a vast time period, and its characters and events are simultaneously well-trodden by historians, well represented in popular culture, and often misunderstood by the general public (e.g., Millar, Costa Lopez, 2021), so it provides plenty of options for political actors to pluck something out of its temporal context and recast a narrative around it for political aims. Certain White Supremacists, for example, use a pseudohistorical imaginary of the Knights Templar to cast themselves as the proud heirs of a noble tradition and grant themselves the responsibility to protect the future against 'undeserving' groups (Millar, Costa Lopez, 2021). The narrative can also be completely fabricated, like the Ancient Finnish Kings conspiracy theory (Välimäki, Aali, 2022), which claims that local kings ruled what is now Finland before Sweden took over and covered up their existence for centuries. The alleged rulers' names or dates in power are unimportant in this narrative, as are the borders of their kingdoms. Still, right-wing nationalist groups use it to justify anti-immigrant and other exclusionary sentiments. While the trauma of losing the land and resentment towards those said to have taken it is important here, pride in the ancient Finnish kingdom also emerges.

Examining pseudohistorical narratives through Wüstenberg's (2023) concept of slow memory offers valuable insights into nation-building processes. Slow memory shifts attention 'from "eventful" and "sited" pasts to those that are slow moving' (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60). It opens new avenues for and perspectives on remembrance and methods for considering the past and what from it stands out in the present. In other words, a slow memory approach sidesteps the singular events and individuals or groups that memory studies has devoted its focus to and instead focuses on slower moving past processes that lack bases in specific places or times. We argue that pseudohistorical articulations fit into this framework, as they tend to be more focused on the broad strokes of their past narratives, pulling from them the elements deemed relevant and leaving out the historical particularities that do not fit the desired aims in the present. The White Supremacists romanticising the Knights Templar (Millar, Costa Lopez, 2021) are not interested in the events or particular heroes from the historical record, but rather in the broad strokes of the story that, to them, provides a basis for their self-articulation as responsible (and superior) heirs of a proud lineage. While pseudohistories may emphasise names and dates, these themselves are evidence of a long process. They tend to reflect not historical findings on these individuals or events, but rather many years – often many centuries – of mythologising, legendarising, and other mnemonic processes that have granted the individual or event in question a particular interpretation that makes them or it useful for the pseudohistorical narrative in the present.

While Wüstenberg builds on Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" – such as the long-lasting and ongoing structures of White Supremacy or the dismantling of welfare

states – to examine traumatic pasts, we propose that pseudohistory operates through what we term 'slow joy': the gradual accumulation of positive emotional investments in particular historical narratives. Unlike the acute euphoria of nationalistic triumphs or acute trauma from national defeats, we argue that this 'slow joy' arises over time, seeping into the collective consciousness through repeated exposure to glorified, and, here, pseudohistorical accounts. This process operates through 'sticky affects' (Ahmed, 2021): emotions that accumulate force through repetition and circulation of particular narratives. These emotional investments in specific versions of the past or certain narrative frameworks surrounding past events (Noordenbos, 2022) become embedded in social practices and collective meaning-making, shaping how communities construct and maintain their understanding of history on an affective basis.

This process shares characteristics with nostalgia's role in collective identity formation, where idealised past narratives create continuity and self-esteem for social groups (Sedikides, Wildschut, 2018). Like how memorials commemorate past trauma, promoters of joyful pseudohistories claim that their nation (or social group) should be celebrated or raised up as an act of memorialising the pseudohistorical account. Pseudohistories tend to be broadly or multi-sited in both spatial and temporal terms, their believability as history contingent on vagueness – as the Finnish Kings narrative exemplifies. Their power lies in how they create recursive temporal relationships: narratives articulated in the present construct new understandings of the past, which in turn legitimise present and future national identities. While trauma's role in building group cohesion is extensively documented (e.g., Alexander, 2004; Wlodarczyk et al., 2016) and Wüstenberg's (2023) slow memory framework emphasises this aspect, we argue that the 'slow joy' emerging from pseudohistorical narratives deserves equal analytical attention.

Examining Narratives surrounding Svätopluk: A Rhetoric-Performative Approach

Our analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of rhetoric performative discourse analysis (Palonen, 2018; Hartikainen, 2023), which is based in Laclaudian discourse analysis (Laclau, Mouffe, 1985). This analytical framework allows us to examine how performative acts create meaning – in this case, how Matica and other actors constructed and perpetuated a specific version of Slovak national identity through their discussions and interventions in the 2010 Svätopluk statue controversy and related mnemonic practices. Taking the statue controversy as our entry point, we traced the surrounding public discourse through Matica's publications, statements, and commemorative activities, as well as media coverage and responses from other actors. Rather than attempting a comprehensive content analysis, we focused on identifying key moments and articulations that show how pseudohistorical narratives about Svätopluk were constructed and contested. This approach aligns with rhetoric

performative analysis's emphasis on examining how meaning emerges through public performances and debates.

We analysed these discursive interventions through three main analytical lenses:

1. Articulations of history: How historical elements were selected and combined to construct narratives serving present needs,
2. "Slow" treatment of the past: how Svätopluk centres in articulations of a broadly sited, often joyful past,
3. Identity Construction: How these narratives contribute to Slovak national identity through selective historiography.

We chose this case study due to medieval figures' particular salience in pseudohistorical narratives and Svätopluk's prominent position in Slovak memory culture. The statue controversy provides a focused moment where competing interpretations of history became explicitly visible in public discourse.

The Medieval Slovak Hero: Svätopluk I

Before examining the statue controversy itself, it is important to understand how Svätopluk is positioned in Slovak memory culture, particularly through Matica's discourses. Matica devotes less attention to pre-modern history, but certain medieval entities, like the 9th century West Slavic state of Great Moravia, do appear to justify the claim that '40 generations of Slovaks' (Hlas Matice Slovenskej, 2023c) have lived on the same territory. Matica has dedicated much of its focus here to Svätopluk, Great Moravia's most powerful leader (871–894). While historical sources outline his reign (e.g. Kirschbaum, 2005; Bowlus, 1995), legendary treatments of him have proliferated. Slovak intellectuals in the 18th and 19th centuries mobilised these positive, legendary articulations of him to help develop Slovak national identity and historical consciousness (Homza et al., 2013). The multiplicity of myths surrounding Svätopluk – and the relative dearth of historical sources directly referencing him – makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Matica has nonetheless articulated him as an important figure from a specifically Slovak past in the form of numerous articles about him and his kingdom, school history teaching material (Gešper, Durec, 2023) about him, and even an annual school artistic competition called 'Svätopluk's kingdom come back to life' (Matica slovenská, 2023b).

Despite the known dates assigned to Svätopluk's rule, we argue that a slow memory approach offers a more nuanced understanding of his importance. Svätopluk is literally un-sited as a historical figure, in that the boundaries of his kingdom remain unknown (e.g. König, 2017), yet the Matica material portrays Great Moravia as a direct ancestor to the Slovak state. He is also un-sited in a more figurative sense; Matica articulates him as a powerful leader of a direct precursor to the Slovak nation, despite his lack of

connection with anything Slovak as such, as the concept of "Slovakness" would not exist for nearly another millennium. We can also point to Svätopluk and Great Moravia as a source of 'slow joy'. The Matica material considers him and his kingdom broadly, looking to not only his dates in power but also the societal changes and development in the area that this 'first Slovak state' sparked (Mulík, 2019). The sense of reclaimed national pride and joy emerges in claims that traces in the Hungarian language (Mulík, 2019) or on monuments prove Slovaks' influence on neighbouring states (Gešper, Durec, 2023). In this articulation, Svätopluk began a process that continues to the present, allowing national pride to emerge from long-term success rather than just his reign. As a medieval Slovak hero, Svätopluk has been the inspiration for numerous cultural pieces, such as poems or operas, and he has featured in school curricula, where his legend serves as a morality tale, educating generations of youth on how to be a good Slovak citizen (Otčenášková, 2020).

Svätopluk in the Slovak Public Space

A critical moment in Svätopluk's modern commemoration occurred in 2010, when then prime minister Robert Fico announced a plan to erect a Svätopluk statue at Bratislava castle. The project began in March 2010, when Fico and his allies established the civic association Svätopluk aiming to collect funds to construct the statue. The organisation argued that this step was in line with the 'support and development of historical, cultural and societal values related to Slovak statehood' (Jakubíková, 2010). This articulation of Svätopluk as direct ancestor to both the Slovak nation and state exemplifies our conception of pseudohistory, as it relies on a vague and un-sited articulation of his empire, while ignoring the lack of historical continuity between Great Moravia and modern Slovakia. The government further politicised this historical pride by unveiling the statue, with elaborate historical-themed rituals, days before the 2010 Parliamentary elections (Burzova, 2012).

After the unveiling, historians criticised, among other things, the statue's inscription presenting Svätopluk as the 'king of Old Slovaks' (Balogh, 2010). This inscription exemplifies pseudohistory in action by presenting an unattested version of the past as historical fact, on a state-funded monument. While Svätopluk did exist, the concept of "Old Slovaks" is a modern construction; this reveals how the statue creates multiple temporal layers, projecting current national identity backwards while using this fabricated past to legitimate present-day Slovak identity. This tension became visible in the public response, with the far-right Slovak Community (Pospolitosť) announcing a pilgrimage to celebrate Svätopluk's memory (Jakubíková, 2010). Following the criticism, the new government under prime minister Iveta Radičová appointed a commission to assess the statue. Matica strongly opposed this move, claiming that removing the statue would be a 'barbaric act' that would 'traumatise and humiliate' a 'cultured nation' (Nový Čas, 2010).

When the commission recommended relocating the statue due to its historically inaccurate inscription, Matica's counter-statement argued that such criticism breached the constitution's obligation to protect 'political and cultural heritage' (Weblog Slovenská pospolitosť, 2010). They defended "Old Slovaks" as a legitimate historical term, suggesting that opposing it promoted 'terminology forced upon the Slovak nations in times of unfreedom' (Ibid.). This response exemplifies how pseudohistorical narratives operate: Matica positioned their mythologized version of Svätopluk as authentic Slovak history, framing challenges to this narrative as attacks on Slovak statehood itself. By casting historical critique as national betrayal, they elevated their pseudohistorical articulation above scholarly historical work, linking critics with past oppressors of Slovak identity.

The controversy ended with a compromise: the statue would stay with minor adjustments, including removing the 'King of Old Slovaks' inscription. Matica indicated its displeasure by commissioning a postcard showing the statue in its original form to be sold at Bratislava castle (Kováč, 2012) and publishing a book about the controversy, *The Statue of King Svätopluk at Bratislava Castle* (Machala, Kučera, 2012). These material artefacts demonstrate how 'slow joy' operates through culture and repetitive practices, gradually sedimenting emotional attachments to particular historical interpretations into everyday life. Unlike immediate reactions to historical events, this slow accumulation of pride through mundane objects and regular encounters with the statue creates a durable emotional investment in specific versions of the past through routine exposure. The book and postcards continue the process of slow memory work, not only memorialising Svätopluk but also validating Matica's fight to have their pseudohistorical narrative recognized as legitimate history. These layered temporal articulations – from medieval king to contested statue to commemorative publications – demonstrate how pseudohistorical narratives become embedded in national identity through successive acts of memorialisation, each layer validating and reinforcing the previous ones.

Conclusion

This paper has explored pseudohistory and slow memory through the case of the Svätopluk statue controversy in Slovakia. By expanding Wüstenberg's slow memory framework to include the gradual accumulation of positive pseudohistorical accounts, we have demonstrated how these narratives construct a specific take on history and Slovak identity through 'slow joy' that reinforces a specific vision of Slovak nationhood, affectively charged with a sense of pride. The controversy further illustrates how cultural institutions and state actors can legitimise pseudohistorical accounts that project modern national identities onto the medieval past, even in the face of scholarly criticism. Our analysis contributes to understanding how pseudohistorical narratives become embedded in collective memory through material culture and institutional

practices. The concept of 'slow joy' highlights how positive emotional investments in mythologised pasts can be as powerful in shaping national identity as the 'slow violence' of historical trauma. As debates over national identity and historical interpretation continue to intensify in many parts of the world, it is crucial to recognize the subtle and often overlooked processes through which these narratives take hold and shape public discourse. By shedding light on these processes, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how nations construct and negotiate their collective identities, and the role that pseudohistory legitimised by cultural and state authorities can play in these ongoing struggles over the meaning of the past.

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