

Vuk Karadžić and the Russians

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The mutual cultural relations between Russia and the South Slavs, which had existed since the Middle Ages, underwent a sharp upswing as the consciousness of Slavic unity began to take on a more concrete form, and reached greater and greater dimensions in the 19th century, especially in the age of Romanticism.

As a result of the founding of Chairs of Slavic Philology at Charkov, St. Petersburg and Moscow, more and more Russian scholars came to the West in order to inform themselves about the conditions of Slavic Studies. The path upon which the pioneers of Russian Slavic Philology, Osyp Bodjans'kyj, professor in Moscow, Petr Ivanovič Preis, professor in Petersburg, the Moscow historian Michail Petrovič Pogodin, the Charkow Slavic scholar and ethnologist Izmail Ivanovič Sreznevskij among others, set out, led either by way of Breslau, where since 1842 the Czech poet František Ladislav Čelakovský had served as professor for „Slavic language and literature“: or directly to Prague, the most important center for Slavic studies in the first half of the 19th century (one recalls names such as Josef Dobrovský, Josef Jungmann, Pavel Josef Safařík, František Palacký or the famous-infamous imposter Václav Hanka): and from there to Vienna, the metropolis of the Habsburg conglomeration of peoples.

Wherever the Russian scholars stayed, they came into direct or indirect contact with the linguistic reformer and creator of the modern Serbian literary language, Vuk Stefanovič Karadžić, whose collections of folk songs had practically conquered all of Europe.

His relations with Russia will be the main theme of this paper. Born in 1787, Vuk Karadžić, who died in January of 1864, emigrated to Austria in 1813 after the collapse of the first Serbian Uprisal against the Turks, in which he served as a clerk. He spent much of his time in Vienna, and it was there that he was inspired by the romantic ideas and influenced by the teaching of Jernej Kopitar, the Slovenian scholar and writer who worked as censor and librarian for the Austrian government. Believing that the only genuine living language is the language of the common people, Vuk wrote the first

grammar of the Serbian language, modelled on the speech of the common people, which appeared in 1814. The first edition of his Serbian dictionary followed in 1818, containing some 26,000 words with copious explanations.

As a matter of fact, the purest tradition of the Serbo-Croatian language was preserved throughout historical times in the famous folk songs and folk tales which were handed down orally but not systematically recorded until Vuk Karadžić undertook this task. But the Serbian literary language of the previous periods was never built up on this tradition; it was a Serbian form of Church Slavonic. Later in the 18th century the religious persecution under Empress Maria Theresa caused the Serbs under her rule to look to Russia for salvation. The influence of the Russian teachers sent out to help them brought about the strong admixture of Russian Church Slavonic with the literary language of the time, and produced the terrible hybrid „Slavjanoserbski“ language of the 18th century.

Thus, in promoting his language reform Vuk Karadžić had to combat the ecclesiastical literary traditions which were very strong even during his time. Moreover, his position was aggravated by the fact that in combatting the Russian influence on his language, he seemed to be combatting the only political power that was prepared to support his people during the persecution under Austria and Turkey.

After these short introductory remarks in which I have tried to outline the linguistic problems at the beginning of Vuk's activity, we can pass over to his contacts with the Russians. It seems that as early as 1815 Vuk had the intention of going to Russia in order to obtain backing and material support for his project, but he had to remain in Vienna because of his literary involvements. He tried to get some aid for the publication of his Dictionary from the Russian ambassador to Austria, Count Golovkin, but he was refused and referred to the Austrian authorities. Not until December of 1818, was he able to start his journey to Russia, which was to last almost the months. He travelled via Cracow, Warsaw, Vilna, and Pskov to St. Petersburg where he stayed three months (from February 25th to May 25th, 1819). Subsequently he also visited Novgorod, Tver, Moscow (for 17 days), Tula, and Kiev, and returned to Vienna via Moldavia, Valachia and Banat. During his stay in Russia, Vuk took the opportunity of noting phonetically „some Russian folk songs as sung to me by Russian peasant women and girls in the Orel pro-

vince" as he wrote in a letter to Kopitar. He added that his phonetical transcription might be the first one undertaken. Vuk's trip to Russia took place at a very propitious moment, since at this time the Russian diplomatic representative became concerned with the Serbian interests within the Ottoman Empire. Everywhere on his journey Vuk was warmly welcomed, and he made the acquaintance of a number of prominent personalities in Russian scientific and literary life who ultimately helped him in the realisation of his plans. In St. Petersburg he met Admiral Šiškov, the literary benefactor Rumjancev, Aleksandr Ivanovič Turgenev, a high ranking official in the Russian Ministry of Education, the scholars of Slavic Philology Adelung and Petr Koeppen, and the poets Karamzin and Žukovskij. In Moscow Vuk became acquainted with the poet Dmitriev, the linguist Kalajdovič, and the writer Malinovskij.

Vuk came to Russia as the already well-known author of his Dictionary and Grammar, and the first volume of the collection of Serbian folk songs also appeared at that time. In a letter to his friend, the Serbian poet Mušicki, he wrote, „The Dictionary ushered me into the high society of counts, princes, generals, and ministers“.

In Russia until then it was not known that the Slaveno-Serpski was not the colloquial Serbian language, and so Vuk, or rather his folk songs collections, and his Dictionary, showed them the truth. It is quite possible that the conservative Admiral Šiškov was not enthusiastic about Vuk's new orthography, but in his position as President of the Russian Academy of Sciences he thought it advisable to cultivate Vuk's friendship due to the esteem for his work held by prominent personalities throughout the world. Vuk visited him several times in his office where Šiškov hinted that the Imperial Academy might grant him financial aid.

In regard to this state of affairs it is no wonder that the Russian literary reviews of the time praised Vuk's achievements. His new friend Koeppen (Keppen) said in an article published in „Trudy svobodnogo občestva ljubitelej ruskoj slovesnosti“, „Vuk's dictionary is the best reader of the common language that Serbs ever had, and therefore every Russian school and every Russian University should have it in its library“.

Defending Vuk against the attacks made by the leader of the Serbian conservative party, the Metropolitan Stratimirović, Keppen rejected the Hybrid Slaveno-Serbski, and took Vuk's in his struggle for the introduction of the spoken language into Serbian literature.

In 1825 the journal „Severnie Cveti“ published the first translation of South Slavic folk poetry derived from Vuk's collection. The translator was A. Ch. Vostokov. He continued his translations in the same periodical in 1826 and 1827, supplementing them with his comments on the style and measure of Serbo-Croatian folk poems. At about the same time N. A. Polevoj made the following statement in volume 13 of the „Moskooskij Telegraf“: „in reading Serbian folk poems, we can find in them all the original beauty of the national spirit of creation. We would be happy if some of our Russian men of letters would undertake a comprehensive translation of South Slavic folk poems.“ In addition Polevoj also made an appeal to initiate work on the collecting of Russian folklore: „For does not the accomplishment of the Serbian literary scholar in collecting the folk poetry of his country remind us of the fact that nobody so far has ventured to collect Russian folk treasures, and we have done nothing to preclude the gradual disappearance of ancient Russian folk songs among our people.“

Later on the Russians published some more comprehensive studies concerned with South Slavic folk poetry. Thus, for instance, in 1835 the review „Teleskop“ published Jurij Venelin's study „On the Character of the folk poems of the Transdanubian Slavs“, later published as a separate book, which was reviewed by the well-known literary critic V. G. Belinskij as „containing many rich factually justified ideas“.

There are several other references from Russian periodicals that could be mentioned, but let us return to the facts of Vuk's visit to Russia and the main reasons of his trip. He went there 1) to arrange with the Russian Biblical Society for the translation of the New Testament into modern Serbian, 2) to obtain support for carrying on investigations in the Old Serbian Monasteries, and finally 3) to obtain a regular salary from the Russian Academy. He succeeded in reaching all these goals in the course of time. From a study of the large correspondence which Vuk carried on with Russian scholars at that time one gets the impressions that his visit to Russia contributed also to the final victory of the reformers of the Russian language in literature, represented by Karamzin, Žukovskij, Dmitriev and others.

As a result of Vuk's visit, his reputation in Russia grew to such an extent that 20 years later the Russian professors who were designated for the newly established chairs of Slavic Philology went to

Vienna to see Vuk, and talked with him about specific philological problems.

The first person to be visited by Pogodin, in 1835 and 1839, was Vuk, whom he already knew from a copy of the almanac „Danica“, given to him by Koeppen. The extent to which Pogodin esteemed Vuk and wished to help him can be seen from the fact that he attempted to recruit subscribers for the third volume of Vuk's Folk-songs, and he also nominated Vuk as a member of the „Obščestvo ljubitelej ruskoj slovesnosti“.

In 1840 Sreznevskij stayed nearly six months in Vienna and visited Vuk every day, helping him to edit the second and third volume of his Serbian folk songs. There, under Vuk's leadership, he was introduced to the subtle problems of the Slavic philology, and, as he said himself in his letters to his parents, he was taught a great deal by Vuk, whom he called tenderly „Volčok“. Sreznevskij also wrote Vuk's first biography, based on data given by Vuk himself, and printed it in the „Moskovskij sbornik“ in 1876 he completed the biography by an account of the 1842 to 1864 period: 1864 being the year of Vuk's death. In autumn 1839 the president of the school district of Odessa Dim. Maks. Knjažević and the Russian geographer and ethnographer, Nikolaj Ivanovič Nadeždin, undertook a journey to Vienna. In January 1841, they met Bodjan'kyj, Preis and Sreznevskij at Vuk's house. They all agree that Vuk should accompany them on their scientific trip through the South Slavic countries.

But only Nadeždin and Vuk carried out their projected trip that year, while Sreznevskij went alone to collect folk songs in Slovenia and Croatia. A second trip to the Balkans which was planned for 1848 was thwarted by the Revolution. Two years later (1850) Nadeždin, however, was still supporting the idea that Vuk should be elected a member of the Russian Geographic Society.

In conclusion, an attempt to place Russian interests in Vuk Karadžić in the framework of the 19th century Russo-Serbian cultural and political relations seems pertinent. Ever since the 18th century, the Serbs had considered Russia their friend and supporter. It was, therefore, not unnatural that the ideas of the Panslavs, directed as they were to propagating Russian interest in the Balkans, should be an object of special interest to the Serbs. The idea of Slav unity had already reached the Serbs through the Czech Panslav movement which differed in many ways. The idea of the Russian Panslavs was the union of all the Slavs in one Slavonic civilisation

under Russian leadership as expressed in 1869 by Danilevskij in his book „Rossija i Evropa“. The first step towards this end was cultural unity which could be attained only through a uniform literary language-Russian. While Russian Panslav opinions had thus crystallised, Serbia and the Serbian intelligentsia had moved away from their original dependent attitude to Russia which characterised the first decades of the 19th century. Serbian Russo-philism was always based upon purely Serbian interests and purely Serbian ideas of what Russia's historical duty was and what form Slavic cultural reciprocity should take. A good illustration of the independent attitude of the Serbian intelligentsia towards Russian Panslavism is the fact that the campaign of the Russian Panslavs to make Russian the common literary language of the Slavs gained no supporters among the many Serbs who were otherwise pro-Russian. It is also an example of how Russian Panslavism took little account of the development of culture in other Slavic nations. To suggest that the Serbs, after almost 50 years of struggle for the setting up of their own literary language, should abandon it in favour of Russian was the height of folly. Moreover, it confronted the Serbs with a remarkable change in the direction of Russian influence. In the early years of his struggle for linguistic reform Vuk had the support of the Russians against the attacks of the majority of the Serbian intelligentsia. However, in the 60's Russians such as Hilferding and then Platon Kulakovskij attacked Vuk's reforms as betrayal of Slavdom at a time when they had become a symbol of Serbian national and cultural independence.

Notes

¹⁾ This article is a slight revised version of a paper read at the meeting of the SaMLA in New Orleans on 17. October, 1964.

²⁾ Bibliography

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