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Uniting the Slavs: Pan- and Other 'Slavisms' until World War I

Written by Michel De Dobbeleer


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Dominating Eastern and East-Central Europe from the second half of the first millennium AD onwards, the Slavs in the course of their long history have several times tried to (partially) form political and/or cultural unities. Especially during the nineteenth century (the age of Romanticism and national 'revivals') the ethnic characteristic of 'being a Slav' was put forward, both sincerely and rhetorically, as the main principle for movements such as Central/Eastern Europe-wide Pan-Slavism and Russian Slavophilia.

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The gist of the Pan-Slavic ('All-Slavic') idea/ideology is that it seeks to unite peoples on the basis of their supposed ethnic bonds, that is actually, on the fact that they speak languages from the same – here Indo-European – branch: that of the Slavic languages. However, whereas the languages *within* the West Slavic (mainly Polish and Czech), South Slavic (mainly Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian and Bulgarian) and East Slavic (mainly Russian and Ukrainian) subbranches are to a reasonable extent mutually understandable, this is hardly the case *across* these subbranches (esp. between West and South Slavs), at least since the last thousand or so years.

As regards uniting the Slavs across their language barriers, the first names that come to mind are most probably those of the famous ninth-century brothers, Sts Cyril and Methodius, who devised an alphabet for the Slavs and standardized their written language (the result of which we now call 'Old Church Slavic') in view of the Byzantine Christianizing mission to the Slavs in Great Moravia. Be that as it may, the origin of the Pan-Slavic idea is most often situated in early modern Croatia/Dalmatia.



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whereas the languages *within* the West Slavic (mainly Polish and Czech), South Slavic (mainly Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian and Bulgarian) and East Slavic (mainly Russian and Ukrainian) subbranches are to a reasonable extent mutually understandable, this is hardly the case *across* these subbranches (esp. between West and South Slavs), at least since the last thousand or so years.

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Actual, nineteenth-century Pan-Slavism, though, can be said to have originated during the rise of modern philology, especially among Slavic scholars – such as Ján Kollár (1793-1852) and Pavel Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861) – within the confines of the then Habsburg Empire. Having started as a Herder-inspired Romantic idea connecting language(s) and nation(s), the Pan-Slavic idea was soon embraced by Slavs who desired political change for their peoples in the Habsburg as well as the Ottoman Empire. A culmination point, especially for the ‘Habsburg’ Slavs, was the First Pan-Slavic Congress, held in Prague in revolution year 1848. As a matter of fact, however, the vagueness of the goals and the different political ideas among the participants would right from the start undermine the potential power of this and the Pan-Slavic congresses to come. Among Habsburg (West) Slavs, for example, there were people in those turbulent times who placed their hope in (liberation by) Russia, the big independent Slavic brother, while others considered it a better idea to concentrate on better circumstances *within* the Habsburg Empire/Austria-Hungary. Of this ‘Austro-Slavism’ the main spokesperson was the Czech historian and politician František Palacký (1798-1876).

Whereas Austro-Slavism had its adherents among Western and Southern (‘Habsburg’) Slavs, the latter politically also approached each other within the so-called ‘Illyrian movement’, which had its supporters *outside* the Habsburg Empire too (cf. [Zhelev’s SEDSiva contribution](#)). The situation in partitioned Poland (1772-1918) is geographically beyond the scope of the SEDSiva project, but the fact that one of the three partitioners was Slavic, namely Russia (the other two being the Habsburg Empire and Prussia) helps clarify why the appeal of Pan-Slavism was (very) limited to the Poles.

Parallel to these developments in East-Central and Southeastern Europe, another important ideological concept containing the umbrella ethnonym ‘Slav’ flourished in Russia: ‘Slavophilia’. Ignited by Pyotr Chadayev’s pro-Western *Philosophical Letters* (originally in French; 1836), the famous and long-lasting debate between Slavophiles (*slavyanofily*) and Westernizers (*zapadniki*) would dominate the rest of Russia’s nineteenth century and – as many would say – is actually still ongoing today. At stake was the question whether Russia should more fundamentally follow – the opinion of the Westernizers – or instead drastically stop and turn back – that of the Slavophiles – the course which its history had taken since Peter the Great’s (reign: 1682-1725) thorough reforms. The Slavophiles, such as the Kireyevsky and the Aksakov brothers, considered the modernizing waves in the West in domains as different as politics, technique and culture, to be profoundly un-Russian. Instead they wanted Russian society to be based on traditional pillars such as Orthodoxy and collectivity. Understandably, Slavophilia has been associated with the Pan-Slavic movement, but the term ‘Slavophile’ – literally: ‘friend of the Slavs’ – is at least partially misleading. Slavophiles first and most of all focused on what happened and should happen *in Russia*, and given their preoccupation with Russian traditions, some think it better to call them Russian nationalists. Naturally, several of these Russian traditions may well be considered ‘Slavic’, but on the other hand, the Orthodox faith, for example, was a Slavophile value that was certainly not shared by all Slavs in Europe.

In any case, in the course of the nineteenth century, Russian national interests often intermingled, whether or not strategically, with sincere brotherly feelings towards the (fellow-Orthodox) Slavic peoples in the Balkans, who were since long fighting a common enemy: the Ottoman Empire. The various ways in which the ‘Slavic cause’ – that is, in fact, the connections between the South and East Slavs – was dealt with and thought of, have been famously treated in Lev Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. In the final part of this voluminous 1878 novel, we see the protagonist’s lover, Aleksey Vronsky, after Anna’s suicide, leaving Russia by train as he departs as a volunteer for the Balkan front to help liberate Serbia. Eighteen years earlier, the Slavic cause had already been at stake in the plot of Ivan Turgenev’s *On the Eve* (*Nakanune*, 1860; see [Ilcheva’s SESDiva contribution](#) for its Bulgarian protagonist Dmitry Insarov).

Whereas the Russian (military) help to restore the Slavic states on the Balkans was surely effective, it did not actually lead to concrete, new political forms of Slavic unity. All in all, to conclude, Pan-Slavic and other attempts to *politically* unite different Slavic peoples were little

successful, an exception certainly being Yugoslavism ('Yug' meaning 'South'; although efforts to include the fellow-South Slavic Bulgarians failed). *Culturally*, instead, the inter-Slavic approaches since the rise of Pan-Slavic ideas certainly did generate several monuments (in different senses of the word) still visible today. A peculiar example is the Sokol ('falcon') gymnastics movement and its buildings – some of them architectural gems – throughout the Slavic world. This Sokol movement can be considered as one of the unifying results of Neo-Slavism, a rather short-lived concept that originated among the Czechs around 1900 and that aimed at defending the Slavic interests against advancing Pan-Germanism, but also wanted to do away with the Russian domination within Pan-Slavism.

Without doubt the most monumental cultural witness of the Pan-Slavic feeling of unity, finally, is the Czech Art Nouveau painter Alfons Mucha's cycle of twenty huge canvases entitled *The Slav Epic (Slovanská epopej, 1912-1928)*. Started just before World War I, the twenty paintings are devoted to all-Slavic themes ('The Slavs in their Original Homeland', 'The Introduction of the Slavic Liturgy in Great Moravia' or 'Apotheosis of the Slavs') or depict key events and/or personalities from the history of the individual Slavic nations, such as 'The Bulgarian Tsar Simeon', 'Master Jan Hus Preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel' and 'The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia'.

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Image captions

1 Vinko Pribojević's 1532 *De origine successibusque Slavorum* (in Italian translation)

2 Pan-Slavic Flag

3 Seal of the First Pan-Slavic Congress (Prague, 1848)

4 Ivan Aksakov (portrait by Ilya Repin, 1878)

5 Sokol building in Ljubljana (1926)

6 Alfons Mucha's 'The Introduction of the Slavic Liturgy in Great Moravia' (1912)