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Did the Slavs Speak German at Their First Congress?

"The language spoken at the congress was German, then regarded as the Esperanto of the Slavs."—Albert Mousset, *Le Monde slave* (1946)

"The story that German was used at the congress is a hostile invention."—Lewis Namier, 1848: *The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (1946)

In his Pan-Slav treatise of 1837, *On Literary Reciprocity Between the Different Branches and Dialects of the Slav Nation*, Jan Kollár recommended that all educated Slavs ought to know the four principal Slavic "dialects": Illyrian (Serbo-Croatian), Russian, Polish, and Czecho-Slovak. He thought that the scholar, however, should be able to use all the Slavic dialects, as well as the languages of the Slavs' neighbors. But in a less frequently cited passage, in which he explained why his work was appearing in German, Kollár bemoaned the still limited knowledge of the various Slavic idioms, even among so-called learned Slavs: "When one wishes to make himself understood on any important matter to brother Slavs, he must use a foreign, non-Slavic tongue."¹

Today the question whether the Slavs did in fact speak only Slavic languages at their first congress in June 1848 in Prague, or whether they found it necessary to use German, is largely a matter of curiosity, relegated to the folklore of linguistic strife in Central Europe. But the language issue at the congress is instructive as a barometer of the national enmity which erupted in the spring of 1848. Slavs and Germans who embraced briefly in the streets of Prague, Vienna, and Poznań, as the revolutionary wave spread across Europe, soon became mistrustful of each other's motives and programs as the idealism which sparked the Springtime of the Peoples dissolved into national recrimination and political suspicion.

Pre-March romanticism had defined common nationality almost exclusively in terms of linguistic affinity, and the Slavic reawakening had been nurtured on the belief that all Slavs belonged to a single nation and that their different tongues were merely dialects of a common Slavic language.² The

1. Jan Kollár, *Rozpravy o slovanské vzájemnosti*, ed. Miloš Weingart (Prague, 1929), pp. 45, 47.

2. This theme pervades the writings of Kollár and P. J. Šafařík, the poet and the scholar respectively of pre-March cultural Pan-Slavism. On the Slavic reawakening see especially Milan Prelog, *Slavenska renesansa, 1780–1848* (Zagreb, 1924), and Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, rev. ed. (New York, 1960), part 1. Although the Czech journalist Karel Havlíček dramatically challenged the litany of a unitary Slavdom in his celebrated article of 1846, "Slovan a Čech," an emotional commitment to Kollár's "Slavic reciprocity" still permeated the 1848 congress.

charge that the Slavs had no alternative to using German was therefore invoked by their opponents to ridicule the congress and Slavic aspirations for unity: not only was Pan-Slavism illusory because it was based on linguistic fantasy, but German was the natural medium for conveying the fruits of civilization to the “unhistorical” Slavic peoples in the Danubian basin.

A gathering of representatives of all Slavic peoples in Austria, as well as a smattering of Slavic “guests” from the Russian, Prussian, and Ottoman empires, obviously posed linguistic problems. Several West and South Slavic languages still lacked a stabilized orthography, and considerable dialectal differences existed among the spoken tongues. Although several Slavic languages were mutually intelligible, such as Czech and the Slovak dialects, this was not true of, say, Polish and Serbo-Croatian.³

The congress organizers had foreseen difficulties in communication among the delegates and had taken steps to minimize them. At the suggestion of Pavel Josef Šafařík the main deliberations were conducted in three separate national sections: (1) Czechs and Slovaks, (2) Poles and Ruthenians (Galician Ukrainians), and (3) South Slavs. Only in the few general sessions did Šafařík foresee a possible need to use a non-Slavic language.³ But the formal congress rules of procedure were silent on the language problem, with the exception of the last paragraph, which stipulated that the final resolutions would “also be issued in German.”⁴

To be sure, the congress was attended by a number of philologists, as well as persons who had lived for long periods among different Slavic peoples. Thus it was natural that these men—Šafařík and Palacký, the Moravian František Zach, the Lusatian Jan Petr Jordan, the Slovene Stanko Vraz, the Pole Jerzy Lubomirski, the Slovak L'udovít Štúr, and the Czech Karel V. Zap—should assume key roles in the organization and governance of the congress. But it would be incorrect to assume that a majority of the delegates, who included a high proportion of priests, lawyers, Habsburg officials, and nobles, were familiar with any Slavic tongue besides their native one. Most were accustomed to using German in dealings with other than their own countrymen (and on occasion with them as well). Nevertheless, the euphoric outpouring of Slavic sentiment and patriotism which pervaded the first Slavic gathering acted as a compelling restraint on this practice. The delegates apparently went to considerable lengths, even possibly to feigning comprehension

3. Šafařík to Jan Neuberk, May 4, 1848, in Václav Žáček, ed., *Slovanský sjezd v Praze roku 1848: Sbirka dokumentů* (Prague, 1958), p. 67. Šafařík specifically suggested that either Latin or German might have to be used in the general sessions.

4. “Jednací řád sjezdu slowanského w Praze,” in *Zpráva o sjezdu slowanském* (Prague, 1848), pp. 20–24.

of a foreign Slavic tongue, to avoid using German. This was the candid opinion that the polonized Ruthenian aristocrat and congress delegate Prince Leon Sapieha recorded in his memoirs: "In the general sessions each spoke in his own tongue. We pretended that we understood one another perfectly. However, when we wanted to know what was really happening, it was necessary to ask the speaker to repeat his remarks in German. This repetition took place clandestinely because it was impossible to admit openly that we had not understood."⁵

Although examination of the congress protocols offers no indication that German was ever employed in the sessions, Sapieha's account probably contains a measure of truth. In private encounters some foreign delegates no doubt conversed in French, German, or conceivably Magyar. But in the formal deliberations a self-imposed discipline was adhered to strictly. Illustrative of this vigilance is the case of the itinerant Russian revolutionary, Mikhail Bakunin, who had joined the Polish-Ruthenian section, since none had been allotted for Russians. Bakunin took little part in the formal deliberations, but at one point he requested permission to address the section in French. According to the session protocol the Polish delegates, in unison, urged him to speak in his native Russian!⁶

For a few delegates, notably the Bohemian nobles who had allied themselves with the Czech cultural reawakening, the congress posed a more fundamental difficulty: their knowledge of Czech was imperfect, and some could not speak it at all. For example, Count J. M. Thun, who had chaired the Preparatory Committee and was therefore scheduled to open the congress, wrote to Palacký a few days before the opening and asked rhetorically what the impression would be if he welcomed the Slavic guests in German.⁷ In fact, Thun did not preside at the opening ceremonies, ostensibly because of a sudden attack of gout.⁸

5. *Wspomnienia z lat od 1803 do 1863 r.*, ed. B. Pawłowski (Lwów and Warsaw, n.d.), pp. 229–30. It should be borne in mind that very few Poles shared the intoxication of the Czechs, Slovaks, and South Slavs for Slavic solidarity, and that many Polish delegates were openly critical of the way the congress was handled by its Czech organizers.

6. Protocol in Władysław T. Wisłocki, *Kongres słowiański w r. 1848 i sprawa polska* (Lwów, 1927), p. 71. Bakunin readily assented to this request, adding that even in Russian the feeling and principles of liberty could be conveyed.

7. May 26, 1848, in Žáček, *Slovanský sjezd*, pp. 86–87.

8. See Thun to Prince von Lobkowitz, June 19, 1848, in Václav Chaloupecký, "Hrabě Josef Matyáš Thun a slovanský sjezd v Praze r. 1848," *Český časopis historický*, 19 (1913): 90–91. By another account, Thun's "illness" actually stemmed from the increasingly radical tone which the "foreign" Slavs (principally Poznań Poles) were giving the congress. See Jan M. Černý, *Slovanský sjezd v Praze roku 1848* (Prague, 1888), p. 15, who cites Josef Jireček as his source.

Still other delegates apparently had such a halting knowledge of their native Slavic language that, by one account, their speech in the sessions was an amusing admixture of various Slavic languages and idioms.⁹ But these difficulties notwithstanding, and allowing for the fact that the delegates' remarks were on occasion translated into the other principal Slavic languages (the protocols indicate that this was done only when resolutions were proposed), there is no substantive evidence that the Slavs found it necessary to use German or any other non-Slavic language.

Even before the congress opened, the German and Viennese press commenced a barrage of taunts that the Slavs assembling in Prague would have to deliberate in German. The Heidelberg *Deutsche Zeitung* relayed the "priceless piece of news" that the Slavs were enmeshed in building their own Tower of Babel.¹⁰ Another German reporter, who gained admittance to the opening ceremonies by feigning knowledge of Czech, also expressed amazement that the delegates, unable to understand one another, had resorted to German.¹¹ Other German press accounts falsely maintained that the keynote address of congress president František Palacký was in fact delivered in German.¹²

Such charges were popularized in a drama published in the *Wiener Sonntagsblätter* parodying the deliberations. In each of the first four scenes a different Slav pleads for unity. The other Slavs applaud with cries of "Slava!" (Glory!). In the final scene a Russian, a Pole, a Serb, and a Czech ask for a common resolution, but to their consternation they realize that they cannot understand each other. Hence they resolve to use only German in their subsequent deliberations.¹³ The parody was based on Josef Kajetan Tyl's play *Matka Sláva*, which was performed for the congress delegates. In Tyl's version, of course, the Slavs have no difficulty in understanding one another. In the closing scene the mythical figure of Mother Sláva, against the backdrop of a panorama of Prague, leads her four offspring to a statue of the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand, while an Austrian hymn is played.¹⁴

9. See Matthias Murko, *Deutsche Einflüsse auf die Anfänge der böhmischen Romantik* (Graz, 1897), p. 287.

10. June 8, 1848, p. 1266.

11. *Augsburg Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 10, 1848, no. 162, pp. 2583–84. The reporter was soon recognized as a German and was asked to leave the hall.

12. *Der Wanderer* (Vienna), June 7, 1848, no. 136; *Wiener Tageblatt für alle Stände*, June 8, 1848, no. 3; and *Gerad'aus* (Vienna), June 3, 1848, no. 20. The charge that the Prague Slavs were using German was also raised in the Leipzig weekly *Die Grenzboten*, June 16, 1848, no. 24, pp. 441–42. See also *Laibacher Zeitung*, July 1, 1848, no. 79, p. 466, and *Wochenblätter für Freiheit und Gesetz* (Carlsbad), 1848, p. 170.

13. June 25, 1848, p. 483.

14. Zdeněk V. Tobolka and Václav Žáček, eds., *Slovanský sjezd v Praze 1848: Sbirka dokumentů*, part 1 (Prague, 1952), pp. 498–501.

The widespread belief in the anti-Slav charges stemmed largely from the potential challenge of the Austrian Slavs to Greater German union. Palacký's rebuff to the Frankfurt Committee of Fifty and the subsequent campaign by the Czechs to thwart the elections to Frankfurt from Bohemia unleashed first dismay then bitterness and contempt in German nationalist circles. The Frankfurt intellectuals and the Viennese liberals saw the Austrian Slavs as reactionaries who would even join forces with tsarist Russia—the real enemy in the eyes of European liberals—rather than see their territories become part of a German national state.¹⁵

Although many German intellectuals had viewed favorably the Slavic reawakening, their attitude was pronouncedly paternalistic, and they soon belittled the mounting efforts to place Slavic languages and culture on a par with German civilization.¹⁶ Ignaz Kuranda echoed the theme of Germany's ultimate civilizing mission among the Slavs in the prestigious Leipzig journal *Die Grenzboten* on the eve of the opening of the congress: "Austria had sense and meaning only as a German power; the destiny of Austria was to elevate the primitive Slavic peoples [*Naturvölker*] to the level of German civilization, and to offer them as a dowry to Germany. . . . only one power can take over [this] mission which Austria has let fall from its hands: the German empire which is being forged in Frankfurt."¹⁷ The *grossdeutsch* liberals had no difficulty in distinguishing between the logical joining of Bavarians, Swabians, Saxons, and so on, in a single national state and the unnatural pretensions of Slavs to do likewise.¹⁸ For the radical Viennese journalist Sigmund Engländer the recourse of the Slavs to German at their Prague gathering was "the most

15. See R. John Rath, "The Viennese Liberals of 1848 and the Nationality Problem," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 15, no. 3 (October 1955): 227–39; and Roy Pascal, "The Frankfurt Parliament, 1848, and the *Drang nach Osten*," *Journal of Modern History*, 18 (1946): 108–22.

16. German reaction to the Slavic revival is examined in Eduard Winter, "Die deutschsprachige Öffentlichkeit und die slawische Frage im 19. Jahrhundert," in L'udovit Holotik, ed., *L'udovit Štúr und die slawische Wechselseitigkeit* (Bratislava, 1969), pp. 177–86. See also Gerard Laduba, "The Slavs in 19th Century German Historiography," *Poland and Germany*, 15, no. 3–4 (1971): 8–22; 16, no. 1 (1972): 14–34, and no. 2–3 (1972): 8–31. A remarkable synthesis of German paternalism and culturally supremacist attitudes toward the Slavs on the eve of the 1848 upheavals is found in M. W. Heffter, *Der Weltkampf der Deutschen und Slaven seit dem Ende des fünften Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg and Gotha, 1847).

17. "Prag und der neue Panslavismus," June 9, 1848, no. 23, p. 385. On the journal's posture toward the Danubian Slavs in the *Vormärz* and 1848 see especially Francis L. Loewenheim, "German Liberalism and the Czech Renaissance: Ignaz Kuranda, *Die Grenzboten*, and Developments in Bohemia, 1845–1849," in Peter Brock and H. Gordon Skilling, eds., *The Czech Renaissance of the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 146–72.

18. See I. F. Reinisch, "Slawische Glaubensbekenntnisse," *Der Radikale* (Vienna), July 20, 1848, no. 28, p. 111.

telling proof that they are already firmly rooted in Germandom, and that to dislodge them from this natural ground would simply mean their destruction." There was no escaping the German educational process for the Slavs.¹⁹

The spurious charge that the Prague Slavs resorted to German flourished long after the congress had ended (as the epigraphs of this article show). Even Kuranda's grudging admission,²⁰ in the Frankfurt assembly, that the charge might not be true failed to diminish the popular version, which clearly appealed to prevailing German prejudice. No less a writer than Friedrich Engels, in a series of articles on the 1848 revolution in Germany (which appeared in the New York *Daily Tribune* in 1851–52 under Karl Marx's name), echoed the opinion that the Prague Slavs had been "obliged to express themselves in the hated German language."²¹ Nor was this charge laid to rest even when rejected as an outright falsehood and a malicious fabrication by the Bohemian-German historian Anton Springer (a witness of the events of 1848 in Bohemia) in his authoritative study of Austria in the nineteenth century. Nor was Alfred Fischel, who also refuted the charge in his pioneering study in German of Pan-Slavism, any more successful in ending the controversy.²²

The charge has retained currency not only because the opponents of the Slavs so willingly propagated it but also because to many well-meaning non-Slavs it was plausible that the Prague Slavs would have needed a common language, and German was after all the lingua franca of official and commercial intercourse in the Austrian lands. But at the time of the pre-March Slavic renaissance even the notion that the smaller Slavic peoples should abandon their indigenous "dialects" and use a common Slavic language was alien. And later, the view propagated by Russian Pan-Slavs in the 1860s that Russian should be adopted by all Slavs offended the West and South Slavic patriots.

19. "Die slavische Frage," *Constitutionelle Donau-Zeitung*, June 19, 1848, no. 78.

20. On July 1, 1848, in Franz Wigard, ed., *Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der deutschen constituirenden Nationalversammlung zu Frankfurt am Main*, 9 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1848–49), 1:665.

21. *Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, in Leonard Krieger, ed., *The German Revolutions* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 177–80. Engels added that Palacký "is himself a learned German run mad, who even now cannot speak the Tschechian language correctly and without foreign accent."

22. Anton Springer, *Geschichte Oesterreichs seit dem Wiener Frieden 1809*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1863–65), 2:334; and Alfred Fischel, *Der Panlawismus bis zum Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1919), pp. 271–72. Indicative of the persistence of the charge is Hermann Münch's massive study of the Bohemian question, which appeared after World War II. Münch often cites Springer and Fischel, but in the passage on the language question at the congress he quotes (without elucidation) only the memoirs of Ferenc Pulszky, a Magyar veteran of 1848 and associate of Kossuth, to the effect that "the language of deliberation was German!" See *Böhmische Tragödie: Das Schicksal Mitteleuropas im Lichte der tschechischen Frage* (Braunschweig, 1949), p. 191.

whose efforts were devoted principally to raising the national consciousness of their compatriots by fostering the native literature and securing equal footing for their national languages in administrative, judicial, and educational facilities.²³ What from a later vantage point may seem plausible or logical—namely, that at an international gathering the use of the most commonly understood language, even if it is that of an adversary, hardly threatened one's national identity—was unthinkable in the atmosphere of intense national enmity that enveloped Central Europe in the spring of 1848. Not only in speeches and the press, but in pamphlets, political cartoons, songs, and the theater, Slavs and Germans denounced and ridiculed one another.

Illustrative of this sudden outburst is an exchange (which purportedly occurred in Prague while the congress was meeting) between Bakunin and the German writer from Moravia, Alfred Meissner, who was en route to Frankfurt. When Meissner remarked that the difference between Czech and Russian was certainly as great as the difference between German and Swedish, and that the Slavs would have to expect a repetition of the miracle of Pentecost (the congress opened on the eve of this church holiday) if they were ever to understand each other at their congress, Bakunin retorted that the "affinity of kindred souls" would make up for any language difficulties: the phrase that *all* Slavs knew in their hearts, "Zahrábte niemce!" (Bury the Germans), was understood from the Elbe to the Urals, and from the Adriatic throughout the Balkans.²⁴ These were supposedly the feelings of a man who a few weeks earlier had scarcely known the Danubian Slavs existed, and who had pinned his hopes on Germany to carry the banner of revolution across Europe.

23. See Michael B. Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Pan-Slavism, 1856–1870* (New York, 1956), chap. 6. A notable exception was the Slovak L'udovít Štúr, who, despondent over the failure of 1848–49 and the subsequent betrayal by Habsburg officialdom, in his posthumously published *Das Slawenthum und die Welt der Zukunft*, exhorted the West and South Slavs to entrust themselves to a union with tsarist Russia and adopt Russian as their literary language.

24. Meissner's recollections appeared in the *Kölnische Zeitung*, July 16, 17, 1848, nos. 198, 199, entitled "Bilder aus Frankfurt—Auf der Fahrt zum Parlamente." He did not identify Bakunin by name, but as a "giant of a man," a Russian whose acquaintance he had made two years before in Paris. See also B. Nikolajevskij, "Prag in den Tagen des Slavenkongresses 1848," *Germanoslavica*, 1 (1931–32): 300–312.