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All Over the Place: The Early History of the “Serbs/Slavs”

Ivo Vukcevič's book *Rex Germanorum, Populos Sclavorum** contains an immense amount of data that it probably took thousands of hours to collect. It is written for a general audience interested in the origins of the Serbian nation. It has a long bibliography which contains the names of some serious scholars. There are many illustrations, some of which are rather decorative. These are the book's (potential) advantages. Now for its (actual) drawbacks.

The author never uses any quotation marks. The identification of his sources never includes page numbers and is very often missing completely. The book with its 25 “parts” does not seem to have any structure (e.g. there is neither an introduction nor a conclusion) so that it is hard to understand what the author is aiming at. The vast amount of collected data is completely unordered and therefore useless, as an index is lacking as well.

However, even more frightening than these methodological mistakes are the distortions of historical and linguistic realities, which are to be found on every single page of the book. Therefore this review can give only a superficial impression of the abundance of the author's absurd claims, all of which are indicative of a dangerous ‘Great-Serbian’ orientation. Some examples are needed here to understand what this means: Obviously trying to prove that Serbs are everywhere, Vukcevič derives the ethnonyms *Serb*, *Croat*, *Slav* and *Suebi* (cf. German *Schwaben* ‘Swabia’) as well as the Slavonic roots **jar-* ‘bright’, **žar-* ‘heat’ and the name of the Slavonic god *Khors* from one and the same Indo-Iranian (!) root **svar-*. In order to reveal such “vivid parallels in letter, sound, and meaning” (p. 34), he makes extensive use of unmotivated letter changes like *Suebi—Svevi—Svovi—Svoven—Sloven* (unbelievable but true, cf. p. 368). Obviously it is really “parallels in letter” rather than in sound that he is interested in, as can be seen from his isolation of the “Proto-Serb” (p. 51) root *stri-*: “In Serb, *stri-* as in *strijela* and *strijeljati* is the root of words connoting arrow, shaft, thunderclap, thunderbolt, shoot, and fire” (p. 24). On the other hand he sometimes deliberately changes Slavonic transcriptions to make them look more ‘Indic’ and vice versa.

* Ivo Vukcevič, *Rex Germanorum, Populos Sclavorum: An Inquiry into the Origin and Early History of the Serbs/Slavs of Sarmatia, Germania and Illyria. With Maps, Illustrations, Tombstone Inscriptions, Indo-Iranian/Serb-Slav Glossary, and Extended Bibliography (over 2000 entries)*. Santa Barbara: University Center Press, 2001. xviii, 602 pp.

Thus, the Slavonic root **duch-* becomes *dhu*: “In Hindu mythology *Bhuh* is one of three original breaths.... In Serb, *dhu* is the root of words connoting spirits, soul, blowing, breathing (*dhu*, *dhuhovi*, *dhuvati*)” (p. 27). The name of the Ancient Indian deity **Sribaya*, which was indeed the probable source of the Slavonic theonym *Stribogъ*,¹ is given as “Stribaga” (p. 24).

As the book is written for a non-professional audience, all the material is deliberately given without diacritics, because “too many diacritical marks... have a way of terrifying a general reader” (p. xvii, a quotation from J.P. Mallory²). However, Vukcevič himself sometimes quotes long passages in Latin, Serbian and Croatian, German, Polish, Sorbian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian Church Slavonic (in a *Bosančica*-like Cyrillic type, with a mixture of transcription and translation into Modern Serbian) as well as Russian and Arabic (in transcription)—always without English translations or at least explanatory comments. Even the blurb on the last cover page contains no English description but texts in Latin, Old Serbian, Modern Serbian, and Sorbian—all without diacritics of course, in order not to “terrify” anyone!

While it may generally be a good idea to write for “a general reader,” it is clearly a bad idea to write a book about something one does not know anything about oneself. (This is the difference between popular science and pseudo-science.) The very title reveals the level of the author’s linguistic knowledge. The quotation “*Rex Germanorum, populos Sclavorum*” can be found in a chapter with the same title (p. 172): “Given the Slavic character of central and eastern Germany, it is not surprising that German and foreign documents sometimes refer to German kings as *kings of the Slavs, kings of Slavorum* [sic!].” Here is the ‘evidence’ on which the author bases his argument: “*Ludewicus rex is Hlodowicus rex Germanorum, populos Sclavorum*” (ibid., all emphasis by Vukcevič). Of course this fragment, though deprived of its context, cannot mean ‘king of (the Teutons and the tribes of) the Slavs,’ since *populos* is an accusative, not a genitive. Although the source is not identified, we³ have found the fragment in the *Annals of St. Bertin* and restored its original context:

Hlodowicus rex Germannorum [sic] populos Sclavorum et terras adgressus, quosdam in deditionem cepit, quosdam interfecit, omnes pene illarum partium regulos sibi aut vi aut gratia subegit.⁴

¹ Cf. Max Vasmer, *Russisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1950–58) or Maks Fasmer, *Ėtimologičeskij slovar' russkogo jazyka*, *Perevod s nemeckogo i dopolnenija* O.N. Trubačeva, 4 vols. (Moskva: Progress, 1964–73) s. v. *Stribog*.

² James P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology, and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

³ Many thanks to Dr. Nikolaos Trunte for his valuable help with this task.

⁴ *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. Georg Waitz (Hannoverae: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani, 1883) sub anno 844. The other two ‘evidences’ cited by Vukcevič, which he misinterprets

(When Louis, the king of the Teutons, attacked the tribes and the lands of the Slavs, he took some of them as prisoners and some he killed, and he subdued almost all the chieftains of those regions by force or favour.)

This complete quotation makes it clear that Vukcevič's interpretation is quite the opposite of the truth: Louis II 'the German' was almost constantly at war with the Slavs. He did try to be their king, but in a rather hostile way.

Latin is not the only language that the author quotes and even analyses 'linguistically' without knowing it. The abundance of typographic and grammatical mistakes in the English main body of the text is considerably exceeded in his foreign quotations.⁵ The author does not even manage to write down the Ukrainian word *pryserbytsja* 'to join' correctly: It appears as *pryserbytyja* (p. 41), *pryserbysja* and *pryserbytyja* (p. 43), but never in its correct form. I did not take the time to examine his Sanskrit and Avestan examples.

In order to prove his thesis of the ubiquity of the Serbs, Vukcevič has compiled large lists of toponyms, anthroponyms and other words "linked" to the "Proto-Serbs" (p. 51). Alas, these lists are useless, for some of them try to illustrate well-known facts that need no further illustration, and others contain thousands of absurd word equations without any formal or semantic explanation or context.

To the lists trying to prove undisputed facts belong the hundreds of examples of the Sorbs in Lusatia calling themselves *Serbja* with an *-e-* and not an *-o-*. Who would have doubted that? In the book under review this is demonstrated on 23 pages (pp. 446-68), including 44 (beautiful, though small) facsimiles of title pages of Sorbian books, journals and newspapers. The question, however, is of course not whether the Serbs on the Balkans and the Sorbs in Lusatia use the same word as their respective ethnonym, but rather how this is to be interpreted. Vukcevič's interpretation is clear and simple: The Sorbs are originally Serbs.

The largest part of the book is made up of lists of toponyms in Germany that have—or seem to have—a Slavonic origin. Again, nobody doubts that large portions of what is now Germany were inhabited by Slavs before the Germans came there, as can be seen in many place names like *Rostock* (p. 289) or *Lübeck* (p. 290f.), and that Lusatia is only the last remaining bit of the originally vast area inhabited by Slavs. Still it is a bit surprising to see that the map of the regions

in a similar way, are from the same chronicle, sub anno 851 and sine anno (post 861). All translations are mine.

⁵ Cf. the quotation of Hans Sauer, *Hansestädte und Landesfürsten: Die wendischen Hansestädte in der Auseinandersetzung mit den Fürstenhäusern Oldenburg und Mecklenburg während der zweiten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Köln: Böhlau, 1971): "Hansestädte und Landesfürst~~ens~~: Die wendischen Hansestädte in Ause~~n~~andersetzung mit den Fürstenhäusern Oldenburg und Mecklenburg in der zweiten hälft~~e~~s des 15_ jahrhunderts" (p. 293), "Hansestä~~t~~de und Landesfürsten: Die Wendisch_ Hansestädte in der Auseinandersetzung mit den Fürstenhäusern Oldenburg und Mecklenburg wä~~h~~ren_ der zweiten hälft~~e~~s des 15. Jh_ " (p. 599; mistakes are underlined; deliberately missing umlauts with dotted lines).

inhabited by Slavs in the Middle Ages (p. 163) is a map of the administrative districts of the former German Democratic Republic (cf. p. 160).

In his chapter on Polabian (which is largely based on data collected by R. Olesch), Vukceovich cites dozens of Polabian words and phrases that “are easily understood by speakers of modern Serbian” (p. 333) and therefore reveal “the strongest [of] ties with the modern Serb” (p. 335), although in fact they are all just Common Slavonic words, e.g. “**Led, Led** – Ice” (cf. Russian *led*) or “**Leva Runka, Leva Ruka** – Left Hand” (cf. Russian *levaja ruka*; both p. 333). This pseudo-syllogism ‘IF Serbian is Slavonic AND Polabian is Slavonic THEN Polabian is Serbian’ used to be popular in the Middle Ages (cf. B. Panzer’s comment on Dlugossius⁶) but really should have been overcome by the 21st century. Sometimes the Polabian-Serbian ‘cognates’ do not seem to have very much in common: “**Perundan, [Č]etvrtak** – Thursday” (p. 333). It is surprising that Vukceovich does not even seem to know Serbian (!) very well, as he claims that ‘child’ is “Deta” (three times on pp. 333/5, instead of *dete*, pl. *deca*, cf. Polabian “Deta”), ‘honey’ is “Meda” (instead of *med*, cf. Polabian “Meda”; p. 333), ‘morning’ is “Utro” (instead of *jutro*, p. 333 and again p. 335: “Dobro utro”), ‘good night’ is “Dobro [sic] noc” instead of *laku noć* (cf. Polabian “Dibbre noc”), *slovo* means ‘word’ like Polabian “Sluvo” instead of ‘letter, character’ (p. 334), etc.

Even more doubtful is the long list of Slavonic–Indo-Iranian parallels (pp. 35–40). Only a small part of it is made up by the few well-known Indo-Iranian loanwords in Slavonic like “**Bog** – Bhaga (God)” or “**Rai** [sic] – Rayi (paradise)” (p. 35). Most of the examples are common Indo-European roots that do not prove any special relationship between Slavonic and Indo-Iranian, e.g. “**Mrtvo** – Mrita (dead)” (p. 35; cf. *murder*), “**Brat** – Bhrata (brother),” “**Sin** – Sunu (son)” or “**Tri** – Tri (three)” (p. 38). However, there are also many random guesses based on vague similarities like “**Po[č]itanije/R[ussian]** – Pujan (worship),” “**Strava/O[Id] S[lavonic]** – Svadah (food offered to dead)” or “**Voskliknuti [sic]/R[ussian]** – Vikrosati (cry, shout)” (p. 39). These false data render the list as a whole unreliable and, together with the use of modern instead of reconstructed proto-forms for comparison and the lack of linguistic argumentation, completely useless. The same applies to the rest of the data collected in this book.

In his attempt to prove that it was the Serbs who gave the world civilization, the author eclectically cites the most speculative theories. Thus, he finds “compelling evidence” that the *Spori* mentioned by Procopius Caesareus in his *De Bello Gothico* (III 14:29) are “a clear reference to the Serbs and only Serbs” and therefore “in ancient times all Slavs were called Serbs” (p. 57). A more recent evaluation of the interpretation of *Spori* preferred by Vukceovich has been given by Baldur Panzer:

Die Etymologie dieses Namens ist natürlich nur griechisch, die Bezeichnung also ein ‘Exonym’; Versuche, diese Bezeichnung als ‘serbisch = slavisch’ zu interpretieren,

⁶ Baldur Panzer, *Quellen zur slavischen Ethnogenese: Fakten, Mythen und Legenden* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002) 97; similarly on Mathias de Mechovia (*ibid.*, 106).

halte ich aus grundsätzlichen text- und quellenkritischen methodologischen Gründen für unhaltbar und indiskutabel, sondern vom Wunsch als Vater des Gedankens inspiriert.⁷

(Of course the etymology of this name is nothing but Greek, so that the term is an 'exonym'; for fundamental methodological reasons of text and source criticism I consider attempts to interpret this term as 'Serbian = Slavonic' to be untenable, unworthy of discussion and inspired by wishful thinking.)

Vukcevič, of course, does not forget to mention the *Vinča* symbols. For him there seems to be no doubt that these signs were a fully-fledged writing system "developed some two thousand years earlier than other known scripts," although a book cited by him explicitly calls them "Pre-Writing."⁸ It is clear to the reader that the language represented by this script is nothing but that of "the ancient Serbs", because "the breakup [sic] of the Serbs may have started several thousand years before the birth of Christ" (p. 59). One of the many other interesting details of the overall influence of Serbian culture is the author's claim that the Protestant Reformation was a "Serb" achievement ("It seems that Luther himself was of *Serb-Wend* ancestry," p. 470).

One of the author's favourite sources are the writings of Heinrich Kunstmann, to whom he dedicates a whole chapter of his book (pp. 120-31) and a separate section in his bibliography (pp. 570-71). According to Kunstmann, the Slavs originally came from the Balkans and on their way to the regions nowadays inhabited by the West and East Slavs brought Balkan names with them. Consequently, the word *Moskva* is derived from the name of the Roman province *Moesia* in the south-eastern Balkans (p. 127), the Polish city *Rzeszów* has its name from *Raška* (Southern Serbia), the obvious etymology of the East Slavic tribe *Poljane* (from *pole* 'field', already mentioned in the Primary Chronicle sub anno 898) is rejected in favour of a derivation from *Apollonia* (an ancient city near modern Burgas), and the name *Rus'* is derived from the city *Ragusa* (modern Dubrovnik; both p. 123).

With this etymology of *Rus'* Vukcevič contradicts not only the almost generally accepted derivation from Old Swedish *Rob(karlar)* 'oars(men)', cf. Finnish *Ruotsi* and Estonian *Rootsi* 'Sweden', but also himself: in another chapter he explains on the basis of M. Klinge⁹ that the Varangians who were called to the East Slavonic region according to the Primary Chronicle (*Povest' vremennykh let*) were in fact Slavs (i.e. "Serbs") from the island of Rügen: "Rugians" (pp. 314-15). Why then, the reader may ask, did these "Serbian" princes and grand princes from the Baltic have exclusively Germanic names for almost a century (862-957: from

⁷ Panzer 26.

⁸ Cf. Shan M.M. Winn, *Pre-writing in Southeastern Europe: the Sign System of the Vinča Culture c. 4000 BC* (Calgary: Western Publ., 1981), quoted on p. 104.

⁹ Cf. Matti Klinge, *The Baltic World* (Helsinki: Otava, 1994).

Rjurik/Hrørekr through Oleg/Helgi and Igor/Ingvarr to Ol'ga/Helga)?

Whenever Vukcevič refers to serious linguists, he tends to misunderstand them (either because he really does not understand what they are on about or because he wants to misunderstand them). For example, Zbigniew Gołąb talks about “a striking suffixal parallel” between Indo-European **s(u)e/obho-* ‘Suebian’ and **k̑Hbho-* ‘Serbian’ (> Proto-Slavonic **srb-*),¹⁰ but Vukcevič concludes that the roots “share a common linguistic ancestry” (p. 368).

Similarly, a whole part of the book (part XXV, pp. 554-5, which is divided up into chapter 1, “Ashkenazic Jews,” and—nothing else!) is dedicated to Paul Wexler’s disputed but well-founded theory about Yiddish as “the fifteenth Slavic language.”¹¹ However, Vukcevič does not understand Wexler’s sophisticated scenario of a “two-tiered relexification”¹² of an originally Slavonic language with German and Hebrew vocabulary and misinterprets it “in terms of race” (p. 555), talking of “the racial transformation of the European Jewish community, one that transformed the Ashkenazic Jews into a predominantly Slavic community, more Serb/Sorb (*Serbja*) than Semitic” (p. 554). This is quite the opposite of what Wexler says.

The carefree use of the word *race* and its incorrect application to the distinction between Serbs and Jews in the examples above are symptomatic of Vukcevič’s political motivation, obviously an extreme Serbian nationalism based on racist theories. He tries to demonstrate not only that “**Bosnia is an original and integral part of Serbia**” (p. 117, bold type by Vukcevič), but also that Croats are Serbs (cf. his “Serb rulers” in Rijeka, p. 115) and “Serbs are Czechs are Serbs” (sic,¹³ p. 354) and the rest of the Slavs (not only the Sorbs in Lusatia) are originally Serbs—not to mention ancient peoples like the *Suebi*, *Spori*, *Vandals*,¹⁴ etc. Even more alarming

10 Zbigniew Gołąb, “About the connection between kinship terms and some ethnica in Slavic (the case of **S̑rbi* and *Slověne*),” *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 25.26 (1982): 165-71; here: 168.

11 Paul Wexler, “Yiddish—the fifteenth Slavic language: a study of partial language shift from Judeo-Sorbian to German,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 91 (1991): 9-150.

12 Paul Wexler, *Two-Tiered Relexification in Yiddish: Jews, Sorbs, Khazars, and the Kiev-Polesian Dialect* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002).

13 The author seems to love this tautological formula ‘X is Y is X’. He uses it all over this book.

14 Vukcevič’s numerous quotations of medieval and other sources identifying the (actually Germanic) Vandals with the (Slavonic) *Veneti* (pp. 78-80) have already been shown to be a mistake (“confusio”) in 1678 by Christoph Hartknoch (*De republica Polonica libri duo* (1st ed. 1678, 2nd ed. 1687, 3rd ed. 1698): 15; quoted in Panzer 172), who disputed the competence of those who maintained this position even then: “Cum Venedi sive Slavi [...] in locum etiam Vandalorum successerant, simul etiam nomina Vandalorum et Venedorum [...] confundi a multis coeperunt, ita ut post ea tempora pro uno eodemque populo a multis

than these absurd theories is the author's attitude towards National Socialism, which is apparent in his comment on Alexander Seitz: "a *brilliant* Roman Catholic theologian who considers National Socialism a lay path to and model for a New Order *Civitas Dei*" (p. 20; emphasis by Vukceovich). Maybe Vukceovich's interest in Indo-Iranian languages must be seen in this context (cf. the term *Aryan* and the swastika, which were both borrowed from Ancient India).

Sebastian Brather writes in the conclusion to his short review of Vukceovich's book: "Historiography should ignore this book; this *spadework* is not needed."¹⁵ I would rather say: The world should ignore this book; all it can do is harm. Non-professional readers might take it seriously, and thus it might do a good service to nationalism and extremism (both among the Serbs and among those who consider the Serbs their enemies and might therefore react to it as if this were common sense among the Serbs—which fortunately it is not). Scholars from other fields, journalists or even school authorities might adopt these absurd theories into their programme.¹⁶ Another dimension of the damage done by this book is the impression it conveys of science, especially of the humanities: At first glance, its over 600 pages, its pseudo-linguistic vocabulary¹⁷ and journal abbreviations,¹⁸ its long bibliography ("over 2000 entries," as the title page says) and the name of the publishing house "University Center Press" make it look like a typical product of our universities. Hardly any reader takes the time to find out that "University Center Press" has nothing to do with any university but is probably the author's own

earum rerum non satis peritis haberentur." ("When the *Venedi* or Slavs [...] had entered the region of the Vandals also, the names Vandals and *Venedi* [...] often began to be confused as well, so that after this many people insufficiently acquainted with these matters considered them one and the same people.")

¹⁵ Sebastian Brather, "Vukceovich, Ivo. *Rex Germanorum Populos Sclavorum: An Inquiry into the Origin and Early history of the Serbs/Slavs of Sarmatia, Germania, and Illyria*. Santa Barbara, CA: University Center Press 2001," *The Medieval Review* 7 July 2002 <<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=tmr;idno=baj9928.0207.007>>.

¹⁶ For example, some Ukrainian text books on the history of Ukrainian literature officially approved by the education ministry begin with the *Book of Veles*, a clear fake (cf. Helmut Keipert, "Erfundene Vergangenheit?," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 49.2 [2001]: 264-7); the disputed *Song of Igor's Campaign* is treated very uncritically as 'national epic' in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus; or Kunstmann's theories about Balkan etymologies of *Rus'*, *Moskva* etc. are cited extensively in the—otherwise very interesting—*Handbook of Useless Knowledge* (Hanswilhelm Haefs, *Das ultimative Handbuch des nutzlosen Wissens* [München: dtv, 1998] 149-61).

¹⁷ Cf. "Trg is an Old Slavic root for words connoting marketplace, market town, trading place, trading fairgrounds" (p. 310), where he uses *connote* instead of linguistically correct *denote* or just *mean, signify*.

¹⁸ Cf. "DwS—Die Welt [d]er Slaven" (p. xiv, usually *WdSl*), "ReV—Revue des Etudes Slaves" (p. xv, usually *RES*), "ZsP—Zeitschrift ffü]r Slavische Philologie" (p. xvi, usually *ZSlPh*), "ZtS—Zeitschrift ffü]r Slawistik" (p. xvi, usually *ZSlaw*) etc.

invention and has so far published only this one book. As a consequence, it might well happen that serious scholars examining similar problems (e.g., linguistic and cultural parallels between Indo-Iranian and Slavonic)—and especially those appearing in Vukcevič's bibliography—will not be taken seriously any more.

There is no way to prevent such books from being written and published as long as their authors have the money to do so. The only way we Slavists can oppose their negative influence on public opinion is to write more books and newspaper articles addressed to non-professional readers ourselves.

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