

The Sorbs, the Slovenes, and the Slavic Reciprocity

Slavic Concepts and Connections

The awareness of the Slavs' linguistic affinities and interconnectedness dates back to the period of German colonisation in the 13th and 14th centuries and underpins the forms of their subsequent integration efforts in Central and Eastern Europe. The periods preceding the national revival, which they encountered in various contexts, had a considerable impact on the formation of modern nations and the position of Slavs in multinational and multiconfessional states. They were also caught in different political, economic, and cultural situations as a result of World War I. While some nations already had their own states, others, such as Slovenes and Sorbs, lived in ethnically mixed state formations.

Several concepts of inter-Slavic integration emerged in the 19th century and the years leading up to World War I, with cultural, linguistic, economic, and political implications. Their political and cultural objectives, attitudes toward Russia, and perspectives on linguistic and religious ties were all different. The idea behind Pan-Slavism was that the Russian state could safeguard the Slavs from Germanisation. It included an objective of establishing Slavic reciprocity and a shared Slavic cultural space. Austro-Slavism, which opposed ties with the Russians and advocated a future for the Slavs within Austria, was another concept of Slavic collaboration on our territory. Neo-Slavism was a variant of Austro-Slavism that emerged in the decade leading up to World War I and aimed to bring the monarchy's Slavs, as well as those from outside the monarchy's borders, together.¹ The relationship between the South Slavic peoples was at the heart of the Illyrian movement. The so-called (Pan)Slavic Congresses reflected the many notions of Slavic reciprocity—the first three were held in Prague in 1848, 1898, and 1908, the representatives of the Slavic nations assembled in Sofia in 1910, and again in Prague in 1912. In summary, there were many initiatives and types of cooperation in the political, cultural, scientific, and economic realms, particularly in terms of preventing Germanisation. They were defined by Slavic reciprocity and the desire to cooperate and support one another on the one hand, and by antagonisms and the colourful optics of views on their own state formations and thoughts about the future of Slavic peoples within or beyond them on the other.

Although the Slavic unification movements had political overtones, they had significant ramifications in literature, linguistics, folklore, and culture in general, which sometimes overlapped. Jan Kollár established the concept of Slavic reciprocity as early as the 1830s, based on the idea of Slavic peoples' cultural cohesion. He saw Slavic identity as a bond amongst Slavs and tried to promote the cultural growth of Slavic peoples through literature exchange, the founding of Slavic libraries, and the establishment of Slavic academic chairs. He also recommended literary translations, an exchange of periodicals, scientific gatherings, and the mutual study of Slavic languages.² His ideas were embraced by some and criticised

¹ Irena Gantar Godina, *Neoslavizem in Slovenci*, Ljubljana 1994, pp. 9–12.

² Andrej Rozman, *Ideja o literarni vzajemnosti med različnimi plemeni slovanskega naroda – včeraj in danes*, in: *Slovanstvo v slovanskem jeziku, literaturi in kulturi: zbornik predavanj*, Ljubljana 2010, pp. 69–70.

by others, but regardless of one's feelings on literary Slavic reciprocity, it had a significant impact on Slavic cooperation and integration in the 19th century, and later indirectly, in both the language and broader cultural spheres. Thus, publishing societies known as *Matica* were already being established in Slavic environments in the first part of the 19th century—the Polish *Matica* was founded in 1822, the Serbs established it in Pest in 1826, the Czechs in Prague in 1831, and the Croats in Zagreb in 1842.³ The *Matica Slovenska* was founded in 1864, while the Sorbs founded theirs in 1847.⁴ The Sokol movement was also a significant part of the integration process. Likewise, the integration was pronounced within the context of folklore studies, particularly in the collection of song traditions, but it also evolved into the collection of other themes from Slavic folk life.⁵

Contacts between Slovenes and Sorbs were created within this broader context until World War I, and these formed the foundation for relations during the changing political environment between the two world wars. In the postwar map of Europe, several Slavic peoples found themselves in new Slavic state formations. The Sorbs remained what they had always been: a small Slavic island in the midst of German territory, but adjacent to the Czechs and Poles, with whom they share a West Slavic ancestry. Despite significant changes in relations after the Balkan wars, particularly after World War I and the emergence of new states, such as the state of Czechs and Slovaks on the one hand and that of South Slavs on the other, Slavic peoples remained connected. Scientific interest has become more objective, the comparative component has grown in importance, and the ideological charge associated with dealing with Slavic studies has significantly diminished.⁶ Relations between Slavs have been marked by the altered relations between minorities and majorities, as well as by political, economic, and cultural circumstances. The plight of the Sorbs, who not only remained a minority but saw their position within the Germanic territory degraded even further between the two wars, sparked sympathy and heightened interest in different elements of their lives among other Slavs. During this time, there were many connections between countries, nations, and individuals, and many were established among the Slavic peoples. Czech clubs and leagues were active, particularly in locations where Czechs lived outside their borders, fostering both cultural and economic collaboration. The Yugoslav-Czechoslovak League was established in Ljubljana in 1921 and in Maribor in 1924. It initially concentrated on contacts with other Slavs, including Poles, Bulgarians, and Russians.⁷

Even after World War I, the idea of Slavic reciprocity found a home among the educated, who continued to promote the Slavic idea through literary translations, scientific research, the formation of Slavic studies chairs, scholarship policies, and other initiatives. Cooperation between the universities of Bratislava, Prague, Krakow, and Zagreb was crucial during the time between the two world wars. After completing their studies, the students returned to their respective environments with their language and literature knowledge, forging strong

³ Tone Glavan, *Lužiški Srbi*, Ljubljana 1966, p. 252.

⁴ Poglobitev simpatij med Slovenci in Lužiški Srbi, *Jutro*, 7 April 1929, p. 4; J. B. Šedivý, Lužiški Srbi, *Mladika*, 1929 (X, št. 2), pp. 65–66.

⁵ Ingrid Slavec Gradišnik, Slovanski svet v obzorju slovenske etnologije, *Slovanski svet: očima badatelů a publicistů 19. a 20. století*, Prague 2007, p. 216.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁷ *Jugoslovansko-češkoslovaška liga v Mariboru* (ed. Anton Oven), Maribor 1935, pp. 1–5.

bonds in the process, allowing knowledge of individual Slavic cultures to be transmitted and disseminated in their national cultures.⁸

Prague, which is of particular interest to this publication due to Trstenjak's life and education, was, has remained, and evolved into a kind of Slavic cohesion centre during this period. Following the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, Charles University established additional chairs and lectureships for Slavic languages and literatures, a Slavic seminar, and the Slavic journal *Slavia*, and in 1922 the famous Slavic Institute—*Slavanský ústav*—was conceived and actively launched in 1928. Its primary focus was scientific research and the development of scientific and economic contacts among Slavic peoples, now also in the context of newly established states. Matija Murko, a Slovenian ethnologist and Slavist who taught at the new Prague Chair of Yugoslav Languages and Literatures, was a founding member and further its chairman between 1932 and 1941. The Institute concentrated not only on linguistics, folklore, ethnology, and cultural history, but also on geography, philosophy of history, sociology, and other topics of Slavic interest. During Trstenjak's time, Prague was thus a central meeting and collaborative place for many scholars and artists from various Slavic backgrounds.⁹

The relationship between the Slavs and their interactions with the Sorbs could be followed in both monthly and individual publications of the time, and friendship societies with the Sorbs, which were active in numerous European countries, were also significant. The bond between the Slavic brothers, as they were known at the time, and the solidarity with the isolated Slavic island in the middle of the German world has grown stronger, especially since Hitler came to power, at a time when the Lusatian minority, which was growingly seen by the German state as a troublesome Slavic alien on its territory, came under increased pressure.

Slovenes and Sorbs

Contacts between Slovenes and Sorbs were impacted by the political, economic, and cultural conditions in Europe at the time, as well as by various phases and conceptualisations of Slavic integration. They go far back in time.¹⁰ In his *Spare Winter Hours* of 1584, Adam Bohorič mentioned the Sorbian language and wrote down the Lord's Prayer in the Lower Sorbian language, while Sigismund von Herberstein had already referenced the Sorbs in his *Notes upon Russia* of 1549. Others who have written on the Sorbs include Valvasor, Blaž Kumerdej, Jurij Japelj, Oroslav Caf, Matija Majar Ziljski, Stanko Vraz, Franc Miklošič, and more. Jacobus Gallus was in personal contact with them, and Anton Tomaž Linhart corresponded with the Sorb Korl Bohachwal in the later decades of the 18th century. In the mid-19th century, it was Janez Bleiweis who maintained close ties with the Lusatians, particularly with the Sorbian Slavist Jan Pětr Jordan and the national revivalist Jan Arnošt Smoler.

⁸ Rozman, p. 73.

⁹ Matija Murko, *Spomini*, Ljubljana 1951, str. 212–214, 175.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise specified, informations on relations between Slovenes and Sorbs are epitomised from the sections: Tone Glavan, *Lužiški Srbi*, pp. 243–271, and Vekoslav Bučar, *Slovenci – Poljaki – Lužiški Srbi. Polsko-Lužické stosunki literackie*, 1970, pp. 229–253.

The Slovene periodicals *Ljubljanski zvon*, *Dom in svet*, and *Slovan* wrote about Sorbian culture, notably literature, unintentionally but with enthusiasm during the close of the 19th century. *Tri dni ob Sprevi* [Three Days at the Spree], a travelogue by the music and art historian Josip Mantuani, was published in five parts in *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1894. Mantuani described the costumes, architecture, and cultural and political life of the people of Lusatia, whom he had personally visited, in a romantic tone.¹¹ The Sorbian Slavist Arnošt Muka paid a visit to Ljubljana in 1906.

The relations between Slovenes and Sorbs intensified between the two world wars, i.e. in new political circumstances. Matija Murko, a Slavic linguist and ethnologist who established a chair of Sorbian language and grammar at the University of Prague and encouraged students to learn about the culture of the smallest Slavic nation—also known as the smallest branch on the great Slavic tree, maintained direct contacts with the Lusatians. Writings about the Sorbs in Slovenian periodicals were rather common, especially during the 1930s. Vekoslav Bučar, Božidar Borko, Vera Dostal Novakova, Tine Debeljak, and Jan Šedivý, who studied in Prague and visited Lusatia on his vacations in 1926 and 1927, were among those who wrote about their situation. Articles also appeared in the journal *Etnolog*, edited by Niko Županič, President of the Association of Friends of the Sorbs. In 1931, the Slovene Leopold Lenard, who also was in personal contact with the Sorbs, published his treatise *Srpstvo u poeziji Lužičkih Srba* [Serbianhood in Sorbian Poetry] in Belgrade. Vekoslav Bučar started publishing the newspaper *Srbska Lužica* in 1934, but it closed down shortly after its launch. Several treatises and translations on the Sorbs were produced in Slovenia during this time, and the Sorbs also translated several Slovenian authors. Bjarnat Krawc, a Sorbian composer, travelled to Slovenia and other parts of Yugoslavia in 1934.

In 1937, after the Nazis prohibited the Sorbs' cultural activities, Tine Debeljak's editorial office released¹² the illustrated *Lužiškosrbska priloga Slovenca* [Sorbian Supplement of Slovenec] with contributions from various Sorbian artists. The visual section also includes Trstenjak's *Sorbian Women* and a contribution by the Sorbian painter and writer Měrcin Nowak-Njechorński, who also visited Yugoslavia and wrote about Trstenjak's exhibition in Budyšin/Bautzen in *Serbske Nowiny* in 1928. He even exhibited in Ljubljana and Maribor in 1929.

Personal relationships were also common, owing to shared cultural, political, and academic connections between individuals. Trstenjak, who studied in Prague, came to Lusatia in 1928 and 1929, motivated by the Prague exhibition of Czech painter Ludvík Kuba and the promise of assistance from the French Academy and Marie de Vaux Phalipau, President of the French Association of Friends of the Sorbs.¹³ Like Kuba before him, he painted landscapes and Sorbian women in costume while travelling the length and width of Lusatia. He met all of the important Sorbian cultural figures. For the Wendish People's Bank in Bautzen, he painted his Slavic-related *Homage to the Sorbian Patriots* in Prague in 1929 and 1930.

¹¹ Josip Mantuani, *Tri dni ob Sprevi*, *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1894, five sequels.

¹² Rjana Lužica, *Lužiškosrbska priloga Slovenca*, 17 October 1937.

¹³ Maja Vetrih, *Ante Trstenjak. Akademski slikar – življenje in delo*, Murska Sobota 1998, p. 23.

Ludvík Kuba, an influential, diverse, and creative figure during the period of Trstenjak's studies in Prague, could have had a significant influence on Trstenjak's work; he was characterised by a lifelong and deep interest in the Slavic nations. Despite the fact that Trstenjak was more than three decades younger, Kuba appears to have been a role model for him in many ways, with his colourful artistic charisma. Kuba, who was born in the mid-nineteenth century, was a painter, musician, folklorist, and writer with a broad interest in all things Slavic and a desire to create a constitutive image of the Slavic peoples' folk culture. He was involved in the study of various aspects of Slavic folk culture—mainly music and songs, but also images—not only in the cabinet, but also in the field, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, following the example of the collecting zeal of the time¹⁴. He explored and inventoried the musical and literary material of the South Slavic peoples during his study trips to various Slavic lands, one of which brought him to the nearby Sorbs, similar to his contemporary Matija Murko. Murko and Kuba also knew each other personally¹⁵. Kuba was among the first to visit various parts of Slovenia, and travelled and recorded in Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Macedonian, and Montenegrin regions. *Slovanstvo ve svých zpěvech* [Slavs in Their Songs] is the outcome of his monumental work, which he published in volumes for more than forty years as a core personal endeavor beginning in the 1880s.¹⁶ Trstenjak was likely not just familiar with Kuba's work as a painter, but also with his broader oeuvre, which may have inspired him and made him passionate about both Slavic and Lusatian characteristics.

Vekoslav Bučar met Jan Skala, a Sorbian journalist, poet, and leading ideologue of the Sorbian movement of his time, while studying in Berlin the same year Trstenjak first visited Lusatia. Close ties grew between the two, culminating in Skala's visit to Ljubljana in 1929, when he delivered lectures to a crowded Union Hall and at the university. His lectures and publications made a significant contribution to the understanding of the Sorbs and their place among the Slovenes.

The Association of Friends of the Sorbs in Ljubljana, the first of its kind in Yugoslavia, was founded in 1928. It was formed on the initiative of the French anthropologist and minister Louis Marin, by Niko Županič and Pavle Brežnik, with Vekoslav Bučar as vice-president. Vekoslav Bučar reactivated the Association before Skala's arrival because it had become inactive. It had about 50 members when it was banned in 1939. It did not host events on its own, but collaborated with other associations to deliver lectures. Vekoslav Bučar gave more than 200 lectures about the Sorbs in Slovene and Yugoslav cities, as well as in Romania and Bulgaria.

Friends of the Sorbs associations operated in several European cities between the two wars, including Zagreb and Belgrade, as well as in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and France. They

¹⁴ Marija Stanonik, O zbiranju in raziskovanju slovenske narodne/ljudske/folklorne pesmi (s poudarkom na melodiji), *Slovenska folkloristika: med jezikoslovjem in literarno vedo*, Ljubljana 2004, pp. 72–79.

¹⁵ Murko, pp. 155, 245.

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pánek, Ludvík Kuba in njegov pomen za razvoj kulturnih odnosov med Čehi in Jugoslovani, *Zgodovinski časopis* 1992 (46), no. 1, pp. 65–70; Drahomíra Stránská, Přinos Ludvíka Kuby slovanskému národopisu, *Český lid* 1953 (40), no. 3, pp. 124–128; *Ludvík Kuba. Slovanský svět: očima badatelů a publicistů 19. a 20. století*, Prague 2007, pp. 11–56.

interceded on multiple occasions, among other things, in favour of the Sorbs, who were in an unenviable political situation. In 1933, the Warsaw Association wrote a memorandum in support of the Sorbs, which was co-signed by the Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade associations and addressed to the League of Nations. In 1938, the Ljubljana Association intervened on behalf of the Sorbs at the Stockholm Congress of European Minorities.¹⁷ Cooperation was also maintained inside the Sokol movement.

Other nations' attitudes toward the Sorbs in the past, including Slovenes', were primarily motivated by their status as a minority. This has sparked the sympathy of Slavs and other sympathetic communities at various times, as well as a renewed interest in the exterior characteristics of the Sorbs. Traditional Sorbian women's costumes have attracted the attention of painters, ethnologists, and publicists alike. Their colour palette, the peculiar character of their headgear, and other features, as well as the vivid preservation of old style appearance on various festive occasions captivated them. For baptisms, weddings, funerals, mourning—being single or married—Sorbian women wore distinctive outfits. Certain practices aroused people's interest, particularly the traditional Easter riding procession, which has been passed down through the generations as a folkloric element. Linguists and tourists alike were enthralled by the Sorbs' language, rich creative talent, and active cultural institutions. The wonderful landscape, intermingled in the swampy areas with river canals, which in some places were the only thoroughfares to the villages, was often observed by travel writers, painters, and photographers, among others.

If Mantuani, Bučar, Šedivý, Trstenjak, and others who visited Lusatia before World War II shared in many ways their fascination with the places and people of the smallest Slavic branch, travellers and other writers from the period of the Iron Curtain and its fall—Tone Glavan, Jože Horvat,¹⁸ Aleš Šteger¹⁹—added to this fascination impressions related to the mining of the landscape, the infamous GDR prison in Budyšin/Bautzen, the emergence of neo-Nazism, and the bilingualism of signs, visible at every turn, in inverse correlation with what was heard on the streets of Lusatian towns. Lusatia's unique scenic beauty obviously transitioned from a living heritage to folklorism and tourist curiosity in the second half of the 20th century, and then to a complex post-socialist reality on the threshold of the 21st century. This is one of the reasons why Trstenjak's *Sorbian Women* certainly have a very different, and even more complex, message today than when he painted them.

¹⁷ Bučar, pp. 250–251.

¹⁸ Jože Horvat, *Lužica in njeni Srbi*, Ljubljana 1988.

¹⁹ Aleš Šteger, *Na kraju zapisano 8*, Bautzen, Germany, 17 April 2019, Ljubljana 2019.