

Beyond Prague: The Congress of the Slavs in 1848 and Its Echo within the Reach of the Habsburg Monarchy

Introduction

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The return of the anniversary of an event, especially if it is a round year, always seems to be a good occasion to take a fresh look at historical events and bring them to the attention of a wider public, whether at the local or regional level, or on a supraregional or even supranational scale, depending on how vivid the memory is. The texts presented below are selected contributions to a conference entitled *175 Years Congress of the Slavs (1848–2023). History – Ideas – Commemoration* that was organized at the site of the historic event in Prague. The Prague ‘Congress of the Slavs’ (from June 2 to 12, 1848) was one element in a chain of events that shook the order established by the European powers at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, beginning with the February Revolution in France and continuing to the suppression of the Hungarian independence movement in the summer of 1849.

Although the basic research on the specific course of the Prague Congress was finished long ago, the interpretive possibilities of this event in the context of the revolutions in Central Europe were clearly not exhausted, as evidenced in the conference. The revolutionary year of 1848 can be viewed as a clash of political programmes, as well as a confrontation of diverse socio-political ideas and concepts that attempted to conceptualize and sustain the disappearing world of late feudalism, or to theorize and stimulate the process of the emergence of the new world of industrial capitalism. However, the clash of ideas did not solely mean the confrontation of different conceptions of society, economy, politics, or culture; it also meant the confrontation of different ideas concerning national identity, emancipation, freedom, economic (in)equality, and social justice. It was here where the germs of

political ideas and visions were born that still strongly influence our thinking about society and individuality, various rights, social and economic justice, identity politics, social change, and revolutions, etc.

Although 175 years later conceived as a common and unifying element in the history of the continent, the events are anchored in public memory in different dimensions and forms. In Germany, for example, the focus was on the ‘history of democracy’ and on the question of the future design of the Frankfurt Paulskirche as the venue for the first German National Assembly and as the starting point for the development of the parliamentary idea in Germany.

However, the assemblies in Frankfurt—the Pre-Parliament and the National Assembly—were not only a matter for the ‘Germans,’ but also provided an opportunity for discussions with non-German neighbours, in particular with the Poles, whose parallel struggle for national self-determination proved so incompatible with the wishes of the Germans in the Prussian province of Posen that the enthusiasm for the Polish Cause that had prevailed since 1830/31 quickly turned into anti-Polish resentment. A clarification of national relations can also be observed in relation to the Czech ‘Bohemians,’ whose representative František Palacký, in his famous letter to Frankfurt, declined the invitation to participate in the parliament of ‘German patriots’ and instead assumed the chairmanship of the Congress of the Slavs in Prague. This meeting, unlike any other in Europe, was based on an idea that transcended national boundaries: the political implementation of the idea of Slavic mutuality or even of a permanent unity of all Slavs.

The impetus for organizing a conference 175 years later came rather unintentionally and unexpectedly from a specialized historical discipline that at first glance seems far removed from nineteenth-century history—namely, archaeology, specifically Slavic archaeology. Since 1965 (in Warsaw), an *International Congress for Slavic Archaeology* (*Congrès International d’Archéologie Slave*) had been organized every five years, in all the countries of the former Warsaw Pact. The political implications became apparent with the changes of 1989, as the sixth congress planned for 1990 could not take place until 1996 in Veliky Novgorod in Russia. Due to the fact that doubts about the usefulness of an ethnically connoted archaeology took hold, this was the last in the series of those congresses. However, in 2020, a new initiative was launched to hold a conference on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Novgorod congress on Slavic archaeology, dedicated to the theme *Slavs and their Neighbours in the 1st Millennium AD*, which took place in Novi Sad in Serbia in October 2021 with the relatively broad representation of archaeologists from Russia. Thus, while revealing a completely different constellation than at the meeting in Prague in 1848, which involved only one Russian, Mikhail Bakunin, this was, of course, not the only distinguishing factor. Nevertheless, in this context, the idea

arose to revisit the emergence of a scientific basis for the concept of long-lasting Slavic unity (in this case, revealing itself in archaeological finds) in connection with the approaching anniversary of the Prague Congress of the Slavs.

Eventually, this idea flowed together with further considerations regarding the commemoration of the events in Prague in 1848 and their long-term impact until the present day, all the more so as the situation of today's 'Slavic world' gives rise to reflections on the question of the historical significance of the so-called Slavic mutuality which has been demonstrated in history by various means: congresses (starting with the Prague one in 1848 and ending with the Moscow ones during World War II) and ideological currents (as shown, for example, in Czech history, starting with Havlíček's reflection on the relations of the Czechs to Slavism¹ through Kramář's Slavic Constitution² and the crimes of Václav Černý's Pan-Slavism³). The results of so-called Slavic mutuality were and are quite ambivalent, and its implementation very often led to disillusionment. Nevertheless, various reminiscences of similar programs resurface, which phenomenon is especially topical and dangerous at critical moments, such as during the current war in Ukraine. Analytical views concerning the illusion of Slavic mutuality are therefore very relevant both regarding dialogue with the public and the European intellectual environment. The conference led to reflection on the historical role of Slavophilia, or rather, asked whether the latter was not just a purposeful ideology for the national and state-law goals of the Slavs. During the several-day session, the history of the Slavic Congress in Prague itself, the involvement of Slavs in the European revolutions of 1848, the history of ideas and political movements associated with so-called Slavic reciprocity, Slavic archaeology, and the 'second lives' of the Slavic Congress were discussed.

The international scientific conference on the 175th anniversary of the Slavic Congress in Prague took place with the participation of the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (Leipzig), Collegium Carolinum (Munich), and the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe (Marburg). From the departments of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic were represented the Institute of Philosophy, the Institute of Archaeology, the Institute of Contemporary History, the Masaryk Institute, the Institute of History, and the Slavic Institute. Of the number of contributions to the conference,⁴ four are presented here,

1 Borovský, *Slovan a Čech*, 83–90.

2 The text of the project for a Slavic State in: Galander, *Vznik československé republiky*, 243–50.

3 Černý, *Vývoj a zločiny panslavismu*.

4 More information, including the programme, is to be found at <https://www.hiu.cas.cz/udalosti/175-years-congress-of-the-slavs-1848-2023-history-ideas-commemoration-1>. The conference was fully documented in video format by Historický ústav AV ČR and is available on YouTube.

dealing with Metternich's attitude toward the Slavs and the reactions in three ethnopolitical entities (Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia). It is under consideration whether to publish further contributions from the conference in the coming volumes of the journal *Historical Studies of Central Europe*.

Literature

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