Sarah McArthur
Slavophile ideology and representations of Serbia in Russian travel writing, 1810-1850
May 2007, Budapest

In my paper I would like to briefly analyse the shift in images and representations of the Orthodox Slavic populations of the Ottoman Empire, with particular attention to Serbia and the Serbs, that occurred in Russian travel writing in the first part of the 19th century. If one reads travel accounts of history texts written from the mid 19th century up to pretty much the present day, it would be easy to get the impression that Serbian and Russian brotherhood represent a sort of eternal and unchanging "truth." This was not, however, always the case. In fact, in 1804 when leaders of the First Serbian Uprising appealed to the Russian government for aide in their struggle against the Ottomans, few in Russia had any knowledge of where exactly the Serbs writing to them were located, and if they were Orthodox in faith or not. Although Russians had played an active role in supporting Serbs in the Austrian Empire during the 18th century, prior to 1804, there were almost no secular contacts between Russians and Serbs living in the Ottoman lands, and very little was known in Russia about this population.

My aim here is to look at the way in which the image of the Orthodox Slavs that became institutionalised later in 19th century, developed. It is my belief that travellers played a key role in the creation of this image, but their perceptions were influenced by factors beyond the mere act of travelling. In particular, ideologies in fashion at and around Moscow University, and political circumstances that prompted a programme of government sponsorship aimed at acquiring knowledge of the Balkan Christians.

There are not many travelogues about the Orthodox Slavic Ottoman lands written in the first quarter of the 19th century. The first secular Russian travellers to this part of the Ottoman Empire might have been two students in 1804, but it is unclear if they actually crossed the border or just observed Belgrade from Austrian-held Zemun, just across the river. Those accounts that do exist present the Christian Balkans as a dangerous and violent place. Early travellers to the region represent the Christian natives as armed and dangerous, boorish, sly, cunning and blood thirsty, much in the same way as contemporary travelogues written on the region by west Europeans do. Serbia is negatively compared to the Romanian territories of Valahia and Moldavia, and the Serbs are criticised for their bad treatment of the Turkish population living in the area of Belgrade in the aftermath of the First Serbian Uprising. In fact, some early Russian travellers should considerable sympathy for the Turks and their condition as a minority in Serbian regions. The Turks are seen as more cultured than the Serbs, and physically superior. For example, one Russian traveller claims that many wealthy Serbian men take Turkish mistresses, since Turkish women are beautiful, whereas Serbian ones are swarthy and ugly. These views are

not limited to Serbia. Travelling in Bulgaria, the Russian scholar Jura Venelin complains about the lack of libraries and manuscripts, and claims that there is not one literate Bulgarian in the whole territory. He finally removed himself to Bucharest, which he sees as more sophisticated and civilised, in order to do his research.

These negative image of the Christian Slavic Ottoman lands dramatically changed within the space of 30 years. By the 1840s, the numbers of Russians travelling to the Balkans had increased and the image of Serbia in Russian travelogues had shifted. By this time, many of the aspects of Serbia that Russians perceived negatively, such as feelings of danger, are explained as being due to "Turkish" influence and occupation. Meanwhile, Travellers such as Panov see the Serbs as "the pledge of the purity and greatness of the Slav tribes." This greatness was due to the fact that the South Slavs had not been overly influenced by corrupting western vices, but rather had preserved the supposedly "traditional" Slavic style of life. This tradition was imagined as a patriarchal, egalitarian society in which there is no separation of church and state. This idealised image of the Christian Slavs grow into a myth, with the supposedly "primitive" aspects of Serbian life being held up as virtuous, and symbolic of the region's "pure" slavness.

Whereas Venelin had been shocked by the lack of interesting written material in Bulgaria, by the 1840s, many Russians scholars saw it as the cradle of Slavic civilisation and written culture. Many travellers set off travelling, pillaging Bulgarian monasteries and archives along the way, with the intention of taking the materials back to Russia to improve the library holdings there. For example, Professor Victor Grigorovich, travelling in 1841, finds Bulgarian monasteries even small towns to be filled with enlightening old Slavic manuscripts, which he describes in great detail in his travelogue.

So what caused this dramatic shift in representation? One explanation would be that Serbia changed and in the space of 30 years became significantly more advanced. While it is true that the early part of the 19th century was a time of great change in Serbia, I don't think that this explanation is adequate in explaining the radical shift of perception in Russian travelogues, in particular as it was precisely at this time of modernisation that Russian travellers choose to highlight and praise Serbia's supposedly "traditional" primitiveness. Nor does such an explanation account for shifts in perceptions of people within Serbian territory, for example, in 1810, some Russian travellers empathise with the Turks, but few travellers do after 1840.

There is a notion in travel literature theory that, in constructing an image of the other, a traveller actually reveals more about himself and his native culture than he does about the one he purports to be depicting. Following this logic, I want to argue that the changed that occurred in Russian travel writing did so as a result of changes in Russia more than in Serbia.

I think the changes in perception of the Balkans can be attributed to three factors: the demands of scholarship, political considerations, and the influence of slavophilism.

In 1810, when B set off on his journey, there was no tradition of travelling to the Balkans, and very little concept of "slavism" or "slavdom" in Russia, the first department of Slavic studies was created only in 1811, and it was very short lived. At this time there was a great amount of confusion as to who was a Slav and who wasn't, with many even within the Russian university system believing, for example, that Hungarians were Slavs. By the 1830s though, this situation had become embarrassing: universities in the German lands were publishing books about the Slavs and about Russia, some of them none too flattering, while in Russia there was no resources to counter-attack. The universities appealed to the government for help in fixing the situation.

The Government acted quickly, agreeing to fund at least one young scholar from each of the Empire's universities to travel to the Slav lands, with the purpose of learning the local languages and gathering information on the local population. These students were however, subject to certain rules. They were required to keep a diary, with notes on the local population, the region's geography, and Turkish military capacity. They were also asked to bring back books and manuscripts to contribute to the improvement of the Slavic Studies holdings in Russian libraries. The government had its own reasons to be willing to invest funds in this venture. By the early 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, the sick man of Europe, was being watched nervously by all the major European powers, all thinking that military intervention in the region might one day be inevitable. This sudden interest in the region was accompanied by a sudden drive to acquire knowledge about all aspects of the region, with the idea that this knowledge could be later be put to use at the service of the state, should intervention become a reality. The students being funded by the Russian state were thus not merely disinterested scholars: their reports and diaries were read by the state officials who funded them, and the reality they claim they witnessed reflects the Russian interests as well. The sudden discovery of the Orthodox Slavs as being a "brother nation" and the "cradle of Slavic civilisation" is hardly coincidental.

Finally, by the 1840s, many of the students, especially those who had been involved in the academic circles of Moscow University, appear to have been influenced by the Slavophile teachings of professors such as Pogodin. Such professors believed that Russian and the Slavs had a unique place in Europe to save the decaying decadent West with Slavs' supposed spiritual purity and youthful vitality. The influence of this powerful ideology can be seen strongly in the Russian travelogues from the 1840s onwards. The descriptions, in particular of Montenegro, as an idyllic Slavic state reflect the influence of ideologies current in Russian though far more than the do Balkan reality.