

RUSSIAN
AND THE SLAVONIC
LANGUAGES

by

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PREFACE

Something like two hundred million souls use Russian as their maternal, their official, or their auxiliary tongue. The last group contains many of the fifty million speakers of the other Slavonic languages. The westward frontier of their influence stands, at the time this is written, where it did in the tenth century of our era, on a line descending from Mecklenburg to Trieste. Ten centuries ago the eastern limit scarcely advanced beyond the Dnieper; it now reaches to the frozen waters of the Sea of Okhotsk, so as to include within the Russian domain half of Asia, with immense resources as yet scarcely tapped. This is the centre of gravity of the land masses of the globe as much as London is the midpoint of the world's land and water connections. Few countries are so unlike in their situation and strength as Britain and Russia, but they are complementary and have much to do with each other.

To the demand for a knowledge of Russian Britain makes a gravely inadequate response, implying a misdirected language policy in education. From time to time there are large movements of students who wish to learn the language, but they retreat baffled by its remoteness and its difficulty. Those who pursue the study to the end are generally those who have had previous training in the rigours of language-work when acquiring French or German or the Classical tongues. These languages must often, in any case, be used by students in pursuit of data concerning the Slavonic peoples, so that there is a natural order of precedence for their acquirement. Russian is related to English, but at a distance due to four or more millennia of separation. Greek is relatively familiar to English scholars, and by the age of its documents and the archaic nature of the language it is fitted to lead up to the study of Russian, and to furnish the links needed to connect the oldest Russian words with our own. We have, for this reason, given Greek parallels as often as may be.

Our object is to offer a *rationale* of the Russian tongue. We do not simply describe it after the fashion of conversation-grammars, but we account for its present form by the process of development from what was the speech of our own remotest ancestors. The first chapter endeavours to assemble what may be known or conjectured concerning the speakers of the oldest Slavonic. They were not the only ancestors of modern Slavs, since their tongue has spread to many nations who, even within historic times, spoke other languages. We

then endeavour to give a shadowy outline of the history of the unrecorded developments between about 2000 B.C. and A.D. 1000. All the ingredients were shaken together in that period, and the pattern of the language transformed. It is possible to offer a description of the common Slavonic tongue, from which Russian has arisen at the beginning of our millennium; a description the more certain since it is, in most particulars, the same as the description of extant literary documents written in Old Bulgarian. A form of this Old Bulgarian, with Russian modifications, served as the literary language of Russia until the middle of the eighteenth century, and it is still lodged in literary Russian as Latin is lodged in literary English. The chapter on Common Slavonic and Old Bulgarian is one of descriptive grammar. That which follows, on Russian, is designed chiefly to distinguish states of the language at different periods, and to trace the gradual evolution of literary Russian until, in the work of Puškin, it reached complete cultural maturity.

The chapters on West and South Slavonic languages are more briefly sketched. They are intended to show parallel and divergent developments of the same Slavonic speech, and to serve to illustrate by likeness or contrast the development of Russian. But these languages have their own intrinsic interest, though no one of them has, like Russian, become international. They are vehicles of highly developed cultures. If Russia can boast in modern times three great novelists and one great poet, Poland and Bohemia have a longer history of achievement. Poland surpasses other Slavs in the amount and grandeur of its poetry; Czech thinkers have had profound influence on religion, education and politics. The folk-poetry of the Serbs is consummately heroic and tender.

This book has been written under great stress, and cannot but show many faults. The war has absorbed the services of almost all the small band of competent students of Slavonic. One author has been wholly engulfed in public business, and the other partly, during the composition of the work, which has been elaborated too often in hotel bedrooms or railway carriages. Long neglect has left our libraries, despite the gallant efforts of their librarians, deficient in Slavonic works. Not infrequently we have been unable to consult essential works, and have had to rely on our own discretion. Apart from the excellent miniatures contributed by Sir Ellis Minns and Professor Jopson to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, this is the first attempt to give in English an account of the Slavonic language-group. It is the first in any language to make the attempt along lines mainly historical and cultural rather than analytical. It will have the defects of first attempts; but, we hope, also some of the virtues.

We would close this preface by giving our sincere thanks to friends who have aided our task with counsel and help.