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## A Pole looks at a Russian and sees a Finn

Some observations on the 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of language and kinship

In mid-19th century, about the same time the Finnish national movement was discovering the concept of Finno-Ugric kinship and testing its possible benefits for their nation-building agenda, a somewhat distorted variant of that concept was employed by a few romantic-minded Polish activists and intellectuals.

Poland was a political non-entity at the time, the autonomous kingdom under Russian rule a shadow of the former Commonwealth. The Russian Empire was beginning to embrace political Panslavism, positioning itself as a Slavic empire and thereby the natural leader of the Slavic world. In Poland's romantic literature and historiography of the time, Slavicness was an important point of reference, but Polish romantics were reluctant to perceive the Russia as a liberator or legitimate leader. In the long run, the nationalistically inclined Polish intellectuals tended to stay away from Panslavic sympathies.

Some inventive attempts were made, however, to recapture the Slavic label for the Poles without acknowledging Russian dominance. One of Poland's the most influential cultural figures of the period, the émigré poet Adam Mickiewicz, delivered a series of lectures on Slavic literatures in the Collège de France in Paris, in which he did his best to question Russia's Slavic credentials. Referring to the racial classifications of J. F. Blumenbach and prioritizing them over language, he classified the Moscow Tsardom as founded by Finnic peoples who merely adopted a Slavic idiom but remained Finnic in their essence. The "genuine" Slavs, he insisted (such as the Poles, the Czechs, or the properly Slavic Russians of Ukraine and Novgorod), were a Caucasian race and some of the "best predisposed to civilization", while "the Finn — gloomy, miserable, created to toil in the yoke or to destroy — encountered a superior being in the Slav, but defiled it with his touch". Two decades later, the historian and ethnographer Franciszek Duchński abstained from Mickiewicz's derogatory language, but he elaborated his concept and essentialized it further by classifying the relevant ethnic groups in explicitly racial terms.

The "Finns" as portrayed by Mickiewicz have hardly any points in common with the romantic self-image of the Fennomans, but they do correspond with M. A. Castrén's worries about Finns being perceived by the world as related with "the despised Mongols". As a patriotic Finnish linguist, Castrén was concerned that linguistic data might give the Finns an unwelcome racial label. He would seek comfort in the fact that linguistic classifications did not correspond with racial features; at other times he would encourage the Finns to prioritize cultural achievements over prestigious descent. Both the Polish and the Finnish romantics were working within a similar discourse, which employed organic metaphors for describing language and conceptualized linguistic kinship as not just akin to (and at times synonymous with) biological and racial. These confluences of language and race can be found in works by prominent authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — philosophers, ethnographers, historians and, indeed, linguists — but it also seems to have lingered on in popular concepts about language and

identity long past the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Paradoxically, the discourse which stressed the central role of language as a foundation of thought and marker of identity, was just as capable of downplaying its role as something superficial and adoptable as — opposed to the immutable bonds of blood and race.

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