

---

**THE SLAVIC KALABALIK:  
THE PRUTH CAMPAIGN, CHARLES XII'S SWEDISH CAMP  
AT BENDER AND THE RISE OF PAN-SLAVISM  
(A Theory on Peter I's campaign in Wallachia, Moldova  
and its Legacy)**

---

**Jackson Little**

The Great Northern War (1700-1721) rent the geopolitical fabric of Eastern and Central Europe. Twenty-one years of war saw the ruin of the Swedish Empire, the prostration of Poland and the rise of the Russian Empire under its first Emperor, Peter the Great. Although Russia was ultimately victorious, there was one definitive chapter where all of Russia's nascent imperial gains and the life of its first emperor were threatened by Peter's disastrous campaign on the Pruth River in the Ottoman Balkan provinces. Although provoked into war by the Ottomans, Peter's cultural attempts to rally support in Wallachia and Moldova were clear antecedents for the later cultural theory of Pan-Slavism. I aver that Russian Pan-Slavism was the product of a diplomatic and military effort to oust the exiled King Charles XII from Ottoman Moldova and affect an expedient ending to the Great Northern War on favorable terms to Russia. My theory is meant to provoke a reexamination of the diplomatic significance of Peter's military ventures as well as a discussion on the role of Eastern European polities in the birth of Pan-Slavism. Historians such as Hans Kohn consider Pan-Slavism a product of nineteenth century Central Europe but Peter's Pruth Campaign clearly developed the evolutionary basis for the Russian form of Pan-Slavism that would arise in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

In 1709 the Battle of Poltava marked the turning point of the Great Northern War in Russia's favor and the end of Charles XII's 1708 invasion of Russia. The defeat of the Swedish army forced Charles XII to flee into the outlying reaches of the Ottoman Empire where he ensconced himself in a small military camp a paltry number of Swedish soldiers and staff who traveled with him while the rest of the army surrendered at Perevolochna. This minute Swedish enclave, in present-day

Moldova, enjoyed the protection and favor of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III. Ahmed's hospitality extended in the Ottoman geo-political sphere when he refused to honor Russian requests for the extradition of the Swedish King. Charles XII was similarly frustrated when Ahmed III refused to break the long-standing Ottoman truce with Russia signed shortly before the opening of the Great Northern War. Charles' persistent lobbying eventually convinced the Ottomans to declare war against Russia in 1710 (Frost 2000, 294). Peter's subsequent military response attempted to enlist the aid of Christian forces in Wallachia and Moldavia. Although Moldavian ruler Dmitri Cantemir lent his support, Russian forces were betrayed, outnumbered and ultimately surrounded by Ottoman forces on the Pruth River. Despite his vulnerable position, Peter was able to negotiate safe passage back to Russia, only sacrificing his gains in the Sea of Azov. Dissatisfied with the Ottoman response, Charles XII continued pushing for war until the dire situation in Sweden and increasing Ottoman animosity forced him to leave in 1714 for Sweden (Hughes 1998, 45-46).

The Eastern European studies academic community continues to devote considerable attention to the theory of Pan-Slavism but the majority of contemporary scholarship focuses on specific nations' interaction with Pan-Slavic theories. Olga Maiorova's 2010 publication *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870*, is a recent example of this exclusive focus. Hans Kohn's older work *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology* focuses exclusively on the movement's history but very little modern scholarship furthers his inquiries into the movement's origins. Despite Russia's extensive redevelopment of Pan-Slavism in conjunction with Slavophilism, Pan-Slavism's roots are firmly entrenched in the Slavic communities

of Central Europe where they were exposed to the German Romantic movement of the 1820's and 30's. Central European Pan-Slavism developed as an early form of Central European cultural nationalism that gripped the German principalities as well as the Czech and Slovak communities of Central Europe (Kohn 1953, 11). The theory of Pan-Slavism was an attempt to development a sense of ethnic kinship amongst the disparate Slavic communities in Central and Eastern Europe along the lines of linguistic congruity. The emphasis on Slavic linguistic kinship was augmented by the theory of "Slavic *Volkgeist*"; both of which developed into proto-nationalist movements throughout the major and minor Slavic communities scattered in the Austrian, Russian and Ottoman Empires. Despite the push for Slavic hegemony, Pan-Slavism was riddled with numerous fractious interpretations. Pan-Slavic theorists in Ukraine and Bohemia approached applied the theory of kinship in relation to their liberation from foreign hierarchs, in this case the Austrian and Russian Empires (Hunczak 1974, 82-83). Russian Pan-Slavism was markedly different than that espoused by its Central European adherents. In Russia's case, Russian Imperial Pan-Slavism grew into an increasingly potent force during the Westernizer-Slavophile debates of the nineteenth century.

Slavophilism was directly supported by Pan-Slavism due to the latter's encouragement of unity between other Slavic communities and the recovery of a grand, ancient cultural heritage in the face of Western corruption and subjugation (Hunczak 1974, 84-85). While Russian Slavophilism and Pan-Slavism emphasized the exclusivity and purity of Russia's cultural heritage, the latter theory was increasingly coopted into Russia's imperial ambitions and developed as a means of legitimizing Russia's dominion over other Slavic realms such as Ukraine. Thus Russian Pan-Slavism rapidly moved away from a theory of universal unity on equilateral terms towards an image of hegemonic Slavic community dominated by the larger community constituted within the Russian Empire. Effectively the smaller Slavic communities were to be drawn into the Russian Empire's politico-cultural orbit, with Russia serving as the sun (Hunczak 1974, 87). This sense of Imperial Russian politico-cultural centralism developed during the nascent period of the empire's growth

when Peter expanded Russia's political and military sphere of influence. I am not refuting the role of Central Europe in Pan-Slavism's origin but I believe that new investigations are required to determine the agency of the Eastern European politico-cultural communities in the movement's early development prior to the nineteenth century. Contemporary scholarship avoids drawing connections between Pan-Slavic theory and other intellectual movements prior to the French Revolution. Although the Pruth Campaign cannot be considered an intellectual movement, it is just one example of a pre nineteenth century event inspiring the development of a nineteenth century cultural theory.

Although Russia was provoked into war by Charles XII's machinations at the Ottoman court, I believe that Peter's risky decision to invade the Ottoman vassal states of Moldavia and Wallachia was borne largely out of a sense of political foresight. If he wished, Peter could have prepared defenses in Russia's southern frontier and simply waited for the Ottomans to arrive. Having recently witnessed the destruction of Charles XII's previously invincible Swedish army, it is unlikely that the Ottomans would have been willing to undertake a major invasion of Russia. If Peter could stimulate a friendly revolt in both regions and with the aid of his army, fresh from its victory over Charles at Poltava, then he could limit Ottoman power in the region, secure further gains in the Black Sea and possibly capture Charles XII who was sequestered only a few miles away on the Dniester River at Bender. The potential rewards from capturing the fugitive Swedish king and potentially ending the Great Northern War much earlier would have been sufficiently attractive to convince the previously cautious military leader to embark on a long campaign, deep behind enemy lines. In order for the plan to succeed Peter needed to ensure the loyalty and support of the Wallachians and Moldavians upon whom he relied for reinforcements, supplies and intelligence.

To garner support from his Balkan allies Peter cast himself as the "liberator of the Balkan Christians" (Huges 1998, 46). In addition, Peter issued a declaration to Christian's residing within the Ottoman Balkan territories: "I am taking upon myself a heavy burden for the sake of the love of God, for which reason I have entered into war with the Turkish realm... because the Turks have trampled

on our faith, taken our churches and lands by cunning, pillaged and destroyed many of our churches and monasteries” (Hughes 2002, 96). Peter’s adoption of a religious motive for his invasion of the Ottoman Balkan provinces masked Russia’s developing imperial ambitions for the Black Sea region and Russia’s border regions with the Ottoman Empire. Peter went beyond adopting a religious motive for the invasion. He reached further back to Russia’s pre imperial connections with Byzantium and developed a modified version of Constantine the Great’s slogan: “Under this sign we conquer”. The combination of Russia’s link to the Eastern Roman Empire and its religious affinity with the Balkan Christian established a clear imperial precedent for Russian involvement in the Balkans (Sumner 1965, 38-39). Although Peter made no direct mention of a greater sense of Slavic kinship, his development of a Christian kinship network with the Balkan princes of Moldavia and Wallachia was an embryonic stage of development for the theory of Pan-Slavism. Russian Pan-Slavism relied on a number of cultural foundations including the theory of universal Orthodox kinship (Hunczak 1974, 86). Peter’s mandate to defend the Orthodox faith of the Balkan Christians may be construed as an early development of the religious foundations for Russian Pan-Slavism. Although the Pruth campaign of 1711 was a serious defeat for the Russians, their imperial ambitions were only temporarily stifled. Throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century, the whole of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century prior to the fall of the dynasty, Russian Emperors and Empresses continually influenced geopolitical events on the Ottoman Empire’s European frontier, frequently under the auspices of defending Christian or Slavic brethren from the yoke of the Ottoman Sultan’s Islamic rule.

The Pruth Campaign of 1711 is a minor chapter in the history of the Petrine Era and the course of the Great Northern War. Ultimately Peter’s goal of expanding his Russian dominions further

south towards the Black Sea and limiting the Ottoman Empire’s authority was a failure due to a number of military and diplomatic factors. His losses were comparatively light considering the possibility that Charles XII’s intrigues at the Ottoman court could have brought the recently victorious Russia to its knees once again. Despite this failure, Peter’s adoption of the mantle of a Christian liberator bears striking similarity to the basic premises of later Imperial Russian Pan-Slavism. Future Russian incursions into the Ottoman Empire in 1735 and 1768 drew their legitimacy from the failed Pruth Campaign and Peter’s promise to the Balkan Christians. This promise developed from Peter’s imperial mandate into Pan-Slavic theory through Catherine the Great’s campaigns in the Crimea and Balkans, as well as later Russian ventures in the Black Sea, Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. The pretense of defending the Orthodox Christians of the former Byzantine Empire gradually developed into the Pan-Slavic mandate for unity under Russia’s guiding imperial hand (LeDonne 1997, 91, 104, 138-139). Peter’s military ventures during the embryonic stage of the Russian Empire’s growth played a major role in defining later Russian conceptions of cultural nationalism as well as their relation to other Slavic communities whether their relations were based on linguistic, political or other cultural congruities. His political objectives for the Ottoman Balkan territories were inspired partly by his goal to bring the Great Northern War to a rapid conclusion by capturing Charles XII at Bender and hoping to further expand Russia’s imperial borders. Pan-Slavism’s link with the 1711 Pruth Campaign is a definitive example of the role of an early eighteenth century polity in the development of the nineteenth century Pan-Slavic cultural theory. The high likelihood of other historical connections necessitates a current reevaluation of the origins of the Pan-Slavic movement as a whole and a broadening of current examinations of the movement’s impact in Central and Eastern Europe.

### Bibliography

- Frost 2000:** R. Frost, *The Northern Wars: 1558-1721* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited 2000).  
**Hughes 1998:** L. Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven: Yale University 1998).  
**Hughes 2002:** L. Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University 2002).  
**Hunczak 1974:** T. Hunczak, *Pan-Slavism or Pan-Russianism*. In: *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution* (Rahway, NJ: Rutgers University 1974), 82-87.

- Kohn 1953:** H. Kohn, Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1953).  
**LeDonne 1997:** J. LeDonne, The Russian Empire and the World 1700-1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment (Oxford: Oxford University 1997).  
**Maiorova 2010:** O. Maiorova, From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870 (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press 2010).  
**Sumner 1965:** B.H. Sumner, Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books 1965).

***Calabalâcul slav: Campania de la Prut a lui Petru I, tabăra regelui suedez Carol XII la Bender și dezvoltarea panslavismului (Despre campania lui Petru I în Valahia și Moldova și consecințele lor)***

*Rezumat*

Articolul reprezintă o nouă abordare a semnificației cultural-diplomatice a campaniei de la Prut a lui Petru I din 1711 și influența acesteia asupra procesului de evoluție a panslavismului la jumătatea secolului al XIX-lea. Principalul argument în noua interpretare a fenomenului, autorul îl identifică în acceptarea de către Petru I a mantiei de „apărător al popoarelor creștine” – slogan din arsenalul diplomatic rus, care mai târziu își va lăsa amprenta și va influența dezvoltarea formei imperiale ruse a panslavismului. Scopul urmărit de autor în articol este provocarea unui nou dialog privind apariția panslavismului și semnificația Marelui Război de Nord pentru diplomația est-europeană.

***Славянский Калабалык: Прутский поход, шведский лагерь Карла XII в Бендерах и подъем панславизма (О походе Петра I в Валахию и Молдову и его последствиях)***

*Резюме*

Статья представляет новый взгляд на культурно-дипломатическое значение Прутского похода 1711 года и его влияние на подъем культурного течения панславизма в середине XIX века. Основной довод заключается в принятии Петром мантии «защитника балканских христиан» – термин из дипломатического арсенала, позже повлиявший на развитие русской имперской формы панславизма. Цель статьи – вызвать новый диалог о происхождении этого движения и об огромном значении Великой Северной войны для восточноевропейской дипломатии.

23.01.2013

Jackson Little, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, 200 Upham Hall, 100 Bishop Circle, Oxford, OH 45056, USA, e-mail: littlejd@miamioh.edu