CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE AND RACE: CROATS, ILLYRIANS, SLAVS AND ARYANS

Introduction

In 1823 the poet and future author of the Croat national anthem, Antun Mihanović (1796–1861), wrote an essay in a Viennese journal in which he attempted to prove that the Slavic languages also belonged to the Indo-European linguistic family. Mihanović spoke of the hope that the new science of Indo-European comparative philology would shed light on the origins of the Slavs, their languages and customs, ‘for they say that a beautiful period is approaching, in which the night that has covered the prehistory of our race for thousands of years is finally being extinguished by the light that burns from India.’ Mihanović was dismayed (as were other Slav scholars) by the fact that the founders of Indo-European comparative philology had failed to include the Slavic tongues in the great European (or Aryan) family of languages. Mihanović posed the question as to ‘whether we [Slavs] are allowed to hope that we will one day discover what our ancient ancestors thought, what they achieved…how they suffered, and how they mastered a difficult life?’ Similarly to so many other young Romantic scholars and writers throughout central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, Mihanović was fascinated by the European wide interest in distant linguistic and racial origins, stretching to antiquity and beyond.

The Indo-Europeans

The Indian light that Mihanović referred to had begun to illuminate European scholarship in the late eighteenth century when scholars such as the English Orientalist Sir William Jones (1746–1794) highlighted the existence of a linguistic relationship between the sacred language of

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2 Cited in ibid., 64.
3 Ibid., 63.
Vedic texts, Sanskrit, and Latin and Greek, as well as with the Germanic languages. This scholarly discovery eventually led to the theory that India (or some other Central Asian region) was quite possibly the original birthplace of the white European peoples. No longer did the ‘Semitic’ Middle East represent the exclusive cultural and spiritual cradle of their civilisation. The Sanskrit word ‘Aryan’ (from Sanskrit ārya, meaning ‘noble’) became popular during the course of the nineteenth century as a linguistic designation for the Indo-European, or Indo-Germanic, family of languages (including, apart from the Romanic and Germanic languages, the Slavic, Celtic, Baltic, Albanian, Armenian and Indo-Iranian languages) and, by association, as a racial term for the speakers of these languages. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars and popular writers in Europe often used the term Aryan to refer to the white Caucasian race, first identified by the German physiologist and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840).

Blumenbach divided humankind into five great branches: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, Ethiopian and American. The German scientist was most impressed by the physical features of the Georgians of the Caucasus region. Accordingly, Blumenbach ‘gave to that variety [i.e. white men] the name of the Caucasian mountains because it is in that region that the finest race of men is to be found, the Georgian race.’ The skulls of the Georgians were ‘beautifully shaped’, while their skin was white, ‘and this colour seems to have belonged originally to the human race.’ The Caucasian thus represented the ideal European type and the highest racial type of humankind. Blumenbach did not, however, bring into question the fundamental unity of the human species. As with other intellectuals and scientists of the Enlightenment, Blumenbach was seeking to define man’s nature and his place within the natural world. The new science of race was also influenced by the aestheticism of late eighteenth-century...