CHAPTER 1

THE SEVENTH-CENTURY: BEFORE THE GATES OF EUROPE

‘Look, you have cast out Love!
What Gods are these
You bid me please?
The Three in One, the One in Three? Not so!
To my own gods I go.
It may be they shall give me greater ease
Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities.’

All of us instinctively desire that we – natives of our homelands, whatever name these may bear – can claim to have lived in the countries of our birth from time immemorial, from the moment ‘when it all began’. Needless to say, such an assumption is understandable, but its truth cannot be established. Of course, the population of Europe, which has grown first at a natural and later at an industrial pace, has not experienced any serious collapse or large-scale transformations since prehistoric times. On the other hand, it would be hard to claim that sheer weight of numbers says very much. The key act in self-identification by social bodies in Europe was always those claims made by its elites, whatever their origins – often they lay outside – which the non-elites viewed as most persuasive. It was men and women of standing, respect and consequence who focused the hearts, minds and consciences of whatever social group acknowledged them by rallying behind those who gave them a new, ethnic, social, and ultimately national, identity. This happened regardless of whether such elites were of domestic or foreign origin. It was social agents that built new nations; and linguistic affiliations, biological kinship, a common gene pool did not. Indeed, even blood ties wither, grow old and decrepit and lose vitality, if they are not re-invigorated by other factors that frequently come from outside.

It has been observed that areas that are culturally homogenous frequently mask a surprising heterogeneity in the biological substrate of their populations. Again, we should note that it is an underlying cultural pattern, maintained above all by an (elite) language and religion, which makes identities and nations survive. Let us examine how an ethnic community – and this, if we wish, can include many nations – is defined
by modern science\textsuperscript{1}. Five criteria are of relevance here: a) a common name; b) a shared myth of common origin; c) a shared acknowledgment of a commonly experienced historical past; d) common territory, and e) shared characteristics of a social body displaying a particular and unique culture without parallels elsewhere. In this way, the key factors that determine ‘ethnicity’ – i.e. that answer the questions: who are we, who do we want to be, and do not want to be? – are not biological. We would do well to bear this in mind.

What then, in practice, is Slavdom and Slavinity? Instinctively we all know the answer, though the notions have been disputed throughout the centuries. Yet any attempt at a definition must necessarily fail. Slavinity cannot be defined by the tools of physical anthropology, by geographical analysis, by material features of the environment in which Slavs live, by social structures or by any particular form of spirituality. The only feature that Slavs do definitely have in common is language, or, in later ages, a set of languages. Slavdom is thus defined by the sharing of a common Indo-European language over a fairly long historical period, beginning perhaps somewhere in the murk of prehistory, possibly in the first centuries A.D., and probably before the fourth-century A.D.\textsuperscript{2}.

Let us start this historical investigation by borrowing a set of terms from philosophy. Slavdom had been pouring forth from somewhere in eastern Europe from (at least) the fourth post-Christian century, like Aristotle’s notion of matter, an unformed component of the human race. However, wherever they ended up, Slavs adopted the very different economic habits, social norms, manners and customs of the local communities they encountered \textit{en route} or in their new abodes. Thus the initially undifferentiated ‘matter’ of the Slavic-speaking mass gradually crystallized into a number of forms or configurations of social life according to the conditions prevailing in their new homelands. From the very beginning, Slav society showed a surprising degree of adaptability, flexibility, and an ability to adopt models from their host communities, and to employ these to their own advantage.

The primeval motherland of the Slavs, which they left to occupy their present homes, is now thought to be in one of two regions of eastern Europe. In both cases, one of the basic arguments for thinking so is

\textsuperscript{1} More on this cf. Romeny 2005.

\textsuperscript{2} On the linguistic affiliation of Slavic cf. now Rehder 1998.