IDENTITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE
Did The Early Slavs Follow The Rules
Or Did They Make Up Their Own?*

The study of the past can never be carried out in isolation from the context in
the present in which that investigation takes place; it is the latter which dictates
the questions we ask of the traces left by past communities and societies. Modern researchers set out to investigate the past of a place (site, locality, region, country) or of people (community, society, ethnic group, nation), though often the distinction becomes blurred in the minds of the investigator and the viewing public and both tend to be subsumed under the label 'heritage.' It is this view of the commonly-inherited past, that it is here that we should seek the foundations of present social reality, which lies behind our projection upon it of some of our own ideals and perceptions. The interpretation of the past has always been the vehicle for visions of an alternative present, for example as esteem-boosting reminders of past glories to offset a glum or uncertain present, a recollection of historical wrongs awaiting some future action to 'right' them, and visions of creative primeval initiators of a culture which persisted in a single unbroken tradition through the vicissitudes of time forming the precious identifying and uniting spirit of a modern community. In the nineteenth-century new visions of the past were one of the ideological weapons adopted by the romantic idealists of various nationalities in central and eastern Europe in the struggle for independence from the great hegemonies of the period.1 One of the

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1 A full survey of the issues concerning 'heritage' and issues of the use of the past in creation of modern identities cannot be included here. See, however, B. Anderson, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London/New York: Verso, 1991); The Politics of the Past, eds P. Gathercole and D. Lowenthal (London/Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1994); Nationalism, Politics and the Practice

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questions which became entangled in these struggles was that of the origin of the Slavic-speaking peoples which covered a large part of the area.

Despite (and perhaps in part because of) the work done in this period and continuing to the present day, the origin and reasons for the spread of the Slavic languages remains one of the greatest mysteries of European historiography. Very many conflicting opinions have been based on different kinds of evidence (linguistic, historical, archaeological) and very many academic conflicts have broken out on the 'correct' manner to interpret the results of all this research. In part, the heat of these conflicts has at its basis the way that the interpretation of the past has been woven into the fabric of a world view based on the power politics of today. The Slavs' have become an emotional issue for many scholars because of the inevitable way they have been accepted as the physical (genetic) ancestors of societies from the Urals to the Elbe and between the Baltic and the Balkans.

While some European scholars eagerly embraced the opportunities created by representing their own discipline (or even institution) as being the one most able to shed light on the past and origins of nations, others - aware of the potential dangers in such an approach - stayed away from these issues. In the years after the establishment of a new order created by the aftermath of the Second World War, one of the pressing problems which needed resolving was the question of the origin of the Slavic-speaking communities. One reason for this need was that the past extent of their territories now conveniently coincided to a large degree with that of the Soviet Bloc. Renewed discussion and debate was started among the scholars from all the states in that Bloc, those from Poland, East Germany and the Soviet Union being the most active followed by Czechoslovak and Bulgarian scholars (Hungarian, Romanian and Yugoslav scholars gave most of their attention to other pasts). These efforts remained to a large extent unappreciated by western Europeans. The linguistic barrier was one of the more obvious reasons for this situation. Just as persuasive was the feeling that these concerns were remote from the 'mainline' history of Europe. For most of the post-war period, even consciously 'global' attempts at synthesis of European history by external scholars have tended to lose sight of huge expanses of space, time (and issues) when it came to central or eastern Europe. Another reason for this phenomenon was the division between the several routes taken in the development of the historical sciences in the two areas conventionally seen as divided by an iron curtain. The curtain itself, although real, was not as
