NOTE

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Notes on the Beginnings of Modern Serbian Literature:
The Kurzbeck Press in Vienna and Its Successors, 1770-1800

In the Orthodox communities of Southeastern Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had seen an almost total hiatus in publishing activity, and as late as the second half of the eighteenth century there existed only very limited possibilities for the production and distribution of Cyrillic imprints. Quite apart from the technical difficulties, which were formidable, there were a number of political and cultural obstructions facing the printer or bookseller who looked to the non-Russian users of Cyrillic for his market:
a) neither the Ottoman Porte nor the Viennese authorities were inclined to initiate any measure which might strengthen their subjects' national self-awareness; hence access to a literature which in appearance and content must recall Slavs and Greeks to their independent past was traditionally regarded as contrary to the Staatsinteresse in both capitals;
b) both Muslim and Catholic authorities were antipathetic to the Orthodox religion which the large majority of the subject peoples of the Balkans subscribed to; the Ottomans perhaps less from religious prejudices than social ones, while the Austrians were yet engaged in the long effort of the Counter-Reformation.
c) In both the Muslim and Catholic-controlled portions of Southeastern Europe, literacy was so low and book-costs so high as to practically limit demand for Cyrillic material to a handful of catechetical works until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The reading public was composed of a fair-sized number of ecclesiastics (by no means a majority); a rather smaller number of local notables; and indeterminate groups of merchants and travellers in the larger centers. Among those nations employing Cyrillic, the literate segment was probably highest among the Greeks. There were followed at some remove by the Serbs of the Habsburg empire; while the Serbs of Turkey, the Bulgars, and the Romanians² could show but a tiny percentage of literates, mostly within the church.

Given this tiny potential market, the commercial booktrade in Southeast Europe of the mid-eighteenth century was so limited as to scarcely exist. In the Ottoman area, including Wallachia and Moldavia, there were no regular distribution channels; book purchases were made occasionally by ecclesiastics and lay persons who enjoyed some

1. The earliest Serbian imprints date from the press founded in Cetinje in Montenegro at the end of the fifteenth century. The Ottoman conquest practically eliminated Slavic printing, and the Catechism of Teofan Prokopović printed at Rimnik in 1726 was the first Slavic language work issued in 88 years within the Balkans.
2. The Romanians were still using Cyrillic in a mixture of Russian and Greek forms in the printed literature of the eighteenth century.
contact with Russia or the West, but most works had been introduced by sporadic gifts from the Russians to the local Orthodox churches. In the Austrian area, north of the Sava-Danube line, the praenummeranten system (pre-subscriptions for a given book, paid to the publisher through local agents) had evolved during the first half of the century. Only rarely, however, could the publisher-printer count on covering expenses without some type of official subsidy. There were no bookstores whatever, in either segment of the cyrillic-using area, until the 1770’s. The earliest of these, in Timisoara and Novi Sad, dealt primarily in non-Slavic works, mostly German; and the whole trade in printed matter was dominated by Germans until well into the nineteenth century.3

Despite these handicaps, there still remained some possibilities for cyrillic printing among the Balkan peoples. Specifically, for the Serbs living under Austrian rule in south Hungary, there were three sources of books during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. In Rimnik, a small place in the Olt valley of Wallachia, a press had been erected under Russian sponsorship in the early eighteenth century. A handful of homilectic and theological works, almost always translations of Russian originals, were produced here for Serbian and Romanian markets through the 1750’s. They were distributed through the church, and along with Russian-printed catechisms and hagiographies constituted the textbooks of the day in the sparsely-located monastic schools.

Partly as a counter to the rising Russian influence over the Serbs, which reached a climax in the mass emigration of Grenzer from the Military Confines to south Russia in 1750-51, the Viennese Court permitted the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Sremski Karlovci to issue a very limited number of copper-engraved (hence inordinately costly) works during the 1750’s and 1760’s. Most notable among these was the Kalligraphie by Zacharije Orfelin, which served as the model for all later efforts to produce an orthographic primer for Serbian children.

But the largest number of Serbian imprints during the first seven decades of the century came from outside the Balkans, from the establishment founded by Nicola Peccana in Venice, where a large and wealthy Serbian merchant colony had existed since the seventeenth century. The Peccana press was purchased and reinvigorated by the Teodosije family in the 1750’s, aiming at supplying the modest demands of the Serbian monasteries and schools for devotional and theological works. By the middle of the 1760’s, up to eleven new titles or reprints were leaving this press annually.4

The Serbian literary language of the mid-eighteenth century was in transit from the Russian variant of Church Slavic to Slavoserbian (srboslovenstvo). Neither of these were comprehensible to the masses, due to their sharp differences from the colloquial tongue.


4. Georgije Mihailević, Srpska bibliografija XVIII veka (Beograd, 1964). Dmitrije Teodosije was a Greek national resident in Venice, who obtained control of the Peccana press in the late 1750’s. After sporadic issuances of Serbian works for the first several years, the pace picked up after the cooling of Austro-Russian relations at the end of the Seven Years War. During the period 1765-70, twenty-two new titles left the Teodosije press for distribution to the Serbian markets.