

UDC 130.2Брюкнер
ORCID iD 0000-0002-9782-9194

Y. Horb

UNDERSTANDING BRÜCKNER: *SLAVS AND WAR* FROM A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

More than a hundred years have passed since the Polish-German Slavist Aleksander Brückner (1856-1939) published his collection of essays under the unremarkable title “Die Slaven und der Weltkrieg” (“Slavs and War”). The luminary of European Slavic studies, a scholar who had always shunned politics and even near-political debates, suddenly turned to the most acute themes of interethnic relations, exacerbated by the First World War. Then the book went unnoticed and got lost in the hundreds of other titles in Aleksander Brückner's extensive bibliography. However, from the perspective of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, Brückner's publicistic essays collected under one cover read like predictions. Even then, the scholar warned his contemporaries about the inability of Russian culture to engage in dialogue, to coexist with other, weaker cultures. In his opinion, Russia's Byzantine-soaked culture was capable only of expansion, subjugation and absorption. Brückner questioned all possible myths of Slavic brotherhood and unity. Brückner's unapologetic and insistent texts cast doubt on the scholar's reputation and turned him into a puppet of Prussian militarism – so the rumour said at the end of the war. The proposed article offers a new interpretation of the texts of the collection “Slavs and War” – as a document of its time, a synthesis of the experience of a Slavist of international renown and a warning to future generations. We will pay attention not only to the analysis of Brückner's texts, but also to the context in which they were written, the reaction they produced in society, and the need for a revised and critical edition of this important monument of social and political thought of the first quarter of the 20th century. Special attention is paid to other works by the scholar devoted to the interpretation of Russian culture, its history and connections with Western cultures.

Keywords: Aleksander Brückner, Slavic studies, Poland, Pan-Slavism, Pan-Russianism.

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Holding the professorial chair at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in 1880, the young Aleksander Brückner signed a document according to which he undertook to keep away from any manifestations of political activity by students of the Faculty of Philosophy (Pohrt, 1970, s. 96). For most of his university career, the scholar strictly adhered to this commitment and only broke it with the outbreak of the First World War, plunging into the abyss of opinion journalism.

For many who knew Brückner, at that time already a luminary of European Slavic studies, his sudden turn towards politics seemed incomprehensible. Such activity during the years of the World War could well have cost the professor of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures his career and even his life. Suffice it to recall what fate awaited Brückner's fellow writer during the war, the literary critic Wilhelm Feldman, who was deported from Germany and died in poverty (Bohun, 2022; Mendelsohn, 1969; Dobrowolska-Bielecka, 2006; Jazowski, 1970). Nevertheless, Brückner not only stayed afloat, but also returned to active teaching and research.

The crowning achievement of Brückner's wartime journalism is the collection of essays *Die Slaven und der Weltkrieg (Slavs and War)*, some of which were published in German periodicals during the war years. After the war, Brückner tried not to mention this book, and there is no reference to this text in the popular discourse about the prominent Polish-German Slavist Aleksander Brückner. Perhaps it would never have been mentioned again had it not been for the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, the events of which seem to have come off the pages of Brückner's essay. Should this be considered a coincidence, a long-term forecast, or an insight into the underlying nature of the relationship between Slavic cultures? This is just one of the questions we will try to answer in this publication.

The literature on Brückner is as extensive as the scholarly legacy of the Polish-German Slavist. Despite this, we still do not have a full-fledged intellectual biography of the “Berlin hermit” (Domańska, 1988). It would be wrong to characterise the period of Brückner's political activity during the First World War as a white spot in his biography (Kośny, 1991; 2015). On the contrary, we know quite a lot about how and why Aleksander Brückner came to political journalism, but we have no idea where he drew the ideas presented on the pages of *Slavs and War* and whether they were his personal thoughts. We will be interested primarily in Brückner's texts collected under the cover of *Slavs and War*, as well as his works published at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, dealing with the problems of Russian expansion and the place and significance of cultural factors in this process. This article is an attempt to actualise and place them on the plane of the contemporary socio-political situation, the likelihood of which was predicted by Brückner with remarkable accuracy and insight.

The book, which the author himself called a collection of articles previously printed in various German periodicals, is known in two versions. The German-language version was published in Tübingen in 1916 (Brückner, 1916), and the Polish version two years later in Kraków (Brückner, 1918). Brückner claimed that he had nothing to do with the translation of the text into Polish, but this information should hardly be taken at face value, since the translator of the book is unknown. The Berlin Slavist considered his work as a kind of guide to the “Slavic question” for Germans, because, according to Brückner, the position that the Slavs would take during the world war could determine its outcome and the entire future of post-war Europe (Brückner, 1918, s. 1).

In connection with this formulation of the problem by the author, the question arises whether the book was ordered by the Prussian government. We are inclined to believe that the original idea of a certain course of lectures on the national question and presenting it in a favourable light for Germany was voiced to Brückner by someone in government circles. Nevertheless, based on the text of the book, there is no reason to believe that the author was not free to present his ideas – they really came from him. Aleksander Brückner sincerely wanted to reconcile Poles and Germans, his two native peoples. Moreover, the scientist himself felt like a stranger both in Berlin and in Warsaw (Scholze, 1993, s. 140-141). It is our deep conviction that in the case of the texts of the collection *Slavs and War* we are dealing with a political manifesto of a man who realised his profound authority in Slavic studies.

The separate articles in the book are indeed grouped very ineptly and synthetically, which allows for the possibility that some of Brückner's closest associates, most likely the literary critic Wilhelm Feldman, an agent of the Polish Legions in Germany, who had very close friendly relations with Aleksander Brückner, were involved in the creation of the final text (Kośny, 2015). The main part of the book was devoted to the problem of balancing the Slavic nations between two poles – civilised Europe and barbaric Russia. The second edition of *Slavs and War* was expanded by Brückner to include an essay on the February Revolution, which, in his opinion, eliminated the Russian threat, in which the scholar saw a significant simplification of the civilising mission of the Germans (Brückner, 1918, s. 2).

Reviewing all of Aleksander Brückner's ideas presented on the pages of *Slavs and War* is beyond the scope of this study. We plan to focus only on those theses, which find their confirmation in the events that took place 100 years after the publication of this collection of essays of the war period. Of course, Brückner was not a prophet and all his conclusions are only the result of decades spent in the study of Slavic cultures and their dialogue interactions. Only on the basis of this experience did the scholar manage to build a realistic model of the Slavic world, which is still relevant today.

Brückner's alleged Russophobia will be discussed in the next part of this article. Here we should only say that Brückner's attitude towards Russia was not worse than that of the most prominent Russian thinkers of the 19th – early 20th century. Suffice it to cite as an example Aleksander Brückner's thesis that in conditions of Russian domination Ukrainians and Belarusians will never have a chance to realise themselves as a nation, that Russia would rather absorb these peoples completely than give them a chance for self-determination (Brückner, 1918, s. 19). In these words of the “Berlin hermit” we find echoes of Fyodor Tyutchev's ideas that there is nothing more helpless than fraternal peoples who are separated to death by politics. At about the same time as Brückner and completely independently of him, the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev came to similar conclusions (Berdyaev, 1962).

One of the tools for mobilising society against the threat of Russian expansion, both in Brückner's time and now, has been the belief that Russia is not a nation-state and that under favourable conditions oppressed peoples will rise up. However, Aleksander Brückner debunked this thesis as early as the opening section of *Slavs and War*, noting that national uprisings in Russia would never succeed because during the First World War even Muslims came to the defence of Orthodox values and Russian statehood (Brückner, 1918, s. 6).

The scholar also dwelt at length on the thesis exploited by the Russian propaganda machine about the liberation of peoples whose national culture is oppressed. Brückner called this slogan an idealistic cover for Russia's true goals. The historical task of Russian expansionism, according to the Slavist, is the destruction of everything that is not Russian and the conquest for the Orthodox Church of everything that does not belong to it. The researcher ironically remarked that in order to liberate oppressed peoples, Russia must declare war on itself and its statehood (Brückner, 1918, s. 6-7).

Despite the fact that Aleksander Brückner viewed the so-called “Ukrainian question” from the perspective of the realities of the tsarist occupation of Galicia (Nagornaia, 2024; Kozuchowski, 2021; Von Hagen, 2007), his thoughts about the division of Ukrainian society still resonate a hundred years later – already in the realities of independent Ukraine fighting against Russian aggression. For Brückner, the Ukrainian nation seemed artificially divided. He wrote about “Malorusyns” and “Rusyns”, of which the first as an independent national unit did not exist for Russia, while the latter were potentially dangerous, because they carried a threat, possessing a national idea acquired in the centuries-long struggle against the Poles (Brückner, 1918, s. 7).

Paradoxically, even now in the occupied territories of Ukraine Russia uses the “Janissary” method, which was also described by Brückner in the pages of his essays. He wrote that the Russians were taking hundreds of orphans out of Galicia to raise them as loyal servants of Tsarism. It was such children, subjected to forced conversion, who would later obey all the ideological guidelines of the “barbaric” state, which Brückner considered Russia to be (Brückner, 1918, s. 8). However, Aleksander Brückner's rejection of Russian statehood was not associated with a similar attitude towards Russian culture.

In debunking the idea of Pan-Slavism, Aleksander Brückner considered it a utopia only because it always opens the way for Pan-Russianism – it is only a screen designed to justify Russia's expansionist aspirations towards other Slavic peoples (Hunczak, 1974). The attempt to replace Pan-Slavism with Neo-Slavism will also provoke aggression from Russia,

which is convinced that the unification of the Slavs not under the aegis of Orthodoxy is simply impossible (Brückner, 1918, s. 14). The final collapse of the utopia of Pan-Slavism was witnessed by the events of the First World War, but, as we can see, in modern realities it still remains an effective weapon of Russian propaganda, with the only difference that the idea of Slavic brotherhood is now promoted not so much by the state as by a popular pro-governmental narrative – with the help of mass culture.

As an example of a typically Russian model of ethnic tolerance, Brückner gives a summary of the events that took place in Lviv after Russian troops entered the city. The scholar wrote that the Russians proclaimed the dominance of Orthodoxy in a region where there were no Orthodox Christians. All languages were relegated to the background after Russian, which nobody knew in Galicia (Brückner, 1918, s. 16). Aleksander Brückner's harsh and unappealing assessments of 1916-1918 also contained propagandistic overtones typical of Prussian agitations. In particular, he wrote: “No Russian could explain why he was fighting. The tsar's order, the views of robberies, murders, fires, massacres of unarmed Jews – in the eyes of Cossacks and other ‘native Russian’ people this is already a sufficient reason for war (Brückner, 1918, s. 15).” Such value judgments are not uncommon in the pages of *Slavs and War*, but they are all lost in Brückner's convincing argumentation and his vision of Russian cultural expansion.

Aleksander Brückner summarised that a Russian victory in the First World War would mean the loss of autonomy for all other Slavic peoples and their right to national self-determination would be threatened. The revival of Pan-Russianism, the defeat of the very idea of civilisation embodied by European culture – this is what Russia would bring in the event of its triumph (Brückner, 1918, s. 20-21). Brückner's words now sound like a frightening prophecy, but they are based solely on his more than 25 years of experience in researching Russian culture in all its manifestations. In the next part of this publication, we will take a step back from the central narrative of our study and look at Brückner's assessments of Russian culture in his other works.

For Brückner, Russian culture of the 12th – 18th centuries was a continuous stagnation, the sources of which the researcher tried to find out. According to Brückner, the origins of cultural stagnation should be sought in the lack of schooling. The scholar noted that the West (including Poland) could not boast of liturgy and science in their mother tongue – Polish, Czech, etc. Instead, in Rus', the liturgy was conducted in the Church Slavonic language, so understanding and conducting religious rites required only basic reading skills. An education of a higher level, not to mention scientific knowledge, was inaccessible not only to the masses, but also to the elite. Hence, according to the scholar, the complete decline of literature and culture in general. Brückner concluded that ancient knowledge and literature were dead capital, and theology, as the only possible and accessible knowledge, led to the decline of thought (Brückner, 1901, s. 916-918).

The scholar also touched upon the problem of the cultural isolation of Rus', which also became one of the factors of the lack of progress in cultural life. The scholar stated that for Orthodox hierarchs, the West was a source of apostasy, heresies, and even “devilry”, so any contacts with Western culture were severely cut off, and without intercultural communication, the progressive development of culture was impossible. This was the source of the limited and one-sided nature of Russian culture, which lived its own life (Brückner, 1901, s. 919).

When the Berlin Slavist wrote about Russian culture, he was referring to a single cultural space that covered the entire territory of contemporary Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians, but the monolithic nature of this space was not stable over the course of eight centuries of history. According to the cultural historian, the 13th century became a certain milestone – until then, we can speak of a single Rus' (Kyivan) culture. The Mongol invasion

destroyed this monolith, as did the Polish-Lithuanian expansion. Thus, it was external actors who contributed to the separation of Russian culture from Rus' (Brückner, 1901, s. 927-932).

The transfer of the metropolitan capital to Northeastern Rus meant the migration of the Rus' culture to the north, and ancient Kyivan Rus' became the arena of cultural expansion of the Polish-Lithuanian state, and thus of the West, of Europe. According to Brückner, the establishment of Vladimir and then Moscow as the capital of Orthodoxy completely halted the progressive development of Russian culture – it entered the dark ages and the dawn in this darkness broke only in the late 17th century, after another rapprochement between Kyiv and Moscow. Thus, Aleksander Brückner once again tried to focus his reader's attention on the fact that it was thanks to Western influences from the territory of modern Ukraine that Russian culture received an impetus for development after centuries of decline and darkness (Brückner, 1901, s. 934-935).

For Brückner, even 19th-century Russian literature reflects the two ways in which ancient Russian culture developed. The scholar gave an example of the contrast between Nikolai Gogol's good humour and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin's evil sarcasm and irony. The first imitated the Kyivan branch of the Rus' culture, while the second imitated the Moscow branch. In the same context, the researcher cited earlier examples of the literary work of Tsar Ivan the Terrible and Daniil Zatochnik. Aleksander Brückner interrupted his presentation at the end of the 17th century, when he wrote that all early modern Russian literature was the work of Kyivan scribes, just as the works of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Goncharov, Nikolai Gogol, and Alexander Pushkin would not have been possible if Kyivan literature had not nourished Muscovy with the juices of Western culture (Brückner, 1901, s. 911, 938, 949).

Brückner was attracted to Russian literature, first of all, because of its unapologetic attitude towards the authorities and the system. According to the researcher, no foreigner (including a Pole) has written as much truth about Russia as Russian writers have – about censorship, government pressure, the general attitude of the authorities towards the people as slaves, etc. Brückner recalled the words of Emperor Alexander II, who called the artist Vasily Vereshchagin a nihilist because of his truthful paintings, and the same comparison, according to Brückner, can be extended to literature, which can be called great because it is truthful. The researcher also mentioned specific examples, first of all, Alexander Herzen, who spent his entire life fighting the system and was a great friend of Poland. Saltykov-Shchedrin, according to the Slavist, also depicted the most repulsive aspects of the Russian Empire and did so in a peculiar manner – he wrote “drunk, with gnashing of teeth”, without hiding his anger (Brückner, 1906, s. 14-16).

Aleksander Brückner had a rather original attitude towards Anton Chekhov's work. The scholar quite appropriately noted that if a Pole had written about Russia in this way, he would have been immediately accused of hatred and subjectivity. In this context, Brückner particularly singled out *K svadebnomu Sezonu (The Marriage Season)*, which is saturated with clownery and hatred. However, according to the Slavist, Chekhov sincerely admired those *muzhiks* whom he portrayed with such undisguised hatred in his works. According to Brückner, this explains the contradictory nature of Chekhov's work, which is grey and monotonous on the one hand, and colourful and full of vivid imagery on the other (Brückner, 1906, s. 16-17).

The culmination of Aleksander Brückner's research on the history of Russian literature was a series of his generalising works, which opens with the German-language *Geschichte der russischen Litteratur (History of Russian Literature)*, published in Leipzig in 1905. The scholar considered Russian literature exclusively in terms of its importance for Russians, and not in the context of the global development of culture, while at the same time recognising that Russian literature belonged to the “great” literatures, among which it was considered the

youngest. Defining a distinct difference between Russian literature and, for example, French or German literature, Brückner wrote that thinking Russians, unlike other European nations, do not have freedom of press, speech, or assembly, but literature is their only refuge and source from which they can draw ideas of freedom (Brückner, 1905, s. 1-2).

Thus, Russian studies occupied a prominent place in the scientific heritage of Aleksander Brückner, and the scholar almost exclusively focused on the study of Russian literature as the most reliable reflection of the diversity of the cultural process in the Russian lands. Brückner also included language, education and science in the history of literature and demonstrated a clear connection between these concepts. It is interesting that Brückner separated Russian culture from the state and the authorities. For the researcher, Russia was a centre of barbarism and Asiaticism, but the scholar did not allow such statements about the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is where Aleksander Brückner's statement about cultural barbarism came from when he wrote about the expansion of barbaric Russia with a rich Russian culture. The merger of Russian literature and state power, according to Brückner, is characteristic of the period before the 19th century and after 1917. These were the dark ages of Russian culture, a period of illusory cultural progress.

Aleksander Brückner's texts published in the collection *Slavs and War* are certainly products of their era, but to consider them propaganda agitations would be too simplistic approach. In the title of this article we have used the phrase “understanding Brückner”, but it is possible to truly understand the ideas presented in *Slavs and War* only in the context of Aleksander Brückner's entire scientific heritage concerning the problems of the history of Russian culture. Brückner could be and probably was a Russophobe, but only in relation to the Russian state, to the regime of “Byzantineism” established there, as the author characterised it.

In Brückner's understanding, Russian culture was not inherently enemy and expansionist, but it was used as a weapon by the regime. Interestingly, the scholar traced this instrumentalisation of culture over eight centuries – since the division of Rus' culture into the Kyiv and Moscow branches. In the realities of contemporary times, the essays collected under the cover of the book *Slavs and War* acquire a prophetic halo only because we are dealing not with political journalism of the period of the First World War, but with an original historical and philosophical study of the dialogue between power and culture, where the scientist invested the experience of decades of substantive study of the problem.

Slavs and War has never been translated and published in English, which makes this book practically “invisible” in scholarly and popular discourse. These texts were forgotten almost immediately after publication and are very rarely cited even among the narrow circle of researchers of Aleksander Brückner's creative heritage. This article is an attempt to actualise Brückner's forgotten texts, which require a critical English-language edition. A careful and consistent study of this work is complicated by the peculiarities of the creative laboratory of the scholar, who almost always neglected scientific apparatus, quoted from memory, and was characterised by an uneasy style of writing.

Almost half a century ago, Władysław Berbelicki raised the question of publishing the scientific and epistolary heritage of Aleksander Brückner as one of the pillars of European Slavic studies. This project remained unrealised – cultural studies as a science has moved a long way forward and Brückner's texts look like only historiographical artefacts from the point of view of their scientific value. However, the next expansionist turn of Russia, aimed at assimilation and absorption, makes us once again address the texts of the collection *Slavs and War*, which help us to understand not so much Brückner himself, but the truths that the scientist tried to convey to European minds more than a hundred years ago.

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Є. Горб

РОЗУМІЮЧИ БРЮКНЕРА: «СЛОВ'ЯНИ ТА ВІЙНА» З ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ XXI СТОЛІТТЯ

Минуло понад сто років відтоді, як польсько-німецький славіст Александер Брюкнер (1856-1939) опублікував свою збірку есеїв під нічим не примітною назвою «Слов'яни та війна». Світило європейської славістики, вчений, який завжди цурався політики і навіть навколополітичних дебатів, раптово звернувся до найгостріших тем міжетнічних відносин, загострених Першою світовою війною. Книга залишилася непоміченою і загубилася серед сотень інших позицій у розлогій бібліографії Александера Брюкнера. Однак, з точки зору триваючої російсько-української війни, публіцистичні есе Брюкнера, зібрані під однією обкладинкою, читаються як передбачення. Вже тоді вчений попереджав сучасників про нездатність російської культури до діалогу, до співіснування з іншими, слабшими культурами. На його думку, просякнута «візантійщиною» культура Росії здатна лише на експансію, підкорення та поглинання. Брюкнер поставив під сумнів усі можливі міфи про слов'янське братерство та єдність. Бескомпромісні та насичені пропагандистськими штампами, тексти Брюкнера поставили під сумнів репутацію вченого та перетворили його на маріонетку прусського мілітаризму – подібні чутки ширилися наприкінці війни. У запропонованій статті пропонується нова спроба усвідомленого прочитання текстів збірки «Слов'яни та війна», як документа свого часу, синтезу досвіду славіста з міжнародним ім'ям та застереження майбутнім поколінням. Ми звернемо увагу не лише на аналіз текстів Брюкнера, але й на контекст, у якому вони були написані, реакцію, яку вони викликали в суспільстві, та необхідність критичного, коментованого перевидання цієї важливої пам'ятки суспільно-політичної думки першої чверті XX століття. Особлива увага приділяється іншим роботам вченого, присвяченим інтерпретації російської культури, її історії та зв'язків із західними культурами.

Ключові слова: Александер Брюкнер, славістика, Польща, панславізм, панрусизм.