

Mathematician's flag is deepest space

by Harun Šiljak - Wednesday, December 23, 2015

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The man starting our story is Vladimir Gershonovich Drinfeld. In 1990, Drinfeld was awarded the Fields Medal, the greatest prize for a mathematician. He is mentioned here because of an interesting detail found in works related to his: the Zastava space.

Name Zastava space appeared in mathematical papers after one mathematician's visit to Croatia. That leaves no space for doubt, it got its name after the Serbo-Croatian (general name for Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Montenegrin used back then) word zastava, meaning flag, banner (or as we sometimes put it poetically around here, bajrak [from Turkish bayrak]).

However, the fun thing about word zastava is that it has three different, separate meanings in different Slavic languages. The meaning mentioned already (flag) appears in Serbo-Croatian, and even the Hungarian word zászló originates from it. But what are the other meanings?

Slovaks, the Czech, Poles and Ukrainians call the collateral (pledged for the repayment of a loan) zastava (from the verb to put). On the other hand, the East side, Russians, Belarussians and Bulgarians call the guard post zastava (from the verb to stop, which again originates from the verb to put). In Serbo-Croatian, we call the latter karaula which is in turn a Turkish word (karavulhane), so if you run into the Russian movie Tihaya zastava here, you might be tempted to think it means A Quiet Flag (what a name!) but it's actually A Quiet Outpost. In turn, our movie Karaula (Borderpost) is in Russian translated as Pogranzastava.

At this point, let me ask you something. In Yugoslav People's Army we had the rank of zastavnik. Is that originally a person in a zastava (outpost) or a person carrying a zastava (flag)? A quick check in other Slavic languages brings us to a discovery that zastavnik is called praporchik there, and prapor is an old Slavic word for flag. So we settled that. But wait... praporci are jingles in South Slavic languages, what do jingles have to do with flags? Think about it.

We already mentioned the Turkish word bajrak we use in South Slavic languages. Ottomans had another word for a flag or a standard which is very often mentioned around here, but not in that context: sandžak (originally sanjak). Sanjaks were also the Turkish administrative areas in provinces, and that is the reason why a border region of Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro is called Sandžak today (during the Ottomans, it was the Sanjak of Novi Pazar). Sanjak is an Ottoman military/war flag, such as the one you see here, Admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa's flag.

What do you see there? A lot of Freemason symbols, you'll say. That's exactly why I've put it there (one of the antifeuilletons to follow will be about Freemasons as well, you'll love it).

The truth is, of course, that Hayreddin Pasha had absolutely no relation with Freemasonry. The top of the flag is a Quran quote, corners contain the names of the first four Caliphs, the middle part is not a compass

but the famous double-bladed sword of Ali, Zulfiqar with the Seal of Solomon, the motive from the ring of King Solomon known to all Abrahamic religions. We usually consider it an exclusively Jewish (star of David), but it's not rare in Islamic tradition either (see coins in 19th century Morocco, for example).

OK, that's enough for one take. I know this text seems like a stream of consciousness, but I had to provide the foundation for this particular Glass Beads Game somehow. In the next antifeuilleton called Fun with flags: Take two except more flags, and bring your own if you want!

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¹ *The worker's flag is deepest red, popular socialist song.*

[This is the forth of a 10-article series to be published in the coming few weeks at Gonit Sora.]

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