

# How the experience of the 1918-1948 period influences national ideologies

What is the role of the seminal moments, figures and processes of the 1918-1948 period in current political and public discourses? What is the role of myth that either emerged during this era or relates to it in retrospective? It seems that they matter – otherwise there would be no, among other events, National Independence Day in Poland. Similarly, Czech castle would not display the Hussite flag to commemorate the burning of Jan Hus, and hence perpetuate myth of relation between a fraction of medieval Protestants and Czech nation, associated with politics of memory of the first Czechoslovak republic.

Particularly influential episode that strongly informs current discourses is the Second World War. For some, like the Polish and the Czech, it was the time of oppression, occupation and suffering. These experiences facilitated later emergence of mythologies of resistance<sup>1</sup> and courage that are being often called up to prove the strength of the nation. It is specifically the case with Poland and its resistance movement or Armia Krajowa, but often appears in Czech public discourse as well – usually connected with the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich or the bravery of Czechoslovak pilots in the Battle of Britain.

Events of the Second World War are not only sources of national pride but sometimes shame, trauma or animosity. These mechanisms were at work in the much disputed case of Brno's apology for the atrocities committed during expulsion of its German citizens shortly after the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> The conflict over whether an apology to supposed perpetrators of murders of Czech people is appropriate or not brought to light hidden aggression and conceptions of collective fault as well as fundamental cultural differences of nations. But maybe such reactions are the symptoms of social catharsis.

Feelings of postponed shame can be felt in discourses of Slovakia and Hungary, countries whose citizens and representatives knowledgeably and officially collaborated with Adolf Hitler's Third

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Józefik, B., Sz wajca, K. 2011. „Polish myths and their deconstruction in the context of Polish-Jewish relations“ in *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* 13 (1): 35-41.

<sup>2</sup> „Czech city remembers expelled ethnic Germans“ in *dw.de* [online] [retrieved 1.6. 2015]. Approachable from: <http://www.dw.de/czech-city-remembers-expelled-ethnic-germans/a-18487935>

Reich and participated (sometimes with extreme initiative) in mass murders of Jewish citizenry. These matters are still the matter of public debate – how to regard e.g. the Slovak war state? While one interpretational strain emphasizes the supposed positives<sup>3</sup> - national emancipation, autonomy and myth of economic well-being, the others see this all in the shade of fundamental violation of human rights and servile collaboration with aggressive totalitarian power.<sup>4</sup> The discourse is rarely univocal.

Normative matrices of interpretation of events changed several times since the mid-war era. Firstly, during the period of nation building when the necessity of common historical consciousness emerged. Then in the wake of the Second World War, at times of occupation and collaboration, either enforced by foreign authorities or inspired by their example. After that, the Communist takeovers led to massive process of reevaluations and reappraisals of the past. Salient examples of Communist interpretations might be the temporary fates of Józef Piłsudski or Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. While the first one became an “incompetent egotist with Napoleonic pretensions,”<sup>5</sup> the latter ended up as a “deceitful bourgeois legend.”<sup>6</sup>

The fall of the Iron Curtain brought not only a new generation of historians who can freely analyze and comment on the past, but also a revival of nationalist sentiments and emergence of movements that cordially embraced old mythologies and invented new interpretations. The extent to which these are informed by particular interpretations of the experience of the crucial 1918-1948 period – and what such inspiration tends to generate, still requires an analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> Apologetic perspective offered by Ďurica, M. S. 2006. *Jozef Tiso (1887-1947)*. Bratislava: Lúč.

<sup>4</sup> Critical perspective on Jozef Tiso and Slovak war state: Kamenec, I. 2013. *Tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka. Dr. Jozef Tiso, 1887-1947*. Bratislava: Premedia.

<sup>5</sup> Biskupski, M. B. 2012. *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland*. Oxford: Clarendon

<sup>6</sup> Hnilicka, K. 1957. “The Communist Anti-Masaryk Propaganda in Czechoslovakia” in *American Slavic and East European Review* 16 (2): 160-0174.