

Persons who became myths

It is not uncommon for those who actively participate in public sphere to become subjects of free interpretation of their actions and character.¹ They gradually enter popular narratives in which they appear not as flash-and-blood figures but rather as symbolic constructions: sometimes complex, sometimes rather simple. Major figures of politically and socially turbulent era between 1918 and 1948 were no exception in this respect, but rather salient examples of the process. Many of those who took part in establishment of national states would, in some cases still in their lifetime, find firm positions in new myths of national emancipation. Depending on both their role and the way in which people, informed by their social background, public interpretations and educational system, understood historical experiences they would become heroes or villains of the new narratives. The luckiest of them rose to the exclusive positions in which their entire biographies became perceived as mythological structures, paralleling the struggle of entire nations. This is often the case with the “fathers of the nation”.

Figures like Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Józef Pilsudski, Miklós Horthy or Jozef Tiso became over time normatively laden, culturally resonant icons² that often serve as synecdochic embodiments of Good or Evil – their names symbolically pollute as well as sanctify³. Indeed, not only the political leaders were subjects of this process, for one must think of those who became discursive examples of will and moral strength, like Mordechai Anielewicz⁴. Many on the other side became the ultimate synecdoches of evil. Here might one think, for example, of Karl Hermann Frank.

The unstable nature of normative dichotomies and shifting position of these icons was specific in the Central-East European region mainly thanks to heterogeneity as well as abrupt political changes that brought about discursive transformations. While for one nation, a certain figure could be an

¹ Berger, S. 2009 „On the Role of Myth and History in the Construction of National Identity in Modern Europe“ in *European History Quarterly* 39 (3), pp. 490-502.

² On iconicity and cultural resonance see Bartmanski, D. 2012. „How to become an iconic social thinker: The intellectual pursuits of Malinowski and Foucault.“ in *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15 (4), pp. 427-453

³ On processes of symbolic pollution and construction of good and evil see e.g. Alexander, J. C. 2003. *The Meanings of Social Life*. New York: Oxford University Press: 109-121.

⁴ Lentin, R. 2000. *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah. Reoccupying the Territories of Silence*. New York: Berghahn Books.

undisputable hero, like Masaryk for Czechs, their perception and moral connotations might turn out to be more problematic when seen, in this case, from the point of view of Slovak nationalists.⁵ From the diachronic point of view of historical development, one can see how power relations, e.g. the German occupation, or later the Communist coups; decisively influenced the interpretation of seminal figures.

Most of these mythical figures of the first half of the 20th century did not simply vanish after some time. They still exist in contemporary political and civic discourses and up to this day influence our thinking about our history as well as about what is moral and what is not. Discussions concerning the nature and place of these figures in history of nations still proliferate. This is particularly true of countries with controversial past, particularly of Slovakia and Hungary due to their pro-German leaning during the Second World War.⁶ Pertaining ambiguities in interpretations imply that cultural traumas still have not been healed. On the other hand, interpretations do not only divide. Right on the contrary – their accordance provides strong base for togetherness and group identity.

The question today is how these myths came to existence and what do they mean for contemporary society. What were the conditions of their emergence and what was the logic behind the choice of figures? To what extent have they represented cohesive elements in contemporary society – and to what extent have they divided it and continue to do so even today? Are processes of such personified mythologization at work today as well? In order to find answers to these questions, the sociopolitical context, the myth, and its object must be subject to critical, sometimes even subversive, investigation.

⁵ See Felak, J. R. *At the price of the republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party 1929-1938*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press.

⁶ E.g. Schiff, A. 2013 „Hungarians must face their Nazi past, not venerate it.“ in *Guardian* [online] [retrieved: 1.6. 2015]. Approachable from: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/hungarians-must-face-nazi-past-not-venerate-it>.