

Eduard Krekovič – Elena Mannová – Eva Krekovičová (eds.): Mýty naše slovenské (Slovak National Mythology)

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Myths are taken for granted and unperceived part of our everyday lives. They are helpful in the creation of both personal and collective identities; they represent bonds in a society and have a significant social function. Myths serve as support for an individual and they establish apparent simplicity and certainty in our thinking. On the other hand, myths are often misused for attaining power and legitimising various (mainly undemocratic) regimes. Although, in general, one could say that a myth is a good servant but a bad master, in science (and especially in historiography) it is a bit more complicated. In contrast to myth, which operates with historical reality more freely, historiography should hold on to facts. However, the question of choosing the relevant facts according to which a past is reconstructed remains. Withholding information and a selective selection of events allows the reconstruction of an ostensibly truthful but mythology-like history.

Several painful spots of Slovak history, which have often been misinterpreted or suppressed, are re-examined in „Slovak National Mythology“ (Mýty naše slovenské). The book consists of 25 texts written by Slovak social scientists (historians, ethnologists, archaeologists, folklorists, sociologists, political scientists and orientalist) that were published in 2003 in the Slovak daily newspaper *Sme* as series about Slovak national myths. The main idea of the series was „to highlight the facts that have not always been interpreted in accordance with historical facts or ideologically misused“.

The texts are arranged chronologically. The analysis starts with the beginning of Slovakia as a historically demarcated territory with a specific ethnic group and is followed by an analysis of the times of Pribina, Svätopluk, Cyril and Metod, Matúš Čák Trenčiansky, Juraj Jánošík, Ľudovít Štúr, Milan Rastislav Štefánik, Andrej Hlinka, Jozef Tiso and Gustáv Husák. In addition to the mythologizing of personalities, the authors also focused on myths related to certain localities (Devín, Martin, and Nitra), to certain regimes (the Slovak Republic in the years 1939-1945, and the run up to communism) or general myths regarding the character and fate of the Slovak nation.

In her introductory study, Elena Mannová examines the meaning and origin of myths and mythologies in general, and scientific research made on them. She highlights certain details from the mythologies of different countries. At this point, an emphasis on several Slovak particularities would be welcomed, since we can talk about a delayed Slovak national revival, which meant that when other

nations were already debunking their myths, the Slovak nation was only just creating them. Elena Mannová also deals with other specific characteristics of Slovak myths which she classifies as sufferer's myths (the myth of the thousand year subjugation, the myth of the sacrifice of history, and the myth of plebeianism), the myths of a centre (a concentration of the best qualities and values, and a mediation between East and West), the myths of rebellion (Jánošík), and the myths of the smaller evil (Tiso and Husák).

Authors who write about myths can follow two basic approaches. They can focus either on the origin and development of the myth or on historical facts, which disprove it. In the latter case, a consistent historiographic description of the event or a person, which has been mythologized needs to be provided, thus serving as a kind of „correction“ of the representation. Most of the texts in this book have been written as a synthesis of both these approaches with an emphasis on the clarification of a historical event as well as with references to the history of each myth. For instance, we discover that neither Pribina nor Svätopluk nor Matúš Čák Trenčiansky can be considered Slovaks although Slovak nationalists have, at various times, appropriated them. The title „the Great Moravian empire“ („Veľkomoravská ríša“) was created much later than the 9th century, when this principality was certainly not so named. There is an historical evidence that the Christianisation of the Slovak territory was the work of Latin priests and thus of the „west“ and not the mythologized Cyril and Methodius and their Byzantine mission. Juraj Jánošík robbed for only about a year, he never studied at a seminary and he did not give his gains to the poor. Milan Rastislav Štefánik did not speak correct Slovak, only the western-Slovak dialect and Andrej Hlinka became a crusader for the Slovak state only after his death. Gustáv Husák was a pragmatist obsessed by power who after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact army took advantage of the situation and worked his way out to the forefront of the party, changing from a reformer into a “normalisator” who was enforcing a model of federation that in fact never operated as a federation. The myth of social justice from 1948 to 1989 is brought into question for example by facts from the health care system where the representatives of the communist party had their own sanatoria. And even ordinary people were not treated equally. „They were prescribed medication according to the number on their prescriptions. The number indicated the category of their working position according to its usefulness for the state. Children and retired people were in the category „0“.“ (Marína Zavacká, *Myths of the Building of Communism*, p. 236)

Another approach is taken by authors who seek to analyse the myth itself – its origin, maintenance, and function in society. This kind of analysis can be applied by any kind of social scientist. An interesting study is provided by Andrej Findor about „the thousand year oppression“ of the Slovak nation, which he refers to as

national chiasm. The authors show that the Slovak „myth of the victim“ (Vladimír Krivý, Elena Mannová), which, as the authors show, was nothing unusual in Central Europe. However, its duration is. Since the thousand-year oppression, it has continued in the notions of Slovakia in 1918-1938 as a „Czech colony“, of fascism and communism as „foreign“ totalitarian ideologies that had infiltrated Slovakia, and of Slovakia after 1989 as a victim of economic transformation. It is interesting that the national myths are connected with the most celebrated Slovak figures. According to a survey for the book „Collective identities in current Slovakia“ (2004) the top of the Slovak pantheon is occupied by the trio of Alexander Dubček, Ľudovít Štúr and Milan Rastislav Štefánik. All three had a tragic death, which could be easily converted into martyrdom within the national ideology. Moreover, both Dubček and Štúr lived a life filled more with disappointments than successes. Their fate reflects the distorted history that has characterised the Central European region for at least 200 years. It seems as if we, Slovaks, could not have a rich, stable, and successful figure at the top of our pantheon who could have a happy life and carry out his or her visions. Such a person, because of Slovak history and the changes of states, regimes, and ideologies, would necessarily have been an opportunist

As Vladimír Krivý and Elena Mannová have noted, the myth of a victim is also useful for the appraisal of Slovak history between 1939 and 1945. Regarding that period of time, an even stronger demythologisation is provided, not only by pointing out various myths connected with the regime (which is undoubtedly helpful and praiseworthy considering the current activism of different pseudo-fascist movements glorifying Tiso's regime) but also by exposing the myth of Slovakia as a victim of German Nazism. Although Tiso's regime was totalitarian, the majority of the Slovak society supported it. Slovak society was not united thanks to the Slovak national uprising. In fact, it was divided into pro-regime and antifascist factions. It would be interesting, although probably not practicable, to find out how many Slovaks were on each of these sides. It is a historical paradox that Slovakia in the 20th century fought in both world wars on the side of the losers but after the war appeared on the side of winners. Joseph Heller's aphorism, which originally refers to Italy, is fitting for Slovakia as well. Heller says that it is not important to win a war, but the real art lies in losing a war and in knowing how to lose it.

The passage concerning the demythologisation of the Slovak nation's origin seems terminologically problematic to me. Some authors (Ján Steinhubel, Vladimír Turčan) refer to a „medieval Slovak nation“. Ján Steinhubel claims that the Nitra principality was fundamental for the formation of the Slovak nation. Ľudovít Turčan emphasises the role of the Hungarian state in a definition of the Slovak nation against the Hungarian „Others“. However, the concept of a

„medieval nation“ is rather inconvenient for a sociologist. In sociology, the nation is usually understood as an entity, which has been created concurrently, in the context of modernisation processes, and thus several centuries later. The nation as a sociological notion has a different quality than of any medieval ethnic group. During the Middle Ages, the notion of equality among all members of a nation was not possible. Therefore, communication within an ethnic group seems to be problematic. Moreover, national identity can be formed only upon the basis of modernisation. It would be more correct (although less elegant) to apply the term „ethnic group“ or „the Slovak ethnicity“ which is used by some authors (e.g. Miroslav Hroch). This term implies that the modern nation can, but does not have to be created after the fall of feudalism. Referring to a medieval community as a nation entails the risk of sliding into primordialist concepts of nation that represent a kind of scientific myth. However, this is only a minor terminological problem that does not detract from the quality of the publication.

The book „Slovak National Mythology“ (Mýty naše slovenské) is fascinating not only for its informative value but also for 62 charming and cheerful reproductions of period photographs, posters, pictures, and post cards. The texts are very literary (the essay by Ivan Kučma analysing the town Martin is fantastic) and also often contain humorous observations or real stories connected with the myths. Each text includes further recommended reading. The book will likely speak to the broader public and at the same time provide valuable knowledge for scholars. Hopefully, there will be more works similar to this one published in the future. In Slovakia, such books as well as a critical debate on their content is still less frequent than the misusing and fabricating of various, not only national, myths. This book has already managed to stimulate intellectual debate. A series of articles by Rudolf Chmel in the daily newspaper Sme at the end of September and the beginning of October provides an example. As the author acknowledges, his „summer contemplation“ was directly inspired by the book „Slovak National Mythology“. In her introductory study, Elena Mannová draws our attention to the myths, which are missing in this publication, principally the myth of Alexander Dubček, and the myth of the Velvet Revolution. The absence of a text on Alexander Dubček, who, according to surveys, is the most honoured figure in Slovak society, is compensated by Rudolf Chmel's article. He attempts to reassess Dubček's myth and states that this myth has a chance to survive only as transformed from the European ideologically-political myth (Dubček represented socialism with a human face) into national one, which it tends to do. However, for historians Alexander Dubček still remains an open topic, which definitely deserves a thorough reappraisal.

There are more difficulties regarding the missing text on the mythologisation of the Velvet Revolution. Ľubomír Lipták's remark is that there was a myth

formed that the jingling of keys on the city squares defeated the communist regime. At this point it is probably best to add a joke from the Polish dissident Adam Michnik, who had heard it from his friends in Prague. „What must happen so that the Russians leave? There are two possibilities - one rational and one miraculous. The rational possibility is that Saint George, who killed a dragon, comes to the Visla and chases the Russian army away. And what is the miracle? If they leave by themselves.“ Gorbachov's perestroika, that lead through unintended consequences to the collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia, was thus a miracle.

Understandably, it is very difficult to eliminate the most powerful myths. Dubček is at the present the most honoured person, and the „Velvet Revolution“ is for us a symbol of at least a belated revolt against the communist regime. It is hard to admit that both Dubček and the Velvet Revolution were more the products of that time and circumstance than of our own will and intention. These and other mythologies are still waiting for analysis. Hopefully they will be written as absorbingly as the texts in the book „Slovak National Mythology“ (Mýty naše slovenské).

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