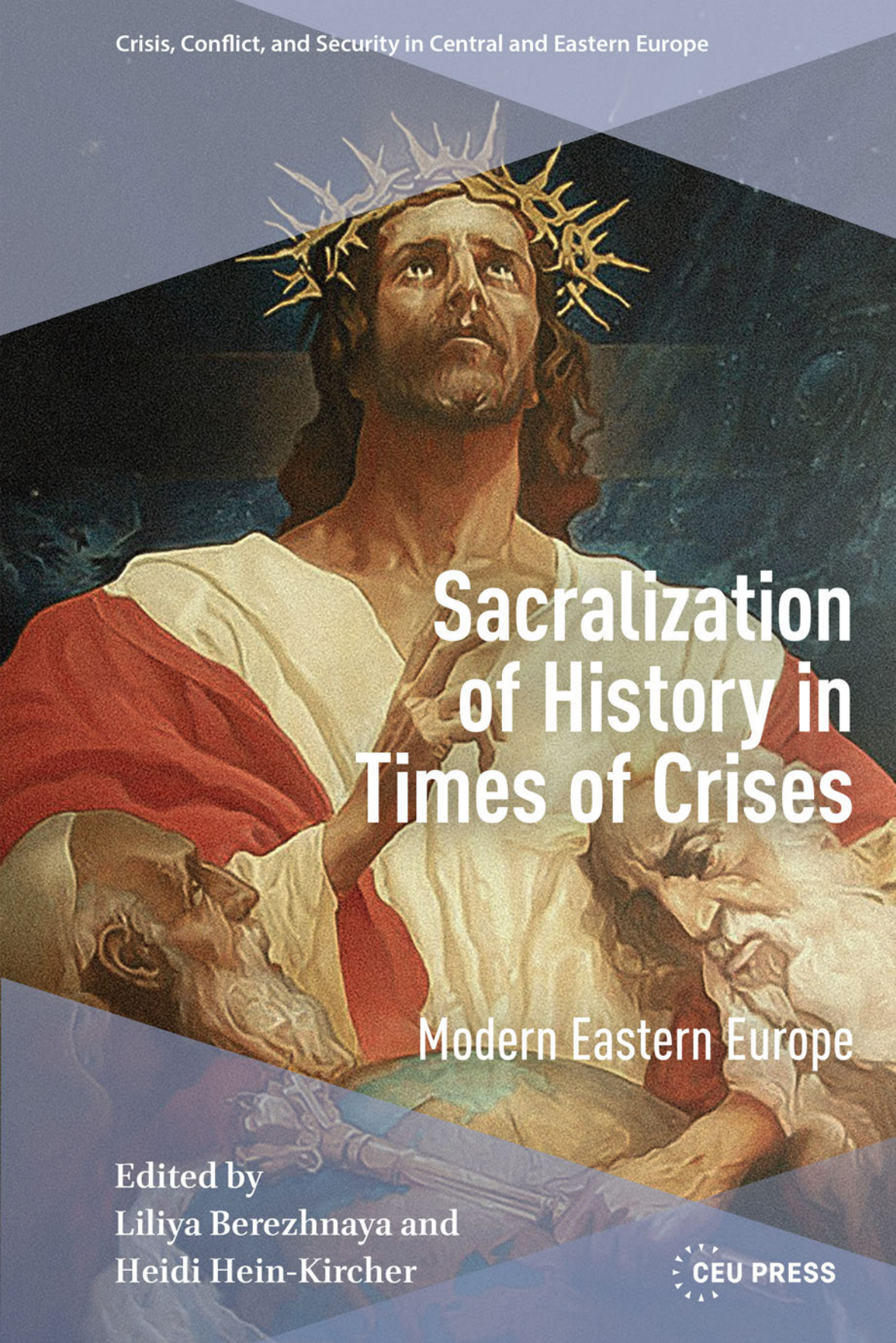


Crisis, Conflict, and Security in Central and Eastern Europe



Sacralization of History in Times of Crises

Modern Eastern Europe

Edited by
Liliya Berezhnaya and
Heidi Hein-Kircher

 CEU PRESS

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1. The Sacralization of History in Modern Eastern Europe: Introductory Remarks

Liliya Berezhnaya and Heidi Hein-Kircher

Abstract: The introduction contextualizes case studies presented in the chapters by providing conceptual reflections on the importance of sacralizing history in modern East European societies. It defines key terms such as “securitization,” “sacralization,” “secularism,” and “post-secularism.” Ultimately, it concludes that the sacralization of history tends to occur predominantly in regions where there is a fundamental social consensus, be it positive or negative, regarding the past, particularly during times of crisis. Conversely, this phenomenon can also manifest in countries where intense political controversies surround the interpretation of history. Central to this process is the societal sense of insecurity and the active involvement of mnemonic actors in propagating religious imagery.

Keywords: sacralization of history, securitization of memory, secularism, post-secularism, Central Europe, Eastern Europe

Most monuments and museums commemorating the Holodomor and other Soviet repressions in present-day Ukraine are adorned with Christian symbolism. It is not strange, then, that the majority of the churches in Ukraine play a significant role in shaping the discourse on Ukraine’s violent Soviet past—including the Holodomor period—as a time of repression and genocide. Following Ukrainian independence in 1991, local priests frequently attended ceremonies to bless crosses and memorials dedicated to the memory of Holodomor victims.

Dignitaries from various Christian denominations, particularly the Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, and Protestants (predominantly Pentecostals, Adventists, and Baptists), are actively engaged in public discussions on historical issues. Some of them have expounded the

spiritual factors underlying the Soviet repression in Ukrainian territories during the twentieth century, discussing these themes in categories of sins, apostasy, and repentance.¹ So, for instance, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate established the “Day of remembrance of the victims of repressions, Holodomor, concentration camps—Victims of human sins and apostasy” on the last Sunday of September. In 2013, Metropolitan Volodymyr (Sobodan) published an appeal that in large parts repeated the position of the former Ukrainian government:

Millions of people died in terrible torment on the generous Ukrainian chernozem. This genocide was an attempt to destroy the very soul of the people, to lead them to complete spiritual slavery. It became an instrument of the diabolic revenge for the inability to eradicate filial memory of God, love of God, faithfulness, and faith in God, from the consciousness of our wise and virtuous people. This faith could be destroyed only through the physical elimination of its bearer. Therefore, the God-fighting authorities, having created a spiritual famine, doomed the nation to physical hunger.²

Archbishop Ihor (Isichenko) of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church went even further in November 2008, claiming the Holodomor as genocide during the whole Soviet period, when Bolsheviks were “murdering people just for speaking Ukrainian.”³ In November 2018, Valeriy Antoniuk, the head of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, commented on Holodomor as “powerlessness and despair of human misery and the resilience of the national spirit” and explained it with “the cruelty, unhealthy authoritarianism, and cynicism of those who do not have God in their minds.”⁴ Such examples demonstrate that Ukrainian churches were, and continue to be, very active participants in the construction of memory landscapes, not least in relation to the Soviet past. Churches played a major identity-forming role in today’s Ukraine even before the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022.⁵

Similar attempts have also been observed in contemporary Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church’s comments on the atheist Soviet past leave room for ambiguity in interpretations. The problem with the Soviet past is not

1 Fert, “Equivocal Memory”; Zhurzhenko, “Commemorating”; Kudela-Świątek, *Eternal Memory*.

2 RISU.UA. “Mytropolyt Volodymyr u zvernenni do 80-i richnytsi.” See also Fert, “Churches and Memory.”

3 Cit. from Zhurzhenko, “Capital of Despair,” 615.

4 Vseukrainskyi Soiuz tserkov evangel'skykh khristian-baptystiv, “Do Dnya.”

5 See the chapters by Yurchuk and Fert and by Kudela-Świątek in this volume.

only whether the atheist regime was secular in its nature, or whether it was “never [an] empty” “sacred space,” but that it was also a story of collective trauma and heroism.⁶ As such, it is difficult for the Russian Orthodox Church to combine the memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War—the major success of the Soviet regime—with recollections of the mass repressions against Orthodox believers.⁷ The outcomes here are sometimes contradictory, have ambivalent meanings, and reflect engagement in a common search for a kind of sacralized “usable past.”⁸ War veterans are often equated with Christian martyrs, whereas victory over Nazi Germany is seen in spiritual terms.⁹ The narratives of the Russian Orthodox Church also provide a certain “chain of memory” connecting contemporary Russia with the prerevolutionary period, marking Soviet times as a semantic break wherein religion was “deprived of memory.”¹⁰ Zuzanna Bogumił and Tatiana Voronina highlight this “orthodoxization of memory in Russia,” indicating the prevalent influence of religious themes in memorial culture. Recollection of the Soviet era and World War II is also portrayed through Orthodox perspectives. Secular commemorations have essentially been relegated to the background.¹¹

This “sacred memory” is openly celebrated in the highest political circles and media in Russia today.¹² At the forefront is what is termed the “conservative turn,” depicted with hues of Christian messianism. Eventually, Soviet socialist morality is also given a conservative expression: “It provided a type of moral community, a sense of integration, order, and shared values.”¹³ Some of these still persist today. However, the coexistence of “multiple moralities” is not unique to Eastern Europe. To some extent Russia and Eastern Europe are set apart by the sacralized historical narratives that accompany these convictions and occasionally legitimize contentious political projects.

In the Balkans also, we observe multiple forms of “unblocking the sacred” in its nationalized form, which always addresses the historical past. One example is the ritual of *badnjak*, known throughout Southeastern Europe

6 Luehrmann, “Was Soviet Society Secular?”; Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*; Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*.

7 Our author Ekaterina V. Klimenko affirms that the Russian Orthodox Church’s martyrological mnemonic project attempts to give an answer to the difficult question of the price of victory in World War II. Klimenko, “Martyrological in Form.”

8 Malinova, “Constructing.”

9 See the chapters by Falina and Klimenko in this volume.

10 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion*.

11 Bogumił and Voronina, *More Than Alive*.

12 Griffin, “Putin’s Holy War.”

13 Wanner and Steinberg, “Introduction,” 3.

as a Christmas practice. It consists of the burning of a log to commemorate Christ “accompanied by either a local family ritual or a ritual performed by a priest.” Historians still discuss whether the revival of this ritual in the postcommunist Balkans (particularly, in Montenegro and Serbia) could serve as an example of the conflicting forms of local nationalism (since the 1990s many celebrations have incorporated national flags). Taking Montenegro as an example,

the religious phenomenon of ritual needs to be understood as a function within certain historical and cultural contexts before its function within the political system can make sense. [...] Christmas in Montenegro is not only a religious event celebrating the birth of Christ, but it is closely intertwined with Eastern Orthodox history and related to the religious and political fate of the region. Christmas in Montenegro marks the birth of Christ, as well as the Montenegrin Vesper, the Montenegrin civil war. [...] Therefore, it is perhaps the most important holiday for commemorating the Montenegrin past.¹⁴

Similar attempts to sacralize history and hence the nation through a politics of memory are particularly visible in Poland. There, conservative political circles, particularly the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), in power from 2014 to 2023, aligned themselves with the Catholic Church even though the 1997 Polish constitution guarantees the “impartiality” of state as well as “principles of respect for the autonomy and mutual independence” of state and church(s) and promises equality of denominations (see art. 25).¹⁵ Yet, the preamble to the new law on education passed in 2016 postulates that public education should “respect the Christian system of values” (“respektując chrześcijański system wartości”).¹⁶ Considering that the law also demands “love for the fatherland” and “respect for the Polish cultural heritage,” it is clear that nationalism and the respect for the (Catholic) faith go hand in hand for PiS. Moreover, as the investigative portal *Oko* shows, PiS politicians have actively pursued an alliance with the Catholic Church. For example, in July 2023 fifty PiS politicians participated in the twenty-first pilgrimage to the icon of the “Black Mother” in Częstochowa, which

¹⁴ See the discussion on the meaning of the ritual in Saggau, “Unblocking the Sacred,” 43–46; Saggau, *Nationalisation of the Sacred*.

¹⁵ Michał Szewczyk argues in this context about a system of friendly (meaning gentle, or coordinated) separation. Szewczyk, “Wybrane problemy.”

¹⁶ Kancelaria Sejmu, “Prawo oświatowe.”

was organized by the Church's radio station Radio Maryja and television channel I *Remain* (*Trwam*). During the event, PiS's chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński, gave a speech at the altar, shortly before upcoming elections to the Sejm.¹⁷ As such, these pilgrimages continue a tradition in the People's Republic where they became an expression of opposition to the socialist regime.¹⁸

All these examples, whether from Ukraine, Russia, the Balkans, or from Poland, show that the "holy" or the "sacred" is still a mobilizing force in relation to the nation. This points to an interrelation or interaction between nationalism and religion, particularly during crises of national integration. This relation makes reference to the history of specific national groups—their history becomes "colored" with references to faith and church such as, for example, in Polish messianism referencing Poland as the "Christ among the nations" and in the motif of being *antemurale christianitatis*, which is widespread in multiethnic and multidenominational Eastern European borderlands.¹⁹ Hence, on the one hand, "martyrdom" and "victimhood" become important characteristics in the explanation of defeats and tragedies as heroic deeds. On the other hand, we can see an inherent promise in these narratives: that the national community would be secure(d) or survive.

One of our leading hypotheses is that reference to the sacred or ascribing to the nation a sacral characteristic render "the nation" an eschatological category. Thus, the construction of "nation" is a tripartite relation: The movement of nationalization includes discourses of securitization, which, in turn, trigger a sacralization of the nation. This can be schematized, briefly, as follows: Securitizing discourses in multiethnic and nationalizing environments are targeted toward the integration of a (national) group.²⁰ They make use of "othering," since such discourses make clear that the ethnic "other" is the very figure which threatens one's own group. While discourses around securitization are about the ontological security of a group, arguments that counter this threat through a sacralized notion of salvation offer a way out of that threat for the group.²¹ Religion and nationalism are not only analogous phenomena, as Rogers Brubaker argues, but religions help to organize society and to channel social relations, so that religions help to foster identification with one's own group.²²

17 Oko, "PiS zapisał Polskę."

18 See also Głowacka-Grajper's chapter in this volume.

19 Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher, "Introduction."

20 Hein-Kircher, *Lemberg*s.

21 Browning and Joenniemi, "Ontological Security."

22 Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism," 3–4.

Sacralization(s) of History: Historical Continuities and Preconditions

In contemporary Eastern Europe, history has emerged as a crucial element in the construction of national and imperial belonging and identity. Religion and motifs derived from religious beliefs have gained significance in these processes as they represent, following Anthony D. Smith, the primary “deep cultural resource.”²³ Memory, in turn, became a function of the “*sacralization*” of history, imbuing it with a sense of reverence and significance. The utilization of religious symbols and practices for the advancement of national or nationalized imperial causes is not a recent phenomenon but can be traced back to national movements in the nineteenth century. Since then, many political rituals deployed by national movements have taken religious form. It is essential, therefore, to take a brief look back and outline a few historical examples to discern the continuities and preconditions of these practices.

In the case of partitioned Poland, the references to religion in Polish nationalism are particularly obvious beginning with Polish messianism as first outlined by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855). This topos refers explicitly to the martyrology of Jesus Christ, since the Polish nation is portrayed as the Christ due to the Christlike suffering its people. The narratives constructed around Polish sites of remembrance were hence “sacralized.” Already, in everyday life, we see the use of religion for national statements, such as after the January Uprising of 1863–64, when black clothes as a representation of mourning became an expression of opposition to the politics of Russification in the Kingdom of Poland. Anna Novikov has recently concluded that

martyrological and messianic aspects are an integral part of the nationalist patriotic discourse and symbolize the temporality of group suffering, which will end only with resurrection and salvation. In accordance with this, the state of mourning was extended from the private sphere to public space and developed into a significant symbol of group unification around common values. [...] Nationalism, which includes many religious features, adopts this perception of mythological sacral time and thus unifies its believers and supporters.²⁴

²³ Smith, *Nations and Modernism*, 254–56.

²⁴ Novikov, “Black Patriotic Fashion,” 187–88.

Due to the close intertwining of the Catholic faith and nationalism, the stereotypical association “Pole = Catholic” arose during periods of national tensions, particularly in contrast with Germans, who were often identified as “Protestants.”²⁵

Another striking example comes from the Balkans. Specific forms of sacralization in historical narration are evident in the tradition of the “nationalization of the sacred” in the region. In the late nineteenth century, the church hierarchy initiated the “transformation of the peasants into the Bulgarians and Serbs,” by appealing to the revived cults of local saints, hence constructing the national culture of remembrance.²⁶ Also, as aptly noted by our author Maria Falina, the interwar Yugoslav period demonstrated “how a nation can acquire characteristics of a sacred entity not by imitation of a religious ritual or by replacing an established religion, but by effacing the boundaries between national and religious communities.” Contemporary rulers were elevated in the religious ceremonies to the cohort of medieval Serbian rulers, most of whom were saints and national patrons.²⁷

Our third example of historical continuity brings us to the Russian Empire on the eve of the 1917 revolution where the multiconfessional order faced challenges. Confessions underwent reinterpretation regarding their association with national identity as the Russian Empire entered the process of nationalization.²⁸ The official doctrine linked Orthodoxy with monarchy and nationality, while Slavophiles regarded Orthodoxy and communal life as essential components of the Russian *narod*. Similar to Catholicism, Orthodoxy had a transnational character, yet many officials and religious authorities linked it with the ethnic majority. For many, the terms “Russian” and “Orthodox” became synonyms (similar to “Pole” and “Catholic”). Some scholars suggest that, as seen in the cases of Poland and the Balkans, developments in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century Russian Empire could be described as the “nationalization of religion.”²⁹ Other scholars point out that late modern Russian imperial reality indicate the limits of this concept. In the last decades of the old regime, neither an imperial nor a nationalist vision held sway. If the final years of tsarist Russia could be seen as the nationalization of the empire, the regime did so only inconsistently and with reluctance.³⁰ However, contemporary scholarship hardly underestimates

25 Porter-Szücs, “The Birth of the Polak-Katolik.”

26 Rohdewald, *Sacralizing the Nation*; Leustean, “Orthodox Christianity.”

27 Falina, *Religion and Politics*, 128, 106; see also Ljuljanović’s chapter in this volume.

28 Miller and Berger, *Nationalizing Empires*.

29 Utz, *Rußlands*.

30 Aoshima and Staliūnas, “Introduction”; Paert et al., “Confession.”

the significance of religiously influenced language in either bolstering or undermining solidarity among national communities in the late Russian Empire.³¹

Here, we can already see that reference to the sacred sphere had become part of historical narration during the emergence and shaping of national movements, including in the multiconfessional continental empires, that gave identity groups a “sacred touch.” This necessary appeal to the people is, as noted above, the product of “deep cultural resources.”³² Since then, the sacralization of history has meant the sacralization of the nation.

Today, religion has entered the public space in practically all East European countries. The level of involvement in historical politics varies from one region to another depending upon church–state relations, for example, or the intensity of secularization processes and related historical issues. But generally, one can agree with Catherine Wanner that

the instrumental use of clergy, religious sentiment and transcendent symbolism in Eastern Europe [...] reflects the emergence of conditions in which religion is capable of playing an expedient role in processes of forging a new governing and moral order. Religion provides the moral justification for proposed norms of behaviour and legitimates the legal regulations and coercive mechanisms to enforce them. In this way, religion is going public.³³

It is clear that history plays a key role in political myths and cultures of remembrance aiming at social integration. As such, we would not only agree with Peter Berger and Serhii Plokhy that both history and religion are resurgent and back but also argue that they were never absent and remained latent and then activated in service of political projects for the national or imperial belonging, attaining it with peculiar moral authority.³⁴ Just this type of reactivation is the focus of this volume—both in contemporary politics and in the course of modern East European history. Our aim is to present the major actors and preconditions for this reactivation.

³¹ Aoshima, *Entangled Interactions*.

³² Smith, *Nations and Modernism*, 254–56.

³³ Wanner, “Public Religions.” For the “classical” approach to public religions in the modern world, see Casanova, *Public Religions*.

³⁴ Berger, “Desecularization”; Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*; Grzymała-Busse, *Nations under God*, 22.

Conceptualizing the Sacralization of History

As we can see, during crises and societal conflicts history comes back to the surface, gaining importance as a religious inflection. Maria Mälksoo uses the term “mnemonic insecurity” when looking at the role of crises and the feeling of danger in constructing national narratives. She says,

the securitization of historical “memory” whereby “our” narrative of the past is seen as being viciously misunderstood and misrepresented by other(s), whose vision of the past is thus regarded as existentially endangering for our existence as “us,” tends to reproduce mutual insecurities and reinstate historical animosities instead of alleviating them.³⁵

Although we can no longer speak of an overall “monopolization” of historical narratives, a securitization of historical memory, associated with the spread of sacral symbols, has been present in East European societies since the age of nationalism.

How can these trends be described and in what terms? Is it politicization of religion, or maybe the specific development of patrimonial churches?³⁶ Or, does it point more towards the sacralization of nation (meaning the transfer of functions and means of representation from religious systems to the concept of the nation), complemented by the abovementioned nationalization of religion (as a process that inscribed nationality into a religious framework)? Both processes have been observed in the region since the end of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Are we witnessing a new round of this old phenomena? Or do we need a new terminology to describe the role of religious actors in the construction of memory cultures in post-atheist Eastern Europe? To give an answer to these questions we have first to define and discuss the key terms currently being used in academic discourses and from which we derive our approach.

Sacralization

In reference to the historical and constructivist understanding of the sacred, contemporary social scientists define sacralization as a “discursive and non-discursive social practices of attribution through which collectives

35 Mälksoo, “Memory,” 222–23; see also Kisiel’s chapter in this volume.

36 Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*; Yurchuk, “Building.”

37 Schulze Wessel, “Einleitung,” 7; Lehmann, “Die Säkularisierung,” 23; Lehmann and Van der Veer, *Nation and Religion*.

negotiated ultimate values and ideas, respectively the boundaries between immanence and transcendence, within and beyond religion.”³⁸ Ultimately, it deals with practices where “the collective understanding of the sacred extends or shifts from the religious to the non-religious fields.”³⁹ As a result, “places, objects, actions, times or ideas were declared unavailable or non-negotiable through processes of sacralization, the ultimate values acquired a binding force with regard to meaning and norms, and the sacred had a community-founding and power-stabilising effect.”⁴⁰ Sacralization as a boundary crossing and transfer practice is understood as “negotiation of that-which-should-not-be-negotiated.”⁴¹ In this respect it holds a paradox and a permanent dynamic in itself.

Marion Schlette and Volkhard Krech define several “phenomenal areas of sacralization” from a religious and sociological perspective: religious sacralization of the religious (e.g., of sacral objects during the liturgy); religious sacralization of the nonreligious (e.g., canonization of individuals); and nonreligious sacralization of the nonreligious (e.g., of artistic production or of political parties).⁴² For the purpose of this volume, the last two definitions are the most germane to working with historical events. Through sacralization, a historical past as a nonreligious field is redefined by the attribution of the peculiar features of the non-negotiable or the predestined. From a cultural perspective, such practices authenticate the “last values” and help to construct collective identities.⁴³ Friedrich Wilhelm Graf operates in this context with the term “sacral transfer” (*“transfert de sacralité”*) to designate an attribution process for modern societies:

Metaphysical transfers from the Absolute to finite entities such as nations, states, and political institutions of all kinds give them an aura of the God-given, eternal, always already valid and make them appear as conforming to the order of Creation. Such transfers increase the emotional binding force and strengthen the legitimizing foundations of political orders, even in a supposedly secular modern age.⁴⁴

38 Gissibl and Hofmann, “Sacralizations,” 15.

39 Schlette and Krech, “Sakralisierung,” 437.

40 Paulmann, “Sacralization.”

41 Gissibl and Hofmann, “Sacralizations,” 16.

42 Schlette and Krech, “Sakralisierung.”

43 Eschebach, *Öffentliches Gedenken*.

44 Graf, “Sakraltransfer,” 749; see also Paert’s contribution in this volume.

This definition is generally shared by most of our contributors, although there are differences in interpretations. For Wiktorja Kudela-Świątek, sacralization is a concept where historical events are transferred from the profane to the sacred sphere. This interpretation is also valid for Piotr Kisiel, who affirms that the sacralization of history means mostly the application of sacral symbols in both religious and secular institutions and narratives, yet sacredness does not entail and is not always associated with holiness.

Maria Falina, Karin Reichenbach, together with Yuliya Yurchuk and Andriy Fert, dwell upon the “sacrosanct,” meaning nonnegotiable, understanding of historical narratives in the public sphere when religious and ethnic identities are interwoven. For them, sacralized history is a “fixed history.” Ursula Woolley shares this opinion but differentiates between the private “anthropological” and political “discursive” forms of sacralization of history. The former is an open practice, whereas the latter concerns opinion makers and policymakers who produce “nonnegotiable” historical narratives.

Yet, there are other forms of the sacralization of history mentioned in the volume. In her chapter on twentieth-century canonizations, Irina Paert draws upon the concept of “self-sacralization” or “self-transcendence,” coined by the internationally renowned German sociologist and social theorist Hans Joas. In numerous studies Joas has advocated for an affirmative genealogy suggesting that human rights emerge from a process of sacralization of each individual, thereby offering a counterpoint to the traditional narrative of secularization as a hallmark of modernity.⁴⁵ Paert utilizes this concept to illustrate how modern canonizations, serving as fundamental self-sacralization of individuals and society, shape a sacred rendition of history.

Finally, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper opts for a more general understanding of the sacralization of history. For her, the presence of the sacralized past in culture binds together different social spheres, including religion, politics, traditions, art, personal, and family life. In other words, the sacralization of history is a “process of distinction that gives rise to sacrality as an attribution category of the extraordinary.”⁴⁶

Barbara Misztal describes the explosion of the sacralization of memory in post-World War II West European societies and explains it as the result of two trends: “the expansion of passion for memory in our amnesiac societies” and “the emergence of a new wave of spirituality in our supposedly secular societies.” She emphasizes that the traumatic events of the recent past favor such explosions, especially in times of transition. Moreover, both

45 Joas, *Die Sakralität*; Joas, *Power*.

46 Heinzer et al., “Sakralisierung.”

tendencies lead to the proliferation of multiple “group memories” and thus to the pluralization and the problematization of memory.⁴⁷ This correlates with our own observations in this volume regarding modern Eastern Europe, where the upsurge in the sacralization of history coincide with the major historical upheavals and crises.

Secularization

Sacralization is by no means a modern phenomenon and processes of boundary marking between the sacral and profane are to be found in most premodern cultures. The sacralized representations of history were parts of these transfer processes. In this context media, languages, and forms of expression, but also the adherent vagueness of meanings and definitions, are important for historical and religious studies.⁴⁸

However, in modern societies, the sacralization of memory attains new features. As recently observed by Euler Renato Westphal with reference to Paul Ricœur and the French Revolution,

[t]he secularization of memory, with its loss of meaning and of the sacred, has other means to sacralize the memorial commemoration of the great deeds of some figures of a nation, such as the great feats of the French nation and the glorious past of the Republic's heroes.⁴⁹

The general trend is frequently described as a modern secularization of the sacred and sacralization of the secular. Secularization is therefore seen as a precondition of various sacralization processes. As scrutinized by José Casanova, modern secularization

entails a certain profanation of religion through its privatization and individualization and a certain sacralization of the secular spheres of politics (sacred nation, sacred citizenship, sacred constitution), science (temples of knowledge), and economics (through commodity fetishism).⁵⁰

Casanova's observation refers first and foremost to Western forms of modern secularization. Other types of secularization are discussed, more controversially, in various social sciences. “Contested secularizations”

47 Misztal, “The Sacralization of Memory”; see also Hervieu-Léger, *Religion*.

48 Beck and Berndt, *Sakralität und Sakralisierung*.

49 Westphal, *Secularization*, 40.

50 Casanova, “Religion,” 460.

mainly concern questions of whether modernization is always associated with secularization (in the sense of functional differentiation in society, decline of religious practices and beliefs, and privatization of religion).⁵¹ Secularizations and secularities in non-European format are particularly *en vogue*. Concurrently, theologians, sociologists, political scientists, as well as historians and communication experts discuss whether the processes of secularization could be observed in early modern Europe. They also study the peculiarities of secularization in different confessional cultures.⁵²

In general, debates continue to revolve around Max Weber's thesis of modernization as the "disenchantment of the world."⁵³ Social scientists disagree on whether religion has lost its value in modern societies. Alternatively, if it has not, then why not? These debates have reached a complex and highly differentiated level and currently address issues such as "multiple modernities" and "multiple secularities."⁵⁴ Or, as stated by Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, "what this suggests more generally is that 'secularization' should not be understood as a dominant and all-encompassing trajectory, but rather as one component of a larger and more contradictory history, which contains moments of sacralisation as well."⁵⁵ Other sociologists of religion today opt for a differentiated "multi-pragmatical theory" in interpreting the religious landscape of late modernity.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, in relation to late modern Eastern Europe, there are also notable attempts to present political and religious entanglements within the "multiple secularities" framework.⁵⁷ It is essential to underscore that the comparison between Eastern and Western contexts in this regard encompasses not only secularization processes but also the manifestations of political religions associated with totalitarian regimes, as well as unique forms of sacralizing history and memory. For the post-Soviet period in relation to the secular or sacral historical narratives in Eastern Europe, the main questions are: How to explain religious revival in some regions of postcommunist Eastern Europe? Are there any patterns or regularities

51 Gabriel et al., *Umstrittene Säkularisierung*; Zuckerman and Shook, "Introduction."

52 Joas, "Gesellschaft."

53 "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world." Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 155.

54 Burchardt et al., "Multiple Secularities."

55 Katznelson and Jones, "Introduction," 9.

56 Pollack and Rosta, *Religion in der Moderne*, 458–85.

57 Köllner, *Orthodox Religion*; Madeley, "Enigmatic Variations"; Endresen, *Is the Albanian's Religion*.

in these post-Soviet “vulnerable forms of secularization”?⁵⁸ If so, how are they reflected in historical narratives?

There are different answers to these questions. As aptly noted by Klaus Buchenau, one group of scholars that could be marked as “supporters of the substantialist line, frequently speak about a ‘return of the sacred’ or a ‘religious renaissance,’” whereas another group referred to as “stylists”

point to continuities before and after 1989; for them, the massive return of traditional religious organizations into the public sphere is just another proof that in many socialist countries, no real secularization took place and that communism conserved religious forms which “only” had to be re-filled with traditional religious content.⁵⁹

In this book, we deal with both approaches, accentuating the waves of sacralization of history in times of crises and desacralization in more peaceful periods. In particular, Piotr Kisiel, Alexander Agadjanian, Karin Reichenbach, and István Povedák address the question of the post-socialist religious revival in Eastern Europe. They argue for both institutional and noninstitutionalized forms of this revival. Kisiel and Agadjanian pay attention to different levels of secularization and institutionalized religiosity within the region and explain it along the lines of the “stylists.” The revival demonstrated the long-suppressed religiosity and the repressed memory. They also admit a certain dynamic in some countries in the direction of the “fast-paced secularization,” equally implemented in historical narrations. Karin Reichenbach and István Povedák in turn observe the revival of pagan groups, especially those linked to radical political movements, caused by the pursuit for authentically ethnic belonging. Forms of the sacralization of history produced by these niche groups often come into conflict with the historical narratives produced by church actors or other institutionalized authorities. This all contributes to a mosaic of contested sacralizations and secularizations in the region that has been recently termed “post-secularism.”

Post-secularism

We apply this concept in relation to the main narratives of the mnemonic actors acting on behalf of various religious institutions and movements

⁵⁸ Agadjanian, “Vulnerable.”

⁵⁹ Buchenau, “Socialist Secularities.”

in modern Eastern Europe.⁶⁰ Whether the idea of a “post-secular turn” is applicable to East European late modern realities is of growing interest for sociologists of religion, historians, and political scientists.⁶¹ Recent studies also pose the question of post-secular conflicts, meaning confrontations “over values in modern pluralistic societies.”⁶²

The term “post-secular society,” coined by Jürgen Habermas, applies to modern societies without one predominant worldview.⁶³ One feature of such societies is the various forms of “syncretic secularism,” a term suggested by Catherine Wanner to designate “a blending of belief, doubt and non-belief with the desire to belong and the refusal to be coerced by institutions.”⁶⁴ Wanner observes a high level of such secularism in many post-Soviet societies.

At the same time, a growing body of scholarly literature deals with the position of the Russian Orthodox Church as a leading agent (after the state) of historical politics in contemporary Eastern Europe.⁶⁵ This memory politics is seen as part of the post-secular culture and as “civil religion, which smoothly combines practices and ideas from the Communist era, from Orthodoxy theology, and from Western Christian social conservatism.”⁶⁶

The Russian case is one of the most interesting within the East European post-secular memory studies. There are also various other examples in the region of religious, memorial, and secular entanglements.⁶⁷ These are mnemonic narratives that represent “a version of the past in the present, often for the purpose of shaping a desired future.”⁶⁸ Transfer processes and dynamics, regional differences, as well as interconnections with secular memory cultures, are important in this context.

These post-secular constructions include cults of secular martyrs, a modern phenomenon that demonstrates the entanglements of the secular,

60 According to Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, mnemonic actors are defined as “political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past.” Kubik and Bernhard, “Introduction,” 4.

61 McLennan, “The Postsecular Turn”; Rosati, *Making*; Rosati and Stoeckl, *Multiple Modernities*.

62 Stoeckl, *Russian Orthodoxy*. See also Obirek, “Postsekularyzm.”

63 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

64 Wanner, “‘Fraternal’ Nations,” 436.

65 Berezhnaya, “Secularization and Lived Religiosity”; Voronina, “From Socialist Realism”; Agadjanian, “Reform and Revival”; Agadjanian, “Religion and Collective Memory”; Rousselet, “The Russian Orthodox Church”; Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher, “Introduction”; Curanović, *Religious Factor*; Torbakov, “Russian Orthodox Church.”

66 Stoeckl, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 7. See also Köllner, *Orthodox Religion*.

67 Bogumil and Yurchuk, *Memory and Religion*.

68 Linde, *Working the Past*; Linde, “Memory in Narrative,” 1.

religious, and heroic. Since the seminal studies of Reinhart Koselleck and George Moss on the role of the cult of fallen soldiers in shaping modern European society, the cults of the “secular saints” have been given attention in historical studies. Koselleck wrote that during the nineteenth century, and especially after World War I, the political cult of the fallen in Europe not only replaced the cult of the ruling dynasty but also served to legitimize new state structures. The religious interpretation of death in anticipation of resurrection was replaced by an understanding of the meaning of the death of soldiers and officers for the sake of a secular state and national security. This also meant the “democratization of death,” regardless of rank. George Moss has further elaborated Koselleck’s thesis and proposed the consideration of the cult of the dead soldiers within the concept of “civic religion” and the “myth of war experience.”⁶⁹ Recently, Uilleam Blacker and Julie Fedor addressed these issues as examples of modern East European secular martyrs. They argue for several distinctive features of these cults in socialist and post-socialist spaces in Eastern Europe. The cults of secular martyrs, “comprising different mixes of religious and secular language,” reflect the peculiar attitude to suffering that “is not only romanticized and sacralized as a crucible of national identity but often also valorized as something of inherent value in its own right.”⁷⁰

Whether sacralized suffering is indeed a characteristic feature of the post-secular cults in the region is not straightforward. We assume, however, that construction of modern secular martyrs’ cults from a secular-functional perspective can serve as an example of the sacralization and of heroization of the secular. In our volume, the cults of secular saints are most prominently analyzed in chapters by Yurchuk and Fert on the Ukrainian Heavenly Hundred, and by Falina on the Russian “Immortal Regiment.” A further example of heroization is provided in Kudela-Świątek’s chapter, which deals with the image of Ukrainian Berehynia as a combination of Christian and pagan symbols.

Security

This concept has become a key part of a societal value system in modernity, a primary aim of politics and, at the same, an important constituent ground for modern societies. Security is directly linked to the perception of threat with the aim of constructing the feeling of security for one’s own identity

69 Koselleck, “War Memorials”; Moss, *Fallen Soldiers*.

70 Blacker and Fedor, “Soviet and Post-Soviet,” 200; see also Hausmann and Sklokina, *Political Cult*.

group.⁷¹ The related process of securitization describes the perception and interpretation of a threat via a dramatization of the current situation, as well as the measures taken by political actors—particularly during internal crises, upheavals, and turning points—in various spheres, including international relations.⁷² Security has become an important political buzzword, especially for political actors aiming for legitimation during a crisis. It serves as a tool for the legitimization of power relations, of identity and social coherence. Moreover, security as a “thick public good” promises safety for the individual and the collective and hence functions as the sacred—it has become the “gold standard of the political” and an important part of political, historical, and memory cultures because security threats are socially constructed.⁷³ Thus, nationalism and national movements are closely intertwined with political mobilization through securitization:

If it can be stated that national mobilization fundamentally addresses the threat posed by another nation, and therefore that mobilization promises to provide security to the community (in the form of national strength), it is all the more true in multiethnic contexts. [...] [S]ecuritizing practices and discourses become central components of national movements when it comes to (discursively) defending one's own culture and language against the perceived threat from the other group. [...] [N]ational mobilization is inconceivable without discourses and practices of securitization. This finding extends previous research on nationalism, which has focused primarily on the importance of a common history, language, and culture of a nationality, by addressing “ethno-cultural” or “national-cultural” security as a protection against assimilation and acculturation as a central identity-forming and group-maintaining set of values through which one's own group can be “set in motion.”⁷⁴

As such, in this volume we further develop a characterization of “the national” as a promise of security: There is a specific triangular relation between nationalism, the constructed feeling of threat to a specific group because of the perceived crisis of securitization, and the sacralization of history that provides a way out of the respective crisis.

71 Rumelili, “Breaking with Europe's Past.” We thank our colleagues from CRC 138 “Dynamics of Security” (founded by the DFG) for giving us some incentives for reflection.

72 E.g., Bonacker et al., “Republican Freedom”; Wang, *Memory Politics*, 3.

73 Loader and Walker, *Civilizing Security*, 144; Daase, “Der Wandel,” 139; Daase, “Sicherheitskultur.”

74 Hein-Kircher, “Making the Nation Mobile,” 110–11.

Analysis of the military conflict in the Eastern Ukraine since 2014 points to memory of the Heavenly Hundred being interpreted through the security lens. Against the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian War there has been a notable escalation in the securitization of historical narratives. History is often cast as a matter crucial to national security. In their chapter, Yurchuk and Fert elucidate how religion becomes intertwined with this securitization process. Securitization imbues memory and religious involvement with a heightened sense of immediacy and urgency. Consequently, the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred can be venerated as martyrs and saints by the churches without undergoing formal canonization processes as the perceived existential threat justifies those extraordinary measures be taken in their honor.

Hence, our conceptual triad allows the analysis to move beyond the traditional understanding of security in purely military terms. Another example of this triangular relation is given by Woolley, who concludes that public texts on church history in contemporary Ukraine offer a prime opportunity to delve into the discourse around the sacralization of history and the “securitization” of denominational identity. Our analytical perspective, which accounts for the interrelationship between nationalism, the sacralization of history, and securitization, helps us to broaden the interpretative account of why crises and other turning points bring acute spurts of nationalism and shape historical cultures.

One of the possible ways to interpret this resurgence of the “sacred” and “security” in national discourses and practices is to examine the transfer of religious semantics to narratives concerning social memory. Religious rituals, images, and concepts can serve as one source to describe a national past.⁷⁵ This topic is not new to the field, and Anthony D. Smith’s statement about the “sacred” dimension of nationalism is the subject of ongoing debates.⁷⁶ Some scholars articulate differences between modern states and regions in their relationship between memories, religions, and politics. So, for instance, Danièle Hervieu-Léger elaborates on the religious grammars of political memory and affirms that in some countries (Great Britain is a prominent example) the absorption of religious conflicts into the political sphere gradually neutralized their socially explosive potential. In other countries, like France, the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, in direct connection with the memory of old religious conflicts, has transferred this potential into the political sphere. This exclusion, in turn, has greatly

75 See, in particular, Falina’s contribution in this volume.

76 Smith, “The ‘Sacred’ Dimension.”

determined the pluralization of the religious scene.⁷⁷ There are also attempts to categorize religious appropriations by political and memory cultures in time and space. Some of them use East European traditions as examples, while others elaborate the categories of different Eastern European cultures of memory.⁷⁸ Furthermore, in their seminal article Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard suggest different categories of mnemonic regimes and mnemonic actors in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. They also point to the way religious and ethnic groups memories inaugurated the reordering of societies.⁷⁹ This applies, of course, not only to post-1989 events but also to the fall of empires in the early twentieth century, as our volume demonstrates.⁸⁰ The sacralization of memory during times of crises and insecurity primarily occurs in regions where there exists a fundamental social consensus, whether positive or negative, regarding the past. Conversely, it can also occur in countries where intense political controversies revolve around the interpretation of history.⁸¹ What is crucial is the general feeling of insecurity within the social structure and the active role of mnemonic actors in dissemination of religious imaginary.

Several years ago, Rogers Brubaker drew attention to the difficulties when studying “religious or religiously tinged language and imagery” in relation to the history of nationalism. He pointed to several methodological difficulties:

Religious movements that pursue a comprehensive transformation of public life do not become nationalist simply by working through the nation-state; nor do they become nationalist by allying with secular nationalists in anti-colonial struggles or by deploying the rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism. [...] Languages of religion and nation, like all forms of language, can be intertwined pervasively. But even when the languages are intertwined, the fundamental ontologies and structures of justification differ. We can be sensitive both to discursive intertwining and to this fundamental difference.⁸²

This conclusion is empirically grounded in developments in Eastern Europe after 1989/1991. There, memory and historical politics have played a significant role in the construction of identity. During the period of transformation and

77 Hervieu-Léger, “Religion.”

78 Kaneff et al., *Memory*; Troebst, “Jalta versus Stalingrad.”

79 Kubik and Bernhard, “A Theory”; see also Ljuljanović’s chapter in this volume.

80 See the chapters by Ljuljanović, Paert, Aleksidze, and Nedici in this volume.

81 Berezhnaya and Schmitt, *Iconic Turns*.

82 Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism.”

stabilization of the newly established political regimes the role of religion in everyday and political life underwent a revival. With the exception of Poland (and possibly the Balkans), where the influence of the Catholic Church on attitudes was noticeable before 1989 and was employed to form an oppositional force, in most countries of the former Eastern Bloc the reemergence of religious life occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union and Soviet hegemony. This revival was accompanied by two entangled processes of the uses and interpretation of history: the focus on the role of religion in identity and memory politics and the overarching understanding of one's own nation as "holy"—a process in which the nation is attributed a religious character.

Brief Outline of the State of Research

The "sacralization of history" has not yet been systemized to any great extent, and where it has been, there are only a few case studies.⁸³ Although the sacralization of one's own (national) history has become obvious in almost every country in Eastern Europe, it is also an important feature of national and political mobilization in other countries such as the United States. Donald Trump uses references to Christian values and creates a strong tie to the conservative evangelical movements. However, the topic is in many ways still underrated in historiography. The interaction between forms of religious life and the notion of security has been scrutinized in the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security*.⁸⁴ Most recently, these issues have been analyzed in a volume edited by András Máté-Tóth and Kinga Povedák, focusing on the example of Central and Eastern Europe. The authors argue that the role of religion in the region can be primarily characterized and interpreted as one of securitization.⁸⁵ It seems that sacralization foregrounds the use of the threat of other nations in the construction of a specific national and religious identities. This process establishes the ontological status of the specific identity group in national integration and coherence building. This leads to a (discursive) self-thematization and dramatization of the state of one's own group.⁸⁶

Although security is certainly relevant to understanding how societies cohere, it has only recently been introduced into the analysis of nationalism.⁸⁷

83 Wasilewski, "Media."

84 Seiple et al., *Routledge Handbook*.

85 Máté-Tóth and Povedák, *Religion as Securitization*.

86 Bielefeld, *Nation und Gesellschaft*, 10.

87 Hein-Kircher, *Lembergs*; Ramisch-Paul, *Fremde Peripherie*.

Heidi Hein-Kircher showed that securitizing discourses on the nation dramatize its fate and form a gateway for discourses on languages and cultures.⁸⁸ Herewith, securitization as a tool for nation building has received another level of importance for a national group as language, common culture, and history. Security is a promise to the national community—and as such, it is directed towards the future. Hence, we can assume that the dramatization of the national history and the use of sacred motives are two sides of the process of nationalization, while religion as a factor or even a catalyst for securitization has seldom been included in historical security studies.

On a conceptual level, Anthony D. Smith as well as Rogers Brubaker, among others, have tried to scrutinize the role of religion for nationalism and hence described aspects of sacralization.⁸⁹ There have been several other attempts to systematize entanglements between religions and nationalisms.⁹⁰ Some studies, like that of Philip S. Gorski and Gülay Türkmen-Dervisoglu, provide valuable insights into relationships between religious nationalism and violence.⁹¹ This approach has been recently criticized by Christopher J. Soper and Joel S. Fetzer for being “only a brief sketch of the interaction [...] in the different models of religion and nationalism.” Soper and Fetzer suggest concentrating on three major forms of this interaction: secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and civil-religious nationalism. They also argue for “stable” and “instable” relationships within these entanglements.⁹² These studies demonstrate the growing interest in the problems of religion and national consciousness. However, the role of crises, transitions, and other critical turning points in history in relation to sacralization is only occasionally taken under consideration.

Another concerned research field is religious studies. Although religious scholars speak of contemporary society as “desecularized,” only a few have problematized the particularities of the multiconfessional and multireligious landscape in detail from a post-secular perspective. One of these studies is by Massimo Rosati, who deals with post-secular forms of remembrance in contemporary Turkey.⁹³ One more important volume in the field has been recently edited by Ferdinand de Jong and José Mapril. The main argument is that in the contemporary “secularising world, religion has become subject to heritagisation. Simultaneously, the increased reverence for heritage

88 Hein-Kircher, *Lembergs*.

89 Smith, “The ‘Sacred’ Dimension”; Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism.”

90 See, for instance, Rieffer, “Religion and Nationalism.”

91 Gorski and Türkmen-Dervisoglu, “Religion.”

92 Soper and Fetzer, “Theory of Religion.”

93 Rosati, *Making*.

has sacralized our secular heritage. This sacralisation of heritage and the heritagisation of religion produce interesting entanglements of the sacred and the secular.⁹⁴ De Jong and Mapril's book explores the processes of turning religion into heritage and imbuing heritage with sacred significance, at the same time examining the role these dynamics play in shaping the future in a post-secular era.

Another significant development in the field is the recently published volume on religion and memory from a post-secular perspective edited by Zuzanna Bogumił and Yuliya Yurchuk. The authors aim to illustrate the influence of religious mnemonic actors in shaping the memory landscape in contemporary Europe and Asia and propose a reevaluation of the role of religion in memory studies overall. They argue that by examining specific mnemonic practices and discourses, it will be possible to discern the complex interplay between secularization and sacralization, which should not be seen as polar opposites. Furthermore, the authors of the volume caution against oversimplifying religion as merely a tool for sanctifying the nation and viewing religious institutions solely as servants of nation-state ideologies. They argue that this more nuanced view allows for the differentiation of the diverse voices within religious communities, dealing with the construction of historical narratives.⁹⁵

All in all, the religious components of memory and identity politics and their "revival" in political rituals and symbols, particularly in political cults which reference the sacred, has only been undertaken to a limited extent and, as such, the primary question remains unanswered: What contribution does the religious component or the utilization of religiously inspired practices make to societies that have been constructed as a nation?

Contemporary Russia has recently become the focus of research in various disciplines. Nicolai Epplée, for example, picks up the question of the so-called Great Terror and comes to the conclusion that "having no proper language of its own to describe the Great Terror, the state prefers to join the infrastructure of memory developed by the Church."⁹⁶ Maria Engström pays attention to the dominant idea in the Russian public sphere that "the real cause of the current new 'ideological Cold War' between Russia and the United States" is seen as "the collision of two messianic projects with common roots in Christian eschatology and European political thought."⁹⁷

94 De Jong, "Introduction," 1.

95 Bogumił and Yurchuk, *Memory and Religion*.

96 Epplée, *Die unbequeme Vergangenheit*; see also Lyozina, *XX vek*.

97 Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 357.

This trend can be traced not only on the level of intellectual debates or official foreign policy but also in the field of memory politics.⁹⁸ Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner analyze these issues more broadly within the context of global cultural wars, where quite unexpectedly “the Russian Orthodox Church [became] a new powerful ally for the American Christian Right.”⁹⁹ Seen from such a mutually reinforcing perspective, the modern turn to establish a “moralist international” by promoting conservatism and religious messianism is neither an East European feature nor a right-wing prerogative.

Considering the available literature on memory and religious studies from a post-secular standpoint and from a mutually reinforcing perspective, our volume endeavors to offer a more intricate portrayal of the memorial landscape in Eastern Europe. We delve into historical origins and enduring trajectories, focusing primarily on periods of crises and perceived threats. Furthermore, we explore the roles of both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized religious actors who contribute to the complex tapestry of remembrance.

Contested Sacralizations of History: The Volume's Structure

The sacralization of history is a complex, multilayered, and multidimensional process. The whole scope of its manifestations cannot be analyzed within one book. Our volume focuses on two meanings in the “sacralization of history.” Firstly, it investigates how sacred topics and religious events form the core of historical narration. Secondly, it characterizes how one group's history is elevated to a quasi-religious status. Both aspects are intertwined, as the examples in our volume show. Acknowledging the role of the “sacralization of history” in this twofold meaning, we discuss how it has become important in today's memory and identity building, particularly in political crises and conflict situations. The case studies in the included chapters deal with memory politics “from above,” often linked with grassroots and even with commercial and entertaining initiatives (e.g., Klimenko's chapter). Hence, sacralization of history seems often be implemented from both directions, which becomes most vividly clear in the chapters on neo-paganism (see Reichenbach's and Povedák's chapters).

98 Suslov and Uzlaner, *Contemporary*.

99 Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralist International*, 29.

The volume chapters therefore explore the following problems, which are derived from our conceptual approach. First, they inquire into the character and role of political, societal, and church actors and networks promoting the sacralization of history. Then, they opt for explaining differences in sacralization forms determined by various religious and confessional cultures. Finally, our authors ask if we can observe a religious language of national history and, vice versa, if the sacralization of history affects religious practice and ideas.

Our volume contributes to an analysis of these problems by paying attention to various forms of post-secularity in the mnemonic landscapes of Eastern Europe. In our attempt to conceptualize the “sacralization of history” we develop different aspects of this process. The first section on the uses and abuses of the sacred discusses the commissioning, if not exploitation, of the sacred in memory politics. Radu Nedici brings our focus to Romania, a hitherto neglected case. He discusses the set of strategies used by the Romanian Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română) to rebuild its image as the national church after the regime change of 1989. Nedici shows that it tried to legitimize this claim in a new pluralistic context by establishing a discourse aimed at equating religious belief with the ethnic nation: The reference to martyrs should hence mobilize Romanians in favor of the post-socialist national state. In so doing, Nedici shows the entanglements of nationalization and the use of religion.

The case of the Orthodox Marian iconography in the Holodomor in pre-2014 Ukraine shows how religious motifs are intertwined with national memory culture. In analyzing these motifs, Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek concludes that since the Orange Revolution, Marian images referring to Orthodox iconography have no longer resonated in the social space and have been gradually replaced by other religious symbols (crosses, angels, and candles). Thus, the sacred character of remembering the Holodomor did not change, but its symbolic representations have been transformed. As the Holodomor memorial in Kyiv (The Candle of Memory) unveiled in 2008 shows, the sacred dimension of the memory of the Holodomor was attained through desacralizing the Marian image and further imbuing it with a secular meaning.

Ursula Woolley’s chapter delves into the conflict between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) following the attainment of autocephaly in 2019. This conflict is depicted through the lens of competing historical narratives.¹⁰⁰ This case of interdenominational

100 See also Bremer et al., *Orthodoxy*.

contestation and its wider security context highlights that societal practices of sacralization and the political securitization of identity are intersubjective, influential, and dynamic. Her analysis of competing texts leads to the conclusion that the emphasis on narrative and historical tropes highlighted in the rival texts illustrate different approaches to discursive sacralization. She shows that avoiding rhetorical or political sacralization, even in an ecclesiastical context, may be a better means of protecting the private experience of the sacred in religious motivation and practice.

That the sacralization of the nation could be interpreted as a phenomenon in the whole post-Soviet space is shown by Nikoloz Aleksidze in the Georgian case, which draws on specific long-lasting Georgian Orthodox traditions. In national discourses, religion stood at the core and has become a tool in the rhetorical arsenal of secular and religious leaders since the emergence of national movement under Soviet rule in the 1980s. Concepts such as “Heavenly Georgia,” “Holy Iveria,” the “Way of Barabbas,” the “Way of Jesus,” and the “Lot of the Mother of God” are constantly referred to; furthermore, since independence, presidential oaths have been sworn on the graves of saints, icons started appearing in governmental offices, and new saints have been introduced after national crises.

To a significant extent, the situation in contemporary Russia also encompasses the sacralization of the historical roots of the Russian nation and Empire. Politicians have increasingly employed religious motifs, particularly evident in Vladimir Putin’s speeches where he legitimizes his actions, such as the war against Ukraine. The sacralization of the Russian nation has long-term roots. The way it has been used to build a post-Soviet Russian nationalized imperialism is discussed by Ekaterina V. Klimenko in her chapter on Russia—My History parks and the staging of exhibitions on the Rurikids, the Orthodox Rus’, the Romanovs, and the history of the Soviet Union between 1945 and 2016. She evaluates the important role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the (re)production of the narrative of national history, which is politically beneficial for Vladimir Putin’s regime, and shows that this cooperation has been ongoing against the backdrop of the regime’s shift in legitimization strategy. Klimenko concludes that Russian history is orthodoxized, and the state is sacralized through this tight cooperation. These chapters show the strong reference to and great importance of religious motifs in national memory politics by focusing on national martyrs—suggesting a strong semantic and spiritual interconnection between religion and the sacralization of history.

The second section, which discusses the (ab)uses of the sacred, leads to a more specific topic within that frame: the staging of martyrdom for

national identity and coherence building. First, Denis Ljuljanović discusses the interpretation of Macedonia as a contested *terra sancta* (holy land) since the Peace Treaty of Berlin (1878), when Serbia and Montenegro were, among others, founded as nation-states. He emphasizes that Macedonia has been revered as the cradle of Slavdom due to its association with the revered Slavic enlighteners Sts. Cyril and Methodius, who hailed from the region. Consequently, intellectuals from Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Macedonia regarded it as *terra sancta*, a sacred land that should not be under the rule of “Asiatic Turks.” Various actors, including Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and local Macedonians, perceived Macedonia as their sacred territory, while even the Ottomans claimed it as an integral part of their state. The Macedonian case serves as an illustrative example of how intellectuals and religious figures have worked till now to sanctify national narratives concerning population and territory, employing messianic arguments to assert their claims.

The role of the church and the inclusion of religious wording and symbolism in coining national narratives is exemplified in the next chapter, by Yuliya Yurchuk and Andriy Fert. They use the memory of the Euromaidan protests to show that such narrations may also be referred to as secular events. The memory of the people killed during the protests in Ukraine is shaped by the narrative of the “Heavenly Hundred” and has many well-articulated religious elements that contribute to the sacralization of protests. The authors conclude that the memory of the Heavenly Hundred is formed as “post-secular sacred,” which allows a sacralized representation of the victims as martyrs without giving them a canonical status of martyrs recognized by the church. Such sacralization without canonization seems possible due to two factors, the established tradition to represent fighters for national freedom as martyrs and saints and the present moment of the war, which shapes this memory as a matter of national security.

Next, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper’s chapter discusses the importance of narratives of martyrdom in highlighting one nation’s glory by focusing on contemporary Poland and hence on a period of post-transition. She shows that the Roman Catholic Church has become one of Poland’s most important mnemonic actors, and that the use of religious symbols and ways of thinking and talking about the world are derived from Catholicism. She explains what we could only hint at in our introduction: the long-lasting, continuous role of the Catholic Church as a factor for national stability since the partitions of Poland and—during socialist times—the Church’s function as the only oppositional institution where dissidents could meet.

As Głowacka-Grajper interprets the focus on national “martyrs” by elaborating on mnemonic practices and tools, Maria Falina analyzes the

process of sacralization of a very “worldly” and violent event—the Great Patriotic War—and shows how the narrations were constituted as sacred in contemporary Russia. According to Falina, this leads to a specific mechanism of state control over the public debate on historical themes. In this case, the veneration of heroes, the worship of martyrs, and the condemnation of enemies coexist with the cult of the Great Patriotic War that remains at the core of historical master narratives. She shows how the highlighting of the historical misuse of narratives legitimizes the current political regime, including the military aggression towards Ukraine.

The concluding chapter of this section investigates the interplay between canonization politics and martyr veneration in Orthodox churches in the Russian Empire and post-Soviet Estonia. Irina Paert examines two illustrative cases—the revitalized cult of St. Isidor of Iur'ev, a fifteenth-century priest whose veneration was renewed by the Russian Orthodox Church in the Riga diocese during the late imperial era, and the canonization of Ivan Lagovskii, executed by the NKVD in 1940 and recognized as a martyr by the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church–Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Paert contends that these examples reflect two different approaches to sacralization: the first centered on territory (as with St. Isidor), and the second on personhood, which is foundational to the new martyrs' initiative led by the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

The third and last section draws our attention to the phenomenon of neo-paganism and its use for nationalism. It shows that referring to paganism as the root of one's own nation could be assessed as an alternative option within national memory culture. Although Polish “*nacjopoganie*” (“nation pagans”) developed from political to cultural activism of extremist right-wing nationalism, Karin Reichenbach discusses the linkage to a pre-Christian (i.e., pagan) past, as the reference point of ethnic origin. She shows that this past is sacralized and transferred into the supernatural, which makes it non-negotiable and provides the basis for anti-pluralist, anti-egalitarian, and racist ideologies. Reichenbach argues that because of the “metapolitical” ambition of the “New Right” to change the mindset of society, extremist ideas and agendas could be introduced into the social mainstream.

The attractiveness of neo-paganism for extreme right-wing movements is also the topic of István Povedák's chapter, which focuses on the resacralization of Hungarianness. He shows how the use of neo-pagan motifs (like runic town signs at the borders of settlements and the Trianon monuments) are interlinked in the national repertoire of imaginaries. It becomes clear that the reconfiguration of national memory has contributed to the birth

of a particular neo-pagan stream of thought that glorifies and sacralizes certain constituents of Hungarian history. Povedák concludes that this helps to distinguish Hungary from other nations and to equip it with “a sacred flavor—a prophetic consciousness.”

The volume ends with concluding comments by the historian Piotr Kisiel and religious scholar Alexander Agadjanian. Both make clear that there are many encounters between nationalism and religion in contemporary Eastern Europe. Two periods are ideal for their intertwined references—premodern history and World War II, which are seen as focal points regarding the narrative construction of national strength and of national martyrdom. Such construction was necessary to create modern national identity and coherence. Kisiel calls for the examination of further development of “religious nationalisms” traceable in many countries of the region (and beyond). Agadjanian sees the reason for the upsurge of sacralization efforts in its powerful emotional energy, a relative weakness of the tradition of rational political mechanics, and the legitimacy-seeking populist policies of the ruling regimes, so that the process of sacralization has turned into bitter contestations over history by various nations and political actors.

Yet, what we can conclude from the case studies in our volume is that in times of secularization as well as in periods of political crises and identity deficits, the sacralization of history is used particularly as a tool for national, or nationalized imperial, rhetoric. The “sacred” becomes both instrumentalized and the main topos of national master narratives. The sacralization of history seems to be the compass for actions and values and is capable of leading nations out of crises and legitimizing exclusion, if not war. It elevates the historical narrative to the level of the last non-negotiable truth.

Although we acknowledge differences of historical, cultural, and political backgrounds in the way of using “sacralizing tools,” we also realize that they have many commonalities both in the region and with the non-European cases. With this volume, our aim is to foster dialogue between various approaches and disciplines in studying identity building, nationalism, history, post-secularism, and security.

We recognize the dearth of additional case studies extending beyond Eastern European multiethnic communication regions. Although there are substantial historical, cultural, and political differences, the use of “sacralizing tools” displays notable similarities both within the Central and Eastern European region and in non-European settings. Collective identity plays a pivotal role in the analysis, as it is deeply connected to both sacralization (of actors, narratives, images, myths, and memories) and securitization, a key aspect of this process. Although our book focuses on

the Central and Eastern European context, it covers a much wider scope and aims at contributing to a universal debate.

Of course, we are aware that there are even more examples in the region we explore, like the situation in Moldova, the influences of Protestants in Poland, or the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. Exploring the politicization of Islam even in post-Soviet states could offer valuable insights into the contemporary entanglements of nationalism and religion. We seek therefore to encourage further case studies that transcend our regional focus, as well as conceptual reflections on the sacralization of history. This concept gains significance considering current discourses across various regimes where the legitimization of power and war underscores a resurgence of the “sacred” within nationalism or imperial self-identification. This highlights the importance of further research in this area.

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Section I

Memory Politics: Uses and Abuses of the Sacred

2. Remembering Religious Dissent through Its Martyrs

The Orthodox Church and the Appropriation of Historical Memory in Post-Socialist Romania

Radu Nedici

Abstract: In response to its critics and the growing religious competition it faced after 1989, the Romanian Orthodox Church has drifted to more radical expressions aimed to underline its fundamental role in the nation's past. As part of this post-socialist strategy, the canonization of the nine martyrs who had opposed Catholicism in eighteenth-century Transylvania typifies the increasingly sacralized vision of history. The profound reshaping their biographies went through to suit the intended narrative and became of evident in the cult these newcomers to the national pantheon have been the object of. A parallel reading reveals how the Transylvanian martyrs have been made to fit into excessively nationalistic patterns since the 1990s. This is the result of rivalry with other groups, but also a consequence of internal strife.

Keywords: religious competition, nationalism, contested histories, politics of memory, Transylvanian Orthodox, Romanian saints, hagiographic literature

The reworking of the past has been the norm in the pluralistic societies that arose through much of East-Central Europe in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1989. However, despite the changes in paradigm, history remained one of the pillars of both shaping post-socialist identities and legitimizing the exercise of political power. Owing to a tradition dating well before the Second World War, the grand narrative of the nation survived largely unchallenged. The nation only experienced a limited overhaul of its symbols

despite the voices that called it into question starting in the mid-1990s.¹ In Romania, where history was notoriously instrumentalized during the long years of Nicolae Ceaușescu being in power, the regime change meant not only that the recent past was swiftly purged of the former dictator's legacy—but also that topics of historical inquiry that had until then been out of bounds reemerged in the public discourse.² As a result, various social actors suddenly found themselves competing for control over the historical memory to preserve the prominent positions they had enjoyed until then or in an attempt to gain increased visibility and consensus.

The present analysis focuses on one particular set of strategies used by the Romanian Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română, BOR) to safeguard its title of national church, as, for the first time in over forty years, it faced a serious religious competitor with the reestablishment in 1990 of the Romanian Church United with Rome, Greek Catholic (Biserica Română Unită cu Roma, Greco-Catolică, BRU). On numbers alone, this contest could only have had one winner. The census data show that 86–87 percent of the Romanians declare their affiliation to the BOR, while less than 1 percent of the population self-identifies with the BRU. Moreover, while the statistics point to a slight decline in membership numbers for the BOR, people shifted mainly to evangelical denominations, not the BRU.³ What made the latter a formidable rival to the BOR was not its immediate force but what it stood for in the public eye. Besides the leading role of its members in the Romanian national movement, the BRU also drew sympathy for its sufferings during the totalitarian period, in opposition to the collaboration ascribed by many intellectuals after 1989 to the BOR.

The Greek Catholic hierarchy tried to capitalize on both accounts. Firstly, in 1997, with the return of the remains of Bishop Inocențiu Klein, one of the earliest political leaders of the Romanians in Transylvania, to the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, in Blaj; and, secondly, as recently as 2019, through the beatification of the seven martyr-bishops imprisoned in 1948.⁴ However, these actions have little in common with the strategies of sacralization of

1 These trends are discussed in Antohi et al., *Narratives Unbound*; Brunnbauer, "Historical Writing." On the regional differences between the various Central and Eastern European historiographies and their ties to Western models during socialism, see Górný, "Historical Writing," 255–58.

2 Verdery, *National Ideology*; Boia, *History and Myth*. On the post-1989 developments in the field of history writing, see Iordachi and Trencsényi, "In Search"; Murgescu, "The Romanian Historiography"; Vultur, "New Topics"; Petrescu and Petrescu, "Mastering."

3 Negruți, "Evolution," 45–46 and Table 6.

4 Verdery, *Political Lives*, 55–93; Vatican News, "Pope Celebrates."

history put in place by the BOR, primarily because of the very fragile following enjoyed by the BRU, which inhibited the development of a discourse of similar breadth between the two organizations. Comparatively, the BOR's intertwining with the nation succeeded on two major accounts that define religion as intrinsic to nationalism: Orthodoxy is often regarded as outlining Romanianness, and it provides a significant number of symbols for the portrayal of a separate identity.⁵

Since the BOR was just one of the actors involved in the attempt to rewrite the nation's history for this new era, the outcome was not merely fortuitous but the result of calculated planning. In an effort to legitimize the claims of continued ascendancy in the new pluralistic context, the BOR aimed to equate religious belief with the ethnic nation, turning once more to history for argumentation. Hardly innovative, for it perpetuated certain tropes that had emerged in the previous century and had survived primarily intact through socialism, it nevertheless entailed a meaningful move towards more radical expressions. In the process, the BOR willingly and quite successfully appropriated certain historical characters and turned them into powerful religious symbols through their canonization. It is the central argument of this chapter that the resulting sacralized view of the past—together with the nationalistic overtones of post-socialism—was the result of stress induced by outside competitors and frictions between internal groups within the church organization. In a deeply religious society, which recent surveys have shown to link church affiliation with national identity, this was supposed to supply a substantial advantage to the BOR.⁶ However, measuring the actual response to it would require an entirely different study.

Still, no two symbols are created equal, with areas of unresolved conflict more likely to determine a quest for legitimacy. For this reason, the memory of the religious riots in the 1740s–60s has been among the most frequently reshaped over the recent decades, with old martyrs remembered and new ones created. The narrative emphasizes the BOR's role in preserving the nation's unity, as it supposedly came under threat in the multicultural province of Transylvania, precisely where the BRU had its stronghold from the eighteenth century until 1948.

The first section of this chapter outlines the historical developments that conditioned the two churches and their quest to bind themselves to the nation. The discussion then centers on specific groups of saints from eighteenth-century Transylvania, examining the context, timing, and

5 Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism," 8–12.

6 Pew Research Center, "Eastern and Western Europeans."

meaning ascribed to the subsequent canonization of former Orthodox leaders of dissent. The search for such symbols began in the 1950s, when the first group of three “confessor saints” was proclaimed. However, it would not be until the 1990s that they began to be more aggressively advertised, following a complete shake-up of their cult and the addition of two more prominent figures. Four other saints from the territories of northeastern Transylvania were given public recognition in the mid-2000s, crowning the efforts to rewrite their story to retain only those elements that corroborated the life course of true Orthodox champions.

Books, songs, sacred images, and public rituals were dedicated to each new cohort of saints. They make up the bulk of the sources upon which this investigation relies as the basis for studying the typical pattern that these imagined biographies of the early modern martyrs of faith conform to and how they are used to convey a suitable image of the past. A comparative approach will also provide an assessment of their place within the larger politics of BOR remembrance. Contrasting the rhetoric used in different scenarios will thus afford an insight into the selection process of the figures targeted by the sacralization of history and their intended application.

Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, and the Nation

Established at the end of the seventeenth century, when the principality of Transylvania passed under Habsburg rule, the BRU was an attempt to secure political control of the land. The dynasty intended to create a Catholic majority by converting most Orthodox Romanians in the province to church union with Rome. Motivated by social aspirations rather than religious concerns, the Uniate or Greek Catholic denomination failed to elaborate any sort of doctrinal justification in the half-century that followed and found itself exposed to the attacks of the Orthodox polemicists.⁷ A popular movement surfaced demanding toleration and the creation of a distinct hierarchy to cater to the spiritual needs of those refusing allegiance to the pope. It quickly spread after 1744 and proved impossible to silence by the authorities. Under pressure from their subjects in the complicated circumstances of the Seven Years’ War, the Habsburgs eventually granted them religious freedom in 1759 and appointed an Orthodox bishop for Transylvania two years later.⁸

7 Nedici, *Formarea identității*; Marte et al., *Die Union*.

8 Nedici, “Religious Violence”; Nedici, “Rethinking Religious Dissent”; Nedici, “Cum să pornești o revoltă.”

From that moment on, the Romanian community was officially split along confessional lines. The two camps engaged in a long fight for control over adherents, albeit with only minimal consequences, after a certain balance in terms of the followers was reached at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁹

The advent of nationalism signaled a new phase in this contest, as the Orthodox and the Greek Catholics furthered their disputes over who better embodied the ethnic nation. Owing to the support from the Habsburg state (which translated into better education and higher social status for its members), the BRU stood at the forefront of the Romanian national movement in Transylvania throughout the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s. Moreover, Greek Catholic political and religious leaders figured prominently in the events that led to the union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania at the end of World War I.¹⁰ However, against the idea that church union with Rome acted as a catalyst to modern Romanian nationalism, the Orthodox insisted that their struggle in Transylvania opposing Catholicism ultimately rescued the nation's unity. In search of historical evidence to support this view and counter the symbolic capital enjoyed by the BRU for its paramount contributions to the nation's cause, scholars close to the BOR centered on interpreting events in the eighteenth century. The two narratives collided repeatedly over the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, with lingering consequences in the ensuing historiography.¹¹

The making of Greater Romania in 1918 has deeply impacted this competition since it relegated the BRU to a minority position within the new state alongside the traditionally dominant BOR. To the disappointment of many interwar intellectuals and politicians, Romania was not only less monochromatic than they had wished for, but even the nation appeared fractured in terms of religious affiliation.¹² Yet, the Constitution of 1923 declared the Romanian character of both churches, thus sparing the BRU from any direct attacks.¹³ Political developments after World War II changed

9 No parallel detailed treatment of the two churches currently exists for the modern period. A useful overview is Bocşan, "Church and State."

10 Popovici, *Studies*, 80–81, notes that the Orthodox did not hold a majority of seats in the leadership of the Romanian National Party from Transylvania and Hungary until after 1901, and even then, most political personalities were Greek Catholics.

11 Teodor, *Coridoare istoriografice*; Câmpeanu, *Biserica Română Unită*; Şincan, "Writing Their History."

12 Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics*, especially 129–88.

13 A good account for the debates of those years is Maner, *Multikonfessionalităţ*; see also Turcu, *Între idealuri şi realitate*, 60–230.

that for the worse, as the Soviet-backed regime took steps for the quick suppression of the BRU in 1948 while securing the submission of the BOR.¹⁴ For almost half a century afterward, the BOR enjoyed a quasi-monopoly over church history writing, which it used to reframe the past and lay claim to symbols that suited its earlier agenda. Through a particular blend of religion and nationalism, it created a historiographic canon that lived on unaltered into post-socialism.¹⁵

“The Transylvanian Confessor Saints”

While continuities are, at times, more significant in this evolution than ruptures brought on by changes in the political system, the promotion of national saints by the BOR is a relatively recent addition to its public legitimization discourse. Excluding two unconvincing attempts in the 1950s, the bulk of Romanian saints were created after 1989, their number increasing annually and currently standing at over a hundred and fifty.¹⁶ However, the apparent appetite evidenced by the sheer numbers is somewhat misleading. The leadership of the BOR made sparing use of this tool, despite periodic calls to acknowledge the holiness of certain individuals, which dated as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century, and with an eye for temporizing decisions.¹⁷ Tellingly, a formal procedure for canonization, which gives the local eparchies the power to advance proposals and collect the required proofs but leaves the final decision to the central Holy Synod, was only developed in the new millennium.¹⁸ Over the last three decades, the newly declared saints have been chosen in such a way that all social and professional categories, periods, regions, and genders would find representation in an effort to signal the ancient and uninterrupted presence of the BOR in the life of the nation.¹⁹

14 Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin*; Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*; Leustean, *Orthodoxy and the Cold War*.

15 Șincan, “Continuing the Historiographical Battle.” On the wider issue of the public role of the BOR after 1989, see Stan and Turcescu, *Religion and Politics*; Conovici, *Ortodoxia*.

16 Daniel, “Bucuria comuniunii cu sfinții,” 6.

17 Stan, “Canonizarea sfinților români.” For the brake effect it had on some clamorous proposals for sainthood, e.g., the refusal to admit the mass canonization of those who died in prison during the Stalinist era repressions, see Biroul de Presă al Patriarhiei Române, “Biserica Ortodoxă comemorează.”

18 Goreanu, “Canonizarea.”

19 Conovici, *Ortodoxia*, 1: 318–29.

The martyrs of religious dissent in mid-eighteenth-century Transylvania constitute a peculiar category among the saintly historical figures. Specifically, because they were not all canonized at once but in three different stages, between the 1950s and the 2000s, and because of their overtly polemical character. In fact, three out of the first seven saints that the BOR declared in 1950 belonged to this group. They were publicly proclaimed after protracted negotiations with the state in 1955 in recognition of their combat against Catholicism two centuries earlier—a fight concluded only by the disbanding of the BRU in 1948.²⁰ At a time when the incorporation of the former Greek Catholic and Orthodox parishes was ongoing, Visarion Sarai (c. 1715–1750), Sofronie from Cioara (c. 1700–1775), and Nicolae (Miclăuș) Oprea from Săliște (c. 1710–1760) meant to embody the centuries-long opposition of the Romanians in Transylvania against church union with Rome. Monks Visarion and Sofronie had played significant roles in stirring up confessional tensions in 1744 and leading the religious riot in 1759–61, respectively. Meanwhile, Nicolae Oprea was among the first Transylvanian Orthodox who traveled to Vienna to petition Empress Maria Theresa for the freedom of religion during the late 1740s and early 1750s. Visarion Sarai and Nicolae Oprea were later imprisoned, and, afterward, all documents lost sight of their whereabouts. In contrast, Sofronie escaped to Wallachia in 1761 and spent his remaining existence as the abbot of a small monastery there.²¹ As such, their sudden promotion ultimately reflected the politics of the day. For, despite leaders of eighteenth-century dissent appearing on various lists of saints-to-be both before and after the Second World War, they had formed a rather indistinct group and had never been among the top candidates for canonization.²² The connection with the recent events was transparent and emphasized in all public speeches and papers published to mark the occasion.²³ The turn to history provided the BOR with the symbols that allowed it to present the so-called reunification of the two churches as a long overdue achievement by inscribing the precipitous developments of the previous decade in an honorable tradition.

20 Brokering between church and state was the canonist Liviu Stan, one of the first to support the idea of national saints, who served at the time as a specialist in the Ministry of Religious Affairs; see Biliuță, “Fascism,” 103.

21 Chifăr, “Der Priestermonch”; Dobrei, “Ein Gegner”; Nedici, “Religious Violence,” 97–100; Nedici, “Cum să pornești o revoltă,” 491–95.

22 Stan, *Sfinții români*, 78, did not specifically refer to them by their name and only counted them at the end of his booklet among other figures that might be worthy of a public cult less than a decade before it was officialized. See also Ciuhandu, *Călugării Visarion și Sofronie*.

23 Marcu, “Proclamarea canonizării Sfinților Ierarhi.”

Similarly, the restoration of the BRU after 1989 prompted a response from the BOR, which included a reshuffling of the symbols it used in defense of the establishment inherited from totalitarian times. In 1992, when the Holy Synod of the BOR decreed the first post-socialist canonization of Romanian saints, two more Transylvanian martyrs were added to the previous list, among a plethora of late antique, medieval, and modern hermits, princes, and bishops.²⁴ Moise Măcinic from Sibiel (c. 1720–1760) and Ioan from Galeș (c. 1720–1780) had both been clandestinely ordained and served as Orthodox priests in the latter part of the 1740s and the first half of the 1750s. They incited dissent through their preaching and participation in the various gatherings that penned requests for religious toleration. They were eventually arrested, sentenced to prison, and are said to have died in the jails of Kufstein, Tyrol, though the surviving records are inconclusive.²⁵ Nonetheless, the two were already included in the catalog prepared by the commission charged with the causes of saints, which the BOR established in the decade preceding Nicolae Ceaușescu's fall from power.²⁶

Their canonization not only became possible in the altered pluralistic context, but it also meant bolstering the public image of resistance that legitimized the BOR's concurrent opposition to any compromise with the BRU.²⁷ Moise Măcinic and Ioan from Galeș were placed in the calendar on the same feast day (October 21) as the three earlier saints and have since been collectively branded as "The Transylvanian Confessor Saints."²⁸ It was also a subtle way of refreshing the cults of Visarion, Sofronie, and Nicolae Oprea after decades of low-profile worship. As they became useful once more to the rhetorical ends pursued by the BOR, their veneration, which had initially enjoyed provincial relevance in Transylvania, was extended to Romania's whole territory in recent decades.²⁹ However, the absence of relics or any miracles credited to their names has probably played a role against the popularity of these martyrs, who have failed to attract crowds on a comparable scale to other contemporary saints. Yet, October 21 continues to be observed as a holy day of obligation in their region, regularly connected to the display of various other holy relics, hence creating the frame for rituals

24 Biserica Ortodoxă Română, "Act sinodal al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române."

25 Dragomir, *Istoria desrobirei*, 2: 47–50, 307–9.

26 Păcurariu, "Preotul Mărturisitor Ioan din Galeș," 443–46; Păcurariu, "Preotul Mărturisitor Moise Măcinic din Sibiel."

27 On the Orthodox efforts to preserve the status quo, see Stan and Turcescu, *Religion and Politics*, 91–117; Conovici, *Ortodoxia*, 1: 339–51.

28 Păcurariu, *Sfinți*, 271.

29 Biserica Ortodoxă Română, "Act sinodal al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române," 12–13.

that involve both church and lay leaders of the community.³⁰ The feast day is highly symbolic since it has nothing to do with the biographies of the saints it celebrates, as custom has it. Instead, it reminds everyone of the events on that day in 1948 when the Greek Catholic brethren returned to Orthodoxy in a theatrical display that took place in the cathedral in Alba Iulia.³¹

However, the circumstances under which each of the five saints acted two centuries earlier had a less clear-cut meaning. The period from 1744 to 1761 was marked by the internecine violence that tore apart the Romanian parishes in Transylvania, opposing Orthodox and Catholics of Greek rite. While being less ethnocentric than future generations would assume, their fight for religious freedom involved repeated appeals for support to the Serbian primate and attempts to gain Russian backing.³² One of the most frequent requests of those times was for the appointment of a Serbian bishop to head the Orthodox in Transylvania. His origins served as a token of his steadfast faith and expressed the Romanians' desire to return to communion with the churches of Byzantine tradition. At the same time, religious opposition implied a set of social demands, for the Orthodox Romanians were denied many of the rights held by the members of the political estates. The success of Serbian propaganda messages in the 1750s owed as much to their defense of the traditional creed as it did to promises of extending eastward the privileges enjoyed by Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy since the end of the seventeenth century.³³

To be effective, however, symbols must be kept simple and unambiguous. Recovering a complex image of the five leaders of dissent would have been detrimental to sacralization. Therefore, the BOR insisted on presenting a unidimensional portrayal of the Transylvanian Confessor Saints. In appropriating the historical characters, the church emphasized only the religious side of the conflict and framed it from a national perspective. The trend is already apparent in one of the earliest and most influential works that approached the topic, but it reached new heights in the literature composed in response to their canonization.³⁴

30 See, e.g., the celebrations in 2019, when a fragment of the relics of Mary Magdalene was brought to Alba Iulia. Arhiepiscopia Ortodoxă Alba Iulia, "Moaștele Sfintei Mironosițe Maria Magdalena au ajuns la Alba Iulia."

31 Renașterea, "Hotar între veacuri." The message was reiterated during the 2020 festivities, Arhiepiscopia Ortodoxă Alba Iulia, "Sfinții Mărturisitori Ardeleni."

32 Nedici, "Rethinking Religious Dissent," 117–19.

33 Iorga, *Istoria românilor*, 274–78.

34 Dragomir, *Istoria desrobirei*.

Per the Byzantine church ritual, saints are often honored through an Akathist hymn sung or chanted as part of their worship on their feast day. Such prayers, either in verse or prose, have become a popular form of piety under Russian influence.³⁵ They are now found everywhere, from small booklets sold inside churches or train stations to digital copies via dozens of websites. Aside from their immediate liturgical purpose, Akathist hymns also provide the faithful with a short story about a saint's life, emphasizing virtues and extolling their conduct with obvious pedagogical intentions. Though uncredited, these literary creations receive the official sanction of the BOR before being marketed.³⁶ Therefore, they represent the most authoritative take on a saint's biography, second only to the decree of canonization but more readily accessible.

A comparison of Akathist hymns dedicated to Saints Visarion, Sofronie, and Nicolae Oprea to those of Moise Măcinic and Ioan from Galeș provides ample evidence of the tone shift from the 1950s to the 1990s. Concerns about the reunification of the former Greek Catholics were the driving force behind the first text. In the second, the return to religious pluralism in post-socialism prompted closer associations between church and nation. Thus, the portrait of the five martyrs is tailored to the intended frame of interpretation—underlying either their love of Christ or their ethnic ties. Visarion and his companions are praised for their “ardent zeal for truth and defending Orthodoxy,” as well as being “firm pillars of our ancestral Orthodoxy.”³⁷ Whereas Moise and Ioan are described as “a rock cut from the Carpathians,” a “home for the entire people,” and a “shield for Romania,” three relatively uncommon attributes of saintly figures but strangely familiar to anyone who has been exposed to the earlier personality cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu.³⁸ The geography of their fight in defense of Orthodoxy also changes accordingly, from impersonal mentions of Transylvania and of the five districts that were the hotbed of dissent in the mid-eighteenth century—“in the regions of Dobra, Deva, Orăștie, Bălgrad, and Săliște”—to a claim of national ownership to the whole province: “on the Romanian soil of Transylvania.”³⁹ Likewise, the reasons deemed relevant for their activism

35 Churkin, “Russkij akafist.”

36 Daniel, “Bucuria comuniunii cu sfinții,” 9.

37 *Viața și Acatistele Sfinților Cuvioși*, 33, 46. Citations refer to the most recent edition of this work, which joins in a single booklet the Akathist hymns for the two groups of Transylvanian Confessor Saints, although they remain separate texts. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

38 *Viața și Acatistele Sfinților Cuvioși*, 71, 65, 81; Cioroianu, *Ce Ceaușescu*, 240.

39 *Ibid.*, 43, 64.

change between decades, from those of a universal religion attached to Sofronie: "Thou have walked across the land of Transylvania with much effort, exhorting the righteous not to depart from the manger of the true Church," to the more narrowly defined motivations ascribed to Ioan of Galeș, who "could not suffer to witness the estrangement from the ancestral faith of the sons of the Romanian nation."⁴⁰ Finally, their public cult is endorsed on entirely dissimilar grounds. Visarion, Sofronie, and Nicolae Oprea should indeed "Rejoice, for thy perseverance in faith gave Romanians all over the country a living example!" and "Rejoice, thou who loved the true faith of thy people!" in a crescendo that culminates with a statement about their religious achievement: "Blessed are ye, for the Lord [...] has eventually brought back to the manger of our Church all those who had strayed from the Holy Orthodoxy."⁴¹ At the same time, Moise Măcinic and Ioan of Galeș are worthy since "thou have revived the love of country, and the ancestral faith in the hearts of thy brothers" and so are to: "Rejoice, for through thee the country shall not perish!"⁴²

The underscoring of the impact upon the nation of the latter group of saints, so clearly expressed in these examples and a recurring topic throughout the Akathist, is doubtlessly a mirror of its age. Its motives lie deep in the confrontation between the BOR and the BRU, reignited after 1989, and the obsessive fears of the early 1990s against irredentist Hungarian claims to Transylvania.⁴³ Securing this borderland had always been a concern, but the lack of an imperial mindset among Romanian intellectuals and politicians for much of the modern period meant that the province was not thought of in terms of an actual bulwark.⁴⁴ Whether or not the anti-Western rhetoric of the socialist regime also translated into the strengthening of the imaginary divide between the Orthodox true faith and the Catholic heresy cutting across Transylvania deserves a separate discussion.

The immediate result was that Moise Măcinic and Ioan of Galeș were given a more prominent role as protectors of the motherland than even

40 Ibid., 32, 66.

41 Ibid., 51, 56, 58.

42 Because of a typographical error, *Viața și Acatistele Sfinților Cuvioși*, 82, reproduces the text on Sofronie already printed on pp. 47–48 instead of the correct paragraph containing the first quote. Cf. Îndrumător Bisericesc, "Acatistul Sfinților Mărturisitori," 159–60. Also, while small rewordings between the two editions are frequent, alterations to the second quote are among the most significant in the new version, as it reads: "Rejoice, for thou are the defender of the country!" *Viața și Acatistele Sfinților Cuvioși*, 79.

43 Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics*, 124–51.

44 For a broad discussion on the concept and its many rhetorical uses, see Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher, *Rampart Nations*.

the most celebrated Romanian, Stephen the Great, ruler of medieval Moldavia (reigned 1457–1504), who himself was the object of sacralization at the initiative of the BOR, which used his name to legitimize the 1992 canonizations.⁴⁵ The latter is also an “invincible defender of the forefathers’ religion and homeland,” one who was “raised in love of nation and faith” and who “strengthened the faith and unity of [his] nation.”⁴⁶ Overall, such expressions are mitigated by a mindful choice of language that is more concerned with linking Prince Stephen to the church rather than the nation. Hence, he is frequently referred to as the “defender of Christendom,” “able soldier of Christ,” and “wise soldier of the Cross,” in addition to being “in all merciful,” “champion of the oppressed and burdened,” and, ultimately, “patron of Orthodoxy.”⁴⁷ As a leading political character of the Romanian past, Stephen the Great already enjoyed public recognition for his military and diplomatic endeavors.⁴⁸ Therefore the BOR’s attention was focused on the more contentious element of his personality, namely the moral stature that warranted his promotion to sainthood.

“The Martyrs of Năsăud”

A similar display of selective rhetoric was also at work in the case of the third group of anti-Catholic militant saints, whose commodification for the use of the BOR entailed even greater reelaborations of their biographies and historical memory.⁴⁹ Tănase (Atanasie) Todoran from Bichigiu (c. 1680/90–1763) and his three companions—Vasile from Mocod, Grigore from Zagra, and Vasile from Telciu—were canonized in 2007. Their sainthood was awarded in recognition of their martyrdom following a failed rebellion in 1763 against the Catholic military rule imposed by the Habsburgs in the region of Năsăud in northeastern Transylvania. Unlike the southern territories, where dissent had been endemic in the 1740s and 1750s, the northern half of the province was spared from confessional clashes until the end of the sixth decade of that century. Finding suitable candidates that lent themselves to being turned into symbols of Orthodox resistance proved, therefore, more of a challenge. The recovery of the four martyrs of

45 Murgescu, “Multiple Roads,” 185–96.

46 *Viața și Acatistul Sfântului Voievod*, 29, 34–35.

47 *Ibid.*, 34, 37–38, 41, 57.

48 Murgescu, “Multiple Roads,” 187–93.

49 On the wider issue of the preference given to the combative attributes of saints in various European contexts, see Berezhnaya, *Die Militarisierung*.

Năsăud was vital for balancing the map of dissent, as the official discourse of the BOR maintained that all Romanians in Transylvania reacted with equal outrage to early modern Catholic proselytism. Their elevation to sainthood was marked by grandiose celebrations in May 2008 on the site where they defended Orthodoxy. The address by Patriarch Daniel, the head of the BOR, reminded the thousands attending that faith and nation went hand in hand, as evidenced by the suffering and sacrifice of the four neo-martyrs, who gave their lives to defend “the ancestral faith in the face of persecutions against the Romanian church and people in this part of the country.”⁵⁰

By integrating research and speculation that dates back to the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, the new hagiography illustrates some of the salient features of Romanian nationalism. The best-known figure in the group, Tănase Todoran, is pictured displaying three distinct characteristics: his loyal service in the Habsburg and later the Moldavian army; the tormenting love for his home soil that made him leave his comfortable estate in Moldavia to return to Transylvania at the height of the nation’s religious troubles; and the wisdom of old age that he proved to possess during successive delegations to Vienna to negotiate the establishment of border guard regiments in the Romanian villages of Năsăud. In contrast, the foreigners depicted appear ungrateful by betraying him twice, first by denying him a discharge from the army and later sending him to prison for defection, and, second, by violating the deal offered to the Romanians who prepared to join the border guard regiments. As befitting an Orthodox patriot, Todoran showed unwavering determination in his fight for the deliverance of his people in the face of his inevitable and painful death. At over a hundred years old, he publicly harangued against his countrymen being forced to take the military oath in order to become soldiers. Accepting the oath meant giving in to church union without any of the benefits initially promised by the Habsburgs. He was then accused of mutiny alongside eighteen other people, and Todoran was sentenced to death and was broken on the wheel on November 12, 1763, while Vasile from Mocod, Grigore from Zagra, and Vasile from Telciu were hanged on the same day. The remaining convicts had their death penalties commuted to flogging, although tradition has it that many of them eventually died because of their wounds.⁵¹

50 Daniel, “Mesaj la canonizarea,” 3.

51 Several biographies of Todoran have appeared both in preparation for and subsequent to his canonization; see, more recently, Zinveliu and Morariu, *Noi aspecte*, 34–45, 96–117.

The Akathist hymn to the four martyrs of Năsăud plays repetitively on these arguments, wrapping their legend in nationalistic overtones: “Ye became defenders and confessors of Orthodoxy against the rulers of foreign nationality and faith.”⁵² In a similar fashion to the Akathist dedicated to Moise Măcinic and Ioan from Galeș, the text affixes labels that impart a vision of ethno-religious identity. Tănase Todoran appears as a “devotee of the true faith and a steadfast fighter against the injustices done to thy people,” an “attendant of the ancestral church and defender of our afflicted nation in Transylvania,” or an “eagle of the faith that guards the Carpathians,” in parallel to being “the one who through thy wounds cured the wounds of thy people.”⁵³

It should be noted, however, that, except for the concluding chapter of his life, all other elements in Todoran's biography are insufficiently documented or outright fabricated. His purported military career, defection, and later imprisonment were inferred from a single indirect reference in a letter from 1750.⁵⁴ No other mention of him exists in documents before 1755, when he was registered in the fiscal records of Bichigiu, where he also served as village judge for two years, in 1757 and 1758.⁵⁵ Tănase Todoran was not involved in the contestation of the union with Rome until May 1763, when he seized the keys of the parish church in his village and refused to allow the Greek Catholic bishop entry into what he considered to be an Orthodox place of worship.⁵⁶ Only a few days later, on May 10, he led the protest against militarization during a ceremony attended by the governor of Transylvania and architect of the border guard regiments, General Adolf Nikolaus von Buccow (1712–1764), and by the Catholic bishop of the Greek rite, Petru Pavel Aron (1709–1764).⁵⁷ At first, the incident was treated as a minor mishap. However, strong opposition in other parts of the military frontier made the authorities resort to harsher tactics to keep the situation under control.⁵⁸ The ensuing inquiry found Todoran guilty of hindering the establishment of the second Romanian border guard regiment and blamed him for interfering

52 *Viața și Acatistul Sfinților Martiri*, 20.

53 *Ibid.*, 25, 31, 38, 41.

54 Șotropa, “Înființarea,” 67–68.

55 Lechințan, “Bichigiu la 1755–1763,” 173.

56 Bunea, *Episcopii Petru Paul Aron*, 238–39.

57 On the expansion of the Habsburg Monarchy's military frontier into Transylvania and its manifold aims, see Bernath, “Die Errichtung”; Göllner, *Die Siebenbürgische Militärgrenze*.

58 The Szeklers' refusal to enlist had resulted in the massacre at Madéfalva in January 1764. See Göllner, *Die Siebenbürgische Militärgrenze*, 29–32.

in matters of religion and denying his son the last rites for which a Uniate priest had been called.⁵⁹

While these charges lend credit to the hagiographic construction, Tănase Todoran's admission to the Orthodox pantheon is no more than three decades old. The development of his cult happened at the expense of the social aspects involved in the protest, which were considered to detract from his Orthodox commitment.⁶⁰ Social rather than religious motives ignited a dispute that opposed the serf peasants in the district of Năsăud to their landlord, the Saxon magistrate of Bistrița, well before the setting up of the military border.⁶¹ Becoming soldiers offered the Romanians a way out of servitude, hence Todoran's plea for certain privileges before taking any oath. While insisting that the regiments should not be used as instruments of conversion, the Orthodox were more concerned with overturning the decision that only Greek Catholics could enlist so that they, too, would have a chance for freedom.⁶²

Tănase Todoran's memory has survived because his confessional allegiance was of secondary concern. Until 1948, the district of Năsăud was mostly Greek Catholic, as were most of the guardsmen, for whom he stood as a symbol of their quest for social status. The centenary of his death was commemorated in 1863 by a large procession led by two prelates of the BRU and all the Uniate priests in the district.⁶³ For over two hundred years, his story has been told and researched almost exclusively by historians of the Greek Catholic faith, who also commented upon his Orthodox stance.⁶⁴ To one of these authors in the interwar period, we also owe the first attempt to make Todoran a national hero by creating a far-fetched link between his sacrifice on May 10 and what was then celebrated as both the King's and Independence Day.⁶⁵

Through both fictional and more scholarly works published during the socialist era, another writer of Greek Catholic descent and a native of Năsăud was responsible for transitioning Todoran toward an Orthodox martyr of faith.⁶⁶ Orthodox theologians, who by now had a free hand at further rein-

59 Șotropa, "Înființarea," 79.

60 Morariu, "Martiriul Sfinților Năsăudeni."

61 Göllner, *Die Siebenbürgische Militärgrenze*, 24–25.

62 Bernath, "Die Errichtung," 176–85.

63 Barițiu, *Istori'a regimentului*, 103.

64 Morariu, "Martiriul Sfinților Năsăudeni," 214–22.

65 Piciu, "173 de ani," 148–49.

66 Tanco, *Virtus Romana Rediviva*, 1: 182–83, 3: 167–69; Tanco, *Lumea transilvană*, 65–67; Tanco, *Trilogie transilvană*, 5–71.

terpreting the events of 1763, quickly seized on the character. However, their interpretation would not yet be shared by the more mainstream media.⁶⁷ It was only after 1989 that Tănase Todoran took his final shape. Năsăud had changed over the previous half-century into a dominantly Orthodox landscape, and the regional elites feared the possible transformations brought about by pluralism. An established local hero, Todoran was perfectly placed to embody the invented tradition of resistance against the BRU by the Romanians of the district. His martyrdom became the topic of numerous papers compiled by Năsăud-born intellectuals, primarily clergy members.⁶⁸ This body of literature mounted pressure for Todoran's canonization, but it still lacked a heavyweight patron to back it.

The game changer arrived in the fall of 2005. Having failed to impose the election of his candidate to the archdiocese of Sibiu, the archbishop of Cluj, Bartolomeu Anania, orchestrated a coup that elevated his eparchy to the rank of metropolitanate and placed him in charge of a large share of the ecclesiastical province of Transylvania. The secession caused a public uproar, for Sibiu had been the center of Transylvanian Orthodoxy for over 150 years and had a significant place on the map of the Romanian national movement. As the press documented the clashes within the BOR, Bartolomeu Anania was widely blamed for seeking worldly power and influence.⁶⁹ To improve his public image and legitimize the new institution, the archbishop defaulted to using symbols with the potential to restore consensus. Readily available, Tănase Todoran's canonization and that of his associates were thus placed on the agenda of the first meeting of the diocesan synod of Cluj in April 2006 and later forwarded for approval to the central Holy Synod of the BOR.⁷⁰ The four martyrs of Năsăud gave the archeparchy of Cluj its version of the Transylvanian Confessor Saints, allowing it to catch up with Sibiu on the issue of historical opposition to Catholicism.

Despite efforts to publicize their cult, they, too, found it difficult to transcend the confines of their home region. Nowhere is this ambition more visible than in the modern painting that adorns the monastery's chapel in Bichigiu, which shows Tănase Todoran on his way to the scaffold, flanked by two Habsburg soldiers. Behind him, a group of Romanian peasants

67 Cojocaru, "Dovezi de statornicie"; Moraru, "Noi dovezi de statornicie"; Bunea, "Un martir al legii românești." Cf. Valea, "1763."

68 Pop, "235 de ani"; Tutula, "Din nou despre revolta"; Drăgoi, "Martirul Tănase Todoran," 5; Mizgan, "Lupta pentru apărarea ortodoxiei."

69 See, e.g., România Liberă, "Mitropolia Ardealului."

70 Feier, *Sfinți români*, 19.

wave the national flag some hundred years before it was created.⁷¹ The anachronism is not merely a slip but rather entirely fitting with the BOR's complex rewriting of the past and its constant efforts over the last decades to infiltrate the national discourse.

Conclusion

By shattering the ideological foundations of what had been, up to that point, the unique normative view over the nation's history, the collapse of the socialist dictatorship in Romania sparked a race to rearrange the pieces of the puzzle into suitable new frameworks. After almost half a century of uncontested sway over the religious field, the BOR faced a difficult transition to pluralism. While multifarious strategies have been aimed at keeping it relevant on the public scene, the sacralization of history targeted the embedding of the BOR deeper into the nation's past to make trivial the recent decades tainted by alleged collaboration with the totalitarian regime. By efficiently using an instrument it owned exclusively, namely the faculty to canonize saints, the BOR forced its association with significant figures of the Romanian pantheon and devised fresh symbols to knit itself more tightly into the fabric of the nation.

The biographies of the Transylvanian Confessor Saints and the Martyrs of Năsăud are excellent case studies of how historical memory has been appropriated and its meanings transformed after 1989. While intrinsic to a confessional reading of the past, the actual context of their lives matters more from the perspective of the values they impart to society, just as eighteenth-century tensions provide a framework that is used to deliver a lecture on Orthodoxy and Romanianness for the contemporary public. This is achieved, first, through the sacralization of a particular group of national heroes, featured for their defiance against church union with Catholicism. Distinctive from the political leaders or the military saints, two of the main categories from which the BOR traditionally recruited its symbols, the Transylvanian martyrs share with the latter the same focus on elements directed toward saving one's ethnic brethren rather than the whole of Christendom.⁷²

⁷¹ Echim, "Particular."

⁷² On the roots of this discourse, which did not originate within the BOR and inherits connections to nineteenth-century nationalism and interwar fascism, see Iordachi, "Nationaler Messianismus."

Secondly, the BOR did not limit itself to appropriating historical figures for which competing narratives might subsist but has successfully privatized these symbols entirely. Tănase Todoran's transformation from a Greek Catholic champion into an Orthodox one is the most obvious example, since his placement in the Orthodox calendar inhibited any alternative construction issued by the BRU. Similarly, Visarion Sarai and all other militant saints are no longer part of the public domain, and their exploits are hardly ever the subject of a parallel nonreligious discourse. Instead, their unilateral proclamation to national saints is meant to operate against Romanians of other faiths, automatically excluding from the body of the nation those who cannot or do not want to venerate them. The elevation to sainthood of the leaders of eighteenth-century Orthodox dissent in Transylvania is a testament to the growing radicalism of the BOR after 1989 in response to the rise of religious competitors—the BRU in particular.

Furthermore, as Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime's nationalistic excesses spilled into the 1990s, the six neo-martyrs who joined the three already canonized half a century earlier gave the BOR a distinct position in relation to the political establishment, providing it with a gallery of valuable heroes for the new era. Unlike the exploitation of medieval saintly figures to benefit modern national awakening projects, the eighteenth-century martyrs gave their modern biographers a far greater degree of interpretive latitude.⁷³ Since they were little-known characters, the BOR was not held to abide by any preexisting portrayal. Instead, they had leeway to produce an account of their lives that successfully merged topics of ecclesiastical and civic concern.

The entanglement of religion and politics is best evidenced by the recent legislative proposals that ask for the repatriation from Austria of the relics of those Transylvanian saints who allegedly died at Kufstein. Filed initially by twenty-six MPs, most of them of the Social-Democratic Party, the draft was withdrawn at the end of the 2020 session of parliament, only to be registered again the following year, this time signed by twelve MPs from the National Liberal Party. Under both redactions, the recital offers explicitly Visarion, Nicolae Oprea, Moise Măcinic, and Ioan from Galeș as role models that demand worship from every Romanian citizen for their contribution to preserving national unity.⁷⁴ The cross-party political support and the media coverage of the subject testify to the impact of the BOR's sacralized

73 For differences at even a regional level, see Rohdewald, *Sacralizing the Nation*.

74 "Propunere legislativă privind repatrierea Sfinților Mărturisitori Ardeleni," B590/2020, Senatul României (2020); "Propunere legislativă privind repatrierea Sfinților Mărturisitori Ardeleni," L72/2021, Senatul României (2021).

vision of history at least at elite level. While it has yet to pass into law, the initiative is ultimately telling of the interplay between the religious practices of the dominant church and the political language of national identity in post-socialist Romania.

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3. The (Ab)use of Orthodox Marian Iconography in the Holodomor Visual Culture in Pre-Maidan Ukraine

Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek

Abstract: The chapter analyzes the memory culture of the Holodomor in pre-Maidan Ukraine as imposed from above and the artistic embodiments of the Great Famine of 1932–33. The use of Marian iconography in the Holodomor culture of memory exemplifies the attempts to find an individual way of working through the trauma. The image of the Mother of God has never been so actively used as in the first fifteen years of Ukraine's independence when it entered the symbolism of memorial sites and social rituals to celebrate subsequent anniversaries of the event. However, since the Orange Revolution, there has been a decline in interest in Marian symbolism and its replacement with conventional symbols of universal mourning sourced from both the sphere of the sacred and the nonreligious forms of honoring the memory of the dead.

Keywords: Holodomor, sacralization, postmemory, places of memory, Marian icons, Berehynia, trauma

Presenting human suffering through the medium of art is extremely difficult. As in the case of the Holodomor famine, interpretations of human experience (even artistic ones) are incapable of expressing the tragedy of the victims, the suffering of survivors, and the guilt of passive witnesses. The choice of symbols (iconography) reflects the way the Holodomor is understood and interpreted by a given community of memory in a specific historical period; in other words, it stems from those aspects of the history of this event that the patrons and creators consider the most important and worthy of passing on to their descendants. Consequently, the Holodomor's places of memory are diverse and reflect the times in which they were created. However, one

of the characteristic traits of Holodomor visual culture is sentimentalism and using symbols to create a powerful emotional impact.

We can easily distinguish a number of iconographic motifs that prevailed in Ukrainian monumental sculpture at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Holodomor, on the other hand, is represented in Ukrainian monumental art by the painting of Our Lady of Pokrova, the Protection of Our Most Holy Lady, a hungry child, a Cossack (Petlurian) cross, querns, ears of grain, cranes, bars, arms stretching out to the sky, bells, Orthodox crosses, burial mounds, and angels. It is through these symbols that the victims of the event are commemorated. Since the early 1990s, the creation of such a material testament to their memory has been accompanied by a desire to comprehend and make meaningful the sacrifice made.

This analysis focuses on the issue of using Marian iconology in the visual culture of the Holodomor. The main research question posed is whether the iconic images of the Virgin Mary, present in Eastern Christian culture, were used deliberately to commemorate victims of the Holodomor or whether this has been a natural, vernacular way of dealing with loss in public space, strengthened by the need to honor victims of communism using religious symbols and social rituals, which additionally emphasize its secular character.

These considerations are based on the iconographical analysis and iconological interpretation of visual culture. Both are qualitative methods aimed at interpreting visual content rooted in art history and sociology. That is why they have the potential to help us better understand and explain the meanings of contemporary visual sources. As a method, iconology—more than just iconography—is inductive, subjective, critical, analytic, and transdisciplinary in its ideas.

Erwin Panofsky, the founder of iconology as the study of the “symbolism” and content of visual imagery, discussed it as interpretive iconography. A scholar working in the framework of iconology, Panofsky aims to expose a visual work’s successive semantic layers through a series of analytical activities:

- Pre-iconographic description (identification of all that can be perceived by the naked eye in a given work, including objects and events)
- Iconographic analysis (establishment of the theme and study of the work’s conventional significance based on cultural knowledge)
- Iconological interpretation (surmounting an artwork’s conventional perception)¹

1 Panofsky, *Meaning*, 53–57.

Many scholars use both terms interchangeably. However, according to Panofsky's understanding, iconology as a method went beyond iconography. While iconography has few prerequisites, it is associated with the first descriptive step and is based on thorough research of visual and textual sources and their verbal condensation in the form of a contextualized interpretation.² While iconography contends with identifying types of visual motifs and attributing meanings to them, iconology uses the visual objects not simply as a means of gaining more information about the visuals themselves; the visual objects are treated as sources and evidence for more comprehensive social, political, and cultural analysis of the time in which the visuals were produced and used.³

Conducting an iconological analysis reveals the iconographic motifs that are significant from a symbolic perspective and facilitates their interpretation in the context of the meanings bestowed by the collective memory and the artist, whose work anticipates and attempts to meet this community's expectations and notions about how best to remember the Holodomor. This analysis positions iconological analysis as an opportunity to consider forms of narration about the past other than the historiographic, which have yet to be fully valued by historians.

It will come as no surprise that the Holodomor has been the object of sacralization since the beginning of the independent Ukrainian state in 1991. While analyzing the visual culture of the Holodomor, certain repetitions of Marian's symbolism became apparent. It should also be noted that while sacralization has its own literature, the issue of using Marian iconography has yet to be raised in the literature on the field. The primary hypothesis here is that the use of Marian iconography borrowed from the Orthodox tradition illustrates the search for an individual style of working through the trauma of the Holodomor. Style here is understood as a language, a way of communicating between the creator of the symbolic approach to trauma and the recipient of such a message. The following reflections are based on research into the visual culture of the Holodomor carried out in 2017–21. The analytical work began with participant observation and identifying specific images of the Mother of God, leading to the reading of the representation of the Holodomor in the places of memory. Here, the Holodomor's sacralization in the independent Ukrainian state established in 1991 is outlined, but only as far as it is needed to contextualize further considerations.

² Müller, "Iconography."

³ Ibid.



Fig. 3.1. Independence monument in Kyiv, Ukraine (2001). Photographed by Andriy Fert.

The Sacralization of the Holodomor

The first question that should be asked when considering the sacralization of Holodomor imagery is how the notion of sacralization is defined in this study. Here sacralization is understood as the transfer of certain historical events from the sphere of the profane into the sphere of the sacred. It can therefore be possible to ascribe a real sacred dimension to the traumatic events in the history of a particular community in order to build a set of moral values which shape the identity of that community, as well as the pseudo-sacral nature of such practices. In making sense of suffering in the history of one's own nation or community, with which an individual identifies at a given point in life, we see attempts to deal with trauma based on the resources available to the individual. On the sociopolitical level, we are speaking of civil religion, in which social actors use religious symbols and rituals for specific purposes mainly to satisfy the need to consolidate a divided society, create a common version of symbols comprehensible for a larger group of people regardless of religious beliefs or even a group with no religion at all.⁴

4 See Paulmann, "Sacralization," for his conceptualization.

The sacralization of the memory of the Holodomor has two parallel traditions. One is the tradition of the Ukrainian diaspora and postwar emigration to North America, where religious rhetoric appealed to many people as the most appropriate option. The first, so far little-known, forms of remembering the Holodomor as places of memory were, therefore, deeply religious. The first “memory communities” that attempted to memorialize the Holodomor originated in parish communities. Consequently, this resulted in the choice of where a monument should be located, its form (shape and symbolism), and its role in “practices of involvement.” In this context, we view the deepening process of sacralizing innocent victims’ suffering as the only way of dealing with loss in the social/collective forms of experiencing it. In a broad sense, academic reflection on the subject of the sacralization of the memory of the Holodomor by the Ukrainian diaspora was never undertaken. From 1950 onwards, an essential role in this process was played by the Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the United States, whose center was located in South Bound Brook, New Jersey, and the political theology program developed by its hierarchs during the Cold War. In the sacred version of the Holodomor incorporated into the relevant prayers and artistic representations of people associated with the milieu of this Ukrainian-American Jerusalem, the event appears as one of the many sacrifices suffered by the Ukrainian people on their way to independence at the hands of a very broadly conceived Russia (“Red Moscow,” “the Russian executioner,” and so on). Throughout the war, the Holodomor casualties were often mentioned in the prayers and speeches of the hierarchs as victims in the fight for Ukrainian freedom and independence. Remembrance days of the Holodomor victims (the so-called Pentecost and White Sunday) were established during the liturgical year and were included in religious ceremonies related to the remembrance of the deceased.⁵

Yet, the sacralization of the Holodomor’s memory in post-Soviet Ukraine takes on a completely different dimension. The issue in the mid-1990s included not only reclaiming memory but also the polyphony of memory, conflicts, difficulty, and manipulation of it and its appropriation and instrumentalization. In his work, evocatively titled the *Danse macabre*, Georgii Kasyanov took on the task of analyzing the development of the Ukrainian public and academic discourse about the Great Famine of 1932–33.⁶ He distinguished the Holodomor (which he referred to in quotation marks as “the Holodomor”) as a historiographic and political concept. He even

5 Kudela-Świątek, *Eternal Memory*.

6 Kasi'anov, *Danse macabre*.

stressed that the disastrous famine and historical events of the 1930s were a concept meant for academic inquiry only. In his work, Kasyanov should have paid more attention to places of memory related to the Great Famine or the connected social rituals. He was more interested in the controversies surrounding the construction of the Candle of Memory monument in Kyiv, which could be viewed as evidence of the politicization of the Holodomor. In 2018, he published the second edition of his book under the new title *Rozryta mohyla* (An open grave), where he continued to stress the politicized character of the discourse about the Holodomor in post-Soviet Ukraine and proposed to view it as a sort of social religion.⁷ To Kasyanov, the Holodomor appears to be an essential element of the victimization process and the creation of the image of Ukraine as a nation persecuted by communists.

There are also works by many other researchers outside of Ukrainian historiography who have taken up this topic. The most important works for the development of the academic discussion on the issue of commemorating the Holodomor in independent Ukraine were written by Stefan Troebst, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, Wilfried Jilge, and Per Anders Rudling.⁸ In these studies, the element of the Holodomor imagery sacralization is less emphasized, but its manner of commemoration by the abovementioned authors is also perceived in terms of civil religion.

This inquiry will reflect on the social process of symbolizing the Holodomor, both at the level of political decisions of the independent Ukraine authorities and the level of actions taken by social organizations working in this field. The role Marian iconography served in this respect compared to other religious symbols used to sacralize Holodomor imagery will also be discussed. Therefore, it is worth considering how national mourning has been experienced in public space since 1991 and why this topic played such an essential role in the social life of independent Ukraine. Above all, it will be significant not so much to ask how innocent victims were honored, but rather what meaning was attributed to the death of millions of Ukraine's inhabitants in the newly created state in 1932–33 and what the dynamics of this process were.

As Alexander Etkind notes, mass murders can be interpreted in religious (giving one's life in sacrifice) and secular (political) categories (sacrificing oneself in the name of (re)gaining independence). The casualty can be seen either as a "victim" (when the death is due to a reason) or as a "sacrifice"

7 Kasi'anov, *Rozryta mohyla*.

8 Troebst, *Postkommunistische*; Zhurzhenko, "Capital of Despair"; Jilge, "Holodomor und Nation"; Rudling, "Memories of 'Holodomor'."



Fig. 3.2. Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster monument in Kyiv, Ukraine (1996). Photographed by Andriy Fert.

(when the death is for a cause).⁹ The choice of religious symbolism, therefore, indicates the need to sanctify the sacrifice of the Ukrainian nation on the path to independence in the fight against the tyrant. Given that Christian beliefs are based on faith in the resurrection of bodies and hope for eternal life, religious rhetoric in our cultural circle may seem like a natural way

9 Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 29.

of making sense of the deaths of millions of fellow citizens. On the other hand, Ukraine in 1991 appears to us as a postcommunist state that until recently united its citizens via faith in the bright future of the Communist Party and the negation of the need to believe in superstitious religions (the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church did not exist in the Soviet Union at all in communist times). The loss of life by millions of Soviet citizens acquired a special ideological significance only if it brought the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) closer to victory.¹⁰ This form of sacralization of the sacrifice for the good of the country was predominantly present in memorial sites throughout the Soviet Union. In addition, what we can observe in the case of Ukraine as a postcommunist state, in which many different religions initially coexisted and only one would play the role of a state religion, is the process of sacralization not only of the Holodomor but much more broadly of the entire period of history that preceded independence in 1991. It is important to note that the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, saw a religious revival as a critical element of the social space in the new Ukrainian state.¹¹ The Holodomor, on the other hand, has had a vital role in the process of symbolic separation from the communist past—Ukraine's cutting itself off from its heritage.¹² This event places Ukrainians in the unequivocal position of victims of a system and the broadly conceived Russia (as the heir of the Soviet Union) as their tormentor.

Generation of Post-Memory and Sacralization

It is also necessary to acknowledge how the Holodomor's recollections were transmitted within communities of memory. Both were outside of Soviet Ukraine in the 1940s–80s and in independent Ukraine in the early 1990s, the memory of the Holodomor was cultivated by people and communities who, for the most part, did not experience the event. As a result, it is necessary to consider how individuals engaged in and synthesized experiences from first- and even secondhand sources to form their identities. Marianne Hirsch first addressed questions about individuals' involvement in hereditary memory in her work on post-memory. This concept is applicable to the experience of recent generations of Ukrainians,

10 Konradova and Ryleva, "Geroi i zhertvy."

11 Boiko, *Ukraina 1991–1995 rr.*, 145–50.

12 Marochko, "Holodomor-henotsyd."

something that was communicated to them emotionally and seemed to be the foundation of their memories.¹³

Katarzyna Kaniowska, referring to this concept, built upon it with her own understanding in relation, not so much to individuals as to social groups. For Kaniowska, post-memory is not only the memory experienced by someone else but the memory of the second generation, which, having not lived through the experience captured by memory, is doomed to define their own identity on the basis of past experiences that are not their own. For Kaniowska, post-memory is an extension of the memory of witnesses and participants of the past reality and shapes contemporary thinking and knowledge about herself and the world of individuals and communities who have this memory. Moreover, her understanding of post-memory is also based on knowledge about the past, which is built on the empathic reconstruction of others' experiences. Kaniowska states:

Post-memory, therefore, must be a narrative that is accepted and assimilated, accepted as one's own, and functioning as one's own. The appropriation process here is two-dimensional—the holders of the post-memory receive rather than create this representation of the past, and, moreover, the past reality is presented to them not through their own experience but through the sympathy-imbued notion of their loved ones' experience. They are in thrall to the post-memory in the sense that it is the post-memory that defines the boundaries of their identity/self-awareness and the forum of their action. Being in thrall to post-memory brings a peculiar relationship with the past. In its simplest terms, it may be described as making an effort to pay off a debt (a vain effort, for there is no way of recompensing for wrongs experienced) to those unjustly affected by suffering.¹⁴

In other words, members of the memory community become the confidants of a generation that experienced a formational event with authentic experiences, which trigger emotions and generate empathy with properties that bind and consolidate the group.¹⁵ Identification of the group's post-memory makes it possible to grasp and diagnose the role empathic experience had, as well as the experience of specific social groups by other groups that empathically worked through this experience, rationalized and created values based on

13 Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory."

14 Kaniowska, "Postmemory," 46.

15 Kaniowska, "Memoria."

it, and incorporated it into their own narrative about reality.¹⁶ In the case of Ukrainian communities in North America, this sense of indebtedness stems from empathy, compassion, and even a desire to make sense of the suffering and reward the victims of the Holodomor, at least in a symbolic sense of the word, by giving testimony in public about the experience passed on.¹⁷ This is symbolic because it is evidence of a testimony passed down through generations of post-memory. A similar example of a generation that fell victim to the Holodomor was in post-Soviet Ukraine. The community associated with the Association of Holodomor Researchers, which was the core of the community of memory of this event, undertook activities characterized by a sense of mission to make the facts public, preserve knowledge, and respect "limit situation" experience and moral evaluation. Moral judgment was also practically a religious experience. Sacralization of the Holodomor was a comprehensive concept in post-Soviet Ukraine because the new symbolism combined pagan (ethnic, Slavic) and spiritual (more often Orthodox than Greek Catholic) elements.

On the one hand, it is worth noting that Ukrainian circles abroad saw the most appropriate form of commemorating the victims was with religious practices, and this ritual was formed naturally and spontaneously.¹⁸ In post-Soviet Ukraine, the religious character of commemoration was to meet a broad spectrum of social needs (detachment from the communist past, national revival, the creation of new social rituals, and a new pantheon of heroes and victims of history). This difference can be seen in the images of women in the visual culture of the Holodomor.

On the other hand, as Oleksandr Hrytsenko notes in his research on the memory policy of the Ukrainian presidents Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko, and Viktor Yanukovych, in each of these cases, the theme of the 1933 Great Famine served a different role in their policies of memory. It should also be emphasized that in the years 1994–2005 (the two terms of Kuchma's government), this topic was important but not crucial for the president's policy. It was a period when nongovernmental organizations and local social initiatives in individual regions of the country played a unique role in cultivating the memory of the event. Oleksandra Veselova also emphasizes the role of private sponsors in such initiatives, mainly individuals belonging to the Ukrainian diaspora. In the first decade of Ukrainian independence, the process of Holodomor symbolization was conducted very energetically by the Association of Holodomor Researchers. This social organization brings together local

16 Kaniowska, "Postpamięć," 391.

17 Sysyn, "Ukrainian Famine"; Sysyn, "Ukrainian Orthodox Church."

18 Kudela-Świątek, "Wspólnoty."

historians, scientists, and activists who mark the graves of mass Holodomor victims, lobby for monuments, and hold anniversary celebrations.¹⁹ Only in the times of President Yanukovich is it possible to notice similar processes.²⁰

Attention should also be paid to the connections emerging within the culture of Holodomor memory developed in the Ukrainian diaspora, especially by the abovementioned Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the United States. In 1990, its head at that time, metropolitan Bishop Mstislav (Skrypnyk), who had been a longtime creator of the idea of sacralizing Ukrainian victims of the communist regime, was proclaimed in Kyiv to be the primate, i.e., the head of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church separated from the Moscow Patriarchate, which clearly positions him in the sociopolitical space of postcommunist Ukraine. One of the most important patrons supporting the activities of the association is the American patron of Ukrainian origin Marian Kots.²¹ The sixtieth anniversary of the Holodomor in 1993 was to be held in cooperation with the diaspora and the association.²²

However, in the sacrosanct depiction of the Holodomor created by the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States, it was difficult to find any references to the Orthodox Marian iconography. Female figures (mothers with a child or several children) are used and modeled on the image of the Madonna with a child, but they are far removed from the Orthodox tradition. Western European art influences are visible to a greater or lesser extent. It can be unequivocally stated that in the case of Ukraine, Marian images are an important distinguishing feature of the sacralizing images of the Holodomor in comparison with the visual representations of the event created within the Ukrainian diaspora. It can be argued this is an element of a grassroots tradition and not a part of the political game undoubtedly conducted on the issue of the sacralization of history in independent Ukraine.

Why Is the Holodomor Trauma Female?

Expressing trauma or traumatic memories associated with a particular experience is always challenging. Visual representations of trauma are not usually created to emerge as an intellectual and, therefore, creative attempt to overcome trauma and conduct a dialogue with oneself and one's

19 Veselova, *Z istorii*.

20 Hrytsenko, *Prezydenty i Pam'iat'*, 214–45.

21 Veselova, "Viddanist' Ukraini."

22 Hunchak, *Moi spohady*, 152–54.

contemporaries about lived traumatic experiences.²³ As has already been mentioned, in the post-memory generation, this is reinforced by the sense of the sacred mission of paying the debt.

Therefore, to properly communicate with the recipient, the creator must manage to convey their idea in a comprehensible form for a viewer who does not tackle the problems of art and memory daily.²⁴ Observing monuments, we notice single symbols that we immediately associate with specific facts we remember—either from experience or other sources; these are the facts that have influenced the formation of the so-called semantic layer.²⁵ Less often, we can see what the artist wanted to convey at the level of the idea by connecting single symbols into a whole. Therefore, through their form, individual symbols can influence the recipient in such a way that associations they incite move in the direction of a specific event that the monument symbolizes. Moreover, they arouse the feelings intended by the creator as the viewer's response to the event. In this way, it is also possible to shape in the recipient a specific image of the commemorated event as a whole. In other words, in the case of monumental sculpture, the whole idea should be conveyed in the simplest way possible and in the form of iconography that is as easily interpretable as possible. Misunderstandings between the artist and the recipient often result from the ambiguity of the form and—more specifically—from the coexistence of various elements within it, which can be interpreted differently if regarded separately. These elements are the texture, material, composition, and manner of the artist's expression, which we can call their style.²⁶

Most architectural metaphors are implicit and mixed. Most often, they are based on anthropomorphic figuration.²⁷ A symbol in architecture is a sign or an object that represents another object or a concept. The information conveyed by the symbol is determined by a code or through a social contract. The experience of symbols provokes an emotional, most often an unconscious, reaction resulting from the contrast between the relative simplicity of the object and the potential complexity of the symbol's meaning.²⁸ Symbols in art function on many different levels, depending on what beliefs and customs inspire the artists. Symbolic images can quite easily take on different meanings for different people, and rarely (at least

23 Chuchvaha, "Memory, Trauma," 27.

24 Mozdyr, *Ukraïns'ka*, 105–6.

25 Lewandowski, "Rzecz o pomnikach," 4.

26 Ibid., 5.

27 Lenartowicz, *O psychologii architektury*, 198.

28 Ibid., 199.

in art) are they endowed with a constant, unchanging core of meaning independent of the social and religious environment.²⁹

An important example is Griselda Pollock's theoretical approach to trauma concerning the maternal centers on mothers and motherhood images as visual tropes of trauma created by artists of both genders. According to her, trauma has a specifically feminine association. The maternal-feminine is the unthinkable sphere, and womanhood and motherhood are connected with birth and death:

Artwork that itself arises in response to the trauma of the Other, that of inherited trauma of the child of the survivor of the Shoah, and to the trauma of the world thus damaged by the matrixial horror of that epoch-changing event of tearing the commonality of all that wears a human face, all born of the matrixial web of originary severality and co-emergence, thus is the product of the trauma of violence inflicted on the matrixial and of matrixial trauma that aches for the encounter—in which we may have to bear the grains of the trauma of the Other but in doing so, being thus traumatized, we are also solaced at a deep level by this potential contact with what formed our humanity, with what humanized us as a dimension able to share or rather unable not to share.³⁰

It must be noted that in the case of monument representations of the Holodomor, the image of motherhood develops in different directions. The first are images of motherhood, which are explained through the maternal concept as a manifestation of fragility and uncertainty in the face of an indefinite future.³¹

Oksana Kis notes that in traditional Ukrainian culture, the image of the mother occupies the highest position in the hierarchy of social values. In folk consciousness, her image is surrounded by a halo.³² In the *Mala ukrains'ka entsyklopediia* (Little Ukrainian encyclopedia), published in the mid-1950s, Professor Yevhen Onats'kyi stressed that the cult of the mother found its reflection in folk culture, as evidenced by many rites in which the mother figure plays the key role. At the same time, to Ukrainians, the image of the Mother of God is the embodiment of ideal motherhood. She also signifies homeland, which has been clearly showcased in the literary

29 Hall, *Dictionary*, xii.

30 Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," 52.

31 Kudela-Świątek, *Eternal Memory*.

32 Kis, *Zhinka*, 194–95.

heritage of the Ukrainian nation.³³ Indeed, monumental representations of the Holodomor, using the image of the Mother, remain within the sphere of traditional national values and folk tradition. At the same time, this image is very detached from how women (including mothers) coped during the Holodomor. This is a sublimated, safe image that does not reveal life's day-to-day dramas, making it ideal for mass culture.³⁴

In this context, it seems necessary to pay attention to the aesthetic and affective aspects of religious symbolism in visual representations of the Holodomor. Since monumental art's overriding goal in the post-memory generation is to arouse strong emotions, aestheticization is one of the best approaches (although it is difficult to evaluate in terms of ethics). Here the aestheticization of suffering in representations of the Holodomor means that images of human pain, destruction, and loss of dignity (including, e.g., cases of cannibalism) in places of memory are shown through aesthetically beautiful artifacts and through intellectually and emotionally moving artistic installations. Establishing a link with the past thanks to a multi-sensorial and aesthetic experience replaces the *sacrum*, combining aesthetic, metaphysical, ludic, and cognitive aspects in one encounter. This means that the ongoing process of aestheticization has appropriated the sphere of history and become its essence. In certain situations, the experience of the past as something that, although long gone, is still emotionally present may be similar to mystical or deeply religious experiences.³⁵ In other words, the aestheticization of suffering in the Holodomor culture of memory happened by giving the sacrifice a religious dimension.

On one level, we are dealing with the fact that the image of suffering most often invoked is motherhood and the image of a woman. On the other level, in Ukrainian culture, the Mother of God is traditionally perceived as the ideal mother—the Mother of the Homeland (motherland). This point is also crucial when considering the viewers' ability to recognize the symbolism of a new event in a public space. Aesthetically beautiful images can encourage the viewer to reflect on the nation's past or at least make them pause for a moment in the shadow of such a monument.

In the early 1990s, the creators of monumental architecture faced the difficult task of creating visual culture. It was up to those first artists to decide whether to produce a new symbolic approach or follow the already existing and proven ones. In other words, the first symbolic approach to

33 Onats'kyi, *Mala entsyklopediia Ukraïny*, 934–35.

34 Kis, "Women's Experience."

35 Nieroba, "Rola warstw," 175.

the Holodomor had to be conveyed through symbolic signs understandable to the viewer brought up in the Soviet monumental art tradition while emphasizing the fault of the previous system residing in the fact that the Holodomor took place at all. In the Soviet monumental tradition, it was part of the convention to allude to trauma through the representation of the motherland as the mother and the traumatic experience of war as her suffering. In any case, images of the Holodomor trauma generalized mothers' referring to the Virgin Mary as Theotokos in the 1990s. Therefore, images of motherhood are probably the starkest and most evocative in generating an impression of the Holodomor and its trauma. The same visual tropes of sacrificed maternities reappear several decades after the Holodomor to produce the compelling visual symbolism many people can understand. However, in the case of the Holodomor commemoration, religious symbolism was combined with Ukrainian folk tradition in a rather unusual way.

Besides Oranta, Christian Pokrova, and Pagan Berehynia

Ukraine, as a newly independent country, has been engaged in a dynamic nation-building process since the early 1990s, reinterpreting and rediscovering its historical memory and identity.³⁶ As part of this political project, the Ukrainian state actively promoted a new interpretation of the Ukrainian myth of Berehynia (a Slavic female demon).³⁷ In postcommunist Ukraine, Berehynia was presented as a deep-rooted pagan goddess of the domestic hearth who symbolized the mother-protector of her children, home, and nation. According to this myth, Ukrainian women have always enjoyed equality in their differences and have never competed with men for their public roles. Still, they have been greatly respected and influential as the opposite gender. The post-socialist Ukrainian state enthusiastically explored this myth to design a new gendered space within the larger Ukrainian nation-building project.³⁸

As Wilfried Jilge emphasizes, the Berehynia cult links a patriarchal post-Soviet mother cult with a transnational one, i.e., starting from a national cult of the Virgin Mary (Theotokos), which simultaneously incorporates Christian and general Eastern Slavic as well as Soviet elements.³⁹ For Maryna

36 Bazylevych, "Public Images."

37 Pavlychko, "Feminism"; Rubchak, "Christian Virgin"; Kis, "(Re)Constructing."

38 Rubchak, "Christian Virgin," 319.

39 Jilge, "Between 'Mother Homeland.'"

Bazylevych, the image of Berehynia is also infused with Christian motifs, as Ukraine experiences a large-scale revitalization of Christianity.⁴⁰ A religious revival and rewriting of Ukrainian history are a part of the search for so-called Ukrainian roots that would help the new territorial state create a shared sense of identity. The revival of Orthodox Christianity imparts significant changes to gendered spaces. Bazylevych is known for her patriarchal ideology and Orthodox Christianity.⁴¹ Additionally, Hanna Chuchvacha notes that the evangelical symbolism and Christian metaphors in art were underpinned by the growth of spirituality and a massive social turn toward the church, which was no longer persecuted. By the 1990s, the increasing influence of Orthodoxy and the general rise of mysticism in post-Soviet countries were primarily encouraged by the Moscow Patriarchy's dominance in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Yet, the Virgin Mary and her icons were inseparable from Orthodox historical memory and collective hope during times of national crisis.⁴² The collapse of the USSR and the economic crisis only strengthened the Church's influence, becoming a new ideological outpost for many. In this bottomless social and political crisis, the cult of Mary was stimulated by collective memory. Her religious images, reinterpreted in this new sociocultural environment, became part of the new visual vernacular entitled to express anxieties, traumas, and uncertainty and, on the other hand, to disrupt Soviet aesthetics and artistic canons.⁴³

The splendid statue of Orthodox Berehynia (Oranta) towering over the main square of Kyiv (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) is a strong statement about the intended role of women in post-soviet Ukrainian society. The Oranta (meaning prayer woman; another name is the Great Panagia) is a figure with hands raised in prayer, symbolizing a redeemed soul in Orthodox iconography. The female figure in traditional Ukrainian dress resembles the Virgin Mary and a peasant woman simultaneously, emphasizing the connection to the land and spirituality. With an ancient history, this figure was painted in the catacombs by the first Christians. As Jilge highlighted, the monument is reminiscent of the image of the Oranta as the Berehynia of the roots, which forms the heart of the new national idea of post-Soviet Ukraine (the mid-1990s–2014).⁴⁴ Moreover, this image is also associated with

40 Bazylevych, "Public Images."

41 Pavlychko, "Feminism," 306.

42 Shevzov, "On the Field of Battle."

43 Chuchvaha, "Memory, Trauma."

44 Jilge, "Between 'Mother Homeland,'" 53–54.

St. Sophia Orthodox Cathedral situated in Kyiv, a symbol of the centuries-old tradition of the Ukrainian state.

It's important to add that the myth of Berehynia is much more apparent in another iconographic image of the Mother of God. A further canonical embodiment, the Pokrova (Theotokos, the Protectress or Virgin of Mercy), shows the Virgin Mary covering God's people with a veil. Therefore, in this type of iconography, we find examples of the Virgin holding a veil or an open Maphorion over people's reduced figures at her feet. We can also see Mary in the position of Oranta, and angels have the veil over her head. This is an image deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture. It is connected with the iconography of the period of Cossackdom, October 14, when the Orthodox Church celebrates Saint Mary the Protectress, and the official Defender of Ukraine Day (since 2015).⁴⁵

Since 1996, Kyiv has also erected a place of memory to commemorate the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. It is called *The Madonna of Chernobyl* and is located in front of the Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum. It is an architectural and sculptural composition: three semicircular arches laid out in red brick form a frame for a stylized bronze figure of a woman standing under the central arch, with her head bowed, in a long, straight dress that falls to her feet, leaving her bare feet exposed; her hands are prayerfully pressed to the chest. At her center is a figure of a baby with outstretched arms. Two bronze bells are fixed in the side arches. The composition is associated with an iconographic image, and the architectural framing is associated with an ancient Ruthenian temple motif. The designers are sculptor Leonid Verstak and architect Anatoliy Haydamaka.

Anastasiya Honcharenko emphasizes that since the early 1990s, Ukrainian sculpture has faced new challenges—abandoning the Soviet forms of presenting the past and developing new ones to commemorate the tragic pages of twentieth-century history for a mass audience. Her opinion is that the images of the Mother of God (Theotokos) have become associated with the tragic events in the history of Soviet Ukraine. Simultaneously, they are not objects of religious worship but a form of presenting the Mother of God as the eternal defender of the Ukrainian nation.⁴⁶

However, when we talk about commemorating the Holodomor in public spaces, the image of Berehynia is explored indirectly. Holodomor iconography uses universal Christian symbols but remains deeply rooted in the Orthodox Church. From the very beginning, the exploration of Marian

45 Plokyh, *Tsars and Cossacks*.

46 Honcharenko, "Zhinochi obrazy."

iconography is in the foreground. The canonical images of the Mother of God were used here: the already mentioned Oranta and the Pokrova. It takes place in a public space or, preferably, in the statements of activists related to the Holodomor's commemoration on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary. Moreover, the religious connections of the first anniversary of this event in independent Ukraine were reflected in the first Holodomor monument in Kyiv.

For instance, in one of her press statements in 1993, Lidia Kovalenko-Maniak, president of the Association of Holodomor Researchers, emphasized that the religious element is symbolically crucial in these commemorations. She also held that the most significant number of people died in the period from the autumn of 1932 to the spring of 1933. Nevertheless, she measures this time with critical Orthodox holidays, specifically the period between Pokrova 1932 and Triytsia (White Sunday) 1933.⁴⁷ Therefore, one of the components of the state celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Holodomor in Kyiv were *panakhydas* (solemn Orthodox liturgical services) throughout 1993. Here, again, Kovalenko-Maniak counts the time according to the liturgical calendar and tells about the period between the Pokrova in 1992–93.⁴⁸

The first monument commemorating the victims of the Holodomor was unveiled in Kyiv in 1993, located near St. Michael's Orthodox Church. The memorial in Kyiv is the shape of a square stele made of grey granite. There is a cross cut out of the stone slab, inside which a female figure (made of metal) was placed; it, in turn, contains the figure of a child with outstretched arms. The soil on which the memorial was erected had been brought in from all regions of Ukraine and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.⁴⁹ According to the official interpretation, the female figure, alluding to Orthodox iconography, is supposed to "symbolize [...] a woman-mother with outstretched arms and a dead child in her womb."⁵⁰ Both figures were placed in the middle of the cross to emphasize that they died a martyr's death.

The monument was codesigned by Mykola Kyslyi and Vasyl Perevals'kyi. As in many other works of art, the artists' personal motivations played a prominent role here. The family of Perevals'kyi came from Cherkasy, where in the 1930s it suffered both as a result of repressions and the Holodomor.

47 Kovalenko-Maniak, "My zatialysia," 91.

48 Ibid., 94.

49 Veselova, "Pam'iatni," 434.

50 Miroschnychenko, "Smertiu smert' podolavshy."

The sculptor, therefore, had a personal need to address this subject matter in his artistic work:

The monument depicts a graphic cross as a symbol of a martyr's death and, at the same time, of eternal life. Against the backdrop of the cross, a suffering mother represents both Mother Ukraine and the Mother of God, with a child on her chest. The woman's silhouette alludes to a well-known twelfth-century icon—*The Great Panagia (Oranta)*. [...] The architect Mykola Kislyi had ideas about how to illustrate this image in stone, but there was a shortage of granite to execute it.⁵¹

The Great Panagia mentioned by the artist is an icon also known as *The Oranta of Yaroslavl'*. It is a depiction of the Virgin Mary from the twelfth or thirteenth century, according to different estimates. The painting was found by chance by art conservationists in 1919 in the Orthodox Spaso-Preobrazhenskiy male monastery in Yaroslavl' on the Volga River in Russia. At present, the icon can be viewed in the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

One variant of the *Oranta* is *Znamenie* (Our Lady of the Sign), which shows the Theotokos in a similar gesture of prayer with Jesus in the womb. Paintings of this type in Orthodox iconography typically depict the Madonna with Child, but rarely without him. In these depictions, the child is shown inside a medallion in his mother's womb. He is mysteriously suspended and seems to contradict gravity. As a rule, the child has the face of an adult man. He is holding a scroll of the scripture and raising his right hand in blessing. In the second version, the image shows Mary without Jesus, with her hands raised in prayer.⁵²

The design proposed by Pereval's'kyi and Kyslyi is a secular interpretation of religious themes, which became a characteristic feature of commemorating the Holodomor in independent Ukraine. At that time, social rituals commemorating this event in public space had not yet been developed, so broadly defined indigenous tradition and culture became a reference point for artists. Consequently, secular (sometimes even folk or primal) symbols appear next to religious ones on the memorials of the Holodomor victims. This apparent semiotic volunteerism has led to the creation—based on symbols that memory communities understand to be Ukrainian—of a complex but fragmented image of loss. Simultaneously, the lack of Holodomor iconography was compensated for by sentimental symbols alluding to

51 Kozats'kyi krai. „Vsesvitniovidomyi symvol Holodomoru.”

52 Kondakov, *Ikongrafiia Bogomateri*, 110–11.



Fig. 3.3. Holodomor monument in Kyiv, Ukraine (1993). Photographed by Tetiana Pastushenko.

individual experience (referring to the experience of the death of a loved one, not to the political aspect of genocide and its mass scale). The artist's goal was to persuade viewers that the Holodomor trauma was their personal loss and that the place of memory should function as a secular shrine, where Ukrainians who perished in the famine could be honored. To summarize, it is worth noting that over the years, such artistic experiments led to the creation, based on such motifs and symbolic collages, of Ukraine's canon of iconographic motifs unambiguously associated with the commemoration of the Holodomor.

This interpretation has gained immense popularity through numerous replicas and copies situated worldwide. Furthermore, in this way, it physically and symbolically crossed the borders of Ukraine and became removed from its social and political context. Each subsequent copy already has its own tradition and history, built around a community of memory.

The Holodomor Icon or the Holodomor Emblem

Some of these works were inspired by the key element of the Kyiv monument: the image of a mother with outstretched arms and a child in her womb. This was the case in Munich in 2008, where a memorial for the Holodomor victims was unveiled in the Cathedral of the Intercession of the Mother of God and St. Andrew. The memorial bears the image of a mother and child taken from the Kyiv monument and an inscription in Ukrainian: "In memory of millions of Holodomor victims in Ukraine 1932/33" ("На згадку про мільйонні жертви Голодомору в Україні 1932/33").

The memorial designed by the English architect Alistair Pierson revealed that in 2009, the town of Rochdale in Greater Manchester used the same motif.⁵³ It is worth noting that Pierson gave the shape of a cross to the stele itself rather than to a space cut out in the stone, and the image of a mother and a child is close to the top of the cross. A more artistic interpretation of the Kyiv monument is found in the Canadian town of North Battleford, where a Holodomor memorial was put up in 2008 (and officially unveiled in 2014).⁵⁴ The sculpture shows only the figures of a mother and a child, while the silhouette of the cross is not used. In 2008, in Buenos Aires, in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, a commemorative plaque for the

53 Nebesniak, "Pam'iatnykom," 9.

54 Cairns, "Holodomor Monument."

Holodomor victims, an exact copy of the Kyiv memorial, was put up on the cathedral wall.

While the abovementioned memorials allude to the original work to a larger or smaller extent, there are also some exact copies of Vasyl Pereval's'kyi's monument (varying, however, in size). The first one was created in 2008 in the village of Litky in the Kyiv Oblast in Ukraine.

Around the same time, a copy of Pereval's'kyi's monument was erected on the Plaza de Armas in the city center of Encarnación, Paraguay. An essential element critical to the understanding of what drove the Ukrainian community in Paraguay to found the memorial is that it is close to another monument, a bust of Taras Shevchenko, funded by the Ukrainian population of the town. This gives the memorial a much broader meaning; to this community, the memory of the Holodomor is an element of national heritage, an important aspect of their identity, and a remembrance of the sacrifice made by their nation on the path to independence. A year later, at the initiative of Vitório Sorotiuk, a similar, smaller-scale copy of the memorial was unveiled in the Ukrainian park in Curitiba, in the Brazilian state of Paraná.⁵⁵

Pereval's'kyi's design can be seen as a sign of memory that serves as a reminder of this event and draws attention to the topic, especially since the practice of copying the monument continues (as illustrated by the fact that the image of the Kyiv monument was also used as a motif in the monuments in Clifton, New Jersey, USA, in 2010, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, in 2011, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, in 2017, and Leicester, England, UK, in 2018). In 2016, another exact copy was unveiled in Toronto. However, it is worth noting in this case that the inscriptions that supplemented the symbols of the original sculpture are an element of interpretation.

There are two ways to look at the phenomenon of replicating this monument. On the one hand, it signals the approval of the community of memory for the way in which one artist showed the memory of the Great Famine. It is a symbolic consent to this particular way of remembering this historic event. This is important, mainly because the Ukrainian monument has been copied by the diaspora, which means that the symbolic interpretation of the Holodomor is perceived more uniformly by the Ukrainians in the diaspora and independent Ukraine. Furthermore, by replicating the monument, the community of memory pulls back from the effort of reflecting on its own version of commemorating the Holodomor, which could instead be created by a local artist, not necessarily of Ukrainian descent. Since, from the very beginning, the copy of the memorial is not linked to the imagery of the

55 Kozats'kyi krai. „Vsesvitniovidomyi symbol Holodomoru.”

specific community of memory, there is a risk that its foreignness to the community that replicates it will only grow more profound over the years. In other words, rather than adopting such a monument, the community of memory may merely foster it. In the case of copying this memorial, the replication almost always involves interpreting the original.

We could take this reflection even further and view the replication of this monument as a symbolic refusal to reflect on the commemorated event. A copied iconographic motif chosen instead of an original interpretation is a gauntlet thrown to the viewer; it shows that the community of memory is incapable of a new interpretation of the horrendous suffering of millions of Holodomor victims. After all, we're talking about the efforts of the post-memory generation, for whom reminiscences of the Holodomor are part of family folklore and national mythology.

In the case of commemorating the trauma of Chornobyl, icons recognized by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church appeared.⁵⁶ In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the icon of Our Lady of Pokrova was adopted. Contrastingly, in the case of the Holodomor, a recognizable Marian representation is the copied monument of Pereval's'kyi and Kyslyi. This repetition has resulted in the creation of a new iconic image of the Virgin Mary for the purpose of cultivating the memory of the Holodomor. On the one hand, they are rooted in Christianity (which is why they fit into parish areas in the West) and, on the other, they resemble a tombstone (which is why they fit into Ukrainian cemeteries).

Meanwhile, the image of the monument has become a relatively recognizable symbol of the Holodomor and is used on Holodomor book covers and posters announcing commemorative events. In this situation, we can talk about desacralization (abuse of the icon of the Mother of God) in the process of symbolizing the Holodomor in Ukraine. There is a noticeable point in the replication process when social mourning ends and the conventionalization of iconographic images associated with the visual culture of the Holodomor begins.

From Madonna to Everyday Mother

It is interesting to note that the image of the Mother of God did not appear in the Holodomor places of memory created on the initiative of the Ukrainian diaspora until the time of the Orange Revolution. Only during

⁵⁶ What is meant here is that the devotional images of the Theotokos in relation to the Chornobyl nuclear disaster were officially blessed by the Orthodox Church and given special liturgical veneration. See Romashko, "Russian Orthodox."

President Yushchenko's term (2005–10) would the ties between the Ukrainian diaspora's remembrance policy and that of the independent Ukrainian state be additionally strengthened due to the deep respect that the president had for the implementation of the symbolic policy by the Ukrainian diaspora. For the first time, monuments using Marian iconography were created in countries inhabited by the Ukrainian diaspora. However, these were not new monuments but copies of the aforementioned Kyiv monument.

Since the Orange Revolution, Marian images referring to Orthodox iconography no longer resonate in the social space and have been gradually replaced by other religious symbols (crosses, angels, and candles). Thus, the sacred character of remembering the event does not change, but the symbolic representations have transformed, becoming increasingly conventionalized with recognizable repeating sets of symbolic signs. During this period, the sacred dimension of the memory of the Holodomor was attained through the desacralization of the Marian image and further imbuing it with a secular meaning: a woman (Mother) or a girl (potentially a future mother) and the use of a candle as a universal symbol of remembering the dead. Both of these symbolic representations appear in the Holodomor memorial in Kyiv (*The Candle of Memory*), unveiled in 2008 as an initiative of the then-president.⁵⁷

Since President Yanukovych (2010–14) built his policy on the negation of his predecessors and discredited his undertakings in the context of commemoration, in his term, that image had to be decentralized. At that time, visual representations remained relatively conventional in form.⁵⁸ However, the subject of Holodomor memory returns in its sacrosanctity only after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. In the background of the 1993 Holodomor monument in Kyiv and on the walls of the Church of St. Michael, there is a socially organized memorial site called Heavenly Hundred. Visiting there now, one gets the impression that it is a memorial site for the victims of both events. In social rituals, the center of gravity has shifted from national sacrifices to individual sacrifices remembered as martyrs (innocently murdered, saint martyrs).

The process of sacralization of the Holodomor in independent Ukraine progresses into the moral and aesthetic (post-memory) dimensions and is carried out in the public space by the usage of Orthodox iconography. The moral dimension includes how the victims are, in a sense, remembered as one of the many sacrifices made on the altar of history in the name of Ukraine's independence. The aesthetic dimension was established with the

57 Hrytsenko, *Prezydenty i Pam'iat'*, 638–95.

58 Ibid., 914–44.

creation of the first memorial sites. This idealized image of suffering and the representation of Holodomor victims as martyrs in the centuries-old tradition of Ukrainian independence movements effectively eliminates other, weaker, symbolic representations of the Holodomor. This image has been repeatedly reinterpreted and copied as the most appropriate or acceptable to new generations of Ukrainians. Replicating the symbolic motif from the *Znamenie* icon in memorials now founded near parish churches by the Ukrainian diaspora may indicate both approval of such a martyrological interpretation of the Holodomor and an inability to reflect anew on this event in the context of discovering or building a new identity.

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4. “Holier Than Thou?” Discourses of Orthodox Interdenominational Ecclesiastical Historical Politics in Ukraine at the Time of the Ukrainian Autocephaly Process

Ursula Woolley

Abstract: The autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, granted in 2019, was contested by the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian government, and their supporters in Ukraine. This chapter analyzes rival texts of church public history in Ukraine from pro-autocephaly and anti-autocephaly sources. In a place where societal practices of sacralization and the political securitization of identity are intersubjective, influential, and dynamic, this case of interdenominational contestation and its broader security context invite exploration of the concept of the sacralization of history. The analysis indicates that avoiding rhetorical or political sacralization, even in an ecclesiastical context, may be a better means of protecting the private experience of the sacral in religious motivation and practice.

Keywords: affect, autocephaly, canonicity, legitimacy, orthodoxy, securitization

Introduction: The Orthodox Church of Ukraine Receives Its Tomos

The formal decision to seek autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was made by the Unifying Council (Ob'iednavchyi Sobor) of clerical and lay representatives of the different branches of Orthodoxy in Ukraine

at the St. Sofia Cathedral in Kyiv on December 15, 2018.¹ The Tomos (official church document) confirming the autocephaly of the OCU and its inclusion in the formal list (diptych) of independent (autocephalous) national Orthodox churches was given to the new Ukrainian Metropolitan Epifanii during a service at Constantinople led by the Ecumenical Patriarch on January 6, 2019.²

The words in the preceding paragraph depict this event as one of ecclesiastical institutional process. Although for people of faith who are supporters of Ukrainian autocephaly it will have felt “sacralized,” as described above it depends more for its authority on institutional or processual legitimacy than on a shared sense of sanctity between political or ecclesiastical actors and the audience. However, in the months and years preceding and following the confirmation of the autocephaly of the OCU, the discursive sacralization and sometimes desacralization of additionally legitimating public historical narratives were important in building societal and political support for or against this autocephaly. Where “sacralization of history” had already been devalued, especially from the standpoint of Ukraine, by its use in Russian government discourses of political legitimation (information war), how was it now used in Kyiv in a situation where contested sacrality was at the heart of what was at stake?³

This chapter explores how the concept of the sacralization of history can help explain competing discourses of ecclesiastical history at the time of the recent Ukrainian autocephaly process. Equally, it explores what Eastern Orthodox interdenominational historical politics in Ukraine suggests about the explicatory value of the concept of the sacralization of history. It shows how competing public narratives of church history involve historical tropes frequently slipping between apparently intentional rhetorical sacralization and apparently intentional rhetorical desacralization, to strengthen the case for or against autocephaly. Just as, over recent years, the sacralization of history in Russian elite and official political discourse has been

1 Sahan, *Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy*, 68. Two bishops of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), Metropolitan Oleksandr Drabynko and Metropolitan Symeon Shostats'kyi, attended the council. They were afterwards deprived of their bishoprics by the UOC-MP.

2 Sahan, *Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy*, 70.

3 The sacralization of history, discursively and representationally, has grown more frequent and emotive in Russian political discourse since the invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. It has recently been used in official Russian rhetoric accompanying Russia's “full-scale” invasion of Ukraine. See TASS, “Putin Says,” para. 7; Leustean, “Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,” paras. 1, 2–5.

part of a broader verbal and semiotic dialogue with other former Soviet republics, indicative of ebbs and flows of political power between them, so the sacralization of history as an affective technique, as used in recent church politics between Ukraine and Russia, reveals to us aspects of the dynamics in that wider political relationship.⁴

This chapter starts with the establishment of relevant definitions of the concept of the sacralization of history, a note on local context, and a survey of recent literature on Ukrainian autocephaly. It analyzes differing approaches to contrasting tropes from church history in Ukraine through the lens of the sacralization of history in OCU and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) public texts of ecclesiastical history—from church websites and nonacademic literature.⁵ It explores how these texts display the potential and limitations of the sacralization of history as a concept and, in its political form, as an instrument of political influence.⁶

Definitions of Terms: “Political” Sacralization or “Anthropological” Sacralization?

Some disciplinary perspectives designate sacralization as the personal or social practice that creates and reinforces religious rituals.⁷ Others take the word to signify the discursive instrumentalization of the sacral—an appeal to a shared commitment to faith or religious authority. By extension, sacralization signifies the political instrumentalization of the rhetorical

4 Zhurzhenko, “Monumental Commemoration,” 173; Kazharski and Makarychev, “From the Bronze Soldier,” 5. Since 1991, the UOC-MP has often followed and advocated for the objectives of the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). See Sherr and Kullamaa, “The Russian Orthodox Church”; Wanner, “Affective Atmosphere,” 71. Nonetheless, individual priests in the UOC-MP have disagreed with Moscow’s position, and this situation continues to change. See Hromads’ke Radio, “Znaiu, shcho vseredyni UPTs.” The UOC-MP statute of May 2022 discursively formalized an increased distance from the ROC following the full-scale invasion. See Onufrii, “Statut pro Upravlinnia.” There is skepticism in Ukraine about the validity of this. See LB.ua, “Ruka Moskvy.”

5 The text of public history on the website of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, as the seat, in 2023, now disputed, of the head of the UOC-MP, is representative of the UOC-MP approach to church history. It is certainly also interesting to compare the differing degrees of politicization present in the public websites of different UOC-MP churches at the time of the autocephaly process, but that is not the purpose here.

6 This chapter does not attempt to quantify this influence. See one approach to this separate question in Brik, “When Church Competition Matters?”

7 Montemaggi, “Sacralisation,” 305.

power of the (apparently) sacral. With these last two definitions, “discursive sacralization” is used politically, though not only within the scope of the formal political process.⁸ Imbuing political communications with a sense of sanctity can make them more persuasive. However, as with many affective rhetorical approaches, it can also cause the opposite effect.⁹

The political and anthropological definitions of sacralization above describe experiences frequently at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Whereas sacralization as a personal or social practice is open to all, the political instrumentalization of sacralization is more available to those with greater power. As Francesca Montemaggi states, widespread individual and “small group” religious practice can reinforce the power of discursive sacralization by political elites, although the correlation is not exact.¹⁰ The importance of religiosity and faith in Ukraine is significant. Ukraine is a comparatively faith-driven country, with more than 85 percent professing a Christian religious affiliation.¹¹ Analysts explain this above average religiosity as one consequence of being, in the imperialist phrase, a “nonhistorical” nation.¹²

“Sacralization of History”: The Local Context and Its Conceptualization

In 2017, Aleksandar Pavković analyzed how Russia and Serbia used the political sacralization of history to influence domestic public and international perceptions of their claims on Crimea and Kosovo respectively.¹³ Indeed, sacralized and historicized discourses in Serbia about claims on Kosovo are what first brought this tactic of discursive political legitimation back into

8 Smith, “The ‘Sacred’ Dimension,” 813; Pavković, “Sacralisation,” 510.

9 See Haidai et al., *Polityka i Pam’iat’*, 27–28. An overfamiliarity with top-down sacralization as an inheritance from Soviet communism has sometimes meant that nonelites have developed cognitive habits to partly inure themselves from this attempted elite influence.

10 Montemaggi, “Sacralisation,” 291.

11 Pew Forum, *Pew Templeton*; Wanner, “Affective Atmosphere,” 77. This chapter discusses sacralization in competing public texts of ecclesiastical history. The relatively frequent incidence in surveys of respondents confessing a denominationally nonspecific Orthodox faith (“just Orthodox”), as noted by Catherine Wanner, has been a factor in Ukraine in audience reception of these discourses, but it is not the focus here.

12 *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, “Narysy ukrains'koi identychnosti.” By comparison, the Pew Forum study quotes “profession of Christian religious affiliation” in Russia at 73 percent, Germany at 66 percent, and the UK at 59 percent.

13 Pavković, “Sacralisation.” See also Teper, “Official Russian Identity.”

wider public consciousness in Europe in recent decades.¹⁴ Before then, wider debate was more limited: whether this was from a lack of interest or caution is unclear: heightened diffidence in audiences on "sacralized" subjects is one of the affective functions of political sacralization.¹⁵

In the post-Soviet space, however, "historical politics" has become increasingly colored by the language and imagery of the sacral or the quasi-sacral.¹⁶ In the context of the war against Ukraine, one widely observed approach in Russian government political communication has been the "sacralization of history" in discourse referring to the Soviet victory in World War II.¹⁷ The "securitization of historical identity" and the "sacralization of history" in political discourse are overlapping forms of the same gambit intended to consolidate allegiances and delineate group boundaries. In recent Russian government communication, the latter has evolved from the former.¹⁸ Certainly, one view of public history is that it is inevitably sacralizing: almost any shared story of the past can be construed as a potentially sacralizable, politicizable identity narrative.¹⁹

When the Soviet Union broke up, and the ongoing negotiation of power between the state and the individual took a turn in favor of the individual, the public demonstration of sacralized private or unofficial memory became easier and assumed wider importance.²⁰ During the Soviet period, the private and concealed sacralization of personal or collective memory, unsanctioned by the state, developed in response to extreme state control over public expressions of the historical and the sacral. The political implications of the new, more open sacralization of individual historical memory were significant.²¹ The public sharing and collective acknowledgement of previously private sacralized memories was arguably a more potent force in (identity) politics than nationalism per se. However, that was not how this phenomenon was understood in academic debate at the time.²² Maria Mälksoo's elucidation of "mnemonic security," building on the Copenhagen School concept of the "securitization of identity," captures the significance of contested collective historical memory in international post-Soviet and

14 Pavković, "Sacralisation," 501–3.

15 Wanner, "Affective Atmosphere," 70.

16 Zhurzhenko, "Monumental Commemoration," 174.

17 McGlynn, *Memory Makers*.

18 Woolley, "The Securitization," 340.

19 Megill, *Historical Knowledge*.

20 Kas'ianov, *Past Continuous*, 6.

21 Misztal, "The Sacralization of Memory," 81.

22 Smith, "The 'Sacred' Dimension," 813.

postcommunist regional politics. However, Mälksoo does not explicitly identify the sacralized element within it, whether sincerely faith-related or quasi-faith-related.²³

The importance of the sacralization of history in the identity of nonhistorical nations and the importance of sacralization in unofficial, nonstate practices of ritualization both characterize the societal context in Ukraine of the analysis below.²⁴ The top-down sacralization of history in elite political discourse and the bottom-up sacralization of personal history in private personal practice illuminate opposing positions over ownership of the historical narrative as a quasi-sacred identity narrative during the post-Soviet period. In the rival public texts of church history analyzed below, “sacralizations of history” are combined with other types of rhetorical legitimation, especially, on the part of the UOC-MP, appeals to “canonicity” (ecclesiastical legitimacy, drawing on a mix of precedent and interpretation of canon law).

Recent Writing on Ukrainian Autocephaly and Sources

From the disciplinary perspective of international politics, the negative reaction of the Kremlin and of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to Ukrainian autocephaly and the precise nature of the influence of the ROC on the UOC-MP in Ukraine are both of interest.²⁵ In religious studies, academic debate has advocated for or against OCU autocephaly, discussing possible social and political consequences and citing canonical precedent.²⁶ Historical debate on the subject has often been partisan.²⁷

In the context of the debates and circumstances outlined above, this chapter examines public texts of church history and texts from church websites showing opposing views on Ukrainian autocephaly. As the seat,

23 Mälksoo, “Memory Must Be Defended,” 222–23.

24 *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, “Narysy ukrains'koi identychnosti.”

25 For example, Sherr and Kullamaa, “The Russian Orthodox Church”; Rychko, “Pochaiv Lavra.”

26 For example, Pushkov, “The Issue of Legal Boundaries,” 4; Denysenko, “Spilkuvannia Sviatoho Dukha v Ukraini”; Denysenko, “Explaining Ukrainian Autocephaly”; Hovorun, “War and Autocephaly.”

27 For example, Ponomariov, “Ukrainian Church Autocephaly,” 231; Mudrov, “Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.” See also Brekhunenko, *Vіina za svidomist'*, 139–54. Brekhunenko defines key Russian myths about the church in Ukraine as: “the Kyiv Patriarchate is a schismatic church which does not have God’s blessing”; “Ukraine is the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate”; and “the Ukrainian language is not a holy language and cannot, therefore, be used for the liturgy.”

until 2023, of the UOC-MP, which opposed OCU autocephaly, the history text from the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (Kyiv Monastery of the Caves) website represents the anti-autocephaly perspective.²⁸ Meanwhile, the history text from the website of the OCU represents the pro-autocephaly perspective, alongside the website of St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv and the popular nonacademic little history of Ukrainian autocephaly published by Father Vitaly Klos in 2019 and distributed by the OCU.²⁹

This chapter also explains how differing emphases are reflected elsewhere, including in journalism. It does not analyze political speeches because the discursive value of different emphases in historical narratives can be seen more clearly in more specialized texts than in major public speeches, where semiotic value is often generalized or even more implicit.³⁰ The narrative emphases discussed below are one aspect of the contestation of power. This contestation also involves, on one level and in one set of formats, disputes over physical damage to church and parish property, along with polemics and monitoring of changing denominational allegiance in local news media. At the other (top) end of the social spectrum, it involves the energetic international projection of power by the ROC and President Poroshenko's apparently mistaken political decision to put the autocephaly process at the heart of his unsuccessful 2019 reelection campaign.³¹ The structure of the texts and discourses analyzed below, as well as their role in supporting or undermining autocephaly, sit somewhere between the abovementioned two extremes of political participation.

One broader perspective is to view this renegotiation of discursive emphases and the shifts in institutional power they represent as part of a centuries-long, continuous negotiation of power between Kyiv and Moscow. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is now the context that defines the circumstances of the discourse under examination. This was preceded by decades of gradual reconsolidation of authoritarian power in Moscow following the Soviet collapse and the intensification of various forms of Russian intervention in Ukraine preceding and following the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas in 2014.³²

28 Sviato-USpens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, "Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii."

29 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy"; Andriivs'ka Tserkva, "Sviatyi apostol Andrii Pervozvanyi"; Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*.

30 For a discourse analysis of political speeches about Ukrainian autocephaly, see Shestopalets, "Church and State in Ukraine."

31 Hlavcom, "Na Poltavshchyni"; Hovorun, "War and Autocephaly," 7–8, 14; Relihiino informatsiina sluzhba Ukrainy, "Pry rotatsii arkhiierei."

32 Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, 36.

In discussions of autocephaly, there is frequent reference to events and precedents from nearly two millennia ago. However, it is also essential to understand autocephaly in the light of the last few decades of history, ever since *glasnost* (openness) allowed for somewhat more open religious expression—though principally for Orthodox Christianity—in the last years of the Soviet Union.³³ The Kremlin then sought to work more openly with the ROC to better understand and influence faith-related social practice and faith-related politics as central Soviet institutions weakened.³⁴ The combination of the post-Soviet reemergence of faith in public life, the role of the ROC in extending influence abroad on behalf of Moscow, and the war with Russia have heightened in Ukraine what Catherine Wanner terms the current “affective atmosphere of religiosity” and its use as an “expedient political resource.”³⁵ In other words, when the OCU achieved autocephaly, sacralization and the political instrumentalization of sacralization were both widespread.

The analysis below looks at narratives concerning six periods of history:

1. The ecclesiastical foundation myth of St. Andrew and the “pre-Kyiv” period
2. The period of the rise of Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine
3. The long intervening period between the decline of Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine and the seventeenth-century reemergence of Kyiv as a center of ecclesiastical influence
4. The period towards the end of the seventeenth century when Muscovy wrested formal rather than de facto control of the Kyivan church from Constantinople
5. The Russian imperial period
6. The “short” twentieth century, from the decline of the Russian Empire to the end of the Soviet Union and the reappearance of independent Ukraine

Interwoven in the textual rivalry between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian-autocephaly versions of this history are different approaches to the sacralization of these narratives. The “moral high ground” and the convocational sacralizing power of the competing narratives are both contested. Sometimes the sacralization of history takes a back seat to other forms of rhetorical persuasion.

33 Mitrokhin, “Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov,” 313.

34 Mitrokhin, “Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov,” 306. Note the Ukrainian view in 2023, in the heightened discourse of war, that this in itself was a Russian “special security operation.” See Radio Svoboda, “Davaite naberemosia terpinia,” para. 6.

35 Wanner, “Affective Atmosphere,” 70.

The Foundation Myth of St. Andrew and the Symbolism of Crimea: The Sacralizing Distant Past

The story of St. Andrew the "First-Called" is emphasized differently in pro- and anti-autocephaly texts. Pro-autocephaly texts need to reappropriate the narrative from the ROC and displace the visual memory of Patriarch Kirill, the ROC Primate, arriving in Kyiv in 2013 with a full-size St. Andrew's cross in tow.³⁶ The website of St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv describes St. Andrew proclaiming the gospel (literally sacralization) in Taurida, Scythia, and Iveria (with Scythia standing for Ukraine, Taurida alluding to Crimea, and Iveria nodding to Georgia). St. Andrew "reaches a city" ("diishov do mista")—a putative settlement where Kyiv now stands—with the implication being, inaccurately according to the standard primary sources, that St. Andrew reached Kyiv and went no further.³⁷ The story then mentions (with emphatic sacralization) St. Andrew's presence on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem when Christ ascended into heaven.³⁸ Early sources of church history (Nestor, Eusebius, and Origen) record him proceeding northward to Novgorod. In fact, he travels onward to many other places in East and Southeast Europe: the St. Andrew image is powerfully sacralizing, but without this selective narration, it would not endow much particularity.³⁹

The OCU narrative of Christianity in Ukraine, starting with the early eparchies (bishoprics) of Crimea and Taurida, contends with the Russian government's sacralized narratives of Crimea, claiming that it had "always" been "Russian."⁴⁰ The semiotic association of Russia with early Christianity in Crimea uses literal sacralization (the trope concerns religion and is advanced as indisputable precisely because of this) to enhance its appearance of legitimacy.⁴¹ The St. Andrew's Church narrative of this early part of the story also refers to the Roman emperor attempting bribery and interfering

36 Ukrains'ka Pravda, "Patriarkh Kyryl prybuv v Ukrainu."

37 Andriivs'ka Tserkva, "Sviaty apostol Andriy Pervozvanyi," paras. 1, 4. In some respects, St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv symbolizes contestation over ecclesiastical history narratives in Ukraine. Hetman Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709) engaged in commissioning and funding its construction. It was officially designated for use by the Ecumenical Patriarch during the recent autocephaly process.

38 Andriivs'ka Tserkva, "Sviaty apostol Andrii Pervozvanyi," para. 6.

39 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 32–33. St. Andrew is traced in Russian narratives of Crimea in Jobst, "Holy Ground," 132.

40 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy," para. 1.

41 Pavković, "Sacralisation," 505.

in Kyivan church matters, by implication prefiguring subsequent imperial threats from without in the future.⁴²

The Rise of Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine: Volodymyr Better Historicized, or Just Differently Sacralized?

Public narratives surrounding the rule of Volodymyr (c. 958–1015, ruled 980–1015) have been a focus in public history since the late-Soviet millennial “Christianization” celebrations in 1988. The reintroduction of the Russian imperial trope of the “baptism of Prince Volodymyr,” at the height of *glasnost* also involved the ROC reclaiming use of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra from the Soviet state. This trope was reasserted on a relatively blank discursive canvas, domestically and internationally. The Cold War, with all its now barely imaginable limitations on (predigital) information flows, was coming to an end.⁴³ Contemporaneous initiatives presenting a Ukrainian perspective on Volodymyr did not enjoy the same amount of international attention.⁴⁴

Recent Ukrainian narratives of the Kyiv-Rus' period have desacralized it, unlike the 1988 ROC presentation, and opted for a more secular sacralization. They start the story before 988 and expand it southwestward to include Constantinople. In this version, the rule of Prince Volodymyr is noted for its “liberal” reforms (the spread of education and learning and the relative emancipation of women). It represents, it is argued, a proper “symphonic relationship between church and state.”⁴⁵

The OCU narration adopts a standard post-Soviet historiographical approach, gradually addressing key tropes of Soviet propaganda by adding more detail and nuance to replace the dominant, lingering Soviet public narrative.⁴⁶ Instead of the ROC trope of the 988 baptism of Volodymyr standing for the beginning of local “Christianization,” the pro-OCU narrative now emphasizes earlier diplomatic connections with Constantinople: Prince Ihor

42 Andriivs'ka Tserkva, “Sviaty apostol Andrii Pervozvanyi,” para. 6.

43 Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia*, 25.

44 Denysenko, “Explaining Ukrainian Autocephaly,” 433.

45 See Mitrokhin, “Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov,” 304–6. The ROC message in 1988 reasserted Orthodox Christianity in counterpoint to the secular “faith” of Communism. In practice, this involved concessions to and accommodations with Soviet state institutions. Nonetheless, it constituted the discursive reassertion of the validity of the sacral, as opposed to the sacralization of Marxism-Leninism. Alternatively, arguably, it merely shifted the institutional responsibility for the deployment of sacralization in official political communication from the CPSU to the ROC.

46 Stiazhkina, “Rad'ians'ke,” 54–57.

signed an international treaty with Constantinople in 944, when, sources suggest, there were already baptized Christians in his entourage; Princess Ol'ha (d. 969) had arranged her baptism in Constantinople well before 988.⁴⁷

As often in struggles in political discourse, in cases where the historical content, in the words of Ilya Kalinin, is a "limited resource," and where the resources of the parties involved are unequal, a discursive move by the under-resourced party is repackaged (co-opted) by the better-resourced one.⁴⁸ The Kyiv Pechersk Lavra narrative about the founding in 1051 of its central Holy Assumption Cathedral describes St. Anthony's vision on Mount Athos of the Virgin Mary, giving the project her blessing.⁴⁹ The symbolism of Mount Athos today, combining geographical and spiritual proximity to Constantinople with strong and well-funded links to Moscow and the ROC, is therefore present by association.⁵⁰ The vision of St. Anthony is sacralizing in its primary, mystical sense. The connection between Mount Athos (referenced by the Kremlin for symbolic sacralization) and the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra is (politically) sacralized by association. St. Anthony subsequently becomes the (institutionalized and sacralized) head of the monastery.⁵¹

The OCU narrative for 1051 mentions the installation at St. Sofia of Ilarion, the author of *Slovo pro Zakon i Blahodat'* (The Sermon on Law and Grace), as Metropolitan of Kyiv-Rus'.⁵² Associating the institution of the Kyiv-Rus' Metropolitanate with St. Sofia in this millennial time frame similarly, though less mystically, provides legitimating historical longevity also tinged with sacralization. In the OCU text, *The Sermon on Law and Grace* symbolizes the putatively progressive state-building politics of Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine and reinforces the idea of Kyiv (not Moscow, nor indeed Constantinople) as a place of (relatively) advanced legal and social practice.⁵³ The OCU narrative acknowledges in passing the "sufferers and martyrs" Sts. Borys and Hlib

47 Klos, *Aytokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 47; Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy," para. 2.

48 Kalinin, "Struggle for History," 255.

49 Sviato-USpens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, "Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii," para. 2.

50 Seddon, "Putin and the Patriarchs," especially paras. 4 and 37–43. There have been several visits by senior Russian figures to Mount Athos in recent years. From the perspective of Moscow, publicly signaling the connections between Moscow and Mount Athos/Constantinople supports the narrative of Moscow as the inheritor of Byzantium, the Third Rome to Constantinople's second.

51 Sviato-USpens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, "Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii," para. 2.

52 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy," para. 3.

53 Oleksandr Hrytsenko describes the deployment of the image of "progressive, state-building, early Kyiv," in this instance uncharacteristically in a speech given by President Yanukovich, in Hrytsenko, *Prezydenty i Pam'iat'*, 995–96.

in its story of Kyivan learning. However, the sacralization implicit in the *Sermon* (it was Ilarion who propounded the idea of the sanctity of Kyiv as a “second Jerusalem”) is not foregrounded.⁵⁴ The Lavra text notes the “humility, submissiveness, and obedience” of St. Anthony’s successor, Feodosii.⁵⁵ This alludes to the theological and cultural importance of submission and submissiveness (kenoticism) specifically ascribed to Kyiv, which has had wider long-term ramifications for Russia’s view of Ukraine: Ukrainian submission, militarily and politically as well as discursively, is what Moscow has been seeking openly since February 24, 2022.⁵⁶

Between the Fall of Rus’ and the Resurgence of Kyiv: A Less Cluttered Canvas in Public History for Retrospective Narration?

The previous section begins to illustrate the traditional sacralization of Ukraine in the UOC-MP anti-autocephaly narrative, broadly consistent with official Russian public communication and policy goals. The pro-autocephaly narrative, however, sketches out a differently defined and partly desacralized moral high ground.

Now the OCU narrative turns to Prince Andrii Boholiubs’kii (c. 1111–1174) and his unsuccessful request to Constantinople to authorize a separate metropolitanate in the north, in Vladimir. As the Kyivan principalities descend into more frequent infighting, it describes his 1169 attack on Kyiv, setting the Lavra and St. Sofia on fire.⁵⁷ Another pro-autocephaly version of this period casts an earlier key figure in traditional Russian historical narratives in the same light. Prince “Yurii Dolgorukii briefly seized the throne of Kyiv twice” represents him with that brief phrase as an unsuccessful upstart. It echoes the terms on which in standard works of Soviet history, and more recently in politicized public history initiatives, Russian narratives derided Ukrainian figures involved in the brief periods of fragile Ukrainian statehood at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁸

The Lavra narrative, alternatively, focuses on the dedication of the monks “working to avert the break-up of Kyivan Rus’,” and then on much later attacks

54 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 4; See also Berezhnaya, “Imagining the Third Rome,” 190; Shumylo, “Uiavlennia pro Kyiv,” para. 6.

55 Sviato-USpens’ka Kyievo-Pechers’ka Lavra, “Lavra v Khrystyians’kii istorii,” para. 4.

56 Fedotov, *Russian Religious Mind*, 110–11; Lewis, *Russia’s New Authoritarianism*, 170–75.

57 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 5.

58 See Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain’skoi Tserkvy*, 80; Hrytsenko, *Prezydenty i Pam’iat’*, 996.

on the Lavra by Mongol Tatars in 1399 and 1416.⁵⁹ Mirroring the narrative of the enemy from the east is the enemy from the west in the shape of the Lithuanian Prince Olgerd (c. 1296–1377), “initially a pagan”—he helpfully combines the twin evils of paganism and Catholicism in one person. After the Union of Krevo in 1385 Olgerd is attempting to foist more Catholicism on Kyiv.⁶⁰ The monks of the Lavra once again “in these difficult times” are commended for leaving Kyiv and going north to develop new monasteries in Muscovy.⁶¹

The trope from this medieval period to which pro-autocephaly writers return is of *Soborne obrannia* (“collective” or “catholic” election), the process by which the metropolitans of Kyiv and Halych were chosen by convening the widest possible group of their bishop peers.⁶² The *Soborne obrannia* represents the idea of the collective deliberative choice of a leader, implying (relative) transparency and (relative) power sharing. To a Ukraine-perspective readership, it prefigures the process by which the Cossacks chose their hetman. *Soborne obrannia* represents a totemic, locally specific approach to aspirations about the sharing of power and the transfer of power in implied contrast to the concealed, behind-the-scenes elite machinations symbolically associated with Moscow. It is the symbol of democracy, which is the sacralized trope of national history here, rather than the ecclesiastical reference.⁶³ The 2020 discussion about rotation onto and off from the governing council of the OCU, between religious affairs journalist Lana Samokhvalova and Metropolitan Dymytrii of L'viv, indirectly refers to and reinforces this trope of idealized Ukrainian democratic power sharing.⁶⁴

The close rhetorical relationship between discursive sacralization and political legitimation is emblemized by the narration of the gradual physical move of the Kyivan metropolitanate to Moscow. Then, in 1448, Moscow unilaterally selects a new Metropolitan for Kyiv and All-Rus' and receives a 141-year anathematization from Constantinople.⁶⁵ Pro-autocephaly versions of this story first emphasize notional Kyivan agency (“Ratens'kyi

59 Sviato-Uspens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, “Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii,” paras. 8, 11.

60 See *ibid.*, paras. 14, 19; Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 97–98. Whereas for the pro-Russian approach of the Lavra, the rising power of Lithuania is the unambiguous purveyor of (schismatic) Roman Catholicism, for the pro-autocephaly narrative the choice of rhetorical emphasis is less straightforward.

61 See Sviato-Uspens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, “Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii,” para. 16.

62 See Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 63. The adjective “*soborne*” in Ukrainian relates to the noun “*sobor*,” which conveys “cathedral” and “gathering.”

63 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” paras. 6, 8.

64 Relihiino informatsiina sluzhba Ukrainy, “Pry rotatsii arkhiierei.”

65 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 91–92.

and Feohnost effectively *move* the seat of the metropolitan to Moscow in the mid-fourteenth century.”) Secondly, they promote the history of the Kyiv and Halych metropolitanate under Lithuania’s auspices.⁶⁶ The selection of Hryhorii Tsamblak (c. 1365–1420) as Metropolitan of Kyiv and Halych at a church council in Navahrudak in 1415 predates the 1448 appointment by Moscow of a (different, separate, Moscow-based) Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus’.⁶⁷ The anti-autocephaly narrative imposes clear confessional identity distinctions (Olgerd was initially a *pagan*), appealing to shared understandings about what is Orthodox (again, including the sense of correctness and theological legitimacy) and what is not.⁶⁸

The Resurgence of Kyiv and the Rise of Muscovy: Sacralized History and Sacralized Canonical Legitimation

The period from the end of the sixteenth century (when Orthodoxy had to respond to the Union of Brest of 1596) to the beginning of the eighteenth century (involving intensifying control from Muscovy over Ukrainian lands, after Constantinople is persuaded to cede the Ukrainian church to Muscovy in 1685–86) is a period of intense interest. Church historical narratives of the initial local Orthodox response to the Union of Brest in 1596 choose different emphases.⁶⁹ Pro-autocephaly texts negotiate the ambivalence of historical reality by attributing moral value both to the new Orthodox “brotherhoods” “protecting local faith from external influences” and to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), formed by the Union of Brest in 1596. In this narration, because it has retained administrative self-government, the UGCC has, by implication, achieved the protection of local faith by different means.⁷⁰

Anti-autocephaly public church history of the period from 1654–86 hinges on the canonicity, or not, of rival interpretations. Pro-autocephaly approaches aim to delegitimize historical events in the eyes of audiences today by pointing out the unethical forms of power involved.⁷¹ The discursive sacralization intrinsic to the concept of canonicity is important here. The anti-autocephaly

66 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 5.

67 Ibid., para. 6.

68 Sviato-Uspens’ka Kyievo-Pechers’ka Lavra, “Lavra v Khrystyiians’kii istorii,” para. 14.

69 Ibid., para. 19; Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 8.

70 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain’skoi Tserkvy*, 97–98; Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 8.

71 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain’skoi Tserkvy*, 114–23; Ukrain’s’kyi tyzhden’, “Zirvaniy ‘tserkovnyi anshlius,’” paras. 7–23.

narrative uses the sense of sacralization in the concept of canonicity to reinforce institutional legitimacy. This is easily done when the subject is the church, and its very *Pravoslavie* (Orthodoxy) combines the concepts of legitimacy, power, and rectitude (the sense of rule and governance is more present in Russian etymology than in Greek). The pro-autocephaly narrative uses clearly desacralized, or perhaps differently sacralized, moral arguments about how Moscow attained and reinforced its ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Kyiv.⁷²

The anti-autocephaly approach is underpinned discursively by the important cultural trope, significant in the Russian view of Ukraine, of the "Ukrainian" impulse to self-determination as inherently schismatic and therefore destructive.⁷³ The pro-autocephaly approach relies instead on appeals to a common sense of justice. While it does not impose a sense of the sacral, it invites reflection about whether the story is morally troubling, and this in turn invites further reflection about personal conceptions of the sacral. Although this discourse analysis categorizes these as competing rhetorical approaches, they have comparable ends in mind. These rival rhetorical approaches are, however, important in drawing philosophical and political distinctions. A rhetorical appeal to canonicity can be said to constitute the discursive use of sacralization as a political tactic. Discursive sacralization is effectively persuasive, but may only be necessary where there is no more rational argument capable of garnering political support.⁷⁴

The Russian Imperial Period: Competing Visions of the Moral High Ground

Competing narrative emphases in the story of the Russian imperial period are less complicated. It broadly unfolds in recent texts in either more pro-imperial or decolonizing terms. Pro-autocephaly narratives of Ukrainian church history prefer to portray an unequivocal sequence of instances of

72 The argument against the autocephaly of the OCU on this point drew on the sacralized, canonical (or not) legitimacy of the right acquired from the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1685 by the Moscow Patriarchate to appoint the Metropolitan of Kyiv. This led to the subordination of the Kyiv Metropolitanate to Moscow. See Pushkov, "The Issue of Legal Boundaries," para. 3. The pro-autocephaly narrative argued that the ROC's bribery of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dionysii IV with 120 sable skins and 200 gold coins to achieve this delegation of responsibility and its breach of the terms on which Constantinople granted it additional rights proved its moral and sacral invalidity. See Radio Svoboda, "Kyiv lishilsya metropolii," para. 28

73 Brekhunenko, *Viina za svidomist'*, 139–46.

74 Ponomariov, "Ukrainian Church Autocephaly," para. 2.

Russian aggression in bad faith, with the consolidation of the hold of the Russian Empire over Ukraine as a central part of this story.⁷⁵ Some narratives emphasize ecclesiastical rearguard action on the part of individuals and networks in Ukraine from 1686 and for a century afterwards.⁷⁶ A similar but more nuanced approach emphasizes the continuity of a spectrum of the exercise of local political agency, the development of local cultural specificity, or repeated resistance to the external sources of power applied to Ukrainian church figures and church institutions. This approach tells the story of a century of new initiatives protecting local freedom of action and local customs and control.⁷⁷

This is the period where an imperial, institutionally legitimating historical narrative foregrounds the formal subordination by Peter I of the Holy Synod in Moscow to the Russian state with the Spiritual Regulation of 1721 and the Act of Secularization of Church Lands of 1786.⁷⁸ Pro-autocephaly narratives concede the institutional legacy of imperialism (the reestablishment in 1817 of the Kyiv Clerical Seminary and Academy under an 1808 ROC statute), although they point out that this is on the basis of Petro Mohyla's (1596–1647) Kyiv-led seventeenth-century institution building.⁷⁹

At the center of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra story of the imperial period is the relationship between the “political capital” on which Russian imperial power is based and the “intellectual and cultural capital” (in this instance, in the form of “religious capital”) on which, in this narration, Ukrainian power is based. The superior political capital of the imperial center uses its narrative relationship with the cultural capital in the historicized intellectual and ecclesiastical power of Ukraine, here represented by the Lavra, to increase its legitimacy. So “not one of the Russian tsars failed to lavish attention on the Lavra.”⁸⁰ Expounding this trope of symbiosis between political and cultural capital, the Lavra narrative notes the number of members of the imperial elite who wish to be associated with it or to be buried there.⁸¹ It points out the pecuniary advantages of its imperial era access to financial resources: “The Lavra is famed for its free hospitality to pilgrims. [...] It

75 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 132–38; Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” paras. 12–15, 19–25.

76 Ukrain's'kyi tyzhden', “Zirvanyi 'tserkovnyi anshlius.”

77 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 125–31.

78 Ibid., 122.

79 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, “Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy,” para. 21.

80 Sviato-Uspens'ka Kyievo-Pechers'ka Lavra, “Lavra v Khrystyians'kii istorii,” para. 22.

81 Ibid., para. 30.

provides five scholarships for young men without means who are called to study for the priesthood in Kyiv and Kostroma."⁸²

This narrative also makes concessions to Ukraine-perspective sensibilities. It foregrounds, or reappropriates, the anathematized and historically contentious figure of Hetman Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709) in a list of major eighteenth-century donors to the Lavra. Then, alluding both to the trope of the connectedness of ROC monasteries "to the people" and the Ukraine-perspective trope of civic activism, it comments that "the Lavra was constantly involved over the years in local civic and community issues."⁸³ While both approaches to the Russian imperial period stake out politically different versions of the moral high ground as persuasive devices, this is more precisely categorized as ethically or ideologically competitive rhetoric than sacralization. Apart from the ecclesiastical theme, its primary rhetorical quality is not one of sacrality.

Divergent Narratives of the Soviet Period and Post-1991 Misunderstandings

In the Lavra narrative, the story of Christianity in Ukraine during the Soviet period, the "short twentieth century" of 1917–91, is subject to a comparable dramatic simplification to the "Christianization of Rus" trope. The depiction of the Soviet period for the Russian Orthodox Church as one of generalized and underexamined shared tragedy is one of the messaging defaults of Russian government communication in recent decades.⁸⁴

Advocates of Ukrainian autocephaly tell a different story. The severe weakening or effective destruction of more locally oriented church structures in Ukraine during the last decades of the Russian Empire—and of nascent Ukrainian national institutions from the late 1920s—does not supply easy material for an attractive teleological narrative. Pro-autocephaly texts celebrate instances of intellectual creativity and short-lived institution-building progress, including the 1917 eparchial meetings in Poltava and Kyiv (the most radical among nationwide meetings in their advocacy of autocephaly). They mention the announcement in May 1920 of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine at a meeting of the Second All-Ukraine Orthodox Church

⁸² Ibid., para. 25.

⁸³ Ibid., para. 28.

⁸⁴ Ibid., paras. 34–38.

Council.⁸⁵ Nonsacral legitimation also underpins the narration of the 1919 law on Ukrainian autocephaly introduced under the Presidency of the Ukrainian People's Republic of Symon Petliura (1879–1926).⁸⁶

Contrastingly, discursive political sacralization is used in narrating the story of the consecration of Vasyl' Lypkivs'kyi (1864–1937) as metropolitan of the autocephalous Ukrainian church. The canonicity of his consecration is disputed by the ROC, delineating the distinction between sacralization as experienced in personal practice and sacralization as conferred by institutional authority.⁸⁷ The bitter disagreements and atomization that habitually accompany political defeat then color the public story of Ukrainian Orthodoxy until, after World War II, Metropolitan Ilarion Ohienko (1882–1972, formerly minister of education of the Ukrainian People's Republic), then leading the North American Ukrainian diaspora, begins again to generate and publicly communicate a more united approach.⁸⁸

Discussion: Sacralization and Desacralization of History in Competing Positions on Ukrainian Autocephaly

So how do the patterns of the sacralization of history discussed above relate to and implicitly comment on the differing definitions of sacralization explored at the beginning of this chapter?

The prehistory of Christianity in Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine, in the story of St. Andrew the First-Called, is an unambiguous instance of the sacralization of history.⁸⁹ The securitization of historical identity, and by implication of religious identity, is present in the detailed textual allusions overlaid on these sacralized identity myths, whether by limiting the narration of St. Andrew's travels or representing historicized Kyivan associations with Crimea.⁹⁰

The period of the heyday of Kyiv-Rus'-Ukraine is a source of contested semiotic power in the competing traditional teleological schemas of Russian

85 Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy," paras. 26, 33.

86 Ibid., paras. 31–23.

87 Sahan, *Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy*, 29.

88 Wilson, *Ukrainians*, 248.

89 Klos, *Avtokefaliia Ukrain's'koi Tserkvy*, 32–33; Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy, "Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy," para. 1.

90 In these early stages, the symbolic geographical location of engagement is reversed. The anti-autocephaly narrative claims association with the Greek-Byzantine "West" in the form of Mount Athos; the pro-autocephaly narrative claims the historical longevity of a political relationship with more easterly Crimea.

and Ukrainian history.⁹¹ In the case of the rival denominational narrations discussed here, the broad distinction is between a new "securitized" narrative of historical identity in pro-autocephaly texts, and tropes aligning with official or institutional Russian historical discourse in the anti-autocephaly version. Rather than the historical narratives themselves being overtly sacralized, they each appeal to a sacralized form of identity allegiance.⁹²

The period between the decline of Kyiv-Rus' and the Union of Brest is used in the competing narratives discussed above as a canvas on which to sketch and redraw other lines of demarcation. The diminished presence during this period of centers of political power on the territory of today's Ukraine means that it is more susceptible than other periods to the imposition or historicization of other sacralized identity narratives.

Approaches to the late seventeenth century in the history of Ukrainian autocephaly are distinguished by a desacralized appeal to common perceptions of moral rectitude in the pro-autocephaly texts and by an affective appeal to a shared sense of the sacral in the anti-autocephaly narration.

References to the Russian imperial period are again characterized by a simpler appeal to the conventional ideological and philosophical colorations pertaining to the different teleological narratives. Despite the religious subject matter, there are more appeals to status than sacrality.

During the Soviet period, the forms of sacralization of history in the different narratives diverged. The pro-autocephaly narrative draws on the sacralization of martyrdom and constructs ecclesiastical institutional legitimacy. The UOC-MP narrative subscribes to the sacralization of Ukrainian identity or "Ukrainianness," which, as discussed above, is part of the (neo-)imperial narrative strategy according a special place for the overall Ukrainian contribution historically to the development of the Russian Orthodox Church.

After 1991, sacralized discourses of church history in Ukraine interacted more intensively with the then more public expression of (denominationally nonspecific) sacralized personal memory and with the post-Soviet "political sacralization" of various tropes of national history. In the early post-Soviet period, there was respect or even reverence (perhaps also political caution

91 See Tolochko, *Kyivskaya Rus'*, 9–45, for analysis of the discursive disaggregation of the Ukrainian national historical narrative from the Russian imperial one at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

92 This contrasts with the less subtle sacralization of history in political discourse in Russia. Vladimir Medinsky, minister of culture of the Russian Federation (2012–20), had defended the sacrality of historically false public political communication in an interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in 2015. See *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, "Rol' istorii v lichnosti."

and social tentativeness at a time of profound dislocation?) for the possibility of historical accuracy and more public and specific (often nationalizing) narratives of historical identity.⁹³

When discussing Ukrainian autocephaly, it is important to emphasize that the sacralization of history as an instrument of political affect has generally been left to extreme polemicists and political commentators rather than used directly in mainstream public texts of church history.⁹⁴ “Political” sacralization has played a role, particularly in arguments relating to legitimacy and canonicity, where, as previously discussed, it repeatedly takes the position of a rhetorical device as a last resort. The sacralization in Russian and pro-Russian discourse of “semiotic Ukraine” is an essential characteristic of the discursive landscape analyzed here. It is distinct from, but sometimes ambiguously interacts with, the nonelite sacralization of Ukrainian identity by Ukrainians, both as a counterpoint to revanchist Russian political capital and as a source of nonelite identity consolidation.

Conclusion

In the pre-2022 ecclesiastical relationship between Ukraine and Russia, the experience of the sacral (whether personal, local, national, or supranational), and the power to articulate and interpret this experience in elite public discourse, constituted a form of valuable but also subjectively defined political currency, over which there was intense discursive competition. What might be termed “religious capital,” as opposed to the more general “cultural capital,” in the instance of Ukrainian autocephaly, was at stake in the relationship between the two countries.⁹⁵

The case discussed in this chapter invites further urgent exploration for its own sake and continued exploration in connection with the concept of the sacralization of history. This concept invites debate during this current period of change, when perceptions of identity, legitimacy, and the historicization and sacralization of both are subject to redefinition and contestation by political and religious actors as well as academic ones.

The analysis here shows how the susceptibility to discursive affect associated with religious identity in general, and perhaps denominational identity

93 See, for example, Shevchenko, “Pro pidporiadkuvannia,” 60.

94 For a less moderate approach, see, for example, UNIAN, “Vasyl' Anisimov”; Taushev, *Tserkov' Khrystova*.

95 The concept of cultural capital is taken from Bourdieu, “Les trois états,” 5.

in particular, increases the importance and effectiveness of the discursive sacralization of history as a political instrument. Paulmann's concept of "systems of interpretation and order of the sacred" enhances our understanding of the determination demonstrated by the Russian state to impose its systems of interpretation on Ukraine.⁹⁶ The importance in Russian political thought today of messianism generating discursive sacralization, alongside an emphasis on the imposition of systems of interpretation in achieving regional hegemony (to which Paulmann's concept speaks), is explored by David Lewis in *Russia's New Authoritarianism*.⁹⁷ The general preference in the pro-autocephaly texts discussed here for rhetorical desacralization suggests a contrasting view—that the political sacralization of history, even, ironically, of church history, is neither always preferable nor effective.

During the Ukrainian autocephaly process, the UOC-MP, still closely aligned with the ROC, set out to maintain influence by disseminating sacralized discourses of commonality with Russian Orthodoxy. It is not yet obvious how the watershed of Ukrainian autocephaly, especially in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion, will allow for the sustained creation and definition of a simultaneously sufficiently inclusive and exclusive ecclesiastical institutional and discursive space. Historically and semiotically, the idea of a church or monastery as both fortress and dissemination point, depending on changing political circumstances, is familiar to us, particularly in Ukraine, as explored by Berezhnaya.⁹⁸ In the case of Ukraine today, denominational identity as potentially securitized personal identity is part architectural but also part experiential construction.⁹⁹

At the time of the autocephaly process in Ukraine, public texts of church history used discursive sacralization selectively to "securitize" denominational identity, either in favor of autocephaly or against it. These texts presented an ideal case for exploring the discursive sacralization of history and the ethical, intellectual, and political questions it raises.¹⁰⁰ It is to be

96 Paulmann, "Sacralization."

97 Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism*. The importance in recent Russian political thought of regional hegemony over knowledge and interpretation is discussed at 58–61; the importance in Russian political thought of Russia as *katechon*, or sacred bulwark against perceived disorder and evil, understood as justifying evil acts in fulfillment of the role, is discussed at 193–204.

98 Berezhnaya, "Bastions of Faith," 148.

99 Wanner, "Affective Atmosphere," 101.

100 At the time of writing, the circumstances of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine have produced instances of more extreme sacralization in elite public discourse: Anastasiya Larina reports in September 2022 on Patriarch Kirill's assertion that a Russian soldier who dies fighting in Ukraine will thereby be absolved of all his sins. See Larina, "Patriarkh Kirill poobeshchal."

hoped, though not imminently expected, that the intentional desacralization of historical narratives and a clearer understanding of the consequences of the affective sacralization of history in political discourse can in the future provide for the better mutual protection of different sacral practices.

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5. The “Lot of the Mother of God”: Imperial Mystique and the Language of Sovereignty in Modern Georgian Political Thought

Nikoloz Aleksidze

Abstract: The chapter discusses the varied usages of the medieval Georgian concept of “the Lot of the Mother of God” in contemporary political discourses. The belief in medieval writing that Georgia had been allotted to the Mother of God for conversion was one of the most powerful tropes of the sacralization of Georgia, the Georgian language, and the reigning dynasty. Since the nineteenth century, this narrative was eagerly appropriated by the Russian religious and political discourse and incorporated into the rhetoric of empire. Consequently, today, Georgia’s sacralization through the concept of the “Lot” has been severely criticized as a dangerous residue of Russian imperial subjectivity. The debates over Georgia’s foreign and domestic policies and its Euro-Atlantic or Eurasian aspirations have been largely unfolding with this medieval concept in the picture.

Keywords: Georgia, Mother of God, Russian Empire, nationalism, medievalism

On October 15, 2015, a scandal broke out in Tbilisi. Ilia State University hosted an exhibition of contemporary artists. Among others, a painting by Lia Ukleba, who had already gained moderate fame in liberal circles for her transgressive art, was exhibited. Ukleba’s piece, *The Virgin with Toy Pistol*, depicted a pregnant woman who bore an unambiguous resemblance to the Mother of God. In her left hand, Mary supported her belly, which carried Jesus, while in her right hand, she held a “toy” pistol aimed at her

head. The painting may have passed unnoticed if not for an existing icon of the pregnant Mother of God, to which Ukleba's painting bore an uncanny resemblance.¹

The public display of the painting triggered a violent reaction and split Georgia's elites in half. Social media was flooded with posts condemning and defending the painting, with elaborate argumentation appearing across a broad ideological spectrum. In heated debates, people discussed if it was appropriate for a university to display blasphemy and whether or not it violated the rights of faculty members and students. Earlier that year, the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting occurred in Paris, an event that resonated in Georgia in the debates over free speech and religious freedom. The Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II, reacted furiously to the exhibition:

There is an exhibition at the University of St. Ilia the Righteous, where the All-Holy Mother of God is depicted holding a pistol and killing herself. This is an offense against our faith and Georgia. I am stunned that the rector and the professors allowed such blasphemy. Never has Georgia seen such indignity. Georgia is the Lot of the All-Holy Mother of God, and I hope they will come to their senses.²

The patriarch's statement added fuel to the fire, with controversy now encompassing all areas of public discourse, from freedom of speech to women's rights, Georgia's history and its identity, to eventually becoming entangled in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic vs. Eurasian foreign policy discourses. The patriarch had both his patriotic and religious sentiments hurt, as the painting was, on the one hand, blasphemous and, on the other, a criticism of a dominant trope of Georgian national imagery: Georgia as the "Lot of the Mother of God." He was baffled by such an overt attack on a symbol that he had considered the strongest cohesive trope of sacralization in Georgia for decades. In response, Ukleba explained that she had protested against recent cases of femicide and the general intolerance prevalent in the country. With her attempted suicide, Mary refused to bring the child into this world and to take Georgia under her protection. In other words, she would rather die than accept Georgia as her allotment.

This was just one of the prominent cases of a challenge to the established sacred narrative articulated by the Patriarchate. Other similar scandals broke out sporadically over the last several decades when the church complained

1 Georgia Today, "Suicidal Saint."

2 Netgazeti, "Ilia II."

that some authors and artists had desecrated Georgia's sacred history or image.³ Since the emergence of the national movement in the 1980s, sacralization has become a tool in the rhetorical arsenal of secular and religious leaders. The tropes that Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991–92), its long-reigning patriarch, Ilia II (installed in 1977), and other political leaders utilized in their public speeches were consistently religious. Concepts such as "Heavenly Georgia," "Holy Iveria," the "Way of Barabbas," the "Way of Jesus," and the Lot of the Mother of God were repeated over and over again. Since independence, presidential oaths have been sworn on the saints' graves, and icons' bricolages started appearing in governmental offices. Over the last four decades, hosts of historic or recently deceased figures, even if with dubious Christian careers, were canonized, and statues of saints were installed in Georgia's public spaces as hybrid images of modern political aspirations and historical nostalgia.

This excessive sacralization of public discourse and space was met with resentment by secular-minded intellectuals. Yet, even the various sacralization strategies were in conflict and competition. Since the national movement gained ground in the late 1970s, Georgia's secular and religious elites, such as Gamsakhurdia and Ilia II, have nurtured deep mistrust of each other. Eventually, since independence, the relationship between the Church and the state has become one of the most problematic issues in Georgia's internal politics and, indeed, its foreign policies.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how the repertoires of sacralization, such as the Lot of the Mother of God, have been recalibrated in contemporary politics and why a trope with seemingly cohesive power has become so divisive in public discourse. The critical question asked is how it is possible that identical tropes, images, and symbols extracted from medieval Georgian writing that serve the politics of sacralization are so blatantly competing and incongruent.

In order to understand the origins of the contrasting methodologies of sacralization, we must turn to a transitional moment in Georgia's history and revisit the origins of sacralization in Georgian national thinking since the early nineteenth century. A momentous event in the history of sacralization was the Russian annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801 and, over time, other Georgian kingdoms and principalities. This act was an event of political and symbolic significance, saturated with the language of sacralization. As a response, in the 1860s, during the rise of the national

3 See, for example, the scandal of the "First Russian," a story by the novelist Lasha Bughadze. The events are narrated in Bughadze, *patara k'vegana*.

movement, when the first Georgian national programs were articulated, attempts were made to desacralize the empire by creating an alternative language of Georgia's sacredness.

Since Georgia's independence, the history of Georgian nationalism and religiosity and the interaction between the two have been explored in several studies and numerous reports by Georgian NGOs.⁴ This study offers a slightly different reading of what can be labeled as two contrasting strategies of sacralization and illustrates how medieval tropes of sacredness were incorporated into modernist projects of sacralization. Medieval tropes, such as the Lot of the Mother of God and the general "elect-nation" narrative cultivated since the Early Middle Ages, were eagerly adopted by nineteenth-century and modern authors. Yet, meanwhile, the same tropes were also incorporated into Russian imperial rhetoric towards Georgia. Therefore, since the nineteenth century, a certain conundrum has arisen, whereby the same medieval tropes were utilized both in Russian imperial or Georgian colonial subjective rhetoric of the empire's sacredness and were meanwhile integrated into the rhetoric of Georgian sovereignty. Arguably, this "bivocality," which formed over the nineteenth century, is still maintained in Georgian public discourse and its strategies of sacralization.⁵

Georgia: The Lot of the Mother of God and Its Annexation

In 1801, the Russian Empire formally annexed the Kingdom of Eastern Georgia (Kartli-Kakheti). Over the next few decades, other Georgian kingdoms and principalities followed the East's suit. All institutions of an independent Georgian polity were abolished: the Bagratids, who had ruled in Georgia since the Early Middle Ages, were forcibly exiled to Russia; the independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church, founded in the fifth century, was terminated; and the Catholicos-Patriarch was exiled. Other native political, social, and legal institutions were also gradually removed and substituted by Russian analogs. By the mid-nineteenth century, Georgia was fully and seemingly terminally integrated into the Russian Empire.

4 Most of these studies are in Georgian; for some collected articles in Western languages, see Blauvelt and Smith, *Georgia after Stalin*; Rapp, "Dismantling"; Jones and McFarlane, *Georgia*.

5 For the concept of "bivocality," see Batiashvili, *Bivocal Nation*.

Since Muscovy's first interest in South Caucasia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and establishing diplomatic ties with the Georgian kingdoms, the Muscovite emissaries have been exposed to Georgian religious and political narratives and eagerly appropriated and reproduced tropes collected from medieval chronicles as recounted by their Georgian hosts.⁶ Local authorities proudly exhibited their collections of sacred relics, along with the stories associated with them, some of which were considered fundamental to Christian history. The king of Kartli took pride in the tale of *The Lord's Tunic*, translated from the Holy Land to Mtskheta by Georgian Jews after the Crucifixion, and its eventual deposition beneath the Cathedral of the Living Pillar (Svetitskhoveli), a story originating in the seventh-century chronicle *Conversion of Kartli*.⁷ The patriarch and king of Western Georgia, the Kingdom of Imereti, displayed a whole inventory of Marian relics (such extravagant items as the Theotokos's milk, a lock of her hair, her tooth, a range of miraculous icons, etc.).⁸ Meanwhile, the Duke of Samegrelo was a proud owner of the robe belonging to the Mother of God—a fragment of her belt and her miraculous icon.⁹

All these items and accompanying stories served as material confirmation of one of the best-established medieval Georgian myths, recorded in the *K'art'lis C'xovreba* (Georgian chronicles) and reproduced in many other narratives.¹⁰ Following the Pentecost, when the world's regions were distributed to Christ's disciples for evangelization, Georgia was allotted to the Mother of God, and as such, has since enjoyed her personal protection. Since Christ prohibited the Theotokos from leaving Sion, Apostle Andrew bore the responsibility of converting the Georgians in her name.¹¹ Later, in the fourth century, on account of her female nature, St. Nino of Cappadocia was escorted by the Mother of God to Christianize Iberia and baptize its royal family. The tale of Georgia as the Lot of the Mother of God, with its many spin-offs, was integrated into historical, hagiographic, homiletical narratives, and even legal documents at various times and in diverse rhetorical contexts.

Arguably, this ethno-religious claim stemmed from two relatively independent sources. First, it emerged in the tenth century in the Georgian

6 For a study of some of these accounts, see Allen, *Russian Embassies*.

7 For the original story of Christ's Tunic and Georgia's conversion by St. Nino, see Lerner, *The Wellspring*.

8 Yevlev, *Stateinyi*, 52–53.

9 Yevlev, *Stateinyi*, 63–64; Aleppskii, *Opisanie Gruzii*, 71.

10 The *K'art'lis C'xovreba* is a collection of Georgian historical narratives first compiled and edited in the eleventh century by Bishop Leonti Mroveli.

11 Beri, *C'xovreba*, 16.

monastery on Mount Athos, where the Georgian language and monks were believed to enjoy the Theotokos's patronage exclusively over the Greek-speaking monks. In such multiethnic establishments, where the Georgian minority was often repressed by their Greek peers, Georgians seemed to have cultivated the idea of the Theotokos's personal patronage of their language and identity.¹² The second source was the evolving rhetoric of the ruling Bagratid dynasty, which claimed direct descent from the biblical king David and, therefore, also kinship with the Mother of God. This claim, too, was developed as a rhetorical defense against the Byzantines, especially during the wars with the Macedonian emperors in the eleventh century. In the eleventh century, since the unification of the Georgian kingdoms, the two traditions merged in a narrative that sacralized Georgia par excellence (with its language, people, land, reigning dynasty, and Chalcedonian Orthodoxy) as a chosen land personally protected by the Mother of God. The belief remained firm even after the disintegration of the Georgian kingdom. In the absence of Georgia as a united body politic, a certain unifying mystical concept of Georgia, or rather, "Iveria," was retained, marking it as a land of the Theotokos. Arguably, Iveria, a term that had originally stood for the Eastern Georgian kingdom, now represented this pan-Georgian identity maintained by its belonging to the Mother of God.

Since the fall of Constantinople, the reproduction of late antique and medieval stories that sacralized Iveria/Georgia and its former constituent parts has served a purpose beyond vanity. Since the sixteenth century, Western and Eastern Georgian rulers have focused on establishing military alliances with Muscovy, counterbalancing Ottoman and Persian aggressive policies. As a part of this diplomatic effort, Kartlian, Imeretian, and Megrelian elites reproduced the image of Georgia as a holy land to thereby raise Muscovy's interest in it.¹³ To this end, as sporadically recounted in Russian travelogues, Georgian rulers were eager to share some of their most precious relics with the Muscovite tsars. For example, the Duke of Samegrelo even considered letting go of the Theotokos's robe for diplomatic purposes.¹⁴ In a bizarre act of political, personal, and religious desperation,

12 Grdzeliidze, *Georgian Monks*, 97–164.

13 According to Russian accounts, the Persian Shah Abbas I sent a precious gift from Kartli to Russia when he looted the Cathedral of the Living Pillar, stole the Lord's Tunic, and sent it as a gift. Belokurov, *Delo o prisylke*. The story is published on the official website of the Russian Patriarchate and is titled *A Long Path to Moscow*. See Avgustin, "O Rize Gospodney"; for an English translation, see Avgustin, "The Lord's Robe in Russia."

14 Yevlev, *Stateinyi*, 63–64.

for example, King Teimuraz I (1589–1661) gifted the Tsar a piece of the thumb of his martyred mother, Queen Ketevan, as a sign of political commitment.¹⁵ The abundance of martyrs, their relics, and associated stories across Georgia deeply impressed Muscovite officials. Georgian saintly narratives became known and reproduced in Russian writing. Strikingly, however, the saints that made it into Russian commemorative practices and calendars were almost exclusively female—such as Nino, Shushanik, and Queens Tamar and Ketevan. This was probably determined by the centrality that Queen Tamar and her “Golden Age” occupied in historical narratives and folklore. All these stories and their markedly female nature confirmed the Russian perception that Iveria was indeed the Lot of the Mother of God. In other words, even before Georgia’s annexation, Russian officials and writers had internalized and sacralized Iveria as a quasi-religious concept and a certain coveted holy land directly associated with the Holy Land.¹⁶ Therefore, since the fall of Constantinople and Muscovy’s appearance in the Caucasus, the political cult of the Mother of God has experienced a radical transformation in valence: if previously it served as a symbol of prestige against the hostile Byzantines, in this new context, it became a device to flirt with Muscovy’s and then the Russian Empire’s imperial ambitions and imagery by forging a familiar Rome–Jerusalem analogy.¹⁷

Annexation as Sacralization

In the seventeenth century, Muscovy was largely uninterested in the affairs south of the Caucasus. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that the Russian Empire devised a plan to occupy the kingdoms and principalities immediately adjacent to the Ottoman and Persian realms. The infamous 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk, ratified by Catherine II and Kartli-Kakheti’s Erekle II (1744–1798), was the culmination of these efforts, an act that heralded the downfall of the Georgian kingdom, eventually ending in its formal annexation and the removal of the Bagratids.¹⁸

15 “Documents Related to the Arrival in Moscow of the Georgian King Teimuraz,” published in Paichadze, “Masalebi.”

16 Sukhanov, *Khozhdienie*, 112–14.

17 For a similar analogy between Kyiv and Moscow, see Berezhnaya, “Imagining the Third Rome.”

18 For the most recent study of the Treaty, see Merkiladze, *Treaty*.

Kartli-Kakheti's official annexation was announced in Emperor Alexander's manifesto of September 12, 1801.¹⁹ The act that the emperor had allegedly issued reluctantly is a fusion of political, moral, and religious justifications for annexation while also claiming benevolence and mercy:

We are sympathizing with your situation and have seen that the presence and mediation of the Russian army in Georgia is the only barrier against bloodshed of our coreligionists and their eventual annihilation that had been plotted for you by your ravaging and infidel neighbors.

The tsar then claims to have wished initially to maintain the political status quo and preserve the independence of the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom. Yet Georgia's parochialism and political immaturity rendered his wish unrealistic. Therefore, he was forced to abolish the monarchy and save Georgia from its decadent self.²⁰

In Alexander's rhetoric, Georgia as a political body had been an utter failure, devoid of any pragmatic means to sustain itself or any potency to self-realize politically, a recurrent trope in nineteenth-century Russian literature and some colonial Georgian writing.²¹ In Russian Romantic poetry, Georgians were consistently represented as passive and timid people, where women played a greater role than men, as opposed to the hyper-masculine image of Russia.²² Georgia was portrayed as a holy land, the world's oldest Orthodox land outside the Holy Land itself, the Lot of the Mother of God, which could fully self-realize its sacred identity and destiny only within the Holy Russian Empire, the new Rome. In contrast to its failed political body, in Russian religious and imperial perception, Georgia was saturated with ancient Christian relics that corroborated the idea of Georgia as the Lot of the Mother of God. A series of legends have evolved depicting how the Holy Tunic, the Holy Nail, and the Cross of Nino have peregrinated from Georgia to Russia to seek haven and protection from the invading Muslims—a tendency that also pointed to Georgia's destiny within the Russian Empire.²³ Therefore, in a rather tragic twist of fate, the success of Georgia's rulers in forging an image of Iveria as a holy land in their original dealings with the

19 For a study of the history of the annexation of the Georgian kingdoms by the Russian Empire and a discussion on the Manifesto of 1801, see Gvosdev, *Imperial Policies*, 77–98.

20 Beliaevsky, *Utverzhdenie*, 35.

21 Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, 190–91.

22 Ibid., passim.

23 See, e.g., Tolstaia, "Iverskaia Ikona."

Muscovites granted the Russian emperor a religious justification to annex the kingdom by the early nineteenth century.

This dichotomy of the profanity of Georgia's political body, as opposed to the sacred nature of its mystical body, is articulated in Emperor Alexander's next action. As an act of goodwill, the emperor returned to Georgia the Cross of St. Nino that had been gifted to him by the Georgian royal family when they had left Kartli and settled in Russia; this was issued simultaneously with the manifesto of annexation:

Having been informed of [...] the pious reverence of the Georgian nation from antiquity towards the true and life-giving cross of St. Nina, and that its preservation in its body was the sign of prosperity, and that its removal from the limits of Iveria was a sign of wars, quarrels, and misfortunes that [...] befell this country, we have long decided to return to Georgia this Divine gift and sign and seal of the Divine grace [*blagovolenie*] towards it that has blessed all our heroic deeds for the benefit of this nation, having earlier sent this priceless gift to our treasury. [...] We, therefore, order you to announce publicly its translation to the Georgian land, in accord with the chief clerics, with due honor, and to place it in the main cathedral of Tbilisi, so that thus erected among the nation who rightfully venerates it, it may become the reason of its happiness. And together with it may peace and prosperity return to that country, and may the wondrous power of the cross heal many wounds brought about by mutinies and internal strife, and may the Lord's grace bring to a successful ending our aims and valiant deeds for the sake of the saving of the Georgian nation, for the sake of its glory and success.²⁴

Alexander's rhetoric of "gift-giving" was ingenious: with the return of Georgia's most sacred relic, the symbol of Georgia's original conversion in the fourth century, Alexander was effectively emulating Constantine, who had given the Georgians Christianity, baptized them, and assigned them a place in the universal salvation history as well as the Orthodox Empire.²⁵ The annexation was effectively framed as Georgia's second baptism in the baptismal font of the new Orthodox Empire, a correction of the aberration that used to be Georgia's failed historical sovereignty. Indeed, over time,

24 The letter, along with other documents related to Russian policy in the Caucasus, is published in Beliaevsky, *Utverzhdenie*, 36–37; also Butkov, *Materialy*, 510.

25 On imperial gift-giving, especially in Russian imperial context, see Grant, *Captive and the Gift*; Aleksidze, "A Nation."

part of Georgia's elites has internalized the religious rhetoric of *Pax Rossica*, entirely relinquishing the hopes for political emancipation. In the vision of the Romantic poets, Georgia turned into a historical concept, a holy land whose history of wars, martyrdom, and destruction providentially led towards eventual bittersweet peace under the Russian aegis.²⁶

Therefore, the medieval tropes of Georgia's sacred identity and purpose, encapsulated in the concept of the Lot of the Mother of God, were appropriated by Russian imperial discourse, which, instead of dismissing these claims, doubled down on the same course of sacralization. The "allotment" trope, familiar to enlightened Georgians, was now recycled as Georgia's historic allotment to the Russian Empire, with the existing repertoire of sacralization being absorbed in imperial rhetoric. It was, therefore, in this colonial context that Georgia's first sacralization took place. From the imperial vantage point, Georgia was perceived as a holy land at the periphery of the Orthodox Empire. Its symbols of sacredness served as a material confirmation of its subalternity instead of political sovereignty.

Arguably, the breaking point between the two visions of Georgia came in the 1860s, when a competing rhetoric of Georgia's sacredness emerged. The project of the rising national movement of the 1860s was effectively to dismantle the imperial mystique. Its goal was to deconstruct (or desacralize) Georgia as an imperial *other*, as a passive recipient of its "Lot," whether of the Mother of God or the Orthodox Empire, and to substitute it with a novel language of sacredness coupled with the rhetoric of political sovereignty.

Dismantling the Imperial Mystique

Despite the attempt to present Georgia's annexation as a "voluntary" and "logical" choice by Russian imperial historians, Georgia's incorporation into the Russian Empire was far from painless, especially in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.²⁷ A series of uprisings were staged, all of which were brutally suppressed. A generation later, Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907), a gentrified nobleman briefly educated in St. Petersburg, was still in his early twenties when he embarked on what we can call the sacralization of the nation and, conversely, the desacralization of the empire.

26 For the themes of nineteenth-century Georgian Romantic poetry, see Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 138–49.

27 For Russian or pro-Russian interpretations of the annexation, see, e.g., Dubrovin, *Giorgii XII*; Avalov, *Prisoedenenie Gruzii k Rosii*; Bregvadze, *Slavnaia stranitsa istorii*.

Arguably, Chavchavadze singlehandedly conceptualized the idea of the Georgian nation, a concept exhibited exceptionally over the next century, revitalized during the rise of Georgian nationalism under Stalin and the national movement of the 1980s.²⁸ To this day, Chavchavadze remains the central figure of the Georgian national narrative, and, since the 1980s, he is also a saint of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Arguably, Chavchavadze launched a project to restructure the national narrative in response to the existing imperial discourse and create a novel, anti-imperial discourse of sacralization. Chavchavadze devised a systematic methodology by repeatedly musing on activity vs. passivity and substance vs. form dichotomies in his nationalist writing. With his Tergdaleuli allies, he spent decades forging the idea of the Georgian nation as an abstracted yet sacred entity, saturating it with religious and ecclesiastic tropes. Among many similar rhetorical feats, the verses of Akaki Tsereteli, Chavchavadze's ideological ally, particularly stand out: "The icon is my fatherland, and the iconostasis is the entire world." In 2004, this verse was used as the opening line of Georgia's new national anthem.

Chavchavadze actively sought out symbols of sacred sovereignty as opposed to the colonial alterity of his previous generation. He was keen to maintain a dynamic interrelationship between Georgia's religious and political identities, as opposed to contrasting the two, as first articulated in Alexander's manifesto and then in Georgian colonial writing. Georgia (or Iveria) was, for Chavchavadze, a legitimate political project where the political and religious validate each other. Among other writings, this is particularly transparent in his 1888 article written on the occasion of the Feast of St. Nino:

Georgians have added this new Faith, this new Covenant, to the old one—to the fatherland and nationhood. [...] Christianity, apart from Christ's teaching, meant among us the entire Georgian land. Even today, in the South Caucasus, Georgian and Christian are synonymous. Instead of "becoming Christian," one may often hear that someone "became Georgian." [...] The spread and establishment of Christianity is by itself a great achievement, but Christianity has also tied us together and has strengthened. [...] This two-fold, magnificent labor has been handed over to us by our Illuminator Saint Nino. This is exactly why this day must be celebrated when our Church commemorates with glory this virgin and the equal to the apostles. [...] This apostle has brought us the teaching

28 See Zedania, *K'art'veli eris*; Suny, *Making of the Georgian Nation*, 113–43.

that has subsequently adopted our fatherland, our nationhood, and has nurtured them down to our days.²⁹

Chavchavadze's words themselves did not contradict the established vision of Nino's evangelism. The repeated stress on the national and political implications of Nino's mission as a groundwork for Georgia as an autonomous, self-sufficient entity with all the necessary ingredients of nationhood was, it can be argued, Chavchavadze's invention. It implicitly polemicized with the imperial Nino narrative, as symbolized by her cross seated in the Sioni Cathedral in the middle of Tbilisi, as a reminder of imperial grace.

Chavchavadze's other strategy was to revisit the political implications of Nino's evangelism, which the imperial civilizing discourse had recently subverted. He achieved this strategy, among others, in his *Letters of a Traveler*, a fictional travelogue meditating on the historic south–north road that connects Russia with Georgia: On his way home, Chavchavadze encountered three men: a Frenchman, a Russian officer, and a local highlander at the Russian–Georgian border. The gift of enlightenment, an imperial trope cultivated by the Russian rhetoric since Georgia's annexation, is here mocked and demystified. As Paul Manning observed in the comic Socratic-like dialogue, Chavchavadze exposes the emptiness of the Russian mission, first through the Frenchmen, followed by a hilariously nonsensical explanation of what constitutes “civilization,” as offered by the Russian officer. As he enters the highlands near Mount Kazbegi—the liminal space between Russia and Georgia—the form and substance of the dialectic change diametrically. Here he encounters a local highlander who articulates the authentic national project in his simple and barely comprehensible local dialect that contrasts with the “civilized” language of the Russian officer. In this dialogue, Georgia's history, identity, and belonging are revealed as sacred and essentialist entities as opposed to the nonsensical nature of the Russian imperial claims.³⁰ Finally, after crossing the Georgian border, Chavchavadze juxtaposes Mount Kazbegi, the symbol of the Caucasus and a holy mountain of sorts, with the River Tergi (Terek), where the former is criticized for its cold aloofness and the latter praised for its stamina. Crucially, in Chavchavadze's view, the River Tergi defies imperial subjectivity by being the only river to flow from Georgia into Russia.

Chavchavadze's attack on old symbols of national sacredness also extended to the language. In one of his earliest articles, Chavchavadze

29 Chavchavadze, “St. Nino.” See also Aleksidze, “A Nation.”

30 Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land*, 28–80.

viciously attacked his older contemporaries' literary and linguistic tastes by brutally mocking the literary merits of recent translations and the established abstruse, archaic, and pretentious language. Ultimately, he succeeded in offending practically all established writers of the generation. It was there, as a conclusion to his less than a pious tract, that Chavchavadze articulated what has since become the single most often quoted sentence of the Georgian corpus and, albeit in a heavily truncated form, also the motto of Georgian nationalism for subsequent generations:

Our ancestors have left us three divine treasures: *fatherland, language, and faith*. If we fail to care for them, what kind of men shall we be? What are we going to tell our descendants? I don't know about others, but we will not let even our own father trample our ancestral language. Language is a holy thing; it is public property; nobody ought to touch it with their sinful hand.³¹

Although yet unknown to the twenty-four-year-old Chavchavadze, it was the reconfiguration of the sacred nature of the language that launched the project of (re)sacralization of nationhood. By the mid-nineteenth century, Georgian literary elites took pride in the three registers of the literary language, initially advocated by Catholicos-Patriarch Antony I (1744–1788). He believed that a specific lofty register of pseudo-medieval Georgian was to be retained for matters deemed sacred, whereas a lower register would be used for secular and everyday topics.³² The Georgian elites of the mid-nineteenth century eagerly appropriated these register differentiations and were not at all keen to dispose of them. Even some letters that have long become redundant were jealously retained.

Chavchavadze's project was seemingly self-contradictory. On the one hand, he attacked the ossified nature of the Georgian literary language. He criticized the usage of this archaic, pseudo-classical language and obsessions with empty forms by desacralizing, if not, as his opponents would argue, desecrating it. By contrast, Chavchavadze's linguistic register was markedly colloquial. While desacralizing this formal language, he argued that it was solely the cohesive function of the language, which glued together the nation's mystical body, that could be considered sacred. Therefore, his conservative sententia that "three divine treasures have been left to us by

31 There exists no standard translation of this article, yet the original Georgian can be found all over the web due to its popularity.

32 Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 127–28.

our ancestors: fatherland, language, faith” seems to contradict his attack on linguistic archaism, literary classicism, and piety towards the Georgian language. However, Chavchavadze attacked precisely this sacred redundancy by singlehandedly removing the useless five letters of the alphabet from usage. In the context of the language, he formulated the analytic dichotomy between form and substance, passivity and activity, a theme that permeated his subsequent nationalist writing. The constant meditation on the form and substance by which the young Chavchavadze chiseled the idea of the fatherland as a sacred (*cminda*) concept, as opposed to the empty form of the previously held understandings of sacredness, was arguably the cornerstone of Chavchavadze’s nationalist project.

A New Cult of Saints

Chavchavadze’s other strategy of chiseling an alternative image of Georgia’s mystical body was reevaluating the cult of saints, a crucial aspect of the Georgian piety internalized by Russian imperial rhetoric. While the Lot of the Mother of God was undoubtedly an unchallenged ethno-religious concept, arguably, Chavchavadze and his peers sought out saints that would project activity as opposed to the “passivity” embedded in the cult of the Mother of God and the plethora of Georgia’s female saints. Chavchavadze thereby polemicized the established trope in Russian Romantic literature of Georgia as a passive, idyllic, and “feminine” other. Apart from reevaluating the already established saints and assigning them a new place in national imagery, Chavchavadze aimed to create an alternative pantheon of national saints detached from imperial subjectivity. As argued by Susan Layton, the imperial discourse was particularly keen on feminizing the Georgian body politic as a passive entity.³³ Feminization was, on the one hand, indeed determined by the general Orientalist tropes, whereby the imperial center was presented as a masculine subject, whereas its colonial periphery as a feminine other. Yet, feminization also draws from the Russian experience of the saintly Georgian pantheon as utterly feminine.

In implicit opposition to this established rhetoric, Chavchavadze, Tsereteli, and others launched a virtual archaeology of markedly masculine saintly figures of Georgia’s history, with an aim to uncover and promote those male

33 Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, passim.

saints that the imperial gaze had left behind.³⁴ In contrast to imperial discourse, Chavchavadze aimed to saturate the Georgian pantheons with national (i.e., male) saints associated with the Georgian body politic and dissociated from the established Russian imperial discourse. The church certainly commemorated some of these figures, yet they had not achieved currency comparable to their female counterparts. Over the decades, the T'egrdaleulis reanimated the memory of many male saints and martyrs. Chavchavadze's poem "King Dimitri T'avdadebuli" is a hyper-masculine account of Georgia's thirteenth-century martyr, King Demetre II. Here, the glory of old Georgia is contrasted with contemporary desolation, and the representation of gender roles—where women used to beget children to sacrifice to the nation and men sacrificed themselves willingly—is portrayed. Akaki Tsereteli's poem "T'ornike Erist'avi" is dedicated to the monk and general of the Georgian army (d. 986) and founder of the Iveron monastery on Mount Athos.³⁵

Chavchavadze's project of reanimating the memory of King David IV "the Builder" was perhaps his most influential one. As a result, today King David and Queen Tamar are paired as the two greatest holy monarchs and are often portrayed side by side in Georgian national narratives. In a short, yet celebrated, article, Chavchavadze criticizes the nation's forgetfulness and urges his readers to study their history and the nation's historic figures, most importantly David the Builder.

This great king—what a great manly image [*kac'ur kac'i*, literally, a manly man, an expression particularly popularized by Ilia] he is for our eyes—and what a great document for our pride. It is the commemoration of this kind of man that revitalizes the nation, and the oblivion of such a man must be considered as the nation's deadly sin, who gave birth to him and whose breasts nurtured him. Our protector, the Church, knew this well and it is for this reason that it established January 26 as the date of his commemoration so that at least once a year we may remember this great king, a wonderful man, and the source of our pride. A man must have two names, says our nation: one to leave here and the other to carry with him. No other man has fulfilled this Georgian testament as has King David. Here he left the name of a builder, of a king, of a man

34 This project was, in a sense, reminiscent of a similar discovery of "male" saints in eleventh-century Bagratid royal discourse. For a more detailed discussion, see Aleksidze, *Sanctity*.

35 Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 159–68. For a most recent study on the militarization of saints, see Berezhnaya, *Die Militarisierung*.

with a great soul, and there he took the name of a saint and is adorned with the crown of glory.³⁶

By repeatedly stressing “man” and “manly” in his eulogy of David, Chavchavadze promoted a male military saint instead of the already successful cult of Queen Tamar. The combination of the word *kac'i* (man) with *kac'ur kac'i* (manly man), on the one hand, amplified David's virility; on the other, it removed any ambiguity from the word that conveys both “man” and “human being.” Unlike his great-granddaughter, David the Builder never made it into the ranks of the Russian imperial saints. David was associated with the dramatic expansion of the Georgian kingdom and its military and cultural dominance in the region. As someone associated with Georgia's independent polity, Russian commemorative practices have been uninterested in this figure. A century after the publication of this article, no Georgian would have complained about David being unappreciated. On the contrary, his persona currently constitutes the axis of the Georgian national narrative, singularly augmented during the 2003 Rose Revolution, when Mikheil Saakashvili swore the presidential oath on the king's grave.

Therefore, in his project of sacralization, Chavchavadze targeted three areas that played out in the passivity vs. activity and form vs. substance dichotomies. First, he attacked the notion of the sacred yet fossilized Georgian language. Then he criticized the idea of the empire as a source of enlightenment and Orthodoxy, as opposed to Georgia, as a passive (yet sacred) recipient of this enlightenment. Finally, he subverted the feminine tropes of Georgia as established by Russian Romantic literature by unearthing and focusing on Georgia's male and warrior saints.

Since Georgia's integration into the Russian imperial body in the 1830s, and arguably still today, its secular and religious elites have been articulating two conflicting visions of Georgia's sacredness—ideas that can be found encapsulated in two contrasting readings of medieval sources. The first was adopted and internalized from the Russian imperial discourse of Georgia, or rather Iveria, as the Lot of the Mother of God, as a Holy Land by proxy, allotted by divine dispensation to Russia, the new Rome. In response to this colonial subjectivity, a contrasting rhetoric of sacralization emerged as a project to strip Georgia of the mystical aura of imperial subjectivity and of what was perceived as Georgia's passive belonging to the Russian imperial body. In the second vision of sacredness, the political and the religious are in constant dialogue as a *communicatio idiomatum*, whereby the political

36 *Iveria*, no. 17, 1888.

sacralizes the religious and vice versa. In this context, Orthodoxy, as a historical and religious category, is only fully revealed in political sovereignty as opposed to imperial subjectivity. This twofold understanding of Georgia's sacredness that stems from the Russian imperial context, with even further nuances and internal oppositions, also permeates modern national and political discourses.

The Lot of the Mother of God in Conservative and Liberal Discourses

This nuanced, polyphonic, and conflicting understanding of the sacredness of Georgia's past and identity was reanimated in the public discourse of the last decades of the twentieth century, during the second major nation-building process in Georgia's history. This period was marked by two defining movements: the rise of the national movement and the dramatic increase in religiosity. The two processes were largely interrelated, but not always. The incongruence between the two authorities was reflected in the prolonged antagonism between the leaders of the national movement and the ecclesiastical elites. While Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his associates were identified as rebellious dissidents and were at various times jailed as such, Patriarch Ilia allegedly remained a loyal member of the Soviet *nomenklatura*.³⁷ The anti-Russian sentiments of the former contrasted with the Russophile feelings cultivated by the Church, yet both voices articulated strong ethno-religious nationalism. It was in this context that the dichotomies of nineteenth-century discourses were reanimated.

The chasm between the two perceptions of nationhood widened following Georgia's independence. While in the early 1990s, the two parties clashed over their differing yet equally conservative visions, later, since the turn of the millennium, a virtual war ensued between Georgia's liberal and conservative elites over Georgia's cultural and political identity. The dividing line became one's attitude towards Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the evaluation of Russia's role in Georgia's history, and Georgia's westward aspirations. More than the left-right divide, over thirty years after the declaration of independence, Russian imperial subjectivity, as opposed to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic identity, remains the dividing line between Georgia's

37 For an analysis of the political influence of the Georgian Patriarchate, see the report by Chedia, "The Georgian Orthodox Church."

conservative and liberal elites and their respective political mythologies.³⁸ The scandal that broke out many years later over the parody of the icon of the pregnant Mother of God was an echo of these multiple voices of sacralization, each of which was determined by political stances vis-à-vis Georgia's history, identity, and, crucially, by Georgia's dealings with Russia. By the time of Ukleba's criticism of the Lot of the Mother of God, the Mother of God, as cherished by the patriarch, was increasingly perceived as a residue of Russian subjectivity. From the liberal perspective, the church has been trying to usurp the markers of Georgia's secular identity over the last decades, including the past, sites of memory, public spaces, and national and identity discourses. The canonization of Ilia Chavchavadze was perceived as one such act of usurpation since, from the liberal perspective, Chavchavadze was the very first visionary of a secular nation and a classical liberal par excellence.³⁹

The parliamentary elections of 2012 were a decisive event in Georgia's recent history. This pivotal moment saw Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement lose to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's party, Georgian Dream.⁴⁰ The Georgian Orthodox Church, the conservatives, and the left perceived this event as a major victory over the liberals. However, since then, civil society has arguably seen the very "unholy" alliance between the government and the Church in their conservative and latently pro-Russian policies, so that the conceptualization of Georgia's sacred identity has been challenged as never before. One can argue that this challenge was not merely a resentment against religiosity or ethno-religious nationalism but a conceptual attack on a particular understanding of Georgia's sacred identity, which was perceived as yet another confirmation of Russian subjectivity, comparable to a similar deconstructionist project launched by Ilia Chavchavadze.

This challenge was first revealed in the implicit and sometimes explicit criticism of the patriarch's most cherished Lot of the Mother of God. Arguably, the patriarch's understanding of this concept betrayed deeply ingrained colonial subjectivity. Ilia II never hid his Soviet nostalgia and often spoke with tenderness about Stalin and his personal traumatic experience of Stalin's death.⁴¹ In this, the patriarch is a typical son of

38 A detailed scrutiny of Euro-Atlanticism in Georgia can be found in Coene, *Euro-Atlantic Discourse*. See Rapp, "Dismantling," for an analysis of Gamsakhurdia's nationalist rhetoric.

39 On the ideological contexts of Chavchavadze's canonization, see Tsipuria, "Ilia Chavchavadze."

40 For the 2012 elections in Georgia and its context, see the edited volume Jones and McFarlane, *Georgia*.

41 For the original interview with the Georgian patriarch, where he expressed his pro-Russian sympathies and admiration for Stalin, see Ilia II, "Patriarch Iliya II": "Сталин—это выдающаяся

Stalinist nationalism, for whom Georgia's pride and glory were realized in the Russian imperial context.⁴² For the patriarch, who cherished deeply patriotic sentiments yet was educated in Russia, the Lot of the Mother of God was also perceived as a projection of the Russian imperial vision. Since Georgia occupied the most prominent spiritual place in the Soviet Union, political emancipation was not at stake. The patriarch's vision is comparable to the self-perception of a part of the late Soviet Georgian intelligentsia, who resented both the independence movement and, even more so, modern liberalism. For these artists—singers, dancers, theater directors, and others—Moscow was a stage where they could perform their Georgianness (music, folklore, theater, cinema, etc.) and thereby satisfy their patriotic sensibilities.⁴³ Now that Moscow was beyond their reach and any performance in Russia would result in ostracism, they resented Georgia's existing "body politic." Similarly, for the patriarch, the Lot of the Mother of God gave him, as a Georgian, a sense of pride and an edge in the Russian (Soviet) Empire, as opposed to the collective West, which has been somewhat uninterested in both Georgia's singers and the land's allotment to the Mother of God.

Therefore, in the long aftermath of de-Sovietization, Georgia's conservative and liberal elites clashed over sacralization, similar to the nineteenth-century national movement. This time, the idea of chosenness and that of the Lot of the Mother of God became the cornerstone of controversy. In contrast to the patriarch's obsession with the concept of "The Lot," the liberal specter of Georgia's public discourse has developed a strong criticism of ecclesiastic rhetoric and all its aspects, from human rights to the Church's views on foreign policy. In this latter aspect, the church was always suspect of anti-Western inclinations and pro-Russian nostalgia, fueled mainly by Russia's "coreligionist" propaganda.

The liberal reaction against *cilxvedri* and *ert'morcmune* became particularly furious in the aftermath of the August 2008 war with Russia.

личность. Такие рождаются редко. Он знал значение, мировое значение России" ("Stalin is an exceptional figure. Such people are born rarely. He knew the significance, the universal meaning of Russia").

42 The analysis of various manifestations of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Georgian nationalism can be found in the edited volume by Blauvelt and Smith, *Georgia after Stalin*.

43 Since 2003, Georgia's public discourse and then social media have been filled with regularly erupting scandals over one or another acclaimed theater director's, singer's, or composer's unabashed Soviet nostalgia and criticism of liberal democracy. See, e.g., the following public letter signed by theater directors Robert Sturua, Ketil Dolidze, and others who were often suspected of pro-Russian sentiments and Soviet nostalgia titled "Pro-Western Orientation Hinders Georgia's Development" (Tabula, "Pro-Western").

Secularly minded Georgians and virtually the entire liberal spectrum—civil rights activists, feminists, and others—consolidated in their condemnation of the idea of the Mother of God as Georgia’s protectress and the very concept of “chosenness” for centuries cultivated by the church. Since the nineteenth century, the political implications of the Lot of the Mother of God became tied to Russian imperial ideology, and the concept of the Lot was duly associated with Russian imperialism. Indeed, this medieval Georgian idea remains popular among Russian religious and political writers, common believers, pilgrims, and, incidentally, travel agencies. As a result, the political implications of the Lot of the Mother of God acquired a dangerous ambivalence. On the one hand, before Georgia’s annexation by Russia in 1801, it constituted the core of Georgian messianic political theology. Conversely, the same concept became strongly associated with Russian imperial discourse. Contrary to Ilia’s vision, liberal elites view the very notion of the Lot of the Mother of God as a manifestation of a certain imperial subaltern and colonial passivity. The passive and arbitrary connotations of “being allotted to someone” contributed to this perception. For the current liberal elites, the necessity of freeing Georgian identity from the subjectivity of *cilxvedri* has been tied together with the zeal to free Georgia from Russian subjectivity.

While the Lot of the Mother of God was increasingly frequently and persistently heard in patriarchal discourses, in the past decade, the same concept was appropriated in liberal rhetoric, albeit with a diametrically opposite meaning. Georgia’s younger liberals, critical of the ethno-religious nationalism and candidly pro-Russian sentiments of the church, came up with a mock word to describe Georgia’s current state of affairs: *cilxvedri* (literally meaning: “the Lot”) from *ġt’ismšoblis cilxvedri* (Lot of the Mother of God). Statements such as “I am returning to the *cilxvedri*” or Facebook posts with pictures of filthy streets and ironic hashtags (#cilxvedri) became a common marker of alterity, of differentiation between *us*, the liberal, pro-Europeans, and them—conservative, ecclesiastic, and arguably, at least in part, pro-Russian groups. *Cilxvedri* essentially became a synonym for everything that was wrong with the country.

A similar twist was given to another word, originally popularized by the 1801 Manifesto of Emperor Alexander—*yedinoverie* (meaning “coreligionism”) in Russian—with reference to the shared Orthodox religion between the Russians and the Georgians. Recently, the Georgian word *ert’morcmane* (coreligionist or fellow Orthodox) has been commonly used as an ironic synonym for Russia. Over the last year, expressions such as *ert’morcmane*

zmebi now increasingly appear in reference to the atrocities committed by the Russian troops in Georgia and especially in Ukraine.⁴⁴

The criticism of the patriarchal discourse originated mainly from non-governmental liberal elites and never from political groups that desperately required ecclesiastic support to accumulate political capital. The icebreaker came in May 2014, when the chairman of the Georgian parliament, David Usupashvili (chairman of the Republican Party and then a prominent member of Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition), gave what was arguably a historic speech. Usupashvili opened a Church-organized conference dedicated to the veneration of the Mother of God in the Orthodox world. He started with a lengthy quote from the Georgian author, Jemal Karchkhadze, written soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union:

Two thousand years have passed since we started believing that we are the Lot of the Mother of God (I believe, in this symbol also lies the key to the national mission), and in these two thousand years, we have not approached with a single step this high goal. On the contrary, we zealously try to retreat, to such an extent that from time to time, we make attempts of spiritual suicide. Let us, for a brief second, imagine a small religious miracle: The Mother of God wished to see her land. What will she see? She will see idolaters engulfed with the sickness of slavery who believe that freedom is merely a change in lords. She will see rich Pharisees who do philanthropy merely for the eyes, while real people really die with real deaths. She will see deceivers who perform piety and have turned faith into a matter of bargain. The Holy Mother of God, I assure you, would have rejected such a country. The legend will end, and the symbol will be erased. Apparently, the metastasis of Communism has been rooted deep into our national body. If we look closely and consider the fact that the Mother of God has never seen her country, we must think that Georgia is merely potentially the Lot of the Mother of God; whether or not it becomes such in reality depends on us and only us.⁴⁵

After quoting Karchkhadze, Usupashvili lashed out at two hundred years of Russian colonial rule and seventy years of Soviet rule with an ardent defense of Georgia's liberal democracy. He particularly attacked the idea cultivated

44 While a statistical analysis of the usage of either of the two expressions is not conducted here, a straightforward search in Google or Facebook will easily prove this point.

45 Parliament of Georgia, "Davit Usupashvili." For the original quote by Karchkhadze, see *C'iskari*, March 2016, 3, http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/155058/1/Ciskari_2016_N3.pdf.

by most of the ecclesiastical hierarchs that the West is an essential opponent of Orthodoxy, whereas the Russian Empire is its protector. Usupashvili concluded his speech with a rhetorical question of whether the Church can follow secularism's principles: "It must do so, and if it succeeds, then we will not be ashamed of the [eventual] visit by the Mother of God."

A few months later, Usupashvili stepped down, and for a good reason—his liberalism was intolerable for both the Church and the ruling party. His speech in the presence of the high clerics and other government officials was an attempt to restructure the national paradigm. The high bishops and the patriarch seated next to him were used to delivering theology into politics; however, it was the first time in their experience that a secular authority challenged the ecclesiastic narrative in their presence and subverted the religious paradigm that they embodied. Usupashvili implicitly criticized the patriarch himself. The patriarch's devotion to the Virgin Mary and their alleged exceptional relationship with her formed the framework within which all of the patriarch's sermons were delivered. In this belief, the patriarch promised Georgia's salvation and unification. Yet, in Usupashvili's paradigm, already embedded in liberal discourse, the Lot of the Mother of God transpired as a symbol of passivity, of imperial and colonial subjectivity, which needed to be changed into that of activity, thereby inadvertently mimicking Ilia Chavchavadze's tactics.

For the aging patriarch, something unthinkable was happening: liberal Georgians were becoming increasingly critical of "The Lot," and *cilxvedri* was not only fading away from their ethno-religious imagery but was even being mocked. In his many sermons, he often articulated his frustration at the contrast between how Georgian elites were abandoning his favorite idea and the eagerness with which the Russians maintained it by hailing Georgia as the Lot of the Mother of God. The patriarch resented what he saw as Georgian denialism of their identity, a resentment that Russia's soft power has since capitalized on. Vladimir Putin's determination to advance the idea of *Rusky Mir* and a vision of Russia as a protector of traditional values against Western liberal encroachments found an ally in part of the Georgian Church and conservative groups.⁴⁶ Therefore, in 2012, with the change of government, the patriarch found his revenge. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations were nominally retained but, in practice, restricted, and the entire Georgian government made sure to cozy up to the Church. Seven

46 For a study of the rise of ultra-right sentiments in Georgia over the last decade, see Kandelaki, "Euroscepticism and Religion." A list of emerging pro-Russian and anti-European parties with their agendas since 2012 can be found in the same article.

years later, in April 2019, another prime minister appointed by Ivanishvili addressed the Parliament to quickly adopt new legislation whereby May 12, the feast that marked Apostle Andrew's arrival in Georgia, would be declared as the day of *cilxvedroba*, i.e., the day when Georgia became the Lot of the Mother of God. The law, pompously adopted and inscribed into the Constitution, utilized bizarre religious language and quoted the medieval *Georgian Chronicles* as an authoritative source for such a decision. The new clause proclaimed the traditional belief that Georgia's election by The Mother of God guaranteed Georgia's political longevity.⁴⁷ The act, which was aimed at placating the Church for the upcoming elections, cultivating the concept of "sovereign democracy" borrowed from Russia, and securing the votes of pious Georgians, became the most ridiculed decision in recent history, especially by those who had some basic knowledge of the source material: The markedly late and political insertion in the *Georgian Chronicles*, which never claimed to be an authentic part of the original corpus, was now carved in the Constitution. From a myth, an ideological claim, the Lot of the Mother of God has now become a legal entity.

Conclusion

While sacralization of nationhood, history, or language is a relatively universal phenomenon in nationalist discourses, judging by examples from Georgia's recent history, sacralization can often be perceived as a threat to national identity in colonial and postcolonial nationalist discourses. Georgia had two competing and contrasting sacralization strategies during the nineteenth century: the imperial vision, derived from Russian imperial rhetoric, and the national program, articulated by the founders of the national movement. Both reached out to medieval Georgian writing for rhetorical inspiration, but the latter was specifically designed to desacralize the ingrained imperial perspective on Georgia. While the leaders of the national movement were forging a vision of the fatherland's sacred and mystical body in the absence of political sovereignty, they had to deconstruct the already-existing construction of Georgia as a peripheral, yet sacred, *other*. Sacralization was therefore embedded in the evolving nationalistic discourses and dichotomies of form vs. substance, passivity vs. activity, and femininity vs. masculinity.

47 Lomsadze, "In Times of Trouble."

In time, these two visions of sacredness, colonial-subjective and national-sovereign, acquired further ideological meanings. They found repercussions in contemporary controversies over Georgia's political and cultural belonging, where these nineteenth-century tropes were inadvertently reanimated. Just as Chavchavadze strove to dismantle the imperial mystique surrounding Georgia, similarly, there is an increasing tendency in modern liberal national discourse to desacralize the millennium-old tropes such as the Lot of the Mother of God, now perceived as a tool of Russian soft power, and to substitute it with a novel language and imagery of political sovereignty.

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6. Orthodoxizing History, Sacralizing the State, Legitimizing an Autocrat

The Russian Past in Russia—My History Parks

Ekaterina V. Klimenko

Abstract: This chapter focuses on how Orthodox Christianity has been used in the Russia—My History (RMH) parks to create a narrative of Russian history beneficial to the current Russian political regime. Close attention is paid to the scenography of the park: its spatial organization, color, light, music, and sound effects. A product of direct cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the state, the RMH narrative intertwines religion and history to bolster the regime's legitimacy. Orthodoxizing Russian history, this narrative sacralizes the Russian state. In its rapid development, having followed the ideological shift in the regime's legitimization strategy, the RMH chain testifies to the state's ability to make political use of religion rather than the ROC's influence on the history politics of the state.

Keywords: history politics, religion, Russian Orthodox Church, Putin, "Russia—My History"

During the first days of November 2013, Manezhnaya Square in Moscow was even more crowded than usual.¹ Thousands of people queued in front of the Manezh exhibition center, waiting for hours in the late Russian autumn cold

¹ The collection of primary field data was conducted partly within the project "From the Enemy of the People to the Holy Martyr—Analysis of the Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Revolution of 1917 and of the 80th Anniversary of the Great Terror in Russia," supported by the Polish National Science Centre (grant no. UMO-2016/21/B/HS6/03782) and coordinated by Dr. Zuzanna Bogumił. The research was executed at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences within the project "Church, State and 'Russia—My History':

to see the multimedia historical exhibition *Orthodox Rus'—My History: The Romanovs*, which was on display in the exhibition hall, situated just a few steps away from the Kremlin walls. On November 4, 2013, the exhibition was opened on the same day that two holidays are celebrated in Russia: a national one (the Day of People's Unity) and an Orthodox one (the Feast of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God). Dedicated to the four hundredth anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, the exhibition narrated the history of Russia from the accession of Mikhail Romanov to the throne in 1613 until the revolution of 1917.

Its first visitors were Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill, accompanied by (then Archimandrite) Tikhon (Shevkunov), responsible for organizing the exhibition. Media covering the visit specifically mentioned that both Putin and Kirill began their tour by lighting candles before the Feodorovskaya icon of the Mother of God. The icon, considered the patron icon of the Romanov family and one of the most venerated miraculous icons in Russia, was brought to the exhibition from Kostroma and displayed before the entrance.

Extensive media coverage of this visit was likely one of the factors that predetermined the overwhelming success of the exhibition, which came as a surprise to the organizers themselves. Due to this success, the exhibition remained on display for nearly three weeks instead of several days as initially planned. As a result, it was visited by over three hundred thousand people over the three weeks, with up to fifteen thousand visitors every day.²

The exhibition was still on display in the Manezh when calls were made to make it available to a wider audience, either by making it permanent or by showing it in different regions of Russia. Thus, Nikita Mikhalkov, a prominent film director and, at the same time, a devoted supporter of Vladimir Putin, speaking at "The Triumph and the Ruin of the Empire: The Lessons of History" conference, suggested that *The Romanovs* become a permanent exhibition with personnel so it could show "day and night."³

Years later, it seems that Mikhalkov's wish has come true. *The Romanovs* is now united under the roof of the so-called Russia—My History (RMH) historical park with three multimedia exhibitions (*The Rurikids*, *The*

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2 See the report on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov, "Vystavku 'Pravoslavnaya Rus'. Romanovy."

3 A brief account of the conference was given on *Vesti*, a news program created by the "Russia" TV channel (accessed September 20, 2018; currently unavailable).

Twentieth Century: From Great Upheaval to Great Victory, and *The Twentieth Century: 1945–2016*), all from the cycle *Orthodox Rus'—My History*. They are all on permanent display in Pavilion no. 57 of the Moscow exhibition center VDNKh. Moreover, nearly identical parks are located in over two dozen of Russia's largest cities.

The rapid development of the RMH chain of multimedia historical parks may be interpreted as the manifestation of the sudden conquest of Russia's competitive historical market by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).⁴ However, this chapter suggests that RMH highlights a different phenomenon: that of direct cooperation between the ROC and the state in the (re)production of the narrative of national history, which is politically beneficial to Vladimir Putin's regime. This cooperation has been ongoing against the backdrop of the regime's profound ideological shift in legitimization strategy. Russian history is orthodoxized, and the state sacralized in the historical parks to bolster the regime's legitimacy. RMH, therefore, showcases how Orthodox Christianity can be instrumentalized in order to narrate national history in a politically expedient way. The project, hence, is evidence of the state's (successful) attempt to make political use of religion rather than the ROC's influence on the history politics of the state.

This chapter focuses on how Orthodox Christianity has been used in RMH parks to create a narrative of Russian history beneficial to Vladimir Putin's political regime. It will reconstruct this narrative as it was (re)produced in the Moscow headquarters of the RMH chain when it first opened, and trace the changes introduced to the content on display since then. Because the park's exhibitions are built around texts, the focus here will be on their analysis. The visual materials—photographs, graphics, charts, and maps—displayed in the park will also be studied. Close attention will be paid to the scenography of the park: its spatial organization, color, light, music, and sound effects. The study relies primarily on field data: field notes, photographs, and audio-video recordings taken during personal visits to the original version of the park (in May and November 2017 and August 2018) and its revamped version (in September 2019). To help trace the project's history, personal interviews with the authors of the exhibitions on display in the park are used. Relevant documents, books, articles, and media publications are referenced when necessary.

4 Laruelle, "Commemorating 1917 in Russia."

Nation, Past, and Religion: Towards the Legitimacy of a Political Order

A legitimate (political) order is one that “enjoys the prestige of being considered binding.”⁵ In the world of modern states, a government is considered binding if it governs on behalf of the people governed and, through this rule, fulfills these people’s will. It is the idea of “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” which is both the basis and the threat to the state’s very legitimacy,⁶ that makes forging “the people” at the same time internally homogenous and distinct from other peoples of the kind indispensable. Following the hegemonic logic of contemporary political imagination, “the people” is constructed in national terms. “Nation” thus becomes the way of imagining this both limited and sovereign community.⁷

As Benedict Anderson points out, although nations are modern inventions, they are imagined as rooted in distant pasts.⁸ Since the very first attempts to theorize the nation, the connection between the (national) community and the (collective) past has piqued scholarly interest: Ernest Renan, in his now-classic answer to the question “What is a nation?,” emphasized the importance of remembering, as well as forgetting, for the formation of a nation.⁹ Since then, “nationalist storytelling”—i.e., linking the past, present, and future in a linear historical timeline in such a way that the nation assumes a privileged and valorized role—has been central to “all of the variegated approaches to theorizing nationalism, however different their claims regarding its origins.”¹⁰

The emergence of the modern state was, in many respects, a result of the old political order of absolutist monarchies losing their legitimacy, bolstered by the idea of divine right and the principle of succession. Hence the need to develop new legitimization strategies instead of those rendered irrelevant. At the same time, modern states have proven capable of developing mechanisms and tools that allow these new legitimization strategies to be implemented. While establishing (or inventing) continuity with suitable historic pasts became a way out of this legitimacy crisis, modern states turned historiography “into a nationalist enterprise.”¹¹ Historical museums

5 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 31.

6 Calhoun, *Nationalism*.

7 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5–7.

8 Ibid., 5.

9 Renan, “What Is a Nation?”

10 Bell, “Mythscapes,” 66.

11 Hobsbawm, “Introduction”; Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 126.

appeared as a powerful instrument for building nations and narrating their histories.¹²

More often than not, the rise of a nation is conceptualized as belonging to modernity, either as having been brought about by it or as having made it possible.¹³ All the while, the modern age is repetitively understood as clashing with religion (hence the definition of it as “a secular age”).¹⁴ Thus, nationalism is frequently seen as intrinsically secular, and modern societies are considered both nationalized and secularized. However, the relations between modernity and secularity, as well as those between religion and nationalism, are far from straightforward. Just as modernization does not necessarily bring about secularization, nationalism is not necessarily secular. Politicized by activists who see it as an alternative to secular nationalism or hijacked by populists who turn it into a mere marker of a community of “good us” as opposed to “bad them,” religion is often used to imagine the nation.¹⁵ Thus, it becomes “an important factor in the formation of the nation and the understanding of the nation’s distinctive role in history.”¹⁶

While both history and religion underpin national imaginings, religion shapes the way national history is narrated, and nationalism influences the religious outlook on history.¹⁷ Thus, history and religion intertwine to forge the communities upon which the legitimacy of modern states is founded.¹⁸

From Performance to Ideology: Vladimir Putin’s Ideological Turn

Historically, the concept that a nation is the primary source of legitimacy for the (modern) state is inherent to the logic of democracy. However, since the legitimacy of autocrats is more than an oxymoron, legitimation matters for authoritarian regimes.¹⁹ As far as nationalism is the predominant rhetoric in which legitimacy is debated in the modern world, references

12 Aronsson and Elgenius, *National Museums*; Knell, *The Contemporary Museum*.

13 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Greenfeld, *Five Roads*.

14 Taylor, *Secular Age*.

15 Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion*; Roy, “Beyond Populism.”

16 Marsh, “Religion and Nationalism,” 101.

17 Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*; Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*.

18 Porter-Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland*; Hanks, “Narratives of Islam”; Bogumil and Yurchuk, *Memory and Religion*.

19 Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars.”

to the nation—as well as to history and religion that allow for imagining it—are employed by autocrats to legitimize their governments.²⁰

One of the three pillars of the stability of autocracies (the other two being repression and co-optation), authoritarian legitimation involves making ideology- and performance-based legitimacy claims.²¹ The relationships between these two types of legitimacy claims, like the relationships between the pillars of authoritarian stability, can be viewed as complementary: in times of high economic performance, there is little need for making ideology-based legitimacy claims; however, the latter is required when performance-based legitimacy claims are no longer credible due to economic decline. In a nutshell, when the regime can no longer deliver, the strengthening of ideological indoctrination may be used to bolster its legitimacy.

Here legitimacy claims based on references to nation, history, and religion are regarded as a subtype of ideology-based legitimacy claims. The legitimation strategy of a particular authoritarian regime—a specific way of claiming legitimacy—can be understood as being shaped around ideology- or performance-based claims or include a combination of both.

During the first two presidencies of Vladimir Putin (2000–2004 and 2004–8) and Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term (2008–12), the regime's legitimacy was bolstered by economic performance.²² This changed dramatically at the turn of 2011–12, when mass political protests swept Moscow and several large Russian cities. Although immediately triggered by the fraudulent State Duma elections, the political discontent manifested in the protests was caused by the economic downturn that followed the drop in oil prices in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.²³ This, the first economic downturn since Vladimir Putin's ascent to power, undermined the economy-based legitimacy of his political regime. Hence, the regime changed gears: since 2012, the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, it has been putting more emphasis on ideology than on performance to claim legitimacy.²⁴ The foundation—as well as the core element—of this ideology has been a narrative of Russian history politically beneficial to the regime.

20 Calhoun, *Nationalism*.

21 Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars."

22 Treisman, "Presidential Popularity."

23 Chaisty and Whitefield, "The Effects."

24 Robinson, "Russia's Response to Crisis"; Smyth and Soboleva, "Looking beyond the Economy"; Greene, "End of Ambiguity in Russia"; Damm and Cooley, "Resurrection"; Kratochvíl and Shakh-anova, "The Patriotic Turn."

One of the consequences of the ideological shift in the regime's legitimation strategy has been the rapprochement between the ROC and the state. Importantly, the church–state rapprochement has been pointed out repeatedly by scholars of Russia and traced in the fields of foreign policy and international relations, public education, the military, and even in feature films.²⁵ All in all, this long-lasting process was characterized as Russia being desecularized from above.²⁶ The rapprochement between the state and the ROC in history politics has not escaped scholars' attention. Thus, the growing importance of the ROC on Russia's (rather competitive) market of interpretations of the (Stalinist) repressions has been studied extensively.²⁷ More importantly for this chapter, the similarities between the readings of Russian history promoted by the state on the one hand and the ROC on the other have been pointed out repeatedly.²⁸ The overwhelming success of the RMH project, it can be argued, indicates a new milestone in this rapprochement. The ROC and the state now directly cooperate in the (re)production of the narrative of the national history, which bolsters the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's regime. The importance of this can hardly be overestimated.

From "Orthodox Rus" to "Russia—My History": The History of the Historical Parks

The RMH developed sweepingly against the background of the growing importance of ideology for Vladimir Putin's regime. Its emergence is a telling indicator and a key product of the direct cooperation between the ROC and the state in the (re)production of the historical narrative politically beneficial to it.²⁹

25 Knox, *Russian Society*; Marsh, "From Atheism to Establishment?"; Burgess, *Holy Rus*; Köllner, *Religion and Politics*; Payne, "Spiritual Security"; Curanovic, *Religious Factor*; Glazer and Petrenko, "Religion and Education"; Basil, "Orthodoxy"; Lisovskaya, "Religion's Uneasy Return"; Richters, *Post-Soviet*; Binder, "Rethinking History."

26 Karpov, "Social Dynamics."

27 Dorman, "Ot Solovkov do Butovo"; Bogumił, "Stone, Cross and Mask"; Fedor, "Setting"; Bogumił et al., "Sacred or Secular?"; Bogumił and Voronina, "Time of Persecution."

28 Torbakov, "Russian Orthodox Church"; Zimmermann, "Never Again!"; Agadjanian, "Religion and Collective Memory."

29 Parts of this chapter's contents have already been published. See Klimenko, "Building the Nation"; Klimenko, "Politically Useful Tragedies."

Initially, RMH was the ROC's project.³⁰ Its (pre)history can be traced to the 1990s and the ecclesial–public exhibition–forum *Orthodox Rus'*: RMH is the forum's spin-off. From November 4 to 7, 2011, the exhibition *The Russian Orthodox Church—A Summary of Twenty Years: 1991–2011* was held in Moscow Manezh as a part of the forum. The exhibition, which was one of the first projects of (then Archimandrite) Tikhon (Shevkunov) as the head of the Patriarch's Council for Culture, told the story of the restoration of church life in the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate over the twenty years that had passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Overwhelmingly successful, the exhibition pointed to what direction the organizers should go for further development of the project.

Two years later, on November 4, 2013, *The Romanovs*, the first multimedia exhibition of the cycle *Orthodox Rus'—My History*, opened. In the following years, the cycle was completed with *The Rurikids* (dedicated to the seven hundredth anniversary of Saint Sergius of Radonezh), *The Twentieth Century: From Great Upheaval to Great Victory*, and *The Twentieth Century: 1945–2016*; the exhibitions were held in Moscow Manezh in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively.

In 2015, the next step in the development of the project was taken. The first three exhibitions of the cycle (the fourth, dedicated to postwar Russian history, was still under construction at the time) were united under the roof of Pavilion no. 57 of the Moscow exhibition center, VDNKh, and the first RMH multimedia historical park came into existence.³¹ In 2017–19, historical parks proliferated throughout Russia. In the regional branches of the RMH chain, all four exhibitions of the cycle *Orthodox Rus'—My History* were replicated. They were complemented with a “regional component”: an exhibition or section dedicated to the history of the corresponding region of the country. In the Moscow headquarters of the chain, however, only the “federal component” was (and still is) on display.

In 2018, the Moscow park underwent significant reconstruction: the second part of the exhibition, *The Twentieth Century*, dedicated to the period from 1945 to 2016, was added, and the existing content on display since 2015 was revamped.

30 It is important to stress that the ROC is far from uniform institution, as various factions coexist within it. See Papkova, *Orthodox Church*. Indeed, groups of clergy and laity hold diverging interpretations of Russia's past. See Kormina and Shtyrkov, “Pravoslavnye versii.”

31 The park was inaugurated on December 29, 2015. The mayor of Moscow, Sergey Sobyanin, Patriarch Kirill, Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), and Vladimir Medinsky, the minister of culture of Russia, participated in the inauguration ceremony.

Since the first days of its development, RMH has received overwhelming financial and administrative support from the state. All four exhibitions of the cycle *Orthodox Rus'—My History* were organized by the Fund for Humanitarian Projects (Fond Gumanitarnykh Proektov), founded in 2013, half a year before the opening of *The Romanovs* in Moscow Manezh.³² In addition to public funding from federal and regional budgets, the Fund for Humanitarian Projects receives donations from sponsors, mainly the gas company Gazprom.³³ Finally, since 2016, the parks have been used for teaching school history upon the recommendation of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.³⁴ At the time of writing this, RMH parks have become an essential part of a state-sponsored effort to forge a historical narrative politically beneficial to Vladimir Putin's regime.³⁵

Museum or Textbook? Space, Color, and Light in the Russia—My History Park in Moscow

The halls of the original exhibitions of the Moscow RMH park flowed one into another, leaving visitors with little freedom to choose their own journey through the park. They could neither decide in which sequence to observe them, nor they could avoid any single one of them. Thus, to progress through the park's exhibitions, visitors had to follow the path laid out by its creators. As they did, Russia's history unfolded in strictly chronological order before their eyes like a parade of its rulers: princes, tsars, emperors, general secretaries of the CPSU, and presidents. The exhibitions in the park displayed no artifacts. Instead, multimedia devices—some of them interactive—filled the halls. To learn about Russian history, visitors were expected to read the texts projected on panels, screens, and light boxes. Thus, the park appeared to be less like a museum than a textbook, or at least a combination of the two.

Each exhibition hall had several large panels, each up to six meters high and four meters long, and focused on specific topics, events, figures, and processes

32 Official website of the Fund for Humanitarian Projects: <http://expohistory.ru>.

33 Klimenko, "Building the Nation."

34 Letter of the Department of State Policy for Public Education of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation no. 08-1975, September 21, 2016, <http://mosmetod.ru/metodicheskoe-prostranstvo/vospitatelnaya-rabota/klassnaya-rabota/metodicheskie-materialy/metodicheskie-rekomendatsii-departamenta-gosudarstvennoj-politiki-v-sfere-obshchego-obrazovaniya-minobrnauki-r.html>.

35 Klimenko, "Building the Nation."

crucial for the corresponding period. Images (drawings and photographs) and short, slogan-like phrases were displayed on the panels, and interactive screens were positioned in front of each. Inscriptions on the panels were replicated as links on the screens, which visitors could click and be redirected to an entry with more detailed information.³⁶ The tops of the screens were framed with a timeline of ecclesial history, which focused exclusively on the history of the Russian Church. The identical ecclesial timeline was displayed on the walls of the halls, above the panels. Some exhibition halls had other devices: light boxes, kiosks, and installations. In addition, several short films were screened in the park's halls. Combining animation, newsreel clips, and fragments of Soviet motion pictures with music and voice-over narration, these films revealed the park's reading of Russian history without any intricacy or ambiguity.

The layout of *The Twentieth Century: From Great Upheaval to Great Victory* was somewhat different. Projected on the walls of each hall and stretching throughout the exhibition, the historical timeline was its centerpiece. The timeline listed various historical events chronologically: policy decisions and administrative reforms; economic achievements and international agreements; military battles and peace treaties. Interactive screens displaying the same timeline were located in the halls, and brief entries provided basic information about the corresponding events.³⁷ Just like in *The Rurikids* and *The Romanovs*, the timeline of ecclesial history framed the tops of the screens and was projected on the upper part of the walls of the halls.

Color, light, and sound effects, as well as the spatial layout of the exhibitions, played a crucial role in the forging of the park's specific historical narrative. Several halls of the park stood out in terms of their size and shape. One example was Hall no. 10 of *The Rurikids*, dedicated to Sergius of Radonezh. Not only was it larger than others, it was also circular. Its ceiling resembled a cupola, with drawings projected on it depicting monks, priests, and saints of the Russian Church. In addition to several interactive devices, the hall had lounge chairs—soft and comfortable, they invited visitors to sit and listen to the religious music played here.

In stark distinction to this stood *New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia*, an exhibition in Hall no. 4 of *The Twentieth Century: From Great Upheaval to Great Victory*. Considerably bigger than the other park halls, its layout was akin

36 For instance, the hall of *The Rurikids* dedicated to Vladimir the Saint had the panels "Rus' and the Idols," "The Sanctifier of Rus': Prince Vladimir," "The Baptism of Rus'," and "Rus' and Christianity."

37 For example, the screen "Conspiracy of the Decembrists and the Secretive Associations" had the entries "The Uprising on the Senate Square," "The Trial of the Decembrists," and "The Repentance of the Decembrists."

to a narrow labyrinth, with the walls closing in on the visitor. The hall was different not only in terms of its size and shape but also because of the sound effects: the music that played there was reminiscent of a military march, the hissing of a scourge, and the screeching of a saw. In the other halls of the park, by contrast, Georgy Sviridov's *Snowstorm*, a romantic waltz written for the 1964 film adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's novel, constantly played.

Neither of the park's halls were well-lit. However, some were particularly grim, like Halls no. 7 and no. 8 of *The Rurikids*, which narrated the tales of the Fragmentation and the Yoke, respectively. In contrast, Hall no. 4 of *The Rurikids*, dedicated to Vladimir the Saint and the Christianization of Rus', seemed flooded with warm, soft light, giving the impression that it was painted gold. At the same time, the halls telling the story of the Fragmentation and the Yoke were colored a disturbing combination of black and blood red.

Blood red played a particularly important role within the park. In addition to several halls—the abovementioned *New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia*, *The Repressions*, and Hall no. 1 of *The Romanovs*, dedicated to the Time of Troubles—quite a few panels were colored this way. They were located throughout the park and stood out in the halls, painted in a calm yet cold emerald green or sapphire blue. Such were the panels dedicated to *Paganism* in Halls no. 1 and no. 4 of *The Rurikids*; the panel titled *The Age of Revolts (Buntashnij Vek): The Uprising of Stepan Razin* in the hall of *The Romanovs* dedicated to Alexei Mikhailovich; the panel *The Revolt of Pugachev and the Russian Masonry* in the hall devoted to Peter III and Catherine II; *The Conspiracy of the Decembrists and the Secretive Associations* in Halls no. 14–15 telling about Alexander I; *The Birth of the Russian Terror: The Murder of Alexander II* in the hall dedicated to Alexander II; and the panel *Revolutionaries and Their Foreign Friends* in the hall dedicated to Alexander III. During its 2018 reconstruction, the park was completed with the exhibition *The Twentieth Century: 1945–2016*. Then, another blood-red-colored panel was added to the list: *Dissidents—The Discordant: Political Opposition to the Soviet Regime* in the hall named 1964–1985: *The Flowering and the Beginning of the Crisis*.

National Unity, Orthodox Christianity and the Pendulum of Russian History: The Russia—My History Narrative

The spatial layout of the park's exhibitions, sound effects, music, color, and light were all used to (re)produce a specific, cyclical vision of Russian history. As narrated in the park, it unfolded like a pendulum: from times of

decline and decay, to periods of flourishing and grandeur, then returning to devastation and ruin.

Thus, the park told the story of Slavs who, because of their discord, fell under the rule of the Khazar Khanate in the south and had to pay tribute to the Varangians in the north. Only when they overcame this discord, detrimental to all, and invited a ruler could they secure their thriving future. Thus, the Norman theory of the origins of Russian statehood (that it was established by Normans—Vikings or Varangians—who came from Scandinavia) was upheld in the park. Nonetheless, the emphasis was put on the Slavs' resolve to unite, founded upon the understanding that "instead of desired prosperity," freedom brings about only "incessant strife."³⁸ Thus, one of the key motifs of the narrative (re)produced in the park was introduced in its first hall—that of internal dis/unity. Disunity leads to dependence on external enemies, and, eventually, to the loss of sovereignty; only through unity is it possible to defeat the enemies, overcome all the troubles, and flourish.

The tale of national dis/unity continued in Halls no. 7 and 8, respectively, dedicated to the Fragmentation and the Yoke. The panel *Fragmentation*, located in the cognominal hall and colored, not surprisingly, in blood red, listed the consequences of internal dissent: wealth accumulation by clans and families, the desolation of the people, the shrinking of the population, the decay of households and crafts, the desertion of lands and cities, the devastation of Kyiv and other cities, and defenselessness before the external threat. The subjugation of Rus' by Batu Khan (c. 1205–1255) was portrayed as the result of internal strife. Only after the unification of the people under the rule of a strong leader, St. Prince Dmitry Donskoy (1350–1389), was victory over the external enemy achieved, the state consolidated, and the country moved forward towards greatness.³⁹ The latter was manifested in the rise of Moscow.

The same pattern was used in the park to narrate the story of the Time of Troubles, followed by the accession of the Romanov dynasty in 1613. Internal strife resulted in the devastation and ruin of the country and, eventually, in foreign intervention. The unification of the people in the face of the common enemy led to the latter being expelled from Moscow. Finally, all

³⁸ The interactive screen "The Creation of Rus': Prince Rurik" located in Hall no. 1 of *The Rurikids* exhibition. Photographed by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 3, 2017.

³⁹ In 1988, the year of the thousandth anniversary of the Christianization of Rus', Prince Dmitry Donskoy was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Today, he is one of the most venerated military saints in Russia.

troubles were overcome, the first tsar of the new dynasty ascended to the throne, and the new period of Russian state's grandeur began. The reign of the Romanovs was portrayed as a road from one great success—be it a military victory, fiscal or administrative reform, or cultural achievement—to another, even greater.

The history of the Russian state, as it was narrated in the park, repeated itself again in the revolutions of 1917.⁴⁰ Disastrous in their consequences, they came about as a result of people betraying their unity. However, as the people unified in the face of a monstrous enemy (under the rule of outstanding, yet controversial, leader Joseph Stalin), their greatest triumph was achieved—the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Then, the Russian state reached the peak of its might.

During the 2018 reconstruction of the Moscow RMH park, the final (until now) episode of the ever-repeating drama of Russian history was added, depicting the disintegration of the USSR, followed by today's Russia "rising from its knees." Now on display in the last hall of the revamped park, a panel is dedicated to and titled *The Ukrainian Crisis: The Unification of Crimea with Russia*. Thus, with the triumph of Putin's Russia, the pendulum of Russian history has concluded its final movement: the tragic internal dissent that brought on the disaster of the failure of the Soviet state is long gone, and the Russian state, ruled by its leader, returns to grandeur.

When examining the role that the past plays in nationalist mobilization, John Coakley identifies several components—"historical stereotypes," in his terms—that are integral to national history narration; among them are the myths of the dark age, the age of struggle, and the golden age.⁴¹ This taxonomy is instrumental in analyzing the national narrative (re)produced in RMH. Like any national narrative, this one included the myth of the golden age(s) of Russia's grandeur, when the people are united, and the state is strong; the myth of the dark age(s), when the state is weakened due to the people's disunity; and the myth of the age(s) of the people's struggle against their internal and external enemies, as well as for their unification and the restoration of their state's strength. As these ages alternated before their eyes, the park's visitors could watch the history of the Russian state and that of the Russian Church unfold—the two key protagonists of the narrative (re)produced in RMH.

40 For a detailed account of the interpretation of the 1917 Revolutions in RMH parks, see Klimenko, "Building the Nation." For an analysis of the way the history of the Soviet atrocities is narrated in the park, see Klimenko, "Politically Useful Tragedies."

41 Coakley, "Mobilizing the Past."

Special attention was paid to tracing the relations between the Russian Church and the Russian state, which were represented as an alliance that Russia and its people benefited from. Contrastingly, antagonism, tension, and conflict between the two were hardly discussed. Thus, the only state policy towards the Russian Church that was moderately criticized in *The Romanovs* was the secularization of Church lands by Catherine II. Even the Petrine reform was interpreted as a change for the better. According to the park, with the abolition of the patriarchate, the Russian Church “became one of the main pillars of absolute monarchy.”⁴² The reform contributed to the strengthening of the state and, hence, should be seen in a positive light.

While the link between the Russian Church and the strength of the Russian state was one of the key motifs of the narrative (re)produced in the park, Orthodox Christianity was represented as the bedrock of the national unity of Russians. Since this very unity was portrayed as foundational for the Russian state, the latter’s strength appeared resting (and depending) on the Russian Church. In this respect, Orthodox Christianity was set against paganism, which was portrayed as fostering a “stubborn urge to disintegrate” and provoking “somber animosity towards the community.”⁴³

Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Church played a crucial part in the tale of the Fragmentation and the Yoke narrated in the park. The blessing that St. Sergius of Radonezh (1314–1392) gave St. Prince Dmitry Donskoy before the battle of Kulikovo (1380) was represented as the primary reason why the Russians, torn by their internal strife, were able to come together to fight the Golden Horde, their common enemy. Having won the battle, the Russians paved the way for the rise of Moscow.

Similarly, during the Time of Troubles, when “the Muscovite state was practically ruined, but the Russian Church remained,” Patriarch Germogen (c. 1530–1612) called upon the Russian people to rally to the defense of their faith and their state.⁴⁴ The militia, under the leadership of Prince Dmitry Pozharsky (1578–1642) and merchant Kuzma Minin (?–1616) and protected by the Icon of Kazan Mother of God, liberated Moscow. The road to the accession of the Romanov dynasty and Russia’s (yet another) golden age of greatness began.

42 Ecclesial timeline located in the Hall no. 6 of the exhibition *The Romanovs*. Photographed by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 3, 2017.

43 Audio guide for the exhibition *The Rurikids*. Recorded by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 3, 2017.

44 Audio guide for the exhibition *The Rurikids*.

This age ended in 1917 with the revolutions. Bringing about “decay, chaos, expulsion, tears, violence, blood, and death,” the revolutions was, in the park’s interpretation, the result of the Russian people betraying Orthodox Christianity that their unity rested upon.⁴⁵ They had to pay for their sins with the millions of lives lost in the Soviet Terror. It was only when the theomachist Soviet state “traversed the bloody abyss that separated it from the historic Russia,” when the people began returning to “the roots of its history and the moral ideals of its forebearers,” and when “ruthless and incogitant destruction of ancient traditions gave way to careful treatment of national history, literature, and art,” that the Russian people triumphed.⁴⁶ The victory in the Great Patriotic War became “the evidence of their inner transformation.”⁴⁷

The role that the Russian Church and Orthodox Christianity played in strengthening the Russian state was depicted far from being purely worldly; it was mystical, too. As the short film *Miracle in Russian History* showed, miracles determined “the historical destiny” of Russia, and were as crucial as “natural, national, economic, and political factors.”⁴⁸ In the ecclesial timeline displayed in *The Rurikids*, the tales of miracles were cataloged in turn with the episodes from the history of Orthodox Christianity, such as the construction of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Constantinople or the founding of the Inkerman Cave Monastery. Most importantly, all these tales were related in the first three halls of the park, which told the story of the period from the third millennium BC until the first Rurikids. Thus, the link between Orthodox Christianity (hence, the Russian Church) and Rus’ (hence, Russia) was portrayed as having existed long before either Russian statehood took shape or Rus’ was Christianized. In fact, the connection between the two appeared to be more ancient than Christianity itself.

As for the Christianization of Rus’, it was represented as a mysterious encounter between the country and its people on the one hand and their only true religion on the other. The Christianization was framed as having been primed by the entire pre-Christian history of Rus’ and at the same time miraculously preordained. To continue with Coakley’s taxonomy, Orthodox Christianity was thereby incorporated into the myth of the origin of the

45 Audio guide for the exhibition *The Romanovs*. Recorded by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 3, 2017.

46 *The Victorious People*, a short film shown in exhibition *The Twentieth Century*. Recorded by the author in the Moscow RMH historical park on November 3, 2017.

47 Ibid.

48 *Miracle in Russian History*, a short film show in the exhibition *The Rurikids*. Recorded by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 3, 2017.

Russian nation.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it was employed to identify what Russia *is* and who Russians *are*: It was Orthodox Christianity that shaped the “mysterious Russian character,” invested the Russian people with “spiritual power,” and gave Russians the “amazing ability” to “endure the ultimate ordeals” to “restore [their] country from ruin,” the park suggested.⁵⁰ As Orthodox Christianity was turned into (the only) positive marker of the national community of Russians, national and religious identities were fused, and the effect of *nationodoxy* was produced.⁵¹

By contrast, the West was represented as this community’s constitutive other and was used to identify what Russia *is not*. Russia was portrayed as having always been surrounded by enemies. On top of the internal ones—rebels, mutineers, and revolutionaries—it had external ones, both in the East and the West. The latter were represented as threatening the very (Orthodox Christian) soul of Russia and its people and thus were far more dangerous than the former. The idea was conveyed clearly in *The Fragmentation* hall of *The Rurikids*. A large panel dedicated to St. Prince Alexander Nevsky summarized succinctly his (civilizational) choice between the Mongol Yoke and Catholicism: “To strengthen defense in the West, to look for friends in the East.”

The depiction of Alexander Nevsky’s choice between East and West as predetermined by Orthodox Christianity and paving Russia’s rise to grandeur; the portrayal of Orthodox Christianity as foundational for the national community of Russians and the Christianization of Rus’ as mystically predestined; the inclusion of the tales of miracles into the narrative focused on the (political) history of the Russian state and the representation of the Russian Church as playing a crucial role in the latter’s formation, consolidation, and development—all seem to suggest that, in RMH, Russian history was orthodoxized. But is this suggestion justified?

49 Coakley, “Mobilizing the Past.”

50 *The Baptism of Rus’*, a short film show in the exhibition *The Rurikids*. Recorded by the author in the Moscow RMH park on November 4, 2017.

51 Vyacheslav Karpov, Elena Lisovskaya, and David Barry use the term “ethnodoxy” to define “an ideology that rigidly links a group’s ethnic identity to its dominant faith” (Karpov et al., “Ethnodoxy,” 639). In the historical park, though, not only the community of ethnic Russians but also the Russian national community was conflated with the community of Orthodox Christians. The terms “*Russkii*” and “*Rossijskii*” were not differentiated but used interchangeably. At the same time, the ethnic and religious diversity of Russians was not represented. Thus, the apparent contradiction between the multi-religiosity of the people(s) of Russia on the one hand and the representation of Orthodox Christianity as foundational for the national unity of Russians on the other was resolved (or, rather, papered over).

To answer this question, it is necessary first to identify the meaning and purpose of the incessant movement of the pendulum of Russian history as the latter was narrated in the park. To frame this within the terminology of John Coakley, it is necessary to reconstruct the myth of Russia's destiny as it was represented there.⁵²

Indeed, church–state relations were portrayed in the historical park primarily as nonantagonistic, tension-less, and conflict-free alliances. However, it was not the Russian Church that appeared as the primary purpose (hence, the main beneficiary) of this alliance, but the Russian state. It was not the state that was represented as aiding the Church in attaining its heavenly goals. On the contrary, it was the Church that came across as assisting the state in achieving its earthly ones. It was not the state that was envisioned as protecting Orthodox Christianity as the (only) true religion. Instead, it was Orthodox Christianity that was characterized as strengthening the state. It was not the state that was envisioned as being directed by divine law or ecclesiastical principles and norms in its politics and policies. Conversely, it was the Church that was depicted as guided in its actions by the interests of the state. Thus, throughout the park, the Russian Church appeared as a handmaiden—albeit an indispensable one—of the Russian state.

The Russian Church and Orthodox Christianity were portrayed in the historical park as foundational for the unity of the national community of Russians. However, this unity itself was envisioned as the backbone of the Russian state. It was vital to be sustained primarily (if not exclusively) because the strength of the Russian state depended on it. The hierarchs of the Russian Church played an important part in the historical narrative (re)produced in the park. This part, though, consisted mainly in aiding Russia's rulers in unifying the nation, hence strengthening the state. Miracles were an integral part of Russian history, as it was narrated in RMH. Nonetheless, they only seemed to be happening in order to save the state from an inevitable and utter collapse. All in all, it appeared that the purpose and meaning of history—according to the RMH reading of it—and the mission of the Russian nation—as it was imagined in the park—were the creation of a strong Russian state. Thus, it was not Orthodox Christianity that was celebrated in the park but the state. And it was not religiosity that was the defining characteristic of the narrative (re)produced there, but statism. Even

52 Coakley, "Mobilizing the Past."

if Russian history was, in fact, orthodoxized here, it was only to sacralize the Russian state.⁵³

Notably, the Russian state was depicted self-same in the park regardless of whether it was Kyivan Rus', the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation. Similarly, no distinction was drawn between the tribes of Kyivan Rus', the inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the subjects of the Russian Empire, the population of the Soviet Union, and the citizens of the Russian Federation. Russia's history was narrated from the perspective of its ruling center, wherever it was located at a particular point in time: in Kyiv, Novgorod, Vladimir, Moscow, St. Petersburg, or Moscow again. This centralizing approach to history narration contributed to gluing together Russia's pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet pasts, which was crucial for the historical narrative (re)produced in RMH. Covering the history of Russia from Kyivan Rus' to Putin's Russian Federation, this cyclical narrative papered over all the ruptures, breaks, and chasms of Russia's past.⁵⁴

In this respect, it matched perfectly with the "official" historical narrative of Putin's regime, the one that Olga Malinova calls "the narrative of a thousand years of Russian history"⁵⁵ and Tomas Sherlock "a bricolage."⁵⁶ The key motif of this narrative is "the organic connection among the tsarist, communist, and postcommunist periods, with the Russian state as the unifying element."⁵⁷ It is centered around the idea of the state's continuity from the prerevolutionary period through the Soviet epoch to Putin's attempts to "make Russia great again" and is an essential component of the ideology of statism.⁵⁸ This ideology has been the cornerstone of the legitimacy of Putin's regime since the beginning of the 2000s.⁵⁹

53 In this regard, the study of RMH can shed new light on one of the key questions related to the church–state alliance in present-day Russia, namely, who this alliance benefits the most, the former or the latter. For important contributions to this debate, see Knox, *Russian Society*; Lisovskaya, "Religion's Uneasy Return."

54 The cyclical approach to history narration inherits a long-lasting tradition within Russian historiography. Employed by Nikolai Karamzin in his twelve-volume *History of the Russian State* (1816–26), it is often associated with Russian conservative thought. See Carleton, "History Done Right".

55 Malinova, *Aktualnoye Proshloye*.

56 Sherlock, *Historical Narratives*.

57 Ibid., 161.

58 Koposov, "The Only Possible Ideology."

59 Gill, *Symbolism*.

Conclusion

As the RMH project grew from a cycle of exhibitions organized by the Patriarch's Council for Culture into a chain of multimedia historical parks administered by the Gazprom-funded Fund for Humanitarian Projects, it changed. The essence of this change has been the irretrievable, albeit gradual, deorthodoxization of the narrative (re)produced through it.

Firstly, the term "Orthodox" was omitted from the title of the project, *Orthodox Rus'—My History* and was therefore changed to *Russia—My History*. Then, when the exhibits in the regional branches of the chain were complemented with a "regional component," attention was paid to the "traditional" religion(s) of the corresponding region. Thus, visitors to Kazan, Makhachkala, and Ufa parks could learn about Islam. Furthermore, the "federal component," the core exhibit replicated in all the regional branches of the chain, was modified to de-emphasize the role of Orthodox Christianity and that of the ROC in Russia's history; information about Russia's "other religions" was also added.

Finally, during its 2018 reconstruction, Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Church were rendered far less pronounced motifs of the narrative (re)produced in the Moscow headquarters of the chain. Interestingly, this was achieved with seemingly insignificant changes, of which the crucial one was the removal of the timeline of ecclesial history. Now, it frames neither the walls of the Moscow RMH park nor its interactive screens. Moreover, information on Russia's ethnic and, more importantly for this chapter, religious diversity was added to the exhibit. In a nutshell, whatever the exhibitions on display in the Moscow headquarters of the RMH chain are today, they are hardly replicas of the exhibitions of the cycle *Orthodox Rus'—My History* that the Patriarch's Council for Culture once organized. Nonetheless, the statist narrative, politically beneficial to Vladimir Putin's regime, is still (re)produced there.

Initially a spin-off of the ecclesial–public exhibition–forum *Orthodox Rus'*, the long-lasting project of the ROC, RMH received overwhelming financial and administrative support from the state. A key product—and at the same time a telling indicator—of direct cooperation between the two, it has become the *lieu* of the (re)production of the historical narrative, which is politically beneficial to Vladimir Putin's regime.

From the project's very inception, this narrative was less religious than it was statist. Russian history was indeed orthodoxized there. However, the emphasis was put on the sacralization of the state. As the project grew, one could watch the historical narrative (re)produced through it deorthodoxize.

Nonetheless, its key characteristic remains intact: it is profoundly statist and bolsters the regime's legitimacy.

Today, RMH showcases how Orthodox Christianity can be instrumentalized in order to narrate Russian history in a politically expedient way. At the same time, it demonstrates how religion and history can intertwine to legitimize an autocrat. All in all, RMH barely manifests the invasion of Russia's historical market by the ROC. Rather, it testifies to Vladimir Putin's regime's ability to appropriate various mnemonic initiatives for its own political benefit.

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About the Author

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Section II

Staging Martyrdom

7. Between States: Macedonia as a Contested *Terra Sancta* (1878–2023)

Denis Ljuljanović

Abstract: This chapter examines the sacralization of history from the fin de siècle to the present, focusing on Balkan state (Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria) policies in relation to Macedonia, encompassing its historical context under the Ottoman Empire as well as its later iterations as Yugoslavia, FYROM, and North Macedonia. The study argues that despite the increasing secularization of these states, sacred beliefs have played a central role in nation-building processes. Statesmen, educators, and clergy contribute to the sanctification of national narratives, depicting their nations as chosen and policies as sacred. Drawing on various archives and news media sources, this chapter aims to analyze the state policies of these Balkan states throughout the late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries and their meta-narratives concerning the territories known as (Ottoman, Yugoslav, FYROM, and North) Macedonia.

Keywords: the Macedonian question, Balkan states, Macedonia, small-state imperialism, sacralization of the nation, Slavic Jerusalem

A month after the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when the new nation-states emerged in the Balkans (such as Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania), a Bulgarian intellectual of the time, Marko Balabanov (1837–1921), emphasized that “Macedonia is the cradle of Slavdom, the country of the holy Slav enlighteners Cyril and Methodius” and that the country was “in peril of falling under a worse oppression than before.”¹ Not only he, but other intellectuals of the time from Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, and Macedonia shared the same

¹ *Maritsa Plovdiv*, no. 9, August 25, 1878.

opinion; they believed Macedonia was a *terra sancta* (holy land) and should never be under the “oppression of Asiatic Turks.”²

Since the late fourteenth century, this territory, known in modern days as North Macedonia, has been part of the Ottoman Empire, first ruled from the Ottoman capital Edirne and then Istanbul (since 1453). Following the Ottoman conquest of Macedonia, this territory became part of Rumelia (the European part of the Ottoman Empire, also known as Turkey in Europe). It was divided into *sanjaks* and *vilayets* (Ottoman administrative units), resulting in significant changes in toponymy and demographics. This led to the complete disappearance of the use of the name Macedonia by the Ottoman administration. The name Macedonia first became popular with travelers and adventurers from Europe during the nineteenth century. In the “long century,” Macedonia earned both a geographical and political meaning imagined differently by various actors (Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, local Macedonian, or Ottoman). However, they all shared one belief: Macedonia was “their” sacred land. Even for Ottoman statesmen, the territories that included Macedonia were the lands where the four pillars of the state (*dört rüknlu devlet*) were established.³ Geographically, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia were the main claimants to the Ottoman province of Macedonia, consisting of three vilayets: Salonika, Manastir, and Kosovo, by the end of the Balkan Wars. Thus, from the late nineteenth century to the present, Macedonia has also been “continually in flux,” having its borders altered with each attempt by a neighboring nation-state to claim it as part of its imagined territories during nation-state building.⁴ Accordingly, this chapter discusses that sacred belief, which remained central to greater nation-building processes of the aforementioned states. Moreover, the mnemonic actors (statesmen, educational personnel, and clerics) worked on sanctification of national narratives over population and territory, representing their nation(s) as “chosen peoples” and their policies as “sacred.”⁵ In other words, these actors declared a sort of political messianism to legitimize their imperialistic attempts. Firstly, towards Ottoman Macedonia (1878–1913), and later similar narratives obstructed the integration of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM since 1990) and North Macedonia (since 2019) towards European integration, as will be discussed in-depth below. Therefore, this

2 Bakic-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms.”

3 Gawrych, *Crescent and the Eagle*, 55.

4 Yosmaoğlu, “Constructing.”

5 On the categories of mnemonic actors in contemporary Eastern Europe, see Kubik and Bernhard, “A Theory.”

chapter aims to analyze the state policies of the aforementioned governments, particularly during the late nineteenth century, as well as the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These policies played an active role in constructing overarching narratives and shaping the perception of Macedonia as a sacred territory. Through an examination of these processes, we can deepen our understanding of how imagined communities were intentionally crafted and how sacred narratives were employed to shape and exert influence over the Macedonian context.

Based on this historical context and contemporary discourses, this chapter also aims to answer the following questions: Who are these mnemonic actors promoting the sacralization of the nation?⁶ What is their role in the construction of sacred national narratives? How are their projections contested with those of other national communities or states in Ottoman Macedonia, FYROM, and North Macedonia? Which figures of the national past are revived in this process? How do mnemonic actors use these figures to legitimize their “small-state imperialism” and dispute Macedonia’s name, church, and language?⁷

Contentious Imaginations of Macedonia as *Terra Sancta*

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are marked in the Balkans as periods of historical sacralization of both the nation and its (contested) territories.⁸ The abovementioned Balkan states exercised sacrality over a population as a sacred community and territory. According to Peter Haslinger, in the same way that collective history, historical figures, and tradition have to be “sacralized,” “imagined,” or “invented,” spaces undergo a similar process in the form of “invented territory” or “imagined territory.”⁹ Its goal is not only to maintain control over the population but also to maintain power over territory and incorporate it into a national, religiously infused meta-narrative. Liberating the Ottoman Macedonian provinces and their population from the “Ottoman yoke” (as the Balkan nationalist

6 Schulze Wessel, *Nationalisierung*; Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*.

7 Fabrykant and Buhr, *Small State Imperialism*.

8 Faludi, “Multi-level (Territorial) Governance”; on sacralization of the spaces (territories), see Ejduš and Subotić, “Kosovo as Serbia’s Sacred Space.” On concept of sacralization especially in Eastern Europe, see Schulze Wessel, *Nationalisierung*.

9 Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium*, 30. In this vein, Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory) can be comprehended as an attempt to disclose the way in which imagined territorial space is filled with identity sites that reinforce its claims to be a historically legitimate national and political entity.

actors of that time called it), Macedonia became the objective pursued by different protagonists: Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia.¹⁰

Macedonia remained a part of the Ottoman Empire after the Congress of Berlin (1878). It was then divided into three vilayets: Salonica, Manastir, and Kosovo, headed by a governor (*vali*, since 1902 *umum müfettişi*) who was appointed by the sultan. For each of the Balkan states, Macedonia occupied a special place in their concept of boundaries, space, and affiliation with their population. Consequently, after 1890, Macedonia became the playground of several nationalist movements: Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, etc. For every party involved in the conflict, Macedonia and the Macedonians were subsumed into narratives of their regional and local identity, which contained claims of sacralization intended to legitimize the social, political, and ecclesiastical order of the Balkan states. In anticipation of the Ottoman collapse in Europe, the Balkan rivals employed propaganda portraying Macedonia as *terra sancta*. In this regard, the media in Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia represented their final war, the Balkan Wars (1912–13), as sacred and compared it with the fight of the Crusades—both in the sense of a “sacred struggle of the Cross against the Crescent” and the superiority of “European civilization” over “Asiatic Turks.”¹¹ In this context, the Balkan Wars could be interpreted as a by-product of the “small-state imperialism” of the Balkan governments, which were involved in the sacralization of history and political messianism during “the age of empire,” but also presently, as their narratives become an obstacle for North Macedonia and their access to European Union. Particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, the Balkan states often blended nationalist and imperial discourses and practices. These states placed great emphasis on their rich heritage and deep historical roots in Macedonia, drawing upon past imperial legacies to justify their contemporary imperialistic policies. They looked to figures like Alexander the Great, to the Bulgarian Empires, and to the Serbian Empire, all of which had historical connections to Macedonia, as examples to bolster their claims.

Greek Perception of Macedonia (1878–1913)

Greek intellectuals made concerted efforts to construct a myth of ancient Hellenic ancestry, even among the Orthodox Slavic-speaking communities residing in Macedonian villages. The concept of an “ancient Macedonian

¹⁰ Lange-Akhund, *Macedonian Question*, 7.

¹¹ Aronson, *Crowns in Conflict*, 86–87.

nation" was also incorporated into the national mythology propagated through the Greek education system and school curriculum.¹² Textbooks from 1892 stated that "the whole of ancient Macedonia, the homeland of the philosopher Aristotle, of Philip, and Alexander the Great, is and has stayed 100% Greek."¹³ During this era, there was a shift in the interpretation of Alexander of Macedonia, presenting him as a symbol of the "Macedonian province and Greek ethnicity," thereby preserving the Greek identity of the Macedonian region. Within the context of the Greek state's perspective, influenced by the Megali Idea (Great Idea) project, Macedonia encompassed the territories of the Manastir and Salonika vilayet. From a "Greek lens," the Macedonian question was perceived as a necessary struggle to propagate holy Hellenism.¹⁴ This notion of Hellenism emerged as a response to the Bulgarian Exarchate, which advocated for the use of the Bulgarian language and education. The resulting competition between Greek and Bulgarian intellectuals and clergy, sometimes even within the same community or church, initially manifested as a rivalry over educational and ecclesiastical influence in Macedonia. As a result, it furnished the conflicting Greek- and Bulgarian-oriented parties, also known as the Patriarchists and the Exarchists, with a clearly defined cause to shape the local population according to the state interests. One of the tools used as a fundamental marker in the process of nation building was undoubtedly education, which enabled the spread of nationalism as a sacred mission to establish an imagined community and sense of belonging to common space as imagined geography.¹⁵ The millet system of the Ottoman Empire enabled intellectuals and teachers to develop their "patriotic agitation" and to bring the local population into a "mass movement."¹⁶ In other words, the nationalist teachers/mnemonic actors could now pursue their imaginations and were willing to attempt "enlightening the locals." During the 1880s, education in these communities underwent a transformation aimed at fostering a collective national identity, forming what can be described as a cohesive "imagined community." Intellectuals within these communities asserted that Macedonia was not only a

12 Vangeli, *Nation-Building*.

13 Kiminas, *Ecumenical Patriarchate*; Dragouni, "Macedonia in Greek Textbooks," 420; Gounaris, "Social Cleavages"; Gounaris, "Preachers of God"; Gounaris, "National Claims"; Livanios, "1904–1908"; Gerd, *Russian Policy*, 10.

14 This refers to Greek intellectuals and politicians who defined Greek policies toward Ottoman territories. In order to avoid generalizations and essentialization with the entire Greek-speaking population, quotation marks have been used.

15 Schulze Wessel, "Über Autorität."

16 Barkey and Gavrilis, "Ottoman Millet System"; Koçunyan, "The Millet System."

constituent part of Hellenic civilization but also the homeland of renowned historical figures like Alexander the Great, while remaining an inseparable component of the Byzantine Empire throughout centuries.¹⁷ Greek nationalists, driven by the ideology of the Megali Idea, imbued historical figures such as Alexander the Great with a sacred status and envisioned Macedonia as an essential constituent of a grander entity called “Greater Greece.”¹⁸ To further reinforce these beliefs, the Greek government produced numerous books that extolled the splendor of ancient Macedonia and celebrated the achievements of Alexander the Great. Notable among these works was *The Prophecies of Alexander*.¹⁹ The distribution of such books was often provided with the assistance of the teachers who worked in various schools in Ottoman Macedonia. According to Greek statistical data, the presence of Greek schools in Macedonia experienced a noticeable increase during the period between 1878 and 1885, growing by 7 percent. This growth continued at a significant rate, reaching an 81 percent increase by 1905.²⁰ However, it was only after the establishment of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) that Greek nationalists responded with military actions against the schools that were opened in Bulgaria.²¹ In 1894, they formed a clandestine nationalistic organization called the Ethniki Etaireia (National Society). Comprised of nationalist officers who advocated for the realization of the Megali Idea, the Ethniki Etaireia included many Greek members who were refugees from the three vilayets of Macedonia. It is important to note that these Greek entities, including the Ethniki Etaireia, the Greek government, and the Patriarchate, did not possess a unified national program.²² The specifics of their agendas and policies are beyond the scope of this chapter and will not be discussed here. However, many of these policymakers worked on the promotion of Macedonian territories as

17 Gounaris, *Steam over Macedonia*, 8.

18 Ibid., 73.

19 Ibid., 36.

20 Karakasidou, *Fields of Wheat*; Historical Archive of Macedonia (IAM) in Thessaloniki, AEE: biork/, 96.

21 Kofos, “Dilemmas and Orientations,” 143.

22 The Greek situation in Ottoman Macedonia was multilayered, contested, and often led to clashing of rivalries inside the same communities. Competition between rising nationalisms, but also within nationalist movements, was often shaped according to the current needs and interests of various members of the organizations and institutions. Thus, the controversies between the ecclesiastical and educational spheres, also between the state and brigandage, often resulted in clashes and support of various interests. However, those cases are different from the aims of this study since this chapter highlights the sacralization of history in Macedonia instead.

part of the Greek heritage since the times of Alexander the Great. This policy was primarily driven by the objective of countering Bulgarian interests in Ottoman Macedonia and advancing the overarching political agenda of the Megali Idea. It is important to acknowledge that this Greek political program clashed with the Bulgarian counterpart, which will be discussed in-depth below.

The Bulgarian Perception of Macedonia (1878–1913)

The sacralization of history was also inherent in the Bulgarian national movement since its beginnings. The pivotal figure, Saint Paisius of Hilendar (1722–1773) played a significant role in countering Greek influence and asserting Bulgarian cultural and religious autonomy. In his renowned work, *Istoria Slavyanobŭlgarskaya* (Slavic-Bulgarian history), published in 1762, Paisius focused on Bulgaria's medieval past, particularly its two empires, with the intention of rekindling the spirit of the Bulgarian community.²³ This work is considered the earliest piece of Bulgarian historiography. Paisius's book, which emphasized the value of education in Bulgaria, served as an inspiration for many Bulgarian intellectuals who subsequently commenced publishing textbooks in Bulgarian. Prior to this, Bulgarian literature had been written in Slavonic-Bulgarian, a linguistic hybrid that persisted until the 1840s.²⁴ These textbooks frequently drew upon Bulgarian songs, particularly epic poems from the medieval empires. The efforts of these intellectuals were bolstered by the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870, led by clergy members.²⁵ This institution reinforced an "invented tradition" centered around the medieval Bulgarian states and is considered a direct outcome of the culmination of the Bulgarian nation-building process. The Exarchate held a sacred status, revering the memory of the medieval Bulgarian Tsardoms, and is regarded as a significant

23 The First Bulgarian Empire existed between the seventh and eleventh century and the Second Bulgarian Empire between 1185 and 1395.

24 Wiener, *America's Share*, 33. Some of these textbooks were works of the Miladinov brothers (both died in 1862) from Struga (today in North Macedonia), who published *Bilgarski narodni pesni* (Bulgarian folk songs, 1861) or Lyuben Karavelov's (1834–1879) book *Bulgari ot staro vreme* (Old time Bulgarians, 1867). On the Church Slavonic, Slavonic-Bulgarian, and Bulgarian language(s), see Tosheva, "Strukturno-funktsionalen status."

25 The Bulgarian Exarchate was established in 1870 by an edict of the sultan. In this regard, it has been founded a semi-autonomous Bulgarian Church in Constantinople, with an exarch. Greek nationalists and Patriarchists long opposed this decision.

aspect of Bulgarian identity.²⁶ The struggle for an independent church proved vital for forming a new imagined community and establishing a new Bulgarian Tsardom.²⁷ Notably, the Exarchate was centered in Istanbul, where the Bulgarian intelligentsia was active. Istanbul served as a hub for the movement towards ecclesiastical independence and also fostered the development of Bulgarian scholarly inquiry and patriotic activism. It was in Istanbul that Bulgarian intellectuals formulated a national agenda rooted in a romanticized perception of medieval Bulgarian history. One of the notable figures involved in this movement was Petko Slaveikov (1827–1895), who played a significant role as the publisher of the newspaper *Makedonia* (1866–1872). Slaveikov advocated for presenting Bulgaria as the legitimate successor to Samuil's empire, which had ruled from 997 to 1014. He actively campaigned for the establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian church in Istanbul and is credited with coining the term “Macedonian question” to highlight the shared interests of Bulgarians and Macedonians in their quest for a unified state. In drawing this parallel, Slaveikov referred to examples such as the Prussians' role in Germany and the Piemontese in Italy, both of which had played crucial roles in promoting the aspirations of their respective nations. By invoking these historical precedents, Slaveikov sought to bolster the legitimacy of Bulgarian and Macedonian claims and emphasize the importance of their cause within the words:

The whole of humanity moves toward self-rule and not toward oppression, but the point is that self-rule will be achieved only through union in one body. Today all nations recognize this need and are in a hurry to achieve it; are we going to be the only ones to go in the opposite direction? Others unify, although they have been separated for ages, like Pruss and Bavarians, Piemontians and Napolitanians, and we want to separate now, to separate [Bulgarians and Macedonians] although we are from a uniform element and we have been united until now. Isn't that wise and commendable?²⁸

Influenced by the prevailing nationalist ideas of the time in Europe, Petko Slaveikov and others envisioned an independent Bulgarian state that

²⁶ Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties* 55. Stefan Rohdewald (*Götter der Nationen*, 20) points out that this was not only the case with Bulgaria, but also with other nations in the region: “Die überregionalen Heiligenkulte der Südslaven.”

²⁷ Penchev, *Tsarigrad/Istanbul*, 1.

²⁸ Slaveikov, “Makedonskiat vüpros.”

encompassed Macedonia, considering it the “cradle of Bulgarian culture and Slavdom.” Slaveikov viewed Macedonia as the heartland of the medieval Bulgarian Tsardom, particularly during the reign of Tsar Samuil, and regarded it as “the homeland of the most zealous Macedonists.”²⁹ This rhetoric focused on the expansion of Bulgarian territory into Macedonia, portraying it as an unbroken extension of Bulgaria since medieval times. Prominent politicians, clergy members, and intellectuals were inspired by the idea of resurrecting the glory of the medieval empires in Macedonia and venerating figures like Cyril and Methodius or Clement of Ohrid as saints. In doing so, they emphasized the civilizational differences vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire and sought to incorporate Macedonia and its sacred Christian heritage into a unified Bulgarian entity. The proponents of this view often invoked the Treaty of San Stefano (1878), which preceded the Congress of Berlin and established the concept of Greater Bulgaria. They appealed to this treaty to advocate for the inclusion of Macedonia within the Bulgarian domain. The newspaper and education systems played pivotal roles in expressing discontent with the perceived unfairness of the Berlin Treaty and frequently depicted Macedonia as either Western Bulgaria or Southwestern Bulgaria.³⁰ In this context, an influential newspaper that actively advocated for Greater Bulgaria and the cause of Macedonia was *Tselokupna Bulgaria* (Complete Bulgaria). The inaugural issue of this newspaper, published in June 1879, prominently emphasized its primary objective as “supporting and educating the people about our endeavors towards unity.”³¹ *Tselokupna Bulgaria* played a crucial role in disseminating information, promoting national consciousness, and rallying support for the unification of Bulgarian territories, including Macedonia. The newspaper sought to unite Bulgarians and create a sense of shared purpose and identity by highlighting the importance of national unity and the aspirations for a greater Bulgaria. This reflected a shift in the interests of Bulgarian intellectuals, who no longer valued only military activities but also education. In schools, Bulgarian intellectuals tried to define an imagined map of Bulgaria. Books and newspapers often taught that Bulgaria consisted of Northern Bulgaria (Severna Bŭlgaria), Southern Bulgaria/Eastern Rumelia (Juzhna Bŭlgaria/Istochna Rumelia),

29 Ibid.

30 Sujecka, “The Image of Macedonia,” 138. See the example of *Yugozapadna Bulgaria*, Sofia, no. 1, September 11, 1893.

31 *Tselokupna Bŭlgaria*, June 20, 1879, Tarnovo, no. 1, 1. This newspaper was edited by the abovementioned Petko Slaveykov. He also put out the newspapers *Osten* (1879), *Tselokupna Bulgaria* (1879), *Nezavisimost* (1880–1883), *Tarnovska konstitutsia* (1884), *Istina* (1886), *Sofiski dnevnik* (1886), and *Pravda* (1888).

and Western Bulgaria/Macedonia (Zapadna Bŭlgaria/Makedonia).³² Hence, newspapers, history, and geography textbooks spread the image of Greater Bulgaria that incorporated Macedonia and its famous personalities, such as Tsar Samuil, Saints Cyril and Methodius, or Saint Clement of Ohrid as “Bulgarian.” One of the promoters of such ideas in schools and education was a geographer and ethnographer, Vasil Kanchov (1862–1902), a publicist of Macedonian ethnography, teacher, and actor, who became the chief school inspector of the Bulgarian schools in Ottoman Macedonia between 1894 and 1897.³³ He claimed a Bulgarian tribe was settled over Macedonia, which “determined [the borders of Macedonia].”³⁴ Within this framework, the notion of a Bulgarian tribe being historically settled in Macedonia was put forth and the population residing in Ottoman Macedonia was perceived as “local Bulgarians” according to this narrative. These constructions of historical claims created a space for expansion and, unfortunately, fueled violence. By activating boundaries and narratives, destructive campaigns were orchestrated against the local population, particularly those who were not recognized as Bulgarians.³⁵ One significant institution involved in the production of such knowledge was the Saints Cyril and Methodius School, also known as the Bulgarian Men’s High School in Thessaloniki. Established in 1880, this educational institution was supported by the local Bulgarian community and the Bulgarian Exarchate.³⁶ It played a crucial role in promoting and sacralizing the history of Macedonia and its territories while guiding actions and legitimizing the desired order. Through religious missionary efforts and educational initiatives, the Bulgarian state sought to solidify its claim over Macedonia and justify its actions.³⁷ At the same time, such policies make it possible to explore the purposeful shaping of sacrality by certain actors through mechanisms, structures, and processes of change. Furthermore, prominent figures like Vasil Kanchov and Kuzman Shapkarev played significant roles as mnemonic actors, contributing to the rise of a political movement that sought the independence of Macedonia from Ottoman rule. They were instrumental in training the leadership cadres of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which operated under the ideological protection of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Within this context, the right-wing faction of IMRO emerged as one of

32 *Tselokupna Bŭlgaria*, Tarnovo, no. 1, June 20, 1879, 4.

33 See Kanchov, *Orohidrografia na Makedonia*.

34 *Ibid.*, 18.

35 *Ibid.*, 18.

36 Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties*; Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*.

37 Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties*; Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*.

the primary political forces leading the insurgency against the Ottoman Empire. They fought against the policies of Greece and Serbia, and actively promoted a sacral policy in Macedonia. Nearly all the founders of IMRO emerged from the Saints Cyril and Methodius School.³⁸ Hence, this group further constructed and reproduced narratives about the “Bulgarian” saints and the medieval imperial glory of the Bulgarian Empire in Macedonia. This process intensified after Bulgaria gained complete independence in 1908 and peaked in the Balkan Wars (1912–13). The holy and imperial imagery was also present in the mass media, where Bulgarian ruler Ferdinand was declared “emperor of the Bulgarians.” During the Balkan Wars, he framed his country’s war aims as “the sacred struggle of the cross against the crescent” and fought against Greece and Serbia over Macedonia in the Second Balkan War (1913).³⁹

Serbian Perception of Macedonia (1878–1913)

Prior to and during the Balkan Wars, Serbia asserted its own territorial claims over Macedonia, leading to conflicts with the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria, and, to a lesser extent, Greece. Similar to Bulgaria, Serbia’s policy towards the Ottoman territories was founded on the notion of medieval imperial grandeur, with a particular focus on the medieval Serbian Empire (1346–1371). In the Serbian imagination, Ottoman-controlled Macedonia held great significance as the core of the former Serbian Empire. This empire was established by Tsar Dušan the Mighty, and its capital was Skopje (today the capital of North Macedonia). He was credited as the ruler who established a strong empire that covered the largest part of the Balkan Peninsula. Indeed, following the collapse of the Serbian Empire in the fourteenth century, its territories came under Ottoman rule in the fifteenth century. However, in the early nineteenth century, Serbia experienced two significant uprisings against Ottoman rule: the First Serbian Uprising in 1804 and the Second Serbian Uprising in 1815. These uprisings were pivotal events that sparked a resurgence of Serbian national consciousness and cultural revival. The Serbian intellectuals of that time embraced and constructed a narrative of medieval imperial glory, drawing

³⁸ The following individuals studied or were teachers at the Saints Cyril and Methodius School: Gotse Delchev, Dame Gruev, Todor Aleksandrov, Andrey Lyapchev, Ivan Mihailov, Petar Darvingov, and Anton Ketskarov. See Hacısalihoglu, *Die Jungtürken*.

³⁹ Adanir, “Ethnonationalism,” 14.

inspiration from the legacy of the Serbian Empire. They sought to revive the memory of the former empire and its cultural and political achievements as a means of fostering national identity and mobilizing support for the struggle against Ottoman rule. These uprisings served as catalysts for the construction and promotion of a sense of historical continuity and a renewed connection to the medieval Serbian Empire. In this sense, Ilija Garašanin (1812–1844), a statesman and inventor of Greater Serbia (Velika Srbija), in his well-known book *Načertanije* (The draft) from 1844, wanted to achieve this revival of the Serbian state and Serbdom in such a manner that it could not be said that the Serbs demanded something they had never had. Accordingly, the medieval Serbian state was the mold on which its modern counterpart would be built. Consequently, the aspiration to build a new Serbian Empire, as articulated by Garašanin, necessitated the “clearing of ruins and the establishment stable historical basis.”⁴⁰ Serbian intellectuals ascribed a national significance to these local uprisings of 1804 and 1815, despite being local rather than national events.⁴¹ Simultaneously, these intellectuals crafted a narrative regarding Serbdom in Ottoman Macedonia, aiming to solidify Serbian cultural and national presence in the region. Furthermore, a series of internal rebellions in the Ottoman Empire, followed by the territorial loss of some of the empire’s provinces like Greece (independent as of 1830) and Serbia (autonomous as of 1835), enabled many Serbs to develop cultural and national activities in the Habsburg and Ottoman provinces—more precisely, in Macedonia. Thus, Serbian intellectuals had already established a national foundation (Matica Srpska), founded in Pest in 1826 and later moved to Novi Sad in the Habsburg Empire. In this regard, cities like Vienna, Budapest, and Novi Sad had become sanctuaries for the promotion of Serbian national culture and Serbian nationalism. However, these ideas did not remain only on the side of the Danube in the Habsburg Empire.⁴² The notion of a shared national identity extended to other Ottoman provinces where the local population spoke South Slavic languages. Indeed, the perception of speaking the same language as other South Slavic “brothers” began to differentiate among Bulgarians in the late 1860s. This divergence became

40 Slijepčević, *The Macedonian Question*, 146; Sisic, *Jugoslovenska misao*, 91–92.

41 On the Serbian uprisings and Serbian history, see Zundhausen, *Istorija Srbije*. Holm Zundhausen argues that “it is more appropriate to speak of peasant uprisings than of a revolution.” See Zundhausen, *Istorija Srbije*, 76. Phillip Longworth does not share the same thought that nationalism played a significant role in these events. Longworth, *Making of Eastern Europe*, 176–77.

42 Longworth, *Making of Eastern Europe*, 176–77.

even more pronounced after Serbia gained independence at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, leading to conflicts between Serbia and Bulgarian national movements in Ottoman Macedonia. The emergence of distinct national identities and aspirations among Bulgarians and Serbs contributed to the growing tensions between the two groups. While there had previously been a sense of potential linguistic and cultural unity, the divergent national movements and the territorial ambitions of Serbia and Bulgaria in Ottoman Macedonia created a rift between them. This clash of interests and competing national movements further exacerbated the differentiation between Bulgarians and Serbs, leading to heightened conflicts and rivalries in Ottoman Macedonia. The newly independent Serbian state sought territorial expansion in areas referred to as “Old Serbia” (“Stara Srbija”) and “Southern Serbia” (“Južna Srbija”).⁴³

Between the Congress of Berlin and the Balkan Wars, the Serbian state and its intellectuals tried in various ways to oppose the Bulgarian policy in Ottoman Macedonia, or Southern Serbia, as referred to by intellectuals. Jovan Ristić (1831–1899) was a Serbian diplomacy leader specializing in Macedonian issues. After being appointed in Istanbul in 1861, he became Prince Mihailo's close advisor on many issues related to Serbian foreign policy. As a member of the Society of Serbian Slavdom (Društvo Srpske Slovenosti), he was involved in promoting the Serbian language in the Ottoman Empire. During his time, the Department for Churches and Schools in Old Serbia (Odbor za Crkve i Škole u Staroj Srbiji)⁴⁴ was established (in 1868), intended to promote education in Serbian and preserve “the Orthodox faith in Old Serbia.”⁴⁵ Svetomir Nikolajević (1844–1922) was elected its first president. He was known for both his moderate views in response to the Greek claims in Macedonia and his harsh views against the Bulgarian developments in Ottoman Macedonia.⁴⁶ The members of this department established a journal titled *Bratstvo* (Brotherhood). Its first issue contains many texts about Southern Serbia, especially about cities such as Veles, Prilep, Ohrid, and Solun. This issue maintained that “Macedonia was conquered by the Bulgarians in the ninth century when Serb brothers

43 “Stara Srbija” was a term used mostly for Kosovo vilayet (latterly Kosovo). Južna Srbija was a term used mostly for the Manastir and Selanik vilayets (latterly Macedonia).

44 Nedeljković, *Delovanje Odbora*.

45 Ibid. See the original quote: “sačuvanje pravoslavlja u Staroj Srbiji.”

46 Notes about Svetomir Nikolajević: “Jedan je od osnivača Radikalne stranke, Društva Svetog Save i beogradske masonske lože ‘Pobratim,’ Rektor je Velike škole između 1888–1890.” See Vojvodić and Milorad, *Društvo Svetog Save*.

began a clash among themselves.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the city of Prilep was glorified: “[T]here is probably no Serb who has not heard of Prilep, the home of Marko Kraljević, son of Vukašinov.”⁴⁸ *Bratstvo*’s first issue also discussed the “southern borders of Dušan’s empire” (“južne granice Dušanova carstva”), that is, of the Serbian Tsardom during the time of Tsar Dušan the Mighty. It claimed that “Macedonia belong[ed] to an old Serb glory of the Serbian state,” therefore the text was promoting a “geographic and ethnological survey in Macedonia and Old Serbia.”⁴⁹ The publication also included a map depicting Macedonia as an old Serbian territory.⁵⁰ The aim was to emphasize that “Macedonians [did] not have anything to do with the Greeks. Macedonians are not of Greek origin. Macedonians speak the Serbian language and celebrate Serbian heroes, kings, and tsars.”⁵¹ This first issue also included a poem known as a Serbian folk poem, which was dedicated to Saint Sava, a “religious protector of all Serbs.”⁵² It is worth mentioning that *Bratstvo*’s editor, Jovan Hadži-Vasiljević (1866–1948), was a prominent Serbian historian, ethnographer, and secretary of the Society of Saint Sava who worked for the “national enlightenment of Serbs in the Ottoman Empire.”⁵³ As an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Serbian state, he served from 1898 to 1904 in Ottoman Macedonia in the cities of Bitola and Skopje. In a study based on the years he spent in this region, *Južna stara Srbija: Istorijska, etnografska i politička istraživanja* (Southern Old Serbia: Historical, ethnographic, and political research), Hadži-Vasiljević clearly stated that “Southern Old Serbia was the nucleus of Serbian state life in the medieval ages.”⁵⁴ Accordingly, the medieval Serbian Tsardom was a nucleus for the further imagination of Ottoman Macedonia as part of the Serbian state.

This idea was also promoted in the Serbian educational system by the most prominent historian of that time, Ljubomir Kovačević (1848–1918).

47 *Bratstvo*, Kraljevska državna štamparija, 21: “koristeći se srpskom neslogom i pocepanošću (Bugari) osvojiše Mačedoniju i držase je do propasti bugarske države 971 godine.”

48 *Ibid.* See the original quote: “nema valjda Srbina, koji nije čuo za Prilep, prestonicu Marka Kraljevića, sina Vukašinova.”

49 *Ibid.*, 187.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, 189: “Macedonians [did] not have anything to do with the Greeks. Macedonians are not of Greek origin. Macedonians speak the Serbian language and celebrate Serbian heroes, kings, and tsars.”

52 *Bratstvo*, Kraljevska državna štamparija, 105, name of the text: “Sveti Sava—Analize pesme,” at http://www.lektire.me/prepricano/sveti-sava-analiza-pesme_669 (last accessed June 6, 2022).

53 Hadži-Vasiljević, *Južna stara Srbija*.

54 *Ibid.*, 7.

As an author of schoolbook texts, Kovačević glorified Serbian rulers such as tsar Dušan or Saint Sava from the Nemanjić dynasty, who established an autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church (1219) and became its first archbishop.⁵⁵ Kovačević glorified Serbian rulers such as tsar Dušan or Saint Sava from the Nemanjić dynasty, who established an autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church (1219) and became its first archbishop. In the 1830s, when Serbia became an autonomous state inside the Ottoman Empire, Saint Sava became the patron saint of Serbia, Serbs, and Serbian education. He “praised [Saint Sava] as the ‘Sun of Serbian Heaven’ [...], representing and reproducing powerful images of the national golden age, national reconciliation and unification, and/or martyrdom for the Church and the nation.”⁵⁶ Hence, the rulers were used to support “direct competition with the national projects of neighbors.”⁵⁷ Generally, in this context, the religion became nationalized, nations were sacralized, and national heroes were perceived as secular saints who fought for the Serbian nation protected by Saint Sava. In his honor, the Saint Sava Society (*Društvo Sveti Sava*) was established in Belgrade in 1886, which was particularly active in Macedonia. According to Stefan Rohdewald, the rivalry between Bulgaria and Serbia over Macedonia was not only a territorial contest but also a competition over the national identity of local groups, with religious figures of memory playing a crucial role.⁵⁸ Both countries sought to assert their claims over the region by emphasizing the significance of revered saints and historical figures. The Serbian government, for instance, focused on the veneration of figures like Saint Sava, while Bulgarian intellectuals and clerics emphasized the importance of Saints Cyril and Methodius. These religious figures became symbols of national identity and were invoked to legitimize territorial ambitions in Macedonia.⁵⁹ Additionally, the decline of the Ottoman Empire created an opportunity for the Balkan states to enhance their legitimacy by adopting imperialist narratives imbued with religious undertones. These narratives portrayed territorial conquests as a sacred mission, carried out in the name of saints and medieval tsars who were believed to have ruled by God’s will. Within these agendas, the Balkan policymakers stressed the crusade’s character as the struggle “for the realization of God’s justice by the sword brought by Christ the Savior.”⁶⁰ Hence, military victories in the

55 Kovačević and Jovanović, *Istorija srpskog*.

56 Aleksov, “Nationalism in Construction,” 47.

57 Ibid., 293.

58 Rohdewald, “Figures,” 290.

59 Adanir, “Ethnonationalism,” 14.

60 Konstantinova, “Political Propaganda,” 83–84.

Balkan Wars (1912–13) divided Ottoman Macedonia between the Balkan rival states (Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia), who dramatically expanded the territories and population.

Macedonia in the “Short” Twentieth Century

During the twentieth century, the Balkan states engaged in a struggle for control over Macedonia, dividing the Ottoman territories among themselves during the Balkan Wars (1912–13). However, Bulgarian policymakers strongly believed that they deserved a larger portion of the “Greek” and “Serbian” regions of Macedonia. Consequently, during the First World War, Bulgarian authorities aligned themselves with the Central Powers. With the assistance of the Habsburg and German Empires, they occupied the territory that corresponds to present-day North Macedonia. However, shortly after the war, the region came under Serbian rule as part of the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929). Despite being a union of various nationalities, the king of this new kingdom, Alexander I, was a former Serbian king. Maria Falina’s works emphasize the significance of religious politics and the involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church during his reign (1921–34) in the interwar period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.⁶¹ The Orthodox Church in the newly created kingdom insisted on the idea of *Svetosavlje* (the way of Saint Sava), a term originally coined by the circle surrounding Archbishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956), who was a Bishop in the Eparchy of Ohrid (1920–31) and the Eparchy of Ohrid and Bitola (1931–36) in today’s North Macedonia. He promoted the rapprochement between the church and Serbian society and was closely related to Dimitrije Ljotić (1891–1955), who established the fascist movement Zbor (United Militant Labour Organization). This distinctive ideology of *Svetosavlje* blurred the boundaries between religion and politics and insisted on the nationalization of religion and the sacralization of the nation.⁶² Just before the war, the Church promoted the sacred character of the nation and the Serbianization of Christianity, and tried to establish a tradition of connecting church and state in a “positive way.”⁶³ The Orthodox Church was not the only actor connecting religion

61 Falina, “Between ‘Clerical Fascism,’” 248; Falina, *Religion and Politics*.

62 Falina, “Between ‘Clerical Fascism,’” 248; Falina, *Religion and Politics*; Falina, “*Svetosavlje*,” 508; Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*, 473–94.

63 Falina, “Between ‘Clerical Fascism,’” 250.

and state; many politicians, like Prime Minister Nikola Pašić (1845–1926), paid attention to this “symbiosis” as well.

Throughout the First and Second World Wars, today’s territories of North Macedonia became a highly disputed region between Bulgaria and Serbia. The Bulgarian government insisted on their claim to rule over “Vardar Macedonia” (“North Macedonia”), which had been under Serbian control since 1913. Consequently, large parts of the region were occupied by Bulgarian troops in the 1940s with the assistance of Nazi Germany.⁶⁴ However, during the occupation in 1943, the Macedonian Communist Party and the People’s Liberation Army of Macedonia were established, working towards the liberation of Macedonia from the fascist Bulgarian government’s occupation. Eventually, the territory was fully liberated at the end of November 1945, coinciding with the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia. This territory, known at that time as the People’s Republic of Macedonia (and since 1963 the Socialist Republic of Macedonia) was then incorporated as a constituent state within Yugoslavia and remained part of it until its peaceful secession in 1991. During this forty-five-year period, the socialist authorities generally discouraged religious practices, although they acknowledged the autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in 1967. Just five years later, construction began on the largest Macedonian Orthodox church, Saint Clement of Ohrid, in the capital city of Skopje. In contrast, the Serbian Orthodox Church did not recognize the new national Macedonian Orthodox Church and blamed the socialist regime for inciting the schism.⁶⁵ The Macedonian Orthodox Church strategically utilized prominent figures like Saint Clement, as well as Saints Cyril and Methodius, to differentiate themselves from the Serbian Orthodox Church and the veneration of Saint Sava. As a result, Macedonian churches refer to themselves as *Svetiklimentova Crkva* (Church of Saint Clement), in contrast to the Serbian *Svetosavska* (Church of Saint Sava). In 1986, on the occasion of the eleven hundredth anniversary of Clement’s birth, Archbishop Gavril of Ohrid and Macedonia, along with the Holy Synod, expressed the following about Clement: “He has made us a worthy people, Slavic Israel, and Ohrid—Slavic Jerusalem.”⁶⁶ By presenting Macedonia as the “Slavic Israel” and Ohrid as the “Slavic Jerusalem,” the Macedonian Orthodox Church aimed to legitimize its religious, social, and political authority while countering the claims of

64 Opfer, *Im Schatten des Krieges*.

65 Perica, *Balkan Idols*, 12.

66 Rohdewald, “Beyond the Shadows,” 11. Source: *Vesnik na makedonskata pravoslavna crkva* 6 (1986), 167.

the Serbian Orthodox Church over (North) Macedonia. This sacralization of the land helped create a distinct Macedonian narrative, reinforced by figures like Gligorie Gogovski, the president of the Governing Council of the Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Gogovski emphasized Clement's "cultural" significance solely for the "Macedonian people."⁶⁷ The socialist regime, on one hand, supported the Macedonian Orthodox Church in shaping a strong national narrative from Skopje, also as a response to Bulgarian claims. Cyril, Methodius, and Clement, as revered religious figures, played significant roles in the process of sacralizing Macedonia and giving it a sacred character. Saint Clement, in particular, held a prominent position as the patron of Sofia University "Saint Kliment Ohridski" in Bulgaria since its establishment in 1904. Simultaneously, he became the patron saint of the city of Ohrid and the Macedonian Orthodox Church (now North Macedonia).⁶⁸ Similarly, Cyril and Methodius served as patrons of the National University in Skopje since 1949, while in Sofia, they were patrons of the National Library since its founding in 1878/79.⁶⁹ These examples illustrate how saints were utilized in public institutions to instrumentalize religion for nationalistic purposes. Politicians and religious leaders were actively involved in the process of nationalizing religion, utilizing various objects and spaces such as icons, churches, libraries, and the concept of Macedonia as an imagined territory to advance their nationalist agendas.

The Post-Socialist Period of (North) Macedonia

As socialist Yugoslavia dissolved, a religious revival known as the "return of God" emerged in the region. The newly formed states developed close associations with religious institutions and revived old nationalist ideologies. Unfortunately, this relationship contributed to escalating tensions and fostering animosity among Orthodox Serbs, Macedonians, Bulgarians, and Greeks within the Macedonian context. The conflicts that arose were nonmilitary in nature but were deeply rooted in the historical narratives from the late nineteenth century that had been previously mentioned. According to these actors, the newly established country of Macedonia could not gain full recognition because its historical heritage was claimed

67 Rohdewald, "Beyond the Shadows," 11. Mentioned in Gogovski, "Pozdraven govor na m-r Gligorie Gogovski," 15.

68 Rohdewald, "Beyond the Shadows," 12.

69 Ibid., 12.

by Greece, Bulgaria, or Serbia.⁷⁰ Hence, the states reinforced their glorious past of Macedonia, sacralizing history by denying the Macedonian language, church, education, and name. Although the country became a member of the United Nations in April 1993, due to a dispute with Greece over the name Macedonia, it was admitted under the provisional description of the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (abbreviated FYROM).” In the twenty-first century, FYROM faced two significant challenges. Firstly, it experienced internal conflict with its Albanian-speaking population, which was resolved through the Ohrid Agreement in 2001.⁷¹ This agreement aimed to address the rights and representation of the Albanian minority in the country. Secondly, there was a long-standing dispute over the name “Macedonia” with Greece, which hindered FYROM’s integration into the European Union (EU) and NATO until 2018. The dispute between Greece and FYROM emerged in 1991 when FYROM gained independence from Yugoslavia. Greece expressed concerns based on historical and irredentist considerations regarding the use of the name “Macedonia,” as many Greeks identify themselves as “descendants of ancient Macedonians,” including Alexander the Great. Greece contended that the use of the name Macedonia implied territorial claims over the Greek part of Macedonia, and it prohibited the use of the name by other countries. Consequently, Greek cultural heritage considered Macedonian history exclusively as part of Greek heritage. For many years, Greece and FYROM engaged in negotiations to resolve the name dispute, with the involvement of the United Nations. The culmination of these efforts was the signing of the Prespa Agreement in June 2018.⁷² As a result, FYROM renamed itself the “Republic of North Macedonia,” and this name change came into effect in February 2019. The agreement facilitated North Macedonia’s path towards Euro-Atlantic integration and led to its accession to NATO in March 2020.⁷³ The resolution of the name dispute and the country’s new official name marked a significant milestone for North Macedonia, enabling its closer integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions and fostering better bilateral relations between those two countries.

Since 2020, Bulgaria has utilized a veto policy to oppose the accession of North Macedonia into the EU. This has created a significant obstacle for North Macedonia’s EU integration aspirations. The disagreement between the two countries has reignited debates and tensions concerning historical

⁷⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁷¹ UNHCR, “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”

⁷² Hellenic Republic, “Final Agreement.”

⁷³ NATO, “North Macedonia.”

interpretations and cultural appropriations. The ongoing dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia extends beyond the issue of the country's name⁷⁴ and encompasses various contentious aspects, including identity, language, nationality, and even the veneration of saints.⁷⁵ During the nineteenth century, religious figures played a significant role in solidifying the concept of "imagined communities" and "imagined geographies" by nationalizing religious contexts within the framework of historicism. This process led to the perception of the nation as a sacred entity, elevated above others. Within Bulgarian and Macedonian national(istic) historiographies, saints continue to hold a prominent position. They are utilized as powerful symbols to convey the sacred nature of their respective nations, emphasizing their exceptional status within the broader context of secularization, the nationalization of religion, and the formation of "imagined communities."⁷⁶ Furthermore, the nationalization of Clement's memory was further promoted inside the Macedonian Orthodox Church in 2001 as part of "Patronal Celebrations," where the Metropolitan Cyril demanded, "that this day must be declared our national holiday, because of the greatness and importance of the epochal work of Saint Clement [*svetiklimentovo delo*]."⁷⁷ In addition to Saint Clement, Cyril and Methodius are also highly revered in Macedonia. However, unlike Saint Clement, they have not been elevated to the position of church patrons and leading national saints. Nonetheless, all of these religious figures serve as a counterforce against Bulgarian national narratives surrounding North Macedonia and the claims of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the Macedonian Orthodox Church, particularly in response to the influence of Saint Sava. As mentioned earlier, the Serbian state has sought to assert the influence of Saint Sava as a guardian figure over the region commonly referred to as Macedonia, which has been known as Southern Serbia in Serbian historiography since the late nineteenth century.⁷⁸ The Serbian Orthodox Church has also been engaged in a longstanding dispute regarding the full recognition of the Macedonian Church as an independent and autocephalous entity. During one of the annual events of the Academy of Saint Sava held in Skopje on January 28, 2019, Aleksandar Vulin, a former Serbian minister of defense, emphasized the idea that "where the Serbs live, Serbia is also present, and it will be a part of your lives."⁷⁹ His state-

74 Rohdewald, "Citizenship, Ethnicity, History."

75 Rohdewald, "Beyond the Shadows."

76 Rohdewald, "Figures," 288.

77 Ibid. Mentioned in Nikolovska, "Svečeno," 179.

78 Slijepčević, *The Macedonian Question*.

79 Republika Srbija Ministarstvo Spolnih Poslova, "Svetosavske svecanosti u Makedoniji."

ment underscored the importance of the population of North Macedonia for Serbian policy and highlighted the unifying role attributed to Saint Sava. Despite the protracted dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches, a significant development occurred on May 24, 2022, when the Serbian Orthodox Church officially recognized the autocephaly of the Macedonian Church. This recognition marked an important turning point in the relationship between the two churches and potentially opened new possibilities for dialogue and cooperation.⁸⁰

North Macedonia has made significant progress in addressing important issues related to its national interest. Firstly, it successfully reached an agreement with Greece in 2018 regarding its name, resolving a longstanding dispute. Secondly, in 2022, the Macedonian Orthodox Church reached an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding its independence. However, challenges persist regarding the interpretation and significance of religious figures like Saint Clement and Saints Cyril and Methodius, particularly in relation to Bulgarian policy and historiography.⁸¹ These issues continue to be points of contention that require further examination and negotiation. The debates surrounding historical and religious figures have been ongoing for theologians, sociologists, and historians since the late nineteenth century. In the context of North Macedonia, these figures continue to be subjects of intensified competition, particularly when it comes to defining the boundaries between the secular and the sacred. Despite criticisms from within North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and the EU, there have been no concrete measures taken to reconcile these different perspectives and present transnational or transregional approaches to history.⁸² Moreover, in EU documentation, the Bulgarian government has consistently advocated for the use of the term “official language of the Republic of North Macedonia” instead of “Macedonian language,” as they view the Macedonian language as “an evolution of the Bulgarian language.”⁸³

Conclusion

Since the late nineteenth century, Macedonia has been a region that has been the subject of competing claims by Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia

80 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Serbian Orthodox Church.”

81 Ljuljanovic, “Imagining Macedonia.”

82 Rohdewald, “Beyond the Shadows,” 14.

83 Government of Bulgaria, “Ramkova pozitsia.”

within the Ottoman Empire. These states sought to assert their political dominance over Ottoman Macedonia by nationalizing religion and sanctifying the nation as part of their respective identities. Bulgarian and Greek priests and intellectuals took a leading role in advocating for their nations in Ottoman Macedonia, promoting Christian saints as ethno-national figures. Although Cyril and Methodius were traditionally considered Slavonic or Christian rather than “national figures,” the Bulgarian (and latterly Macedonian) mnemonic actors incorporated them into the sacred figures of Bulgarian (and Macedonian) nationalism. As a response, the Serbian state reached out to create the Saint Sava Society (*Društvo Sveti Sava*) to forge a Serbian national consciousness through religious figures against the local Slavic-speaking population of Macedonia, who were bound somewhat to non-nationalist Orthodox religious practices. These proponents of nationalism clashed over competing nationalist policies, each envisioning Macedonia as an integral part of their future “greater state” and “nation.” Saints were instrumentalized to consolidate and legitimize these national agendas, leading to the nationalization of religion and the sacralization of the nation. As illustrated in this chapter, it was through the representation of saints that churches gained much of their significance as a political force and were able to impact the decision-making processes based at the state level directly. Once religion gained significance on the state level, politicians could leverage religious mobilization to achieve the sacralization of the nation. However, this process also resulted in the contestation of saints and historical interpretations that persist today. In this respect, in 2019 the Bulgarian government-imposed preconditions for North Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations, raising questions about the Macedonian nation’s connection to Bulgarian identity and whether the Macedonian language is a Bulgarian dialect. While Bulgarian nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries translated these Christian saints (such as Cyril and Methodius or Clement) into Bulgarian, their trans-ethnic role can be traced in a complex contact zone spanning Byzantium and the Bulgarian, Serbian, and Ottoman Empires. These Christian saints were venerated not only in Bulgarian territories but also among various local Christian populations in different parts of the Balkans, including Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians, Greeks, and even Christian Albanians. This ambiguity in the veneration of “Bulgarian” saints in a transnational context challenges Bulgarian historical interpretations of Macedonia and contradicts the Bulgarian government-imposed preconditions on North Macedonia’s access to the EU. Perhaps ironically, this study suggests that not only

“Bulgarian saints” but also cult figures like Saint Sava and Alexander the Great played significant roles in multiple transnational contexts rather than existing solely within a “national vacuum,” as suggested by state narratives and historiographies.

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8. Churches and Sacralization of Euromaidan Protest in Ukraine from a Post-Secular Perspective

Yuliya Yurchuk and Andriy Fert

Abstract: The chapter focuses on the memory of the people killed during the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine called the “Heavenly Hundred” and which has contributed to the sacralization of protests in the country. It argues that this narrative is formed as “post-secular sacred” which allows a sacralized representation of the victims as martyrs without giving them a canonical status of martyrs recognized by the Church. Such sacralization without canonization is possible because the established tradition to represent fighters for national freedom as martyrs and saints serves as a mold for the memory of the Heavenly Hundred. In addition, the present moment of the war shapes this memory as a matter of national security. It provides the memory with the sense of immediacy and urgency in which the questions of canonicity can be ignored.

Keywords: Ukraine, post-secular, Heavenly Hundred, Euromaidan protests, Revolution of Dignity, sacralization

The protests Metropolitan Epiphanius referred to took place from November 2013 through February 2014, later to become known as the “Revolution of Dignity” or “Euromaidan.” More than a hundred protestors were killed, and their memory was shaped into the narrative of the “Heavenly Hundred.” Their memory became a crucial symbol for legitimating a new deal between state authority and civil society. This memory was instantly framed as sacred, saturated with religious symbols, and dedicated to presenting the victims as martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the nation. Later, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas in the spring of 2014 contributed anti-Russian and anti-imperial sentiments to this memory, fostering patriotic mobilization.

Major Ukrainian churches became important actors in shaping the annual commemorative rituals that sacralize this memory. This chapter seeks to analyze how different Ukrainian churches developed the religious content of the cult of the Heavenly Hundred against the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian War (which started in 2014) in Donbas and the relapsing of national and religious identities. It focuses on the process of and making of martyrs, which includes (a) rituals of commemoration and narratives and (b) religious appropriation or invention of *lieux de mémoire*, or places of memory.

Specific attention is paid to the practices of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the OCU—including its predecessors, the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (UOAC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP)—given their active engagement in memory of the Heavenly Hundred. There are several reasons why an analysis of the role of other churches and religious groups in forming the memory of the Heavenly Hundred is not examined. First, there are limitations to the scope of this study, and, for practical reasons, this chapter focuses on the churches that are most intensely engaged in memory work. Second, another significant religious actor, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), sees the tendencies toward sacralization of the memory of the Heavenly Hundred as an iconoclasm, making it near impossible to analyze the sacralization processes.¹ Other religious groups, including Jewish and Muslim, could not be considered part of the analysis for methodological reasons, as these religions have different mnemonic traditions that would be difficult to compare to the Christian mnemonic tradition of martyrdom.

The period on which this chapter is focused is between 2014 and 2020. Additionally discussed will be instances of commemoration shaped by actors who do not represent any specific church yet actively use religion to form the memory of the Heavenly Hundred. The argument will be raised that the memory of the Heavenly Hundred is constructed under the strong influence of the cult of the New Martyrs, which allows a sacralized representation of the people killed during the protests as martyrs, even though they are not recognized as such officially.

This chapter follows the understanding of “sacralization” proposed by Johannes Paulmann, who applied Lynch’s definition of sacralization “as a process in which things and ideas are declared or experienced as unavailable,

1 See Golovko, “Antikhristianskoie bogoslovie uniatov”; Volga, “Ukrainskiy neonatsionalizm”; Religiino-informatsiina sluzba Ukraini, “Mediakesurs.”

non-negotiable, and meaning-giving, having community-founding as well as norm-giving effects.”² By “canonization,” we mean the official granting of a special (canonical) status to some texts or saints/martyrs, which are thus officially recognized as genuine and authentic.³ Canonization is a standard procedure in Catholic and Orthodox Churches through which a person is recognized as a saint or a martyr. Sacralization is a process in which secular actors imbue sacred meanings on secular events or people. In the religious sense, canonization is always connected to the ecclesiastical sphere. Only through canonization do some people become recognized by the church as martyrs and saints. This chapter deals with a specific kind of sacralization: sacralization promoted by the churches without official canonization. Thus, even if the Heavenly Hundred are presented by the church as martyrs, this status remains purely symbolic

Sacralization without canonization, which we witness in the case of the memory of the Heavenly Hundred, is possible due to two factors. First, the established tradition of representing fighters for national freedom as martyrs and saints serves as a mold for the memory of the Heavenly Hundred; second, the Russian war against Ukraine shapes this memory as a matter of security. Therefore it provides the memory with a sense of immediacy and urgency in which the questions of canonicity can be ignored. Such a specific way of remembering is a product of an exceptional historical condition of post-secularity, which is part and parcel of postmodernity that allows, and indeed exacerbates, fragmentation and fluidity of memory. In this, we see a clear difference between the sacralization of secular martyrs in previous historical epochs and the present.

The central hypothesis presented here is that the churches in question attempt to give religious meaning to the Heavenly Hundred narrative by linking it to the martyr cults that already exist in society and by situating this narrative within the broader context of the Ukrainian nation’s centuries-long anti-imperial struggle. In fact, historically, the introduction of new martyrs by a church was often a response to societal, political, interreligious, or interconfessional tensions and conflicts.⁴

A constructivist approach to martyrdom, as elaborated by Elizabeth Castelli, will be applied throughout the chapter. This argues that martyrs are produced not by the lived experience of particular historical individuals

2 Paulmann, “Sacralization.”

3 Van der Kooij and Van der Toorn, *Canonization*.

4 Krischer, “Eine Sakralisierung”; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs*; Tannous, *Making*.

who are venerated as martyrs but by the stories later told about them.⁵ These stories become a “usable past” for the communities that reactualize and align with them, depending on the purposes of the present. Moreover, martyrdom is constructed not only through stories but also through different kinds of performative actions and material and visual representations.

This study contributes to the discussion surrounding secular and the sacred in memory studies, bringing to the foreground the role of churches in memory production.⁶

Secular Martyrs

Researchers use the term “secular martyr” to refer to secular actors, such as intellectuals, the media, or the state, that appropriate the religious discourse of martyrdom. Martyrdom was previously inseparable from faith and was associated mainly with the church. The gradual transfer of this concept to the secular domain took place during modern times, particularly under the influence of nationalism and Romanticism, which blurred the line between the concepts of “hero,” “saint,” and “martyr.” Framing the emerging idea of the nation in religious metaphors and dichotomies as a community of faith, the Romantics appropriated the concept of “martyr” from religion to stress the commitment of the people whom they defined as national heroes to the service of and sacrifice for the nation. These tendencies toward the sacralization of secular martyrs could be traced both in the west and in the east of Europe.⁷

In Ukraine, as Uilleam Blacker explains, “the image of the martyr can be found at the beginning of the modern Ukrainian national project, in the writing of the Romantic writers and activists of the mid-19th century.”⁸ The first secular martyrs conceived by these writers were the Ukrainian Cossacks—free warriors who lived on the frontier between Poland, Muscovy, and the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries—whom the Romantic discourse represented as a “Christian brotherhood of equals”

5 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*.

6 Bogumił and Yurchuk, *Memory and Religion*; Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*; Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*; Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*; Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*.

7 Berezhnaya, *Die Militarisierung*; Schröer, “Helden”; Qutram and Laybourn, *Secular Martyrdom*; Krischer, “Eine Sakralisierung”; Schulze Wessel, *Nationalisierung*.

8 Blacker, “Martyrdom,” 257

that suffered “torments” for the national cause.⁹ Later, the oppression of the Ukrainian language and culture in the Russian Empire turned the Romantic writers themselves into martyrs, particularly the poet Taras Shevchenko.¹⁰ In all these instances, it was not a religious authority that initiated the sacralization of martyrs; it was the intellectuals who borrowed the language of religion for what Bellah called “civil religion,” in which national heroes took the places of the Christian martyrs and saints.¹¹ However, in the process of this research, the opposite can be witnessed: it is the churches that are the main actors in the sacralization of the Heavenly Hundred. Paradoxically, even though the churches participate in the sacralization, they do not recognize the Heavenly Hundred as official martyrs.

Regarding the differences between the national-Romantic creation of the secular martyrs and the present, this study is positioned within the postmodern epistemological tradition and refers to post-secularity as a condition that influences how churches participate in the sacralization of secular martyrs. In our understanding of the relation between postmodernity and post-secularity, we follow the line of thinking presented by Gianni Vattimo, who argued that in postmodernity, we entered an era in which Christianity did not need to lead a polemic with rationalism and the Enlightenment.¹² This perspective reveals that the church is reflexive of its position in the larger world, where Christianity can “see itself as merely an internal element in the conflict among cultures, religions, and world views.”¹³ Per-Arne Bodin argues that as a result of such (self-)reflexivity, the church works with the postmodern fragmentation of meta-narratives in its own way: it combines genres and styles, asks questions of authenticity, repudiates grand narratives, and opens itself to alternative interpretations.¹⁴ As this chapter will show, this is exactly what these new hybrid forms of memory are, which are created as a result of sacralization: they are neither entirely religious (even if promoted by the church) nor secular (even if the main objects of sacralization are a nation and national heroes). That is why we use the hybrid term “post-secular sacred” to emphasize the fluid and fragmented nature of sacralization, which is a part of fluid and fragmented memory.

9 Blacker, “Martyrdom,” 261.

10 Blacker, “Martyrdom,” 260–61; Yekelchuk, “Creating a Sacred Place.”

11 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”; see also Krischer, “Eine Sakralisierung.”

12 Vattimo, *After Christianity*.

13 Ibid., 98.

14 Bodin, *Language*, 16.

Post-Secular Sacred: Sainthood and Martyrdom beyond Canonization

Post-secularity is characterized here in accordance with scholars who propose that it is the “intertwining” of the secular and the religious in new ways.¹⁵ Not only is the widely shared agreement on a “return of religion” to modern societies emphasized but also the “return of secular” into the religious sphere (or rather its persistent existence in society).¹⁶ Following Asad’s conceptualization of post-secularity, this study accepts the idea that there has never been any lineal development from the time of religion to the time of post-secularism.¹⁷ It is acknowledged that religious actors often shaped and disseminated the historical myths that have served until now as sites of memory.¹⁸ The churches’ engagement in memory projects that we analyze vividly demonstrates that the lines between the religious and the sacred are largely blurred. The churches not only legitimize the national as sacred but also nationalize the sacred.

Churches play a significant role in producing the post-secular sacred by inducing the sacred status of the saints and martyrs on the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred in the public commemorative space without canonizing them. As a result, the post-secular sacred exists within churches and is (co-) produced as both secular and sacred at the same time.

Securitization of Memory and the War Context

In the period of military conflict in the east of Ukraine, the memory of the Heavenly Hundred was framed as a matter of security. Since 2014, against the background of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the intensification of the securitization of history, whereby history is framed as a matter of national security, can be witnessed.¹⁹ Scholars also illustrate that religion becomes securitized in such contexts.²⁰ In this case, securitization gives memory work and religious engagement a sense of immediacy and urgency, allowing questions surrounding canonicity to be ignored. As a result, heroes of the

15 Molendijk, “In Pursuit of the Postsecular,” 110.

16 Cf. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*.

17 Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.

18 Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher, *Rampart Nations*.

19 Yurchuk, “Historians as Activists.”

20 Shestopalets, “Church as an Existential Threat.”

Heavenly Hundred can be commemorated as martyrs and saints by the churches without being canonized.

The existential nature of the threat allows the legitimization of extraordinary measures against them.²¹ This approach allows analysis to move beyond the traditional understanding of security in military terms. Applying the securitization theory does not deny the emergency of the situation in Ukraine, which faces a fully-fledged Russian military invasion. But as this study is not analyzing the role of the churches in the war, it seems appropriate to use the tools presented by the theory in this analysis of discourses and practices concerning memory.²²

From Spontaneous to Organized Memory

The commemoration of the victims of Euromaidan began immediately after the first victims were killed. These commemorations were spontaneous and had religious elements: people used crosses, icons, and candles to commemorate the places protestors were slaughtered. Such religious symbols are a common feature of spontaneous shrines; people across cultures tend to refer to their religious repertoire when faced with death, tragedies, and catastrophes.²³ The more organized commemorations followed almost immediately, and churches of different confessions were among the first actors to overlook these commemorations.²⁴

On February 24, 2014, four days after the mass shooting at the Euromaidan stopped, the Supreme Council of Ukraine (the Ukrainian parliament) adopted Decree no. 774-VII, "On the commemoration of the participants of the armed conflicts during the peaceful protests." The decree included a proposal to posthumously grant Orders of Heroes of Ukraine to the protestors killed during the Revolution. On June 26, 2014, the president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, made a proposition to the

21 See Buzan, *People*, 23–24.

22 According to securitization theory, security relates not only to the survival of the state but also of the group identity. To a certain degree, the securitization of the memory of the Heavenly Hundred by the churches goes in line with the "securitization" trends which already exist and function in society because of the war. In the Ukrainian context, the securitization of the past could be best seen when the decommunization laws were adopted in 2015. These laws frame historical narratives as the questions of security (Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk, "Memory Politics").

23 Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*.

24 Fylypovych and Horhusha, *Maidan i Tserkva*; Yekelchuk, "Heavenly Hundred." <AU: Not in References>

parliament to establish an Order of the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred. Its purpose was to distinguish people for their civil courage, patriotism, and protection of democratic values during the Revolution of Dignity and other events related to the protection of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The relevant legislation was passed by the parliament in July 2014. Following these developments, ninety-nine victims of the Euromaidan were awarded the Order of Heroes of Ukraine (as only Ukrainian citizens could be awarded this order, other victims received the Order of Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred).

By presidential order, November 21 was established as the “Day of Dignity and Freedom.” February 20 was appointed the “Day of Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred.” On October 15, 2014, the Ministry of Culture registered as a historical heritage of Ukraine “the site of the battle and mass killing of the citizens” on Hrushevs’koho and Instytuts’ka Streets in Kyiv. The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance took an active role in the formation and promotion of the memory of the victims of the Euromaidan: they launched the oral history project and curated the memory work on the “territory of dignity”—the space where the protests took place and where the victims were killed. This work culminated in the establishment of the Museum of Dignity in Kyiv.

The UOC-KP also granted the Medal “For Sacrifice and Love for Ukraine” to all 106 heroes of the Heavenly Hundred. The UOC-KP (and, since 2019, the OCU) also holds a special service in the cathedral of St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Monastery, the main cathedral of this church, which, as will be discussed further, has played a central role since the beginning of the protests.

Several main tendencies can be distinguished that influenced the formation of the memory of the Heavenly Hundred:

1. The name “Heavenly Hundred” itself gestures to two distinct directions in memory formation: “heavenly” links the memory to the religious sphere, and “hundred” (a squadron) to a previously established memory node of the wartime nationalist movement (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists [OUN] and the partisan group it formed, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army [UPA]), which operated in *sotni* (squadrons).
2. The active role of the churches in commemoration of the victims.
3. The active participation of state and nonstate actors in the formation and promotion of the memory of the protestors.

Topography of Memory of the Heavenly Hundred

The scholar of memory James Young drew attention to the significance of the space around monuments:

A monument becomes a point of reference amid other parts of the landscape, one node among others in a topographical matrix that orients the rememberer and creates meaning in both the land and our recollections. For, like a narrative, which places events in chronological order, the memorial places events in some cognitive order. [...] It is still perceived in the midst of its geography, in some relation to other nearby landmarks.²⁵

If we take a bird's-eye perspective over the space of memory created by the killing of the protestors, we can clearly see that this memory is inscribed into the geographical landscape. It forms a specific space of memory that existed long before the formation of the new memory node of the Heavenly Hundred. We can distinguish the "topographical matrix" of this space by taking notice of all the elements that form it.

In relation to the geographical location, the commemorative objects dedicated to the victims of Euromaidan are situated in a well-defined space that resembles a triangular form that crosses the central part of the city. It is virtually impossible to visit the city and not see these monuments. From north to south, the triangle's longest side connects the historical district of Podil through the famous Kyiv hills over the Dnipro River to the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (Kyiv Monastery of the Caves). The shortest side of the triangle connects the oldest Christian church in Ukraine, Sofia Cathedral, with Podil in the north and Kyiv Pechersk Lavra to the east.

Upon closer inspection of the architectural and memorial objects enclosed within this triangular space, one can observe the history and memory of the Heavenly Hundred that are contained within it. It is part of Instytuts'ka Street, where in February 2014 the main conflict between protestors and security forces occurred, and the geographic location where the greatest number of protestors were killed. Here, the commemoration of the victims started first with the public burial services for the first victims of Maidan. Then, when the protests finished, this street became the first place where the spontaneous remembrance began.

As stated above, the streets within the closest vicinity to Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Instytuts'ka and Hrushevs'koho Streets, were listed by the

²⁵ Young, *Texture of Memory*, 7.



Fig. 8.1. Topography of Memory of the Heavenly Hundred. Collage created by Daria Anfalova, August, 2021.

Ministry of Culture in the official register of historical heritage sites several months after the protests. It is worth noting that the Greek Catholic Church was the first institutional actor to take care of the commemorative space and erect the cross on the site of the mass shootings. The priests of all confessions often create a framework for remembering in the space, otherwise ruled by chaos and a sense of loss. However, in the end, the Greek Catholic theological seminary erected the Ecumenical Church of Archangel Michael and the New Martyrs of Ukraine in this place in memory of the Heavenly Hundred.

To the north of the imaginary triangular space is the abovementioned St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery. It is famous for opening its gates to protestors in the autumn of 2013. Later, it became a refuge and hospital for the wounded. To commemorate the victims and the role of the monastery in these events, the church transformed its monastery walls into a monument of memory for Euromaidan protestors and the soldiers who died during the war in Donbas—adding up to the already existing memorial of 1932–33 famine

victims standing near the monastery bell tower. Every month, the OCU conducts a *panakhyda* (a special service for the dead) to commemorate the soldiers and all those “who died for Ukraine” in front of this Wall of Memory. It should be noted that St. Michael’s monastery and the Ecumenical Chapel on Instytuts’ka Street host several ceremonies every year to commemorate the Heavenly Hundred, organized by the state authorities. Several memorial processions (organized by churches and nonchurch actors) take place every year from St. Michael to the Ecumenical Chapel.

At the top of the triangle is the Church of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Ukraine (founded by the Autocephalous Church in 1997, now OCU). On the opposite side, at the bottom of the triangle, there are St. Sofia Cathedral and Kyiv Pechersk Lavra. On the respective lines of our imaginary triangle, we can see the main memorial sites dedicated to the Heavenly Hundred: the Heavenly Hundred Square (near St. Sophia Cathedral) and St. Nicholas Church in Askold’s Grave historical park, which is dedicated to the Heroes of Ukraine, including the Heavenly Hundred. To the south of Instytuts’ka, near Askold’s Grave, the UGCC built the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Chapel in 2019. This chapel is a unique case, as the UGCC church in Askold’s Grave in Kyiv has long represented itself as a national memorial. In the churchyard, one may find the graves of Ukrainian soldiers who fought against the Bolsheviks in 1918 in the Battle of Kruty, an essential node of memory in Ukraine that was activated during the protests in 2014 because it symbolized the fight for independence by the young people devoted to the idea of freedom.²⁶ Near St. Nicholas Church is the monument to the Heroes of Kruty. This monument also has a pronounced religious character as it is shaped in the form of a cross. In such a way, we can see that the secular memory of the “national liberation struggle” is entwined in the religious texture of memory, making it impossible to say which form prevails over the other.

After the Revolution of Dignity, Askold’s Grave again became a burial place. First, there was the burial of the unidentified protestor who died in a fire on the Maidan. Then, as the war unfolded, several soldiers killed in the east of the country were also buried there. Over 2018–19, the church’s rector, Father Ihor Onyshkevych, had been looking for the proper way to honor the victims and came up with the idea to establish a chapel in the bell tower of his parish and dedicate it to the “Ukrainian Heroes and Exaltation of the Cross.” With the advent of a full-scale war, the chapel has become a

26 Yurchuk, *Reordering*.

site of ecclesiastical farewell for the fallen soldiers. However, this time, the burials usually take place elsewhere.²⁷

Moving further through the space, visitors come to a special memorial dedicated to the Holodomor, which is reflected in the following monuments: the monument to the victims of the Holodomor near St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery; the monument of a girl with an apple symbolizing the Holodomor near the National Holodomor Memorial; and the Holodomor Memorial, whose museum and main building are shaped like a lit candle. It should be noted that the monuments to the Holodomor also have pronounced religious features that position the Holodomor as a sacred space of memory.²⁸ In the same space, there are also monuments to Christianity: the nineteenth-century St. Volodymyr Monument commemorating the Christianization of Kyivan Rus', and the relatively recent monumental sign dedicated to the thousandth anniversary of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus' erected by the UOC-MP.

Overall, the Heavenly Hundred's memory is immersed in an already established texture of memory, with articulated national and religious features. The churches either repurposed (St. Michael Church in Askold's Grave historical park) or appropriated (the Ecumenical Chapel) space to commemorate the Heavenly Hundred. The Holodomor, Christianity, and "national liberation struggle" are the nodes of memory that form the network into which the memory of the Heavenly Hundred is woven. Both religious and secular elements of this memory reinforce each other and shape distinct forms of remembrance, which we commonly refer to as "post-secular sacred." In these commemorations, the sacrifice for the nation is highlighted. And this secular cause is a sufficient reason for the churches to serve *panakhydas* and have annual commemoration services and processions on specific days.

Discursive Sacralization

The memory of the Heavenly Hundred is sacralized through the official discourses of both the OCU and the UGCC. In the following subchapter, an analysis of the speeches and sermons of religious leaders will be presented. Their sacralizing discourses are actualized on the days of memory connected to the Euromaidan events, such as the Day of Dignity and Freedom (November 21) and the Day of the Heavenly Hundred (February 20). Importantly,

²⁷ See, e.g., *Suspil'ne Novyny*, "U Kyievi poproshchalsia."

²⁸ Kudela-Swiatek, *Eternal Memory*.

November 21 is rooted in religious tradition as it is a day honoring the memory of St. Michael, the patron saint of Kyiv.²⁹ Here we have distinguished four main themes employed in the discourses of the churches in their commemorations of the victims of the Euromaidan: the Heavenly Hundred as martyrs; parallels to the past; communism and Russian aggression as forces of evil; and, finally, a renewed Ukraine.

The Heavenly Hundred as Martyrs

On the discursive level, the UGCC is the most active proponent of the Heavenly Hundred as new martyrs. On the first anniversary of the protests, the head of the UGCC, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, drew similarities between the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred and “Christian martyrs of the first centuries [who] with their pure souls transformed their lives into a pure sacrifice.”³⁰ Furthermore, the head of the UGCC continued his speech by relating the memory of the Heavenly Hundred with the memory of the victims of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in Ukraine, placing them together in the space of martyrdom and sacrifice. In this way, the sacrifice of the first Christians in the name of the faith is equal to the sacrifice in the nation’s name. To some degree, the fate of the Church is equal to the fate of the nation. When the boundary between the nation and the Church disappears, the sacrifice for the nation can also be equated to the sacrifice for the Church and the faith.

Although the formal requirements of martyrdom and sainthood in the religious sphere remain strictly limited to the sacrifice for faith, in the current circumstances, martyrdom is presented on the borderline between the secular and the sacred: the mere fact that the victims’ memory is addressed by the head of the Church lends the memory an aura of sacredness, rendering questions about the official status of martyrdom obsolete.

Parallels to the Past: The “National Liberation Struggle” and Church History

In his sermons dedicated to the Heavenly Hundred, the archbishop drew parallels between the Church and the *kryivka* (bunkers) associated with the history of the nationalist underground of the twentieth century.³¹

29 Berezhnaya, *Die Militarisierung*, 53–54.

30 Sviatoslav, “Propovid’ Blazhennishoho Sviatoslava pid chas nichnyh chuvan.”

31 Ibid. In Ukraine, there is a certain trend in remembrance culture where the underground struggle of the OUN and UPA is celebrated in cafés stylized as *kryivka* (bunkers). Such “bunker cafés” can be found in Lviv and Rivne. In addition, memorial places dedicated to the UPA’s history also feature bunkers as central elements, e.g., the memorial dedicated to the Battle of

This parallel to the bunker also has implications for the history of the UGCC, as the Church's underground services during Soviet times were often referred to as the "catacomb church," drawing parallels to the emergence of Christianity in the Roman Empire. In such a way, we can see how the Church and national history are connected through the shared memory nodes of bunkers and catacombs. The bunker leads to further connotations about the war and the need to hide from the enemies. It makes one think about the threats and search for safety. In this way, we can see how these parallels to history are also connected to the threats of the present, and the sacralization of the Heavenly Hundred becomes a part of the securitizing discourse.

On another occasion, the archbishop mentioned the Cossacks who "set grounds for our [Ukrainian] statehood," which the soldiers "of the national liberation struggle" have to fight for in the present.³² Here, too, we see the parallels between attempts to gain independence in 1917 and the UPA, as the mere wording "the national liberation struggle" is usually connected to these movements in Ukrainian historiography and memory culture.

The head of the UOC-KP, Patriarch Filaret (Denysenko), also drew parallels to the Cossacks and the Battle of Kruty when describing the Heavenly Hundred: "I believe that this feat [the actions of protestors on the Maidan] will inspire generations and generations of Ukrainians, in the same way that we are inspired by the feats of the Cossacks and sacrifice of the heroes of Kruty."³³ Thus, we can see that discursively the Church actors draw parallels to the Cossacks and to the national liberation movement in a similar way as it is done in the topography of memory discussed above. We see the same elements of Ukrainian history: Kruty, Cossacks, and the national liberation struggle. Remarkably, all these elements are secular; they are not connected to religion, but referred to by both heads of the churches that acquire a sacred status in which the history itself becomes a part of the sacred.

The Communist Past and Russian Aggression as Forces of Evil

In the speeches of the heads of the churches, the communist past and the contemporary Russian aggression against Ukraine are described as the main forces of evil. Archbishop Sviatoslav, for instance, equates the "entire

Gurby in 1944 (one of the biggest battles between the UPA and NKVD forces). On the role of *kryivka* in the memory space of the "national liberation struggle," see Yurchuk, *Reordering*.

32 Sviatoslav, "Propovid' Blazhennishoho Sviatoslava z nahody sviata Pokrovy."

33 Filaret, "Peredmov."

communist camp” with “the dark forces” when speaking about the time when Karol Wojtyła was elected pope in 1978.³⁴

Patriarch Filaret also drew parallels between the communist past and Russian aggression in the present when he lamented that the mere existence of the Ukrainian state was under threat, underlining the importance of the fight against the aggression, where the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred set a good example for others to follow: “Now we are also going through challenges: are we worth having a Ukrainian state and be free, or will we again end up in the Russian yoke?”³⁵

Noteworthy, when the protests against the rigged election results started in Belarus in the summer of 2020, the head of the UGCC drew parallels between the Ukrainian struggle for freedom and dignity, framing the totalitarian past as the main enemy in this struggle and the Ukrainian people as setting an example of how to fight this enemy:

The Ukrainian people that in the new times continue fighting for, protecting, and strengthening their freedom and dignity, know as no one else does how difficult and complicated it is to get fully cleansed of the totalitarian past and to live in the freedom as God’s children, freely and responsibly developing their civic world and dedicated to the life of the state.³⁶

In these discourses, the totalitarian past is equated with the Russian aggression of the present. Securitization becomes the leading principle in explaining the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, framed as a contest between good and evil. The suppressed position of the Church in Soviet times strengthened the image of the conflict as not only political but also metaphysical and ecclesiastical.

Heroes and a Renewed Ukraine

Remarkably, in the dialogues of the church leaders, Ukraine gains a special, even messianic, role in the fight for freedom and justice in the world. We have already seen it in the example of the reaction to the protests in Belarus. The most active proponent of this theme is the head of the UGCC. In his sermon, Archbishop Sviatoslav explicitly declared that “the blood of the martyrs [which] was spilled on the Maidan” showed that the fate of the world,

34 Sviatoslav, “Propovid’ Blazhennishoho pid chas nichnyh chuvan.”

35 Filaret, “Zvernennia Patriarkha Filareta.”

36 Sviatoslav, “Zaklyk Blazhennishoho Sviatoslava do syniv i dochok Ukraïns’koi Greko-Katolyts’koi Tserkvy do molytvy za Bilorus’kyi narod.”

especially of Eastern Europe, depends on Ukraine.³⁷ The focus on dignity and a renewed Ukraine becomes most prominent in this theme. By 2013, the archbishop was already positing dignity as the main feature reflected in contemporary Ukrainian societal life by the events on Maidan.³⁸ Dignity became the attribute in naming the protests: the Revolution of Dignity.

The concept of dignity was used as an example to future generations and contemporaries who support the cause of the new Ukraine. The emphasis on renewal and novel development of society, thanks to the dignity demonstrated by this society, became one of the most prominent features in the speeches of Archbishop Sviatoslav. In one of his speeches, he emphasized that the sacrifice of the people who had given their lives for Ukraine “will become a cornerstone of our renewed free and independent Ukraine” and set an “example for the generations of new Ukrainians” about “love and patriotism—everything that is the brightest and the best in the human soul.”³⁹

As we can clearly see from these discourses, it is not the questions of faith that the church leaders raise. It is patriotism and sacrifice for the nation that stand at the center of martyrdom. Love of the motherland makes one a hero; heroes set examples of love and dignity, and future generations should follow this example. The heads of both churches reinforce this stance. Archbishop Sviatoslav points out that “the hero is made not by the hatred of their enemies but by the love of their motherland.” This is the love that “comes from God and is stronger than death.”⁴⁰ The same was emphasized by Metropolitan Epiphanius (Dumenko), the head of the OCU, who said, “It is highly important to eternalize the memory of people who selflessly protected their God-given land for the future generations,” and “the Church will always pray for those who have given their lives in the fight against the aggressor.”⁴¹

The heads of the churches also stress that it was the best “sons and daughters of the country” who “have given their last breath for the peaceful sky, for their families, for their motherland, and for each of us.”⁴² Filaret also spoke of the Heavenly Hundred as “the best sons and daughters who have given

37 Sviatoslav, “Propovid’ Blazhennishoho Sviatoslava pid chas nichnnyh chuvan.”

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Epiphanius, “Poslannia predstoiatelia.”

42 Press Service of Kyiv Metropolitanate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (PCU), “Predstoiatel zustrivsia.”

their lives for the freedom of Ukraine.”⁴³ Thus, we see that, discursively, the churches shape the memory of the Heavenly Hundred as both heroes and martyrs. The amalgamation of the hero-martyr imaginary is a relatively common feature of the memory culture of the nation, especially regarding war remembrance.⁴⁴ In this case, we can see that the churches also shape such memories.

What can clearly be distinguished in the speeches of the heads of the churches is that they all, by shaping the memory of the Heavenly Hundred as heroes and martyrs, draw on the well-established secular memory nodes of the national liberation struggle, starting with the Cossacks, and later the history of suppression of the Church in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, these discourses are formed under the influence of a securitization strategy, through which both the past and the present are seen through the lens of the security threat.

Icons of the Heavenly Hundred

This subchapter focuses on several icons and icon-like memorial pictures developed by either official churches or local or vernacular communities to commemorate the Heavenly Hundred. Official churches and vernacular communities commemorate the protestors by iconifying them as pious persons under God's protection or as saints, usually in the company of the heroes of the “national liberation struggle” (OUN-UPA and Cossacks) or the New Martyrs of the twentieth century. The following argues that the UOC-KP and OCU as its successor, together with the UGCC, endorse those practices of iconification.

Icon-like Photographs

Icon-like photographs in this study refer to pictures featuring a collective photo of the Heavenly Hundred placed together surrounding the Cross or an icon of Jesus Christ. Such collective icon-like photographs are well dispersed across Ukraine and represent a perfect example of the hybrid post-secular sacred, in which secular and religious elements are entwined and which are shaped under the influence of both secular and religious actors.

The emblematic case is a removable banner the OCU erects within the main cathedral of St. Michael's Monastery every year on February 20. It

43 Filaret, “Zvernennia Patriarkha Filareta.”

44 Brunotte, “Helden des Todes”; Tarlow, “Archaeology of Remembering.”

features bust photos of protestors placed around the enormous face of Jesus Christ, known as Mandylion. The banner bears the inscription from the Gospel: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Similar to the sermons discussed above, we can see that the icon also sets an example and puts love in the center, this time the love for friends. On Heavenly Hundred Memorial Day, the OCU leaders serve *panakhydas* in front of this banner, after which the congregation, together with state officials, lights candles near the banner, as they usually do at the traditional icons, while bishops deliver sermons or speeches about the protestors' sacrifice.⁴⁵

Similar practices are well-spread at the level of local parishes across Ukraine. For example, the UOC-KP community in Starokostiantyniv (Khmelnys'ka region in the western part of Ukraine) consecrated a panel featuring the Heavenly Hundred heroes of local origin on the eve of Palm Sunday 2016.⁴⁶ It depicts a resurrected Christ surrounded by two angels, with photos of the soldiers to the right and the Heavenly Hundred to the left. In the same way as the banner from St. Michael, this panel also bears the text from John 15:13 but has two smaller inscriptions: "Heavenly Hundred stand guard" and "They died for the freedom and the integrity of Ukraine."⁴⁷ In this way, we can see how the fragmented genres of photography and iconography are merged into a hybrid form of memory that simultaneously draws on both the secular and the religious. These icons draw on the same discursive formulas of patriotism and love previously discussed.

Protestors as Pious Persons

Another widespread practice, seemingly approved by the official churches, is the depiction of the Heavenly Hundred as pious persons praying to God or standing guard under God's protection. Unlike icon-like photographs, this approach portrays protestors as an integral part of icons by using the same artistic techniques to depict protestors and the central figure of the icon—God or Theotokos. Such a practice evokes the early modern Orthodox tradition of picturing nonsaint national heroes, sponsors, and state rulers as icons in prayer position. For example, the icon *Mother of God, Protector of Maidan* hanging in the Ecumenical Chapel of the UGCC on Instytuts'ka Street in Kyiv has an enormous image of the Mother of God with arms

45 Cherniavska, "Dlia nykh Revoliutsiia."

46 Depo.Khmelnitskii, "Podil'skykh heroiv ATO."

47 Radushyns'ka, "Facebook Post."



Fig. 8.2. Icon *Mother of God, Protector of Maidan*. Photographed by Andriy Fert, 2021.

stretched in prayer, while her veil covers small but recognizable figures of Maidan protestors standing by her side.⁴⁸

The same scene can be observed with the UOC-KP 2017 icon, *Theotokos, Protector of Ukrainian Warriors*. In this icon Ukrainian soldiers from different periods—from medieval Kyivan Rus' through ATO soldiers—are placed

48 According to personal observation by Andriy Fert in May 2021.



Fig. 8.3. Icon *Theotokos, Protector of Ukrainian Warriors*. Wiki Commons.



Fig. 8.4. Icon of Ukrainian warriors and the Heavenly Hundred in the UGCC chapel in Askold's Grave historical park. Photographed by Andriy Fert, 2021.

under the veil of the Mother of God. Among them, in plain view, stands a Euromaidan protestor in a helmet with a shield, resembling Serhyi Nihoiian, the first protestor killed by shooters in January 2014.⁴⁹

The UGCC chapel in Askold's Grave historical park in Kyiv is also decorated with various icons portraying the Heavenly Hundred, ATO soldiers, Cossacks, UPA warriors, and medieval Ukrainian princes standing under the veil of Theotokos in positions of prayer.⁵⁰ The choice of the Intercession of Theotokos for such iconifying practices is hardly accidental since the Orthodox Feast of the Intercession on October 14 coincides with the Day of the Cossacks, the Day of the Creation of the UPA, and the Day of the Defenders of Ukraine. Thus, we can see an explicit appropriation of the "national liberation struggle" commemorative discourse discussed above in the ecclesiastical visual representations of the Heavenly Hundred.

Interestingly, one can also see another element added to this memory: medieval Ukrainian princes. It can be explained by the intention to draw parallels to the long history of Christianity in which the princes introduced, strengthened, and protected it (starting with Prince Volodymyr's baptism of

49 Ukrinform, "U Kyievi osvityaty ikonu Bohorodytsi."

50 Kostura, "Maryna Sochenko."

Kyivan Rus', which in itself is a strong memory node in the memory culture of Ukraine resonating in attempts to (re)create a distinct Kyivan tradition of Orthodox spirituality).

The majority of those illustrated in the chapel in Askold's Grave are not saints, but those who "sacrificed themselves for Ukraine." Father Ihor, a rector at Askold's Grave, stressed that this chapel was meant as a national memorial and a tribute from his congregation to those who "gave their lives" for the good of Ukrainians. "In a way, they all are martyrs," he said when asked if those icons contradicted the ecclesiastical canons.⁵¹

The official church seems to endorse the chapel: the consecration ceremony in 2019 was conducted by the Kyiv diocesan bishop of the UGCC, Bohdan Dziurakh, and a prominent Ukrainian chaplain, Father Andrii Zelins'kyi.⁵² Thus, we see that the new form of sainthood and martyrdom without canonization—what we call post-secular sacred—is indeed formed and supported by the Church.

Protestors as Saints

In April 2014, Ukrainian artist Roman Boichuk presented the icon of the Heavenly Hundred, for which he claimed he had obtained a blessing from Cardinal Liubomyr Huzar, head emeritus of the UGCC.⁵³

Boichuk's icon is a triptych. The central section depicts the Heavenly Hundred with plaques of their names under the veil of Theotokos and God the Father. In the upper left of the icon, Boichuk placed the so-called Bell of Maidan (the bell of St. Michael Monastery that rang on November 30 when police forces attempted to disperse the protestors). In the upper right, he placed the figure of Cardinal Huzar. The Maidan protestors stand in the middle of the triptych in the company of the New Martyrs of the UGCC (Greek Catholic priests executed by the communists) and Christ's Disciples. Attempting to differentiate between the official saints and the Heavenly Hundred, the artist depicted the former with halos and the latter without them.

The left section of the triptych depicts Euromaidan protestors marching against their enemies under the intersection of St. Michael the Archangel. The right segment represents episodes of Euromaidan history placed within

51 From a conversation with the rector, Father Ihor, conducted by Andriy Fert in June 2021, unrecorded.

52 Synod Episkopiv Ukrains'koi Greko-Katolits'koi Tserkvi, "U Kyievi."

53 Radio Svoboda, "Prykarpats'kyi khudozhnyk."

the figure of the Mourning Mother/Mourning Mary, the Ukrainian symbol of Holodomor.

The UGCC denounced the icon immediately after its presentation. A spokesman for the UGCC Ternopil diocese, Father Oleh Haryshyn, notably stressed, “In the language of iconography and from the perspective of iconographic canons, the painting *Heavenly Hundred* is not an icon, but it surely is an icon for every Ukrainian patriot.”⁵⁴ This explanation can be an apt example of how the post-secular sacred can be regarded: both as sacred and nonsacred, both as religious and nonreligious at the same time.

In 2019–20, a group of dentists working on the frontlines in the Donetsk region built a church for soldiers near the village of Karlivka. The distinguishing feature of this church is the controversial iconostasis portraying the Heavenly Hundred—namely, Serhyi Nihoiian and Mikhail Zhynnewskiy—as Christ’s disciples.⁵⁵ Neither icon has a name plaque, so one may reasonably assume they are apostles. Nevertheless, the church’s founders and the media readily spread information that the icons portrayed heroes of the Heavenly Hundred.

The church in Karlivka was officially opened in July 2020, but there has been no information on whether any priest of any church had consecrated it.⁵⁶ Before Russia’s full-fledged invasion, the church in Karlivka served as a community center where chaplains could perform baptisms and marriage rites for soldiers. In this way, we see the church functioning as both religious and nonreligious places with ambiguous status. Since February 2022, Karlivka has suffered from intense Russian shelling because of its proximity to the frontline. Nevertheless, the church has functioned all this time as a place of humanitarian aid distribution and a religious site. In mid-May 2022, one of the church founders observed, “Here [at the church], we pray for the living and the dead. When we built it, we could not possibly imagine how flawlessly this place would perform its function.”⁵⁷

Memorial Services to the Heavenly Hundred

The churches usually commemorate the Heavenly Hundred by conducting ordinary funeral services, *panakhydas*. However, some communities of the UGCC and OCU also practice specific yet not widespread prayers that, in a

54 Tsebryi, “Heroi.”

55 Religiino-informatsiina sluzba Ukraini, “L’vivs’ki.”

56 Radio Svoboda, “Nepodalik Donetskoho aeroportu.”

57 Yaschenko, “Facebook Post.”

way, venerate the Euromaidan protestors as role models of genuine Christian commitment and holy martyrs. This subchapter brings three such cases into focus and argues that the official churches tend to prohibit explicit veneration of the Heavenly Hundred.

The Stations of the Cross: "Freedom and Responsibility"

The Stations of the Cross is a typical practice of the Catholics and Greek Catholics in Ukraine. The prayer "Freedom and Responsibility" reconstructs the way of Christ to Calvary, Crucifixion, and Resurrection and the ethos of suffering-resurrection some religious communities employ to commemorate traumatic historical events like, for instance, the Holodomor. The prayer first appeared in 2014, and the official UGCC and Roman Catholic bishop conference approved it immediately.⁵⁸ Now, it is common for communities of believers to use this prayer on February 20.

The prayer begins with strong parallels between the events of Euromaidan and Christ's journey to Calvary. Just as Christ was sentenced to death, the Ukrainians were also "sentenced to death many times" by different foreign invaders and internal enemies.⁵⁹ According to the prayer, when Christ falls under the weight of the cross for the first time, it is reminiscent of the Maidan protestors falling from the bullets.⁶⁰ Simon helps Jesus carry his cross, while Veronica wipes his face with her veil, in the same way that protestors helped each other and "protected the wounded [...] from the massacre" during the February 2014 shootings. Finally, the prayer says that the Roman soldiers gambled for Christ's clothes just like the Berkut soldiers, a special police unit in 2014, who, "under the same diabolical influence, tore clothes from Maidan residents when there was snow and frost around."⁶¹ When Jesus takes the cross on his shoulders, he chooses the difficult yet righteous way:

The heroes of the Heavenly Hundred [...] followed a thorny path of struggle for their freedom and the freedom of our entire nation. They followed the path of Christ and took responsibility for the sins of our nation. [...] They are a shining example for us to follow.⁶²

⁵⁸ CREDO, "Khresna Doroha Svobody."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Thus, as the prayer urges, the believers should follow them by fighting with injustices and evil, raising their voice against violence, and protecting the nation from Russian aggression. The prayer justifies this call by highlighting the protestors' resemblances to Christ:

Many compared the face of Christ from the Shroud of Turin with the faces of the dead *Maidanivtsi* [participants of the Euromaidan protests]. What a remarkable resemblance in noble peace! O Jesus, even in this way, Thou are giving us a sign of the righteousness of our struggle for our freedom! Thou accept our people's sacrifices to the body of Thy martyrs, witnesses of Thy Holy Truth.⁶³

"Freedom and Responsibility" represents the Heavenly Hundred's death as a sacrifice for the nation and Christ, which made the nation better:

[T]hose who rebelled against the evil that dominated our state, against the aggressors from the East, from Moscow swamps; who sacrificed their lives to protect the rights, honor, and dignity of our nation, to protect the rights of Holy Church and our people.

Religious and national elements here clearly overlap. Furthermore, we see direct parallels to the speeches of the heads of the churches, which have been previously discussed.

The prayers, like the speeches, align with the framework of securitization. This blend of the national and the religious, seen throughout the text of the Stations, reaches its peak in the concluding prayer, which asks God "to make our nation a participant of Thy glorious triumph over evil." Again, as in the speeches, we witness Ukraine gaining a special soteriological mission in the contest between good and evil.

Vigil "Blood of the Martyrs—Seed of the Church"

The UGCC seminary organized a vigil called "Blood of the Martyrs—Seed of the Church" within the framework of the official state memorial program. It was dedicated to the Heavenly Hundred in February 2016 in the Ecumenical Chapel in Kyiv.⁶⁴ Vigils of this kind happen annually, but their explicit appeal to the New Martyrs cult make this one stand out. In short, the UGCC

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ NebesnaSotnya.in.ua, "Kyiv."

seminary used the cult of the New Martyrs to commemorate the Heavenly Hundred.

The first time this vigil was held, on the morning of February 20, 2016, it began with a liturgy and a *panakhyda* for the protestors.⁶⁵ It was organized as a “meeting requiem,” meaning it featured a religious service with so-called secular practices like reading poetry, singing national songs, lighting candles of memory, and having a moderator with a microphone detail why the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred were murdered. The priests organized a procession in the shape of the Stations of the Cross that went late into the evening of the same day.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, unlike “Freedom and Responsibility,” the Stations of the Cross used in this case did not draw any explicit parallels between the protestors and Christ and only prayed for the rest of their souls by reading aloud their names at the end of each station. The procession concluded with the singing of an Akathist to the New Martyrs.⁶⁷ The UGCC developed this service back in early 2001, and it naturally does not mention the Euromaidan protestors. But using this exact prayer after the procession to honor Euromaidan’s victims in a way made the Heavenly Hundred into New Martyrs.

Even the title of the vigil bears the same appeal: the authors took it from a quotation attributed to the second-century Christian writer Tertullian claiming that the blood of Christian martyrs is the seed of the church. The church here is a national community, and both the New Martyrs and the Heavenly Hundred sacrificed their lives for its sake.

Akathist to the Heavenly Hundred

The only prayer that explicitly venerates the Euromaidan protestors as saints was developed in early 2014 by Ioan Shvets, a UOC-KP bishop. The official church immediately banned it,⁶⁸ and Bishop Shvets, in response, suggested his followers use his text as a literary work instead.⁶⁹

There is no evidence that this prayer has been used ever since. The Akathist unequivocally represents Maidan protestors as saints who came to Kyiv with a specific soteriological mission “to save the land and the people” from “the lost sheep” who carried out the “criminal orders of the

65 CREDO, “Khresna Doroha Svobody.”

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Religion.in.ua, “Kyivskyi Patriarkhat.”

69 Ioan, “Akafist ‘Nebesnyi Sotni.’”

hell-dwellers and the servants of the devil”—the regime of President Yanukovich (2010–14).⁷⁰

The Akathist directly invokes the Heavenly Hundred for intercession several times and refers to them as “the conscience of Kyiv and Ukraine” and “Ukrainian angels.” Each invocation concludes with the phrase “Rejoice, oh Kyivan Heavenly Hundred, consecrated before the throne of God by sacrificial love!,” which is a typical Orthodox practice in addressing the saints. According to the prayer, God himself gathered protestors in Kyiv and filled them with his grace: “[Oh, Heavenly Hundred], you were guided by the power from heaven and sanctified by the grace of the Holy Ghost.” The Mother of God “inspired you to stand up for the truth, and Archangel Michael, the heavenly patron of Holy Kyiv, gave you commitment and strength.”⁷¹

The murder of the protestors is portrayed as martyrdom, both religious and national, at the same time. According to the Akathist, the protestors came to Kyiv because they “had love of God and Ukraine in their hearts.” They combined prayers with the exclamation “Glory to Ukraine!,” and, having dedicated themselves to their country, they “strove for eternal life.”⁷² Like the previously mentioned Catholic prayers, this prayer places the Heavenly Hundred among those “who were persecuted for the truth in earthly Ukraine during history.” The protestors followed God and the examples of “all Ukrainian ascetics of the past,” and by following their examples, the believers could feel “a sense of kinship with our God.”⁷³ In the end, the Akathist directly addresses the Maidan protestors, asking for their help to bring about a better future for Ukraine:

You are our wealth and joy, our faith, hope, love, your lives full of labors and truth have become bright examples for the future generations of Ukrainians. [...] Oh, ascetics, zealous and pure, help us be worthy of calling ourselves Sons of Ukraine and your brothers, and protect your blessed memory forever! Oh, Merciful Lord, may their fervent prayers guide our passionate and cunning will to do only good, so that we may not continue to commit sins, but only do what is just and pleasing to Thou in building our Ukrainian state. [...] Together with the heavenly forces, we glorify All-Holy, and Good, and Life-Giving Lord—the Father and the Son, and

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

the Holy Ghost—in union with the Heavenly Hundred and the Heavenly Thousands of Ukrainians revealed to us in recent times!⁷⁴

Thus, we see how artistic (secular) forms are merged with religious forms. But where are the boundaries between the poem and the prayer? This merging of poetry and prayer can be seen as an interesting example of the post-secular sacred. Even if not acknowledged by the church officially, it still functions as a prayer and is used in church services. Noteworthy, one of the first books on Maidan that appeared almost directly after the protest with works of poetry and prose begins with the foreword of the head of the UOC-KP, Patriarch Filaret.⁷⁵

Conclusion

On August 24, 2022, Ukrainian Independence Day was celebrated amid the brutal Russo-Ukrainian War. In Zaporizhzhia, once a prosperous urban center, now a frontline city neighboring the biggest nuclear power plant in Europe and frequently under heavy Russian shelling, the local authorities, together with the OCU bishop, unveiled the new monument to the Heavenly Hundred. Made of steel, the monument features the 104 names of the Heavenly Hundred protestors, the national coat of arms, and an image of a falcon. After the consecration ceremony, Bishop Fotios argued in his sermon that by honoring the Heavenly Hundred on Independence Day, one should free themselves from “slavish thinking,” such as the Russia-ridden concept of Ukrainians as the younger brothers of the Russians.⁷⁶ While building on narratives and practices considered in this chapter, this ceremony epitomizes a slight shift towards more militaristic sacralization of the Heavenly Hundred under the conditions of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

The Heavenly Hundred remains a cult in the making. It emerged immediately after the bloodshed on Kyiv’s Maidan in January–February 2014, and, since then, it has become an integral part in defining the contemporary Ukrainian identity. Both secular and religious actors have taken an active role in shaping the narrative about the protestors, giving meaning to their cause and turning them into martyrs for the nation

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Filaret, “Peredmova.”

⁷⁶ Ukrinform, “U Zaporizhzhzi vidkryly pamiatnyk.”

and Christianity. Drawing on the concepts of martyrdom for the nation invented by Romantic movements of the nineteenth century, contemporary Ukrainian churches have found themselves in the unique position of cocreators of the national cult. Acting within twenty-first-century conditions, the churches are much freer than in the nineteenth century. The postmodern condition allows them to be more creative and simultaneously draw on different traditions and genres. As a result, the churches (co) produce a post-secular form of sacred memory: icons with photographic elements, poems used for prayers, and monuments that combine religious and national symbols.

Before the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the churches rarely touched upon canonicity issues and often represented Maidan protestors as martyrs while addressing their memory in public spaces. However, within church walls, the question of canonicity grew in importance; the churches were quick to prohibit the explicit veneration of the Heavenly Hundred as martyrs by the priests or icon-painters, which testifies to the willingness of ecclesiastical authorities to hold some spheres as “purely” religious.

All practices and narratives studied in this chapter have, at their core, ideas pertaining to sacred patriotism and heroism. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they draw extensively from overlapping sources, including the Cossacks, the OUN-UPA, and other heroes of the “national liberation struggle.” Exacerbated by the processes of history securitization and the promotion of heroic role models in the Ukrainian memory landscape after 2014, this secular martyrdom overlapped with various Orthodox and Greek Catholic cults of New Martyrs—Christian believers executed by the Soviet regime—and, as a result, influenced the cult of the Heavenly Hundred. From this perspective, the active role of the UGCC in the Heavenly Hundred commemorations seems only too natural. Perceived as the victim of the Soviet regime by the broader public, this church creates the discourse by representing the protestors as new martyrs, defenders of Christianity: Ukraine against Soviet Russian repressions. Moreover, in the processes of sacralization analyzed in this chapter and the interconfessional cooperation between churches, both Catholic and Orthodox traditions are revealed. This can also be seen through the prism of post-secularity and postmodernity, which allow such crisscrossing, transmutations, and negligence of strictly defined boundaries.

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9. Martyrdom and Glory: Sacralization of Memory Practices in Modern Poland

Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper

Abstract: The three decades of sociopolitical transformation of post-communist Poland were the time of forming a new “mnemonic culture” and a “politics of memory.” Its narratives concerned the fight against communism, and earlier narratives dealing with the suffering of the Polish population during the Second World War were filled with new symbolism and meaning. Also, the language of memory narratives changed by using religious symbols. The Catholic Church has become one of the most important and influential memory actors. The author analyzes how the institution of the Church and religious language is present in contemporary memory projects, both at the local and national levels, and how the Church has developed a way of talking about national history.

Keywords: axiology, Catholic Church, postcommunism, religion, symbol

The three decades of sociopolitical transformation of postcommunist Poland witnessed the formation of a new “politics of memory,” primarily connected to the events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The collapse of communism in Poland and other countries in Central Europe during 1989 meant that social memory was “unlocked” and pluralized.¹ The emerging freedom of speech meant that the single official narrative about the past—promoted by the Communist Party in public discourse—was replaced by multiple new, sometimes opposing, interpretations of the past, which triggered heated debates.² However, despite the collapse of the communist system, World War II remained a vital element of social memory in Poland,

¹ Lebow et al., *Politics of Memory*; Kwiatkowski, *Pamięć*.

² Korzeniewski, *Transformacja pamięci*.

both in official and private dimensions.³ To this day, families discuss topics concerning the period, often triggering strong emotions and memories of suffering and injustice.⁴ Furthermore, apart from the memory of the German occupation, there is also that of the Soviet occupation, postwar expulsions, and the times of communist repression. However, social relations with the twentieth-century past are also the realm of oblivion, repressed guilt and trauma.⁵

On the one hand, new memory narratives appeared, for example, concerning the fight against communism. On the other hand, previous narratives concerning Poles' suffering during the Second World War developed and gained new symbolism and meaning. It was not just memory narratives that changed but also their language. The new characteristic feature was the use of religious symbols and ways of thinking and talking about the world derived from Catholicism. There also appeared to be changes in the institutional aspect of memory politics. The Roman Catholic Church joined the political life of the postcommunist state under transformation and has become one of Poland's most important and influential memory actors. This was possible due to the Church's strong social and moral position after the communist period and its perception as an institution that provided space and opportunity to oppose communism, including preserving the memory of events that could not be officially commemorated in communist times.⁶ Religious institutions of minority groups also began to develop within the new democratic framework and participate in shaping the collective memory of minorities. They played an important role in recalling and commemorating the past, often in opposition to the narrative of the majority group.

Collective memory is a transmission belt of a group's values. However, it also depends on these values—the axiological system functioning in a society that causes certain events and characters to be remembered as role models (emanations of its ideals) or as negative examples. However, such an axiological memory simultaneously determines the axis of the narrative about the past, to which everything fits: "Axiological memory insists on memories of specific actions taken by specific persons being treated as a kind of proof or evidence to substantiate the real existence of

3 Nijakowski, "Pamięć."

4 Kwiatkowski, *Pamięć*, 188–89.

5 Bilewicz, *Traumaland*.

6 Casanova, *Public Religions*; Mink, *Polska w sercu Europy*. These events were, among others, such events as the Katyń massacre, the Soviet repressions during and after the war, the repressions of the Stalinist era, or commemorations of people perceived as heroes of the interwar period, which was assessed negatively during the communist era.

values or witness before a specific community.”⁷ Individual events seem significant and worthy of remembering and being passed on to subsequent generations as they actualize the values society deems important. In defining axiological memory, Karłowicz states: “Its domain is common ideals, not an assessment of the status quo. It does not describe what we are, but what we would like to be.”⁸

The axiology of memory is not limited to its content, as the processes of transmitting this content are equally important. How we talk about the past reflects the social values that create the “obligation to remember,” which also has religious roots because the duty to remember is at the heart of Christian rituals.⁹ Linking this obligation with practices derived from religion causes memory to become sacred; this includes rituals of remembrance for the dead or special memorial rituals for people defined as saints and martyrs. This means that the narratives about the nation’s past use tools from the field of religion (language, symbols, ideas, rituals), but also that memory becomes an element separated from secular everyday life. Religious memory structures hardly submit to tools of secular critique, such as historical research or discourses that provide new frames to old narratives.¹⁰

The distinction between social memory and history often stems from assigning subjectivity and instrumentality to the former and striving for objectivity with the latter. However, history as a science also cannot avoid elements of subjectivity and instrumentality in its interpretations. Therefore, what is most important is that collective memory is a socially shaped relationship with the past in which emotions play an important role (e.g., fear, pride, a sense of belonging, euphoria, sadness, and a sense of loss), defined as feelings that arise in a group about particular events from the past. This doesn’t mean that history is emotionless and more objective than collective memory—even if historians strive for such objectivity—but that history argues to include facts from the past in its narratives and evaluates their importance differently than memory. Nevertheless, history and memory are closely related. Individual and collective memory narratives are a source and research material for historians, but, as Jay Winter notes, historians are

7 Karłowicz, “Pamięć aksjologiczna a historia,” 37–38.

8 Ibid., 36.

9 Misztal, “The Sacralization of Memory.”

10 For example, one could mention the many years of discussions about the roles Poles played during the Holocaust after the publication of Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbours* in 2000 (for more about discussions on the book, see Dobrosielski, *Spory o Grossa*) or discussions regarding the interpretation of Poland’s history through postcolonial theories; see Mayblin et al., “‘Other’ Posts in ‘Other’ Places.”

essential to all people who create and transfer memory narratives: “Those who try to reconstruct their ‘memory’ of past events need historians to establish the boundary conditions of possibility.”¹¹ Wulf Kansteiner also believes that historians and their works are used to reinforce the reality of a given memory message.¹² Following the concept of Astrid Erll, we may say that memory and history are different ways of the presence of the past in culture.¹³ Sacralization of memory—events, people, and places connected with the past—is also how the presence of the past in culture unites different spheres of social life such as religion, politics, traditions, art, or personal and family life.

The Catholic Church has played a significant role in the everyday life of many Poles for hundreds of years and thinking in terms derived from the Catholic religion is deeply rooted in the majority of Polish society. Although society is becoming more secularized and the Catholic Church is facing increasing criticism, religious terms are used to define liminal situations and mark space in the form of objects, signs, or names.

This chapter will focus on four aspects of the sacralization of memory in modern Poland:

1. *Ideological*: Ideas linking the past with the future that stem from the Catholic religion and influence the interpretation of national history (martyrdom, salvation, and glory).
2. *Symbolic*: The use of religious symbolism in commemoration in secular places and facilities such as monuments, museums, or memorial plaques—both at the national and local levels.
3. *Spatial*: A sacred space like a church or cemetery becomes a site commemorating events from the national or local past. It can be both a place that previously existed as a sacred object into which commemorations were introduced and a place recreated as a space of sacred memory (such as popular installations in Poland called Golgothas).
4. *Institutional*: The Roman Catholic Church as a mnemonic actor is an institution that undertakes numerous activities commemorating itself in the context of national history (e.g., the cult of saints and martyrs, with particular emphasis on clergy,¹⁴ presented as significant for the history of Poland) and actively participates in state and local commemorative rituals.

11 Winter, *Remembering War*, 10.

12 Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 324.

13 Erll, *Memory in Culture*.

14 Priests beatified and canonized as martyrs and saints are particularly important in church commemoration, as they prove that the institution follows the ideals it preaches. The case of people whose actions were necessary for religious but also national reasons strengthens the message about the connection of the Polish Catholic Church's history with Polish national history.

All these aspects can be distinguished at the analytical level, but they appear closely intertwined in modern Poland's threads of collective memory and commemoration methods. As a result, a certain way of thinking about commemoration emerges, one strongly culturally rooted and lasting despite the progressing secularization of Polish society. The institutional aspect of the sacralization of collective memory seems to be the most susceptible to secularization.¹⁵ However, criticizing or ignoring the church in memory practices does not mean abandoning the religious way of making sense of the past or the religious elements in commemoration practices.

Ideological Sacralization: Interpretation of National History through Religion

In Poland, due to the lack of sovereignty in the nineteenth century and subjection to states alien both in terms of culture and religion—a factor particularly significant in the Russian Partition—the Catholic Church became the backbone of everything that is Polish.¹⁶ The Roman Catholic Church considerably increased its importance in shaping national identity and memory among Poles: “The Catholic Church turned out to be the only institution which could penetrate the areas of the three partitions. In the nineteenth century, Roman Catholicism, Romantic nationalism, and Slavic messianism contributed to the new Polish civil religion.”¹⁷ Over a hundred years, the church acted as a substitute for the partitioned state, becoming the repository of history, culture, tradition, and collective memory, with the result that religious and nationalist elements became closely entwined.¹⁸ At that time, the works of major Polish poets and writers elaborated concepts of the Polish nation's messianism and shaped the vision of Poland as “the Christ of nations,” which also led to the reinforcement of the stereotype of the “*Polak-Katolik*” (“the Pole-the Catholic”).¹⁹

15 Baniak, *Religia katolicka*.

16 From 1795 to 1918, there was no independent Polish state, the territory of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided between the Russian Empire, the Hohenzollern Empire, and the Habsburg Monarchy.

17 Casanova, *Public Religions*, 160.

18 Ibid., 165. See Waligórska, “On the Genealogy,” and Waligórska, *Cross Purposes*, on the changes in the meaning of the symbol of the cross in Polish political life.

19 See Janion and Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i historia*; Rudaś-Grodzka, *Sfinks słowiański*; Walicki, *Filozofia polskiego romantyzmu*. The first Polish messianic ideas originated in the seventeenth century. The Polish nobility was then convinced they had a divine mission to spread Christianity in Eastern Europe (Tazbir, *Poland*). However, the heyday of messianic ideas

In the communist era, perceived as having a solid community and moral authority supporting anti-communist activities, the Catholic Church became one of the major oppositional forces.²⁰ Many secular people sympathized with the Church and supported its interpretation of the past because churches were the only public spaces where one could commemorate a past tabooed by the state that was important for national and family memory.²¹ During that time, "Polish Catholicism served as a public civic religion rather than a private religion for individual salvation."²² After 1989, secularization processes advanced, and the church turned from an opponent of the communist state into a partner of the democratic state, thus becoming open to receiving critical evaluation (e.g., as an institution with excessive political involvement).²³ Nevertheless, church influence remained strong in Poland, especially in remembrance and commemoration of the past. Moreover, it seems that the "memory boom" that Poland has witnessed in recent years has reinforced the position of the religious language in the public domain, commemorative practices, and ceremonies.

The sacralization of national memory relating to the history of Poland is visible in ideas relevant to both giving meaning to events from the past and those used to describe individual events. This sacralization primarily refers to the idea of martyrdom as leading to glory and salvation (of oneself, others, or even the whole world). The idea makes sense of suffering by showing that it is never pointless: Even if we cannot explain why someone was murdered—as in the case of victims of mass crimes, where one's social class or ethnicity determined their fate—we can indicate that such deaths also contributed to the salvation of the nation and its ultimate victory and glory. The idea of saving the world through martyrdom also applies to the interpretive framework of the history of Poland as a state.²⁴ According

was the nineteenth century, when Poland was divided between three neighboring powers and all the uprisings suffered defeats. Polish messianism was shaped parallel to other ideas of this type (such as Jewish or Ukrainian messianism). However, its essence was to recognize that the "resurrection of Poland" (i.e., regaining independence) would bring salvation to all nations (thus bringing them freedom and independence), which was why Poland was left with God's appointed role as the savior of nations. See Janion and Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i historia*; Rudaś-Grodzka, *Sfinks słowiański*; Walicki, *Filozofia polskiego romantyzmu*.

20 Grabowska, *Podział postkomunistyczny*, 291.

21 For example, the memory of Katyń in Poland. In the 1980s, some church parishes laid plaques commemorating the victims of the Katyń massacre. Jarosz, *Zbrodnia katyńska*; see also Kosicki, "Forests."

22 Casanova, *Public Religions*, 194.

23 Grabowska, *Podział postkomunistyczny*.

24 Blacker and Fedor, "Soviet and Post-Soviet."

to the ideology of Polish messianism, Poland's suffering ultimately led to salvation, meaning the liberation of the whole world (and, therefore, of all nations). This idea changed its social meaning when Poland became an independent country. However, the motives related to the nation's suffering are still used to build the international image of Poland and the state's "moral capital."²⁵ Although moral capital does not have to be created in connection with religion—or perceived as referring to religion—its "local" understanding often includes religious elements such as references to the category of martyrdom and emphasis on the victims' religiousness or the presence of clergy among the victims.

Reflecting on how researchers perceive religion and nationalism, Brubaker distinguishes four approaches: religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena; religion as a cause of and explanation of nationalism; religion as part of nationalism (deep embedding); and religious nationalism as a distinct alternative to secular nationalism.²⁶ In this context, Brubaker positions Poland as a country in which Catholicism influenced nationalism, but in the case of modern Polish society, we observe a situation in which religion becomes part of nationalism, especially in its memorial aspect. Even if the messianic perspective about the destiny and history of the Polish nation is not very popular in everyday thinking, it easily surfaces during serious crises or remembrance events.

Following Émile Durkheim, many researchers indicate the need for sacralization in social life and observe the realization of this need in nationalism.²⁷ Nationalist ideologies employ the phenomenon of "sacrificing one's life for the nation" as one of the most important elements that strengthen the sense of the importance of the national community among its members and determine its personal ideals. Benedict Anderson calls this kind of sacrifice "secular salvation" and says that "death for a nation" can replace "death for the faith" in times of secularization.²⁸ Many other researchers also highlight the importance that the social interpretations of death—when members of society may be perceived as secular martyrs—hold for the persistence of the community: "The underlying cost of all society is the violent death of its members. Our deepest secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge

25 Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny*.

26 Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism."

27 Durkheim, *Elementary*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism*; Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism."

28 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

that society depends on the death of these sacrificial victims at the hands of the group itself."²⁹

However, when belonging to a religious community and having a national identity are closely intertwined, both types of martyrdom (for the nation and the faith) merge. A death can accommodate local content and universal meaning that helps merge the individual and local suffering with the narrative of national identity and collective past.³⁰ Barbara Misztal also positions the memory boom and nationalism as a substitute religion that establishes the sacralization of memory she perceives as a new spirituality.³¹

Even though we may notice an emergent "secular salvation" in Polish culture, the secular language does not always have adequate words, metaphors, or narrative construction tools to describe and explain the mass death of people killed without fighting, victims of mass persecutions, ethnic cleansings, or mass shootings. On the one hand, there are victims par excellence, meaningless and nameless, led to the slaughter and killed in civil wars filled with religious and ethnic undertones. On the other hand, there are active victims, fighting, and killed in the name of higher values, often of a national character. We may use the word "victim" to call the former, but the latter will be better called by the term "sacrifice."³² While heroes who sacrificed their lives or other significant people can be commemorated by erecting monuments without religious references, it is more difficult to commemorate large-scale group trauma. In the case of heroes, the achievements of individuals' lives are commemorated, while in the case of the victims of mass killings centrally it is their death that is commemorated. This is where religious language enters with the message that there is no such thing as meaningless suffering; all suffering can amount to martyrdom, and each victim helps build the nation's future as a community of believers.³³

29 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice*, 21.

30 This phenomenon is not connected only with Catholicism or Christianity but can be found in many societies (see, for example, the case of Russia: Minkova, *Making Martyrs*; Bogumił and Łukasiewicz, "Between History and Religion"; Fordahl, *The Ultimate Sacrifice*; Hatina, *Martyrdom*). See also Winter, *War and Martyrdom*, 217.

31 Misztal, "The Sacralization of Memory," 68–69.

32 Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny*, 26–29, introduces a division into traumatized and heroic victims (who are mainly fighters like soldiers or insurgents). However, this division can also be more problematic because traumatized victims can be perceived as heroes, too.

33 Moreover, in Poland, the cult of the dead is not only a religious phenomenon but a form of cultural pattern. Poles visit the graves of their deceased loved ones on All Saints' Day, celebrated on November 1, a festival celebrated by most inhabitants of Poland. Along with the progressing processes of secularization, nonreligious methods of commemorating the dead appeared in

These ways of thinking about mass suffering as martyrdom leading to salvation and glory—derived in Poland from Catholicism—appear in interpretations of both national and local histories. The images of salvation allow the community to come to terms with their deaths to some extent while simultaneously imbuing horrendous events with meaning. The idea of martyrdom and salvation symbolically deprives the perpetrator of power over the victims. In the perpetrator–victim relationship, the former seems to have all the power, so by killing the victim, they win. However, if we place the criminal situation in a broader national or even supernatural context, the roles are reversed, and these are the victims who become victors. In a religious context, all victims can achieve victory status and contribute to national glory.

Symbolic Aspect: Sacralization of Memory through Religious Symbols

References to the Roman Catholic religion are visible in the symbolic language of public commemorations, especially those referring to the nation's past and the theme of death. In many commemorations, especially those relating to World War II and communism, people use a language referring to religious symbolism in the form of signs (cross, rosary, crown of thorns) and topoi (Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows). These signs are so common in the cultural landscape of Poland that they dominate cases commemorating individual and collective deaths. They become an element of monuments, museum exhibitions, commemorative plaques, and, above all, places of death and burial.³⁴

There are monuments related to mass deaths where the cross is the key element. An example is the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970 in Gdańsk. The monument commemorates the workers of the shipyard

Poland, however, religious symbolism still dominates in their commemoration and relevant practices. See Tanaś, "Sfera profanum."

34 After the war, placing a cross on the death sites or graves was the first "remembrance gesture." In her project "Non-Sites of Memory—Un-commemorated Genocide Sites in Poland," Roma Sendyka shows that such a commemoration with a cross (sometimes made of the simplest available materials, e.g., tree branches) was a sign of places marked with death. Sometimes such signs disappeared completely or were accompanied by new ones, often disorderly, depending on the actions and emotions of individuals. However, the religious sign turned out to be the fastest way to clearly express the message about "separating" a place from everyday life due to its marking with death. Sendyka, *Nie-miejsca pamięci*.

who were shot during the pacification of the protests by the police. It consists of three crosses with anchors in place of the crucified Christ. In Warsaw, in 1995, the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East was unveiled, commemorating the victims of the Soviet invasion of Poland—including officers murdered in Katyń—as well as the repressions and deportations to the eastern territories of the Soviet Union, which were a consequence of the occupation of Polish territories by the USSR.³⁵ The monument is designed as a railway platform, with many crosses crammed together to represent and commemorate the dead. Prewar Poland was a multinational state, so representatives of various national groups were among the victims of the Soviet regime. This differentiation was included in the monument, as all categories of victims were commemorated with a religious sign: Roman Catholic or Orthodox crosses, and in the case of Jews and Muslims, respectively, mitzvahs and pillars with a crescent sign. In some monuments, next to the cross, there is also a form referring to a church altar or a figure of the Virgin Mary. However, the cross is most often used in memorial sites. In Poland, there are numerous local commemorations of places of death and suffering in the form of a cross or a statue of the Virgin Mary. These are often located at the entrance roads to a village or town, at local cemeteries, or crime scenes in nearby forests and fields. Their inscriptions refer to specific individual or collective deaths, but they often also hold a thanksgiving character. They are a voice of the local community's gratitude for surviving the war, and they ask for divine protection.

Religious references also appear in Polish museums established in Poland in recent years. An example is the Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów, central Poland. It conveys the history of the Polish countryside during the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the Second World War. The project's authors made numerous attempts to create a secular building in this place. In the beginning, they attempted to remove the existing religious objects—a chapel built back in the 1950s—and commemorations created in the 1990s that directly referred to the religious way of thinking: the *Pietà of Michniów* (a statue depicting a woman holding her dead son on her lap) and the *Hill of Crosses*, on which each cross was to symbolize one of the pacified Polish villages. Ultimately, after the residents' protests, all these elements were incorporated into the architectural layout around the museum building. In the building, a prayer room has been designed to be a place for peaceful reflection in silence. Even such an element aroused distrust, as the residents wanted to clearly define that the prayers were

35 Jarosz, *Zbrodnia katyńska*.

Catholic and that other religions would not be practiced inside.³⁶ For the local community, brought up in the Catholic tradition the idea of commemorating their history without religious symbols was unacceptable.

Religious symbols are also used to “domesticate” memorials from communist times, namely those created when religion was eliminated from public spaces and official ceremonies. After the Second World War, numerous monuments relating to the events of the war appeared all over Poland in forms that corresponded to the principles of socialist realist art. They were most often obelisks or images of human figures. A popular element was the sword referring to the symbolism associated with the Battle of Grunwald in 1410 presented during the communist era as Poland’s greatest victory over Germany, analogous to the victory over the Third Reich in the Second World War. Only the graves, whether mass or individual, were religiously themed. In postcommunist times, other elements began to be incorporated into these memorial sites. An example is the commemoration of the pacification of villages by German forces in central Poland. In the 1970s, national memorials were erected at two sites associated with the May 1943 pacification: one near the former village of Żuchowiec, and the other by the former village of Gębice. Both sites were located near the Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów and the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows in Kałków. There were concrete monuments and a granite stele with inscriptions in these places, but today this space is also occupied by a statue of Our Lady, Queen of Poland, with a crowned eagle emblazoned on her chest.³⁷

One of the most known examples of the conflict surrounding the attempt to introduce the Catholic religion to the most important memorial site of the Holocaust is the issue of the crosses of Auschwitz. The conflict began in the mid-1980s after the Polish Carmelite Order decided to move into the building bordering the Auschwitz camp. After years of disputes, only one cross remained—the papal cross from the mass celebrated by the Polish Pope John Paul II during his visit to Auschwitz in 1979. In 1998, the dispute broke out again after rumors about plans to remove the papal cross emerged, which incited protests and the erection of new crosses, symbolically marking the memorial site as Polish by way of direct connotation with the figure of the “*Polak-Katolik*” (“the Pole-the Catholic”).³⁸ In time, this dispute was also resolved and additional crosses were removed.³⁹ Although the conflict

36 Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper, *Milieux de Mémoire*.

37 Ibid., 57–58

38 Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 55–60.

39 Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*; Zubrzycki, *Sacred Religio-Secular Symbols*.

around the Auschwitz memorial site was resolved, the presence of the cross (its erection and removal) has become a source of heated disputes in Poland at the local and national levels on many occasions. The last sharp conflict broke out over the Smolensk Cross, a wooden cross placed by Polish scouts in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw immediately after the Smolensk catastrophe on April 10, 2010. An event in which President Lech Kaczyński was killed together with his wife and representatives of Polish authorities, veterans' organizations, and military commanders. Disputes over the disaster and the methods of commemoration are closely related to the polarization of Poland's political scene, but they also have a religious dimension.⁴⁰ One of the sides in the conflict used religious symbols perceived by part of society as "the endangered sacrum."⁴¹ The conflict over attempts to remove the cross lasted for several weeks. Finally, a decision was made to move it to the nearby Church of St. Anne, to a separate place created in the side chapel. Nevertheless, for several years, people appeared in front of the Presidential Palace, recreating the shape of the cross by setting burning candles on the pavement and organizing public prayers.⁴²

Spatial Aspect of Sacralization: Sacred Spaces and Sites of Memory

Space components that provide shape to the memories of the past can be named "memory landscapes," as this term underlines their physical character.⁴³ Space is not passive; it seems to be an objective witness of the past and influences individuals and communities through its sheer existence, even without conscious actions to shape it.⁴⁴ This is precisely why space has both the power to create memories and induce oblivion or selective amnesia about certain events. Kapralski writes: "Locations as points binding space, memory, and identity, are becoming less and less specific and material; they are no longer 'physical anchors,' but rather 'abstract locations' to an increasing extent as social relations become delocalized."⁴⁵ This is why

40 Dziekan, *Od rytuału do konfliktu*; Niżyńska, "Politics of Mourning"; Przyłipiak, *Memory*; Stanley, "Defenders of the Cross."

41 Threats for the sacred are of a different kind: From political opponents inside Poland to the broadly understood "modern world" and its alleged hostility to religion.

42 Niżyńska, "Politics of Mourning"; Stanley, "Defenders of the Cross."

43 Kapralski, *Pamięć, przestrzeń, tożsamość*.

44 Ibid., 29.

45 Ibid., 35.

communities are desperately searching for and creating places of memory that can provide a sense of temporal anchoring in the modern world.

In Poland, we observe the sacralization of public spaces in many aspects.⁴⁶ Sacred spaces that become memorials can be divided into two categories. First, they are spaces belonging to the Church that became relevant because of the events there or the practices of memory that developed around them. These are churches, monasteries, and cemeteries that played an important role in the history of Poland and social memory. Secondly, these are the places of remembrance created by the Church in its buildings and sites, such as Church museums, sanctuaries, or pilgrimage sites, but also in Golgothas, which are Ways of the Cross recreated in space which presents the suffering of Christ along with the parallel suffering of the Polish nation or the local community.⁴⁷

Through old traditions or remembrance activities undertaken by persons associated with the Church, places closely related to religious institutions become places of national remembrance. Such a tradition is the custom of placing deceased rulers in church crypts and displaying commemorative plaques of people and events in galleries or separate chapels devoted to historical events, such as the gallery and chapels in Warsaw's Field Cathedral of the Polish army.⁴⁸ Notably, in communist times, when many events could not have been commemorated for political reasons, churches and graveyards became separate spaces where the commemoration was still possible. The congregation of people in churches to commemorate specific people or events caused religious language to permeate these forms of commemoration indefinitely. Participation in such events was, in turn, both an exhibition of memory or religious feelings and a political manifestation attractive to nonbelievers. After 1989, when more space became available for such manifestations, many lost contact with the Church. Still, the conviction regarding the inseparability of commemoration and religious language persisted, stemming from an earlier past and reinforced during communism. As a result, even commemorations appearing in public spaces outside church premises conveyed their message using religious language, as in the case of public masses and prayers and the presence of clergy members.⁴⁹

46 Przybylska, *Sakralizacja*.

47 See Bogumił, "Stare i nowe"; Haładewicz-Grzelak and Lubos-Kozieł, "Story-ing Memory"; Karaskiewicz, *Świątynia*.

48 Jarosz, *Zbrodnia katyńska*.

49 Chelstowska et al., *Relacje*; Sowiński, *Dobra nowina*.

Important places of remembrance in communist times were cemeteries. People often make crosses out of candles in the central alleyways on All Saints' Day. This was the case in many cemeteries, not only the large, historically significant ones located in large urban centers but also smaller, local cemeteries. In this way, people could commemorate those who did not have graves or whose graves were located outside of Poland.⁵⁰ Thanks to this practice, the memory of the lost territories of the prewar Polish state and the memory of the officers killed in the Katyń massacre were kept alive. During communism, the memory of the Katyń massacre was repressed, and hence, individual temporary commemorations in cemeteries—known only to the initiated few—helped to build memory communities that, after the transition to democracy, could officially create memorials.⁵¹

The necropolis in Radzymin is one example of a cemetery in which the memory of the local community and the national memory is concentrated. This site illustrates how the cemetery's sacred space, combined with religious rituals of remembrance of the dead and religious explanations of the history of Poland, merge into one coherent system of thinking about the past. Radzymin is a small town near Warsaw where, on August 15, 1920, the Polish army defeated the Soviets in the Polish–Soviet War (1919–21). In local and national narratives, this victory is perceived not only as a military action but also as a miracle performed by the Virgin Mary on the festival of the Assumption of Mary. After the battle, collective and individual graves for victims were built at the parish cemetery, which became a venue of choice for commemorative state ceremonies. During communism and Poland's subordination to the Soviet Union, the situation at the state level changed radically. The memory of the battle of August 1920 became uncomfortable, and the authorities sought to erase it from Polish social memory.⁵² Efforts were made to eliminate all traces of commemoration of this event in public spaces and to ensure that the name Radzymin did not appear in public discourse. In such a situation, the cemetery with the graves of the fallen became a place where residents could consistently demonstrate that they were fulfilling their religious and national obligations regarding the memory of the victims and heroes. Every year, on the anniversary of the battle, they placed candles on the graves and laid flowers, while the local communist authorities eliminated these signs of remembrance.⁵³ As a result, the memory

50 Głowacka-Grajper, *Transmisja pamięci*.

51 Jarosz, *Zbrodnia katyńska*.

52 Ochman, "When and Why."

53 Głowacka-Grajper, "Pamięć."

of the battle survived in the local environment, and the social category of “memory guards” appeared to refer to those who understood their role in national and religious terms.

Besides sharing space for remembrance activities, the Church also created a place of this kind. An example is one of Poland’s most popular pilgrimage sites, which welcomed up to eight hundred thousand pilgrims in some years: the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows in Kałków.⁵⁴ The sanctuary is a site of memory commemorating the Polish nation’s twentieth-century martyrology. Its central place is the Golgotha of the Polish Nation, built in 1986. The Golgotha resembles a castle. The building is thirty-three meters high, surmounted by a fifteen-meter-high oak Cross of Salvation, visible from far away and illuminated at night. The building’s facade is embellished with twenty-two Polish coats of arms from various eras. The five-story stone building houses thirty chapels and oratories commemorating historical figures and events regarded as crucial for comprehending the Polish nation’s fate in the twentieth century. Their dedicatees comprise the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, important figures in the Polish Catholic Church and tragic events from communist times like the murder of nine miners in the Wujek Coal Mine or the deaths of shipyard workers during strikes on the Baltic coast in 1970. There are chapels dedicated to Poles murdered and incarcerated in the East, including the Polish officers murdered in Katyń. By the entrance to the Golgotha, there is an expansive exhibition devoted to Poles honored with the title “Righteous among the Nations” for saving Jews during World War II. According to the official interpretation presented on the sanctuary’s website:

The Golgotha was meant to commemorate the sacrifice of martyred Poles from ancient and modern times and to bear testimony to the fact that Poland has kept its faith in the Cross and the Gospel. Inside the Golgotha, the latest Polish history has been recorded. [...] In this, Christ’s Passion and the torments of the Polish nation merge into one.⁵⁵

World War II and communist era victims are presented as modern martyrs. Their example shapes models of morality, and their sacrifice demands commemoration and veneration. The concept of sacrifice is the key element linking the history of salvation and the nation. Religious and national memory are martyrological, for they focus on paying the ultimate sacrifice

54 Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper, *Milieus de Mémoire*.

55 <https://sanktuariumkalkow.pl/golgota-martyrologium-narodu-poskiego/>.

and its consequences defined by granting new life to other individuals and the community.

The incorporation of elements from Polish history into the religious narrative of the Savior's passion and resurrection is a nationwide phenomenon. Golgothas with a national flavor have appeared during the last three decades in other places in Poland; Tylicz in southeastern Poland hosts the Golgotha of the Beskids, Bydgoszcz (the capital of a province north of Warsaw)—the Golgotha of the Twentieth Century (known as the Bydgoszcz Calvary), Będzin (in southern Poland)—the Sanctuary of Golgotha of the East, Radzymin—the Calvary Road of the Polish Nation in commemoration of the deeds of Polish soldiers in 1920; Iwonicz-Zdrój (southern Poland, in the Low Beskid)—the Golgotha of the Polish Nation. Also, the Golgothas that include local elements in commemorating local crimes exist, like the Kashubian Golgotha in the woods close to Piaśnica Wielka (Baltic Sea coast). These Golgothas come in various forms. Sometimes they are a collection of commemorations referring to religious symbolism (such as the *Pietà*). In other places, they form the Way of the Cross, with all its stations included in the Catholic canon. Individual stations are accompanied by inscriptions, figures, and symbolic installations that refer to various events in Poland's history.

Notably, such memorials organized on church grounds are the only commemorations offering a comprehensive vision of Polish history and explaining its place in the world or even in the "divine plan." No museum in Poland comprehensively shows the history of Poland although the Museum of Polish History was opened in Warsaw on the site of the former Russian citadel. As of 2024, however, it still did not feature a permanent exhibition.

Institutional Sacralization: The Entanglement of National and Church History

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland has over a thousand years of history, closely related to the history of the Polish state.⁵⁶ This means that the history of the Church and its people is also an element of the history of Poland and the Poles. Today, particularly intense commemoration activities are undertaken about people and events from the Second World War and

⁵⁶ Even during communist times the Church took the lead in organizing important national events. For example, it organized the Millennium of the Polish State in 1966, which included three years of religious preparation activities that entailed the peregrination of the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, the most important icon for Polish Catholicism.

communism. The first, and most important person to be commemorated was Pope John Paul II, who, according to the art historian Monika Stobiecka, has been commemorated with seven hundred monuments all over Poland.⁵⁷ Moreover, the pope is commemorated in every Catholic temple in Poland with paintings or stained glass, while city streets, schools, and two universities bear his name.⁵⁸ In the Church narrative, the pope is presented as the most important Pole of the twentieth century, not only for religious reasons (as the head of the Church and a saint) but also for the history of the Polish state, as the leader of the Vatican who contributed to the creation of the Solidarity movement and the fall of communism in Poland and throughout Central Europe.⁵⁹

Moreover, a museum in Warsaw presents a coherent religious vision of the history of the Polish church in the twentieth century: the Museum of John Paul II and Primate Wyszyński in the Temple of Divine Providence. Primate Wyszyński led the Polish church in the most challenging times of communism; he was very close to John Paul II; and, most importantly, he was the Primate of the Millennium because it was during his pontificate that the Millennium of the Polish State and the baptism of Poland were celebrated. The narrative about these two men can be seen as martyrological as it is heroic and victorious. It is a victory for the Church and the entire Polish nation simultaneously. The assumption that God guided these people's lives leads to the conclusion that God also intervened in the fate of Poland, which brings us back to the basic idea of combining the history of Poland with the divine history of world salvation.

During the pontificate of John Paul II, many saints from all over the world were beatified and canonized, especially those persecuted during World War II. Among them were clergy and laypersons, but the Church focuses primarily on commemorating the former, among whom two figures come to the fore. Maksymilian Maria Kolbe was a Polish Conventual Franciscan

57 Oko, "Papież gigant."

58 The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow and the John Paul Catholic University of Lublin.

59 According to public opinion polls conducted in May 2022, after revealing numerous scandals in the Church, Pope John Paul II is still a moral authority for 81 percent of Polish society. CBOS, "O społecznym autorytecie Kościoła," 1–5. Moreover, after the broadcast of a journalistic report showing the ambivalent attitude of the pope in the times when he was still a diocesan bishop in Poland towards priests committing pedophilic acts, public opinion polls indicated that Polish society prefers that such journalistic investigations should not be conducted. In the survey carried out on March 20–23, 2023, 49 percent of respondents answered that the memory of John Paul II should be protected due to his merits, and 40 percent believed that journalists should deal with his past. See Oko, "Zostawcie Go w spokoju!"

friar, missionary, martyr, and Catholic saint who died in Auschwitz after sacrificing his life for that of another prisoner. In many places in Poland, there are monuments and places of worship related to Father Kolbe, and the first parish dedicated to him was erected in Kałków when the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows was later established.

The second person to be commemorated was a victim of the communist security apparatus: Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. He was the chaplain of the Warsaw branch of the Solidarity trade union who celebrated very popular masses “for the homeland” with an anti-communist message. He was murdered by security officers in 1984 and beatified in 2010. Monuments and other commemorations of Father Popiełuszko began to appear all over the country. However, the most important memorial site is in the church in Warsaw which was his last place of pastoral work. Near the church are a tomb and the priest’s statue, while the church crypt hosts a museum initiated almost immediately after the funeral by the priest and the people who knew Father Popiełuszko personally, which opened in its final form in 2004.⁶⁰ The museum narrative is closely related to the religious message by the symbols used and the arrangement of individual rooms that foreground Popiełuszko’s path from birth to martyrdom. Although the museum focuses on presenting the fate of one man, it constantly refers to the fate of his home country.

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland has an extensive structure: it owns over ten thousand parishes and over thirty-four thousand different types of buildings, including churches and chapels. Therefore, the Church is well-positioned to convey narratives about itself and its connection with the fate of Poland and present itself as a depository of national and religious values, promoting them not only in a traditional way through paintings, figures, masses, and pilgrimages but also by modern means, such as museums with contemporary installations. Commemorating oneself—by foregrounding famous people from the clergy—is an indispensable element that builds the institution’s identity and maintains its social position, aiming to highlight its meaning in the history of the Polish nation.

Future of the Sacralization of Memory: Conclusion

Today, the church in Poland is going through a crisis related to the disclosure of numerous scandals and the criticism of John Paul II, on whose myth the

60 Obrębska, “Muzeum ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki.”

Catholic Church in Poland has long built its authority and position. The younger generation's secularization, as observed by social researchers, is also associated with reluctance toward the institution of the Church. However, it does not always mean renunciation of faith but relegating it to the private sphere.⁶¹ Do these processes entail opposition to the sacralization of memory? Many sacred commemorations or places of remembrance with religious elements have already become a permanent part of the cultural landscape of Poland. Even nonreligious people can understand the meaning of religious signs and symbols thanks to their common usage. Referring to this religious language also means a bond with ancestors, previous generations, and their commemorative choices. Moreover, religious signs are not always perceived as signs of the institutional church. They can also be seen as signs of folk culture, a culture of laypersons who dealt with suffering and the past as they knew how: by referring to religion. Even if the youngest generation copes with suffering differently, they do not question the choices and feelings of previous generations. Moreover, in a situation where secularization primarily concerns the institutional and not the spiritual dimension, it is limited to criticizing the institutions of the church but not all religious elements. In interviews with the oldest generation in local communities, sometimes an opinion appears that young people do not want to get involved in commemorations based on the activities of church institutions (e.g., they do not want to order occasional masses or participate in them), but they pray in places of remembrance (such as collective graves or places of execution) and cherish the religious commemorations located there (crosses, figures) without questioning their meaning.⁶²

With the progressing secularization, the importance of the ideological aspect of the religious collective memory is decreasing. It is still strong in some social groups and closely associated with the church, but it is rather niche in public discourse. Although the image of Poland as an exceptional nation is still present, this exceptionality is no longer given a mystical character. Similarly, with the decreasing authority of the Catholic Church, the perception of this institution as a key actor in the field of memory is also changing. However, this does not mean that the clergy, previously commemorated and presented as role models, completely lose their authority. It can be hypothesized that clergy presented as heroes of collective memory due to their deeds and the sacrifice of their own lives have a better chance of maintaining their social position within the field of social memory than

61 Baniak, *Religia katolicka*; Mariański, "Religious Condition."

62 Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper, *Milieus de Mémoire*.

people from the church hierarchy, which is subject to increasingly harsh criticism.

The sacralization of memory in its symbolic and spatial dimensions is still vital in Polish society because it merges with the local and national identity to create a specific memory culture. Even if religious elements are perceived by many people not in the mystical and supernatural dimension, but in the dimension of ethnic, national, or local tradition, they can be reactualized in specific, liminal situations. Sacralized memory can therefore be seen as a resource to which political and cultural leaders and all members of society can appeal when seeking ways of emphasizing the uniqueness of their group, protecting its identity, or explaining tragic events.

According to Barbara Misztal, remembering has a spiritual dimension because, in modern social perception, it is related to ideas about the soul and identity, which may lead to the sacralization of memory.⁶³ This is a different kind of sacralization than the one in which the past is remembered through religious ideas, symbols, and institutions. However, both types of sacralization are closely related to traumatic memory, especially a death resulting from violence against members of our group, along with mass, collective, and organized deaths. Moreover, as time separates contemporary people from the traumatic events of the twentieth century, they remember the tragic events through social memory and the past generations' modes of remembrance through personal experience. Therefore, the secular language of memory can undergo renewed sacralization—not by direct reference to religion but to the culture of the remembering group shaped in the past by the religious ways of understanding the world.

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63 Misztal, "The Sacralization of Memory," 69.

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10. “This Is a Sacred Legend That No One Must Touch”: Narratives of Martyrdom and the Sacralization of History of World War II in Contemporary Russia

Maria Falina

Abstract: This chapter focuses on the use of the religious language of martyrdom regarding the history and memory of the Second World War in Russia. Paradoxically, even those actors that strive to pose counter-narratives free from state centrism remain within the symbolic realm of martyrdom, making it possible to maintain the master narrative of Russian history centered on the state. Despite the intent to promote private, personal memories of the war and open up the space for alternative memories, the initiative had the opposite effect and did not result in more critical reflections. Adopting a post-secular approach to analyzing the memory of state terror could offer insights into why Russian society has so far failed to address the central question of responsibility.

Keywords: Russia, Soviet Union, World War II, Russian Orthodox Church, martyrdom, immortal regiment

On December 28, 2021, the Supreme Court of Russia ruled that Memorial, one of the oldest civil society and human rights organizations in post-Soviet Russia, must cease operations. The prosecutor accused Memorial of creating a “false image of the Soviet Union as a terrorist state,” “denigrating the memory of the Great Patriotic War,” and “attempting to rehabilitate Nazi criminals.”⁶⁴ On February 24, 2022, Russia started a devastating mass-scale military invasion of Ukraine, citing the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine as its

64 Memorial, “Verkhovnyi Sud.”

primary objective. In retrospect, experts, but not necessarily the public, saw both events as the culmination of Russian domestic and foreign policies. However, both sent shock waves across Russia and the world.⁶⁵

The link between the two events runs deeper than their being part of the radicalization of Putin's authoritarian regime, which silences oppositional voices and attacks its perceived enemies at home and abroad. Both are part and parcel of Russian politics of history, as shown by repeated references to national socialism. The suppression and destruction of civil society organizations and initiatives, especially those actively and expertly documenting past and present state crimes and abuses of state power, is an integral part of an approach to history that Russia's official regime has promoted. Direct references to the Second World War used immediately before and during the first weeks of the war against Ukraine demonstrate that history matters and is an essential resource for political mobilization. In the spring of 2022, at the time this chapter was written, it was impossible to look at Russian politics, especially the Russian politics of history, through any lens other than the war in Ukraine.

History in post-Soviet and post-socialist countries is routinely used for political purposes, often in service of nationalist, right-wing populist politics.⁶⁶ This chapter does not discuss all aspects of Russian politics of history (already a subject of many excellent publications).⁶⁷ Instead, it focuses on one specific aspect—the sacralization of history. The term “sacralization of history” can describe a situation in which, in the public sphere, history is understood as a fixed narrative about the past. Simultaneously, this narrative is elevated to the level of the sacred. The sacralization of the nation, a widespread phenomenon in modern European history, follows a similar pattern and is often intertwined with the sacralization of history.⁶⁸

In the case of the sacralization of history in Russia, the expert knowledge of professional historians and archivists is often denied in favor of interpretations that support the authorities' agenda. This chapter will demonstrate how some historical narratives are based on the uncritical acceptance of officially sanctioned “irrefutable truths” instead of a critical

65 Coalson, “Memorial Shutdown.”

66 Koposov, *Memory Laws*. Koposov provides a detailed account of the politics of history and memory in post-Soviet Russia in the context of the “memory boom” in Europe.

67 Miller and Efremenko, *Politika Pamyati*; Miller and Lipman, *The Convolutions*; Koposov, *Memory Laws*; Eppe, *Neudobnoye proshloye*; Weiss-Wendt and Adler, *The Future*; Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

68 Schulze Wessel, *Nationalisierung*.

analysis of evidence. Public history is therefore transformed into a space free of doubt. It becomes a matter of belief. In Russia, over the past two decades, the possibility of having a critical conversation about the past has been curtailed, ultimately leading to extreme censorship and widespread self-censorship.⁶⁹ At the same time, the sacralization of history can describe a specific mechanism of state control over the public debate on historical themes. In this case, the veneration of heroes, the worship of martyrs, and the condemnation of enemies become the only sanctioned forms of public interaction with the past. Traditional religious institutions and communities may play an active role in this process, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and secular and using their authority to support a specific historical interpretation, thus essentially becoming actors of public history. As a result, there is little space left for critical inquiry, accountability, or justice. This second aspect, the sacralization of history as a mechanism of control, is this chapter's primary interest. The intention here is not to debunk old and new falsifications. Instead, the intention is to shed light on the reasons behind the acceptance of the well-documented distortions of historical facts as accurate by sections of the Russian public. It will do this by highlighting specific ways in which misleading historical narratives are used to legitimize the current political regime, including military aggression, and, at the same time, exploring how these narratives use religious language to strengthen their appeal.

Russian sacralization of history includes the development of a master narrative of past events and experiences, of which the Second World War is the most significant. Importantly, this narrative is characterized by the state's central role as a historical actor. This conception of history is promoted in school textbooks and public commemorations alike.⁷⁰ The state is seen as the main and often the only legitimate historical actor. While the more minor details of interpretations of specific events may vary, the resulting master narrative of Russian history is self-aggrandizing and often imperialist, although not necessarily explicitly so. Herein lies the justification for the state's right to oversee academic history writing, education, and public-facing historical projects. More than their right, in the eyes of Russian statesmen, it is their duty to control, regulate, and protect the "historical image" of the

69 In the Soviet period, history writing was also subject to strict ideological control and was not necessarily evidence-based. However, the premise of "Marxist-Leninist historical methodology" was that it is based on a scientific approach to the past. While history was important, the official ideology was future-oriented and did not derive its legitimacy solely from the past.

70 Brandenberger, "Promotion."

Russian state. These ideas are not new and have deep roots in the culture of Russian governance and state administration. As Koposov notes,

the idea of the state was central to the “conception of self” that typified Russian bureaucrats, who tellingly called themselves “the sovereign’s men” [*“slugi gosudarevy”*], but was even more characteristic of the secret services, whose representatives formed the core of the new president’s [Vladimir Putin’s] team.⁷¹

The glorification of the state, as captured perfectly in the very first line of the Russian national anthem, “Russia is our sacred state,” involves the glorification of key state agencies such as the army, or, less obviously, the secret services, and the veneration of Russian foreign victories. Notably, very little attention is paid to how those affected perceive these victories, making the master narrative state-centric. Cultural and scientific advances are presented as, first and foremost, the accomplishments of the Russian state, even when the state has actively undermined, persecuted, or killed the scientists and artists who created them.

Context: The Legal Framework

It is hardly a coincidence that the chief Russian negotiator at the failed peace talks with Ukraine in the spring of 2022 was the former minister for culture and self-fashioned historian Vladimir Medinsky. It is not his academic credentials that earned him this position but rather his support for and development of the Kremlin’s vision of Russian and Soviet history.⁷² Medinsky made his career as a public historian in part by popularizing the idea that it is necessary to put a “positive spin” on history for it to be used in the service of Russian state interests. The growing importance of history for the political legitimation of Putin’s regime since he became the head of state has been well documented.⁷³ The process was made possible and necessitated by introducing new legislation regulating historical

⁷¹ Koposov, *Memory Laws*, 240.

⁷² A member of the State Duma from 2008 to 2011, Medinsky published a highly successful three-volume study exposing negative stereotypes about Russia, including historical ones. Despite this widespread success, the academic community criticized his doctoral dissertation in history for not following the basic principles of historical research and for violations of academic integrity. Meduza, “Pochemu Vladimir Medinsky.”

⁷³ Kurilla, “Presentism.”

memory, increased control over history education, and the appearance of new institutional actors.

Only a few years after coming into power, Vladimir Putin clarified that he did not share his predecessor's lax approach to history. In 2004, the Ministry of Education revoked its recommendation and thus effectively removed from classrooms a textbook of Russian twentieth-century history. The ministry cited "inaccurate or prejudiced statements on Soviet and contemporary Russian history" as the reason. Unofficially, Putin was unhappy with the critical assessment of his presidency.⁷⁴ Curiously and, in retrospect, ominously, the All-Russian Council of the Veterans of the Great Patriotic War continued to criticize the textbook for its lack of patriotism and its prejudiced account of the war even after its removal from the recommended list. The following year, Putin announced that he considered "the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century."⁷⁵

The work to increase state control over history education continued. The so-called "Filippov textbook controversy" occurred in 2007–8 and concerned several publications by a team of authors, including textbooks and teacher's manuals.⁷⁶ The authors sought to "erase any harsh criticism of Russia's twentieth-century ruling regimes" by listing positive achievements next to more critical assessments.⁷⁷ Most critics focused on the positive assessment of Stalin, who was described as an "efficient manager."⁷⁸ In 2013, the efforts to create a single, streamlined account of Russian and Soviet history were renewed. Putin insisted on creating a narrative "free from internal contradictions." This was in line with other steps taken to regulate historical memory and, increasingly, historical production.

Regarding formal legislation regulating historical memory, Russia appeared to be playing catch-up rather than being a trendsetter. However, as the case of history textbooks demonstrates, the Russian government demonstrated interest in and means to engage in influencing the formation of historical memory even before the formal adoption of the Russian memory law in 2014, known as the "Yarovaya Act" after the name of State Duma deputy Irina Yarovaya, who formally introduced it. From 2009 to 2013, the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History at the Expense of Russian Interests was tasked with protecting Russian interests

74 Kachurovskaya, "Uchebniki"; Kurilla, "Presentism," 32.

75 President of the Russian Federation, "Address."

76 Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii*; Filippov, Danilov et al., *Istoriya*.

77 Kurilla, "Presentism," 32.

78 Kaposov, *Memory Laws*, 242.

in the emerging “memory wars.” The commission’s mandate was unclear. Its composition did not clarify its purpose either: out of the twenty-seven members, only three were historians. Commentators and scholars debated whether it was meant to increase state censorship and enforce a “Filippov style” narrative centered on the achievements of the state, oversee access to potentially embarrassing archival records, or defend the actions of the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War and to “refute historical revisionism that threatened to compromise the country’s interests abroad.”⁷⁹

The work to create a legal framework for regulating historical memory and reassessing Russia’s past, primarily its Soviet period, had started long before 2014 and was an important aspect of the Perestroika period. Despite the opening of the archives and the general availability of information about the crimes of the Soviet regime toward its own citizens, there was no legal judgment of the Soviet state, which remains an essential characteristic of the Russian transition to postcommunism.⁸⁰ Nikolay Koposov has discussed at length how, during the period of democratic reforms led by Boris Yeltsin, the competition between the communist, Russian nationalist, and democratic actors accounted for the government’s inability to pass definitive legislation.⁸¹ As a result, the Democrats’ memory laws of the 1990s “developed the tradition of anti-fascist legislation rather than that of decommunization,” which was the case in East Central European postcommunist states.⁸²

The 2014 law, adopted during the war in Eastern Ukraine, was meant to solidify domestic support for Putin, threatened by the futile but unprecedented in scale protests after the parliamentary elections in December 2011, and to help legitimize Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.⁸³ The law was just one of a series of changes that increased censorship in Russia, including online media, and the restriction to the point of impossibility of the activities of a wide range of NGOs labeled as “foreign agents.” The year 2014 was, in many respects, a turning point in Putin’s regime’s cultural politics, including its approach to history. The 2014 memory law added a new article to the penal code: Article 354.1, “On the Rehabilitation of Nazism.” Not unlike memory laws adopted in other European countries, the article criminalized the denial of historical facts and the justification

79 Brandenberger, “Promotion,” 201.

80 The only legal act containing direct official condemnation of the crimes of the Soviet regime is the law “On the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repressions,” adopted in October 1991. Epple, *Neudobnoye proshloye*, 35.

81 Koposov, *Memory Laws*, 207–37.

82 Ibid., 237; Koposov, “The Russian Memory Law.”

83 Koposov, *Memory Laws*, 207.

of the crimes established by the Nuremberg Tribunal. Unlike its European analogs, the Russian law also made punishable the public "dissemination of knowingly false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War," thus drawing an apparent distinction between the actions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. It also criminalized public disrespect of somewhat ill-defined "Russian military glory," memorial dates associated with the "defense of the fatherland," and "public desecration of the symbols of Russia's military glory."⁸⁴ In April 2021, the law was amended to make the suggested punishments harsher and to include "veterans of the Great Patriotic War" and "the memory of the defenders of the fatherland" alongside the actions of the Soviet Union and the military symbols that need to be protected from desecration and insult.⁸⁵

Using religious language, i.e., "desecration," opened the door to the sacralization of history that was not accidental. In 2013, in the wake of the Pussy Riot trial, the Russian Duma adopted a much-criticized law that criminalized the "offence of the feelings of believers" and made it possible for the guilty party to be imprisoned for up to three years. Extending the same principle to symbols of historical and national significance made sense in the logic of the authoritarian regime that turned more nationalist, imperialist, and socially conservative. It is difficult to disagree that "the Russian memory law can be regarded as an extreme case of the deplorable Eastern European tendency of using such legislation for the protection of national narratives because it openly endorses the memory of an oppressive regime against that of its victims."⁸⁶

The Second World War

Adopting new legislation, establishing an institutional framework, and elevating history to a more prominent place in the public sphere resulted in solidifying and promoting a more streamlined version of twentieth-century Russian history that brushed over the problematic events and periods. The centerpiece of this narrative is the Soviet victory over Nazism in the Second World War. The war myth, or the victory myth, presents the victory as a foundational event in Russian history. Like most examples of foundational myths, it is polyphonic. It would be an oversimplification to label it as only

84 Russian Federation, Article 354.1 of the Penal Code.

85 Ibid.

86 Kaposov, "The Russian Memory Law," 205.

one thing. It is, however, possible to explore how the war and the victory are narrated and commemorated and how the Russian state gradually took control over the historical narrative, marginalizing and eventually censoring voices it deemed subversive.

As a foundational myth, the war myth has several important functions: it allows for the whitewashing of Soviet history by marginalizing state terror and shifting the focus to the “positive achievements” of the Soviet regime. It also allows Russia, as the heir of the Soviet Union, to claim the position of the moral high ground as the victor over the ultimate evil of the twentieth century. These reasons combined, the victory is the source of national pride and an essential glue that holds an otherwise divided society together. It also legitimizes Putin’s imperial ambition, which, in turn, is meant to rekindle the image of Russia as great power and solidify the widespread support for his regime.⁸⁷

The contemporary Russian war myth retains important aspects of the myth established in the Soviet Union. In 1965, after two decades of no official celebration except for 1945–46, Victory Day, marked by the Soviet Union and in today’s Russia on May 9, was reinstated as a public holiday. The Great Patriotic War replaced the Revolution and the Civil War as the formative historical experience. As Nina Tumarkin notes, “in its idealized form, the war had everything: violence, drama, martyrdom, success, and a chic global status.”⁸⁸ The victory and the war myth served as useful foundations of the ideological construction meant to hold the Soviet colossus together when the ideological fever of the first decades of the Soviet experiment had waned. Similarly, after many failed attempts to establish new rituals and invented traditions in post-Soviet Russia, the authorities turned to the Great Patriotic War as their prime source of a usable past.⁸⁹ The victory and the myth of the Great Patriotic War emerged as the near-universally shared elements of the new Russian identity.

87 For a broad overview of the functions of history writing and memories of WWII in Europe, see Echternkamp and Martens, *Experience*.

88 Tumarkin, “The Great Patriotic War,” 600.

89 None of the national holidays introduced after 1991 enjoy the same level of acceptance as Victory Day; they remain national only in the sense of being present in the calendar. A “Day of Agreement and Reconciliation” was marked on November 7 from 1996 to 2004 and was meant to replace the October Revolution Day. In 2005 the holiday was moved to November 4 and is now called “Day of National Unity.” “Independence Day,” officially known as the “Day of Russia,” is marked on June 12. “Constitution Day,” marked on December 12, ceased being a public holiday in 2005.

Although it was used consistently for political purposes, the memory and narrative of the war differed strikingly between the Yeltsin and Putin eras. In the 1990s, Russian officials spoke from an anti-Soviet point of view. However, since the 2000s,

a new emphasis was placed on the idea of the continuity of the thousand-year-old Russian state, and the critical attitude toward the Soviet past has given way to its selective appropriation. Instead of double victimhood at the hands of the Nazi and Soviet regimes alike, the theme of mass heroism and suffering as the enormous price paid for the victory took up a central position in the official canon of commemoration.⁹⁰

New rituals and commemorative practices placed the victory—but not necessarily the war itself—at the center of the ideological construction. These practices sought to create social and national cohesion in Russia, promote Russia as a global power, and increasingly revive Russian imperial ambitions. The new cult of victory included an increased emphasis on the military, for example, during the Victory Day parades; more active involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC); and the proliferation of various grassroots and digital initiatives aimed at the preservation of personal and societal memories but also of the Soviet legacy.⁹¹ This process was accompanied by a lack of concern for the lives lost unless this loss could serve a current political interest. It is remarkable that the forensic work of recovery and identification of the remains of the fallen soldiers continues to this day and that the estimate of military losses (let alone civilian losses) remains just that, an estimate.⁹² As the following sections will show, the war, its memory, and its outcomes are presented as sacred. However, is it, to quote a popular wartime patriotic song, “the people’s war, a sacred war”?⁹³

90 Malinova, “Political Uses,” 65.

91 Bernstein, “Remembering War.”

92 The Soviet leadership chose to “fix” the losses at 20 million and later amended the number to 27 million. Contemporary researchers cite “24–27 million premature deaths and the best part of 3 million other Soviet citizens who were displaced by the war and never returned to the USSR.” Stephen Lovell, *The Shadow of War*. The official database run by the Ministry of Defense is regularly updated with new data (<https://obd-memorial.ru/html/>).

93 “The Sacred War” (“Svyachshennaya voyna,” also known as “Arise, Great Country!”) is one of the most famous Soviet wartime songs, the lyrics by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach and the music composed by Alexander Alexandrov, the author of the Soviet national anthem. The first verse and the chorus go: “Vstavay strana ogromnaya, / Vstavay na smertnyy boy / S fashistskoy siloy tyomnoy, / S proklyatoyu ordoy. / Pust’ yarost blagorodnaya / Vskipayet, kak volna! / Idyot voyna narodnaya, / Svyashchennaya voyna!” (“Arise, vast country, / Arise for a fight to the death

The more the state invested in it, the more the war became impersonal. From a heroic feat of individuals, it turned into an achievement of the impersonal state.

The Narrative of Martyrdom

Since the early 2000s, the official commemorative practice has moved far from mourning human losses and honoring the respectful but painful memory of the dead to the uncritical glorification of victory. The new approach to war combines two critical components: first, the notion that the victory constitutes the greatest, universally significant historical achievement of the Soviet Union, of which the Russian Federation is the rightful heir; and second, the martyrdom of those who died for this cause. Following the definition suggested by the philosopher Aleksey Zygmunt, martyrdom is understood to consist of two parts: the cause (Why did the person suffer and/or die?) and the narrative (How is the story of their suffering created, maintained, and performed through linguistic and symbolic means?).⁹⁴ One or both components can be religious, secular, or mixed. Whether a specific case is classified as religious or secular, one does not criticize martyrs for what they may have done; one can only venerate them. When applied to the Russian context, this meant the impossibility of a critical discussion of the actions of the fallen soldiers that preceded their deaths. Moreover, it became harder to critically discuss the actions of those who survived.⁹⁵ If one were to criticize the living, what would that mean for the memory of the fallen?

Herein lies a key mechanism that allows the Russian politics of history to be successful. As long as the Soviet (or Russian) dead of the Second World War are considered martyrs, there can be no criticism of the Soviet army's actions, nor can there be a meaningful discussion of whether their deaths and suffering could have been avoided. These two aspects combined make it possible to put a positive spin on the catastrophic cost paid by the citizens of the Soviet Union and ignore the crimes of the Soviet regime. This may help explain why there is so little reflection in state-funded popular culture of the

/ Against the dark fascist force, / Against the cursed horde. / Let noble wrath / Boil over like a wave! / This is the people's war, / A sacred war!").

94 Zygmunt, "Suchshestvuet li," 259.

95 One such theme is the mass rapes perpetrated by the Soviet Army in Germany and Central Europe. While it is one of the central lines of memory in Central Europe, it is barely mentioned in Russia. For the case of Hungary and the complex dynamic of memory of gendered violence, see Mark, "Remembering Rape"; Pető, "Women as Victims."

complex nature of warfare, the ugliness of the war, and its inevitable human cost. This contrasts sharply with the series of powerful and complex cultural representations of the war from the late Soviet era, be it in literature or film.

The martyrdom of the Soviet soldiers is presented quite stereotypically in the 2010 feature film *The Brest Fortress* (directed by Aleksandr Kott). Loosely based on real events, the movie tells the story of the heroic struggle and death of the defenders of the Soviet Union in one of the first battles with the Wehrmacht. The film had remarkable success in Russia, almost matching Nikita Mikhalkov's epic and very expensive *Burnt by the Sun II* released the same year. *The Brest Fortress* delivered a clear message of martyrdom and, as explained by a commentator, "is a story about the great destiny of great people who, by their sacrifice, restore their own humanity and the mankind, and rebirth themselves as a nation."⁹⁶ Clearly, thinking of the soldiers as martyrs allows the Russian public to reinforce their belief in the war's great cause and the victory's universal significance.⁹⁷

Another example of war martyrdom, with a long afterlife and continued presence in the Russian public discourse and media landscape, is the legend of the Panfilov heroes. According to the account published by the military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*, on November 16, 1941, twenty-eight soldiers from General Panfilov's division met their heroic deaths near the village of Dubosekovo, just over a hundred kilometers east of Moscow after having stopped the attack by an entire German tank division. The story was well publicized immediately after its publication and would continue to "thrive for decades as an important component of the Soviet myth of World War II."⁹⁸ When several "martyrs" turned up alive, the military started an investigation. In May 1948, the chief military prosecutor Nikolay Afanasyev completed his report, which showed that hundreds of soldiers were involved in the battle and that the posthumous newspaper account, including the famous words, "Russia, is vast. Yet, there is nowhere to retreat—Moscow is behind us!" was a fabrication. To complicate the story further, one of the supposed martyrs was tried after the war for collaboration.

In June 2015, the Russian State Archive published Afanasyev's declassified report on its website. Instead of resolving the issue, it created a new controversy and eventually led to the resignation of the head of the

96 Krupnov, "Brestskaya krepost."

97 On the concept of martyrdom and the discourse of victimhood and suffering in contemporary Russian cinema, see Binder, "Rethinking History."

98 Brunstedt, *The Soviet Myth*, 2.

State Archive.⁹⁹ Russian state authorities doubled down and continued to maintain the martyrdom narrative. Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky enthusiastically supported a new feature film based on the myth, and, on multiple occasions, called the twenty-eight Panfilov heroes “saints.” He added that those who doubt their sacrifice and heroism and are trying to find inaccuracies in the account are not much different from the heroes’ killers. According to Medinsky, even if the account of their actions has been entirely made up, it is nonetheless “a sacred legend that no one must touch.”¹⁰⁰ The state Duma deputies continue to mark the memory of the Panfilov heroes with a minute of silence.¹⁰¹

This case demonstrates the power of the martyrdom narrative. It reveals some of the contradictions that arise when the sacralization of history is combined with the erosion of civil society and democratic freedoms. Once included in the sacred narrative of the past, a proven falsification must be protected and remain unchallenged. The legislation nominally intended to protect the public from falsified historical accounts of the war applies only to facts approved by the state. Did the Panfilov heroes exist? Yes, but not the twenty-eight whose memory has been preserved. These martyrs exist purely as symbols of sacrifice, not as real humans made of flesh and blood. How it fits with the fact that the remains of the tens of thousands of fallen soldiers are still unlocated and unidentified is a question for another time.

In order to strengthen the martyrdom narrative, the Russian authorities engaged the assistance of the ROC, thus going full circle and bringing the secular martyrs into the fold of a religious organization. The images of the Panfilov heroes found their way onto the outside walls of the main cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, constructed in 2018–20 on the territory of the “Patriot” military-memorial complex in the Moscow region. The deputy chair of the synodal department for the Church’s relations with society and mass media, Vakhtang Kipshidze, stated that the images were, in fact, “not icons or religious images.” Rather confusingly, he insisted that the Church does not support the religious veneration of the Panfilov heroes, but instead, “the images should be interpreted as a symbol of heroism, of soldiers’ self-sacrifice.”¹⁰² While the Russian church does not consider the twenty-eight canonical saints,

99 GARE, “On the 28 Panfilov Heroes.”

100 BBC News Russian, “Medinsky.”

101 Russian State Duma, “Deputaty pochtily pamyat’.”

102 BBC News Russian, “Boy 28 panfilovtsev.”



Fig. 10.1. Bas-relief depicting the Panfilov heroes on the wall of the main cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in "Patriot" Park, Moscow region. Photographed by Maria Falina.

it obviously approves of and supports their secular cult, thus blurring the boundary between Christian and secular martyrs.

This is not the first time that the ROC and religion, more generally, have entered the commemorations of the Second World War in contemporary Russia. While mourning the dead, especially fallen soldiers, has a long and rich Christian tradition in Europe, the religious aspect of commemorations was marginalized in the militantly atheist Soviet Union. The comeback of religious commemorative practices in the post-Soviet period is unsurprising, given the rise of religiosity and growing interest in Russian religious traditions in the 1990s. However, it did evolve to create a somewhat incoherent set of practices, many ideologized.¹⁰³ The Victory Park memorial complex, built in Moscow in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the victory in 1995, is one such example. Aesthetically contested and openly military in character, the

103 Knorre and Zygmunt emphasize the militarist imagery and rhetoric characteristic of the more conservative (and nationalistic) Russian Orthodox public actors in the last decade. Knorre and Zygmunt, "Militant Piety." Other scholars point to the lack of a coherent theological position in Eastern Orthodox Christianity regarding the ethical issues posed by war and violence. Hamalis and Karras, *Orthodox Christian*.



Fig. 10.2. The Victory Park memorial complex on Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow. Credit: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0, <https://www.mos.ru/legal/rules/>. Attribution: Mos.ru.

Victory Park complex reveals, among other things, the symbolic confusion of the 1990s. The addition of the Russian Orthodox Chapel of St. George, a synagogue and a mosque supplemented the original Soviet era architectural designs. Curiously, only the mosque seems to have become the center of a lively religious community, probably because of the shortage of mosques and prayer houses in Moscow, given the size of its Muslim population. Apart from the three temples, the central obelisk combines the statue of the goddess Nike on top and the figure of St. George slaying the dragon at the bottom. To add to the symbolic cacophony, Victory Park is routinely used for socialization and public entertainment. It is a popular location for high school graduates to celebrate the end of the school year, for photo shoots of newlyweds, open-air concerts, and mass demonstrations, usually in support of Putin's regime.

A Cause to Defend and Remember

The notion that Russia has always represented the forces of good and fought against the absolute evil of Nazism and fascism is at the core of the Russian sacralization of history. As Alexander Agadjanian describes it:

[T]he victory tends to be seen as a sacrificial experience of global relevance, or the quintessential example of purposeful suffering. [...] The triumph of the victory tends to be interpreted in terms of redemption for all the sufferings of the century, including the atrocities of the Stalinist

terror. The evils of the Gulag, Holodomor, Katyn, mass ethnic deportations, and so on all seem to be redeemed through the victory over the greater evil of Nazism.¹⁰⁴

It is the sacred cause for which Soviet heroes and martyrs died and suffered and for which contemporary Russia is prepared, or so the authorities would have us believe, to fight again should such a need arise. In this context, the otherwise baffling appearance of bumper stickers reading "To Berlin!" and "We can do it again" on cars in many Russian cities makes sense. The public accepts this cause as worthy and is ready, at least symbolically, to accept the necessity of a new sacrifice.

Ironically, in early 2022, as Ivan Krastev noted, "the myth of the Soviet Union and the heroic fight against the Nazis is not, in fact, embodied by Putin, but by [the president of Ukraine] Zelensky."¹⁰⁵ Russian propaganda has consistently used the rhetoric of the fight against Nazism and the memory of the victory to expose critics of the regime as enemies of Russia and to justify Russia's imperial ambitions, including military aggression against Ukraine. The problem, however, is that to maintain the belief that the Soviet Union and the Soviet army were forces for good, it is necessary to curate the historical narrative of the war that refutes any challenges to it. Focusing on martyrdom makes it easier to overlook historical inconsistencies and evidence contradicting the universal narrative of good fighting evil.

In light of this, the chronology of the war becomes important. In the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, the part of the Second World War that is remembered is called the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45. The events of 1939–41 that preceded Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union are not included in the war narrative and hence are not commemorated. Although not officially taboo, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet occupation of Poland and the Baltic states are marginalized.¹⁰⁶ Any critical, in-depth discussion of Soviet military campaigns in 1939–41 and the imposition of the Soviet regime on the occupied territories is muted. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as censorship and a straightforward denial of Soviet aggression. This is how the situation is perceived in Eastern and Central Europe.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, the absence of public condemnation could

104 Agadjanian, "Religion and Collective Memory," 37.

105 Gorris, "Interview."

106 Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars."

107 For a conceptual framing and a discussion of the Estonia case see, e.g., Astrov, "The 'Politics of History.'"

indicate not a denial of the pact's existence per se but a desire to avoid having a difficult conversation that would inevitably raise the issue of accountability, an unwillingness to face this problematic past and engage in critical introspection.

The new concept for the Filippov history textbook published in 2007 included the assessment of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact as generally positive. The authors argued that the alternative would have been a “similar agreement between Germany and England,” which would have meant a unified anti-Soviet western front—a negative outcome.¹⁰⁸ The authors make a relativist argument and point out that democratic England and France were also culpable in entering into agreements with Nazi Germany. According to this interpretation, the agreement's true historical significance was that it elevated the Soviet Union to the level of great European powers that make decisions about the fate of Europe. A broadly similar interpretation was presented a decade later by Medinsky, who called the pact a Soviet “diplomatic triumph.”¹⁰⁹ This historical narrative of the Second World War, intertwined with the history of Soviet crimes, understandably led to a series of “memory wars” between Russia and several post-socialist states, notably Poland, Ukraine, and the three Baltic states.¹¹⁰

Inside Russia, the narrative of the Great Patriotic War as a just defensive war has won over the more nuanced and complex narrative of the long Second World War, in which the Soviet Union was an ally of Nazi Germany from 1939 to 1941. The actions of the Soviet army in Europe in 1945 are presented as liberation, not occupation. The crimes against civilians committed by the Soviet army were silenced. New legislation was introduced in 2021–22 to make punishable by fine or arrest the equivalence of the actions of the USSR and Nazi Germany and “the denial of the leading role of the Soviet people in defeating Nazi Germany and of the humanitarian mission of the Soviet Union during the liberation of European states.”¹¹¹ When introducing the bill in May 2021, one of its authors, Elena Yampolskaya, refuted any accusations of censorship and underlined the need to protect the historical memory from desecration. She insisted that certain “historical and moral axioms,” red lines cannot be crossed: “the Soviet army was a liberator and hence a benefactor of Europe. [...] The equivalence of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany is criminal and blasphemous.”¹¹² The use of religious language strengthens the overall case.

108 Prosveshcheniye, “O kontseptsii.”

109 Medinsky, “Diplomaticheskii triumf SSSR.”

110 Miller and Lipman, *The Convolutions*.

111 State Duma, Transcript of the debate on law no. 166218-7.

112 Ibid.

Scholars of memory point out that since 2014, post-Soviet memory politics have acquired a new dimension: "the emergence and, in some cases, the cultivation of what amounts to a new temporality in which elements of the past and present are fused together and linear historical time collapses."¹¹³ The most widely discussed aspect is the weaponization and abuse of the terms "genocide" and "Nazism" by Russia, which have been used to justify military aggression against Ukraine.¹¹⁴ Another mechanism of this fusion, which seems to encounter less critical reflection, is the extension of the language of martyrdom developed for the Great Patriotic War to contemporary events. A case in point is an installation dedicated to children who were victims of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014–15. The installation presents two-dimensional figures of white angels with the names of the dead children engraved on them circling high over a set of damaged swings and children's toys and is a central part of the exhibition *Ordinary Nazism*, "dedicated to the history of the emergence and development of the Ukrainian version of Nazism from its inception to the present day," at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow.¹¹⁵

A war narrative with clear dividing lines between good and evil has also pushed aside not only critical academic analyses but also more nuanced and complex private memories.¹¹⁶ The official narrative places the Russian or Soviet state at the very center. There is no history outside of state structures. As Nikita Petrov, one of the leaders of the now-disbanded Memorial, observed, "the past, complete with the notion of a sacral, all-powerful state, in particular, is making a strong comeback in Russia."¹¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, this persistent and ultimately successful work to claim the memory of the Second World War as the memory of state victory prompted the development of an alternative commemorative counter-practice that centers on the memory of individual wartime experiences.

The grassroots initiative "The Immortal Regiment" originated in 2012 in the Siberian city of Tomsk, met with remarkable nationwide success, and was very quickly appropriated by the authorities, who took control over the organization, thus undermining its very foundation—the need to carve out a space for the personal, familial connection to the war. The meaning of the new ritual has been debated both by the Russian public and scholars of

113 Fedor et al., "Introduction," 5.

114 Segal, "Putin."

115 Victory Museum, *Ordinary Nazism*.

116 Personal memories of the war have been at odds with the official narrative since the war's end. See Merridale, *Ivan's War*.

117 Petrov, "The Soviet Past," 71.

memory and politics of history.¹¹⁸ The Immortal Regiment came into existence out of the organizers' desire to give the war veterans a visible place in the Victory Day celebrations, most of whom had passed away by then. It is a notable attempt to reclaim the victory in the Second World War for the people and to move the historical limelight from the state to the individual. It is also a reflection of the acceptance of the general premise of the war myth and the cause of Soviet martyrdom, made ever more apparent by the format of the counter-practice—a solemn column of people walking while holding up high enlarged photographs of their (by now mostly dead) family members as though they were icons at a religious procession. While resisting the state takeover of “people’s memory,” this counter-commemoration strengthens the idea of the martyrdom of the Russian/Soviet people and thus can smoothly enter the space of the sacralization of history. Importantly, it does not strive to create and maintain an open and critical conversation about the war. With or without state backing, the Immortal Regiment initiative made its own contribution to the sacralization of history in Russia. With the increased popularity of the movement, the processions now include other images (of Stalin and, strangely enough, of the last Russian tsar, Nicolas II) and actual icons. Aleksandr Volkov, the chairman of the information committee of the Moscow diocese, noted that it was perfectly appropriate to participate in the procession with an icon of a Russian warrior saint, e.g., St. George, if no family portrait was available.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

Regarding broader issues of Russian memory politics and dealing with the complicated past, one of the central yet unresolved challenges is the question of responsibility. Arseniy Roginskiy (one of the founders of Memorial) observed that the most important part of the memory of terror is about the victims: “It is all about the victims. We all remember the victims, or at least we are willing to remember them. [...] On that, there is a national consensus. But there is no agreement on who the culprit is.”¹²⁰ He also acknowledged that historically and in public memory, it is not easy to separate victims from perpetrators due to the very nature of the terror that easily moves a person

118 Dahlin, “Known and Unknown Soldiers”; Fedor, “Memory, Kinship”; Kurilla, “The ‘Immortal Regiment.’”

119 RIA Novosti, “Svyashchennik.”

120 NIODFilm, “Legacies of the Gulag.”

from one category to another. This raises questions about who and how to remember and mourn.¹²¹ Without going into a detailed discussion of the memory of Soviet state terror, which has received more scholarly attention than the memory of the Second World War, it is important to critically assess the place and role of religious languages, concepts, and rituals when it comes to the analysis of commemorative practices, especially in light of the dilemma presented by Roginskiy—the need to remember not only the victims but also the perpetrators.

Post-secular approaches to history and memory studies have gained prominence in the last two decades. This chapter shares the assumption that it is imperative to “show that religious elements are intertwined within different networks of the individual, collective, cultural, and public memories of today’s secularized societies, and it is this nexus that is deserving of further analysis and understanding.”¹²² As this chapter demonstrates, acknowledging religion’s importance goes beyond including religious institutions in the list of memory actors. It makes a case for the need to include the use of religious rhetoric and concepts in the analysis of the politics of history, in particular, the analysis of public history. Religious concepts and rhetoric are often used by secular actors, e.g., by politicians, who use them to increase the appeal of their message to the public and legitimize the otherwise questionable means by describing the aims as sacred.

The central place of the memory and history of the Second World War in the sacralization of history in Russia is clear. The war offers multiple examples of heroism, sacrifice, and martyrdom and has been used by the Russian authorities to establish strict rules that govern public history. The forced closure of Memorial referenced in the opening of this chapter was rhetorically supported by the accusations of the desecration of the memory of the Soviet Union and its victory. Thus, the impact of the sacralization of the history of the Second World War goes beyond its history. The question, then, arises: What does the sacralization of history mean for other aspects of Russian history and memory of the twentieth century, most notably state terror?

When it comes to the Russian politics of memory, the analysis of the intersection between religion and memory has focused chiefly on the forms of commemoration and the relationship between the ROC and the state as key actors in the process. However, this relationship does not fit easily into one model. Firstly, “in the light of the lack of government willingness to

121 Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

122 Bogumil and Yurchuk, “Introduction,” 11.

commemorate the victims of political repressions, which in turn creates a vacuum of coherent secular commemorative language, the ROC has grown in stature as an actor shaping collective memory,” write the researchers of Russian commemorative practices and languages, suggesting that the Church played a leading role.¹²³ Meanwhile, Agadjanian notes that

within the context of a close ideological partnership with Putin’s regime, the Church has been trying to avoid direct confrontation with the state by using the official political memory agenda based on narratives of triumph, sacrifice for the sake of humanity, national continuity, and perennial conservative values.¹²⁴

This suggests that the state set the tone, not the Church. Both interpretations point to a complex relationship that cannot be reduced to one actor leading another.

The ROC accepted and promoted the martyrdom model of remembrance when it started canonizing the priest-victims of the Soviet regime as “new martyrs” (*“novomuchenniki”*). It allowed the Church to remember without the need to engage with issues of historical accountability, understood as a force “binding individuals with each other and with governments, organizations, and society across time and space.”¹²⁵ Focus on the victims and martyrs of the Soviet regime allowed the ROC to take little notice of its own relationship with the state in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The post-Soviet Russian state, in turn, has willingly accepted this model, further exempting the state from having to reckon with what it did.

This study suggests that the “sacralization of history” as an analytical tool allows for a similarly nuanced approach to analyzing languages and concepts used in the politics of history and memory. This analysis acknowledges religion’s power and potential for mass commemorations and mass mobilization when employed by secular and religious actors alike.

The successful use of the religious language of martyrdom regarding the history and memory of the Second World War is a case in point. Even those actors that attempt counternarratives remain within the symbolic realm of martyrdom, such as in the case of the Immortal Regiment, making it possible to maintain the master narrative of Russian history centered on the state. Thus, despite the declared intent to promote private, personal

123 Bogumil et al., “Sacred or Secular?,” 1422.

124 Agadjanian, “Religion and Collective Memory,” 39.

125 Cox and Wallace, *Archives*, 4.

memories of the war, the initiative contributed to the opposite because of its unreflected use of religious language. Perhaps adopting post-secular approaches to analyzing the memory of state terror could offer insights into why Russian society has so far failed to address the central question of responsibility. For example, why do many civic initiatives, such as "The Last Address"¹²⁶ with all their achievements, not offer an alternative to the image of the Soviet citizens as victims of the totalitarian regime who bear no responsibility for its crimes?

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11. Passion According to Nationalists

Martyrs for Faith and the Sacralization of History in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire and in Post-Soviet Estonia

Irina Paert

Abstract: The chapter focuses on the politics of canonization and commemoration of martyrs by the Orthodox churches in the Russian Empire and post-Soviet Estonia. It compares two case studies: the martyrdom of St. Isidor of Iur'ev (fifteenth century), whose cult was revived in the Riga diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in the late imperial period, and that of Ivan Lagovskii, whose execution by the NKVD in 1940 was reinterpreted as martyrdom by the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church–Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EAOOC) in 2011. The chapter argues that these two canonizations were forms of sacralization, such as sacralization of territory and sacralization of person. Comparing the two case studies, the chapter demonstrates that sacralization of territory was more characteristic for St. Isidor's case, while the sacralization of person underlie the project of new martyrs, carried by the EAOOC.

Keywords: martyrdom, Russian Empire, Estonia, Russian Orthodox Church, Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, sacralization of person, sacralization of territory

On December 1, when Orthodox believers commemorate the saints of Estonia, priests present a special icon for veneration. The icon is called “The Council of Saints of the Estonian Land.” As there are two Orthodox jurisdictions in Estonia, the Estonian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (EOC-MP) and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church–Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EAOOC), recounting the names of different patriarchs

at the liturgy, the saints depicted on these special icons are also different.¹ St. Isidor of Iur'ev, a priest-martyr martyred in the fifteenth century, is depicted in the center of the icon produced by the EOC-MP. Seventy figures of his parishioner comartys stand behind him. The EAOC celebrates the day of all saints in Estonia on the first Sunday after Pentecost. There is no special icon such as the council of all saints of Estonia, but there are icons of new martyrs, those Orthodox Christians who perished during the Soviet period. This chapter will discuss different strategies of sacralization that can be found in the Church's canonizations of saints.

Estonia, deemed one of the least religious countries in Europe, does not initially appear to be the best model for examining religious forms and sacralization.² It would be more appropriate to focus on the national flag, the song festival, and the Estonian language to explore how modern political phenomena resemble religious rituals and communities.³ Yet, the focus here is on the religious institutional practice of church canonization, which can be understood as different from secular sacralization. The argument here is that the nineteenth-century renewal in the veneration of martyrs and the post-Soviet emphasis on martyrs under the Soviet regime were both modern phenomena that are difficult to separate from discourses in the secular sphere. This approach will allow us to understand the process of sacralization and resacralization of the memory of martyrs in Estonia during the twentieth century and broaden our understanding of how the cult of martyrs is used to sacralize religious communities and networks.

This chapter will focus on sacralization through the canonization of martyrs, bringing two case studies from the period: the first when Estonia was one of the borderlands of the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century, and the second from contemporary independent Estonia in the 2000s. Both cases deal with the process of canonization—a kind of institutional sacralization that has been widely discussed in the literature. Gregory Freeze has shown how the canonizations of saints in the late imperial era aimed at legitimizing the imperial regime during the political crisis, trying to find a base in popular piety.⁴ The canonizations of 1917–18 by the Council of the Orthodox Church in Russia (ROC) responded to the political violence of the

1 As of August 20, 2024, the EOC-MP has dropped the addition “MP” from its title and has modified its church statute. But for the sake of clarity we use EOC-MP in this chapter.

2 The work has been supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1599. On Estonia's secularization, see Altnurme, *Old Religion, New Spirituality*.

3 Paulmann, “Sacralization,” 293–303. Also Graf, “Sakraltransfer,” 748–49.

4 Freeze, “Subversive Piety.”

Bolshevik revolution and, through the traditional ecclesiastical act, gave a precise evaluation of the political events.⁵ The canonization of Nicholas II and his family by the Council of the ROC in 2000 was highly controversial.⁶ Having been interpreted as a compromise with the conservative section of the ROC, the critics emphasize the persistence of the sacralized figure of the monarch in Russian history and the widespread religious culture of the *tsarebozhie* (divine royalty cult).⁷ Other scholars point out that, apart from the conservative monarchist trend, there was a broader public investment to commemorate the political murder of the royal family, which embraced various colors of the political spectrum.⁸ The attempts of the churches to sacralize the past and use history for the purposes of religious cults are never free from the influence of secular discourses and practices.⁹ In this respect, it is vital to show the mutual influences between political and religious discourses in the process of sacralizing the past, as the scholars of religion and nationalism demonstrated in their work.¹⁰

Another focus of this chapter will be on institutional practices rather than the popular reception of martyrs. The process of recognizing a person as a martyr has evolved since the early Christian era, when the term “martyr” (from the Greek *martyrs*, meaning a “witness”) acquired a theological meaning. The recognition of someone as a martyr by the Church was accompanied by special liturgical practices, such as having the names of martyrs commemorated during the liturgy and on the anniversary of the martyr’s *dies natalis*. The *passio* of the saint was read in church as part of the commemoration, and the account of his or her death became a part of *acta martyrium*. Institutional practices also included the involvement of authority.¹¹ The canonization process often started with a local bishop, but it required the approval of a special commission for canonizations at the level of the local church. Sometimes the civil authorities were also involved.¹²

Canonization is an example of collective self-sacralization, which is an anthropological phenomenon—meaning that the symbolic world shapes human beings both physically and in the environments they inhabit. This

5 Semenenko-Basin, *Sviatost*, 63–64.

6 See, for example, Rousslet, “Constructing Moralities.”

7 Zygmunt, “O fenomene.”

8 Kormina, “Imperator osmatrival gorod.”

9 Bogumił and Łukaszewicz, “Between History and Religion.”

10 Berezhnaya and Schmitt, “Introduction.”

11 Delahaye, *Les passions*; Kemp, *Canonization*.

12 Caridi, *Making Martyrs*, chap. 1.<

study follows sociologist Hans Joas's concept of self-sacralization. The thesis traces the collective self-sacralization of tribal societies to the sacralization of kings and other rulers, the sacralization of the people or nationhood, and the sacralization of the individual through the notion of individual human rights.¹³ This concept helps to answer the question of why the Church needs to have special rituals and procedures for the canonization of a saint whom God already endows with the grace and charisma of sainthood. The Church does not confer sacredness through the ritual recognition of the dead person's sanctity by declaring him or her a saint since this is God's work. The ritual of canonization is essentially a self-sacralization of the community that worships the saint in question, who becomes an intercessor for this community before God. Therefore, this chapter will contribute to the debate on sacralization and the entanglement of secular and sacred in modern religious practices, focusing on the Orthodox Church's canonization practices.

From Eucharist to Territory: From Territory to Person

The holy deaths of martyrs since early Christian times have strengthened Christian unity. Through the worship of martyrs, the Christian church sacralized its mission to be the City of God and a sacred covenant between God and its people. In the Latin West, the relics of the martyrs were preserved in lavishly decorated reliquaries made of precious metals. In the Christian East, the relics of saints and martyrs were placed in special holy icons. The altars in the Eastern Orthodox temples contained antimins—a piece of cloth with martyrs' relics sewn into it. These numerous relics, like the Holy Eucharist particles, symbolized the presence of the Holy in every parish church. St. Ignatius of Antioch explicitly compared the martyr's body with that of the Eucharist: "I am God's wheat and shall be ground by their teeth so that I may become Christ's pure bread."¹⁴

The veneration of relics was not simply a hierophantic phenomenon; it also ensured solidarity. The Reformation annihilated this concept of unity by downplaying the cult of martyrs and the centrality of the Eucharist.¹⁵ In the post-Reformation era, the association of a martyr's death with the Eucharist lost its cultural significance. However, martyrdom as such has

13 Joas, *The Genesis*; Joas, *The Sacredness*; Joas, *The Power*.

14 Paul, Letter to the Romans (4:1–2 and 6:1–8:3).

15 Dürr, "Zur politischen Kultur."

not lost its currency in both reformed and unreformed churches. In fact, with the exception of Christians killed by Muslims, many martyrs of post-Reformation Europe were victims of inter-confessional violence or state repression of religious dissidents.¹⁶

In early Christian times, the saints' relics were already associated with a specific place of their martyrdom, even though this was not always the case. The blood of martyrs, poetically termed by St. Clement (Tertullian) "the seed of the church," turned the territory into sacred ground. Indeed, modernity did not invent the sacralization of territory on which the blood of martyrs was shed, yet, in the modern period, nationalists reinvented these premodern aspects of the saint's cult. In the situation where different Christian communities inhabited the same territory, claims to land by one or another religious group were based on historical hierophantic events such as the apparition of Mary and the blood of martyrs or heroes shed in this land. We can, therefore, argue that this was the case for canonizations in the nineteenth century.

A prominent scholar of nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, has distinguished three narratives of the sacralization of territory:

- when a particular religion (i.e., Judaism) proclaims a people and land holy,
- the sacralization through the holy deeds of heroic ancestors,
- the sacralization of the new land, which offers freedom to the new settlers escaping persecution (America).¹⁷

Even though Smith's model has been applied in the studies of Serbian and Russian nationalism, etc., its potential, applied to religion, has not been used to its full extent.¹⁸ Following Smith, we focus on the second kind of sacralization, the sacralization through the holy deeds of heroic ancestors.

The impact of the sacralization of the individual on twenty-first-century canonizations and the discourse surrounding martyrs has so far not been sufficiently addressed.¹⁹ In *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (2012), Hans Joas, with reference to Émile Durkheim, connects the decline of torture and the "birth" of prison since the second half of the eighteenth century with the rise of the sacredness of the human person.

16 The examples include John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), an account of Protestants' deaths in Catholic countries, Russian Old Believers who were executed and persecuted by the Orthodox sovereign, the Greek Catholic martyrs of Pratulín, etc.

17 Smith, "Sacred Territories."

18 Pavković, "Sacralisation."

19 Joas, *Sacredness*, 16–18.

He distinguishes the sacredness of the individual from “the unscrupulous, egocentric self-sacralization of the individual.” He demonstrates the impact of this widespread belief, which, according to him, has Judeo-Christian motifs, on the discourse of human rights. While the triumphant march of the discourse of human rights did not prevent humanity from gross violations of this idea as in fascism and national socialism, “the concept of *sacredness* asserts the dignity of the person as the core of the modern culture of punishment.”²⁰

By comparing two case studies, that of the martyrdom of St. Isidor of Jur’ev and Ivan Lagovskii (the former serving as the case for “sacralization of territory” and the latter “sacralization of the person”), it can be argued that canonization of victims of Stalinist repression in the 1940s and 1950s went hand in hand with the discourse of human rights and human dignity and the discourse of national suffering. Rather than a persistence of the traditional form of veneration of martyrs as witnesses of Christ, the suffering and deaths of ordinary people and priests are perceived as a gross violation of the sacredness of person and life.

Imperial Canonizations: St. Isidor of Iur’ev and Sacralization of Territory

By the nineteenth century the Baltic territories of Livland, Courland, and Estland colonized by the Teutonic Knights in the twelfth century had become the site of intense social conflict. As the Lutheran Church was under the control of the Baltic German landlords and the Russian imperial government tried to observe the terms of the Treaty of Nystad (1721), under which the privileges of the Baltic German knighthood were preserved in exchange for their loyalty to the Russian crown, the farming population of Estonian and Latvian ethnicity suffered from economic, social, and cultural deprivation. Conversions to Orthodoxy quickly spread, first in Livland in the 1840s, then—less spontaneously but still quite explosively—in Courland and Estland in the 1870s and 1880s, forming the basis for an Orthodox minority made up of agrarian laborers who clashed with the local landlords.

The *passio* of martyr Isidor, whose cult was revived in the late nineteenth century through the diligent work of Bishop Arsenii (Briantsev) of Riga, can be interpreted as a narrative of the sacralization of the territory of the Baltic through heroic deaths. In 1472, the Priest-Martyr Isidor suffered, together

20 Joas, *Sacredness*, chap. 2, and esp. 64.

with seventy-two of his parishioners, death by drowning in the River Emajõgi at the hands of the Roman Catholic city authorities of medieval Tartu (known in Russian as Iur'ev). Isidor was a pious priest in the Orthodox Church on the "Russian" side of Tartu, a church attended by Russian merchants and their families. According to the medieval legend, Iuri Triasogolov, a city elder of Tartu, reported Isidor to the city authorities and to the bishop, who persecuted Isidor for his criticism of the Latin rites and beliefs.²¹ On the Feast of the Epiphany, when Isidor and his parishioners were on their way to the river as part of the Orthodox ritual to bless the waters, they were seized by Iuri's hirelings, put on trial, and presented with the choice to convert to Catholicism. When they refused, the death sentence was immediately enforced, and all seventy-three people were drowned in a hole in the ice.²²

While the legend of Isidor's martyrdom was recorded in seventeenth-century manuscripts, historians deemed it an unreliable late invention because of discrepancies in the records.²³ Historians argued that St. Isidor's autobiography was almost completely copied from the vita of another saint, Prince Mikhail Chernigovskii (d. 1245), only that the Latin church has replaced the Tatars.²⁴ However, in 1897, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church restored the commemoration of the martyr Isidor and the seventy-two martyrs of Iur'ev, which signified a revival or recanonization of the Iur'ev martyrs. This approval was one of seven canonizations during Nicholas II's reign. Alongside patriarch Germogen of Moscow, Isidor, and the seventy-two others, they were canonized as martyrs.²⁵

The story of the martyrs' suffering is striking but lacks clear motivation: Why would another Christian church punish the Orthodox believers so absurdly, even though they might be regarded as heretics in the eyes of Rome? It can be argued that the Roman Catholic persecutors in the story were the prototype of the Lutherans who lived side by side with the new Orthodox converts and resisted Orthodoxy's spread among the peasants. The cult of St. Isidor was artificially revived at the same time that legal

21 *Stradanie*, 4. Old Believers copied the more extended version of the vita in 1897, which provided a more detailed description of the speech. The child, "beautiful as Moses," tore himself away from his captives, went to the ice hole, and made a speech: "You are Godless and damned Catholics. Why do you stand and look at them? I am too a Christian and believe in Lord Jesus Christ and want to accept the same death as the teacher great Isidor and my mother and the rest," after which he threw himself in the river. Morozova, *Knizhnost' staroverov Estonii*, 103.

22 *Stradanie*, 12.

23 Selart, "Püha märtyr Isidor."

24 Fetisov, "K literaturnoi istorii," 218–21, as cited in Caridi, *Making Martyrs*, 178.

25 Freeze, "Subversive Piety," 309–12; Semenenko-Basin, *Sviatost'*, 28.

prosecutions were taking the place of Lutheran pastors who gave sacraments to the Orthodox apostates (those who were baptized either as children or adults and could not legally reconvert back to Lutheranism). During this period, ninety pastors were sentenced by the courts.²⁶

The official recognition of the cult of St. Isidor was accompanied by special services in churches, processions, the making of icons, and the publication of the vitae of martyrs in Russian, Estonian, and Latvian. The revival of the cult was initiated thanks to the efforts of Bishop Arsenii (Briantsev) of Riga (1887–1997), who commissioned in 1896 a special liturgical service to the martyrs that was celebrated on January 8 each year.²⁷ The martyrdom of St. Isidor at the hands of “Latins” provided a narrative for the uneasy cohabitation of Orthodoxy with the Lutheran faith, which was predominantly in the borderland region. The tense relations between the Orthodox and Lutheran churches, caused by mass conversions of Estonian and Latvian peasants in the nineteenth century, led to the politicization of Orthodoxy in the Baltic region.²⁸

The cult of St. Isidor had great significance for the town of Tartu. In 1900, the Commission for the Commemoration of St. Isidor, under Anton Budilovich, the rector of Dorpat University (renamed Iur'evskii University in 1893), proposed the establishment of an annual cross procession on January 8. The procession along the streets of Tartu would stop at the Townhall Square, and there the Gospel was read. Then a *moleben* was served on the bank of the River Emajõgi, where the bodies of the martyrs were supposedly drowned.²⁹ Bishop Agafangel, who promoted the recanonization of St. Isidor in 1898, actively supported the cult of the martyr and attended the procession annually. In 1913, when the Romanov dynasty celebrated the three hundredth anniversary, one of its five altars of the newly built church of St. Alexander Nevsky in Tartu, was dedicated to St. Isidor, and in the same year the name of St. Isidor was given to a parish school in Tartu.

However, the significance of St. Isidor went beyond Tartu. On October 18, 1898, the first church dedicated to St. Isidor was consecrated by Archbishop Agafangel in Valga, a town with a mixed Estonian and Latvian population. In addition, a mosaic of St. Isidor decorated the north façade of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Tallinn, consecrated in 1900.³⁰ In 1913 an Estonian

26 Weber, “Religion and Law.”

27 RGIA. F. 796, Op. 177. D. 2408 (1896).

28 Polunov, “Imperiia.”

29 Estonian Historical Archive, 296-7-1613 (1900–01) (Livland governor's chancellery's case regarding permission to organize an annual procession in Tartu), 1–2.

30 *Revel'skii Aleksandro-Nevskii sobor na Vyshgorode*, 70.

brotherhood was established by the priest Pavel Kulbusch amongst migrant workers in St. Petersburg. Archbishop Ioann, who was evacuated to Tartu, planned to build a chapel on the banks of the River Emajõgi, but due to the war, these plans did not materialize.³¹

The saint had functioned as a symbol of Orthodoxy in the Baltics, a region portrayed as a crucible of the contest between Western and Eastern Christendom. As medievalist historian Anti Selart noted, the legend of St. Isidor offers an insight into how we can understand, through the prism of the Livonian War and the contacts between West and East in fifteenth-century Tartu, Old Livonia's participation in the political interactions between Rome, Moscow, and Constantinople.³²

Even though the cult of St. Isidor was imposed "from above," it cannot be seen solely as a symbolic instrument of Russification. Scholars of medieval memorial culture have commented on the importance of the patron saint for nonelite social groups that could not trace their origins to some great ancestor. The regular liturgical commemoration and prayers for intercession directed to their "own" saint played a consolidating role for members of the group. The patron saint sacralized the group's existence and legitimized its place in the divine order, becoming not simply a heavenly patron but an object of social and professional self-identification for its members.³³

St. Isidor appealed to the subaltern Estonian Orthodox and inspired converts to struggle for their cultural and religious recognition. At the same time, the cult was revived for the entire Orthodox Church in the Baltics. The fact that St. Isidor's martyrdom took place in Tartu, the heart of Baltic German and Estonian intellectual and theological culture, allowed the Estonian Orthodox minority to identify themselves with the martyr-saint. When Estonian native priest Pavel Kulbusch set up the Brotherhood of St. Isidor in St. Petersburg and launched a plan to build a church dedicated to the martyr, he actively participated in "the linguistic picture of the world that was shaped by the official canonization of St. Isidor."³⁴

The refusal of St. Isidor to accept the union with Rome was interpreted in the late nineteenth century as part of the steadfastness of the Baltic Orthodox to withstand the pressure from the Lutheran Church for individuals to leave Orthodoxy and reunite with the Lutheran rest of society. While the Orthodox Church could rely on imperial political and legal power in their

31 Kumysh, "K sooruzheniiu."

32 Selart, "Püha märtyr Isidor."

33 Arnaudova, *Memoria*, 28; Bauer et al., *Patriotische Heilige*.

34 Semenenko-Basin, *Sviatost'*, 20.

competition with Lutheranism in the borderlands, the ordinary Orthodox converts were still regarded as victims of the arbitrary powers exercised by the German (Lutheran) landlords. The martyrdom of Isidor was a witness to the historical presence of Orthodoxy in the Baltic region before the Reformation; a priest who died in the manner of early martyrs was proof of Orthodox affinity with true Christianity and served as a model for those who perceived themselves as victims of persecution.

There were other forms of sacralization of the territory in the Baltics as well. For example, the governor of Estland province, Sergei Shakhovskoi, actively supported the construction of the women's Orthodox Piukhtitsa Dormition monastery in the 1890s. Ethnographers and bureaucrats studied the archaeology of Kuremäe in Estonia's northeast, a location where a medieval legend recounted Mary's apparition and later, a working-wonder icon was discovered. The team of Shakhovskoi's bureaucrats discovered barrows that allegedly contained the bones of Russian soldiers. Not unlike the land of Kosovo,³⁵ where a historical battle between Serbs and Muslims took place in the thirteenth century, the border region between Russia and Estland Province was the site of prominent battles in Russian history—foremost among them Prince Alexander Nevsky's battles against the Teutonic Order.³⁶ Both Tartu and Kuremäe were places of contestation between two groups: while in North Estonia, an Orthodox convent was built on the foundation of a Lutheran church, and the power of the state was used to overrule the property rights of the local landowners, in Tartu, the tsarist bureaucrats fought tooth and nail to subvert the power of the Baltic Germans, who tried to preserve the traditions and German-oriented academic culture of Dorpat University. According to Smith, the sacralization of land is a strategy of decontestation, by means of which the territory in question is transferred beyond the realm of politics, since "the sacred is taken to be simply above and beyond the political."³⁷

Thus, in the competition between the Baltic German-oriented and Russian-oriented cultures in late imperial Russia, the cult of martyrs was used to sacralize the territory of the Baltic provinces. The emphasis on the historical medieval battles and heroism of the medieval Russian prince St. Alexander Nevsky had been employed in Stalin's Russia and to some extent justified the claims of the USSR to the Baltic territories, but heroic

35 For the Kosovo battle, see Pavković, "Sacralisation."

36 White, "Bright Beacons".

37 Pavković, "Sacralisation," 509.

death on the battlefield became more prominent than martyrdom for the sacralization of territory.³⁸

It is possible to argue that the sacralization of territory through the body of the martyr has been reinvented in the era of the crisis of the empire and the rise of nationalism. The imperial bureaucrats and the Estonian Orthodox used the local saints to sacralize the territory of the Baltic borderlands. These claims competed with the attempts to represent the Baltic land as a territory in which the Orthodox and Russian influence was foreign and superficial. In the twenty-first century however, the role of the martyrs can be discussed through the prism of not only the sacralization of the territory but also the sacralization of the person.

Canonizations of New Martyrs and Sacralization of the Person

The process of dealing with the communist past in the period of transition within the Orthodox Church took various forms. To some extent, the canonization of new martyrs was the traditional way to deal with the trauma of communist repression. However, at the same time, the ritualization made it more challenging to engage with the problem of the hierarchs' collaboration with the regime. The canonization of new martyrs serves as an illustration of self-sacralization: the Russian Orthodox Church presented itself as the victim of communism and a successor of the prerevolutionary Holy Russia. In the former Soviet republics, the situation was more complicated. Due to the canonical conflict of the 1990s, the Orthodoxy in Estonia is represented by two legal bodies, which, despite their *de jure* ecclesiastical autonomies, have canonical affiliation with the rivaling patriarchates: the Estonian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (EOC-MP) and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church–Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EAOC).³⁹ Here we will discuss the differences between the canonization of new martyrs by these two church organizations to highlight the new patterns of the traditional Orthodox veneration of martyrs.

Father Vladislav Kumysh, the founder of Narva's Orthodox secondary school, was the driving force behind the canonization of new martyrs. With the help of archivists in Tartu, he researched and composed the *vitae*

38 Berezhnaya, "“God Is in Truth”"; Schenk, *Aleksandr Nevskij*, 36.

39 To distinguish between these two actors, EOC-MP and EAOC will be used to indicate the jurisdiction of the two patriarchates, or short terms such as "Moscow" and "Constantinople." For more on the issue of two churches, see Rimestad, "Orthodox Churches in Estonia."

of the three Orthodox martyrs of 1919: Bishop Platon (Kulbusch), Father Mikhail Bleive, and Nikolai Bezhanitskii.⁴⁰ Kumysh's publications are characterized by an accomplished literary style, proper citations, and the correct publication of historical sources. He composed the biography of martyr Sergii Florinskii (1873–1918), a military priest who came to Estonia during the First World War and was one of the victims of the mass execution during the Estonian Workers' Commune near Rakvere. Father Vladislav was instrumental in promoting these martyrs for canonization at the Council of the ROC in 2000. In 2003 the relics of martyr Sergii were exhumed and solemnly transferred from the grave into the church. All new martyrs are depicted on the icon of the council of saints of Estonian land, together with St. Isidor; their feast is celebrated on December 1, the name day of Bishop-Martyr Platon.⁴¹ Following the canonizations in 2000, submitting new applications to the Commission for Canonization has slowed since new restrictions were introduced in 2008.

The veneration of new martyrs has become a focus of activity for the EAOOC under the leadership of Metropolitan Stephanos (Charalambides) since 1999. Following the inclusion of Bishop-Martyr Platon to the lists of new martyrs by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in August 2000, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarch issued an act of canonization of Bishop Platon and his comartyrs Father Mikhail Bleive, and Nikolai Bezhanitskii in October of the same year, emphasizing the significance of these figures, especially Platon, for Estonian Orthodox under Constantinople. The reason why the martyrs of 1919 were canonized twice by two local churches suggests that the issue of canonical territory, a contested question between Moscow and Constantinople, affects the process of canonization.⁴²

The Agents and Processes of Canonization in the EAOOC

A priest in the EAOOC, Andreas Põld (b. 1967), started collecting the materials of the Orthodox Estonians who were victims of the Stalinist repression in the early 2000s. He pieced together fragmentary evidence from the archives,

40 Kumysh, *Sviashchennomucheniki*.

41 Kornilii, *O moem puti*, 206.

42 The problem of canonical territory derives from the church law according to which there can be no two bishops in the same city. This law applies only to Orthodox bishops and continues to stir debates, even though in practice it is often violated. The Russian Orthodox Church refuses to recognize the canonicity of the Estonian Church under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

newspapers, personal testimonies, and the database of the priest August Kaljukosk.⁴³ Father Andrey comes from Saaremaa, studied at Leningrad Theological Seminary, and was ordained as a priest in 1991 by Metropolitan Kornelius (Jakobs). He served in the parishes in Saaremaa, Muhu, and Setomaa. It is possible that Father Andreas's interest in new martyrs comes from his experience in the Russian Orthodox Church, where the interest in canonizations of new martyrs began in the 1980s and 1990s.

The materials collected by Põld led to the canonization of the two martyrs: Father Vasilii Solovskii (1870–1919) and church elder Stefan Grivonogov, who served in Saatse (Setumaa) in 2004, by the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Bolsheviks shot Father Vasilii and Elder Stefan in Setumaa in 1919. Building on the success of this application, the head of the Church, Metropolitan Stephanos, encouraged Father Andrey to continue his search and focus on the period after the Soviet occupation. Father Andrey made a list of names of repressed clergy members, using telephone books in the hope of finding relatives, but this effort was in vain. He faced numerous obstacles: The data about the repressed individuals who were executed in accordance with Article 58 on the counterrevolutionary activity of the Soviet Criminal Codex did not provide information about religion: “[I]t was difficult to distinguish who suffered for faith and who did not. This was the main task to determine who suffered for faith. People prayed.”⁴⁴

Father Andreas collected and selected historical material, wrote hagiographies and documents proposed for canonization. He gave his collected materials to Metropolitan Stephanos for approval, who forwarded them to the Synodal Commission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He described himself as a church historian and his work as an instrument of divine necessity: “This is our history, part of our church life. The time was ripe [...] I am not a historian, but with his [Metropolitan Stephanos's] blessing, I succeeded.”⁴⁵

The canonizations of the Estonian martyrs by the Ecumenical Patriarchate came in three sets: in the year 2000, the victims of the Red Terror during the War of Independence (1919) were canonized, including Bishop Platon. In 2012, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople canonized eleven men and women who were shot or sent to camps during the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states in 1940–41. “It is our pleasure to notify your Excellence that the victorious and crowned these martyrs’ holiness has now received

43 Interview with Andreas Põld, December 28, 2012.

44 Interview with Andreas Põld.

45 Interview with Father Andreas.

recognition of the church,” stated the official Act of Canonization, suggesting that it was not the Church that made saints but God who crowned them for their deeds.

According to the Act of the Synod of April 17, 2012, the individuals recognized as saints were those “who gave witness during the difficult and truly martyr-like period for your Church during the first Soviet occupation year of 1940–41, being deported, imprisoned, tortured (literally, flogged), chained, and enduring prison hardships.”⁴⁶ In the words of the act, the recent political history was interpreted in biblical terms, as the suffering of those arrested and imprisoned is described in the words of the sacred texts that convey the trials of the apostles and martyrs for Christ, using expressions such as “flogged” and “chained.” The eloquence of the Church documents elevated ordinary history to the level of sacred history since the individuals brought forward for canonizations were no longer victims but holy martyrs to whom the Church could pray for various needs. The act of canonization represented the sacralization of the suffering of the victims of Stalinist repression. The organs of the state used the language of politics, “anti-Soviet propaganda,” “terrorism,” and “conspiracy.” They operated with imaginary categories of enemies, spies, and counterrevolution, yet the mechanisms and procedures of repression were rational, routinized, and mundane. The Church, however, interpreted the routine of political violence into the lofty hagiographic language that separated the realm of spirituality from mundane life. As a result, the person who suffered injustice at the hands of the Stalinist state became a member of the heavenly family of saints, and his or her death was treated as the heavenly birth, which is commemorated as a Church feast. There were conditions to be met: not just any victim of political injustice could be a saint; one had to stand for one’s faith and show resoluteness and steadfastness on trial.

The interpretation of Soviet terror through the language of martyrdom in Estonia had already started in the 1920s. Beginning with the homilies and lamentations dedicated to Bishop-Martyr Platon, the Estonian Orthodox Church presented the violent deaths of their clergy members as martyrdom, even though attempts at canonization had not been made until the 1950s.⁴⁷ Some Lutheran clergymen and organizations also used the discourse of martyrdom during the interwar period. They drew the attention of Christian churches in Europe to the communist assault on Christians and mobilized public opinion for anti-communist ecumenical and political support.⁴⁸

46 Polunov, “Pühima Patriarhi,” 7.

47 Paert, “Martyrdom.”

48 Ibid.

The anticommunist discourse of the 1920s and 1930s found a new application after the occupation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union in 1940–41 and again in 1944. The Estonian refugees who fled to the West in 1944 cultivated the view of their motherland as a victim of the savage Bolsheviks, while the Christian actors used the language of martyrdom.⁴⁹

The Controversial Canonization of Ivan Lagovskii (1889–1941)

The majority of those canonized by the Estonian Orthodox Church between 2000 and 2019 were members of the clergy: two bishops and eleven priests. In addition, the EAOE proposed the canonization of a few lower clergy (deacons and sacristans), laymen, and women. Two wives of priests, Anna Petai and Marta Leisman, who were arrested with their husbands and died in the Gulag, are the only two women among the canonized saints. The active laymen Ivan Lagovskii, Stefan Grivonogov, Andres Punshun, and Ioann Värk were also canonized as saints.

It is important to point out that Estonians and Russians were represented almost equally among the canonized martyrs. Among the Russians, we find not only the “native” Russians, who were born in Estonia, but also those who came as émigrés and refugees, including Ivan Lagovskii and Aleksander Gadalín; the latter came as a war refugee in 1944. The intention to include Russians signified that the EAOE wanted to present itself as the Orthodox Church of Estonia rather than the Church for Orthodox Estonians. Since the early 2000s, having overcome the initial period of Estonianization, the EAOE has been trying to incorporate parishioners whose native language was not Estonian, publishing Russian-language periodicals, translating sermons and church documents into Russian, and incorporating the Russian martyrs into the pantheon of Estonian martyrs.

Ivan Arkadieievich Lagovskii was born into a priest’s family in Kinishma. As a graduate of the Kyiv Theological Academy (1908), he left Russia during the Civil War and enrolled in the Russian Pedagogical Institute in Prague in 1923. In 1926, Lagovskii became actively involved in the Russian Student Christian Movement (Русское студенческое христианское движение, RSKhD), a lay-based transnational organization that aimed to mobilize young Russian emigrants in Christian ministry worldwide.

In 1925–26, he was elected to be the secretary-general of the RSKhD and then became the editor of the *Herald of RSKhD*, the movement’s periodical

49 Vööbus, *Martyrs of Estonia*.

published in Paris (first issue in 1925). While branches of RSKhD existed in Germany, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and France, the Baltic countries, especially Latvia and Estonia, began to play an active role in this Christian youth movement. Lagovskii met Tamara Bezhanitskaia, one of the Estonian delegates to the RSKhD congress in Paris, who was a schoolgirl at the time, and married her in 1930.⁵⁰ In 1933, he moved to Estonia, where he continued to lead the RSKhD as one of the secretaries and published the *Herald* in Tartu. Under Lagovskii, the movement's work was directed not only at the Russian students but also at various groups of active Christian youth, including village youth in the Pechory region. The activity of both RSKhD and the Peasant Movement aimed at organizing the young people in small groups (*kruzhki*), which focused on self-education, reading and interpreting Christian literature, organizing public lectures and summer gatherings, and working at schools and kindergartens.

When the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic states in 1940, members of the RSKhD were targeted by the NKVD, along with other Russian political and cultural figures. Lagovskii was arrested on August 5, 1940, and sent to Leningrad for interrogation. He was accused of anti-communist and aggressive activity against the Soviet Union. His active contact with Western Christians and criticism of the Soviet anti-religious policy were used against him in accusations. The interrogators tried to connect Lagovskii with the scout organization Vitiazi, which was considered a militaristic anti-Soviet organization, as well as with anti-Soviet political émigré circles such as Novyi Grad. Lagovskii was executed under Article 58 for anti-Soviet activity in 1941.⁵¹

The massive interrogation case of Lagovskii drew interest from historian Sergei Isakov, who published extracts from it in the 1990s.⁵² Isakov had access to the interrogation files of Lagovskii in the 1990s and included biographical material on him in his book on Russians in Estonia.⁵³ However, the most significant contribution to the memory of Lagovskii and other members of the RSKhD was the publication of the memoirs of Tamara Miliutina (née Bezhanitskaia), Lagovskii's wife. Having served two sentences in Stalinist camps, Tamara returned to Estonia in the 1950s and became a member of the Russian intelligentsia circle in Tartu, centered around Juri Lotman. She has

50 Miliutina, *Liudi*, 62–65 and elsewhere.

51 Estonian Historical Archive, F-130. 1166.v0.1-2.

52 Vestnik RKhD, "Delo RSKhD v Estonii."

53 "Delo RSKhD, kopii dokumentov iz arkhiva KGB." Tartu University Library archive. 157.2. 110.

been well connected with the Russian émigré literati in Paris and Estonia and met many literary figures in the Gulag. By sharing her memories with the professors and students at Tartu, even before her book was published, Tamara was the living custodian of the memory of the Stalinist repressions. Thus, Lagovskii's memory was not lost but lovingly preserved in these semi-dissenting Soviet intelligentsia circles.

Despite the informal commemoration and publication of the interrogation file of Lagovskii, the EOC-MP launched the canonization process of Ivan Lagovskii alongside other members of the RSKhD. It is possible that one of the initiators of the canonization process was Bishop (and later Patriarch) Aleksii (Ridiger), whose father, Mikhail Ridiger, was a member of the RSKhD in Estonia. While commemorating the clergy who perished in the Gulag was not possible during the Soviet period, during the 1980s and 1990s, some attempts to bring back the memory of the repressed clergy were made. Bishop Aleksii was the only one who knew where the bust of Bishop Platon was hidden in the altar of the Church of Transfiguration.⁵⁴ Bishop Kornilii (Jakobs), who replaced Bishop Aleksii in the Tallinn diocese in 1990, had started the process of canonization for three members of the RSKhD: Ivan Lagovskii, Tatiana Dezen, and Nikolai Pen'kin. As a child, he was taught by Dezen, while his wife (Kornilii was a widower before he became bishop) was an active member of the movement. Having also experienced Soviet repressive policy, he had sufficient personal reasons for promoting these individuals for canonization. For example, in 1957–60, he served a sentence in the Mordovian camps on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda.⁵⁵

The materials for canonization, which included the history of the RSKhD, biographical information of its members, a detailed analysis and reproduction of the extracts from the interrogation cases, and photographs totaling 317 pages, were prepared in 2008 and put forward to the Canonization Commission in Moscow.⁵⁶ However, this application failed due to weak argumentation based on the behavior of Lagovskii during interrogation.⁵⁷ The commission regarded Lagovskii's response to his interrogators as if he were too willing to collaborate by providing other people's names and information. While Lagovskii provided substantial information during his interrogation, it is not clear whether this information did or did not incriminate other people. Many of the names mentioned during the interrogation

54 Information from Father Aleksander Sarapik. Interview with the author, January 21, 2019.

55 Kornilii, *O moem puti*.

56 Ivanen, "Materialy."

57 From personal communication with Metropolitan Kornilii.

were people living outside the reach of the secret police in France and other countries, while others were dead. This was a typical tactic used by other defendants.⁵⁸ The interrogation files of Dezen and Pen'kin were exemplary from the point of view of standing up for one's beliefs: both defendants denied all charges and withheld any names or other information that might have incriminated other members of the movement. However, their canonization was also denied.

Despite not yet having any direct evidence, the reasons for the Moscow Patriarchate's refusal to canonize the members of the RSKhD were manifold. Firstly, after 2012, the enthusiasm for canonization receded in the ROC; in fact, thirty-six saints previously canonized were removed from the church calendar, such as in the case of Vasilii of Kineshma.⁵⁹ Secondly, the members of the RSKhD were lay people who were too actively involved in religious life. A typical martyr in the ROC was a clergyman; laity and women were underrepresented among the hundreds of new martyrs. Finally, the RSKhD is viewed with suspicion in Church circles because it is considered a Protestant movement rather than a strictly Orthodox one.

Metropolitan Kornilii was personally disappointed about the decision, but he did not reapply, which is sometimes a normal process in the Church.⁶⁰ However, when in 2012 the Ecumenical Patriarchate canonized Ivan Lagovskii, Kornilii received a phone call from Moscow, most likely from the Department of External Church Affairs, demanding an explanation. This was a typical situation within the large bureaucratic organization: while the Canonization Commission denied the canonization of the members of RSKhD, other departments chastised the bishop for letting his ecclesiastical rivals canonize a Russian person as a saint.

The efforts of the EAOC to canonize Lagovskii and other Russians were independent of the decision of the Moscow Canonization Commission. It was likely Father Andreas Pöld was not aware of the work done by the EOC-MP. The Estonians have only learned about the repressions against Russians in interwar Estonia more recently through Tamara Miliutina, who became known to the Estonian public after receiving the Open Estonian Foundation award in 1999 and after her memoir was translated and published in two

58 Miliutina, *Liudi*.

59 Luchenko, "Uzhe nesviatye sviatye."

60 For example, the Piukhtitsa Dormition Monastery in Estonia applied for the canonization of Blessed Ekaterina, a holy fool living in the monastery. Their application was turned down twice but accepted the third time. Mother Ekaterina was canonized as a local (*mestnochtimaia*) saint on March 7, 2018.

editions in 2007 and 2010.⁶¹ The memoir suggests that the Soviet repression in the Baltic states affected not only Estonians, but also Russians living in Estonia. The paradox is that currently, the story of RSKhD in Estonia is better known among the Estonian public, while the Russian Orthodox have very little knowledge about this movement and its people.

The canonizations by the EAOB took into account the “canonical territory.” For example, Tatiana Dezen and Nikolai Pen’kin of the Russian Student Christian Movement, who were both arrested and shot in 1941. Together with Lagovskii, they could not be put forward for canonization, as they acted in Pechory, then the territory of Estonia, but now the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Father Andreas emphasized the importance of the services written and dedicated to martyrs and icons. He proposed that the leader of the Russian Student Christian Movement, Ivan Lagovskii, should be venerated by students. Father Vasilii Solovskii, for example, who had many children, is fashioned as a patron saint of families and young people.

The didactic message of canonizations was to show people that the Orthodox Church venerates not only saints of the fourth century but that sainthood is something that can be obtained in modern times. The main questions and tasks centered around those of veneration and communication with the saints. Father Andreas emphasized the relationship of exchange: “In as much as we venerate them, they will help us.”

Conclusion

Comparing the two cases of martyr veneration, St. Isidor of Iur’ev and Ivan Lagovskii, we witness two different strategies of sacralization: one focused more on the sacralization of territory and the other on the sacralization of a person.

The imperial and church actors in the Baltic during the time of Alexander III resurrected the cult of St. Isidor, a medieval martyr of Tartu. However, while it originated as a symbolic expression of the imperial claims on the territory of the Baltic, it had different meanings for different actors. For example, the subaltern Estonian converts of the late imperial era also found the martyrdom narrative of St. Isidor appealing because it gave them justification for their claims to the sacred past and territory. They were no longer outcasts from the historical Lutheran Church, renegades, and not

61 Miljutina, *Inimesed minu elus*.

true sons of the nation, but heirs of the martyrs who lived in this land before the Livonian Order conquered it. Yet, the recent transformation of St. Isidor into one of the holy fathers of the iconic “Council of All Saints of the Land of Estonia” supports claims that the institutional structure of the EOC-MP corresponds to the canonical territory of Estonia. The deaths of martyr Isidor and his seventy-two parishioners, who occupy a central place in this symbolic space of the icon, strengthen the identity of this institution that has a controversial jurisdictional status as being territorially rooted rather than imported, and provide the Orthodox believers who remained within the fold of the ROC with a sense of right and legitimacy.

The canonization effort by the EAOE signified the fulfillment of the wish to bring together as many possible Orthodox victims of the regime so that Estonian Orthodoxy could claim its place in the Estonian national narrative—characterized by victimhood, injustice, and suffering. They achieved this, firstly, by applying for canonization to the Ecumenical Patriarchate: representatives of the EAOE made their story of suffering and injustice known beyond the national borders since the saints canonized by one local church can be venerated in other local churches. Secondly, they tried to merge the national and local religious myths, creating a seamless narrative for both their own community’s consumption and presentation to the outside world. By choosing August 20, 1991, the date Estonia regained independence, as the date for the commemoration of the new martyrs, the EAOE made an apparent gesture of loyalty and secular patriotism, showing how the canonization of martyrs is politicized and represents “religion as a secular category of difference.”

However, leaving the nationalist discourse aside, attention needs to be paid to the emphasis on the violation of the human right to life and freedom. The stories of new martyrs serve as reminders of the gross crimes of the communist regime against the dignity and right to life of human beings. This chapter argues that modern discourses of sacralization of persons and sacralization of territory have profoundly affected the Orthodox Church’s discourse and practice. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinctions between churches that align their narratives with those of the secular nation-state and those that diverge from such alignment. Additionally, the inability of the EOC-MP to obtain Moscow’s approval for the canonization of victims of Stalinist repression serves as a poignant reminder of the influence wielded by the transnational institution of the Russian Orthodox Church over its seemingly independent churches beyond Russian borders—a sway that encompasses both symbolic and political dimensions.

Appendix

Estonian Martyrs Canonized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate between 2000 and 2019

2000	2004	2012	2019
Bishop Platon (Kulbusch) (1869–1919)	Priest Vasilii Solovskii (1870–1919)	Priest Vasilii Ristkok (1877–1942)	Priest Vladimir Irodionov (1885–1945)
Priest Nikolai Bezhanitski (1859–1919)	Stefan Grivonogov (1870–1919)	Priest Johannes Kraav (1914–1941)	Priest Leonid Lavrov (1882–1954)
		Priest Joann Sergejev (1908–1943)	Sacristan Alexander Gadalín (1878–1951)
		Priest Arteemi Vapper (1913–1944)	Bishop Peeter Pähkel (1875–1948)
		Priest Nikolai Leisman (1902–1943)	Archimandrite Alipii Ivlev (1877–1950)
		Marta Leisman (1903–1943)	Ioann Värk (1904–1952)
		Deacon Vasilii Astanin (1888–1941)	Andres Punshun (1882–1955)
		Deacon Peeter Kozlov (1885–1942)	Priest Serafim Ul'ianov (1906–1955)
		Joann (Ivan) Lagovski(I)(1889–1941)	
		Theodor Petai (1890–1942)	
		Anna Petai (1889–1948)	
		Priest Mikhail Bleive (1873–1919)	

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Section III

Narrating Paganism

12. “*Nacjopoganie*”? The Sacralization of the Pre-Christian Past as Identity Politics in Modern Polish Paganism

Karin Reichenbach

Abstract: This chapter asserts that the concept of nativeness serves as a fundamental pillar for adherents of Native Faith in contemporary Poland, often intertwined with an ethnocentric and ethnicist view of nationality. Consequently, neo-pagan movements inevitably engage in identity politics, intertwining notions of common ancestry and religious belief. The pre-Christian, or pagan, past is thus sacralized and elevated into the supernatural realm, rendering it non-negotiable and potentially providing a foundation for far-right ideologies rooted in ethnicist principles such as anti-pluralism, anti-egalitarianism, or racism. Moreover, the chapter contends that the appeal to pre-Christian Slavic history and culture is bolstered by the widespread fascination with the Middle Ages in contemporary popular culture, attracting a broad audience of cultural missionaries for identity politics.

Keywords: Poland, native faith, neo-paganism, far-right ideologies, New Right, popular history

In October 2019, Polish writer Przemysław Witkowski published an online article on the leftist magazine *Krytyka Polityczna* website that concerned the cooperation between famous film director Wojciech Smarzowski and historical reenactor, publisher, and neo-pagan activist Igor D. Górewicz in connection with a planned series about the ancient Slavs. With reference to Górewicz’s radical right-wing past (from which he distances himself today) and observations of certain right-wing tendencies in Polish neo-paganism, he introduced the term “*nacjopoganie*” (“nation pagans”). Witkowski’s piece reflects an ongoing discussion about neo-paganism related to (extremist)

politics, questioning the current impression that after a radical phase around the turn of the millennium, Polish Native Faith adherents have abandoned extremist political ambitions and now generally ban any political aspirations from their community's mindset and practice. While religious studies scholars attribute the loss of politicality in Polish neo-paganism to a shift from political to cultural activism, this chapter calls into question the assumed nonpolitical nature of ethnic neo-pagan currents in Poland. It highlights still prevalent ethno-nationalist and even far-right notions and how respective actors may use cultural work to spread those notions in the public sphere.

Since the concept of nativeness forms the essential foundation for adherents of Native Faith, this chapter argues that this is often linked to an ethnocentric, ethnicist concept of nationality. Thus, neo-pagan currents inevitably engage in identity politics. Because common ancestry and religious belief are inextricably linked, the pre-Christian (i.e., pagan) past, as the reference point of ethnic origin, is sacralized and transferred into the supernatural, which makes it non-negotiable¹ and may serve as an unquestionable introduction of far-right worldviews grounded on an ethnicist fundament like anti-pluralist, anti-egalitarian, or racist ideologies. Furthermore, it will be argued that the reference to pre-Christian Slavic history and culture is supported by the widespread interest in the Middle Ages in current popular culture, which opens up a wide field and attracts a large audience for cultural proselytization for both nonextremist and extremist identity politics. In the sense of the New Right's metapolitical ambition to change society's mindset, extremist ideas and agendas could be introduced this way into the social mainstream and thus become normalized.

By examining the politics of a religious movement centered on ancient, pre-Christian traditions, this chapter focuses on how the sacralization of pre-Christian history may serve as right-wing politics. This study considers not only a minority religion, whose memory discourse seems marginalized by Catholic dominance,² but also focuses on right-wing extremist tendencies and those small but politically powerful forces within the field—therefore serving as an additional perspective on the sacralization and politicization of history.

Following a brief overview of the neo-pagan movement in Central and Eastern Europe, this chapter will investigate the development of the Native Faith movement in Poland and the presumed shift from political activism

1 Paulmann, "Sacralization."

2 Baraniecka-Olszewska, "State Historical Policy."

to cultural work in the 1990s and 2000s. From there, a discussion of the ethnicist framework of neo-paganism and how it is linked to practices of sacralizing the past that serve as identity politics will be addressed. Using examples from related cultural fields, this is an attempt to map out the range of influence representatives of these scenes may have acquired in public life.

Neo-paganism in Eastern Europe

"Neo-paganism," also known as "modern paganism," refers to new religious movements that exist apart from and often in opposition to the established world religions. While being called "pagan" does affront many of their adherents since it is a pejorative term used by the Christian church, others do not object. In ethnically centered currents of neo-paganism, however, an increasing number seems to prefer a vernacular equivalent of the term "Native Faith," such as the Polish *Rodzimowierstwo*, to which this chapter is dedicated. However, there is no established name agreed upon by a significant majority, and both varieties seem generally accepted in academic discussions.³

The modern pagan movement generally encompasses a broad spectrum of different spiritual concepts. Broadly, it can be divided into two approaches. Firstly, there is a universalist, cosmopolitan current composed of more open, inclusive movements that gather wisdom from various sources and people from various backgrounds. Though undoubtedly very imprecise, these are sometimes subsumed under "New Age" phenomena. Secondly, there are those who emphasize the ethnic character and origins of their faith, attributing its cosmic system and religious practices to a specific pre-Christian (if we speak of Central and Eastern Europe) society from which they believe they personally descended.⁴

Ethnic neo-paganism can hence be understood "as a movement inspired by nature-based spirituality, stressing the need to return to ethnic or tribal identity, to pre-Christian roots, to the old customs, and indigenous values."⁵ There are, of course, fluid transitions between universalist and ethnic currents; though in contrast to Western and especially Anglo-American countries, usually a dominance of ethnic neo-pagan currents is postulated

3 Schaab, *Götter*, 22.

4 Aitamurto and Simpson, "Introduction"; Rountree, "Introduction"; Schaab, *Götter*, 17–20.

5 Wiench, "Neo-paganism," 283.

for Eastern Europe.⁶ Because of the reference to ethnic descent, ethnic neo-paganism (or Native Faith) tends to be more exclusionary. Adhering groups often only admit members they believe to be part of their ethnic group.⁷ Consequently, these currents are more prone to ethno-nationalist ideas.

Central and Eastern European Native Faith movements have emerged to a greater extent only after the collapse of communism. However, in most cases, there were precursors, specifically at the beginning of the twentieth century, with some notable continuations and revivals in postwar times. The attitude of communist governments was ambivalent and changed according to political agendas. In the Soviet Union, efforts to promote pre-Christian native heritage in the course of anti-religious, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western policies in the 1960s and 1970s provoked the foundation of neo-pagan movements in some places. It also led to the formation of more radical actors who breached the boundaries of state ideology and thus became dissidents.⁸ In the socialist states of Central Europe, neo-paganism was repressed during Stalinism, and leading representatives were sometimes prosecuted and imprisoned while others turned to internal or external emigration. Though the pressure lifted during thaw periods, the movement did not gain momentum until the 1990s (there are, however, examples where it was carried on by emigrés in North America).⁹ Against this background, the post-socialist expansion of neo-pagan groups in Eastern Europe is mainly understood as a consequence of the lifting of oppressive politics and the beginning of individualization, democratization, and opening processes in the transformation period. Therefore, it has even been suggested to apply a postcolonial perspective to this phenomenon.¹⁰

In the last ten to fifteen years, many studies have been published describing and analyzing the growing trend of modern paganism in different parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Useful overviews are offered by Piotr Wiench, and as a more general introduction to the phenomenon, terminology, and concepts of modern paganism, Michael F. Strmiska.¹¹ An entire volume, *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (2013), edited by Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, provides both

6 Strmiska, "Modern Paganism"; Aitamurto and Simpson, "Introduction"; Witulski, "Imported Paganisms," 10; Rountree, "Introduction," 11–12; Simpson, *Native Faith*, 12; Schaab, *Götter*, 18–19.

7 E.g., Schaab, *Götter*, 253–60.

8 Shnirelman, "Perun vs Jesus Christ"; Rudling, "The Cult."

9 Shnirelman, "Christians."

10 Wiench, "Postcolonial Key."

11 Wiench, "Neo-paganism"; Strmiska, "Modern Paganism."

an introduction to approaches and terminology as well as insights into different countries by way of several case studies.¹² Another, more recent volume, *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism* (2017), edited by Kathryn Rountree, generally approaches modern paganism in Europe and North America, but it does contain some contributions about Eastern Europe.¹³ Finally, two recent issues of *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* (in 2017 and 2018) bring together articles on paganism and politics, with a focus on Polish and Czech neo-pagan movements.¹⁴ For the post-Soviet countries and, in particular, today's Russia, Viktor Shnirelman, Kaarina Aitamurto, and Marlene La Ruelle have published numerous enlightening studies discussing the context and development of the different ethnic and religious situations with a particular focus on nationalist-oriented paganism.¹⁵

In a greater part of Eastern Europe, Native Faith is connected to Slavic pre-Christian traditions, like in the movements of *Rodzimowierstwo* in Poland, *Rodnoviry* and *RUNVira* in Ukraine, and to a certain extent those in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, though there are also Celtic references here.¹⁶ The Baltic neo-pagan currents of Romuva in Lithuania and partly as well in Latvia, northern Poland, and the Kaliningrad region try to reconnect to ancient Prussian heritage, whereas Native Faith movements in Latvia, Estonia, and Belarus are generally directed at other non-Slavic heritage like, e.g., Latvian *Dievturība*, *Maausk*, or Ugro-Finnish shamanistic traditions in Estonia.¹⁷ While Native Faith movements in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe have already been extensively studied from different points of view, research on Balkan modern paganism seems scarce so far, where apart from Slavic neo-paganism, other traditions are sought for like in Romania or with Tengrism in Bulgaria. Tengrism might also gain influence in Hungary with regard to the neo-Turanist movement and its annual organization of the Kurultáj meeting.¹⁸

12 Aitamurto and Scott, *Modern Pagan*.

13 Rountree, *Cosmopolitanism*.

14 *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017), and 20, no. 1 (2018).

15 E.g., Shnirelman, "Christians"; Shnirelman, "Russian Neopaganism"; Laruelle, "Alternative Identity"; Aitamurto, *Paganism*; Shizhenskii and Aitamurto, "Multiple Nationalism."

16 Ivakhiv, "In Search"; Lesiv, "Ukrainian Paganism"; Dostálová, "Czech Neopagan Movements"; Vencálek, "Religious"; Reichstätter, "Decline."

17 Wiench, "Neo-paganism," 284–86, 287; Strmiska and Dundzila, "Romuva"; Dundzila, "Baltic Lithuanian Religion"; Pranskevičiūtė, "Contemporary Paganism"; Misane, "Traditional"; Ozoliņš, "Dievturi Movement."

18 Hubbes, "Romanian." For Hungary, see Szilárdi, "Neopaganism"; Kremmler, "Eurasian Magyars."

Development of Polish Native Faith in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: From Political to Cultural Activism?

Ethnic neo-paganism in Poland—often termed in the vernacular expression for Native Faith since the 2000s by followers as *Rodzimowierstwo*—is understood as the worship of general Slavic, at times regional, “tribal” gods.¹⁹ Aiming for a more detailed definition, Simpson and Filip understand this term as referring to

groups and individuals who practice a Slavic spirituality that acknowledges some form of polytheism or many forms of deity based in a continuation of Slavic traditions of the pre-Christian past, with emphasis on the use of historically and ethnographically reliable sources.²⁰

This reliability of sources differs, of course, from what seems reliable in academic discourse.²¹

The majority of Polish Native Faith adherents regards themselves as preservers of an ethnic Slavic identity, understood as a collective national identity relying on primordial traditions or even as a community of common descent.²² On the one hand, they strive for a return to perceived ethnic roots, often rejecting modernization, individualization, and pluralization processes in favor of a romanticized Slavic past. On the other hand, they often regard their activity not so much as a reenactment of bygone practices and lifestyles but as the creation of something new and contemporary, which, though inspired by traditions, is resumed and continued by them by actively creating and contributing something new to the old.²³

Estimates of how many adherents Native Faith movements have today is difficult to determine due to the often informal networks. While Simpson estimated that there were between two thousand and two thousand five hundred practitioners of *Rodzimowierstwo* in Poland by the end of 2015, less than a half were organized in registered associations.²⁴ Others estimate up to ten thousand followers, with less than two thousand regularly active participants.²⁵ However, it seems that *Rodzimowierstwo* is gaining more

19 Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 65–66.

20 Filip and Simpson, “Selected Words,” 3.

21 Simpson, “Strategies,” 13.

22 Schaab, “Ethnische Schale,” 2.

23 Simpson, “Strategies.”

24 Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 82n2.

25 Schaab, *Götter*, 90.

and more followers, as reflected in the recent establishment of federations for cooperation between different groups.

The first movement of Polish neo-paganism dates back to the interwar period and was rooted in romantic nationalism. In the 1930s, the most influential group of that time emerged from the magazine *Zadruga* and its editor, Jan Stachniuk. The ideas within the *Zadruga* circle were based on anti-Catholicism, Slavic neo-paganism, certain aspects of communism, and Polish nationalism.²⁶ Stachniuk's philosophy and attitude towards pagan belief seem quite complex and ambiguous, seemingly deriving from a severe critique of Catholicism and its negative effects on Polish economics and civilization rather than a connection with what is perceived as Slavic heritage and ancestry. He developed the culturalist concept of "*wspakultura*," as un- or anti-culture, to describe and criticize processes countering and impeding cultural development when people did not actively engage in creating and developing the nation. He saw the contemplative nature of Catholicism as *wspakultura* and advocated for its abolition.²⁷ His circle of followers included Slavophiles and also adherents of racist notions, forming an ideology that was not only based on anti-Catholicism and *Rodzimowierstwo* but also on severe Polish nationalism.

While several prewar neo-pagan adherents did not survive the war or went into exile, others, like Stachniuk himself, were arrested during the late 1940s and early 1950s or adhered to their beliefs only in private. With most of the former activists gone, there were only a few attempts to revive the movement and establish new organizations in the post-Stalinist thaw period.²⁸ With the exception of the Łódź-based *Klan Ausran*, those attempts appeared to be seemingly short-lived, and several neo-pagan organizations emerged almost immediately after 1990.²⁹

Three of these organizations registered officially as religious associations of Slavic Native Faith: The *Rodzimy Kościół Polski* (Native Polish Church) and the *Polski Kościół Słowiański* (Polish Slavic Church), both in 1995, and the *Zrzeszenie Rodzimej Wiary* (Association of Native Faith) in 1996, which was renamed *Rodzima Wiara* (Native Faith) in 2006. Of those, only *Rodzimy Kościół Polski* and *Rodzima Wiara* have remained active and still exert influence today, forming the two largest registered organizations. However, their conceptions of Native Faith differ considerably. *Rodzimy Kościół Polski*

26 E.g., Strutyński, "Ideology"; Gajda, "Co zostało."

27 Strutyński, "Ideology."

28 Schaab, *Götter*, 137–58.

29 Simpson, "Polish Rodzimowierstwo," 113–14.

seems to be the only large organization that combines ethnic neo-paganism with universalist ideas. It is one of the very few that admits non-Polish or non-Slavic members.³⁰ In contrast, *Rodzima Wiara* adheres to the tradition of the prewar *Zadruga* movement and stresses much more pan-Slavic relations and biological roots, which it connects to ancient Aryan ancestors.³¹

Since 1996, only two other organizations have completed the registration procedure. The first one, *Zachodniosłowiański Związek Wyznaniowy "Słowiańska Wiara"* (Western Slavic Religious Union "Slavic Faith"), registered in 2009, and the second one, an official religious association under the name of *Związek Wyznaniowy Rodzimowierców Polskich "Ród"* (Religious Union of Polish Native Faith Adherents "Ród"), completed it only recently in 2024.³²

The lack of further institutionalization is, among other factors, the consequence of a change in 1997 to the requirements for registration as a religious organization. While before, membership of at least fifteen Polish citizens was sufficient, since then, one hundred members must be documented before such registration is possible.³³ Nevertheless, without formal registration, another overarching confederation, the *Zrzeszenie Polskich Wspólnot Rodzimowierczych, Konfederacja Rodzimowiercza* (Association of Polish Native Faith Communities, Native Faith Confederation) was established in 2015 and some of the registered and several informal groups have joined it.³⁴

Apart from these examples, there are many more informal groups, networks, and cultural associations dedicated to *Rodzimowierstwo*.³⁵ It is also represented by some publishing companies (*Wydawnictwo Toporzel* and *Wydawnictwo Triglav*), the radio station Radio WID, and other cultural expressions, which will be discussed below using examples of historical reenactment and musical subcultures.

Although Stachniuk himself did not place much emphasis on ancient Slavic religious traditions, a considerable part of today's neo-pagans feel committed to the specific *Zadruga* spirit formed by his followers combining Stachniuk's anti-Christian culturalist-nationalist philosophy and political position with a neo-pagan identification, which is why he is still perceived

30 Schaab, "Ethische Schale"; Schaab, *Götter*, 159 and 178–89.

31 Schaab, *Götter*, 189–97.

32 Ibid., 203–6; see also <https://slowianskawiara.pl>. See official website of *Związek Wyznaniowy Rodzimowierców Polskich Ród*: <https://zwrprod.pl>.

33 Simpson, "Polish Rodzimowierstwo," 115.

34 Schaab, *Götter*, 166–67. See also https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konfederacja_Rodzimowiercza for a list of the individual members.

35 Cf., e.g., Simpson "Polish Rodzimowierstwo"; Schaab, *Götter*.

as an "almost legendary figure" who "continues to tower over the landscape of the Polish Neopagan movement."³⁶

Several groups founded in the 1990s, such as the *Rodzima Wiara* association, followed this *Zadruga* tradition. Other organizations were more dedicated to a combination of religious and political activism, such as the *Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Tradycji i Kultury "Niklot"* (Association on Behalf of Tradition and Culture "Niklot"), the *Zakon Zadrugi "Północny Wilk"* (Order of Zadruga "Northern Wolf," ZZPW), and the *Nacjonalistyczne Stowarzyszenie Zadruga* (Nationalist Association Zadruga), some of which have reduced their activities lately. Within these modern Zadrugian organizations, racist, ethno-pluralist, and white supremacist theories had or continue to have significance.³⁷ For example, *Niklot*, founded in 1998, links the *Zadruga* tradition with identitarian and other New Right ideologies. It is connected to *Rodzima Wiara* in personnel and ideas.³⁸ *Niklot* originally emerged from the circle of the "metapolitical" magazine *Tryglaw*, which is still attached since it was established by *Niklot* leader Tomasz Szczepański.³⁹ These and similar groups adhering to the *Zadruga* tradition and ethno-nationalist political agendas engaged in political extremism and activism around the turn of the millennium in the form of demonstrations, leaflets, the formation of the (unsuccessful) party *Unia Społeczna Narodowa* (National Social Union), cooperation with other parties, as well as members aspiring to political offices.⁴⁰

Since the mid-2000s, this open political activism beyond the inherent discourse about ethnic identity seems to have ceased or been replaced by cultural work. It has apparently moved "away from the unquestioned inclusion of politics in the sacred circle and toward more cultural and artistic expression."⁴¹ Accordingly, the prevalent tendencies of ethno-nationalism are marginalized in most current research in favor of a broader picture of Polish neo-paganism mainly concerned with unpolitical practices of spiritual contemplation and cultural representation, with the intent "to keep political slogans away from the sacred."⁴² It is, however, questionable if this "shift to the cultural" can indeed be regarded as an abandonment of

36 Strutyński, "Ideology," 283.

37 Filip, "Polityka," 180.

38 Simpson, "Only Slavic Gods," 71.

39 Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 67–68.

40 Wiench, "Neo-paganism"; Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 65–67; Gajda, "Co zostało"; Filip, "Polityka."

41 Simpson, "Only Slavic Gods," 76; Anczyk, "Contemporary"; and Schaab, *Götter*, 169.

42 Simpson, "Only Slavic Gods," 71.

political ambitions and activity. Instead, as Mariusz Filip has highlighted,⁴³ the political aspirations and practices of early post-socialist and current Polish neo-paganism might not be fully understood nor systematically explored.

There may be two reasons for this ambivalent evaluation of political behavior. First, it seems to be a matter of disciplinary perspective. Scholarly attempts to understand ethnic neo-paganism in Poland and beyond are dominated so far by approaches from the fields of religious studies, religious sociology, and religious psychology—mainly focusing on religious concepts and practices. This perspective on religious practices and spiritual self-representation neglects other realms connected to the phenomenon and runs the risk of overlooking or giving less consideration to certain issues, e.g., political issues.⁴⁴ Beyond this, religious studies scholars need to strive for a neutral and emphatic approach to their objective. They must maintain a respectful and politically inclusive attitude to obtain an emic perspective and reach an understanding unbiased by their own personal attitude towards the religious movement being studied. This may lead to a mindset where any practices framed as religious must be respected within the right to religion and religious freedom. Thus, political issues appear to be excluded from discussion outside of the religious context.

A second reason for the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the political climate in Polish Native Faith currents appears to be a limited understanding of politics. In many studies on neo-paganism, the definition of political remains ambiguous or is linked to obvious forms of politics, such as sloganeering, participation in political organizations, events, initiatives, demonstrations, or regular party politics.⁴⁵ However, political action or practice may go beyond these spheres and take different forms.

This problem has already been addressed by Filip, who convincingly illustrated that the so-called shift from the political activism of the 1990s and early 2000s to a seemingly less or even unpolitical cultural activity does not necessarily mean an abandonment of political engagement.⁴⁶ With the example of the Koszalin-based far-right neo-pagan group *Zakon Zadrugi Pótnocy* “*Wilk*” (ZZPW), Filip explicates how their attempts to cooperate with political parties and candidates for local elections failed and were met with an indignant media echo, which led to the group’s “decision to withdraw

43 Filip, “Polityka.”

44 Ibid., 175–76.

45 E.g., Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods.”

46 Filip, “Polityka.”

from political life" since this type of action did not have the desired effect.⁴⁷ Subsequently, the members of ZZPW dedicated their efforts to cultural activities, like organizing festivals with presentations of medieval combat, customs and craftwork, music, barbecues, and beer.⁴⁸ According to Filip, "this kind of grassroots work is aimed at a slow 'change of national character' that takes place outside the consciousness of the public," targeting a wider audience with less obvious, "gentler" means of political agitation.⁴⁹ He concludes that in these activities, the group ceased to be distinct from the folkloristic strategy of the allegedly unpolitical faction of *Rodzimowierstwo*.

Nativeness and the Sacralization of the Past as Identity Discourse

In general, the way Native Faith is anchored in ethnic identity has raised the question, as Piotr Wiench argued, of whether a vast number of Native Faith communities actually do—and to what extent—share common features of religious movements, as such he regards an "elaborate system of religious and moral thought, a mature set of doctrines, refined theology, or institutional support for individual members."⁵⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that concepts of what defines religious communities may differ, he states that Native Faith adherents "frequently are more focused on the discourse of identity, and in some cases, even on an overtly political message," than on religiosity.⁵¹

The general extent of political traits or the question of how far Polish *Rodzimowierstwo* represents not only a religious but also a political movement is judged by other scholars ambiguously and even controversially. This seems to correspond with the very ambivalent self-concepts formulated by adherents of the Polish Native Faith, presented in Schaab's study on their ethnic identity construction in relation to various aspects.⁵² Interestingly, a small poll made in 2018—which did not aim for scientific standards but seems to suggest trends in Polish neo-pagan self-description—shows that nearly half of the respondents do not connect Native Faith with national descent. As a result, they regarded *Rodzimowierstwo* as a cosmopolitan belief, whereas nearly one-third of respondents claimed that Slavic neo-paganism was only for

47 Ibid., 179.

48 Ibid., 184.

49 Ibid., 183–84.

50 Wiench, "Postcolonial Key," 13.

51 Ibid.

52 Schaab, *Götter*.

people of exclusively Slavic origin.⁵³ This contradicts academic studies, which, with little exception, observe the exclusive character of the vast majority of groups as well as the interlinkage of references to ethnicity or nationality and the ancient past with conceptions of (biological) ancestry.⁵⁴ However, in contrast to the alleged cosmopolitan views, when asked about their concept of nation, more than 60 percent of respondents in the mentioned poll adhered to the nation as “a community of blood, language, and culture,” consequently emphasizing the importance of ethnicity and ancestry. What is regarded as “native” by adherents of the Polish Native Faith and what function the reference to nativeness has in their conceptions of it can show why ethnic neo-paganism in Poland and beyond is closely related to ethno-nationalist ideologies and networks.

Scholars studying *Rodzimowierstwo* who have been in close contact and exchange with different groups over the years agree that nativeness is the foundation and principal category for them: “nativeness is central to the selection of beliefs and practices which participants endorse.”⁵⁵ As Simpson observes, “native” refers to a “here-ness and us-ness,” linking territory to tradition and ancestry, thus providing “a sense of an essential shared identity of the people and places involved, in both time and space.”⁵⁶ Consequently, ethnic identification as a Pole and/or a Slav is the crucial element for Polish *Rodzimowierstwo*.⁵⁷ This ethnic identification can have different qualities, which Simpson describes as concentric identities directed at local Slavic tribes, general Polishness, Western Slavism, universal Slavism, and Indo-Europeanism, which can merge according to the situation.⁵⁸ Whichever, they all represent an identification with ethnic nativeness understood in an essentialist way as something natural, something one is born with, and something that does not change “over the course of whatever history is involved and over whatever geographic area.”⁵⁹ With a few exceptions, for Native Faith believers, pagan Slavic traditions are linked to ethnic origin rather than being some ancient practices that anyone can adopt. Polish or Slavic descent is, therefore, a prerequisite for membership in most groups. The only explicitly known exception, accepting a different background if

53 Duchtynia, “Ankieta Rodzimowiercza 2018.”

54 Wiench, “Postcolonial Key,” 10–13; Aitamurto and Simpson, “Introduction”; Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 75; Schaab, *Götter*, 267–73.

55 Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 66.

56 Ibid., 66–69.

57 Schaab, *Götter*, 272.

58 Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 67–68.

59 Ibid., 66 and 69.

there is a willingness to acculturate, is the *Rodzimy Kościół Polski*, which has been criticized for this by other groups, some of whom even deny its belonging to *Rodzimowierstwo*.⁶⁰

Some groups, particularly those in the *Zadruga* tradition, combine ethnic identity with racial-biological concepts and references to Aryan origins. Apart from *Rodzima Wiara*, whose beliefs will be examined in more detail now, Schaab cites Wrocław-based *Fundacja Watra* as another example,⁶¹ whose ties to the right-wing extremist scene and popularization efforts will be discussed later. *Rodzima Wiara*'s religious credo, as presented on its website, is based on a discernible ethno-nationalist and even prevalent racist and anti-Semitic worldview.⁶² It conceives Poles and other Slavs as relatives and descendants of the "ancient Aryans" and, thus, stresses that

the ancient Polish faith is a natural religion emerged together with the nation, with all of Baltica-Slavia-Arya, it is a source of power and spiritual rebirth. Not only a person but also the nation has religious needs. Native Faith comes to meet them.⁶³

Aryan-Slavic-Polish descent is inextricably linked with religious faith, thereby sacralizing the former and naturalizing the latter. How the concept of Aryan ancestry follows unmistakably essentialist and biologically racist patterns of thought is demonstrated in the paragraph concerning "character and inheritance," explaining that "genes carry our basic, psycho-physical characteristics countless times from generation to generation, becoming the immortal link that binds the past to the future."⁶⁴ The dominance of Catholicism is consequently understood as a contradiction to the "genotype," causing an inner split and weakening the character of people and especially of the nation.⁶⁵ As a result, *Rodzima Wiara* deplures

the break of cultural continuity, separation from the native subsoil, but also [...] a deep negative spiritual disruption. The acceptance of

60 Schaab, *Götter*, 269–70.

61 Ibid., 178–89, and 269.

62 <https://rodzimawiara.org.pl/rodzima-wiara/poszerzone-wyznanie-wiary.html>. The following quotations were taken from here. The website does not function anymore and was partly removed to <http://rodzimawiara.com.pl>. See also the summary by Schaab, *Götter*, 189–97.

63 <http://rodzimawiara.com.pl/dropdown2/>.

64 The original text has been removed from *Rodzima Wiara*'s website; it is, however, quoted in a forum entry: <https://www.netkobiety.pl/t70606.html>.

65 Ibid.

Judeo-Christianity led to a discrepancy between descent and confession, between inherited genetic record and imposed foreign values.⁶⁶

The renewal of Aryan unity is therefore declared one of the organization's aspirations.

When the concept of *Rodzimowierstwo*, in addition to nativeness as a cultural tradition and ethnic identity, frames ancestry biologically, i.e., racially, and ties in with white supremacist ideas of Aryan descent and heroism, this echoes ideas of the *völkisch* movement of prewar Germany, which followed a racial Germano-centric ideology and strove to create an anti-egalitarian, corporately organized, and religiously founded society.⁶⁷ Central *völkisch* patterns of thought in the following were absorbed by national socialism, which is why Piotr Wienc, despite the marginal influence of racist neo-paganism in Poland, cautioned that "one should keep in mind the ominous example of the rapid emergence of a social movement exploiting folk mythology and a rhetoric of return to indigenous, tribal roots, which became a powerful political force—the German Nazis."⁶⁸

Since the connection between religion and ethnic identity defines Native Faith, identity discourse and identity politics are always involved. Concurring with Filip, it seems that the indissoluble nexus between religion, ethnicity, and sometimes even race inevitably leads to a politicization of faith, the expressions of which may lay beyond classical religion studies' focus on phenomena determined by a belief in the supernatural.⁶⁹ When religion and ethnic identity are thus interlinked, identity discourses and practices are sacralized, and their inherent politics are made sacrosanct, which makes it more challenging to address and analyze their political impact because relevant ideas and ideologies are neither perceived nor questioned in their political significance. Consequently, we should ask how different groups act upon it, what strategies of exclusion, identity missionary, and ideologization can be traced in neo-pagan activities. Returning to the perceived shift from open political activism to allegedly unpolitical cultural engagement, it seems necessary to look at the cultural activities neo-pagan actors are involved in and into cultural fields where references to the pre-Christian past have a specific significance.

66 <http://rodzimawiara.com.pl/dropdown2/>.

67 Puschner, "Grundlagen," 6.

68 Wienc, "Neo-paganism," 291.

69 Filip, "Polityka," 180–81.

Ethnocentric Neo-paganism in Popular History Practices in Poland

The ZZPW group is so far the only representative of the far-right neo-pagan circles of the late 1990s and early 2000s that has been closely investigated, and its efforts to transform political activism into a cultural one as a grassroots attempt to "change the national character" have been explicitly observed, even though their public cultural actions lasted only for roughly two years.⁷⁰ There are, however, other actors from those formerly radically politically oriented groups who have shifted from political to cultural engagement. Since the functionalization of cultural activity and the popularization of pre-Christian faith and lifestyle have been discussed as a metapolitical strategy in these circles before, it can be argued that their cultural, spiritual, or even artistic expression may still have a political agenda at its core. Such cultural expressions appear primarily in historical reenactment, particularly of the Slavic Middle Ages, and the subcultural musical scene of black metal and neofolk. Of course, in neither of these fields can pagan or even right-wing political identity be attributed to a majority.

Though several authors repeatedly mention the interlinkage between *Rodzimowiercy* and reenactment groups, and pagan-related metal and folk music have been frequently named as popular artistic expressions of native belief, the political potential of this overlap has not been discussed in academic research to a reasonable extent. Only few attempts have been made to further investigate the specific closeness of ethnic neo-paganism to historical reenactment and the black metal subcultures, as well as a certain tendency to radicalized nationalism or even white supremacism in the intersections of these milieus.⁷¹ Contrarily, though, the increasing entanglement of *Rodzimowierstwo* with reenactment and pagan-inspired musical cultures has even been considered a reason for the turn from political to unpolitical cultural activity, attributing it to the "growing interest in Polish *Rodzimowierstwo* among groups that are not primarily politically oriented, such as the Polish metal scene or historical reenactment groups."⁷²

Ties between such activities have existed before, partially due to radical political synergies, as, for example, a report covering the sixth Festival of

70 Ibid., 183–85.

71 Hoppadietz and Reichenbach, "In Honour"; Hoppadietz and Reichenbach, "Nationalist Appropriations." See, in particular, the recently published volume dedicated to this phenomenon with studies from Germany, Poland, and Hungary: Hoppadietz and Reichenbach, *Staging the Pagan Past*.

72 Anczyk, "Contemporary," 234.

Slavs and Vikings in the white supremacist *Resistance* magazine in 2001 may indicate.⁷³ This report relates to the international festival of early medieval battle reenactments taking place every year at Wolin in northeastern Poland. Evidence of the significance of this festival among the far right includes the fact that the magazine was put out by the record label *Resistance Records*, at the time owned by William Luther Pierce, who, in his lifetime, was the head of the US neo-Nazi organization National Alliance and author of the infamous *The Turner Diaries*.⁷⁴

The reporter met in Wolin with representatives of the Eastern European radical black metal bands Graveland, Perunwit, North, and Nokturnal Mortum. Some of these bands are even categorized within the subgenre of national socialist black metal (NSBM), which openly glorifies the Third Reich and the Holocaust.⁷⁵ The reporter recounts his conversations with Robert Fudali, alias Lord Darken, leader of the Polish band Graveland, and with Igor D. Górewicz and Mateusz Piskorski—the latter two then neo-pagan activists of Niklot and the right-wing extremist *Odala* magazine, published in the 1990s—to discuss theories of anti-Christianity, racism, and national socialism.⁷⁶ They discussed the increasing connection between the pagan black metal and the skinhead movements, seeing a lot of common ground and positive mutual influence between the two, estimating even that “over 50% of all people who attend Heathen events are connected to the skinhead movement.”⁷⁷ Other statements by the reporter’s interlocutors clearly show that the festival was perceived to be more than a mere presentation of early medieval lifestyle and battle performance, but rather a place to which people returned to “celebrate their European heritage” and to experience “pagan life and feel the spirit of the ancient ways,” which was considered as “the aim of these events—to stimulate their subconscious to think about their European roots.”⁷⁸ Regular observations show that the Wolin festival remains an annual meeting point for representatives of the radical right scene.⁷⁹

The general overlap of reenactment groups and Native Faith adherents is confirmed by Simpson, who draws from his field research the conclusion that “[a] significant number [of *Rodzimowiercy*] are participants in historical

73 Hubert, “Viking Festival.”

74 Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 22–25, and 211.

75 Dornbusch and Killguss, *Unheilige Allianzen*, 152 and 239–53.

76 Hubert, “Viking Festival,” 6–7; Strutyński, “Pogański narodowy socjalizm”; Strutyński, “Wizja życia politycznego.”

77 Hubert, “Viking Festival,” 8.

78 Ibid., 7.

79 E.g., Banghard, *Nazis im Wolfspelz*.

re-enactment troupes" and rates the proportion around 30 percent.⁸⁰ Reversely, he believes almost 20 percent of reenactment group members consider themselves *Rodzimowiercy*, based on a small poll from 120 Polish reenactors at the Wolin festival, where 19.2 percent claimed to be ethnic neo-pagans.⁸¹ He assumes in this constellation also the possibility of an alternative organizational means for neo-pagan communities to avoid the complex requirements for registration as a religious association because "these troupes often maintain some sort of associated private company which can issue invoices for paid performances of battles or other large events."⁸² Due to the lack of systematic investigation and the informal character of the neo-pagan networks, only a few clear cases document the intersection of both communities. A frequently mentioned example is the Poznań-based reenactment group *Jantar*, whose members simultaneously represent a community of neo-pagan worshippers.⁸³

Though less often mentioned in literature about Polish *Rodzimowierstwo*, neo-paganism and medieval reenactment also distinctively overlap with pagan-oriented musical subcultures, especially pagan and Viking metal, both black metal subgenres, and pagan or medieval-inspired folk music. While there are many politically inconspicuous bands,⁸⁴ others have a clear political message. Some of their radical representatives are linked to the Pagan Front, an international, decidedly racist neo-pagan organization founded around 1998 in association with a US record label. Pagan Front bands adhere to white supremacism, and there are close relations with the NSBM network. A Polish example connecting neo-pagan reenactment and white power music subcultures is the already mentioned Robert Fudali alias Lord Darken and his two band projects, *Graveland*—which is listed with the Pagan Front—and *Lord Wind*.⁸⁵ Apart from his musical ambitions and extremist pagan ideology, Fudali is also an enthusiast of historical reenactment and participates in reenactment events. He also regularly performs with his folk band, *Lord Wind*, as part of the framework program at the Wolin and other reenactment festivals. Many bands in the pagan metal and folk genres dress in historical costumes and reenactment gear on stage and on album covers, revealing a visual link between those cultures.⁸⁶

80 Simpson, "Strategies," 15 and 20–21.

81 Simpson, "Polish Rodzimowierstwo," 126n27.

82 Ibid., 118.

83 Ibid., 119; Schaab, *Götter*, 160.

84 Simpson, "Only Slavic Gods," 77 and 84n10; Schaab, *Götter*, 162–63.

85 Buesnel, "National Socialist"; Hoppadietz and Reichenbach, "In Honour."

86 Hoppadietz and Reichenbach, "Nationalist Appropriations," 224.

The increasing connectivity between ethnic neo-paganism, historical reenactment, and pagan metal or folk music seems to manifest in a growing number of international festivals combining performances from all three fields, such as the Norwegian *Midgardsblot* or the Baltic *Kilkim Žaibu*, held in Lithuania. Also, in recent years, the Slav and Viking reenactment festival of Wolin has regularly included pre-Christian Slavic and Viking rituals and music by pagan folk bands.

Another representative of these three spheres is Igor D. Górewicz, who, in addition to being a vital protagonist of the Polish reenactment scene as the leader of the Szczecin group *Drużyna Grodu Trzygłowa* (Triglav Strongold Warband), has been the long-term deputy head and Szczecin branch leader of *Rodzima Wiara*. He is also the front man of a (lesser known) black and pagan metal band called *Casus Belli* and has also been involved in several folk music projects. Around the turn of the millennium, he moved in far-right neo-pagan circles, tried his hand at active politics by running for local government elections, and his metal band's songs included anti-Semitic and ethno-nationalist elements. At some point in the late 2000s, Górewicz dissociated himself from these far-right connections.⁸⁷

His political engagement back then was closely linked to the neo-pagan organization Niklot and the previously mentioned magazines *Trygław* and *Odala*. As the quotations provided by Strutyński show, Górewicz presented in many articles, in *Trygław* as well as *Odala*, his ideas about Native Faith, nationalism, and political action.⁸⁸ They reveal a worldview of his younger self dominated by a concept of a nation based on culture and biology, as well as by ethno-nationalism and ethno-pluralism.⁸⁹

In these texts, nationalism is understood as the natural political expression of *Rodzimowierstwo* and as "an ideology that cannot be seen through the prism of the relationship with other nations, because the center of attention, the ideological core, is obviously one's own nation and its state."⁹⁰ Likewise, Górewicz stated that advocates of "nativeness" must "oppose it to too strong external influences, especially in terms of worldview and attitudes."⁹¹ As for the political course of action, he suggested first

87 As, e.g., quoted in this blog entry from 2009: <https://inicjacja.wordpress.com/slowianstwo/>.

88 Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego."

89 He confirmed being a supporter of ethno-pluralism also in an interview, given presumably in 2001. Górewicz, "Interview."

90 Górewicz, "Grzechy główne"; cf. Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 69.

91 Górewicz, "Polityczność panteistów"; cf. Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 77.

mastering the "inner area," i.e., spiritual culture, to later transfer the action to the outer area, i.e., social life, politics. This is the task of preparing the ground. It consists of the idea that each participant in the "Zadruga embryo" prepares the field in his own section, shaping the attitudes of coworkers, subordinates, acquaintances, in the field of views on history, politics.⁹²

Further, in order to build "the ideal state" he suggested forming an elite or "aristocracy as a group possessing special qualities of mind, spirit, character and body, [...] an aristocracy with a sense of duty and service to the state."⁹³

This emphasis on a long-term approach to shaping public opinion and the formation of elites can be regarded, according to Strutyński, in the context of the difficulties of becoming a serious factor in national politics.⁹⁴ Other activists of the Polish neo-pagan far right have also proposed this as a form of "metapolitics" to bring about "civilizational and historical changes."⁹⁵ "Metapolitics" here clearly refers to the approach conceptualized by the French Nouvelle Droite as a strategic prepolitical phase to change collective awareness in a cultural revolution from the right through the circulation and normalization of ideas.⁹⁶ In addition, the references to building an elite or aristocracy echo Julius Evola's social ideal of a caste hierarchy, which framed racial and specific class elitism as an Indo-Aryan tradition to be restored. This concept formed one of the key elements of Evola's anti-modernism, which in many ways was heavily inspired by the ideas of French intellectual René Guénon.⁹⁷ Górewicz considered participation in reenactment festivals like the annual Festival of Slavs and Vikings in Wolin as one way of contributing to the shaping of attitudes. A statement he made to *Resistance* magazine reveals his former vehemently racist and anti-Semitic mindset:

We are all against the modern system, especially Democracy and the nigger-loving system. We hate Christianity. We see [Democracy] as Z.O.G. and Jew occupation. Wolin is a historical site of ancient pagan civilization. [...] Here in Wolin, we feel the spirit of our ancestors. It is the best place for the meeting of our movement.⁹⁸

92 Górewicz, "Grzechy główne"; cf. Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 69.

93 Górewicz, "Polityczność panteistów"; cf. Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 77.

94 Strutyński, "Wizja życia politycznego," 69–70.

95 Ibid., 70–71.

96 see, e.g., Griffin, "Between Metapolitics."

97 E.g., Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 52–71.

98 Hubert, "Viking Festival," 7.

Górewicz also regarded black metal as part of this “spiritual and cultural area.” In a statement given (presumably in 2001) in an interview about his band Casus Belli, he said, “for years I [have been] involved in [the] heathen-nationalistic movement, for which black metal music is very suitable media to spread it’s [sic] ideas.”⁹⁹ He also emphasized that his music is related to the ideas presented in *Odala* magazine and that he maintains friendly ties to Graveland and Fudali.

Apparently, in the second half of the 2000s, Górewicz started to dissociate himself from these extremist ideas and his earlier political activism.¹⁰⁰ To date, no further obvious links to the right-wing extremist scene have been observed. He is, however, still in contact with a number of right-leaning neo-pagan activists who, like himself, are still involved with *Rodzima Wiara* and Niklot, and his band is also still more or less active. Thus, though he declares his engagement in *Rodzimowierstwo* and history popularization to be apolitical now, this is doubted by anti-racist and left-wing organizations and press.¹⁰¹

However, the popularization of the early Slavs seems to be his primary concern and passion now. Apart from the discussed activities, he runs the publishing house *Wydawnictwo Triglav*, producing popular publications on Slavic and Viking medieval history. However, he also released a doctoral thesis about the prewar *Zadruga* movement written by the founder and head of *Rodzima Wiara*, Stanisław Potrzebowski.¹⁰² He also published a Polish translation of the so-called *Book of Veles* (*Księga Welesa*), which frequently serves in Eastern Slavic neo-paganism as a kind of bible of the Slavic Native Faith but is regarded as a forgery by scholars.¹⁰³ With his cultural and historical popularization activities, he has gained widespread public support; there is almost no public history project or event on the Slavic and Viking Middle Ages that does not include his participation. He appears, often together with his reenactment group, in history and lifestyle magazines, on TV, in movie productions, and at performances of internationally famous bands like *Amon Amarth*, *Leaves’ Eyes*, or *Atrocity*. He regularly appears in pieces of art and photography; he works as a curator of museum exhibitions; and he also participates in scientific publications and panel discussions.¹⁰⁴

99 Górewicz, “Interview.”

100 An example is quoted in this blog entry in 2009: <https://inicjacja.wordpress.com/slowianstwo/>.

101 Kornak, “Casus Casus Belli”; Witkowski, “Smarzowski”; Witkowski, “Wielka Aryjska Lechia.”

102 Potrzebowski, *Słowiański Ruch Zadruga*.

103 Jabłoński and Górewicz, *Księga Welesa*.

104 Official website of Igor D. Górewicz: <https://www.igorgorewicz.pl/>.

Primarily concerning his involvement in different projects of history education, the question arises as to how far his neo-pagan concepts of the Slavic past and "nativeness" conflict with the popularization of academic concepts of history, even more so as he might still be a representative of the Zadrugian organization *Rodzima Wiara*, despite his name recently disappearing from its website. In an earlier interview formerly published there, he described once more his views on cultural work and the formation of elites as a

long work striving for a change of the prevailing standards of organization and cultural activity, and at the same time researching, developing, and propagating the native tradition and culture in all their manifestations, so that in time a large social group can be created that is ready to take the role of a guide of Polish culture.¹⁰⁵

Górewicz's more recent statements and publications do not reflect the far-right theoretical framework of his former attitudes. However, the dedication to guide people back to their native identity and roots of descent prevails in them. He argues in the introduction of a book about historical reenactment that "the more we venture into modernity, forgetting our roots, the more people will gravitate towards those roots, and the more the roots will emerge from beneath the surface," and "the more group identity is abandoned, the more man, as a herd animal, will seek this identity and community."¹⁰⁶

The statements on *Wydawnictwo Triglav's* website and *Facebook* account show the motivation for its efforts to popularize history even more clearly, saying that by choosing the three-headed Slavic god Triglav as patron,

we linked our activities with that part of Slavic culture for which this figure is responsible—knowledge, memory, and identity. Triglav, as the guardian of wisdom and souls, is the fullest expression of efforts to preserve, deepen and disseminate the knowledge of the culture of our ancestors. These elements are the pillars of the mission of the Triglav Publishing House, which is to popularize knowledge, to promote the memory of past generations, and to present topics related to the native heritage in an accessible way.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Górewicz, "Wywiad."

¹⁰⁶ Górewicz, *Mieczem pisane*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ See the *Wydawnictwo Triglav* website (<https://triglav.com.pl/o-wydawnictwie.html>) and *Facebook* page (<https://m.facebook.com/triglav.books>).

While Górewicz's cultural activities can be clearly linked to at least general neo-pagan missionary and identity politics, other representatives of *Rodzimowierstwo*, already active in the early 2000s, are still evidently connected to far-right circles. This is the case with the group *Fundacja Watra* from Wrocław, headed by Rafał Merski, whose concept of Native Faith and its ethics are characterized by ethnicism/white supremacism, a warrior ethos, and elitarianism.¹⁰⁸ The social media accounts of Merski himself and *Fundacja Watra* show support for and, in turn, are supported by extreme right-wing organizations and actors, like a blog entry dedicated to "European-wide racial-spiritual resurgence" linked to an English white supremacist's *Asatru* website.¹⁰⁹ A few years ago, the community started fundraising and held an auction to finance the construction of a Slavic temple, which would also serve as a meeting place to popularize Slavic history and culture. Among those who donated objects for the auction was Robert Fudali of *Graveland*. When the project recently came to a halt, a newspaper article published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* revealed the neo-fascist background of the endeavor.¹¹⁰

The enormous public presence of popularizers of pre-Christian and medieval history, like Górewicz, and the support shown for the pagan temple in Wrocław are related to an increasing demand for public history events and formats. Medieval history has become fashionable and seems to be increasingly charged with aesthetic and identificational value, a phenomenon that has been described as "neo-medievalism." Many reenactment groups work commercially, are booked by museums or television productions, run their own open-air museums or archaeo-parks, and run e-commerce stores that sell clothes, equipment, and jewelry. History tourism and histotainment, in general, have been booming for some years now, generating a wide variety of media and event formats. Some of the larger reenactment festivals, like the one in Wolin, have become major tourist events and receive official funding. This reconstructionist activism smoothly blends in with the world of comics, fantasy, and role-play, medieval-themed video games, and other kinds of pop-cultural visual processing of medievalness, like the hyped *Game of Thrones* or *Vikings* television series.

108 Schaab, *Götter*, 171–78.

109 Asatru is a religion based on worshiping ancient Germanic and Scandinavian spirits and gods. Rafał Merski's blog: <https://rafalmerski.wordpress.com>. See also Witkowski, "Wielka Aryjska Lechia," who describes further connections with another far-right neo-pagan group Białóżar and the *Szturm* monthly (<https://www.szturm.com.pl/>).

110 Wilczyńska, "Za budową świątyni."

Nevertheless, medievalness sells in the pop/mass cultural sector not only due to the visual aesthetics and exoticism, which undoubtedly contribute to its popularity. It responds to present desires and yearnings to escape the complexities of modern life into a premodern world. In the popular imagination, this world appears as an alternative to the individualism and pluralism of postmodern societies since it seems to consist of community and clearly defined group identities with clear rules, distinct social hierarchies, and virtues. It seems to praise values like strength and power and regards violence as a legitimate or even necessary means to solve conflicts. As Daria Radtchenko once observed for the Russian reenactment scene, the medieval, pre-Christian past is often regarded as something like a historical utopia, or rather a retrotopian fantasy in the sense of Zygmund Bauman.¹¹¹ It represents a place to escape (post)modern life and contemporary civilization to an alternative reality, where, as Radtchenko puts it, "the past is seen as a source of answers to contemporary problems and aspirations."¹¹² The antimodernist and anti-individualist traits, however, and the emphasis on warriorhood, comradeship, patriotism, and heroism provide connectivity with the national-conservative or more radical right-wing belief systems and ideologies prevalent in ethnic neo-paganism. Thus, suppose the radical neo-pagan circles, rather than abandoning their political ambitions, transferred them from open political action and party politics to a grassroots culture war arena. In that case, it seems that, with the increasing popularity and media presence of neo-pagan representatives, an important first step in this direction has already been taken.

Conclusion

As discussed, the Polish Native Faith is inextricably linked to ethnic identity to the extent that its followers perceive it as the original and natural religion for people identifying themselves as Poles or Slavs by birth. Thus, nativeness, understood as cultural and/or biological ethnicity, is the reference point in *Rodzimowierstwo* and, therefore, an integral part of this religion. As a result, the ethnic in-group and all elements thought to be inherent and necessary are sacralized. Common *Rodzimowierstwo* practices described by Scott Simpson as sacralizing folklore illustrate this. For example, secular folk traditions from rural areas without any obvious connection to pre-Christian

111 Radtchenko, "Simulating," 145; Bauman, *Retrotopia*.

112 Radtchenko, "Simulating," 145.

Slavic religious practices are integrated into current neo-pagan rituals because of their native appearance.¹¹³

Since ethnicity is understood as archaic, long predating Christianity, references to the ancient past reinforce the notions of nativeness, continuity, and tradition. The more ancient origins and traditions are believed to be, the less disturbed they appear by “foreign influences” like Catholicism, so that the identification with the pre-Christian past is considered “more Polish” than the traditional adherence to Roman Catholicism.¹¹⁴ Hence in ethnic neo-paganism, the sacralization of the past operates through sacralizing the ethnic origins—while simultaneously amplifying the sense of nativeness. In practice, *Rodzimowiercy* use ritual strategies “to invoke a feeling of continuity and closeness with the past, especially when no exact ancient model is available, and to emphasize that new action taken in the here-and-now is still an integral part of a larger, enduring continuity that stretches across the centuries.”¹¹⁵

The construction of ethnically conditioned sacrality generally excludes participants of different ethnic groups, in particular when ethnicity is thought of in terms of biological ancestry. The connection to the native origins’ ancient past, whose traditions must be resurrected and freed from foreign influences, also results in demarcations. Both can be understood as ethno-nationalist identity politics. This inherent “politicalness” of ethnic neo-paganism expresses itself in practices that are either perceived as merely spiritual, cultural, and traditional or as political activism. The radical right-wing Polish neo-pagans of the late 1990s and early 2000s regarded the former as a means by which the latter would spread ethno-nationalist identity through cultural activities to a wider public in order to achieve “a total change of the national character.”¹¹⁶ While their political attempts in party politics and elections have failed and open discussions of New Right conceptual frameworks have ceased, cultural activities with reference to history, especially the Middle Ages, meet with a demand for history popularization and entertainment offers. How successful the shift from open political activism to cultural activism has been, can be demonstrated by the example of Igor D. Górewicz and the overlapping fields of neo-paganism, historical reenactment, and pagan-oriented musical subcultures. If cultural and spiritual engagement for parts of Polish *Rodzimowierstwo* still follows

113 Simpson, “Strategies,” 18.

114 Simpson, “Only Slavic Gods,” 69–70 and 74.

115 Simpson, “Strategies,” 222.

116 Filip, “Polityka,” 183–84.

a metapolitical strategy to "prepare the ground" for later action in "the outer area," as they have argued around the millennium, that remains to be seen. This question certainly motivates further investigation, looking for the political in the cultural and sacred.

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13. Resacralizing Hungarianness: Pseudo-History, Ethno-paganism, and High Politics

István Povedák

Abstract: The chapter introduces the modes of sacralization of the past revived in Hungary after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The emergence of contemporary reinterpretation and resacralization of history under communist rule was inherently rooted in the politics of memory. As a result, the pseudo-historical concepts blooming in interwar Hungary were automatically revived in the 1990s. Moreover, as a result of the Trianon trauma, the feeling of catastrophe has caused a shift in focus from the present to the sacralized Hungarian prehistory as a foundation for collective identity building. Throughout this chapter, sacralization of the past is presented as permeating banal nationalism and the broad layers of popular culture, and as providing the ideological foundation of contemporary paganism in Hungary as a whole.

Keywords: Hungary, paganism, sacralization of the past, Trianon, right-wing political organizations

In fact, the word “Trianon” could be boldly replaced by “Trauma” in the Hungarian language; it would be easier to give this name to the streets, squares, promenades, and parks in every Hungarian city. They should all be called “Trauma.” [...] I am really bored by this national suffering. I’m tired of all this despair. It’s like a greasy lunch. It’s annoying that they’re crying out for historical justice. I’m angry at the wailing that doesn’t stop, even though I understand it all, this unfulfilled longing, this never-ending howl.¹

¹ Varga, *Mangalica-csárdás*, 245–46.

Observers of Hungarian politics interested in the transformations of Hungarian public spaces will have observed at least two spectacular changes in recent years. The first was the invasion of runic town signs at the borders of settlements.² The second was the burgeoning Trianon monuments commemorating the Treaty of Trianon (June 4, 1920), when the country lost 67 percent of its territory and 58 percent of its population in the centers.³ Although their connection may not seem evident initially, these two developments are closely intertwined. The unofficial and controversial installation of runic town signs was supported by local radical right-wing political organizations. They aimed to exhibit the presence of an extreme right-wing mentality within the community. Runic town signs came to serve as a marker of conservative identity and symbolic possession of space.⁴ Conversely, the local municipalities legitimately erected the Trianon memorials to commemorate an event considered the most severe trauma of the nation.⁵ These monuments mark a neuralgic point in Hungarian history that changed the worldview, national self-consciousness, and mentality of a broad stratum of society for generations.⁶ The decimation of the country predestined the hostile attitude towards the surrounding new states, turning them into evildoers against the Hungarians. Furthermore, as a kind of psychological self-defense reaction, the cultural self-image was also transfigured in the interwar era, and the glorification of the national past intensified.⁷ Although attempts were made to erase these from the national self-consciousness

2 This publication is an outcome of the ERC CZ project n. LL2006 ("ReEnchEu") funded by the Czech MŠMT and led by Dr. Alessandro Testa at the Department of Sociological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. The research was supported by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. The "Sekler alphabet" or "Sekler-Hungarian runic alphabet" in popular parlance developed from the Old Turkic (Orkhon) alphabet. According to linguists, the alphabet appeared in Hungary in the Sekler territories between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. (Seklars are the most populous Hungarian-speaking minority group living in the southeastern corner of Transylvania, Romania.) It is a widespread (but pseudo-scientific) conception that the "ancient Hungarian runic alphabet" has a far longer history reaching back to pre-Christian Hungarian times before the ninth century. For more, see Sándor, "A székelly."

3 For the list of settlements with runic town signs, see https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rov%C3%A1st%C3%A1bl%C3%A1s_telep%C3%BCl%C3%A9sek_list%C3%A1ja. The introduction of 125 Trianon memorials can be found here: <https://trianon100.hu/emlekmuvek>.

4 Sándor, "A székelly."

5 Throughout the chapter, the term "trauma" refers to the emotions and collective experience of the nation in regard to historical culture. "A trauma occurs after a major event with dramatic consequences for the nation concerned, an event which was unexpected, which was not prepared for, and which could not be prevented." Gerner, "Open Wounds?," 81.

6 Romsics, "Nemzeti traumánk."

7 Zeidler, *A magyar*, 5–6.

during communism, the Trianon syndrome reappeared after 1989. This is represented by both the renaissance of so-called runic writing and the invasive spread of Trianon monuments in public spaces. However, turning towards the past and reinterpreting the significance of certain historical actors, eras, or symbols has contributed to the birth of a particular stream of thought that glorifies and sacralizes certain constituents of Hungarian history. Beyond distinguishing itself from the “mundane world,” Hungarian history is endowed with a sacred flavor—a prophetic consciousness.

This chapter introduces the modes of sacralization of the past revived in Hungary after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It argues that the emergence of contemporary reinterpretation and resacralization of history under communist rule was inherently rooted in the politics of memory. As a result, the pseudo-historical concepts blooming in interwar Hungary were automatically revived, after over forty years of silence, in the 1990s. Moreover, as the trauma of Trianon over the past hundred years has not been therapeutically processed, the feeling of catastrophe has caused a shift in focus from the present to the sacralized Hungarian prehistory as a foundation for collective identity building. Throughout this chapter, sacralization of the past is presented not merely as a pseudo-scientific trend that belongs to the competence of historians but as one that permeates banal nationalism, the broad layers of popular culture, and provides the ideological foundation of contemporary paganism in Hungary as a whole.⁸

Reinterpreting History: Theoretical and Historical Background

“Never doubt that you can change history. You already have.” This is a quote from Marge Piercy, the American Jewish feminist poet, that has become a popular motivational text in online popular culture. Now, with a hint of irony, we can interpret it not only as an inspirational online text but as a reference to the current worldwide flourishing of pseudo-history, crypto-history; and conspiracy theories.⁹ Although it may appear that the vast amounts of information available to audiences in contemporary society make modernity a hostile environment for historical inventions, we still encounter increasingly diverse narratives in the public arena. An

8 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

9 Carroll, *Skeptic's Dictionary*; Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*; Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*; Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*; Dyrendal et al., “Role of Conspiracy”; Robertson, “Conspiracy Theories.”

obvious reason for this may be the varying forms of media available to us for disseminating information beyond books. As Fritze claimed, the delivery system for these concepts now encompasses a “charlatan’s playground of film, television, radio, magazines, and the internet.”¹⁰ Online spaces are not merely a source of verifiable knowledge but also provide do-it-yourself resources for historical and religious inventions. Online media, especially social media, has become the most influential factor in this shift.

However, it is worth noting that the reinterpretation of history and the mythicization and demythization of historical figures, events, or processes, are not exclusively characteristic of the post-internet era. These practices were observed, *inter alia*, in ancient Rome, in the medieval chronicles, by the ideologues of the French Revolution, and in dictatorships of the twentieth century. In these periods, the reinterpretation and construction of historical myths, the glorification of historical events and spaces, and the apotheosis of figures and symbols can be observed. In parallel, so too can the vilification and demystification that happened steadily with fluctuating intensity. In the words of Kritzman, “the present mode of historical perception is derived from an imaginative form of consciousness based more on myths than facts. Our knowledge of the past is less a question of our empirical grip on the past than our apprehension of the past as we represent it through the lens of the present.”¹¹

It is also necessary to emphasize that the reinterpretation of history may be attached to more than ambiguously understood pseudo-historical concepts. It is an integral part of paradigmatic political shifts and takeovers. Transformative historic periods increase the intensity of reinterpretation. Rewriting, demystifying, debunking—sometimes even falsifying history—all establish or strengthen the emerging new system’s legitimacy. A Janus-faced process describes these transitions: on one side, actors and events of the past are plausibly linked with the aims of the present and become emphasized and dominant in the mythical/narrative dimension of historical memory.

Conversely, the memory of actors and events considered dangerous and provocative is weakened, falsified, or erased. Heroizing, deheroizing, or even demonizing historical characters, the process of mythmaking (including various conspiracy theories and bulwark myths), or the production of a whole host of invented traditions, all occur due to the changes and

10 Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*, 8.

11 Kritzman, “Foreword,” xii.

uncertainties in identity politics.¹² At the same time, new political systems also make breaking with the recent past obvious to members of society through symbolic language.¹³

Before hastily concluding that the process is an ingredient of totalitarian regimes alone, it is worth considering Professor Aleida Assmann's thoughts. She emphasized that as long as the processes of memory in the individual occur spontaneously and obey the general laws of spiritual mechanisms, a targeted policy of memory and forgetting governs these processes at a collective and institutional level. Because cultural memory has no self-organization, it is relied upon by the media and politics.¹⁴ Therefore,

the relationship between the past and the present is constantly changing and open-ended. Disseminated by the mass media as interpretations or official definitions of historical events, representations are a powerful element in the construction, contestation, and reconstruction of personal and collective memories.¹⁵

Consequently, changes in our present circumstances—whether they occur in democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian regimes—also entail some changes in the perception of the past.

All Central and Eastern European citizens born before the fall of the Iron Curtain have experienced this process at least once in their lifetime. In the unique moment of 1989/90, the elites' historical culture (i.e., the rising democratic system and academic history) converged with popular culture.¹⁶ There was a shared, mutually agreed upon general need to demystify the actors of the communist pantheon. In Hungary, more than three decades later, it can be stated that this initial uniformity has been broken. Frictions between political, academic, nonacademic, and noninstitutionalized discourses focused on Hungarian history are becoming more common and increasingly apparent. This first appeared in the radical right-wing and then in the Christian-conservative political discourses from the 1990s on, when pseudo-historical concepts became increasingly popular. These groups believe academic historians falsified Hungarian history in the second half of the twentieth century. Conspiracy theories emphasizing that a "true and

12 Kendrick, *Heroic Ideal*; Povedák, "From Heroes"; Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher, "Introduction"; Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention*; Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction."

13 Hobsbawm, "Introduction."

14 Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 14.

15 Assmann and Shortt, "Memory," 4.

16 Woolf, "Disciplinary History," 2.

glorious" Hungarian history was deliberately concealed during communism have only intensified and gained increased visibility in the media.¹⁷

Rewriting or Reinterpreting? History in Hungary

Presenting all pseudo-historical ideas and fantasies about the Hungarians' "true and secret" history would be far too exhausting to attempt. Some of these already appeared alongside the awakening of nationalism in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ They were diverse in their details but mutually rejected the academic and officially accepted Finno-Ugrian kinship theory. They proclaimed either Turkic or the "more glorious" Turanian lineage of Hungarians.¹⁹ Although Max Müller's initial concept of Turanism did not emerge as a religious phenomenon, it did acquire a religious guise within Hungary.²⁰ Not only did the radically nationalist, racist, and anti-Western movement believe in the cultural and moral supremacy of the Turanian people and their resurgence to world leadership, but Hungarian Turanianism also sacralized the ethnic community and was manifested as a "political religion." That is, a "religion of nation" which believes Hungarians are God's chosen people with the world's most glorious past and have a unique role in shaping civilization.²¹

These concepts became popular during the interwar years, reaching significant masses. Their spread was facilitated by the cultural policy of the Horthy era (1920–44), which was dominated by an obsession with the territorial losses suffered in the Treaty of Trianon. As historian Kristian Gerner wrote, the Trianon treaty was staged as the handing over of a death sentence and execution in the same act—and practically nobody in Hungary accepted the verdict.²² The regime established by regent Miklós Horthy was characterized by solid nationalism, Christian conservatism,

17 Povedák and Hubbes, *Tapasztalatból hallottam*.

18 Keményfi, "Kulturális hatóerőnk"; Mikos, "Hiányzó hősköltészet."

19 Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar!*

20 Müller, *Languages*.

21 Hankiss was the first in Hungary to use the concept of "religion of a nation" for the imminent dimension of nationalism. See Hankiss, "Nemzetvallás," 66. See more on the connection between nationalism and civil religion in Máté-Tóth, "Szent nemzet." Naturally, the prophetic consciousness of the nation is not exclusive to Hungary. The concept can be found in many places and religious traditions, including civil religion. See, for instance, Bellah, "Civil Religion"; Hammond, "Sociology"; Margry, "European Religious Fragmentation." On Eastern European neo-paganisms, see Rountree, "Introduction"; Aitamurto and Simpson, *Modern Pagan*.

22 Gerner, "Open Wounds?," 86.

anti-communism, and, most importantly, irredentist and revisionist political ideas concerning the redemption of territories of Greater Hungary (the historical Kingdom of Hungary).²³ “Interwar Hungarian historical culture was saturated with irredentism and the Trianon.”²⁴ The figure of Greater Hungary, the Calvary of the Hungarian people, and symbols referring to the Hungarians’ divinely chosen role have appeared equally in official symbolic politics, poetry, art, music, and everyday cultural objects.²⁵ In the wake of the national trauma, reactions ranging from lethargy to revenge appeared in Hungarian society.²⁶ As Béla Pomogáts mentions, the Hungarians not only lost their territorial, economic, and power positions as a result of the Trianon verdict but also suffered severe psychological injuries. These spiritual injuries were represented in literature, where poems, narratives, and personal confessions assessed the spiritual consequences of the fragmentation of Hungarian history, the detachment of vast Hungarian communities, and the allocation of traditional cultural centers.²⁷

Historians of the Horthy era have developed the concept of the primacy of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. This theory follows that no ethnic groups lived in the territories occupied by the Hungarian tribes during the conquest of the ninth century. Therefore, the Hungarian nation has an exclusive “historical right” to the territories ranging from the northern Carpathians to the Adriatic Sea. Count Albert Apponyi (1846–1933), the head of the Hungarian delegation at the conference in Versailles in 1920, emphasized “historical principles,” the Hungarians’ cultural superiority, and political organization. Apponyi argued that Hungarians stood above all other nations in the region. This made them capable of defending the West alone and carrying out a civilizational mission in the Danube River Basin—similar to that achieved by the Roman and British Empires.²⁸ The idea of “the millennial country of St. Stephen” as a “Sacred Whole,” together with the theory that “some greater force” intensified the creation of the natural space of Hungarian land, even in academic life.²⁹ Furthermore,

23 Hanebrink, “Christianity.” Chmel emphasized that the issue of national borders and minorities has manifested itself in traumas, stereotypes, and prejudices determining Hungary’s relations with its neighboring countries since 1920 and has become strongly accentuated again since the beginning of the 1990s. See Chmel, “Syndrome,” 93.

24 Gerner, “Open Wounds?,” 88.

25 Zeidler, *Trianon*, 329–457; Pomogáts, “Trianon”; Zeidler, *A magyar*, 72–81.

26 Zeidler, *Trianon*, 9.

27 Pomogáts, “Trianon.”

28 Romsics, “Nemzeti traumánk.”

29 Keményfi, “Kulturális hatóerőnk,” 111–12.

Trianon trauma pervaded all political parties, social strata, and segments of popular culture, becoming the alpha and omega of banal nationalism.³⁰ The Trianon shock impacted the whole nation, as in Stephen B. Várdy's words, "it became a lasting national malady that has ravaged the minds and hearts of all Hungarians ever since that time."³¹

The socio-psychological explanation behind all this is a kind of social compensation syndrome. By applying Zimbardo's scale, a mix of Past Positive (PP), Past Negative (PN), and Future Positive (FP) social mindsets characterized Hungarian historical culture.³² Due to the land losses in the First World War, the consciousness of trauma and truncation (which can be described as a characteristic of the Past Negative) was decisive. Therefore, social attention turned to the glorious past (PP) and the hope of a positive future, the "Hungarian resurrection" (FP), as a remedy.³³

These circumstances resulted in the emergence of the abovementioned religious Turanistic reinterpretation of history, which not only outlined an alternative origin of Hungarians but enlivened it with a sacred guise. Hungarians were connected with Jesus and seen as the prophetic people of Christ. An important example was *Was Christ Jewish?*, published in 1936 by Ferenc Zajti. An influential painter and Orientalist researcher with no academic credentials, Zajti set out the majority of Hungarian pseudo-historical Christ mythology axioms.³⁴ He claimed the divine chosenness of the Hungarians and their sufferings, the Scythian-Hun-Hungarian (Magyar) origin of Jesus, the doctrine of the ancient Hungarian religion of love, and the Jewish–Hungarian bipolar (sinful-uncorrupted) opposition. In Zajti's words, the "Scythian-Hun-Magyar race," a glorious ancient people, "were predestined to receive the revelation. [...] Jesus was born among them and entrusted them with continuing his messianic mission."³⁵

The communist takeover in Hungary (1947/48) was a sudden shift that sought to erase the foundations of Hungarian national identity, intending to eradicate nationalism from all segments of public discourse. In order to prevent tensions in the region, the Trianon syndrome was covered up by a mythical ideology of proletarian internationalism.³⁶ Even the mention of irredentism was considered taboo. One of the most striking characteristics

30 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

31 Várdy, "Trianon Syndrome," 73.

32 Zimbardo and Boyd, *Time Paradox*.

33 Stolarski et al., "Time Perspective Theory," 8.

34 Povedák, "From the Hungarian Jesus."

35 Zajti, *Zsidó volt-e Krisztus?* 40, 192.

36 Chmel, "Syndrome," 94.

of the period from 1947 to 1989 was the “organized forgetting” that applied a selective approach to history and the “repression of nationalism” as instruments for establishing a new, internationalist communist identity.³⁷ There was no public discourse on various historical events, including the Trianon trauma, nor discussion of the situation of Hungarians living outside the motherland—who were embarrassing or provocative to the regime. Forcing the subjects of the totalitarian regime into oblivion, as anthropologist Paul Connerton noted, begins when their memories are taken away.

Similarly, when an oppressive power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness, it uses the method of organized forgetting.³⁸ The reason is that “our experiences of the present are largely dependent upon our knowledge of the past, and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimize present social order.”³⁹ All social, material, and mental dimensions of cultural memory were attempted to be wholly reshaped equally on a collective and individual level.⁴⁰ The regime developed a false historical consciousness that could not be changed or supplemented. As George Orwell put it in 1984: “History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.”⁴¹ The legends and natural myths that tell historical events have been replaced by a mythopoeia, an artificial myth that its constructors used to manipulate society. The depoliticization of society could only be achieved if the historical memory of the nation was leached out as much as possible and collective amnesia was advocated.⁴² As a result, conflicts with the surrounding states were removed from the agenda, became taboo, and were thus conserved for later generations. Since the analysis of the Trianon syndrome and nationalism was considered an act against the system, generations grew with a shattered national consciousness. In other words, the organic continuity, the chain of memory, was fragmented.⁴³ Experiencing national togetherness was either considered a sin or was only possible in a radically transformed internationalist form.⁴⁴ Conspiracy theories and debunking countermyths were created to deheroize the previously famous political figures of the

37 Connerton, *How Societies*.

38 Ibid., 14.

39 Ibid., 3.

40 Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies,” 4–6.

41 Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 142.

42 György, *Néma hagyomány*, 20.

43 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion*.

44 Zeidler, *Trianon*, 10.

Horthy era and those associated with the Christian churches. In addition, the ritual dimension of cultural memory was also subverted. Religious feasts were moved from the national to the private sphere and replaced with rootless international socialist holidays.

The mixed PP, PN, and FP mindset of the Horthy era was replaced by a new mentality scale with two positions: Past Negative (PN) and Future (F). This comprised the Marxist view of the past as a constant class struggle (PN) and an idealized communist behavior dominated by striving for future goals and rewards (F). Both cultural memory spanning the eras and the *lieux de mémoire* transformed.⁴⁵ The mutilation of the historical narrative dimension of national identity was supported by the domesticated academia, education, media, and propaganda permeating all segments of popular culture. However, this repression could not only eradicate and reconstruct, but it also wounded collective identity.⁴⁶ Grievances caused by communist authorities were stored in society's collective consciousness. Although unable to be voiced or addressed at the time, these grievances came to light after the fall of communism. Radical rejection of the past in the deep layers of national self-consciousness reinforced dependence on the past. As in Orwell's 1984, it was also true in the Soviet Bloc states, including Hungary, that citizens' struggle against state power was the struggle of their memory against forced forgetting.⁴⁷ The ideologies of the oppressive power did not take into account that "memory is not only susceptible to change, it is itself a powerful agent of change."⁴⁸ The more they tried to erase specific details of the past from collective memory and national identity, the more fervently they came to life again as the regime change approached when the regressive reconstruction of national memory finally took place.⁴⁹ The desacralized and devalued view of history forced onto society during communism could not become organic in Hungary. With the overthrow of the oppressive power, its view on history also passed, giving way to a process of diverse reinterpretation. The rebirth of Christian traditions could be observed in festive culture and communal rites, while historical works intended to restore the previously silenced actors, events, and symbols of the past. The reintroduction into the public space and promotion of historical figures of saints, pilgrimage places, sacred rituals, the renewed importance of the

45 Assmann, "Communicative."

46 Máté-Tóth, *Freiheit*.

47 Connerton, *How Societies*, 15.

48 Assmann and Shortt, "Memory," 4.

49 Zempléni, "Sepulchral Land," 74.

religious past, and returning to the nation's collective religious heritage all intended to fix shattered identities.⁵⁰

However, the emerging narratives were heterogeneous, sometimes even contradictory—thus impregnating various nationalisms. Rapid political transformation after 1989 has not been matched by an equally rapid process of reinterpretation of the past. The heterogeneous desire for rewriting history has always coexisted in society. Some of these interacted and existed side by side; others remained more or less unrelated or were in painful states of dissonance, friction, and rivalry. The top-down historical reinterpretation processes were not always in line with the demands from below. The masses, with a wounded collective identity, frequently emerged at a loss from the tumultuousness of twentieth-century history.⁵¹ Their wounded collective identity has begun to repair thanks to past reinterpretation and historical sacralization.

The Rebirth of Pseudo-History and the Resacralization of Hungarianness

It was after 1989 that the sacralization of Hungarian history began within popular culture. The shift originated in the Golden Age and saw the embrace of pseudo-scientific literature and a return to folklore. So did the emergence of pseudo-historical works sacralizing Hungarian history and various religious movements, mainly ethno-pagan.⁵²

As previously stated, the pseudo-historical sacralization of Hungarian history, when the foundations of the historical reinterpretation process were exclusively within pseudo-scientific writings, was already present in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and began to flourish in the interwar era. The rediscovery and popularity of these nearly hundred-year-old obsolete works created the “cultic milieu” of pseudo-historical sacralization.⁵³ The prerequisite of a pseudo-historical cultic milieu is that

there is a stockpile of cultic beliefs or pseudo-historical ideas along with related books, writings, and other artifacts available to provide starter

50 Nora, “From *Lieux de Mémoire*,” xxiii.

51 Máté-Tóth, *Freiheit*.

52 Ethno-paganism refers to contemporary pagan movements with strong ethnocentric and nationalistic characteristics. The exclusive, ethnic-specific undertone with confrontational rhetoric could be observed equally in these predominantly Central and Eastern European pagan movements' narratives and symbolism. For more, see Hubbes, “Romanian.”

53 Campbell, “Cult.”

material for new ideas [in the religious and identity market]. [...] Obsolete and antiquated scholarship is reshuffled and recombined with older pseudo-historical works to create new ideas and hypotheses or often simply to re-invent even older, semi-forgotten pseudo-historical ideas.⁵⁴

The works of Zajti and his followers were automatically banned after 1947 because of their nationalist, racist, anti-Semitic, and religious content. People may have discussed these theories privately, but they never saw the light of day in any publication. The media in all its forms was strictly controlled, and censorship did not allow such theories to appear publicly. However, after forty years of forced silence, the onslaught of pseudo-history and pseudo-linguistics began to reach the public. Most importantly, it was Ferenc Badiny Jós (1909–2007) whose books revitalized the concepts of Zajti (without any reference to the original) and supplemented them with anti-Hungarian conspiracy theories. According to Badiny Jós, Hungarians were the first Christians, and their Scythian Christianity was the original, authentic Christianity. In his book *King Jesus, the Parthian Prince* (1998), Badiny Jós claimed that everything in the New Testament except the *Book of Mark* had been falsified as a result of a Jewish conspiracy against Hungarians, driven by Rabbi Saul (Saint Paul).⁵⁵ Badiny Jós attempted to demonstrate with historical and linguistic sources that Mary was of Scythian-Parthian descent, the daughter of Parthian prince Nakab Adiabene and princess Grapte-Kharax, and the blood-relatedness between Jesus and the Hungarians: “It is the MAH-GARs, called HUN-GARs, [reference to Magyars], who can thus say they bear the human endowment of our Lord Jesus, and thus they are the descendants of the lineage of Jesus.”⁵⁶ Badiny Jós, like Zajti, displayed a dualistic worldview in which malevolent races (Semitics, especially Jews) battled benevolent ones (Turanians, Parthians, and Hungarians). According to him, it was not merely Jesus but the apostles, who were also of Parthian origin, with the exception of Judas, the Jew. He wrote, “Jesus is exclusively the Jesus of Hungarians.”⁵⁷ The ideology contrasts Scythian-Hungarian Christianity and Judeo-Christianity and contains strong anti-Semitic attitudes. Therefore, it quickly found its way into far-right political circles.

54 Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*, 13.

55 Badiny Jós, “Jézus,” 247–56.

56 Ibid., 45, 10.

57 Ibid., 150.

Many of Zajti's and Badiny Jós's assertions have resurfaced in the literature of new generations of Hungarian pseudo-historians. Due to their diligent publication activity and growing media representation, the concept of ancient Hungarian religion as the "religion of love" of Jesus became widespread, attracting increasing popularity since the mid-1990s.⁵⁸ Tibor Varga calls this ancient Hungarian Christianity the "true religion of Christ," distinctively Hungarian while simultaneously a universal faith. It was not affiliated directly with either Rome or Byzantium. However, it was catholic and universal in the strictest sense.⁵⁹ Following Badiny Jós, many pseudo-historians claim this ancient Hungarian religion was forcibly suppressed with the intention of being exterminated by Saint Stephen (1000–1038), the founder of the Hungarian Christian state.⁶⁰ The figure of Saint Stephen is thus deheroized. At the same time, his opponent, Duke Koppány (?–997), who aimed to acquire the throne, is glorified as the protector and martyr of the ancient Hungarian religion of love.⁶¹ However, the sacralization of the nation can be observed beyond the connection with the pseudo-historical concept of the Hungarian Jesus—in particular, certain historical objects, such as the Holy Crown, have also been reinterpreted.

The Holy Crown came together in its final form in the time of Béla III (1172–96), consisting of two main parts, the so-called Greek crown (*corona graeca*) and the Latin crown (*corona latina*). However, according to the Hartvik legend taught in elementary schools, the state's founder, King Saint Stephen (975?–1038), received the crown from Pope Sylvester II (938–1033). Before his death, on August 15, 1038, at the Feast of the Assumption, Saint Stephen dedicated the country in the form of the Holy Crown to the Virgin Mary.⁶² Badiny Jós and other pseudo-historians, such as Gábor Pap (who received the lifetime achievement award from the government-sponsored Hungarian Academy of Arts in 2016) and Tibor Varga, think entirely differently. Badiny Jós claimed that the Holy Crown was prepared by order of the Adiabene dynasty, by magician priests, to represent the holy trinity of "Light-Father, Light-Virgin, and Light-Son."⁶³ According to Varga, it was a

divine sign dreamt in gold that breaks through the homogeneity of the profane space. It shows the sacred place, where the earth, the sky, and the underworld are in contact with each other, where the world came into

58 Szántai, *Jézus Krisztus*.

59 Varga, *Ima*, 62.

60 Badiny Jós, "Jézus," 150.

61 Povedák, "Mythicised History."

62 Bertényi, *A magyar*, 40–56.

63 Badiny Jós, "Jézus," 337.

being, and from where the divine order spread out to the four corners of the earth.⁶⁴

These thinkers believed the nation itself and all its dimensions rose above other nations through the crown. In the words of Tibor Molnárfi, “in the first place, the community itself and its state are sacred. Accordingly, as a consequence of the Holy Crown doctrine and its ideal, the nature of the Hungarian state differs from that of other states.”⁶⁵ The Hungarian people, therefore, as a nation and state, are different from all others and have a special connection with the transcendent:

The Holy Crown is God's thought on the Hungarian being, [...] on Hungarianness, on the Hungarian mission. [...] The Holy Crown expresses the relationship between God and the Hungarian nation: God sent the Holy Crown to the Hungarian nation with a definite aim and with a definite message.⁶⁶

Through the crown, the space in which the transcendent object manifested also became sacred:

It not only had a living quality, but it also designated a special sacred territory. The word *corona* is often used in our official documents to mean border. The Holy Crown thus also comprised the designation of the sacred border within itself. This sacred territory largely coincided with the Carpathian Basin.⁶⁷

With this interpretation, coronations were not merely about the investiture of the ruler; each coronation was an occasion for the renewal and strengthening of the alliance between God and the Hungarian people.⁶⁸ Through this, the Hungarian nation itself becomes chosen, as, in the words of Tibor Varga, “our ancestors preserved something from the presence of God.” Alternatively, as Gábor Pap wrote, “[s]ince no other people besides the Hungarians have ever been able to make the crown function properly in the Carpathian Basin,

64 Varga, *A magyarság jelképei*, 169.

65 Molnárfi, *A Szent Korona*, 6.

66 Kocsis, *A Szent Korona*, 7.

67 Varga, *A Szent Korona*.

68 Varga, *Ima*, 11.



Fig. 13.1. Honoring the replica of the Holy Crown at the “National Assembly of Hungarians” invented traditional folkloresque ritual. Photographed by István Povedák, (2010).

there can be no question about whose task it is in the world revealed to us by the visual program of the Holy Crown.”⁶⁹

However, according to the opinion of many, the Holy Crown is an active entity. It can punish, which means it can also bring down retribution on those who turn their backs on it. According to István Kocsis’s interpretation, this turning away implies a distancing from Christianity—violating the territorial integrity of Hungary, the embodiment of the Holy Crown, and the improper treatment of the Holy Crown itself as an object:

The consequence of rejecting the Holy Crown is that the Hungarian nation has become insignificant. [...] [W]ith the violation of the Holy Crown, a change is occurring in the order of the Universe fatal for life on Earth. [...] Thus we can say: Not only the Hungarian nation but the whole of Christianity is in danger. [...] [I]n 1920, the European Christian world turned away

69 Pap, *Angyali korona*, 90. At this point, referring to Antony D. Smith’s work on chosen peoples, where the author attempts to map out “the sacred foundations of national identity through an exploration of the modern belief-system of nationalism,” is necessary. See Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 5.

from God. It must return to him. It can begin this return by rejecting the spirit of Trianon. [...] Today, the Hungarian people have the most in common with Christ's mystery, because in Trianon—where they, the most innocent, were punished in place of everyone else. [...] [T]hey became the chosen people [...] and for precisely this reason the Hungarian people became the target of suffering of the most spectacular and serious counterattacks by Satan in an increasingly hopeless position, who is for that reason struggling all the more desperately against Christ. [...] Why did Satan's sword rise against the chosen victim [...] against Christ and fall on the Hungarian nation? [...] Is it because the Hungarians are the nation of the Holy Crown?⁷⁰

The Hungarian people have a role in the history of salvation, reaching beyond religious nationalism. In the words of Pap: "If the Hungarian people do not pursue the Calvary path they have undertaken, it is not the Hungarian people who will die: the whole world will be destroyed."⁷¹

Applying Zimbardo's characterology, the return to the interwar mindset is perceivable in the latest Hungarian pseudo-historical works. The Past Negative mentality dominates Trianon narratives, emphasizing conspiracies against Hungarians, while the Golden Age narratives reflect the Past Positive mindset. However, contrary to the previous mentality, the future orientation has almost wholly disappeared. The hope of the Hungarian resurrection was pushed aside by the contemplation of the past.

Sacred Hungarianness and Ethno-paganism

The return to folklore, which is considered to preserve the ancient glorious (pre-Christian) culture of the ancestors, served as a different pathway for the sacralization of the past.⁷² Turning to folklore, or as Alessandro Testa terms it, "popular Frazerism," is formally connected to the past while deeply rooted and constructed by the existential and material needs of the present.⁷³ The most applicable past, according to Testa, is the antique pagan culture,

a declension of a postmodern romantic imaginary, with its taste for magic, fantastic creatures, medievalness, or primeval times. It is this

⁷⁰ Kocsis, *A Szent Korona*, 26, 90.

⁷¹ Pap, *Angyali korona*, 56.

⁷² Magliocco, "Reclamation."

⁷³ Testa, "Intertwining Processes," 24.

sense of the antique (more than any possible and actual antique feature, which can be easily altered or even invented) that permits the binding of a tradition and the people who practice it to a past that can be used to enhance collective sentiments of belonging, community, and identity, but also narrative, memory, and emotional structuring at the micro-level of the individual.⁷⁴

The reconstruction of ancient folk belief elements is primarily a characteristic of contemporary pagan movements in Hungary. Although strongly discouraged by communist state ideology, various new religious movements—including New Age Eastern spiritualities and shamanistic teachings—have infiltrated from the West since the 1980s. The first neo- or urban shamanist underground groups in the 1980s mostly followed the concepts of Michael Harner.⁷⁵ Since the second half of the 1990s, the strengthening ethnicization of contemporary paganism can be observed with an intensifying focus on the ancient Hungarian past when the supposed archaic religion—be that the shamanic *táltos* faith or the abovementioned religion of love—existed in its original form. The majority of contemporary paganisms in Hungary can be represented on a scale. On one end, there is a more inclusive, liberal approach to paganism led by shaman-like figures (*táltos*), open to magical minor groups and movements that focus on the individual's spiritual experiences. On the other is the more exclusive, ethnic-centered, and conservative movement, so-called ethno-paganism, focusing more on the ethnic community and under the influence of charismatic gurus.⁷⁶ As we move from the former to the latter, ethnic-specific markers become stronger, such as the focus on Hungarian prehistory, the incorporation of pseudo-historical fantasies concerning the prophetic role of Hungarians, and even radical-right neo-nationalist concepts.⁷⁷ In addition, many actors in the Hungarian collection of contemporary paganisms incorporate esoteric and Christian concepts into their teachings.

The extent to which sacralization of Hungarianness characterizes an ethno-pagan group can be measured by their rituals, symbolism, and, most importantly, their written teachings and scriptures (supposing they exist at

74 Ibid., 30–31.

75 Kürti, "Neo-shamanism."

76 Hubbes, "Romanian"; Hubbes and Povedák, "Competitive Pasts"; Szilágyi, "Emerging"; Szilárdi, "Neopaganism."

77 Povedák, "Religious."

all).⁷⁸ Contemporary pagan movements worldwide traditionally rely on local ancient mythologies and beliefs to reconstruct these and are rarely based on recent myths. On the contrary, many Hungarian contemporary pagan groups build on the *Arvisura*, an extensive literary work of more than six thousand years of the Hun-Hungarian people, as a founding myth.⁷⁹ The myth was written by Zoltán Paál (1913–1982), a steelworker who was initiated during the Second World War by a Siberian Mansi (or Vogul) shaman named Tura Szalaváré, then a soldier in the Soviet Red Army. Szalaváré arrived in Hungary intending to pass on the secret history of Hungarians preserved by shamans to a chosen person. After Szalaváré died in a bombing attack, Paál started to write down the “secret knowledge” and finished the first version by 1955. Paál continued writing the *Arvisura* until the early 1980s, although his life’s work was published posthumously in 1998. The *Arvisura* tells the supposed true stories of ancestors from the Sirius star system and Ataisz, a sunken prehistoric island where the Hun-Hungarians originated. These ancestors are the direct descendants of the ancient gods of Sirius, who preserved their language and writing. Hubbes characterized this fantastic mythopoetic work as resembling the style of the ancient world and also details the life of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, who—according to Paál—belonged to the Hun-Hungarians.⁸⁰

Since the early 2000s, the *Arvisura* has become a foundation for numerous Hungarian contemporary pagan groups. One example is the syncretic Ancient Hungarian Shamanic Church (*Ősmagyar Táltos Egyház*) established by *táltos* András Kovács-Magyar. The syncretic teachings of the *Ősmagyar Táltos Egyház* amalgamate pre-Christian Hungarian pagan beliefs with elements of Christianity and esoteric spiritualities (e.g., reincarnation, meridians, karma, astrology) while embracing statements linked to the *Arvisura* and incorporating Badiny Jós’s theories. According to their teachings, the Holy Virgin Mary had been living, healing, and teaching for years in present-day Hungarian territory before the birth of Jesus. Mary’s grandmother and her uncle, Melchior (the Wise Man from the east), owned land in Hungary. When Jesus was four years old, Mary fled to Hungary with him and then to Transylvania to meet Melchior. She later fled to Asia and finally to Egypt. Mary returned to Hungary as an older woman, aged ninety-three, and fell asleep in the Mátra Mountains, her body transforming into light. This place

78 Povedák, “Come, Look and Hear”; Povedák, “MOGY”; Hubbes and Povedák, “The Re-paganisation.”

79 Paál, *Arvisura*.

80 Hubbes, “New Hungarian Mythology,” 230.

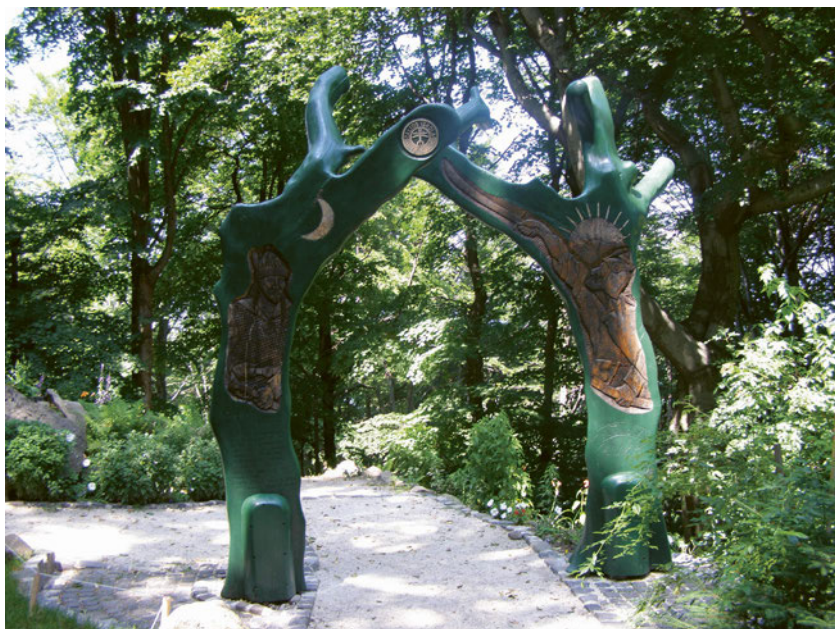


Fig. 13.2. The Attila–Buda Gate at Dobogókő. Photographed by István Povedák, (2013).

is Mátraverebély-Szentkút, a famous Roman Catholic pilgrimage sight where the *Ősmagyar Táltos Egyház* created a sacred grove with a small wooden chapel next to the holy fountain. Followers of Kovács-Magyar not only regard Jesus as a “Hungarian saint,” but they claim he lived in the Carpathian Basin, the “sacral territory” of Hungarians. He was raised for eight years in the Lake Balaton area and the Pilis Mountains and then went to Transylvania, where he met Mary Magdalene. Therefore, an old-new component, the return of the interwar era’s sacred geography with the concept of the divinely created nature of the Carpathian Basin, might be observed in their teachings.

The notion that Hungarians are separate from the mundane worlds of other ethnic groups is equivalent to the Carpathian Basin’s isolation from profane space.⁸¹ The basin is a hierophany that *Ősmagyar Táltos Egyház*’s teachings emphasize as the Earth’s “heart chakra,” or energy center, which is located in the Pilis Mountains in Dobogókő. According to the pseudo-historic theory that Kovács-Magyar incorporated into their teachings, ancient Hungarians knew special energies could be felt and experienced there. Therefore, the Hun-Hungarian ancestors deliberately created the sacral center. Despite the opposing claims of archeologists

81 Keményfi, “Kulturális hatóerőnk.”

and historians, he states that not merely did the ancient Buda castle stand there, but that it was built on the site of Attila's city, where the kings of the Árpád dynasty (1000–1301) were crowned and buried. The legend that the Earth's heart chakra is located in the Pilis Mountains gains increasing acclaim, not exclusively in esoteric popular culture. Visitors to the famous tourist destination of Dobogókő always encounter the objects and symbols installed by the *Ősmagyar Táltos Egyház* in the woods. Most importantly, the Attila–Buda Gate, or “Light Gate,” has symbols of the sun and moon, representing the mother god and the father god, respectively. This is the supposed entrance that separates the profane world from the well-tended sacred grove, with the replica of the Black Madonna of Montserrat in the center of the heart chakra.

Along with this example, there are various currents of contemporary Hungarian paganism.⁸² Some syncretize Christian, esoteric, New Age, and pseudo-historical elements with the *Arvisura* and shamanic traditions, while others reject Christianity and focus on reconstructing the ancient *táltos* faith. Despite their variations, pseudo-historical works glorifying and sacralizing Hungarianness and the (re)mythologization of national consciousness can be considered their shared ideological basis.

Conclusion

In all critical moments of man's social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these moments, the time for myth has come again. For myth has not been vanquished and subjugated. It is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity. This hour comes as soon as the other binding forces of man's social life, for one reason or another, lose their strength and are no longer able to combat the demonic mythical powers.⁸³

82 It is worth noting that although the contemporary pagan scene in Hungary is diverse, with several organizations, their membership is small in numbers. Contemporary pagan groups are on the periphery of religious life with hardly measurable public support and visibility. However, as Tamás Szilágyi also mentions, a far broader pagan intellectual orientation has spread dynamically since the early 2000s in the broader cultural field, especially in the political arena. The appearance of contemporary pagan intellectual orientation in the political field is closely connected with the rise of radical right-wing movements (Szilágyi, “Emerging,” 158). It has significantly strengthened since the emergence of neo-nationalist populism.

83 Cassirer, *Myth*, 280.

Ernst Cassirer's statement from 1946 about the nature of political myths does justice to describing the circumstances of contemporary Hungary: The accelerating cultural and political changes of the past thirty years or more have become a breeding ground for a burgeoning of pseudo-historical concepts. From a functionalist standpoint, fantasies and theories that sacralize Hungarianness serve several vital functions. They provide and reinforce a particular worldview and place the Hungarian people in a broader religious (global), historical, and cosmic interpretive framework. By emphasizing the role of Hungarian traditions and positioning Hungarians as the chosen people, they promote a larger sense of social and group cohesion. It's also important to remember that individuals join these groups not just out of nationalist spirit but to improve themselves and their personal situations. Therefore, these fantasies have a role in strengthening the individual's psychological state.

Their popularity stems from the current cultural-political climate and the fact that Hungarian pseudo-historical (re)sacralization focuses on sensation-alistic topics: The Virgin Mary and Jesus were Hungarians; there is a hidden conspiracy by the Papacy and Jewish people against Hungarians; Hungarians have an extraterrestrial origin; the Carpathian Basin is the sacred territory of Hungarians and the energetic center of the earth; the Hungarian language delineates from Sumerian or God; and, finally, Hungarian runic writing is the most ancient scripture in the world. Many pseudo-historians are obsessive about these claims because they typically approach their subjects with preconceptions or hidden agendas based on the desire for royalties and reputation.⁸⁴ Unlike contemporary pagan ideologists in the Western hemisphere who, when turning towards historical recreation, are often fully aware of the gulf separating the past from the present—to the point of readily accepting that they are not recreating but inventing a tradition, those who sacralize Hungarian history are convinced that they are not creating but restoring and revealing true historical knowledge.⁸⁵ According to their interpretation, official academic knowledge is fictitious because it is based on falsified historical sources and evidence. When sacralizing the past, Hungarian pseudo-historians build on myths, especially invented myths, as historical evidence. Furthermore, the creative reinterpretation of authentic historical sources and documents characterizes their work. They frequently find new meanings or new emphases that previous scholars somehow overlooked.

84 Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*, 12.

85 Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction," 15.

At the same time, it can also be observed that the ideologies and re-mythologizing processes that they outline, in some social strata, function as the determining element in constructing national identity through references to narratives of the past. Just as the findings were factual for the historians of Romantic nationalism, it is also true for the self-appointed historical myth producers of contemporary neo-nationalist culture, that “in constructing a canon of historical research, they are at the same time participating in the formation of a political identity and giving shape to the memory of a particular culture.”⁸⁶ Thus, the sacralization of history is not simply a rewriting of history but has far-reaching consequences that define individual and community identity. Just as Halbwachs’s *La mémoire collective* was shared by different groups of people whose sense of their past told them who they were, today’s tendency for Hungarian historical sacralization provides information not only about the structure and layers of these narratives but also their recipients. This social group’s identity-forming narratives with an ever-widening base are inconceivable without sacralizing and glorifying the past of one’s community. In doing so, they also sacralize their own nationalism. Thus, Hayes’s lines on nationalism, written more than sixty years ago, are still relevant in today’s post-secular age:

[T]here are variant kinds and degrees of nationalism. Some can be reconciled or allied with historical supernatural religion. Others can be utilized to give quasi-religious sanction to an intrinsically materialist and atheist movement like communism. Still, others can be religions in themselves, mutually jealous and exclusive.⁸⁷

The deep embedding of the phenomenon within layers of the collective Hungarian national identity is also demonstrated by the words of the Polish-Hungarian writer Krzysztof Varga:

It is not enough to write a Christian preamble to the Hungarian constitution, as has been done recently, for the nation to begin going to church; anyway, Hungarianism is the real religion of the Hungarians, not Christianity. They pray to the Hungarians, not to a distant, inaccessible God, in whom they have been so disappointed so many times, who was deaf to their prayers and cries for help.⁸⁸

86 Connerton, *How Societies*, 16.

87 Hayes, *Nationalism*, 18.

88 Varga, *Mangalica-csárdás*, 134–35.

The historical perspective of post-secular informal culture appears to have come under the influence of resacralization. It is not only the contemporary pagan movements in Central and Eastern Europe that focus on reconstructing the ancestral, pre-Christian religion of a particular ethnic group, nation, or geographic area that are primarily motivated by nationalism and ethnic politics. Most recently, Rountree stressed that the emergence of such historical inventions is often under the spell of sacralization:

Post-Soviet contexts from the late 1980s may be seen as part of a wave of re-nationalization and re-ethnification. [...] Their efforts at reviving or reconstructing pre-Christian religions have been interpreted as responses to concerns about foreign colonizing ideologies, globalization, and crises in ethnic identity.⁸⁹

These historical reinterpretations are now reaching broader masses in an internet-saturated world. After 1989, the pseudo-scientific trends of historical sacralization became popular among the emerging contemporary pagan movements and became intertwined with politics. Firstly, they gained popularity among radical right-wing parties as a counterculture. Then, with the accession of the European Union (2004), they gained increasing attention as the internet became more widespread. Subsequently, in 2010, when Fidesz, the Christian-conservative governing party, spurred a series of phenomena previously regarded as pseudo-scientific, countercultural, or extremely right-wing, they were officially supported and accepted by the government. During the third, fourth, and fifth Orbán terms of government (2014–18, 2018–22, and 2022–), authors whose writings previously fell outside and often opposed academic scholarship received state support. “As they won the support of the highly popular Fidesz, they began to be covered in the government media, and what had been an alternative, a radical right-wing subculture, has now been transformed into a mass culture industry.”⁹⁰

The last half-century’s religious processes have proved that secularization, with the strengthening of science and rationality, does not lead to a complete turn away from religion.⁹¹ At the same time, it has also become apparent that the sacralization of history has not disappeared either, but that the cultic milieu of pseudo-scientific sacralization of history is constantly present, intensifying in waves, even though individual ideas rise and fall in

89 Rountree, “Introduction,” 4.

90 Povedák, “Religious,” 305–6.

91 Casanova, *Public Religions*; Casanova, “Transnationalism and Religion.”

popularity.⁹² What Colin Campbell described concerning the cultic milieu of the 1970s is equivalently valid for the cultic milieu of pseudo-scientific sacralization of history in Hungary. It is not a product of the current age; rather, it is a permanent feature of society.⁹³ The sole thread that unites the denizens of the cultic milieu—as Kaplan and Lööw wrote—is a shared rejection of the paradigms, the orthodoxies, of their societies.⁹⁴ With the global rise of populism, neo-nationalism, and the conspiracy mentality, the question arises as to which direction pseudo-scientific historical sacralization will proceed. Are they intensifying xenophobia, intertwined with the support of politics increasingly forced to close the increasingly visible reemerging national borders, or are they acting as a placebo for healing the wounded collective identity? Unfortunately, the former's detrimental effects had already been felt in the twentieth century, and we can only hope we will not reencounter them.

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⁹² Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*, 13.

⁹³ Campbell, "Cult," 121–22.

⁹⁴ Kaplan and Lööw, "Introduction," 4.

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Concluding Afterwords

14. Heroes and Saints: The Sacralization of History in Contemporary Eastern Europe

Piotr Kisiel

Abstract: This chapter synthesizes the volume's key themes and findings, exploring the entanglement of religion and nationalism through symbols. It discusses how religious symbols have been repurposed for national narratives and sacralized within religious contexts. It emphasizes the importance of distinguishing „sacredness“ as a socially constructed reverence from religious holiness, illustrating how figures and events have been elevated to untouchable status. It highlights the pivotal role of the Middle Ages and WWII in shaping collective memories and identities and questions how the relationship between nationalism and religion might evolve amid secularization and demographic shifts in the region. Finally, it suggests that broadening the geographic framework and incorporating perspectives from religious minorities and non-Christian groups within Eastern Europe could deepen our understanding of these evolving dynamics.

Keywords: World War II in historical memory, Middle Ages in historical memory, religion, nationalism

In 2017, the Russian film *Matilda*, which is about the love affair between Nicholas II Romanov (1868–1918) and a ballerina, Mathilde Kschessinska, was released.¹ Since the last tsar and his family are martyr-saints of the Russian Orthodox Church, the movie was seen as sacrilege.² Cars were torched, and various cinemas were reluctant to screen the movie for fear

¹ Hyldal Christensen, *Making*, 40–44; Rescheto, “‘Matilda’ Hits.”

² Karin Hyldal Christensen, *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia*, 40–44.

of retribution from the outraged protesters.³ Meanwhile, in Poland, critics noted the use of religious, political, and national symbols and rites during monthly commemorations of President Lech Kaczynski's death (1949–2010),⁴ and there seems to be little agreement as to whether this is merely an issue of the "aesthetics of politics" or rather a true "political religion."⁵ In Ukraine, the parliament has recognized victims of political terror as "heavenly" (Yurchuk and Fert, in this volume). These are just three examples of current encounters between religion and nationalism in Eastern Europe. In each case, the relative importance of the religious and the national component differs, and the historicity in each example is also unequal. This entanglement does not cease to fascinate, and their analysis can be insightful beyond the narrow limits of each case study.

Paulmann points out that the line between the mundane, the profane, and the sacred can be drawn in different manners and has been executed by different actors.⁶ The sacred does not always imply holiness; rather, it may be better understood to result from a social process of authentication of what is supremely valuable within a given group. Therefore, the discussion is not about the (religious) truth but about how important issues are defined and delineated in contemporary Eastern European societies. The essays in this volume show that religious symbols are sometimes incorporated into the national pantheon; in other cases, the religious institution accepts the sacred from the national sphere. Moreover, national groups and states can treat an event or a person in a sacred fashion, even if it has no religious meaning. This is an essential lesson from this comparative study, as it deepens our understanding of how sacralization works in the nationalist context.⁷ Specifically, how symbols can be appropriated in both directions between religious and secular institutions, but sacredness does not always imply or require holiness.

Moreover, there is a recurrent theme regarding historical periods that are considered sacred or from which sacred figures, objects, and events are drawn. Across all the cases in this volume, two periods, namely the Middle Ages and World War II, are consistently in the foreground. The importance

3 Rescheto, "Matilda' Hits Cinemas".

4 Golonka-Czajkowska, "In the Shadow,"; Podgórska and Burszta, "Wyciszony mit,".

5 Gentile, "Political Religion".

6 Paulmann, "Sakralisierung," 435–37.

7 Rieffer, "Religion and Nationalism"; Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism"; Hroch, "National Movements"; Aktürk, "Nationalism and Religion."

of the former aligns with the findings within nationalism studies. During the “national awakening” of the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages were supposed to legitimize the claims of national activists and provide renewal to national cultures.⁸ World War II plays an immense role in the collective memory/memories of various European societies, as shown by the research in the field of memory studies.⁹

Last but not least, there is another temporal aspect to consider, namely the post-socialist period. The entirety of this volume examines the developments after the end of state secularism (i.e., communism) and the return of the “traditional” religions, primarily Christianity, which were suppressed under the state socialist system. At the same time, the post-socialist period was marked by the “return of nationalism,” as noted by many scholars.¹⁰ There are some indications that this religious renaissance might end soon; therefore, it is worth considering the implications at stake here.

These are the three intersecting threads within this book: entanglements between sacred and profane spheres, common temporal references, and the significance of the post-socialist period. After close consideration, it is clear there is still much to examine when it comes to religion and nationalism, and this book suggests what research questions might be fruitfully examined in the future.

Holy Border Guards: Secular Use of Religious Symbols

In Georgia, as Aleksidze argues, chosen Orthodox saints were used to demarcate the borders of the state and the nation. A similar pattern can be observed in Estonia, where competing churches have used saints to mark their territory, which has also been translated into national narratives, as Paert shows. The case of Romania confirms this trend, as demonstrated by Nedici. The figures of Saint Clement of Ohrid and Saint Sava were used by the Bulgarians and Serbian activists, respectively, to lay claim to the territory of North Macedonia, as Ljuljanović argues.

This would suggest that national and religious actors perceive this symbolic marking of the territory as an important act. The saints are used in such situations as symbolic guardians of the territory claimed by a given

8 Baycroft and Hopkin, *Folklore and Nationalism*; Bak, *Manufacturing a Past*.

9 Zhurzhenko, “Geopolitics of Memory”; Pakier and Stråth, “Introduction”; Jordan, “Landscapes of European Memory”; Pakier and Wawrzyniak, “Memory Studies.”

10 D'Appollonia, “European Nationalism”; Boym, “Nostalgia”; Diener and Hagen, “From Socialist.”

community.¹¹ Of course, churches, like states, have means—such as temples and administrative districts (e.g., dioceses)—to make such assertions visible. However, as we can see in these cases, there is a perceived need to symbolically legitimize and fortify them. “Ontological security” requires as much complex infrastructure as it does nuanced markers of space.¹²

Suppose saints can be used to directly claim a territory and symbolically guard it against others. In this case, the figure of the Virgin Mary, or in the Orthodox tradition, the Mother of God, seems to be applied more abstractly. In Georgia, as Aleksidze describes, the mother of Christ was incorporated into the nationalist canon due to her alleged fondness for this Caucasus state. Głowacka-Grajper’s analysis demonstrates that the image of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Sorrow has been used in Poland to represent the national suffering during the Second World War and the times of communism. In Ukraine, according to Kudela-Świątek, Marian iconography is central to the commemorative practices of the Holodomor. Perhaps more surprising, even for ethno-religious narratives in contemporary Hungary, the Virgin Mary is not irrelevant; instead, her Magyar character is argued for, as Povedák demonstrates.

Nationalist claims of exceptionalism are universal, and thus one should not be surprised that many nations have claimed to have a “special relationship” with the Mother of God.¹³ However, one has to be careful not to overdo this argument. Over many centuries, social conventions have been established, for example, regarding funerals and the design of graves. In Europe specifically, a cross is a common feature. Thus, it is hard to argue that the use of crosses or other similar symbols proves a particular link or entanglement between a given national group and a god or “just” religion. Instead, it could be easily explained by the established social norms. As pointed out by Paulmann, these can be treated, at least in some cases, as “religious camouflage,” which employs religious forms without genuinely engaging with the religious content.¹⁴

Flags on an Altar: Religious Use of National Symbols

Apart from appropriating religious icons for the national cause, one can also observe a different trend: the elevation of national symbols in religious

11 Rohdewald, “Geistliche als Krieger.”

12 Steele, *Ontological*; Kinnvall and Mitzen, “An Introduction to the Special Issue.”

13 Kluth, “There’s Nothing Exceptional.”

14 Paulmann, “Sakralisierung,” 441.

contexts. The most striking example of this is provided by Yurchuk and Fert from Ukraine. Here, high-ranking church officials such as Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk compared those who died for Ukrainian independence to Christian martyrs. Klimenko's chapter reveals a subtle appropriation of the national figures by church authorities in Russia. An exhibition organized by the Russian Orthodox Church suggests an intimate link between the history of Russian state and that of the Orthodox Church, to the point that the two have become inseparable. One should not assume, however, that such sacralization of the national symbols is limited to Eastern Orthodoxy. For instance, one can find the explicit placement of national icons on the altars in Catholic sanctuaries in Poland.¹⁵

Notwithstanding those examples, it seems that sacralizing national symbols might be more complex than nationalizing religious ones. Of course, displaying victory banners in royal cathedrals (e.g., the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow) or erecting elaborate graves and monuments to national heroes is far from unheard of. However, they are not directly presented as sacred. For some, blurring the lines between the sacred and the profane can be controversial, even blasphemous—that is, if a religion has a universal aspiration.

For nativist, ethnically defined communities of faith, such tension is of no concern. Their very nature implies the glorification of one's ethnicity or nationality; thus, such symbols would not be out of place in a religious setting, as shown by Reichenbach in this volume. It is, however, worth pointing out that, so far, no pagan temple has been established (at least officially) in Poland, and thus, this thesis cannot be verified in practice. It should also be noted that there are already (neo-)pagan temples in Eastern Europe, like *Lokstene Shrine* in Latvia, *Samogitian Sanctuary* in Lithuania, and the *Ancient Russian Yngling Church* in Russia.¹⁶ As far as it has been possible to establish, no comprehensive study of such sites has been conducted yet.

There are fewer examples of national symbols being directly adopted into the religious sphere compared to the use of religious symbols for national purposes. Therefore, several factors may be at play here. On the one hand, one should not underestimate the control of the Vatican over matters of a religious cult for the Catholic Church or accountability to other churches in an Orthodox context. On the other hand, procedural hurdles in the canonization process or the risk of undermining the monopoly on sacredness could also be considered. Such issues are of little concern for national

15 Kisiel, "Sanctuary of a Sacred Nation."

16 Nastevičs, "Modern Holy Places"; Palangos Turizmo Informacijos Centras, "Samogitian Sanctuary"; Shnirelman, "Obsessed with Culture"; Golovneva, "Saving the Native Faith."

activists, especially if one religious denomination clearly dominates this group. Moreover, from the nationalist perspective, adopting national symbols in religious spaces has the additional benefit of potentially sharpening the separation of other ethnic or national groups. Obviously, it becomes problematic if a national group is not religiously homogeneous, as it risks excluding those who pray in different ways. For instance, the “negative integration” pursued in the German Empire under Bismarck led to social and political tensions.¹⁷

Sacred but Not Holy: Indisputable National Symbols

Besides the sacralization of national symbols and the nationalization of sacred figures and objects, one can approach this subject from a very different angle. Sacralization does not have to imply a special relation to the deity but rather the (in)ability to discuss and criticize a subject publicly. Whether a claim to holiness is made or not, a subject is so “supremely valuable” to a given group that it is beyond the ordinary rules of public debate.

As argued by Falina, Woolley, and Głowacka-Grajper, respectively, the World War II has a sacred character in today's Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. It is not perceived as a holy war, and its actors are not depicted as saints. Nonetheless, they are interpreted to be fundamental to the self-understanding of the three national groups and to be defining moments in the states' histories that they are not treated as merely historical topics.

As demonstrated by Falina, the historicity of the national myths is unimportant. The soldiers of the Red Army who allegedly died heroically under General Panfilov are not characterized as being holy or in the realm of deity; that would be difficult to reconcile with the character of the Soviet Union. Instead, framing them in terms of martyrdom is an attempt to highlight the importance of their deed and take it beyond the historical debate. Once accepted to be secular martyrs, there could not be any debate on their behavior (or their existence). In such situations, casting doubt on such figures would be synonymous with an attack on the national memory and, thus, the collective “I” of the Russian people.

Ljuljanović argues that the entire territory of today's Republic of North Macedonia has been described as a holy land (*terra sancta*) by Bulgarian, Greek, Ottoman, and Serbian activists. The sacred character is not directly based on a special relationship with the Almighty, even if the figure saint might suggest this. Rather, the sacredness is derived from conceptualizing

17 Blackbourn, “State and Politics”; Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole*.

the national territory based on a selective reading of medieval history. It is sacredness without holiness, a social taboo rather than religious dogma.

It is important to remember the distinction between these two kinds of sacredness. The first relies on religious faith; the second can thrive in a purely secular framework. This is important, as societies in Eastern Europe, on the whole, seem to be increasingly distancing themselves from religious organizations, as discussed below. In the future, this might be challenging to the sacred status based on the authority of a church, be it Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, but it is unlikely to undermine the sacred status drawn from the centrality to the national self-understanding. This does not mean they are untouchable forever; instead, one should look at patterns, observable in the popular understanding of history and collective memories.

The Solidification of Sacred Time

When reading the essays in this volume, one may be struck by the fact that most of the figures and events around which the collective narration of the past is located are either in the medieval period or around the World War II. Undoubtedly, there are some exceptions, but how dominant those two periods are, is genuinely remarkable. However, this is, of course, no coincidence.

Scholarship on collective memories gives us insights into the social construction of historical time. It is not unusual that the “important” figures and events are not stretched evenly through time but can be located within a few critical periods.¹⁸ Zerubavel’s research shows that it is a common perception across different societies and cultures that history is packed with meaning in select pockets of time, separated by extended intervals when nothing of importance seems to have happened.¹⁹ This would explain why this volume mentions the early modern period so sparsely. It is the predating period that draws the most attention in Eastern Europe.

To understand why the Middle Ages seem more significant than the Renaissance or antiquity, one must consider why some periods have the appearance of being more meaningful than others. Research on commemorative cultures suggests that “founding of states and establishment of institutions, births and deaths of rulers, declarations of peace and outbreaks of war, uprisings and revolutions” are particularly likely to be celebrated.²⁰

¹⁸ For the discussion on terminology, see O’Keeffe, “Landscape and Memory.”

¹⁹ Zerubavel, “Calendars and History.”

²⁰ Brockmeier, “Remembering and Forgetting,” 17.

Since most European societies claim to be descended from the medieval states (with the notable exceptions of Greece and Italy, which boast ancestral lines directly to antiquity), the Middle Ages would inevitably be crucial for the culture of memory. It is worth stressing that possessing deep historical roots is essential in the national imagination to be considered a “legitimate” nation.²¹ Furthermore, the Christian churches were established in Central and Eastern Europe during this period; therefore, it was also the time of their inception. Woolley points out that because Kyivan Rus’ is claimed by both Russia and Ukraine, narratives about the rule of Volodymyr the Great (c. 958–1015) are not merely an issue for historians but have profound importance for the two states and churches on their territories.

The reasons why the Second World War features so prominently seem to be even more complex. Indisputably, it was not only a major war but the resulting sociopolitical upheavals caused by it: the Baltic states lost their independence, Ukraine was supposedly reunited as a part of the Soviet Union, and Poland’s borders were completely reshaped. At the same time, the new communist regimes (excluding the Soviet Union) replaced prewar right-wing dictatorships (except for Czechoslovakia) and introduced a new socioeconomic system. Secondly, the societies of the regions were transformed due to genocides (against Jews and Roma), ethnic cleansing, and forced resettlements. Furthermore, the war played a vital role in shaping the international order. This is particularly important in the case of Russia, where the so-called Great Patriotic War became the foundational myth of the state.²²

It is, therefore, understandable that such a tectonic event would not only be present in the collective narrative of the past but also play a crucial role in the mnemonic cultures in the region. The fact that it is a “living” memory—that is, a “communicative memory” shared within families (as underlined by Głowacka-Grajper, in this volume)—strengthens the importance of this event in the collective narration of the past.²³

The stories concerning medieval Christian martyrs and the soldiers who died on the altar of the fatherland during the World War II might be sacred for the communities that cherish them. However, they seem to be constructed not dissimilarly to tales of monarchs and poets.²⁴ This highlights the logic that collective memories also apply in religious (or quasi-religious)

21 Mayall, *Nationalism and International Society*, 52; Calhoun, “Nationalism and Ethnicity”; Hroch, *In the National Interest*.

22 Zhurzhenko, “Geopolitics of Memory”; Pakier and Strâth, “Introduction.”

23 Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory,” 125.

24 On the distinction between heroes and saints, see Brüning, “Heilige, Helden, Krieger.”

settings. This comparative volume combines the findings of the existing academic literature and focuses not only the importance of taking religion seriously in nationalism studies but how critical national narratives are for contextualizing religious myths and practices.

Post-Socialism: Reappearance of Religion, Secularization, and Paganism

This volume has another unique dimension, namely the historical moment it appears. The case studies selected for this volume are united by their belonging to the category of Eastern Europe. Historically, cities, regions, and states between the Baltic Sea and Greece had relatively little in common until World War II. The postwar division of Europe and the homogenizing narrative of the Eastern Bloc pulled them into one category.²⁵ After the end of the Cold War, they became post-socialist, despite the notorious problems with conceptualizing exactly what that meant.²⁶ This volume contributes to this discussion and points to the possibility of the end of the post-socialist period.

In the European context, Romania (51 percent), Georgia (50 percent), and Poland (40 percent) have significantly more religious populations than the European average (25 percent). Ukraine (31 percent), Russia (17 percent), and Hungary (17 percent) are positioned in the middle, while Estonia is significantly less religious than other countries (5 percent).²⁷ There is no comparable statistic for the Republic of Northern Macedonia, but the research indicates a highly religious society, possibly the most of all the countries considered here.²⁸

Correspondingly, Christianity is seen as a vital component of the national identity noticeably more often in Georgia (81 percent), Romania (74 percent), Poland (64 percent), and Russia (57 percent) than it is in other European countries.²⁹ Estonia again is at the bottom of the scale (15 percent), and Hungary reflects the average European score (41 percent).

This confirms the widespread notion that post-socialist Europe is characterized by the reemergence and hegemony of religious identities suppressed

25 Schenk, "Mental Maps"; Hagen, "Redrawing"; Todorova, "Trap of Backwardness," 140.

26 Hann, *Postsocialism*; Czaplicka et al., *Cities*.

27 Evans and Baronavski, "How Do European Countries."

28 Popovski et al., "Certain Characteristics."

29 Pew Research Center, "Eastern and Western Europeans."

during the state socialist period. However, this picture is incomplete, as this volume shows.

As Povedák and Reichenbach argue, the end of state socialism led to the revival of the dominant Christian religion and the pagan ones. Though this is a relatively niche phenomenon, it should not be wholly ignored, especially as these religious groups can be linked to radical political movements. This provides an interesting twist on the established narrative, which focused solely on the reemergence of the Catholic Church in Poland or the Orthodox Church in Russia. In contrast to those dominant players, the pagan groups of the nativist kind have a rather different relationship to nationality and ethnicity. Specifically, religion and ethnicity are intertwined and cannot be separated from each other. Arguably, one can see traces of this approach on the radical edges of the Christian churches, too, but this is bound to cause tension with their universalistic claims. The nativist religions experience no such pressure as they are from the very beginning defined by their ethnic character.

Studies of the pagan groupings invite us to pursue several lines of inquiry. In their case, one can probe the exact relationship with the sacred. That is, whether the group perceives itself to be a chosen nation, like, for instance, in Judaism, or whether the nation itself is the object of the sacralization. Secondly, one can analyze how historical authenticity is established by those who engage in nativist religion and to what extent such processes differ from those observed in the case of Christian denominations. Thirdly, one could ask if there are similar nativist groups in Western Europe and, if so, how they compare to those in the post-socialist countries.

The revival of religious life is not the only phenomenon worth examining. The region is now experiencing fast-paced secularization—an interpretation not universally accepted.³⁰ Nonetheless, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, Poland has the biggest gap globally between the religiosity of the older and younger generations, which indicates that within the next few decades, it may become significantly more secular.³¹ Romania is following closely, while Hungary and Ukraine are heading in the same direction but at a slower pace. Since Christianity is perceived as central to the national identity in many of these countries, it is worth considering how the rapid secularization process might impact nationalism and their self-understanding.³² Should this mass rejection of religious institutions materialize, would that not point to the area beyond post-socialism?

30 Wanner, "Interview."

31 Pew Research Center, "Age Gap."

32 Pew Research Center, "Eastern and Western Europeans."

It remains to be seen what long-term effects the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the region's religiosity. While the data available at the moment is limited, a survey conducted in some Western European countries suggests that COVID-19 made the general population slightly or marginally more religious, and the data from Poland indicates that the secularization trend has not been impacted.³³ It is nonetheless worth bearing in mind when considering how the entanglement of religion and nationalism will develop in the next decades.

Furthermore, one should remember that all the countries in the region are facing a profound demographic shift, with their populations getting older and smaller.³⁴ This poses serious challenges that will affect states and societies on a very practical level. However, it could be argued that it is also highly relevant to the issues considered in this volume. Nationalist activists have always paid close attention to the demographic data and called for nations to expand, for fear of being overtaken by others. At the same time, nationalism offered a "collectivized immortality," a promise of life after death in the sacred and eternal body of the nation.³⁵ Does it still have the same appeal if the nation is shrinking? Moreover, how does one reconcile the special nature of the "chosen" nation if the population is decreasing, not least because of the massive emigration?

This volume, therefore, invites us to reconsider the standard notion of post-socialist Eastern Europe as the region supposedly different from the (assumed-to-be) normative Western Europe, not only because of its raging nationalism but also its incomparable religiosity. While Romania and Georgia indeed show levels of adherence to Christianity not seen in other parts of Europe, Estonia is on the other end of the spectrum. This does not mean, however, that in the case of the latter, one cannot fruitfully examine the intersection of religion and nationalism, as Paert convincingly argues. Finally, it is worth considering and closely monitoring what happens to the existing "religious nationalism" observable in many countries of the region should the secularization trend continue. Will these sentiments mutate in the Hungarian fashion where the Virgin Mary is ascribed Magyar character (Povedák, in this volume), or will they develop in a completely different direction? Would the weakening of the established churches also mark the end of the post-socialist period? These are open questions that one might

33 Pew Research Center, "More Americans"; Bożewicz, "Wpływ pandemii"; Boguszewski et al., "Changes."

34 Eurostat, "Population Projected to Decline"; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2017*.

35 Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion"; Bauman, *Mortality*.

consider when looking at the religions and national landscapes of Eastern Europe today and in the years to come.

Looking Ahead

The findings within this volume invite us to think more broadly and continue to study how nationalism interacts with religion in the contemporary world. For understandable reasons, essays in this volume focus on the dominant religious denominations, even if they represent a minority in the given society—as is the case with Estonia. However, one might ask to what extent religious minorities follow the same patterns that can be seen in this book. For instance, one could examine Catholics in Bulgaria or Ukraine or Protestants in Poland. How do they engage with national symbols and discourses, particularly considering their links to national groups outside those countries? Reichenbach's research shows that research on minority groups might not only be intriguing but also lead to significant findings.

It is also useful to think outside the Eastern European framework and compare the cases of Poland or Hungary with, for instance, Italy, Spain, or Ireland. Equally, the Estonian and Latvian Orthodox Churches and their practices could be examined together with Finland. Not only do these countries have a lot in common historically, but Orthodoxy is tied to the history of the Russian Empire in this Nordic country.

Moreover, one could also bring together interdenominational research. Nedici's research shows that such an unequal comparison is far from being irrelevant. Considering that with only a few exceptions (notably Germany), each European country seems to have a dominant religious organization, it might be useful to compare and contrast the national engagements of religious groups across state borders.

Finally, this volume has solely examined Christian churches, with some excursions into the pagan imagination. However, research into how and if Islam and nationalism interact in Europe still needs to be conducted. Of course, the specificities of the Muslim faith and practices would need to be considered; that, however, does not mean that such research could not broaden our understanding of the issues at stake. For obvious reasons, Albania and Bosnia seem to be good starting points. Considering that they are rarely represented in comparative studies of European nationalism, it would be particularly interesting. The centuries-old communities of Muslims in Ukraine and Poland could provide a compelling counterexample and allow us to better understand the articulations of nationalism in a very different religious setting.

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15. The Sacred Power of History: The Useful Past and the Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe

Alexander Agadjanian

Abstract: This chapter gives an overview of the major themes of the volume. Sacralized history has been a widespread—sometimes, the central—mnemonic strategy in the Eastern European nations over the past few decades after the breakup of the communist/socialist era. The reason of the upsurge of such sacralization efforts was its powerful emotional energy, a relative weakness of the tradition of rational political mechanics, and the legitimacy-seeking populist policies of the ruling regimes. The process of sacralization turned into bitter contestations over history and its sacra by various nations and political actors.

Keywords: sacralization, politics of history, Eastern Europe, contested memory, mnemonic actors

Any project or even an intention that might be conceived as a “sacralization of history” would be considered trivial to Plato, the authors of the Jewish Bible, early or medieval Christian chroniclers, or, for that matter, classical Indian, Chinese, or Arabic historians. History for these figures *was* sacred by definition, and would not be considered otherwise. Any discrepancy between the “right” course of events and what actually happened could only be explained within the linear cyclic predetermination as temporary yet meaningful disorders, which were included in the logic of the unfolding sacral order.

This situation has changed dramatically in the last few centuries as the concept of “sacral history” has been gradually shaped in Europe. The old, sacred past, the Christian-predestined continuum, was deconstructed as mythological or idealistic and disconnected from the “real history” or

“human history,” with its presumably different goals and laws. However, this distinction did not become a complete success story for two main reasons. Firstly, modern politics requires potent emotional myths, symbols, and rituals for mobilization and legitimation. Therefore, new objects and forms of sacralization emerged, either in replacement of or in combination with the old religious sacra. Secondly, professional historiography—posing as scientific, despite all efforts of skeptical deconstruction—was sometimes reproducing great mythological narratives of its own (from “universal progress” to “class struggle” or “postcolonialism,” etc.), sometimes closely related to, or occasionally appropriated by, the political ideologies.¹

As a result, both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were full of sacralization efforts, despite the meaning and content of the sacral being respectively recoded in terms of different imaginations and vocabulary appropriate to the “secular age.”² However, the critical impulse persisted, and thus came about new efforts to desacralize the discredited modern myths, only to replace them with new ones in accordance with changing political regimes and public moods. As we move into the twenty-first century, in the region of Eastern Europe, which underwent a major ideological deconstruction, we can observe another tide of sacralization rising again, producing myths, symbols, and rituals, as this volume demonstrates.

There are, of course, some particular drivers that invigorated the sacralization efforts in the postcommunist context: the new independent polities’ need for strong symbolic resources rooted in the past and designed for national mobilization; the respective discrediting of the former, secular ideological resources; and a certain rehabilitation of old religious sensitivities. This leads us to the hypothesis that the production of sacral history—even if not officially or consciously perceived as such—will persist in one form or another and never end. While critical historiography, based on objectivist methodology, will never be able to completely desacralize the political and cultural imagination, it can attempt to present a distanced and objective picture of this process, as this volume does.

The main novelty in the twenty-first-century sacralization projects in Eastern Europe is the newly reenergized resource of traditional religion. The return of religion in the public discourse and its appropriation in politics

1 For a general framework of these fundamental shifts in sacralization processes, we can refer, from within a vast corpus of literature, to the Marxist tradition and the variations of the critical theory, but also, from a different angle, to Cassirer’s *Myth*; Joas, *Sacredness*; Gentile, *Politics as Religion*.

2 For an attempt to formulate a conceptual frame, see, e.g., Balkenhol et al., *Secular Sacred*.

appear both unexpected and understandable. It was unexpected in the context of massive secularization, which seemed to have been a paradigmatic feature of what was conventionally understood under “modernity.” It was understandable within the societies that experienced decolonization at an increasing pace and those that underwent a reversal of the forced, ideology-driven secularity of the communist era.³ Additionally, the old religious symbols, predominantly Christian in the region under focus, possess some energy, at least through an emotional identification with “cultural heritage.”⁴ This symbolic energy, which differed in intensity from country to country (as contrasted with Georgia, Estonia, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic), comes from the repressed memory; from the feeling of renewal, of resurrection—a central Christian trope. These old symbols are therefore suitable for creating a useful past and are being recycled to support a sense of collective identity. The Christian martyrs’ righteous blood becomes the best agent for cementing such memory and identity.⁵

However, the Christian meanings now practiced in these societies have been profoundly reshaped and remodified by the central object of sacralization—the *nation*. The second or even third wave of national consolidation has been unquestionably the dominant trend in these societies during postcommunist times. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, all these societies were struggling to complete previously unfinished national projects. Ironically, this was right at the time when the theorists of globalization enthusiastically discussed the decline of the nation and when the prospect of European integration, for many of these societies, appeared to be an appealing strategy, sometimes even a necessity. Some of them experienced the birth of an “imagined community” as early as the nineteenth century; others went through a period of national consolidation between the two world wars; and others, like most former Soviet colonies that are now independent, began this project after the Soviet empire’s dissolution.

This new rise of the national imagination as a vital resource for political and economic survival, a sense of cultural identity, and continuity has

3 Casanova’s *Public Religions* and Berger’s *Desecularization of the World* are classic references capturing the entire trend. Many studies develop this theme based on materials from Eastern Europe.

4 This global trend of representing religion in terms of heritage, see Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*; Lehmann, “Religion as Heritage.”

5 See Lurmann’s book where the metaphor of “recycling” the religious heritage has been shaped and elaborated: *Secularism Soviet Style*. On various implications of religion on religious memory in contemporary Eastern European and Eurasian contexts, see the recent volume, Bogumil and Yurchuk, *Memory*.

coincided with the return of religion. Therefore, a prominent pattern in ways of viewing history and using it to shape collective identity in this region has been a mixture of the old (and revived) Christian, and new national meanings, thus producing the nationalized Christian sacra.⁶

This combination, or entanglement, of Christian and national symbols, references, and interpretations in constructing historical narratives of a “usable past” by the political elites and other actors has been abundant in the region’s recent history. We have seen this in the Russian cult of the last tsar, as a symbolic link to a millennial national continuity; in the Christian ornamentation of the Ukrainian Holodomor, the mass famine of the 1930s, and the Heavenly Hundred heroes of the Maidan Revolution of the 2010s; in the revival of the messianic tradition of Poland as “Christ among the nations” and the active construction of a sacralized past by the ruling Polish right-wing political elites in the 2000s and 2010s; in the new emphasis on “nationalized” Orthodox martyrs in Estonia; and in fact in many cases in various countries not included in this volume (see the chapters by Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper; Yuliya Yurchuk and Andriy Fert).

However, Christianity, retrieved from the past as a convenient sacralizing agency energizing the national collective memory, has reappeared as a very different tradition and interpreted in a new way. The dominant Christian tradition was contested and remodeled by the quest for a renewed, secularized society, with its new myths and symbols and a dynamic communicative media environment that has affected the shaping of collective memory and identity discourses. The postcommunist societies did not cease to be secular; the secularity resulted from a long structural transformation—the communist anti-religious policy was just the most specific, visible part. The rejection of communism could not be in any way an overturn of the deep trend of secularization. In this context, the retrieved religious elements were delivered to a mixed and chaotic symbolic market. The societies’ quest for the sacra was impatient and indiscriminate: it operated within the suddenly available market, of which the sacralization actors picked the symbols that promised maximal efficiency.

One of those was pre-Christian “pagan” motives that were reified and galvanized as possessing a more profound and more prolonged grip,

6 There is an extensive rise in nationalistic literature, particularly the conversion of religious memory into nationalist sentiments. For example, Verdery, “Nationalism”; Hann, *Postsocialism*; Roudometof, *Nationalism*; Agadjanian, “Revising Pandora’s Gifts”; Tolz, “Forging the Nation”; Smith et al., *Nation-Building*; Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity*.

authenticity, and perhaps a stronger ethno-national resonance.⁷ Thus, we can sometimes observe both negotiation and competition between these two sources of national memory and national psyche—Christian and pagan. In the case of Poland, we witnessed well-established Catholicism being contested by a vibrant *Rodzimowierstwo*, providing a sacral alternative, further mixed with New Age emotional and aesthetic energy. In Ukraine, the martyrdom image of Holodomor, a mother with child, merged with an unusual combination of the Christian Madonna and pagan, ethno-folkish Berehynia, thus creating a chain of associations sacralizing a “myth of Ukraine” infused with suffering but finally receiving the higher protection. In Hungary, the collision of Christian and pagan sources provides, not surprisingly, an amalgam that is additionally strengthened, like in Poland, by the New Age overtones of neo-paganism; with all these sacral resources apparently incompatible, joining their support to the idea of quintessential (and essentialist) Hungarianness and Greater Hungary is a resentment to heal the so-called Trianon syndrome (referring to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon)—a syndrome of a bitter feeling of being historically disadvantaged (see the chapters by Karin Reichenbach, Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek, and István Povedák). Thus, what we can state here is that what we call a mixture of various elements—Christian, pagan, and New Age—creates a sacral cocktail used to orchestrate the key milestones of the past traumas and glories and promote the ideas of national continuity, identitarian security, and political vigor.

What can we say about these combinations of various religious and secular resources? Scholars usually work hard to distinguish various, apparently dissimilar, contradictory elements that make improbable, unexpected combinations. This is because we scholars usually operate with “pure” concepts and are obsessed with deconstructing “unusual” mixtures as “hybrids” or “eclecticism.” The real world is different: mixtures of this kind constitute the norm, and are not the exception.

Another essential point demonstrated in this collection is that, in most cases, the sacralization of a nation vivifies the “us vs. them” mechanism of constructing identities and therefore includes a competition for memory-constitutive milestones of the past. Thus, the Ukrainians and the Russians compete for St. Vladimir, and while doing so, they imply different values in the figure of the baptizer of ancient Rus'. For the Russians, the idea of imperial grandeur is clearly dominant. The Ukrainians' narrative implies a distancing from this aggressively imposed imperial unity and linking the

7 See, for example, Aitamurto and Simpson, *Modern Pagan*.

Saint Prince to a chain of other decolonizing motives—not just emphasizing Kyiv as the birthplace of Rus' but also promoting references to the Saint Prince's former connections to Constantinople and focusing on the later union with the Catholic Church (1596)—all those elements that are supposed to protect a specific, truly Ukrainian way of presenting the sacral history. The dispute over the sacral history, in turn, is reflected in the practical struggle for Ukrainian Church autocephaly, the ecclesiastical independence from Moscow (see the chapter by Ursula Woolley). Macedonia represents an exciting example of century-long, and currently continuing, competing claims for this *terra sancta*, this “Slavic Israel,” home for key saint figures of the Serbs and Bulgarians joined by the Greeks referring to the memory of Alexander the Great (see the chapter by Denis Ljuljanović).

While the examples above show the competition for the sacred history between the different national subjects, there are many examples of internal, intra-nation rifts created by competing mnemonic actors. For example, the Romanian Orthodox and Romanian Uniate Catholics compete for the contested past of Transylvania. Both consider this region a reservoir of the sacred past that can be quickly transformed into collective national memories, empowering the current political capital (see the chapter by Radu Nedici). In Estonia, the Orthodox milieu, which makes up only a part of the nation, is itself split into subcommunities of memory competing for the “true” Estonian Orthodox tradition, and “the sacred” of the newly canonized saints serves to promote an independent national church tradition linked to the independent national project (see the chapter by Irina Paert).

Poland and Georgia, while having varied histories, also have interesting similarities. In Poland, we see the revitalizing of the old conservative Catholic semiotics of the nation, which seems to be intrinsically, almost incontestably linked to the Polish identity, and which provides a plethora of sacral mnemonic tools (the cross being the most frequent and universal, but also statues of priests and Pope John Paul II). This illiberal Catholic resource was used by the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party to push back the opposing attempts to reconstruct (or invent) a liberal, pro-European version of Polish national history. Both sides of this dispute project their presentist visions into the contested past, especially the post–World War I republic (see the chapter by Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper). In Georgia, the Orthodox past is a similarly powerful resource, both mnemonic and political. Yet, it becomes an object of competition between the two rival cultural forces that represent the two different strategies of sacralization and defines the current politics: a conservative, church-related, and, perhaps, tacitly loyal to

the old imperial Orthodox alliance with Russia, and a liberal, pro-European, clearly decolonial national project (see the chapter by Nikoloz Aleksidze).

In Russia, we have seen similar competition among mnemonic sacralizing strategies. The increasingly authoritarian regime created a historical narrative of imperial continuity, blessed by the millennial Orthodox tradition and sealed by the victory in World War II. Like various cases found in many countries, the blood of the mass victims, recoded as heroes, martyrs, and sacrifices, infuses the historical narrative with sacral energy. The ruling regime claims the monopoly on the politics of history and creates a master narrative fixed in laws and school textbooks (see chapter by Maria Falina).

The Orthodox Christian arrangement is an important part of Putinist politics: the return to the holy Christian imperium was in line with creating a usable past to promote the Russian imperial and geopolitical revival. Here, a careful selection has been made: not all sacral symbols are useful. Unexpectedly, the last tsar's canonized figure appears unsuitable for this new master narrative of the imagined Holy Russia: the tsar was primarily a passive victim ("passion-bearer" in the language of the Church), and this fact, although perfectly conforming to the classic Christian trope of martyrdom, created a feeling of weakness and made it emotionally less attractive as a pillar for a sacralized history.⁸ Other saints, such as the Saint Prince, Alexander Nevsky, the hero of a myth of military glory, are much more suitable for this task.⁹

An opposing Russian narrative is based upon the memory of the victims of the Soviet empire, which contains in itself, on the contrary, a challenge to the image of the imperial state. Like the liberals in Poland or Georgia, the Russian liberal activists and the educated class are engaged in the archives-based historiography of the twentieth-century repressions to show an inadequate price for the state's glorious narrative. By doing this, they activate a different vision of Russian history, downplaying the fundamental combination of Orthodox piety and military might.

However, this last combination is central to the official narrative, as it is clearly expressed in the propagandist project "Russia—My History." Interestingly, this project, a powerful example of church-and-state legitimacy-producing collaboration in constructing a useful past, does recognize the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet repressions as part of "upheavals" that happened periodically in the course of Russian history. The anti-church repressions and the victims murdered for their faith and canonized as saints

8 Hyldal Christensen, *Making*; Bogumił and Łukaszewicz, "Between History and Religion."

9 Schenk, *Aleksandr Nevskij*; Berezhnaya, "God Is in Truth."

in the 2000s were included in this narrative. However, another recoding is occurring here: as previously stated, the blood of the saint martyrs of the twentieth century is compensated, indeed redeemed and outweighed, by the glory of the war victory. The message of the “Russia—My History” project is that for the few times, the chaos, the mess, and the anomie that occurred in Russian history were overcome by the comeback of a robust imperial state allied with a solid imperial church—a unity presumably achieved under Putin (see the chapter by Ekaterina V. Klimenko). Moreover, this combination is easily converted into ambitious, offensive claims about forging a sacralized historical memory.

With Russia’s war in Ukraine, first in 2014 and then with the full-fledged invasion beginning February 2022, we have witnessed how these virtual “memory wars” can turn into real ones. Considering all the various political and economic aspects involved, what revealed itself to be an unusually prominent feature of this war was its thoroughly fabricated historical—rather than ideological—justification. The narrative of Ukraine’s historical nullity and national bankruptcy, put forward by the Russian dictator to justify the 2022 invasion, has been orchestrated before and after the war was declared. This is evident in both Russian official comments and the media, with a plethora of symbolism referring to the imperial continuity—both historical and territorial—of the so-called Russian world. The Russian Orthodox Church has directly blessed these narratives, as it later straightforwardly blessed the war itself. As a response, we saw the rise of Ukraine’s national sentiments and the sacralization of a long chain of traumatic experiences imposed by Russian imperialism. The final act came with the terror of the 2022 invasion. The real war makes the sacralization even more critical and dramatic than ever.

During the last decades, the Eastern European nations have been searching for the sacred resources of the past that can be used in the present, to be used in a way that can be converted or recoded to legitimize political power. All political regimes are in search of legitimacy, and revitalized, mythologized, and sacralized history becomes a powerful resource. We should therefore ask: Why did the politics of history, the search for a “usable past,” and the myths of sacred roots and continuity acquire such prominence in the public memory and the political processes of this region? Firstly, perhaps, it is because some of these societies’ political cultures still lack a fully developed tradition of rational choice secular legitimation. Secondly, there might

be resentment within the political elites and among the broader circle of symbolic consumers in Eastern Europe against the globalization of economic and political forces and the ongoing quest for national sovereignty and collective ontological security. This might be part of a broader tendency to revitalize identity populism in many parts of the world. Thirdly, the legacies of the colonial and imperial sentiments that fueled, to varying degrees, the heated disputes of the past have projected into the current territorial and ethnic rivalries. Overall, in Eastern Europe, the process of nation building, historically interrupted by the Sovietization and then put on hold by the idea of European integration, still produces a quest for powerful, sacred-infused national symbols, given the remaining unsettled cases of memory contestations represented in this volume.

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