NATIONAL MYTHS IN THE NEW CZECH LIBERALISM

Kieran Williams

It is well known that events since 1989 have allowed a reassertion and exploration of Slovak national identity. They have also, however, permitted a rethinking of Czechness in which myth plays a central part. New liberals (or 'liberal-conservatives') in the two main successor parties to Civil Forum, while usually associated primarily with economic transformation strategies, have taken part in this attempt at nation-shaping; indeed, a mythopoeic vision of the Czech nation is an essential component of the liberal revolution.

Nationalist mythopoeia may seem incompatible with the intentions of this liberal revolution, which is usually portrayed as rationalist, critical and self-critical, with an aversion to Romantic revolution's reliance on the emotional impulses of national culture.[1] In those rare instances that contemporary liberal theorists have tried to accommodate ideas of nationhood and nationality, they stress that nations are 'evolutive social realities' that emerge spontaneously through undirected interactions. Given the organic, evolutionary nature of the nation, they argue, it would be futile to try to impose a 'guided behaviour' on it.[2]

Guided behaviour, however, is exactly what new Czech liberals, especially Prime Minister Václav Klaus (on whom I will focus), hope to achieve through the use of myth in contemporary political discourse. The apparent paradox arising here is similar to that obtaining in the economic transition: new liberals are using precisely the constructivist devices so loathed in much liberal theory, in the belief that they will deliver the country to a purported condition of spontaneous, undirected order.

Motives

The reasons for this outwardly constructivist undertaking are several and various. The Czech liberal tradition, like those in many countries of Central Europe, always included concern for the fate of the nation as

1. Bruce Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution*, New Haven, CT, 1992, pp. 7–8.
2. Jesús Huerta de Soto, 'A Theory of Liberal Nationalism' in *Il Politico*, 60, 1995, pp. 583–98.

well as for individual freedom; in the nineteenth century the idea of a single, unified community of nationally conscious individuals was embraced as the vehicle for progress.[3] The Czech school of liberal political economy that flourished between 1890 and 1925, represented by Albín Bráf, Jozef Kaizl, Alois Rašín and Karel Engliš, combined principles of free trade, careful spending and restrained (but heartfelt) nationalism.[4] The young Rašín, whom Klaus has often cited as an inspiration, was so radical in his demands for recognition of the historical rights of the Bohemian state in the 1890s that he was imprisoned for two years, and during the First World War was sentenced to death for treason, a sentence commuted by the last Habsburg emperor.[5]

A second source of sensitivity to nationhood is the activity of a circle of independent intellectuals that originally assembled around the periodical *Tvář* in the mid-1960s and covertly re-convened in 1978. The group included Klaus (writing on economics under the pseudonyms Zdeněk Dvořák and Jan Řehák), Tomáš Ježek, Bohumil Doležal, Emanuel Mandler and Jan Strásky. Unlike the better-known group around Charter 77, this circle, which developed in the 1980s into the Democratic Initiative, connected a liberal concern for human rights to questions of nationhood and the national condition. In 1985 they devoted a whole collection of *samizdat* articles to the issue of Czech identity; Klaus did not participate, but Doležal and Ježek, who would serve as close advisers to Klaus after 1989, did.[6] It can be stated, therefore, that from an early point the core of the Czech liberal community linked issues of nationhood to those of individual emancipation.

Finally, a reason can be found in the very goal of the liberal revolution: to eliminate institutions and practices that distort the spontaneous ordering abilities of the market. It is deemed necessary that the individuals who will interact in pursuit of their ends do so with minds cleared of certain expectations and instilled with certain values. New Czech liberals assume that, just as a market of sorts always existed even under central planning, so certain values and inclinations have survived in Czech society which, with encouragement, can facilitate the transition to an open economy. So, as Václav Klaus has admitted:

3. Otto Urban, 'Český liberalismus v 19. století' in Milan Znoj, Jan Havránek and Martin Sekera (eds), *Český liberalismus: Texty a osobnosti*, Prague, 1995, pp. 16, 20.
4. For excerpts of their writings, see *ibid.*, pp. 460–95.
5. František Vencovský, *Alois Rašín: život a dílo*, Prague, 1992.
6. *Hledání naděje 1978–1987: Výber z ineditních sborníků*, Prague, 1993.

I believe in Adam Smith's invisible hand and in Hayek's spontaneously arising system of human interactions. At the same time, I am aware that it is necessary, especially in the initial construction of this system, to maintain certain, not insignificant, regularities and certain sequential rules, and that it is therefore necessary in this phase to grant a large 'constructing' role to the economic centre, to the institution whose role in a time of normal conduct of this conceived system must otherwise be minimal.[7]

In other words, Klaus has admitted that, during the transition to the free market, the state must help create the necessary conditions. This means not only the creation of certain institutions, intervention in market processes (wage, price and rent controls), and the illusion of private ownership (via investment funds and banks in which the state retains a controlling share), but also the formation of identity, appetites and aversions.

New Czech liberals enlist myth to present a vision of the Czech nation as Europeans naturally inclined to democracy, hard work, commerce and self-reliance. A mythologized reading of Czech history serves to erase awkward facts, such as the times when Czechs were inclined to pan-Slavism and looked away from Western Europe,[8] or acquiesced to authoritarian rule, either by foreigners or compatriots. Liberals also seek to establish a profile and programme distinct from that of President Havel and of the original Civil Forum. Above all, they must confront the fact that socialism and Communism, including Stalinism, had genuine support in the Czech working class and intelligentsia before 1948,[9] and that the Left still commands a following.

Choice of Myths

Roughly seven common myths are relevant that can be found in Czech literature, political discourse and popular imagination, as identified by Robert Pynsent,[10] Jiří Rak,[11] Vladimír Macura[12] and Ladislav Holy.[13]

7. Václav Klaus, *Česká cesta*, Prague, 1994, p. 74.
8. Jiří Rak, *Bývali Čechové: České historické mýty a stereotypy*, Jinočany, 1994 (hereafter *Bývali Čechové*), pp. 99–126.
9. Jacques Rupnik, 'The Roots of Czech Stalinism' in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman-Jones (eds), *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, London, 1982.
10. Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality*, London, 1994 (hereafter *Questions of Identity*), especially pp. 148–210.
11. Rak, *Bývali Čechové*.
12. Vladimír Macura, *Masarykovy boty a jiné semi (o) fejetony*, Prague, 1993.
13. Ladislav Holy, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation*, Cambridge, 1996.

The list is not exhaustive and these myths are not necessarily compatible; nor do they feature in every mythopoeic scheme.

1. The foundation myth of the Czech nation, when it entered the Bohemian lands led by Forefather Čech, who looked down from the Říp hill (just north of today's Prague), and viewed the Promised Land.
2. The myth of the natural democratic spirit of the Czechs. This myth is fuelled by legend or by readings of the medieval Bohemian kingdom, and leads to further assumptions that the Czechs are naturally individualist, love freedom and peace, and incline to civic virtue and to liberalism itself.
3. The myth of Slav reciprocity, especially of fraternity with Slovaks, which is portrayed as a time-honoured way to avoid or escape from ethnic, cultural and political isolation. There is a competing myth, however, of Slavs as prone to disunity and petty squabbling, rendering themselves vulnerable to foreign domination.
4. The myth of the special Czech mission, the great contribution to the spiritual liberation of Europe and all humanity, be it Charles IV's Gothic Arcadia, a Hussite purification of Christianity, 'socialism with a human face', or Bohemia as a bridge spanning the divide between East and West. This myth quietly supports arguments of Czech distinctness from (even superiority over) its neighbours, and of having different needs, aims and talents to theirs.
5. The myth of long-running conflict with certain neighbours, especially Germans, and of the unreliability or duplicity of the mightier nations of Western Europe.
6. The myth of a dark age (*temno*) of national dormition, especially after the skirmish of the White Mountain in 1620, which ties into the preceding myth of threats to identity from foreign domination.
7. The myth of realism, centrism (and being at the centre of Europe) and pragmatism as national virtues, the accepting of certain constraints and making the best of them. It can also be seen as a myth of mythlessness, of being a rational nation (again, unlike Poles, Slovaks and Hungarians) that is too honest and self-deprecating to sustain precisely the sorts of myths listed above.

Myths in Action

First, Klaus justifies his own rethinking of Czechness as a part of democratization and economic transformation by equating it to the original national revival that took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[14] Just as that time has come to be presented as the rebirth (rather than invention) of Czech identity, so too Klaus masks

14. Klaus, *Česká cesta*, p. 26.

his revolution as the return to what is natural. The Communist period is portrayed as an age of darkness like that following the White Mountain, in that the nation and all of its members were degraded:

> In the period of Communism we were oppressed individually [...] but we were equally oppressed as a nation. Under the banner of proletarian internationalism, we lost our national (and state) identity and now we are in the process of its repeated definition, in the process of the new formulation of our state and national interests.[15]

Klaus's most histrionic use of myth came in September 1993, when he delivered a speech from the summit of Říp. This is the hill in northern Bohemia from which the nation's mythical forefather, Čech, like Moses from Mount Nebo, looked over the lands below, then descended to tell his people, 'See, this is the land which you have sought. I have often spoken to you of it and promised that I will lead you into it. This is the Promised Land, full of beasts and birds, flowing with honey. You will have abundance in everything and it will be a good defence against enemies.'[16] In his speech Klaus referred to this tale simply as a legend, yet invoked what he considered truly resonant associations with Říp as the vantage point for foreseeing a happy future. He praised the hill as a symbol of 'the traditions of our ancestors', of their 'devotion to the ideas of national and civic freedom'. He reminded his audience that it was on Říp that a Czech prince built a chapel in the twelfth century to celebrate the Bohemian victory over the (German) Holy Roman Emperor Lothar, a battle — claimed Klaus — that affirmed the Czech state's distinct identity. (It should be noted, however, that the name Říp is probably Celtic or Germanic in origin.)

Klaus then looked over the landscape below Říp and reminded his audience of all that the Czechs had accomplished since 1989, assuring them that 'we are not threatened by the events which we have seen in recent days in Russia', since the Czech Republic, alone among post-Communist states, had made the transition to a market economy without social upheaval. Thanks to the 'practical, active patriotism' of every Czech today, he predicted, future generations would praise their achievements and would recall the poet Jaroslav Seifert's line, 'How nice it is here at home.'[17]

In the course of this short speech, Klaus combined myths of origin and destiny, interwove allusions to Czech feelings of superiority over other nations, presented a patriotism of constructive, non-conflictual civic work, and suggested that he was the new Forefather Čech,

15. Václav Klaus, *Dopočítávání do jedné*, Prague, 1995, p. 122.
16. As recounted by Alois Jirásek, *Staré pověsti české*, Prague, n.d., p. 11.
17. Klaus, *Česká cesta*, pp. 9–11.

surveying the glittering Promised Land of a successfully transformed society.

Though he is usually less histrionic, Klaus frequently employs mythical or mythologized characters from Czech history to reinforce a message about contemporary policy. For example, although it was decided not to make St Václav's (Wenceslas) Day (28 September) a state holiday, Klaus gave an address in September 1992 in which he attempted to rehabilitate his namesake as a forgotten national figure who symbolized the values that the new state should endorse. Though Klaus admitted that little is known of the historical Václav, apparently assassinated in 935, traditions tell of:

> a prince basically more humane and educated than were his still semi-barbarian surroundings; a prince who, in the spirit of the faith that he took literally and seriously, to the letter, strove to elevate and cultivate these surroundings; who felt that from the West come not only attackers and conquerors but also, perhaps primarily, bearers and communicators of values in which the life of the individual and the existence of the state can be reliably anchored [...]. It is a tradition of Czech statehood — I emphasize Czech and I emphasize statehood. It is a Christian tradition that pushes certain values to the fore, such as humaneness and culture. It is a tradition linked with Europe.[18]

Klaus noted that Václav's apparent willingness to make an alliance with the Germans was misused by the Nazi Protectorate to encourage collaboration, and that this turned Czechs away from the values of Václav into the clutches of 'Communist Russia'. Now, when Czech statehood had been renewed, he proposed a return to the values represented by the Václav cult to provide a 'common language' to facilitate 'a basic and deep consensus in everyday life'. This return to course can include a *modus vivendi* with Germany, and to justify this relationship Klaus offered a Bavarian audience a benign, mythologized account of medieval Bohemia's suction into Germano-Roman Christianity, away from Byzantine Orthodoxy, a story he felt had to be told today since forty years of Communist rule had obscured the Czechs' 'natural' belonging to Europe.[19]

Klaus has displayed indifference to Jan Hus and, without directly attacking the Hussite movement, he has noted that religious conflicts in the early modern age were marked by violence and intolerance on all sides.[20] When accepting the Conrad Peutinger prize in 1993, he observed that Peutinger had travelled in Bohemia in the sixteenth century and had criticized Hussitism for allegedly endorsing common

18. Klaus, *Rok — málo či mnoho v dějinách země*, Prague, 1993 (hereafter *Rok*), p. 68.
19. Klaus, *Česká cesta*, p. 131.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

ownership, and Klaus added that he himself views 'Hussite utopianism' as simply another third-way illusion, 'which in this regard differs little from Communism'.[21]

Instead, Klaus offered some thoughts in 1993 on the Counter-Reformation cult of Jan Nepomucký (St John of Nepomucene) on the 600th anniversary of his murder. Klaus did not attempt to explode the myth of Nepomucký, a German-speaking ecclesiastical functionary who was killed for asserting the jurisdiction of the Church against the State. A Nepomucene cult was then fostered by the Bohemian clergy in the eighteenth century to dispel the Czechs' international reputation as heretics and ease their return into the Catholic fold, and thereby restore national self-confidence and respect.[22] Instead, Klaus chose to present Nepomucký as the victim of 'the long battle between spiritual and secular powers. This battle is not only the framework within which were born the basic values of European civilization and thus of the Czech nation. It is also the basic feature of European democracy.' Klaus claimed that the resistance of the Church to State domination prevented the complete absorption of the spiritual realm into the political, and thus prevented the rise of something like Byzantine caesaropapism, which, he pointed out, had suffered prolonged decline, and had produced successor states (much of Eastern Europe) which remain backward and corrupt.

Having again found a chance to distance the Czech Republic from most of the post-Communist world, Klaus reflected on the divisive effect of the Nepomucene cult in Czech society as yet another example of an alleged Slav tendency to in-fighting, which he claimed only facilitates foreign domination and inhibits social integration. Klaus warned that today, 'at the moment of the advent of the new Czech state', the emergence of sharp cleavages in society 'would be something very dangerous'. He claimed that the Nepomucene cult has much in common with that of Hus, and that together they could offer a package of values around which Czech society should unite: justice and truth, public right and freedom of individual conscience. 'In the months and years ahead', he warned:

> when we must put our devastated economy in order, renew basic moral and political values, and place our newly arisen independent state on a firm foundation, let us proceed aware of that division of which I have spoken, and which is still so prominently embodied in the dispute over Jan Nepomucký. We stand before a basic task: to search and find what binds all of us, all citizens of this state, regardless of nationality, religious or political persuasion. This means searching for a common Czech patriotism.[23]

21. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
22. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity*, pp. 201–2.

In this way, a fourteenth-century clergyman can be enlisted to serve a twentieth-century politician keen to inhibit the emergence of social cleavages.

Myths of Czech uniqueness combine with myths of Czech realism in discussion of European integration. When asked whether he is a Eurosceptic, Klaus replied that he prefers to subscribe to 'Euro-realism', which he explains as a position 'that accepts reality, attempts to live in it and, at the same time, maximizes the effect that we can have from it'. This rules out what he dubs '*a priori* scepticism and any blocking of reasonable activities'.[24]

Such characteristic realism, Klaus explains, should also direct Czechs to remain modest in their self-perception: he told one interviewer that Czechs should have no illusions that they are in a position to make some great contribution to Europe, that they are somehow the navel of the world.[25] Yet, in almost the same breath, Klaus makes pronouncements that conform perfectly to myths of national mission. He tells his countrymen that they can make a great contribution to Europe just by being a free people.[26] What this means is that Czechs, located (he claims) equidistant to Maastricht and Sarajevo, can use their experience of Communism to warn the world against the constructivist conceit. In particular, Czechs can warn Europe against the dangers of the trend that Klaus claims to see in the West of pursuing vaguely left-wing, interventionist policies, both nationally and supranationally in Brussels:

> The Czech Republic has the chance — in the historical period of which we are speaking — to warn against this danger. We have behind us the experience of Communism and this makes us very sensitive to certain things which the West does not feel so keenly.[27]

It is thus the Czech mission to save Europe from its own unhealthy inclinations, those deep-rooted leanings of which Hayek warned, towards socialism, planning and constructivism. In the service of this liberating mission, Klaus castigates Brussels for maintaining protectionist barriers to trade with East-Central Europe, which he scorns as 'a clear example that neither the idea of the free market nor the idea of Europeanism as such have yet triumphed'.[28] It is the Czech

23. Klaus, *Rok*, p. 70.
24. Vladimír Mlynář, 'Rozhovor s Václavem Klausem' in *Respekt*, 1994, 21.
25. Antonín Přidal, *Z očí do očí*, Brno, 1994, p. 161.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Mlynář, 'Rozhovor s Václavem Klausem'. See also Klaus, *Česká cesta*, pp. 148, 164.
28. Klaus, *ibid.*, p. 136. See also Klaus, *Dopočítávání do jedné*, pp. 141–5.

lot today, he suggests, to teach Europe the true meaning of both, to be a bearer of freedom.

In arguing this point, he has no qualms about comparing himself to Konrad Adenauer, who simultaneously acted as head of government, head of the main German right-wing political party, and as a driving force for European integration.[29] At the same time, Klaus has rebuked Adenauer for rejecting the possibility of positive national sentiments and for espousing a Europe of blurred national boundaries. It is part of the Czech mission to promote a vision of Europe in which national identity, especially the newly rediscovered identity of the Czechs themselves, would not be submerged. Lest Czechs forget the dangers that can accompany dealings with larger nations, such as the British, French and Germans, Klaus periodically reminds them of the ways these peoples have failed the Czechs at crucial moments in the past.[30]

Impact

To date, Klaus's use of myth in guiding Czech behaviour has had limited results. As noted earlier, a key motive for the use of myth is to deter voters from registering their sympathy with parties of the Left. Despite such efforts, in the 1996 elections to the lower house of parliament, the Social Democrats received 26.4 per cent, and the relatively orthodox Communists 10.3 per cent. Another 8 per cent of the vote went to the Republican Party, whose ultranationalism has little in common with the liberal view of Czechness. Although Klaus was able to assemble a minority government, the vote tally showed that a very large share of the participating electorate did not want to conform to the Czech stereotype promoted by the coalition.

Looking ahead, however, liberals may find a more willing audience as new school textbooks engrain in children a nation-centred (rather than class-centred) approach to Czech history. David Čaněk concludes a recent analysis of textbooks with the claim that a clear mythicization of the nation and the national movement can now be detected. The history of the nineteenth century in Bohemia and Moravia is taught exclusively as the history of the Czech national movement, with non-Czech groups (Roma, Jews, Germans) either completely omitted from school history or vilified.[31] Imbued with a view of history in which Czech national assertion plays a central part, the next generation of voters may prove more receptive to the political power of myth.

29. Klaus, *Česká cesta*, p. 149.
30. See his musings on Munich, for example, in *ibid.*, pp. 20–2.
31. David Čaněk, *Národ, národnost, menšiny a rasismus*, Prague, 1996.

POLISH NATIONAL MYTHOLOGIES

Norman Davies

Everyone needs myths. Individuals need myths. Nations need myths. Myths are the sets of simplified beliefs, which may or may not approximate to reality, but which give us a sense of our origins, our identity, and our purposes. They are patently subjective, but are often more powerful than the objective truth — for the truth can be painful.

Some nations have more need of their myths than do others. Imperial nations invent myths in order to justify their rule over other peoples. Defeated nations invent myths to explain their misfortune and to assist their survival. Poland may well have belonged to this latter category, as political adversity over many generations seems to have created the sort of imaginative climate in which myths can flourish. Polish culture, and in particular literature, art and historiography, is full of instances where the national imagination triumphs over realism.

A facetious piece of evidence to support this point of view may lie in the fact that the Polish word for 'myth' is *mit* — pronounced like the English 'meat'. In the days of food shortages in the 1970s and 1980s, when Poles would stand in line for hours on end for the most basic of supplies, they used to pass the time telling jokes. One hoary teaser asked: 'What word has the same sound and meaning in both English and Polish?' The answer was, of course, '*mit*'.

More seriously, it is important to remember that, in modern times, the Poles have had to compete with the mythology of other stronger nations who have often given a pejorative twist to Poland's image. In the national mythology of Russia, for example, the Poles are usually cast in the role of the eternal Western enemy, the traitor to Slavdom, the religious foe of the Orthodox Church, the main resort of scheming foreigners, who constantly conspire to invade Russia and to undermine her traditional values. Russians love to remember the one occasion, in 1612, when a Polish army occupied the Moscow Kremlin. They conveniently forget the far more numerous occasions when Russian armies have trampled over Poland. It so happened that Russia's national identity was crystallizing in the mid-nineteenth century, in the very era when the two great Polish Risings of 1830–1 and 1863–4 shook the tsarist empire to its core. The opposition between noble Russian and ignoble Poland was fixed for the duration. One has only to watch one of the wonderful Russian operas of that era, such as

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Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* or Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, to see how deeply Russians are imbued with a negative stereotype of Poland. It was no accident that Dostoevsky gave Polish names to many of his criminal characters (notwithstanding that his own name was of Polish origin).

The Zionist myth, too, casts Poland in a negative role. It has gained widespread publicity due to the unparalleled tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust and to powerful American support for the state of Israel. In essence, it holds that the stateless condition of the Jewish people in pre-war Europe left them so vulnerable to persecution that the creation of a separate Jewish state in Palestine was the only viable solution. Unfortunately, since Poland was the European country where most European Jews had settled and where the German Nazis chose to perpetrate the Holocaust, an exclusively hostile image of Poland has become a central feature of the Zionist programme.

Germans have looked on their eastern neighbours much as the English once looked on the Irish. Just as Ireland proved to be the only obviously discontented part of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, so the Poles stood out as the most substantial and troublesome minority in the German empire. What is more, Poland provided the most accessible pool of cheap labour for German industries, and millions of poor migrants flocked westwards into the rapidly expanding cities. As a result, the widespread sympathy for Poland, which had been manifested in the era of the *Polenlieder* of the 1830s, faded away; and for at least a century German and Polish nationalism were irreconcilable. According to the hostile German stereotypes, 'Polack' summoned up images of hopeless romantics, feckless workers, undesirable tramps, and anti-German conspirators. *Polnische Wirtschaft* (literally 'Polish economics') became a standard German idiom for 'a right old mess'. So-called 'Polish Jokes', which type-cast all Poles as primitive and stupid, were a close parallel to the 'Irish Jokes' retailed in England. The long tradition of disdain for everything Polish provided a ready-made ingredient for the later Nazi policies of German racial supremacy, where Poles were officially included in the class of *Untermenschen* — 'sub-humans'.

There is no way that the riches of Poland's national mythology can be reduced to the space of one short chapter. They can be illustrated, however, from a number of different examples drawn from a variety of historical periods. In the exposé which follows, seven separate myths will be examined.

1587

In 1587, the memorable *Annales sive de origine et rebus gestis Polonorum et Lithuanorum* was published in Cracow by the Calvinist nobleman, Stanisław Sarnicki. This treatise on 'The Origins and Deeds of the Poles and Lithuanians' was by no means the first of its kind. Sarnicki had several prominent rivals in the historical profession of his day, including the Bishop of Warmia, Marcin Kromer (1512–89), whose famous chronicle, *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum*, had been printed more than thirty years earlier. Sarnicki is remembered for giving a new twist to an old tale.

Ever since the Jagiellonian court historian, Canon Jan Długosz, writing in the previous century, most Polish writers had held to the theory that the Polish nation could trace its roots to the ancient Sarmatians, a nomadic Indo-Iranian people who had settled the plains of Eastern Europe before the Christian Era. The classical division of the Eurasian steppes into *Sarmatia europea* and *Sarmatia asiatica* with the boundary on the River Tanais or Don was still current in Renaissance Europe. Sarnicki's contribution was to claim that the Sarmatians were ancestors not of the Poles as a whole, but only of the Polish nobility. Henceforth, it was the *szlachta* alone who claimed Sarmatian descent. Very soon, *nobilis-Polonus-Sarmata* became synonyms for members of a 'Sarmatian race'. Non-nobles, burghers, Jews and peasants were not even counted as Poles. The 'Polish nation' was seen to consist exclusively of nobles.

Such was the haughty arrogance of this noble racism that it may be compared to the notorious *limpieza de sangre*, the belief in the purity of noble blood which flourished in Spain in the same period. Polish nobles were taught to believe that they were biologically different from the rest of the population, and that their privileges depended on 'the defence of their blood'. Miscegenation with the lower estates was treated as a crime. Walerian Nekanda Trepka, author of the *Liber chamorum* or 'Book of Hams' (1620), spent much of his life rooting out thousands of families of ignoble origin who, having fraudulently wormed their way into the *szlachta*, were busily diluting the race. For him, and his like, it was impossible to think without distaste of nobles and non-nobles marrying or breeding:

> Balsam, when added to tar, ceases to be balsam but turns to tar; and weeds, when sown in the finest fields, will not become wheat [...] so, if a noblewoman marries a peasant, she will certainly give birth to an ignoble

child. For what purity can come from such impurity, what perfume from such a stench! It is a wise proverb: Nightingales are not born from owls.[1]

Poland's 'Sarmatian Myth' has many parallels in other European countries. It has much in common, for example, with the Normanist Theory in Russia, which held that the founders of 'Kievan Rus'' and their kin in the modern Russian aristocracy were the descendants not of Slavs but of Vikings. What is more, like the Normanist Theory, it evolved over time. In the seventeenth century, in the era of Poland's closest contacts with the Ottomans, it helped to bolster the Oriental style of dress and armour which the Polish nobility adopted. In the eighteenth century, it underlay the conservative philosophy of 'Sarmatism' which favoured the complacent view that everything in Poland, including the 'Golden Freedom' of the *szlachta*, was unique and superior. By that time, on the eve of the Commonwealth's demise, the racial overtones of the ancestral myth had mellowed; and large numbers of Jews, for example, were able to buy their ennoblement without difficulty.

The question remains whether Poland's 'Sarmatian Myth' contains any grain of historical fact. Most historians have treated it as a colourful fantasy, a genealogical invention as eccentric as that of Polish nobles who claimed to be descended from Noah or from Julius Caesar. The evidence is certainly thin. But that does not stop scholars from trying. One intriguing curiosity lies in the passable resemblance which exists between the emblems of Poland's unusual system of heraldry and the *tamgas* or 'pictorial charges' of the ancient Sarmatians. Given that a tribe of Sarmatian Alans was said to have disappeared into the backwoods of Eastern Europe in the fourth century, it is nice to think that there might have been some sort of ancestral link between the most efficient cavalrymen of the Roman Army and the most distinguished cavalrymen of early modern Europe. Sobieski's 'Winged Hussars' were still carrying the same enormous lances, and riding the same oversize chargers, that had made the Alans famous more than a thousand years before.[2]

1620

On 11 March 1620, the Crown Chancellor of Poland, George Ossoliński, paid a visit to London, and read a Latin peroration before King James I in Whitehall Palace. He brought news of the latest

1. From W.N. Trepka, *Liber Generationis vel Plebeanorum* (Liber Chamorum), ed. W. Dworaczek, Wrocław, 1963; 'Proemium' quoted by Norman Davies, *God's Playground*, 2 vols, Oxford, 1981, vol. 1, p. 233.
2. See Tadeusz Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians*, London, 1970, discussed by Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea*, London, 1995, pp. 230–43.

invasion of Poland's eastern borders by the Ottoman Turks, and appealed to the English King for aid against the infidel. After all, as he explained, Poland was 'the most trusty rampart of the Christian world':

Tandem erupit ottomanorum iam diu celatum pectore virus [...] et publico barbarorum furore, validissimum christiani orbis antemurale, petitur Polonia.

[At last, the poisonous and hidden plan of the Ottomans has been revealed, and Poland, the most trusty rampart of the Christian world, has been assailed by the vulgar fury of the barbarians.][3]

The myth of Poland's role as the 'Bulwark of Christendom', the *antemurale christianitatis*, had a very long career. Initially inspired by the wars against Turks and Tartars, it was later employed to justify Poland's defence of Catholic Europe against the Orthodox Muscovites, and later against Communism and Fascism. It was still very much alive in the twentieth century, in the Polish–Soviet War of 1920, for instance, or in the spiritual sense, in Solidarity's stand against the decaying Communist regime of the 1980s. Not surprisingly, it inspired the name of a very distinguished academic journal, published in Rome.[4]

The myth of the *antemurale* does indeed encapsulate many splendid sentiments, but it can hardly be taken at face value as a perfect reflection of historical reality. For one thing, the Poles were not alone in seeing themselves as the watchmen of the Catholic world. Hungarians and Croats boasted very similar views, and used the same terminology. For another, it is not realistic to think of Poland's strategic role over half a millennium exclusively in terms of static defensive emplacements. On many occasions, the Poles did man the ramparts. On other occasions, they sallied forth and stormed other people's ramparts. It may have been something of an exception to the general rule, but the sight of Polish soldiers manning the walls of the Moscow Kremlin in 1612, or marching with Napoleon into Russia exactly 200 years later, is not what the *antemurale* was meant to signify. It is a sad fact that different European nations remember different historical dates.

3. *A True Copy of the Latin Oration of the excellent Lord George Ossolinski [...] as it was pronounced to his Majestie at White-hall by the said Embassadour [...]* (London, 1621); printed in W. Chalewik (ed.), *Anglo-Polish Renaissance Texts*, Warsaw, 1968, pp. 247–62.
4. *Antemurale*, Journal of the Polish Historical Institute in Rome (1954–).

1655

In 1655, the Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania had been overrun from all sides. The Russians had taken Minsk and Wilno, and were marching on Kiev. The Swedish armies of Charles X had advanced on two fronts, from Pomerania in the West and from the Baltic provinces in the East. They captured Warsaw and Cracow. The Pauline monastery of Jasna Góra near Częstochowa was one of the very few fortified positions in the country to hold firm. Protected by its holy icon of the 'Black Madonna', the *Matka Boska Częstochowska*, it resisted all attempts to seize it. As the monks intoned their prayers to the Blessed Virgin, and the Prior stood on the battlements hurling defiance, the Swedish cannonballs bounced harmlessly off the roof, and Swedish muskets backfired into the musketeers' faces. The monastery proved impregnable. After months of futile siege, the Swedish King sounded the retreat. Poland was saved. Indeed, she recovered so quickly that, within two years, the Polish armies of Hetman Stefan Czarnecki were advancing across the Baltic into Sweden. In recognition of the country's deliverance, the Polish King, John Casimir, vowed to dedicate his whole kingdom to the Virgin Mary. At the moving ceremony held in the cathedral of Lwów, the *Sluby lwowskie*, in 1656, the Virgin Mary was solemnly crowned as the 'Queen of Poland'. Henceforth, Catholic Poles were taught not just to revere the Mother of God as their patron, but increasingly to regard Catholicity as the touchstone of their national identity. Here was a key moment in the growth of myth of the *Polak-Katolik*, 'the Catholic Pole' — the belief that if you weren't a Roman Catholic, you somehow didn't qualify to be a true Pole.

Given that anything between one third and one half of Poland's population consisted of non-Catholics — Protestants, Orthodox, Uniates, Jews and Muslims — the growing association of Polishness and Catholicity was to prove extremely divisive. The divisions became most intense in the era of nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when each of Poland's numerous minorities developed strong national and ethnic identities of their own. It was no accident that the journal of Poland's most nationalistic political movement, the *Stronnictwo narodowe* or 'National Democracy' of Roman Dmowski (1870–1939), took the name of *Polakatolik*. It would have been news to Polish nationalists of that persuasion to learn that the Teutonic Knights, and the Kingdom of France, had both adopted the patronage of the Virgin Mary long before Poland did.

Even so, for generations of Poles, the serene and sorrowful face of the *Matka Boska* has been the source of great solace. The power of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and her counterpart in Lithuania, the *Matka Boska Ostrobramska*, is celebrated in liturgy and literature alike.

Best loved, perhaps, is the invocation which occurs in the opening lines of the national epic, *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz:

> Panno święta, co Jasnej bronisz Częstochowy
> I w Ostrej świecisz Bramie! Ty, co gród zamkowy
> Nowogródzki ochraniasz z jego wiernym ludem!
> Jak mnie dziecko do zdrowia powróciłaś cudem
> (Gdy od płaczącej matki pod Twoją opiekę
> Ofiarowany, martwą podniosłem powiekę
> I zaraz mogłem pieszo do Twych świątyń progu
> Iść za wrócone życie podziękować Bogu),
> Tak nas powrócisz cudem na Ojczyny łono.

[O Holy Virgin, who guards the Bright Mount of Częstochowa / and shines in the Pointed Gate of Wilno! You, who / shield the castle wall of Novogródek and its faithful folk! / Just as you miraculously returned me to health as a child / (When, surrendered to your care by my weeping mother, / I raised a dead eyelid / And could walk straightaway to the door of your temple / To give thanks to God for a life redeemed), / So by a miracle you will return us to the bosom of our homeland.][5]

Personally, I would add the magnificent words of a later poet, Leszek Serafinowicz, who took the pen name of Jan Lechoń (1859–1956), one of the founders of the Skamander Group:

> Matka Boska Częstochowska, ubrana perłami
> Cała w złocie i brylantach modli się za nami...
> O Ty, której obraz widać w kazdej polskiej chacie,
> I w kosciele, i w sklepiku, i w pysznej komnacie,
> W ręku tego co umiera, nad kołyszką dzieci,
> I przed ktorą dniem i nocą wciąż się światło świeci.
> Która perły masz od królów, złoto od rycerzy
> W którą wierzy nawet taki który w nic nie wierzy,
> Która widzisz z nas każdego cudnymi oczami,
> Matko Boska Częstochowska, zmiłuj się nad nami.

[Oh, Holy Mother of Częstochowa, dressed in pearls, / Covered in gold and diamonds, pray for us all... / You, whose image one sees in every Polish cottage, / In every church, in every humble shop, in every proud hall, / You are there in the hand of the dying and in the baby's cradle; / Night and day, the light burns constantly before you. / You have jewels from kings, and the golden gifts of noble knights. / Yet they believe in you, even those who believe in nothing. / You watch over each of us through miraculous eyes. / Oh Mother of God of Częstochowa, have mercy on our souls.][6]

5. Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, I, ll. 5–13, translated by Norman Davies.
6. Jan Lechoń, 'Matka Boska Częstochowska' in *Poezja Polska: Antologia w układzie S. Grochowiaka i J. Maciejewskiego*, Warsaw, 1973, vol. 2, p. 188.

I take the key line here to be: 'Yet they believe in you, even those who believe in nothing.' Lechoń could see, as many did not, that Poland's supremely mystical Catholic symbol can give strength to Christians and to non-Christians alike.

1768

Umań, or Human', is a little town near the Dnieper, deep in Ukraine and close to the easternmost border of the old Polish Commonwealth. In 1768, it was the scene of a series of terrible massacres. A fearful peasant rising, the *Koliszczyzna*, had sent bands of serfs on the rampage; and in those parts, the peasants were Orthodox. In the mayhem, Catholics and Jews were butchered together in their thousands, or herded into their churches and synagogues and burned alive. A Russian army appeared to restore order by methods little different from those of the rebels.

It is in the setting of that Peasant Rising that one of the great prophetic figures of Polish (and Ukrainian) history and literature most usually makes his appearance. Little of certainty is known about the Cossack seer Mojsej Wernyhora. It is not even certain that he really existed, although one source suggests that he was born in Dymitrówka in left-bank Ukraine and that he fled to Poland after killing his brother. His prophecies first circulated by word of mouth, and were only later written down. In the nineteenth century, when the Commonwealth had already been destroyed, he became a symbol of hope and resurrection. He spoke of a 'Golden Age' before the age of disasters, when all the peoples of the former Commonwealth, especially Poles and Ukrainians, had lived in unity. And he foretold the day when honour, harmony and happiness would return. He was celebrated in many different poetic versions from Goszczyński to Wyspiański. The Romantics were specially susceptible to Wernyhora's spell, not least the sublime Słowacki:

> Czy znasz prorocką dumę Wernyhory?
> Czy wiesz, co będzie w jarze Janczarychy,
> Gdzie teraz gołab lub jelonek cichy,
> Ze łzą przeczystą w szafirowym oku,
> Gdzieś w księżycowym się przegląda stoku?
> Czy wiesz, że wszystkie te się sprawdzą śnicia
> W jednej godzinie rycerskiego życia?
> Ze zemścisz syna, ojca, matkę, brata,
> W tej błyskawicy, co na szabli lata?

[Do you know the prophetic tale of Wernyhora? / Do you know what there will be in the Canyon of Yancharykha / Where now the dove or the silent young stag, / Through crystal tear in sapphire eye, / Watches his reflection somewhere in the falling moon? / Do you know that all those dreams will all come true / In a single hour of this noble life? / That you will avenge father and son, mother and brother, / In the flash which flies from a swirl of the sabre?][7]

In the twentieth century, ideals similar to those of Wernyhora came to be associated with the Independence Movement of Józef Piłsudski, whose aspiration was to restore a modern version of the old multinational Commonwealth. In the work of historians, they were part and parcel of the so-called 'Jagiellonian Concept' — the idea that Poland's past should be shared by all the peoples who had once lived together in the *Rzeczpospolita*. They were abhorred — by Polish nationalists of the Dmowski persuasion who were looking to a 'Poland for the Poles'; by Ukrainian nationalists, who had a similar vision of 'Ukraine for the Ukrainians'; by the advocates of Russian and Soviet imperialism, who sought to divide and rule; and most bitterly by the post-war Communist regime. In a world of nationalisms and power politics, they may have been impractical; and they certainly lost out. But they were no less respectable for that. They had their moments — as during Piłsudski's ill-starred campaign in 1919–21 for a Federation of the Border Nations. In the spring of 1920, when Piłsudski and his Ukrainian allies liberated Kiev from the Bolsheviks in the name of an independent Ukraine, they seemed to be on the brink of realization. But a world misled by Bolshevik slogans shouted incongruously 'Hands Off Russia!', and the opportunity passed.[8] Yet their day may come again. After all, even today, a conscious policy of confraternity is the only barrier which stands between the sovereignty of the nations of Eastern Europe and the triumph of brute force.

1831

It is one of the ironies of Polish history that the national bard, Adam Mickiewicz, never saw Warsaw or Cracow. Born at Nowogródek in Lithuania, he spent most of his life in exile, first in Russia and later in France. In 1831, at the height of the Russo–Polish War that followed the November Rising, he was in Dresden, composing his mystical patriotic drama *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve). Whilst his peers were fighting in vain for the survival of a constitutional Polish Kingdom, he was forging the allegories and metaphors which gave sense to their struggle. Most powerful of all for a Catholic nation was the idea first launched in the scene in Father Peter's Cell, where Mickiewicz

7. Juliusz Słowacki, *Wacław*, ll. 28–36, quoted by W. Stabryła, *Wernyhora w Literaturze Polskiej* (1933), Cracow, 1996, p. 62.
8. See Norman Davies, 'The Kiev Campaign' in *idem*, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish–Soviet War, 1919-20*, London and New York, 1972, pp. 105–29.

imagined Poland's suffering to be a necessary evil for the eventual salvation of all the world. Poland, it was clearly implied, was 'the Christ of Nations'. As had first been mooted during Kościuszko's National Rising forty years before, the Poles were fighting for 'Our Freedom and Yours': 'The Saviour Nation will arise, and united, will heal the whole of Europe.'

Mickiewicz's contemporary, Kazimierz Brodziński (1791–1835) put it most succinctly:

> Hail, O Christ, Thou Lord of Men,
> Poland in Thy footsteps treading,
> Suffers humbly at Thy bidding,
> Like Thee, too, shall rise again![9]

Elsewhere, in his *Books of the Polish Nation*, Mickiewicz repeated the formula in truly biblical tones:

> But the Kings when they heard were frightened in their hearts, and said [...] 'Come let us slay this nation'. And they conspired together [...]. And they crucified the Polish Nation and laid it in its grave, and cried out 'We have slain and buried Freedom'. But they cried out foolishly [...].
>
> For the Polish Nation did not die. Its body lieth in the grave; but its spirit has descended into the abyss, that is, into the private lives of people who suffer slavery in their own country [...]. But on the Third Day the soul shall return again to the body, and the Nation shall arise, and free all the peoples of Europe from slavery.[10]

Notwithstanding its great emotive power, the myth of the *Chrystus narodów* had several major drawbacks. In the first place, it borders on blasphemy. Whatever the injustices involved, no rigorous Catholic can accept that the political fate of a people may be compared even metaphorically to the crucifixion of Christ. There was, in fact, a profound conflict between the patriotism of Catholic Poles and their loyalty to the faith. Those who were more patriotic than Catholic felt that the Church had betrayed them. Those who were more Catholic than patriotic felt that the insurrectionaries had created an impossible dilemma. Even today, many Poles choose to forget that Mickiewicz was not a conventional believer, or that the Pope in Rome actively condemned the Rising which inspired Mickiewicz's near-blasphemous metaphor.[11]

In the second place, the Christ of Nations concept reinforced the divisions already opened up by the older idea of *Polak-Katolik*. By

9. K. Brodziński, 'Na dzień zmarchwystania polskiego w 1831r', *Poezje*, Wrocław, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 239–40; translated by Norman Davies.
10. A. Mickiewicz, *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*, ed. S. Pigoń, Cracow, 1927, pp. 55ff., quoted by Davies, *God's Playground*, vol. 2, p. 9.
11. See Norman Davies, 'The Religion of Patriotism' and 'The Divided Conscience' in *idem*, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 268–78.

strengthening Poland's mystical Catholicity, it weakened the bonds of a multinational society. It was more poetic than practical.

Lastly, there is the vexed question of altruism. 'Christ died for the sins of others.' Therefore, Poland fights for the freedom of all. What a wonderful political spin! Of course, there was a sense in which Poland, by opposing the three great empires of Eastern Europe, was *ipso facto* supporting the cause of other oppressed nations. There were many individual cases of generous exiled Poles who gave their lives in the service of far-flung causes. They belonged to an ancient and honourable tradition. The Republic of Haiti has never forgotten the Polish legionaries who helped throw off the rule of France in 1802–3. There is no Hungarian who has not heard of General Józef Bem, hero of the war of 1848–9. And there was Mickiewicz himself, who went to fight for the Roman Republic (that is, against the Pope) in 1849, and who died in Constantinople in 1855, whilst trying to organize auxiliaries to fight against Russia in the Crimean War.

Yet that is not the whole story. When it came to matters closer to home, the Poles were not always so generous. In the politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was little Polish sympathy for the cause of the Czechs or the Slovaks. In Russia, the task of the tsarist authorities in the western gubernias was greatly assisted by the growing animosities between Poles and Lithuanians, Poles and Jews, Poles and Ruthenians.

1892

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the birth of Poland's modern political parties. The Polish Socialist Party (PPS) came into being, in exile in Paris, in 1892. The Polish Peasant Movement (PSL) held its first gathering at Rzeszow in Galicia in July of the same year. The National League, forerunner of Dmowski's National Democrats, emerged in Warsaw a year later. So too did the Polish Communist group, the SDKP, and its sister circle in Lithuania, the SDWKL. The Polish Christian Democracy or *Chadecja*, which was mainly based in the Prussian Partition, in Silesia, appeared a bit later, in 1902.

Of these, the two parties with the strongest mass support were undoubtedly the Peasants (known as the *ludowcy*) and the Nationalists, the *narodowcy*. The two groups appealed to very different social constituencies, but they both shared a belief in perhaps the most powerful ideological construct of early twentieth-century European politics — what political scientists sometimes call 'integral nationalism'. The central aspect of this construct, most eloquently expounded in this same period in France by the founders of *Action Française*, lay in the mystical union of the nation and the national

territory. Germans invented the slogan 'Blut und Boden' (Blood and Soil). In the Polish case, similar ideas were rooted in the notion which came to be known as the *koncepcja piastowska*, 'The Piast Concept'. One of its early propagators was Bolesław Wysłouch (1855–1937), the founding father of the PSL. The other was Jan Popławski (1854–1908), a leading ideologist of the nationalists.

Reduced to its essentials, the Piast Concept rested on a simple and persuasive historical myth. A thousand years ago and more, the Polish nation had supposedly lived on its ancestral land in unity and harmony, ruled by the benevolent hand of its first legendary ruler, a peasant son called Piast. Over the centuries, however, the Poles lost their unity, and lost control of their native land. All manner of aliens and intruders — Germans, Jews, Ukrainians and Russians — abused Poland's natural hospitality and took large parts of Poland's towns and countryside for themselves. Foreign kings were seated on the Polish throne, to the point when the throne itself was abolished. Poland was robbed of her inheritance. So the message was clear. All patriotic Poles had a duty to unite and drive all foreigners from their native soil: 'Poland for the Poles!' The Piast Concept was the natural ally of the *Polak-Katolik*. It was diametrically opposed to the multinational Jagiellonian Concept which was preferred by the PPS and by Piłsudski's Independence Movement, and which gained the upper hand in the ruling circles of the inter-war period.[12]

One should perhaps recall that modern party politicians were by no means the only ones to have used the Piast legend for their own purposes. In the days of royal elections it had been used as an argument to oppose the rule of foreign kings. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became the custom to give the name of 'Piast' to all Polish-born candidates for the throne. In the Romantic era, Piast was used as a symbol of Poland's distant pagan past, full of mystery, simplicity and bounty:

> Kmieć Piast, przed chatą, dobrego wieczora
> Używał, stary kmieć pełny dobroci;
> A wtem skrzypnęła domora zapora
> I weszli do wrót Aniołowie złoci.
> Wnet przed niemi stół, stągiew miodu spora,
> Pełno mięsiwa i mącznych łakoci,
> Pełno owoców rozsypano różnych.
> Duchów przyjęto jadłem — jak podróżnych
> [...]

[The peasant Piast stood in front of his hut, / A good natured old yokel enjoying the fine evening; / Then suddenly the balcony of his cottage creaked / And in through the gates came the golden angels. / Before them — a table, laden with flagons of mead, / And groaning with meats and baked delights, / And covered with fruits of rich variety. / The spirits were treated to the food, as if they were travellers / ...][13]

12. Davies, 'The Ethnic Core' in *ibid.*, pp. 323–7.

It is perhaps futile for historians to discuss how much of the Piast Concept was true and how much was false. The point is that millions of Poles believed it, and many still do. What is more, many of the foreign statesmen and politicians, from Woodrow Wilson to Stalin, seemed to believe it. Although no one could actually agree where Poland's 'ethnographic territory' lay, and no one could easily define who exactly was a Pole and who was not, there was a widespread assumption that ethnographic Poland had somehow to be defined and that 'the Poles' were suffering an intolerable injustice until they were given it back. It was a ready-made recipe for blood-spilling. Every attempt to define and reorganize Poland along these lines, from the Paris Peace Conference to Potsdam, ran into immediate trouble. In a region of Europe where historical complexities and ethnic minorities abounded, the problem of Poland's frontiers could never be peaceably solved by the nationalist agenda. In the end, it was solved by brute force. In 1945, with Stalin's backing, the Polish Communists callously adopted the Piast Concept of their pre-war peasant and nationalist opponents, and imposed it by methods which would now be called 'ethnic cleansing'. Official maps were drawn up to show that Poland's frontiers under the first known Piast princes, *c.* AD 1000, coincided almost exactly with the frontiers of the Polish People's Republic as approved by the Allied governments at Yalta and Potsdam.[14] All that remained was to make the population fit the frontiers. All the millions of 'non-Poles', mainly Germans and Ukrainians, who lived on the wrong side of the new lines, had to be expelled from their homes; and millions of Poles, whose homes were now in territory 'recovered' by the Soviet Union, had to be expelled to the People's Republic. (All expellees were conveniently called 'repatriants'.) It was the biggest population exchange in European history. It was the natural consequence of nationalist myths about 'blood and soil' in which so many Europeans had believed since modern mass politics began in the 1890s.

13. Juliusz Słowacki, *Król Duch* (King-Spirit), I, ll. 9–16, translated by Norman Davies.
14. See endpapers, *Polska w Roku 1000* and *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, *Słownik Historii Polski*, Warsaw, 1973.

1920

On 20 January 1920, at the little port of Puck, a ceremony took place in which hundreds of Poles waded into the near-freezing waters of the Baltic to celebrate Poland's mystical union with the sea. It was the day on which the Treaty of Versailles was put into force and a stretch of the Baltic shore was transferred from Germany to the newly independent Republic of Poland. A similar ceremony was repeated a quarter of a century later in January 1945, when, at the end of the Second World War, Poland was to receive a much longer stretch of the Baltic shore. The festivities were probably modelled on the annual *sposalizio del mar* at Venice, the festival which celebrates the wedding of St Mark's city with the Mediterranean Sea. In Polish, they are known as the *Zaślubiny Polski z morzem*, the 'maritime nuptials'.

Far be it from a Cracowian like myself to suggest that Poland's traditions lie much more with the plentiful plains and magnificent mountains of the South than with the desolate dunes of the North. For many, the notion of the Poles as a historic seafaring nation is, to say the least, eccentric. Apart from the ancient cities of Danzig and Elbing, both of which were heavily dominated by Germans, the historic Kingdom of Poland had no important coastline from the fourteenth century onwards.

Of course, in the very earliest years of Piast history, Poland had controlled the coast of Pomerania from the Oder to the Vistula. Western Pomerania, fiercely contested by Bolesław Krzywousty in the twelfth century, fell into the hands of the local dynasty after Krzywousty's death in 1138. Krzywousty's court chronicler, Gallus Anonymus, immortalized the Pomeranian connection when he recorded a popular Latin song of the day about the joys of life by the seaside:

> Pisces salsos et foetentes apportabant alii
> Palpitantes et recentes nunc apportant filii.
> Civitates invadebant patres nostri primitus
> Hii procellas non verentur neque maris sonitus.
> Agitabant patres nostri cervos, apros, capreas,
> Hii venantur monstra maris et opes aequoreas.

[Our fathers brought us reeking, salted fish. / But we, their sons, bring fish that's fresh and wriggling. / In the olden times our fathers attacked and captured cities. / But we fearlessly pit our strength against storms and thundering waves. / Our fathers dealt with deer, and bees, and goats. / Their sons hunt for the monsters and the treasures of the deep.][15]

In contrast, Eastern Pomerania, which was also known by its German name of Pommerellen, remained part of the Polish Kingdom until

15. 'De expeditione in urbem Coloberg facta', *Galla Kronika Xięga*, II, 28, in *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, Warsaw, 1968, vol. 1, p. 447.

conquered by the Teutonic Knights in 1308. From then on, until the incorporation of the League of Prussian Cities in 1454, Poland had no shoreline at all. But the memory survived. And when a reborn nation was handed back a stretch of the coast in 1920, it needed a suitable myth and pseudo-medieval ritual to justify it. The 'maritime nuptials' fitted the bill exactly.

22 July 1952

The Constitution of the Polish People's Republic was the most mythical document of contemporary Polish history, and may serve as a fitting conclusion.

As all competent commentators know, constitutions played only a marginal role in the workings of a Communist-type party-state. They were not, as in most true democracies, the supreme basis for the rule of law. On the contrary, they provided a set of regulations relating exclusively to the institutions of the state, behind and through which the institutions of the party could exercise an absolute, unaccountable, totalitarian dictatorship. In short, they listed all the official fictions which masked the reality of Communist power. It was no exaggeration to say that the only clause of a Soviet-style constitution which carried any real weight was the one giving the party 'the leading role' in the state. What this meant, in practice, was that the party comrades could manipulate, or ignore, all other aspects of the constitution with impunity. The odd thing is that the comrades who framed the Constitution of the PRL in 1952 were so complacent that they forgot to include the usual clause about the party's leading role. As a result, they were obliged, under Soviet pressure, to add the clause as an amendment to the Constitution in 1976, together with another clause about Poland's unshakeable alliance with the Soviet Union.

For whatever reason, many people in the West, including far too many political scientists, failed to understand these mechanisms. All too often, the Communist system was described as a 'one-party state', perhaps on the Latin American model, where small cliques of generals or politicians had eliminated their rivals and captured exclusive control of the government. This sort of description seriously underestimates the sophistication of the Communist dictatorship, ignoring the dual nature of the party-state and the fact that the party was itself the executive branch of government. Real power lay with the party's Secretary-General, the Politburo and the Central Committee

Secretariat, not with the 'President', the Council of Ministers, or the state bureaucracy.[16]

These elementary truths used to be all but inexplicable to Westerners unfamiliar with the conditions. If a personal reminiscence is permitted, I would recall a lengthy altercation with an American editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* who consulted me in the mid-1980s about revising the entry on Poland. I had noticed that the existing entry began with a description of the Constitution of the PRL; and I told him that this gave a very misleading impression of how the country was really ruled. But the editor was unmovable. Several hours of pleas and explanations failed to shift him from the view that all country entries in his *Encyclopaedia* started with a description of the Constitution and that there was no reason why an exception should be made for Poland.

In retrospect, one of the most astonishing features of Communism lay in its addiction to myths, fictions, taboos and fetishes of all sorts. Although it claimed to be based on a rational and scientific ideology, it fostered the most irrational and unscientific practices imaginable. It was, in fact, a pseudo-religion, where black was routinely described as white and two plus two was officially proclaimed to make either three or five, as circumstances demanded. Prior to the amendments of 1976, the Constitution of the PRL revealed absolutely nothing about the ruling order. Yet is was published in millions of copies, studied in all schools, conscientiously expounded to all foreigners who were daft enough to listen, and regularly celebrated on the country's National Day (which, of course, was *not* the National Day). For people brought up in democracies, where constitutions set out the basic rules of public conduct, it is impossible to conceive of a so-called 'constitution' whose 'laws' were essentially irrelevant to a totally lawless polity.

All myths serve a purpose. As the purposes change, the myths change with them. The critical question in Poland today, therefore, is whether any of the traditional myths can be revived or modified to match the conditions of life in the 'Third', post-Communist, Republic. After only five or six years, it is difficult to say. Some of the myths are as dead as dodos; the constitution of the PRL is as *passé* as the Sarmatians. The myths of the *Polak-Katolik* or of 'Piast Poland' seem to have little point in a mono-ethnic country whose frontiers are no longer under threat. But the myth of the *antemurale* may rise again if Poland becomes the frontier zone of NATO or Russia renews its ambitions to dominate Central Europe. And the prophecies of

16. On the workings of the party-state, see 'Spiders' Webs and Galley-slaves' and 'Two Nations' in Davies, *Heart of Europe*, pp. 29–62; also in *idem*, *Europe: A History*, Oxford, 1996, pp. 1093–6, 1321.

Wernyhora are never out of date. There may never have been a truly 'Golden Age' on Poland's eastern borders. But the need for Poles to cultivate fraternal relations with their eastern neighbours has never been greater. We shall see. One thing is certain. If the old myths do not suffice, then new ones will be invented.

NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS IN LATVIA: A VIEW FROM RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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The topic of national mythologies has, until now, been addressed only as a political, and not a religious, issue by scholars. While social scientists have researched the myths shared by ethnic communities, scholars of religion, with very few exceptions, have remained silent on this subject. This silence persists, despite the immense potential comparative studies of religion, which have already been applied to the study of religious myth, have to offer in this area.

A closer look at both perspectives uncovers surprising and somewhat confusing results: the very notion of myth — and subsequently the use of the term — is fundamentally different in both. Generally, political scientists and historians describe myths as *beliefs* held by an ethnic community in order to establish, maintain or defend its identity. The repudiation of national myths is sometimes viewed as a sign of the political maturity of the nation, and the willingness to preserve them is considered to be destructive for the nation concerned, or threatening for other nations.[1]

This chapter approaches myth mainly as the sacred story of the nation. The understanding of myth as *sacred narrative* is almost unanimously shared by scholars of religion. This notion points to the specific quality and function of myth — the verbal revelation and justification of some sacred order, which myth performs along with sacred actions and sacred places. Discussing myth, we discuss the form (in the Aristotelian sense of the word), rather than the plot, of the narrative. Nobody expects the archaeological excavation of a temple site to confirm or deny the existence of gods who were worshipped there; equally, the study of myth narrative itself does not aim to discern the 'truth' or 'falsity' of a myth. The follies of attempting to do so were evidenced by Dorothea Wender's ironic analysis of the myth of

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1. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Debunking Ethnic Myths' in *Open Society News*, (Winter) 1994, pp. 9–11.

George Washington, which 'proved' that this cultural hero of the American people had never lived as a real man.[2]

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty defines myth as 'a story that is sacred to and shared by a group who find their most important meanings in it'.[3] Of all definitions of myth this seems to be most helpful here, as it makes clear exactly what we share when we share a national myth. First, we share knowledge of the story which we have learned over time from parents and/or through formal education, and which we recognize in everyday conversation as well as in literature, political discourse and even national kitsch. For insiders who know the myth, even fragmentary references are enough to recall the entire myth and its connotations. Two lines of the Latvian national anthem, 'Where Latvia's maidens bloom, where Latvia's sons sing', will connote little to the outsider. For the 'insider', however, who partakes in the myth, the national anthem evokes the image of *Latvia Felix*, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

Insiders in a culture share a wide range of feelings — pride, dignity, pain, shame, guilt — which are embodied in myth. Myths are often a means of dealing, more generally, with socio-cultural tension. They also serve as a psychological compensator, a vehicle through which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible and acceptable to ourselves. This is achieved by telling 'our story' — the one with which we identify psychologically — as one that happened to somebody else. Narrating a story is a way of recognizing a situation without needing immediately to act on it (by changing the law, driving the oppressor away, and so on), or to be responsible for it. As Lévi-Strauss said, myth allows us to state the problem, but is not, in itself, an answer to it.[4] Finally, meanings and values are shared through myth. Using a specific set of symbols and the language of simile, myth expresses complicated abstract concepts and allows one to possess or experience what may not be accessible by other means. Thus myth conveys notions of freedom, power, democracy, death, justice, evil, and so on. That there may be a discrepancy between the representation of these entities in myth, and people's everyday experience of them in life, is a fact of which those who sustain myths are fully cognizant.

Hence, myths need not be believed to retain their value and function successfully. In fact, the *differentia specifica* of myth as a form of narrative is that the veracity of a myth is not in question. Belief or disbelief, therefore, cannot seriously affect the validity of a myth, and

2. D. Wender, 'The Myth of Washington' in *Arion*, 1976, 3, pp. 71–8.
3. W. Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes*, Chicago, 1988 (hereafter *Other People's Myths*), p. 27.
4. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, IL, 1966, p. 22.

those who share it may take different attitudes. When myths are being related, beliefs are held in a 'different directory', or, to use a phenomenological term, are 'bracketed'. Within religious experience, myths and beliefs refer to different modes or dimensions of religion. While myths are usually treated as a separate (mythological) dimension of religion, beliefs fall into the so-called intellectual mode of religion, which also includes doctrines and dogmatics. Beliefs are usually based on a proof of some kind — trust in the authority of scripture or of a religious leader, experience, rational reasoning or often simply evidence. Myths are authorized by traditions and by their specific relation to sacred time and space. Myths develop a sense of togetherness, they are the means by which human beings tie themselves to the world, feel at home there, and become the heirs of their ancestors. This explains why people who maintain myths may feel so vulnerable or even hostile to social scientists' comments on their sacred stories. Every single element in myth must be in its place and 'safe' — that is, untouched — 'for if they were taken out of their place even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed'.[5]

If 'the sacred' may seem a rather obscure and therefore loosely applied concept, this is probably due to the tradition, established by Rudolph Otto, to define it from the negative — as *das ganz Andere*, 'the complete otherness'. In practice, the closest synonym of 'sacredness' is 'power'. The sacred reveals the power distribution in the structured universe, a realm which could be best described with the help of several sets of oppositions. These are: (1) higher–lower, that is, the hierarchical opposition; (2) central–peripheral; and (3) here–there, which also differentiates 'us' and 'them'. An ethnic community needs a myth in order to find its place within the realm of holiness, sanctify its very existence and justify any claims it may have. 'The sacred' is often misunderstood as an entirely religious quality. There is much evidence in the modern world, however, of the sacred order revealed in secular entities. The nation or state may become a manifestation of the sacred and, therefore, an object of public or private devotion. One example is the icon of 'Mother Latvia', which has been concretized in the sculpture at the Brethren Cemetery in Riga and which has been evoked in countless speeches, especially during the Reawakening period of 1988–91.

Are social scientists and scholars of religion talking about the same thing, then, when they talk about national myths? If not, what is the difference between a national and any other kind of myth? Two scholars of religion have briefly commented on this question. Mircea Eliade first became interested in some aspects of what he called 'the

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

modern myth' or 'the survivals and camouflage of myth' soon after the Second World War. Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* is known mainly for its discussion of mythological time; the fact that nearly half of the book is devoted to a passionate attack on Hegel's perception of history sometimes passes unnoticed. Eliade considers Hegel's efforts to confer value on the historical event, 'the event in itself and for itself', to have bequeathed a dangerous legacy to twentieth-century history and politics:

> In his study of the German constitution, Hegel wrote that if we recognize that things are necessary as they are, that is, that they are not arbitrary and not the result of chance, we shall at the same time recognize that they *must* be as they are. A century later, the concept of historical necessity will enjoy a more and more triumphant practical application: in fact, all the cruelties, aberrations, and tragedies of history have been, and still are, justified by the necessities of the 'historical moment'.[6]

For Eliade, the sacred history revealed in myth seemed more just than what he saw as the cynical expediency of academic history. He depicted the emergence of modern national myths as an unceasing process since, in the secularized era, they would assume the functions of religious myths.

More recently, Ninian Smart has described several areas in which the national idea is incarnate, and has stated that national histories — especially as taught in high schools — are purely versions of myth.[7] From the perspective of religious phenomenology, there is no basic difference between myth and history. Both are narratives and both tell how the present order came into being.

Terminological problems, however, do not end here. Folklorists would probably argue that many of the narratives branded as national myths are in fact historical legends, not myths. Once we distinguish between them, we begin to glimpse the complexity of the terminological issue. If the setting of the story is not in the remote past, and its principal agents are human beings, the story may be classified as historical legend.[8] Tales about revolutions, wars, migration, national resistance, liberation and key figures in these events, or about the origin of national regalia and holidays, are typical examples of this genre. In fact, legends (sacred or profane) are the core of any national lore simply by virtue of their number. They far outnumber other genres and 'represent the transitional field between

6. M. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, London, 1954, pp. 147–8.
7. N. Smart, *Religion and the Western Mind*, New York, 1987, pp. 70–1.
8. W. Bascom, 'The Forms of Folklore' in A. Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1984, pp. 5–29.

everyday life and tale and myth'.[9] Usually, the national tradition houses a corpus of historical legends complemented by those incorporated into national myth and sacred history. 'National lore' is, perhaps, the most precise umbrella term to include national belief, national myth, sacred history and historical legend. Thematically, these could be the same stories: the story-tellers are not troubled by genres overlapping. The difference between myth and sacred history lies in the degree of fabulation; the difference between sacred history and legend lies in the historical scope, as well as in the relationship to the sacred. Moreover, legends are commonly less dependent on emotion as a component of the action, while sacred histories are intended to reveal a particular feeling which is commonly depicted as prevalent in the nation's historical consciousness. In the Latvian case, it is probably pain. History hurts us deeply. We carry it as a heavy load on our shoulders. Of course, such emotions are far from being exclusively Latvian. The Hungarian philosopher Mihály Vajda has written that:

> The so-called 'small nations' of Central Europe have a specific world-view, deeply rooted in their mistrust of History. History — the goddess of Hegel and Marx, the embodiment of Reason and Spirit that directs and judges our conduct — is the history of champions. But the peoples of Central Europe have never been winners. Although closely bound to the history of Europe and unable to exist apart from it, they have always remained the inverse side of this history. This experience, fed on the feeling of frustration with history, houses the singularity of the culture of these small nations.[10]

Obviously, the issue here is not just about emotions. Vajda also elucidates the idea of the 'ownership' of history. According to the Baltic German scholar of the second half of the nineteenth century, Carl Schirren, history belonged to the Baltic German élite and the Latvians had no part in it. Instead of a discussion concerning peoples in the Baltic lands, Shirren found only a debate about winners and losers: 'the locals' lost, so history has 'sentenced' Latvia to be a colony and to remain so forever.[11] In the nineteenth century, on several occasions, the Baltic German clergy and nobility initiated laws and regulations in order to ban the teaching of history at parish schools. History became a mandatory course only after 1918.

It is not surprising, then, that historical consciousness sometimes seeks escape in a so-called 'flight from history'. In inter-war Latvia, Ernests Brastiņš, leader of Dievturi, the Pre-Christian revivalism

9. L. Honko, 'Methods in Folk Narrative Research' in R. Kvideland and H.K. Sehmsdorf (eds), *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*, Bloomington, IN, 1989, pp. 23–9 (28).
10. M. Vajda, 'Filosofijà v Vengrii' in *Vengerskije meridiani*, 1991, 4, pp. 9–10.
11. C. Schirren, *Livlandische Antwort an Herrn J. Samarin*, Leipzig, 1869.

movement, was the author of the idea of 'Latvianized Latvia' as a fulfilment of the sacred mission of the Latvians. Brastiņš declared that:

> The Balts do not create history, if we mean by history changes of certain phenomena. They preserve in their pristine state long-established material and spiritual traditions and stand guard over their land. Language, customs and religion have not been changed, but have been handed down and honoured. The Balts become part of history through no action of their own. But when that happens, they manifest themselves in a truly noble and heroic manner.[12]

This idea, and the false sense of freedom it offers, still retains some emotional attraction, although its attractiveness will wane as Latvia continues on the path towards modernization.

Facing history and using it as a weapon (or shield against the evil, destructive 'history of the others') has been far more effective. As Juris Dreifelds points out, 'in the struggle of Latvia's independence, history became a major vehicle for destabilizing communist rule'.[13] One should add that historical issues have been of paramount importance in all periods of Latvian awakening. The 'Singing Revolution' of 1988–91 in many ways followed the pattern set by the Young Latvian movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, the period notable for the historical orientation of humanistic inquiry in Europe. Inspired by Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, Atis Kronvalds wrote his essay 'Tēvuzemes mīlestība' (Love for the Fatherland)[14] where he suggested that, for the purpose of developing patriotic feelings, national history is the most significant form of knowledge. Kronvalds stated that the only way for the Latvians to free their history from the clichés of the colonial mentality was to contextualize it themselves.

The Sacred Stories of Latvians

Saule Latvi sēdināja	Sun put Latvia
Tur, kur gali satiekas:	Where the ends meet:
Balta jūra, zaļa zeme –	White sea, green land,
Latvei vārtu atslēdziņa.	Latvia has the key to the gate.
Latvei vārtu atslēdziņa,	Latvia has the key to the gate,
Daugavina sargātāja.	Daugava stands on guard.
Sveši ļaudis vārtus lauza,	Foreign people broke the gate,
Jūrā krita atslēdziņa.	The key fell into the sea.

12. E. Brastiņš, *Mūsu dievestības tūkstošgadīga apkarošana*, Riga, 1936, p. 12.
13. J. Dreifelds, *Latvia in Transition*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 20.
14. A. Kronvalds, 'Tēvuzemes mīlestība' in *Rota*, 49, 1886, pp. 491–3.

Zilzibeņu Pērkons sper, Velniem nēma atslēdziņu, Nāvi, dzīvi Latve slēgs: Baltu jūru, zaļu zemi.	Blue-lightened Thunder struck, Took the key from the demons, Latvia tied together death and life: White sea and green land.
Saule Latvi sēdināja Baltas jūras maliņā, Vēji smiltis putināja, Ko lai dzēra latvju bērni?	Sun put Latvia At the edge of the white sea, The wind drifted the sand, What could Latvia's children drink?
Saule lika Dieviņam Lai tas raka Daugaviņu. Zvēri raka, Dieviņš lēja No mākoņa dzīvūdeni.	Sun asked the God To dig Daugava. The animals dug, the God poured Living water from the cloud.
Dzīves ūdens, nāves ūdens Daugavā satecēja – Es pamērcu pirksta galu, Abus jūtu dvēselē. Nāves ūdens, dzīves ūdens – Abus jūtam dvēselē.	The water of life, the water of death Poured into Daugava, I touch it with my fingers, I feel both in my soul. The water of death, the water of life I feel both in my soul.
Saule mūsu māte, Daugav' sāpju aukle, Pērkons velna spērējs, Tas mūsu tēvs.	Sun is our mother, Daugava soothes the pain, Thunder, the slayer of the Devil, He is our father.

The verses quoted above were written by the most celebrated Latvian poet, Rainis, in 1920. They were not widely known until 1989, however, when the composer Martins Brauns set them to music. The song 'Sun, Thunder, Daugava' became one of the anthems of the Latvian 'Singing Revolution' of 1988–91. The wide popularity of this song is not surprising, as it serves as an intensely poetic version of the Latvian national myth. The text is quoted in full here as it illustrates the principles of discriminating between myth and sacred history which were mentioned earlier in this chapter. The poem suggests that the divine election of Latvia — *Saule* (Sun), *Pērkons* (Thunder) and *Dievs* (God) being major deities of the pre-Christian pantheon — is also the cause of its tragedy. Suffering results from the desirability of Latvia, geographically, to 'foreign people', clearly marked as demons. It is worth remembering that Rainis wrote the poetic drama *Daugava* (including these verses) as a response to the events of the First World War and the declaration of Latvian independence in 1918. Hence, grim as it may seem, it is a poem about victory. In 1989, 'Sun, Thunder, Daugava' sounded more like a prayer, paradoxically addressed to the gods in whom nobody believed. More importantly, it consecrated the Reawakening movement by

relating the opposing forces of that time to the motifs found in Latvian folk tradition and mythology (Thundergod's combat with the Devil, and legends of the origin of Daugava and Living and Dead Water).

Latvian sacred history, by contrast, has no supernatural agents. It tells of free and happy Latvian people living on the shores of Daugava. They cultivate their land, venerate their gods and are ruled by wise and just chieftains. The Latvian culture is, then, a peasant one, and it is a commonplace to say that there is a peasant hiding in every Latvian. As the Young Latvian poet Auseklis wrote in his poem 'Old Times', 'everything glitters and shines with wonderful light there'. This 'Golden Age' persists until the Teutonic Knights come to this land, and the so-called 'Seven Hundred Years' German Yoke' is established. For Latvians, the 'German Yoke' denotes the immediate loss of political freedom, and the establishment of poverty and serfdom. As for the German invaders, the story is little concerned with them. They have remained largely 'a mass without quality', as Latvians sometimes still tend to view the aliens. In a rock-opera, for example, based on the motifs of Andrejs Pumpurs's epic *Lāčplēsis*, the invaders are personified in the image of the Black Knight, whom the author of the libretto characterizes as deaf, blind and mute.[15] Indeed, for a long time, a similar approach was adopted in Latvian medieval studies, especially during Soviet times. Germans were present in the history books only as a political force or a social stratum, with barely a single word written about their culture.

The period of the Duchy of Courland (1561–1795), especially during the rule of Duke Jacob (1642–82), is often described as a second 'Golden Age' of Latvian history. In popular consciousness this period is often referred to as the age when 'Latvia had colonies'[16] and many Latvians are surprised when they hear that Jacob was, in fact, not an ethnic Latvian. The spread of these legends is most likely due to popular comics and other pulp fiction appearing in the 1920s and 1930s, describing the adventures of Latvian colonists in Tobago and Gambia. During the 'Seven Hundred Years of Slavery' Latvians are told to preserve their culture — particularly folklore — almost unchanged, retain the hope of freedom and resist the Germans, later the Russians, whenever possible. The Republic of Latvia of 1918–40 is consequently seen as the sacred legacy of distant ancestors.

A very interesting part of the story deals with the perception of the image of the Latvian Riflemen, also called the Red Riflemen from

15. M. Zālīte, 'Librets rokoperai pec Andreja Pumpura eposa "Lāčplēsis"' in *Avots*, 1988, 9, pp. 16–25 (25).
16. Duke Jacob bought the Island of Tobago and the tiny island of St Andrew's in the Gambia river.

1917, who were Latvian regiments in the Russian, and later the Red, Army. If Latvians ever had a legend or history of military valour, then this is the tale. The sacred aura attached to it is noticeable mainly in the language used, otherwise it would be deemed a profane historical legend. The Riflemen have an heroic epic of their own: Aleksandrs Čaks's lengthy poem *Mūžības skartie* (Touched by Eternity, 1937–9). The film director Juris Podnieks also made a documentary about the Riflemen, entitled *Strēlnieku zvaigznājs* (The Constellation of Riflemen, 1982). Interestingly enough, the changing political regime in Latvia has had little influence on the image of the Riflemen in popular historical consciousness. They are romantic heroes not through their actions, but because they were brave, even adventurous, and showed the Russians what real soldiers are like. If the Latvian Soviet historians saw the chief achievement of the Riflemen in the fulfilment of their international duties and ascribed their radicalization in 1917 to a highly developed class consciousness, Latvian historians in exile portrayed the Riflemen as nationalists fighting for the independence of Latvia as promised to them by Lenin in exchange for their services. Trusting Bolshevik promises, and ignoring the character of the regime they chose to support, was admitted as their chief mistake, or as a compromise — a sacrifice for the sake of Latvian independence. Ethical questions, namely those about the sometimes violent actions of the Latvian Red Riflemen, have been raised only recently, and almost entirely from the religious perspective. In 1988, Leons Taivans — then a historian at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, now professor of theology at the University of Latvia — proposed the idea that the sufferings of the Latvian nation after 1940 could be understood as penance for the sins committed by the Riflemen in Russia and also for their role in the battle on Christmas Eve (23 December) 1916.[17] Only in clerical circles has this interpretation been widely accepted. Nowadays, however, more and more Latvians are concerned with the question of whether the Riflemen are a source of pride or shame for the Latvian nation. And shared shame is as strong a vehicle for unity and identity as any of the other feelings commonly married to national lore.

Formalization of Latvian National Lore: Past and Future

It is commonly agreed that the Young Latvians were the founding fathers of Latvian national mythology and sacred history. However, neither their approach nor the motifs they used were original. The tradition of writing the history of Livonia as *Volks-* and not

17. L. Taivans, 'Dievs Kungs ir mūsu stipra pils' in *Svētdienas Rīts*, 1988, 1.

Landesgeschichte was established by Baltic German historiography, which left the Latvians and Estonians almost out of consideration.[18] Hence, Atis Kronvalds argued for a different interpretation from the Latvian rather than the Baltic German viewpoint, but not for a different approach. From that time onwards, Latvian historians have focused on Latvian participation in, and experience of, events taking place in this territory. Depending on the dominant ideology of the period concerned, Latvians have been considered both happy and unhappy at various stages of their history.

The exercise of tracing how and when various segments of Latvian national myth and sacred history came into circulation seems to illustrate O'Flaherty's words that we 'find our myths rather than construct them'.[19] Her statement provides an answer to the frequently posed question: can myths be made *ex nihilo*? Together with O'Flaherty we would strongly argue in the negative — in the case of both myths and sacred national histories. However, one more reason to distinguish between these two genres of national lore is that they are formalized according to different patterns. Thus, national myths creatively address the symbol system of religious mythology and 'recycle it'. National mythology is a 'born-again' religious mythology; it does not incorporate alien symbols before they are accepted as a part of religious consciousness. What Latvian national mythology lacks is probably even more symptomatic than what it houses. It does not propose any claim to the supernatural origins of the Latvians. Some individuals might like to say that the Latvians are 'people of the Sun', but then they refer to the sun as a guardian (the sun is the mistress of the celestial household in Latvian pre-Christian mythology), not as a creator.

The above could be explained by the fact that motifs of the creation of the Cosmos in Latvian religious mythology are not well developed, so this useful pattern is missing. Similarly, there has never been a single Latvian saint. Sainthood for Latvians has no national connotation. Thus the idea of martyrdom, suffering for others — central in Polish or Russian culture — is alien to the Latvians' history of ideas.

In contrast,[20] various segments of Latvian sacred history have almost nothing to do with Latvian religious history. As one of the tasks of sacred history is to provide the nation with a dignified past,

18. W. Lenz, 'Alt-Livland in der Geschichtssreibung 1870–1910' in G. von Rauch (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschbalischen Geschichtssreibung*, Cologne and Vienna, 1986, p. 225.
19. O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths*, p. 164.
20. Still, we must be aware that myths and sacred histories, originating in different circumstances, may be incorporated in the same extended narrative, as the biblical story of Exodus shows.

its history has to be shown according to equally dignified patterns borrowed from noble cultures. The idea of the Latvian 'Golden Age' belongs to the German *philosophé* Garlieb Merkel (1769–1850). The portrayal of the Latvians and their lifestyle was far from flattering in his works, although being a keen advocate of the abolition of serfdom in the Baltic provinces of Russia, Merkel described all the negative traits of the Latvian character as resulting from centuries of serfdom. In his *Die Vorzeit Livlands*[21] and *Die Letten*[22] (especially its first chapter) Merkel argued that, before the Germans appeared in the thirteenth century, the Latvians enjoyed a culture of the highest level, and that their real history is to be found in their folk-songs.

The proposition of a Latvian peasant identity goes back to the works of the so-called Livonian humanists, a group of authors living in sixteenth-century Riga and writing in Latin. They accepted the ideal of *nobilias literata*, that is, nobility achieved through classical education. They suggested that serfdom was natural for peasants as, in the light of the above ideal, they were only *plebs rustica*.[23]

The understanding of peasant (that is, folk) culture as a noble one came with the Enlightenment. But for Herder and his followers, including Garlieb Merkel, the peasants were still 'them', so there is no trace of identification with them. For the Young Latvians, peasants were 'us', and, consequently, this new segment was added to the story. The idea that serfdom (or slavery, as no particular difference was found between them) was introduced immediately in the thirteenth century also belongs to the Livonian humanists. Although educated society in the late sixteenth century knew that serfdom came to Livonia considerably later, humanists used this false statement to support the codification of serfdom. Ironically, the story of the 'Seven Hundred Years of Slavery' acquired a life of its own. It was incorporated in the speeches of the Young Latvians and still provides a basis for the common understanding of Latvian medieval and modern history.

Let us say something about the future now. Myths and sacred histories are cumulative entities and reflect certain trends in the political life of a society. Two of the current issues in Latvia that will most likely require not only political and/or economic steps, but also appropriate ideology, are the desired membership of the EU and the incorporation into the country of a vast number of people that do not identify ethnically with Latvia. The non-Latvian economic élite, in particular, may demand more extended political participation, as well

21. G. Merkel, *Die Vorzeit Livlands: Ein Denkmal des Praffen- und Rittergeistes*, 2 vols, Berlin, 1798–9.
22. *Idem*, *Die Letten, vozglich in Liefland, am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig, 1797.
23. R. Malvess, *Latviešu zemnieks humānistu darbos*, Riga, 1939.

as a share of the ideology pie. At the same time, the ethnic Latvian population, particularly while frustration with the present economic and political situation prevails, is not prepared to give up its notion of history as unjust. Some consensus could be gained by reviving the legend of Riga as a great multicultural centre, the formerly rich and proud Hanseatic *Freistadt*, the place where Kant's principal works were first published and where famous European figures like Herder and Richard Wagner have left their trace. The forthcoming millenary of Riga in 2001 will certainly drive the historical memory in that direction. This does not necessary imply a large-scale reading of Kant or listening to Wagner, but many of Riga's non-Latvian inhabitants (almost half of the population of Latvia live in the capital) may find the idea of living in 'the little Paris' (as Riga is sometimes called) attractive. The feelings of Latvians are rather ambiguous. It is often heard that Riga is not a Latvian city, as only one third of the inhabitants are ethnic Latvians. The Latvian culture still carries the Young Latvians' mistrust in the city: none of the principal figures of the movement was born in Riga or spent long periods of time there. In the epic *Lāčplēsis*, Andrejs Pumpurs described Rigā as the matrix of all evils, a dark shelter of the occupants. And yet, Riga is the place where everything happens: the National Song festivals, the declaration and re-establishment of the independence of the Latvian Republic, as well as many other crucially important events in recent history. More than any other, Riga is *the city* of the Singing Revolution.

The function of the sacred history of Latvia is not exhausted by the recovery of the ethnic and cultural identity of Latvians. Neither should it nurture only those tendencies in the Latvian history of ideas that resist modernization and favour Euro-scepticism. Equally, it may support the notion of the Europeanness of Latvia, and Riga seems to be the most potent image for the celebration of it for all of the peoples living in Latvia.