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## **WRITING NATIONAL HISTORY FOR SMALL NATIONS**

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The successful European Science Foundation (ESF) project *Representations of the past. The writing of national histories in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe*, mastered by Stefan Berger, enriched our knowledge about the different ways towards the construction of national history. It also stimulated our reflections on history's role as an integrating factor during the process of nation formation. In this contribution, I try to find out to what extent the search for a national history for *small nations* differed from state nations. I define *small nations* as those where nation formation was not self-evident and proceeded as part of a national movement which began within ethnic communities.

### **Elements of nation building**

To describe the process, I use the structural model for writing history as part of the nation-building process.

The first element is the level of knowledge regarding historical data from the national past. Usually those data were not as abundantly available nor as clear-cut as with state nations. The validity of the first constructions of national history depended on the amount of historical research still to be done and on knowledge of the sources. If sufficient critical research had been carried out, the new emerging constructed national history could resist later waves of revisionism and criticisms and become a point of departure for at least a widely shared consensus about national history, its



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values, successes, defeats and so on. Extensive historical research, however, required corresponding source materials and eventually also institutional circumstances. Consequently, where the first national historical narratives could in some cases not be based on earlier scientific research, they did not survive as part of a scientific discourse, but degenerated sooner or later into national mythology.

Secondly, there is the stage of nation formation at the time when national history was written. In case of national movements, national histories originated in a period when a successful nation formation was not assured in advance, and consequently, we have to distinguish if national history was written during what I have labelled Phase B or Phase C of national movements. In the former case it has to be understood that the national past was used as source of arguments for national agitation; in the latter case national history was constructed in order to strengthen both national consciousness and the coherence of the already existing national community. Consequently, historians of small nations developed a different understanding of national interests than those related to state nations.

A third element is the concept of nation in general. This could neither be understood as nor defined through statehood, as it was the case with state nations. Consequently, its definition was linked with the generally accepted criteria of belonging to an ethnic community, to be conceived as *nation-to-be*. Those criteria concerned the cultural, religious and linguistic ties among members of the ethnic community. However, in some cases there existed relicts of medieval statehood that could be interpreted and adopted (by Hungarians, Czechs, Norwegians, Catalans, the Flemish, and so on) as an earlier existing, but weakened stage of the nation state.

The fourth element is the continuous historiographical tradition from Early Modern or medieval times, a self-evident point of departure for constructing the history of state nations: medieval chronists and above all Early Modern historical writing offered the first collection of basic data regarding the national past. This advantage was of course not self-evident in the case of burgeoning national movements and we therefore can only identify a continuous historiographical tradition with some of them. When

that was the case, its tradition influenced the selection of historical data, the definition of national territory and of common terms like 'nation', as well as the inclusion of some basic stereotypes about 'the other'. In other cases newborn national history had to be defined in both its territorial and chronological dimensions, initiating the selection of nationally relevant data from the past. At first, information about the national past could originally be picked from the national historiography of neighbouring state nations or empires. Naturally, as such a basis proved insufficient, it had to be widened by finding and analysing historical sources.

A fifth element consists of the consensual understanding of what is *our* nation. Answering to the generally accepted perennialist concept of the nation, also in the case of national movements, historians regarded it as self-evident that their national community existed as such ever since the Middle Ages. In many cases however, there was no political unit (state), which could be adopted as the national one. In such national histories, the *people's* past was adopted as equal to the national.

Finally, state-national history was located within the present borders of the state, without regard to its earlier structure and ethnicity. In the case of national movements, the question what constitutes the national territory had to be answered. Since ethnic communities and national movements operated at the territory of multiethnic empires, their national narratives usually overlapped the history of ruling nations and were regarded as part of the history of state nations: Czech history as a part of German (or Austrian) history, Slovak as a part of Hungarian, Finnish as a part of Swedish, and so on. Two kinds of national demarcation were to be defined and introduced: not only toward the state nation, but also toward neighbouring ethnic communities or national movements.

## **Characteristics**

As mentioned before, not only the writing of national histories differed among state-nations and small nations; also their public reception varied, according to the stage of nation formation. It was different at the time of

Phase B, different when the stage of mass movement was reached and different again after having achieved a full social structure and eventually also when the status of nation state was acquired. The differences were determined not only by the national programme and the degree of national identification, but also by the development of knowledge about historical data and changes of historical methodology. The successful process of national mobilisation was accompanied by political differentiation and consequently, the – originally universal – concept of national history diversified. In this aspect, *small-national* history differed from the state-national counterpart, which was heterogeneous since its beginning according to the political diversification (for example the Tory vs. Whig concept of English history, the revolutionary vs. the antirevolutionary concept in France).

National history written when in Phase C (or in a newly independent nation state), included a new constituent part: the history of Phases A and B, which were highly appreciated at two levels. On one side, the national movement was regarded as the apex of the previous development. It was its success that made the sense or *raison d'être* of national history. On the other side, it was the starting point for the new concept of *our* history, understood as the history of a fully fledged nation. Naturally, we do not meet such a starting point in the classic state-national histories. In their case we can maybe identify the role of political revolutions as analogous to national revivals. Representing the national movement as a decisive part of the national history of a still progressing national movement also fulfilled the educational part within national mobilisation.

Some specific features in writing this type of national histories correspond to certain stereotypes that could be observed and interpreted in the mental makeup of small nations, as soon as their national movements achieved decisive successes. Among the most frequent figures an image observed from below: since national movements always represented some kind of opposition against the old legitimacy and the principles of and dependence on the old system of multiethnic empires, their image of the past was more or less a perspective of those not in power. In some cases, this perspective was not outspoken – above all in cases where national history could not be based on adequate state organisation in the past. For

example, the first master narrative of Finnish history, written by Zachris Topelius, was called *history of this country* and concerned above all the people's history.

The existence as a fully formed nation was commonplace to the members of old state nations, but not self-evident in the case of small nations: it was something that had to be re-established and reinforced, step by step. This also included the feeling of being threatened and the desire to prove that



*Maria Wiik's portrait of Zachris Topelius (1818-1898)*  
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*our* nation – or its historical achievements – contributes to humanity. Consequently, national history had to find arguments proving the specificity of the nation, at the same time tracing national existence as far as possible into the distant past and stressing its continuity. The attitude towards one's own history was very defensive in the dual sense of the word: defending the right to exist as a nation as well as emphasising the defensive position of the nation-to-be against the threat against its very existence (or interests) in the past. In some nations, like the Czech, the feeling of national existence being not self-evident, opened the door for discussions on the *sense* of national history. These discussions – even though they took place when there already was a fully fledged nation – implied also some doubts among the participants about the *raison d'être* of their own national existence.

Histories of small nations shared until the twentieth century the generally accepted perennialist axiom that nations have existed since early historical times. National history was to their members, as in the case of state nations, a kind of collective autobiography. Successes – so far they could be identified as national ones and be included into national history – became a matter of pride. On the other hand, failures initiated feelings of sorrow for being defeated or oppressed ever since. The selection of historical data showed a predilection for events that could strengthen national coherence. Those events could include both successes and failures and were included step by step into new master narratives. Moreover, national history excluded or marginalised episodes that did not contribute to national integration or even could become a disintegrating factor. Maybe this one-dimensional concept of national history was in the case of small nations stronger than with state nations, hence the impression of a teleological streak to their national narratives.

In most cases (except for the Hungarians, Irish and Norwegians) national movements defined their object (nation-to-be) by ethnic criteria, that is by language and culture. The strong ethnic paradigm then dominated its makeup also after having achieved Phase C and even statehood. In many cases it did not cause serious complications (for example with the Estonians, Latvians, Slovenes, Flemish, Catalans): national history was the history of an ethnic community. In some other cases, however, the ethnic

paradigm was combined with nostalgia for the re-establishment of an ancient, lost statehood. That was the case for Czechs, Croatians, Greeks, Serbs, Lithuanians and later on even for the Bosnians (Muslims), Ukrainians and Slovaks. National history was at the same time understood as the history of a former political unit, sometimes surviving in relicts, sometimes only in collective memory. These political units included into their borders not only members of their own nation-to-be, but also of other ethnic communities. The latter usually remained absent or were marginalised, especially in the master narratives of national history.

Territorial claims based on the construction of national history emerged in cases where the ethnic border did not correspond with the political boundary. Instances of historical rights being used as arguments include the dispute about Vilnius (LIT)/Wilna (POL) between Lithuanians and Poles and later also Belarusians, about L'viv (UKR)/Lwów (POL) between Poles and Ukrainians, between Greeks and Turks about Istanbul (TUR)/Constantinopel (GRE), and so on. Other tensions came about because of the overlapping of neighbouring territories, perceived as being national.

As a result of the above-mentioned fear for stronger neighbours, the ethnic paradigm equally influenced the definition of 'national enemy'. This enemy was, by definition, deemed stronger and national history could be interpreted as a permanent struggle against him. Consequently, strong stereotypes very often survived until present times.

## **Authors and readers**

When trying to identify both the authors of national histories and their readers, we find another set of characteristics. Here, we enter a rather neglected research field and our observations contain more questions and inspiration for research projects than conclusions.



*Antoni Popiel's monument (1904) for Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) in Lviv | ADVN, ANTWERP*

Concerning the authors, we find that the difference between Phase B and C of national movements is remarkable. During Phase B, only some national movements had their skilled historians or even professionals, above all where already during Phase A a strong historical interest had occurred. This, logically, determined the quality of the product: national history written by professionals survived during Phase C and influenced more or



less historical thinking after the status of nation state had been achieved. Other national movements, however, missed the opportunity to have their own educated professionals, until they achieved independence and founded their own national universities (for example the Lithuanians, Latvians, Serbs and Bulgarians).

Important was also the position of the author in relation to the national movement. Was he at the same time one of the activists and political leaders of the national movement, like Czech František Palacký, Norwegian Johan Ernst Welhaven Sars or Polish Joachim Lelewel? Or was he above all an academic writer? Generally, authors of national histories during Phase C were above all academic scholars, which however did not exclude their occasional political engagement.

Within multiethnic empires or states, the construction of national history depended on the nationality of the author: did he belong to the elite of the ruling nation or to a non-dominant ethnic community? In the first case, the ethnic community could eventually be included into the history of the empire or state nation (Catalonia into Spanish history, Slovak into Hungarian, Ukrainian into Russian); in the latter case, the history of the ethnic community was regarded as autonomous.

Comparing the public of state-national histories and the target group of small-national equivalents, we find some very distinct differences, basically due to diverging social structures. State-national history took up the tradition of state histories, were very popular already before modern nations were formed: the author could expect that also the newborn national history would be widely read by the academic elite. He could write at a high academic level and had to take into account that there were critical experts among his readers. On the other hand, the author of a small-national history, so far as his ethnic community belonged to those with only newly emerging academic elites, had a much more difficult task: he could not presuppose previous historical schooling of his public. At the same time, his work not only had to live up to scientific standards, he also had to assume the task of popularising historical knowledge in general. His readers were less critical, less resistant to myths and to simplified generalisations. Obviously, the uncritical, less educated reading public

could also be found among the members of state nations, but these, unlike small nations, were not bereft of a critical academic public.

Nevertheless, it is known some transitional cases existed between the state nation with a full social structure and the ethnic community totally devoid of academic elites. To such transitional cases I reckon those ethnic communities whose members could at least in small numbers achieve higher education and participate in the learned activities of Phase A. There existed also remarkable strata of educated readers already on the threshold of Phase B. This was more or less the case in almost all national movements within the Habsburg Empire. These national movements represented a subtype of nation formation, at least if we take into account the educational level of the population. This circumstance also influenced the makeup of both the authors and the readers of national histories. It might well explain why history played an extraordinary strong part in these national movements as an instrument of national identification.

## **Conclusion**

It is necessary to stress that differentiating between two types of national history writing – the state-national and the small-national one – does not deny the existence of common features: the basic, decisive coordinates of constructing national histories were in both situations similar, if not identical. So, let us summarise the most important among them. First of all there is the perennialist interest in prolonging the national existence as far to the past as possible. Second comes an understanding of the national past as an argument in contemporary political discourse, in favour of contemporary national interests. On the third place is the personalisation of national history using different episodes in order to evoke national pride or national sorrow. A fourth characteristic is the approach of national history as a narrative about the struggle or competition with the historical enemy. And last but not least, national history had to be one of the most important – if not the most important – factors of national integration and of strengthening national identity: it was its common destiny, often deemed decisive.