National Identity Between History and Mythology

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Introduction

Stating the problem in the headline, we proceed from understanding mythology as a system which expresses fundamental cognitive structures, worldview laws, systems of perception and comprehension in images and stories.

By history we mean a system of historical knowledge and conditioned by it historical consciousness based on the analysis of causes, effects, functions, and responsibilities. In this article we consider the problem of the formation of national personal identity under the influence of historical and mythological informational fields. A social thought in societies of the Age of changes, especially, in societies of post-totalitarian states, is always directed to radical rethinking of history associated with the efforts aimed at profound changes in educational programs. Here, teaching history in itself is a historical phenomenon as it reflects historical conditions of the society trying to get out of the past into the image of the future. The problem of teaching history in societies of global transformations will be the source for future historians. In its dynamic present, the given problem refers to the sphere of cultural-anthropological interpretations.

The main difference of human sciences from all the others is their principal incapability to separate the object of study from the subject. By virtue of its historical and political significance, history, as no other science, depends on interpretations and suffers from intentional distortions because the political aspect involves history into nation-building, whereas ideological one subordinates the system of identities to the
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political conjuncture.

That is why one of the main and, at that, difficult tasks for a historian is being impartial. The goal of anthropologists is to uncover the logic and patterns of political and ideological history distortions.

MYTH, HISTORY AND POST-EMPIRE SYNDROM

The 20th century passed under the sign of the Empire’s end. The late 20th – the early 21st centuries is a period of the collapse of the USSR, the last Empire. The early 90s of the 20th century were marked by the emergence of the newly independent states upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They all had been bound by the shared recent past that everyone tried to erase from own history or reconsider in favor of prehistory. It is less explained by rational-historical motives to clean the history from ideology than by irrational-psycho logical causes: a) attempts to self-realization of national identity in new political environments; b) psychological compensation of national elites; c) vast intersocial postcolonial syndrome.

Ethnic self-consciousness – mythopoetic in its sense – rejects any information which presents the people being not enough heroic. The reason of such an aggressive perception of the historical facts is a quality of mythopoetic consciousness, where: 1) the world and an individual exist in organic integrity, meaning that a Russian man is unable to separate his private life and the State’s history; 2) there is rejection of contradictions. In mythological consciousness no problems do exist, only miracles. The miracles fulfill an important cognitive and psychiatric function – they resolve mental contradictions and conflicts and provide the integrity of the worldview.

The problem of teaching history in all post-empires and ex-colonies, which are too sensitive to history, is a “mythological sluice” of identity that passes only comfortable information. The higher is the degree of history mythologization, the stricter are the governmental sanctions against “attempts of the distortion”. And vice versa – the higher is the degree of the administrative-criminal regulation of the issues in the sphere of ethics and analytics competence, the faster from these ethico-analytical problems of the historical knowledge their content is removed, being replaced by statutory and regulatory substitutes.

We consider only some examples of the political myth-making in school-books of
post-Soviet countries.

Ukraine

According to *History of Ukraine* by R. Lyah and N. Temirova, which was republished 4 times in 1999-2005 (a secondary school textbook, approved and recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine) the Ukrainian people appeared more than 140,000 years ago (*Lyah, Temirova, 2005: 6*).

The study guide *Ukrainian for Beginners* by E. Gnatkevich states that “the Ukrainian language is one of the most ancient languages in the world … and there is every reason to believe that in the beginning of our chronology it was an intertribal language” (*Gnatkevich, 1992*), in which Ovid wrote his poems (*Gnatkevich, 1993*).

S. Plachinda in his *Dictionary of Old Ukrainian Mythology* informs that the Aryans is “the ancient name of the Ukrainians”, who spread “their knowledge about farming and folk-craft to China, India, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Western Europe, Scandinavia”, and as for Hun chief Attila he was “an ordinary Ukrainian boy” (*Plachinda, 1993*).

Latvia

The Latvian President: “Teaching history in Latvian schools as well as curricula and teaching materials must serve national and state interests of the Republic. On this today, on October 22, 2004, during the opening of the conference *History of Latvia – an Episode or National Roots?*, President of Latvia Vaira Višķe-Freiberga announced literally the following: “History provides the background for the formation of national identity as well as, to a great degree, patriotism and emotional connection with own State and people. That is why understanding history is of fundamental public importance. <…> There must be such a point of view in history which meets national and state interests. In Latvia, we should learn the history of Latvia from the standpoint of Latvia and from Latvian historians’ perspective.” (*Višķe-Freiberga, 2013*).

Here is one of such points of view. One of the major textbooks *History of Latvia: 20th Century* represents Salaspils concentration camp as a “correctional labor” one, no word being said that 100,000 people died there of whom 12,000 were children. As for Latvian SS-squadrons the author informs only that they “differed by their endurance,
skills in conduct of a battle” and other merits (History of Latvia, 2005).

Estonia

So, in the textbook History of Estonia, it is told about one hundred of the Estonians, appended to “the army of Kiev Prince Oleg”, who played the leading role by attack of Constantinople in 907 (Laar, Vahtre, 1997).

Azerbaijan

“By the discovery of America, the achievements of Azerbaijan science were used. First, 200 years before Columbus discovered America, brilliant Azerbaijan scientist Nasreddin Tusi had pointed at the existence of the continent based on his mathematical calculations. Second, Columbus’ teacher Toskanelli was familiar with Nasreddin’s writings and learnt a lot from him. It is beyond any doubt that the knowledge Toskanelli received from Tusi, he passed to his student Columbus. Thus, an important role in the discovery of America belonged to Azerbaijan science.”

Belorus

At the conference of teachers and educators of CIS countries in Astana (April 26, 2010), Deputy Minister of Education of Belarus Kasimir Farino came forward with the idea of making a single textbook on history for all CIS countries, and Minister of Education of the Russian Federation A. Fursenko supported the idea with great enthusiasm. History is a phantom pain of ex-Empire (Prudnikova, 2010).

Transformation of the system of teaching history in schools of the post-Soviet space in newly independent States, the CIS and the Baltic countries, as well as experience is an important material on studying the processes of history rethinking, whereas a practice of history mythologization is also a part of the history (Bagdasaryan and others, 2009: 180).

Russia

From all the countries of the post-Soviet space the most contradictory, eclectic and even absurd differs the view of national history in Russian society. If as the new post-Soviet ideology of all the states, separated from USSR, there formed an attitude to
farewell with the Soviet past and construction of the national future, then how to think about the past remains a big question and a big problem of the public consciousness in Russia. All 25 years of the post-Soviet historical period Russia has spent in historico-ideological fever, one day deposing the idols of the past, another – returning them again on pedestal. Every minute of his life a man of post-Soviet Russia stays in extremely stressful informational-symbolic field, and this is not ordinary information or symbols. These are semiotic systems carrying powerful energetic, worldview, conceptual impulses of all historical eras, and controversial values that have not received any ethical judgement.

Every day in the consciousness of every person from post-Soviet Russia, bits of important cultural information or so-called memes collide, originating from different historic eras, whereas, these eras being ethic and culture-anthropological codes. If consciousness of a Soviet man stayed in historical tranquility – the world according to the Soviet ideology seemed to be simple and clear, then post-Soviet world looks like a post-modern mixture of everything at once. Red Square is simultaneously embowered by the Soviet stars and two-headed eagles of the Russian Empire; in the mausoleum sleeps Lenin’s mummy attended by communist pilgrims, what does not prevent them from praying in churches; the rapid growth of believers' number has no influence on the quality of faith, and faithful Christians see no contradictions between going to church and to sorcerers who “cast/remove a hex”. Just as the representatives of a modern social thought – different “experts” and “analysts”, specialists on “spiritual resurrection” – revive spirituality both from Orthodoxy and Communism, autocracy and anarchism, nationality and totalitarianism. In this mental kaleidoscope on one honorable orbit rotate the figures of tsar’s family members and their killers, the repressed and their executors, Stalin being a bloody monster and “an effective manager”.

All Russian history, in the form and scope received in secondary school without further education, may be comprised in the following bag of words:
overturn”, “Shooting of the Romanov family”, “the Civil war”, “Lenin the Great”,
“Repressions”, “the Great Patriotic War”, “Victory”, “Stalin the Great”, “Atom bomb”,
“Rootless cosmopolites”, “the Cult of personality”, “Khrushchev and corn”, “Cosmos-
sputnik-Gagarin”, “Brezhnev, stagnation, the Cold War”, “Afghanistan”, “Perestroika-
glasnost-Gorbachev”, “GKChP” (Russian abbreviation for The State Committee on the
State of Emergency – Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Chrezvechainomu Polozheniyu)
“the Russian White house”, “Yeltsin”, “Oligarchs”, “Putin”, “Gazprom”, “the Raucous
1990s”, “the Crimea is ours”.

All the abovementioned words and phrases – this is the History from the point of
view of the consumers of average historical education, who have learnt history in
memes.

In this approach, the history is presented as a range of the highest peaks, rising
above the cloud-capped valleys and lower mountains. An observer, looking from the
height of the viewpoint, may learn these peaks by heart, but he cannot see how they
correlate with each other. Correspondingly, this view of history causes fake-memes –
false judgments, such as “Catherine sold Alaska”, “Hitler killed Lenin”, “Pushkin died
in 1837, was repressed”, which become a part of modern folklore. In the mosaic vision
of history, the historical facts make a picture in consciousness on the principal of a
kaleidoscope – the criterion of truth is esthetics; if the facts pieced together a picture,
then this picture is considered the truth.

The problem of historical education in Russia is a problem of the substitution of the
historical knowledge entirety, coming from understanding the complexity of historical
processes as a mosaic in a kaleidoscope of memes, in which have turned the historical
facts in the result of political speculations. In accordance to that, any socio-political
group has an opportunity to make from the elements of the parted History any dish
it likes to feed schoolchildren.

Consequently, a post-Soviet man stays in the constant field of semiotic diffusion and
a conceptual ethic conflict. It should be emphasized: the ethic and worldview conflict,
developing among different personalities and in the consciousness of a single
individual, is the result of post-Soviet historical consciousness, its conceptual
eclecticity and value schizophrenia. Conclusion: history is a conflictogenic factor of the
society of the Age of changes.
As an example of a history book, reflecting the trend of time and being, this way, a historical source, may serve the textbooks by A. A. Danilov and A. V. Filippov: *History of Russia 1900 -1945* (Filippov, Danilov, 2009) and *Contemporary History of Russia. 1945-2006* (Filippov, 2007). Their conception, as the authors said, is aimed to concentrate “the main attention of learners on the explanation of motives and logics of the authorities’ actions”, which consist in justification of mass-terror led by Josef Stalin. In the methodological guideline to the textbook the authors advise teachers that “it is important to show that Stalin acted in a particular historic situation (as a governmental official) quite rationally — as a protectionist of the system, a consistent supporter of the country’s transformation into an industrial society, run from a single center, as a leader of the country menaced by war in the nearest future”. (Filippov, Danilov, 2009a: 131).

The authors claim that the “Soviet Union was not a democracy, but it was the guide and example of a better, fair society for many millions of people around the world. During 70 years, the domestic policy of the Western countries was corrected in favor of human rights under the influence of the USSR, a giant superpower, which had performed a social revolution and won in the most cruel war” (Filippov, 2007: 6).

The book had it own apologists from among professional historians. Thus, L. L. Baturina and I. Y. Falezhinskaya, whose attitude to the book was, in general, positive, confirmed that “However, despite the liberals’ assaults, who speak about excessive statism of the textbook, it comprises a range of impartial assessments on the matters of the modern policy of the Russian government. In particular, it can be observed in chapter 6, *Sovereign Democracy* (Contemporary History of Russia. 1945-2006 by Filippov A.V. — M.: Prosvetchenye, 2007, p. 420-482), where there are given assessment of Putin’s activities”. In other words, the criterion of objectiveness serves a positive evaluation of Putin’s historical role (Baturina, Falezhinskaya, 2010)

That is how the process of teaching history in the modern Russian schools is seen by experts, who are parents themselves.

Elena Miskova, Ph. D., associate professor of the faculty of History at Moscow State University, mother of two schoolchildren:
“In post-Soviet schools no fundamental changes have occurred. There are still some
differences, but they concern formal rather than content-related aspects of teaching. The method of presenting educational materials and pupil’s reply was reduced to so-called presentation. Hence, the main defect of the program has remained: history is only formally taught in chronological order, but in fact, it is divided into domains, where Russia is a separate country and no one schoolchild can relate and reply what happened at the same time in Russia and some other European country. A major discussion regarded the history books with the concept of Stalin being an effective manager written by Alexander Filippov. But it was a storm in a teacup. It ended up in a slight correction of statements concerning Stalin’s time and watering down the facts, which after Perestroika became quite debatable like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Test system of knowledge evaluation was one more reason to break a lance. Although, there is nothing wrong with it, it should only be complemented with a system of essays – expanded written answers and reports, but the level of teacher’s qualification does not let them implement and assess the work. Teachers have not perceived yet that the main challenge for them is Wikipedia, which schoolchildren drag by a computer mouse in their presentations, whereas teachers cannot see the mistakes or turn on the child’s reflection, introducing history as a detective with different versions, and teaching by the method of play” (Author’s Field Research, 2014).

Now it can be seen how under the interference of the State in the process of acquiring scientific knowledge, teaching history transforms from the structural element of basic education into the means of political socialization of an individual, aimed at formation of the syndrome of radical authoritarianism in his consciousness.

STATE MYTH-MAKING

Since a myth is being one of the fundamental cognitive principles, public consciousness of any people is attracted by mythology. This vector is countered by reflexive, progressive, scientific consciousness of elites which mission is to constantly remind to the people their own history and to lead the collective consciousness out of the mythological amnesia to the sphere of civil meanings. In Russia this mechanism does not work. The State and elites do not confront to mythologizing of the public
consciousness, but try to use it in their own interests. That is why the role of the main converter of history into mythology in Russia belongs to the State, and this only reinforces the processes of degradation. As a glaring example of elite degradation in contemporary Russia may serve the story that happened with Minister of Cultural Affairs Vladimir Medinsky, who gained notoriety for a scandal where he received the gown of the professor emeritus of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, “for contribution to historical studies”. There is a detailed investigation about Medinsky’s contribution to historical studies, held by Russian journalist Sergey Parkhomenko, published in his blog (Parkhomenko, 2014). It provides enough analytical data to consider Minister of Culture Medinsky a small swindler, who gained his academic degrees by means of plagiarism and corruption. The appointment of such a person at the post of the Minister of Culture is not a surprise against a background of natural selection among the political elite of modern Russia. We may only guess what made Vice-Rector of Ca’ Foscari University Silvia Bruni to visit Moscow to award the gown of the honorable professor to Medinsky despite the mass protest of the University professors and students and to resign from her position afterwards. All this shows that elites’ degradation may spread over the State borders like a virus infection.

As for the contribution of Minister Medinsky to history, here it is: “The famous “Medinsky’s Imperative” is a profound and, in some way, touching lesson left for historians’ next generations. This is it: “The first question which should be frankly responded by history is how a certain event or private activity meets the interests of the country and people. Weighing Russia’s national interests on the scale makes an absolute standard of genuineness and authenticity of a historical work”. This maxim is respectfully brought by Medinsky from the works of Oleg Platonov, an odious fighter with the Judeo-Masons, whom he solemnly called “a famous Russian scientist and thinker” (Parkhomenko, 2014).

Thus, as the acting Minister of Culture mentioned, modern Russian State offers the following principle to evaluate historical events: Weighing Russia’s national interests on the scale establishes the absolute standard of genuineness and authenticity of a historical work. Such understanding of truth through the lens of one’s own interests reminds of those fundamental structures of human consciousness by which domination in the formation of worldview ethno-social identification coincided with
understanding of self as a human being in general terms, everywhere created ethnonyms, which sounded differently in various languages but had the same meaning: “genuine humans”.

Any attempts of the legislative body – State Duma – to record the greatness of the national history in legislative acts cannot but lead lawmakers to system absurdity. In May 2014, for example, there was introduced a draft of legislation imposing sanctions for symbols of organizations cooperated with Nazi during World War II. As a result, the ban was also imposed on the Soviet Union state flag and coat of arms, which cooperated with Fascist Germany for the first two years of the war they unleashed being allies. Moreover, according to the latest achievements of the Russian parliament, under the ban occurred to be the state flag of modern Russia, under which fought the supporters of Ukraine’s independence in the years of World War II.

SHADOWS OF IDENTITY

Ideally, historical education, providing reliable information and forming ability to analysis and critical thinking, develops the nation. But in the whole post-Soviet space the things go otherwise: the general situation with national historical self-consciousness in Russia is extrapolated to the educational system, which reflects all complexes and phobias. For twenty three years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, teaching history in schools has not changed. It could not change because the nation could not overcome the threshold of historical reflection in public consciousness it approached in the early 1990s. However, the threshold of reflection appeared to be a pain threshold, and after the period of Stalin regime’s crime exposure, there followed anesthetic conceptions: “Stalin is an effective manager”, “justifiability of repressions”, etc. The main difference of Russian national identity is that it is implemented through constant identification of the enemy. Any historical period of Russia’s contemporary history may be defined by the image of enemies.

On the whole, Russian national and ethnic identities of the contemporary history were characterized only by negative markers of identity – being Russian does not mean to be someone and do something but not to be someone and not to do
something: “not to betray the Motherland”, “not to emigrate”, “not to like the Jews, Yanks, wogs (ethnic slur for the immigrants from Central Asia or the Caucasus)”, etc. In other words, the Russians have exercised in negative mobilization and negative identity for the whole 20th century, building existential and ontological systems of reference against the world of antipodes, which spectrum of images serves to trace the historical stages – from the 1920s to the 1980s. An antipode man is: a “bourgeois”, “Nepman”, “kulak”, “Trotskyist”, “Bukharinite”, “pest”, “enemy of the people”, “fascist”, “spy”, “Zionist”, “imperialist”, “jazzman”, “stilyaga” (‘style hunter’ – a representative of youth subculture of the late 1940-early1960s), “huckster”.

Positive identity was reduced to abstract things such as “moral codex of a Communism-builder”, in which it coincided with primitive identities and their self-designations such as “genuine people”, “real people”, etc. The post-Soviet ideological crisis has only strengthened the negative identity, resulting in a high demand for images of destructors from the new era – “cops”, “bandits”, “brigades”, “opera” (Russian slang for police operatives, detectives), “bratva” (‘mates’ from Russian organized crime groups), “Afghans”, “Chechens”, “thieves in law”, and other half-mythological fighters with the world of evil. All this demonstrates actualization of mythologeme as an algorithm for identity formation.

The first serious attempt to creation and positive national identity we meet only in modern opposition movement, developing not in a negative but positive trend – not “against” but “for”. “For fair election!” And this positive of political action descends from positive identity of the doers, from the perception of self being not objects, but subjects of the political process. The basis of this perception is the sense of dignity and self-esteem. These are people who do not want to be puppets, pawns, and manipulation tools. They are sick and tired from the fact that the authorities play with value categories, definitions, concepts, creating from the key-words of the political dictionary a “smokescreen” for manipulations and machinations. People want to return to the words “democracy”, “constitution”, “election”, “government”, “court of justice” their essential meaning, watered down in the result of pseudo-democratic usage with very undemocratic goals. At the same time, in public consciousness there disappeared a preceding taboo for using such words that in Russian political topics had become obscene to be seriously spoken – the words “honour”, “conscience”,

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“pride”, “dignity”. That is, this protest movement endeavors to return to the basic democratic and ethic notions their semantic capitalization. But this remains a history of the future.

BANNIKOV. FOOTNOTES


Gnatkevich, 1992 - Gnatkevich E. Ukrainian for Beginners. (Ukrainskyi yazyk dlya nachinayuschikh) – Kiev, 1992


Prudnikova, 2010 - Prudnikova O. Does it need common history to Independent States Union? (Nuzhna li SNG edinaya istoria?) /