

Historein

Vol 1 (1999)

History and Semiotics



National History: Construct or/and Reality?

Historein Historein

doi: [10.12681/historein.128](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.128)

Copyright © 2012, Historein Historein



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Historein, H. (2000). National History: Construct or/and Reality?. *Historein*, 1, 93–102.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.128>

National history: construct or/and reality?

A workshop addressing the general theme "National History. Construct or/and Reality" was held at the European University Institute (Florence) on the 2nd and 3rd of May 1997. Professor Miroslav Hroch (European University Institute and University of Prague) organised and conducted this project which aimed at a comparative approach of the formation of national histories mostly within Central and Eastern Europe. The first two sessions (Friday, May 2nd, morning and afternoon) were devoted to the exploration of "The Concept of our National History". The following scholars (according to the order of presentation) focused their analysis on certain cases of national histories:

A. First session.

- Professor Otto Dann (University of Koln) - Germans.
- Professor Miroslav Hroch (EUI and University of Prague) and Dr. Jitka Malečková (University of Prague) - Czechs.
- Professor Ottar Dahl (University of Oslo) - Norwegians.
- Professor Marjatta Hietala (University of Tampere) - Finns.

B. Second session.

- Dr. Eva Ring Agh (University of Budapest) - Hungarians.
- Dr. Bronislav Hronec (University of Bratislava) - Slovaks.
- Dr. Effi Gazi (University of Crete) - Greeks.

The third session (Saturday, May 3rd 1997) comprised a general discussion of the theme "Reality and Myth in Understanding National History". Professor Georg Iggers (Distinguished Professor, University of Buffalo) and Professor Stuart Woolf

(University of Venice) also participated in this session. We are presenting a summarised version of this debate which constitutes an interesting exchange of ideas on controversial issues such as nationalism, national identity, historiography, state policy, cultural politics etc. In addition, as a general guidance to the directions of the workshop, Professor Miroslav Hroch's and Dr Jitka Malečková's paper on the case of the Czech national history is also included in this section.

Discussion

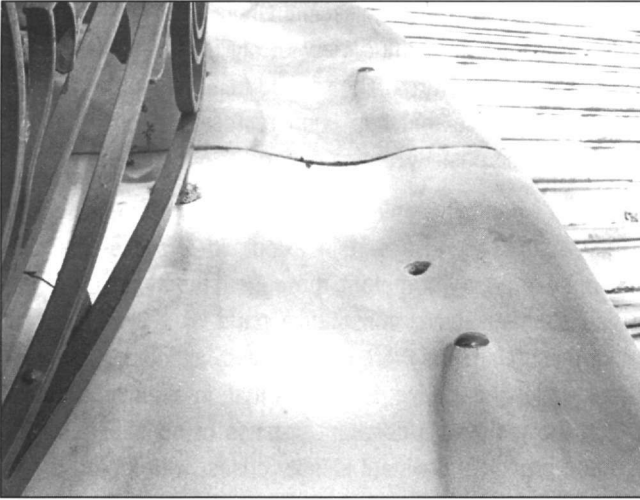
Hroch: I think it is not so difficult for everybody to give some comments on this basic problem of the relation between present and past in the construct of national history.

Hronec: I think it is clear that human beings have always lived in some form of collective constellations, from the manor of feudal lords to the most international empires or from the tribes to the neighbourhoods, but what seems to me to be distinctive about modern constellations is that communities of language, religion, territory, history constituted themselves as a unity and clearly distinguished themselves from the others. So, the nation must be one and it must be distinguished from the other peoples and nations. The Slovak case cannot make a general pattern of course, but nevertheless it shows how the nation can be created out of almost nothing real in history. But although there is, at least from my perspective, ill-foundation of Slovak history, this myth would be very hard to dismiss. But an absolutely open question I think is the case of the 20th century, when you can see paradoxes – that for example everybody would expect some glorification of the Slovak state during the Second World War, but paradoxically only a small proportion of the population would have some positive feeling in this event. On the contrary, there is a Slovak national uprising that in a way was the second largest mass resistance against the Nazis in this part of Europe during the Second World War, and this is incorporated into the national narrative, paradoxically, probably because of the Communist glorification during the 1950s and 1960s. So I think the crucial question now is if this link to the past fits for democratic behaviour or not, from today's perspective?

Woolf: Could you elaborate slightly your very last point? I didn't understand it, I didn't understand what you mean, if what fits for a democratic process?

Hronec: The glorification of the Great Moravian Empire, the fight against the Hungarians.

Ring: I think the national past is a construction. The whole of Hungarian history was neglected, apart from some 18th century foreigners who were interested mainly in revealing medieval sources and presenting the deeds of different rulers. The Hungarian historians published those works in the first place in the 1840s, which no longer identified history with the deeds of the rulers, but examined it with a more modern approach from a national point of view. As opposed to this, the representatives of the liberal political reform movement already after 1830 published in succession their programmes concerning the future of the Hungarian nation, in which they frequently applied historical arguments to prove their viewpoints. Consequently, the political movements using history as a legitimising argument were born earlier than history writing itself. Essentially, the positivistic Hungarian historiography was born only at the end of the 19th



century, although its representatives, disregarding the few exceptions, in their conceptions of the past still preserved the clichés applied by the politicians of the first half of the 19th century. That concerns, for example, periodisation. Historiography rebelled against the mythical concept of the past only at the end of the 19th century, and this occasionally raised quite a big storm. However, it has to be admitted that the public was

able to get rid of the inherited clichés with great difficulty. The reconsideration of the concept of the national past is still going on, even today. In the formation of the concept of the national past, literature also had an influential role. The concept of the nation represented by writers and poets was basically different from that of the liberals. Some ideologists of liberal nationalism emphasised that it is not language that plays a decisive role in nation forming but rather historicity, state rule and political existence. The Hungarian writers have put the stem of equality among language, community and nation since the 16th century. I would like to stress that literature contributed more to the formation of the national past than historiography.

Hroch: And this literature was based on the concept of the linguistic definition of the nation?

Ring: Yes, and on myths and legends, and not on reality, political and historical reality.

Lyttelton: Is there a discovery or also an attempt to discover the popular forms, the popular talents, to use this and to play a role in popular cultures?

Ring: Popular culture was very important in this period, and this developed still in the 19th century. It is very interesting but this is the same in Bohemia with Joseph II. Joseph II was popularised in the 19th century in the folk, in the popular texts.

Gazi: I won't really use the word "invention" to define national history. I prefer the word "construction", although I think that state politics, especially in the 19th century have a substantial role in the formation of a historical discourse about national identity. This is particularly so in the second part of the 19th century when militant nationalism in the Balkans was particularly strong. My impression is that there is also a constant interaction between historical discourses and collective representations of the past.

There are two elements I would like to emphasise in this discussion. The first one is that there are two trends in the Greek national narrative which seem to be completely contradictory to each other but which somehow co-exist. The first one is based on the classical heritage that has been incorporated in the national narrative as the first part in this long chain of historical evolution. I

think that this is strongly related to conceptualisations of classical Greece in 17th, 18th and 19th century Europe and to the formation of a Eurocentric view of civilisation in which the Greeks tried to be included from the 18th century onwards. The second trend has to do with the Christian tradition, the Orthodox Christian heritage that has been represented in the Greek narrative by emphasis on the Byzantine and the post-Byzantine period.

The second issue is that there seems to be a gap between elite and popular culture in the Greek national narrative. The classical heritage survived, to a certain extent, in forms of the elite culture, especially in writings on philosophy or poetry or rhetoric throughout the Byzantine or the post-Byzantine era. Orthodox Christian elements were constitutive parts of a lively popular tradition. I find fascinating the fact that these elements were incorporated, although they were apparently contradictory, into the Greek national narrative; but I think that, in a sense, the final product is of an uncertain nature. It is the result of a constant process of negotiation, even currently, even in the 20th century, and it provokes constant identity crises, with regard to the Greek national identity, to the conceptualisation of the past, but also to the ways the Greeks place themselves either in the East or in the West.

Hroch: Positivism introduces, in the Czech or Hungarian case, some kind of critical revisionism of these nationalist myths. Is it the case also in Greece?

Gazi: No, on the contrary. In Greece, positivism, the engagement with historicism and the notion of objectivity is actually another way of legitimising this version of national history.

Hronec: There is exactly the same phenomenon in the Slovak case. The very small part of positivist historiographers practically never made any attempt to dismiss these myths. On the contrary, they supported them.

Woolf: But can I turn the question back towards the Czechs, at that point, because it seems to me that it is clear that there is some form of very loose association in terms of the way historiography moves from a romantic to a positivist faith in any case, and that within that context there is a shift in most countries which could be dated... slightly but essentially somewhere around the 1860s...?

Hroch: Much later, 1880s - 1890s.

Woolf: In Germany in the 1860s, elsewhere in the 1890s and 1880s. There is no contradiction it seems to me between this and the legitimisation of a national narrative. On the contrary, it would seem to me that the very purpose of "scientific history" is this over-formation of the bearers who assigned their role to themselves more firmly than before. They are setting the parameters of what they will then be regarding as acceptable or not acceptable discourse about the national past. What I would like to ask after listening to this is when positivistic history starts in Hungary?

Ring: In the 1880s.

Woolf: It is the 1880s, and is there also a similar sort of revision, within the context of a national narrative, of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable?

Iggers: What is positivistic? Does that mean scientific in the 19th century? Of course this began

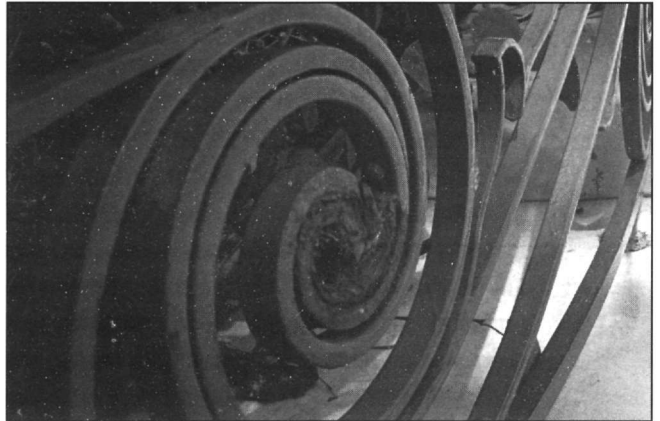
much earlier... and then of course the question is if the claim raised by this supposedly scientific history really was scientific. That means that you have a real contradiction: on the one hand, you have the “Verwischenschaftlichung der Geschichte” and you have the change from Geschichtsschreibung to Geschichtswissenschaft which is supposed to mean objectivity; on the other hand, it goes hand in hand with the creation of ideology and myth. And one person who is deemed a great hero of this whole development until today, who I think is basically a very primitive myth maker, is Johann Gustav Droysen. I think we have to be very careful because this positivistic historiography is not necessarily objective. I mean that it uses scientific language, scientific parameters, in order to propagate what is basically romantic ideology.

Woolf: Well, I wouldn't go as far as your last sentence. I wouldn't agree with your last phrase, but until that there are no problems at all: I was using it in terms of the 19th century positivism deliberately.

Iggers: But what I would be very careful about is the term “positivistic” and I would also be careful about the term “critical”. I mean they called themselves “critical” and “scientific”.

Dann: And what about the Left positions, the socialist positions as critical positions against the myth traditions. So I would ask Effi Gazi: have you in the Greek tradition that Left, socialist criticism of the myths of the national fiction?

Gazi: In the 20th century – I think the first work was published in 1908 and the second in 1924 – the socialists attempted to emphasise social parameters in Greek national history. But they never actually challenged entirely the established



conception of the Greek national narrative. To a certain extent, some of them expressed some criticism about the emphasis on classical Antiquity but they never came so straightforwardly to publicly undermine its importance in the formation of the Greek national identity.

Hietala: During the 19th century, many attempts were made to write Finnish history from the Finnish point of view because during the 18th and the early 19th century the legends of the First Crusade were still very influential. The Swedes had taken for granted that they had been strong, educated and civilised and therefore they had to subordinate the Finns. All good things in Finland, such as culture, administration and justice were in their opinion Swedish. As a result, in the 19th century there were in all sectors attempts to try to show that Finns had had their own history. The first serious history was published in 1869. It wanted to emphasise the role of the Finnish people in creating their history and was, on the scientific level, very much criticised because it had eliminated the Swedish role. What about the “scientific question”? Did our authors really think that they were “scientific”? It's very difficult to say how “scientific” they were, what kind of sources they had, because I think they were selective and they wanted to

interpret history from their own point of view since it was so important to really create, to write Finnish history. I want to mention one work which was very popular. It was circulated around the country, among people, among the middle class. This book, *The Land of Our Own*, you can find it in every house where you can find people with education.

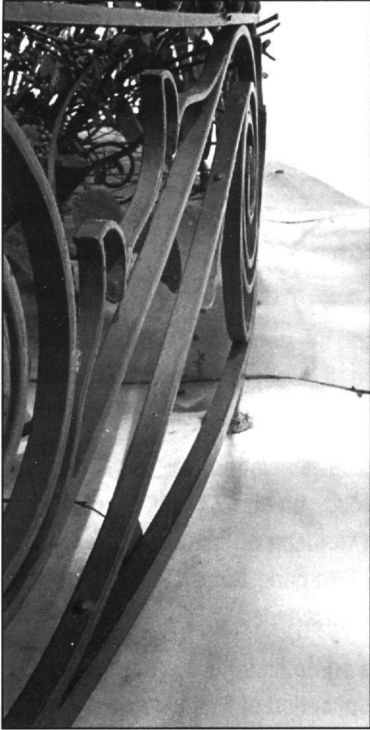
Hroch: What about class interpretation of history?

Hietala: In the 1910s, we have discussions and we have struggles for theory. There were class theories, although we don't know if they had any impact, if we are speaking of distribution of ideas in textbooks.

Dahl: I must confess that I am a bit uneasy about the distinction between myth and reality as it is applied to scholarly work in history. If the truth value is not an important part of the distinction, the question will be the instrumental function or value of certain conceptions, and one question then will be as to the scholarly sincerity of those who launched these myths. Are they launched by the conscious intention that they are to have a certain function in a certain context without regard to the truth? Or if it's considered as a programme, without regard to the possibility of being realised? These are initial doubts in my mind as regards this discussion.

As to the Norwegian historians, they certainly had a conception of a national cultural individuality, with a glorious past which might be part of a myth perhaps. There was certainly a myth of origin which has its most important manifestation in the immigration theory, the separate immigration of the Norwegians as a collective group, from the North. This clearly had a function as an argument for the conception of a common Nordic nationality and culture. This theory is thoroughly discarded of course now, and in that sense I will call them myths, without any truth value. But it must be emphasised that these Norwegian historians were programmatically critical historians, followers of the school of Ranke and Niebuhr, and with the expressed purpose of the research to destroy myths. They strongly denied that they would be willing to make compromises as to truth in order to serve nationalistic purposes. So they had not this intention of launching nationalistic myths to serve a programme or purpose. So much on my part as regards this school of history, which of course was on the winning side of the development of the national ideology and politics.

I would like to present an alternative case which was not on the winning side. But when we consider these myths or constructs within this field, we find that some succeeded and some did not succeed. What is wrong then with those which did not succeed? What I would like to focus on in our Nordic context is the ideology and myth and programme which simply was Scandinavism, that is the idea of a political integration of the three Scandinavian territories' populations, or nations if you like, of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. A project which to some extent may be seen as parallel to the German project, the integration of several political units in a larger, more comprehensive political national Reich, but not so in Scandinavia; though it may be safely maintained that the linguistic and cultural difference between the national units within Scandinavia were no greater than within Germany. So there seems not to be any basic obstacle to the development of the Scandinavian nation. This was really a serious political project in the late Middle Ages. It did not succeed in the Middle Ages but it was launched again in the very era



of nationalism, around the middle of the 19th century. And it also gathered considerable following as a movement and in that sense, it succeeded.

Hietala: I want to add one thing that I forgot to mention, which is common for all Nordic countries, especially for Sweden and Finland. When we are talking about scientific writing, we have some advantages. We have a long statistical tradition. For example, in the case of Finland or in Sweden or even in Norway, you can use facts, you can really take facts from several sources. You can find how many people live there, what their mortality rates are. That was the way Finnish scientists started to publish, already during the 1840s, those scientific tables: what the mortality rate was and what kind of diseases there were. This type of activity belongs, especially in Finland, to this nationalistic field and we have to eliminate these myths or legends that wanted to show that we had our independent history. I really don't know if they used statistical material in Norway.

Dahl: There was statistical material from the Danish Norwegian period, and it was utilised by the historians around the middle of the century.

Woolf: Could I come in on this, quite simply? I wrote a book on statistics, historical statistics. There is no doubt about the quality of Scandinavian statistics and the precocity of them. They are still ideologised in one particular sense which is quite simply they are state-produced. Hence, statistics are in the service of the state and hence offer a very strong support to interpretations of the identification of a nation with the state. Beyond that, I think the question to ask is, for example, about what languages were used, about those parts of Scandinavia which felt themselves distinct. And of course it comes down to be supremely the case of Norway, about whether Norwegian was a separate language or not, what language was used and in what circumstances it was used, at home, in prayer, in public places and so on. I would have imagined that the same question, though I know nothing at all about it, would have presented itself in terms of the use of Swedish and Finnish, in terms of the statistics as well.

Can I pursue this slightly further? From 1861, the International Statistics Association was arguing very strongly for the inclusion in the decennial censuses of a question about the use of language. This was an issue of great dispute of course, obviously in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but it seemed to have been accepted in most places as far as I know. Was the question of language ever included in the decennial censuses of the population, in the latter part of the 19th century, from the 1870s?

Hietala: May I answer on behalf of the Swedish Finland? The Bureau for Statistics was created in 1865, and they immediately became part of this international association and very early

wanted to follow the guidelines. In Finland, when we had an autonomous status, a state in the Russian Empire, they wanted to really take seriously this language problem and they wanted to publish in Finnish.

You mentioned that these statistics are a creation of the state and that is true. But on the other side, the wealth of a nation is in its population and that is why it was so important to count every person in this dispersed settled Finland, just for taxation purposes, and for the army, and so on. But I think that they were quite serious in trying to have the most reliable statistics, at least from the middle of the last century.

Dann: I would like to come back to the last point of Ottar Dahl, the pan-Scandinavian tradition. What was the role of historiography there and was there a myth production about this Scandinavian idea? I think myth production is a sign of success in political fields.

Dahl: There was an emphasis on the near-relatedness of these populations in these states or national areas. On common culture they were closely related, on the possibility of fruitful collaboration, friendly coexistence, and not really in contrast to ideas of national character. Of course, the strongest impulse to this movement came from Denmark. But the movement had many adherents both in Norway and Sweden. In that sense it succeeded.

Hroch: I think Otto Dann's question was in the direction: did some historians write the history of Scandinavia in this conception? Did they try to create a conception of Scandinavians, not of Norwegians, Danes ...?

Dahl: In Denmark, there was a strong scholarly tradition of conceiving the old Nordic civilisations as one Nordic culture or civilisation. The cultural product of this era was common property of the whole area. And this was the main point of opposition between the Norwegian historians and the Swedish and the Danish. The Norwegians emphasised the individuality of the three nations.

Dann: I asked first in direction to historiography. Second, did there exist pan-Scandinavian myths? The idea of a common language for instance, the old Icelandic Sagas?

Dahl: The language of the Sagas was from this point of view considered a Nordic common language.

Dann: We have now two more cases to discuss: the Czech case and the German case.

Hroch: I could continue with what Ottar Dahl just started. It is not irrelevant if we accept the position of relativism or not. I mean, we can't accept the concept that it didn't matter if national identity was based on voluntaristic lies and manipulations, or on honest efforts to discover or to reconstruct the truth... so, how they understood it – naturally influenced by ideologies, influenced by their time, political interests and of course by errors... Therefore I think the discussion about critical historiography, or about what they called "the authority of historical truth" is very important. Of course, we can never say 100% exactly how it was and so on, but this honest effort to achieve more and more exact information about the past is something very important. We have to accept it because if we don't set a point of departure, then it doesn't



matter if everything could be invented about the national past. Then there are no limits to invention, so to speak. Then we run the risk to be denounced – that our own picture of the historical discourse is a voluntaristic one, too.

Now to the Czech case. In more general terms, we have a construct – it was Palacky who started this concept in the middle of the 19th century. This conception of history is related not only to the present, but also to the past because this past existed, as well as to something which has not yet been stressed very much here, to the historiographical tradition of the given country. Now it is very important – let's say in the Czech case – if or how far the historical past of the given nation as construction is compatible with the present national movement. Now let us see the Hungarian movement: we have a national movement that is a political one, for political goals, for autonomy or independence, just in the middle of the 19th century, and we have a past, which is a political one, with a historical nation – of course defined a little bit differently or rather differently, but it is the political past of a nation. Then you can use without complication this past as a material for the construction of national history, with many ideological faults and so on, but there is no problem in doing it, or it is not very difficult to do it. Then you have the opposite case, the Slovak case, where you have of course a past, a social past, a cultural past – people lived in Slovakia and they spoke Slovak. And the Slovak national movement at the beginning was not a political one. The question would be then: why did these Slovak patriots need political history, why did they need a state? For them the most important political argument could be “we have lived here in these territories for centuries and we are here present as a people.” And some of them said that. In the Czech case, we have a national movement based on the ethnic concept, stressing linguistic goals, and we have a conception of national history that stresses state history and the political past. We have the past where some kind of statehood existed – the Crown of Bohemia – where there exists some state which is a material for the construction of political history. But this political past of a state was incompatible with this nation without state and without any national political goals, political claims. So it would also be very logical for the Czech construction of national history to orientate itself to the people's history. The explanation for this I think lies in the historiographical tradition. The historiographical tradition since the Middle Ages had been based on the history of the state. So this historiographical tradition was somehow stronger than the reality of this national movement being a linguistic, ethnic and cultural one.

If we continue then to the second half of the century, when a new political programme emerged as a programme of historical right – historical right in the sense that the Czechs were presented

as the unique nation in this historical unit of the Lands of the Crown of Bohemia – it is no longer compatible with the reality in the past, because the reality was a different one. This was the reason, or the point where these revisionists' criticisms started (social democrats but also others) and I think that from this tension we could explain the fact that the Czechs have the largest number of articles on "the sense of Czech history". There was a huge discussion on what sense our history has. I think it could be explained by the tension between this ethnic concept of the nation and the political claim based on historical rights. It's only my hypothesis, but nevertheless, I think it is a very interesting phenomenon, this discussion of which sense our history has, all the time, until the 20th century.

Malečková: Can I just add something that occurred to me when you were speaking? I think that there may be one other factor to think of and this is the influence from the outside. For example, you see that the Czechs or the Hungarians are using the state, they have a state and they use it, so you try – in the Slovak case also – to find a state to which you can relate ...

Hroch: In the Czech case it is the German one, it is the German concept of "Reichsgeschichte".

Malečková: I think that this impact of more developed historiographies, or generally of the more developed nations, or of the rivals also is one of the reasons why history was constructed. One thing that we didn't stress really is why we are doing it: we want to show to ourselves that we are as good as the others, and we want to show to the others also that we are not worse. We were not worse, and maybe now we have some problems, but our past was as good if not better than yours.

