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Cyril and Methodius. Images. Memory. Identity (A Book Review)

*Кирил и Методий. Образи, памет, идентичност /
Cyril and Methodius. Images, memory, identity,*
eds. V. Zhelyazkova, D. Naydenova, Sofia: Cyrillo-Methodian
Research Centre BAS, 2021. ISBN 978-954-9787-50-4.

The Cyrillo-Methodian tradition is one of the most important elements of cultural identity of Slavic peoples. The (hi)story about the oeuvre of SS. Cyril and Methodius has been used for the various – religious and political – purposes since the Middle Ages, however its particular significance was noticed and emphasized during the process of imagining Slavic nations in the 19th century. Since then, the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition has served as a proof of the unique contribution to the development of the Slavic civilization and as such – became a subject of a peculiar intra-Slavic competition. The palm of priority seems to belong to Bulgarians, however the claims have been also raised by (Northern) Macedonians and Slovaks. On the other hand, the mission of SS. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples was focused on the spiritual welfare of Slavic peoples, so it was also successfully incorporated for the needs of the concept of mutual Slavic cooperation, even Pan-Slavic ideology. Nowadays, proclaimed as the patrons of Europe by the Pope John Paul II, the Slavic Enlighteners are becoming a symbol of dialogue and understanding in the united Europe. Nevertheless, in some circles, they are still perceived exclusively as figures that belong to the Eastern-Orthodox Church, which is often understood from the Russian perspective.

What is important is that being recognized as both the important Christian saints and cultural heroes, SS. Cyril and Methodius have been functionalized within many national and political projects, which as a scientific problem gained attention only after the political changes in Central and South-Eastern Europe in the last decades of 20th century. The book that is under review here is an example of expanding the research field, by showing this shift in the academic approach towards the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition – from the strictly philological and historical to more anthropological and culturological one.

The bilingual album *Кирил и Методий. Образи. Памет. Идентичност / Cyril and Methodius. Images. Memory. Identity* was prepared by Veselka Zhelyazkova and Desislava Naydenova within the framework of National Scientific Program “Cultural and Historical Heritage, National Memory and Social Development”, and published by the Cyrillo-Methodian Research Centre of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 2021. Both of the authors are well-known specialists in the field of Cyrillo-Methodian studies who conduct not only “pure” philological and historical investigations, but also expand their enquires by raising the issues of modern usage of the Cyrillo-Methodian cult.

The aim of the book is to present secular images of the saints within the semantic triade “images – memory – identity”. It is the first of its kind attempt of cataloguing various artefacts, such as monuments, memorial plaques, orders, medals, coins, banknotes, stamps, flags, that are devoted to the Slavic Enlighteners and thus – consist their visualisations. As stated by the authors, all of them “have a special place in the “culture of memory” as evidence of the cultural policy of the state in the progress of forming a collective identity”¹. Moreover, they reflect the leading motives in the interpretation of the saints in relation to the current situation:

from the first orders and medals with the image of Cyril and Methodius (mid-19th century), which appeared in Austria Hungary, to the modern Northern Macedonian stamp depicting the Thessalonian brothers next to Confucius².

The reproductions of the artefacts are organized within five thematic sections: “Orders, Medals, Badges”, “Flags”, “Stamps”, “Coins, Banknotes”, “Monuments”, which begin with short commentaries with historic data regarding a particular type of the artefacts and the most important samples. What precedes is the authors’ introduction and the study by Naydenova, entitled *Cyril and Methodius. Images. Memory. Identity*. All the texts are provided in both Bulgarian and English, which is particularly important from the point of view of the wide scope of the enquiry.

1 *Кирил и Методий. Образи, памет, идентичност / Cyril and Methodius. Images, memory, identity*, eds. V. Zhelyazkova, D. Naydenova, Sofia 2021, p. 8.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 9.

In the “Introduction”, the concept of the book, as well as the basic principles of work with the material are presented. As pointed out, the most important difficulty that occurred during the preparation of the album, was the large chronological range and territorial scope of the research. Another challenge was to identify the source and the context of the artefacts, since most of them are in fact limited series related to a variety of occasions, a result of an institutional order, or a private initiative.

The material is organized in chronological order – from samples of phaleristics to monuments, since precisely the latter are the most popular way of commemorating the saints in recent times. The artefacts from Bulgaria open the sections, followed by those from other countries, arranged in alphabetical order. This approach has been chosen “not only because Bulgarian material is the richest, but because the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition has a special significance in the construction of Bulgarian national identity”³:

While Cyril and Methodius gradually lost their primary role of national unifying figures for other Slavic peoples (for the Serbs, for example, St. Sava was recognized as such, for the Russians – Alexander Nevsky, for the Czechs – John of Nepomuk), for Bulgarian they invariably remain associated with the ideas of unification, legitimization, progress and national pride⁴.

Since the usage of the Cyril and Methodius within the process of building Slavic and national identity has a long history – from the 19th century to the present day, the study *Cyril and Methodius. Images. Memory. Identity* offers a brief look on the socio-political context and emphasis of crucial changes in the main tendency in imagining the saints. As Naydenova summarizes:

Depending on the political situation, their mission has been recognized and appropriated (even simultaneously by political opponents), adjusted and adapted for different uses (even mutually exclusive ones), and a plethora of meanings have been symbolically ascribed to it: religious, educational, pan-Slavic, nationalist bordering onto chauvinist, and, the other extreme, internationalist⁵.

The study consists of five parts: 1. *The work of Cyril and Methodius as a symbol of the claims to power and ecclesiastical and political legitimacy*; 2. *The work of Cyril and Methodius and the construction of national identity*; 3. *The Deed of Cyril and Methodius and the socialist discourse*; 4. *SS. Cyril and Methodius as patrons of Europe*; 5. *Cyril and Methodius imagery – “depository of culture”*. After presenting briefly the historical context and the meaning of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission, Naydenova focuses on secular

3 Ibidem.

4 Ibidem, pp. 9–10.

5 Ibidem, p. 38.

and national narratives which assimilate the figures of the Slavic Enlighteners, showing the key role of the socio-political circumstances, i.e. the disintegration and fall of the great empires (the Austrian Empire and Russia, Ottoman Empire), different, sometimes completely antagonistic ideological attempts in restoring national pride and/or rewriting its history during and after the period of socialism.

The main contribution of the album is that it offers a great collection of secular cultural artefacts, many of which have been forgotten or marginalized from the point of view of the research mainstream. The variety in terms of type and origins, aesthetics and ideology, serves in fact a wonderful starting point for further investigations. In one place, there are gathered Russian medals from 19th century that were made on the occasion of 1885, Bulgarian patriotic flag of Samara, which is a particularly important item of the Bulgarian national ideology, and commemorative stamps with educational and propaganda purposes (with or without nimbus), as well as Slovak coins of Euro, as well as artefacts that are related to the non-Slavic contexts: Italian and Portuguese monuments of the saints as a symbols of cultural identity of local diasporas, and the most peculiar of all – Mozambique stamps.

The collected visualizations reveal how religious figures are appropriate, compositioned within the secular framework, although there are also some monuments and stamps editions which refer directly to the Church institutions. It turns out that the genealogical link with the formation of secular states and the process of modernization does not necessary mean the non-religious instance of the phenomenon. In fact, the modern cult of Cyril and Methodius shows that the religious and the secular dimensions are deeply intertwined, and more – they are insufficient and even limiting when describing and problematizing the modern narrative about the Slavic Enlighteners.

Another contribution is the study by Naydenova itself, as it may be seen as an important review of the intersectionality between the local and the universal, the national and the confessional, the ethnical and the religious. It shows how all the actions are in fact a response to another actions, and everything is well-connected and explainable. For example, why in the beginning of the process of Slavic revitalization of the memory about SS. Cyril and Methodius the Russian Empire was not interested in using the figures of the Slavic Enlighteners? Why Croats were told by the local politicians not to attend the celebrations in Velehrad that were organized by the Catholic Church on the occasion of to the jubilee of 1000 years of the death of St. Methodius? Why did the popes pay attention to these old Slavic saints? What happened when communists acknowledged the potential of these figures? As a historian, Naydenova focuses on the relations between various political powers, including the fight over the Cyrillo-Methodian heritage between the Catholics and the Orthodox,

but also she reminds about the role of the attitude towards the Slavic component and culture, the religious character of the cult, and the ecumenical movement. In this context, it is clear that the further enquiries should address the question of generating memory by delving into the diversity of commemorative practices. State jubilees are particularly interesting case – not only in 19th, but also in 20th century, and today.

The study *Cyril and Methodius. Images. Memory. Identity* shows that Cyril and Methodius are constantly put in different plans and ideological horizons. Within this richness of uses, one may talk about two main aims – to unite and to distinguish, to share and to elevate. The album is a proof of a great importance of the secular images of the two saints, which may be seen as a result of secularization but only in the sense of differentiation of social spheres not a rejection of the Church context. The question why they turned to be so important and plastic in terms of ideological appropriation needs further investigation precisely in a comparative perspective, and the album calls for it very clearly.

Despite all of the contributions that the album delivers, there are some issues that need reconsidering. First of all, some of the artefacts have no descriptions, which is a little bit disappointing, although surely it was caused by the scale of the whole enterprise. Moreover, one may notice some inconsistencies in the order, if indeed the chronology was designed on the basis of the history of state units – from Austrian Empire to Northern Macedonia. This decision helped to avoid the problem of national identification of activists, ethnic affiliations of actions, which seems to be indeed a safe move in the Slavic context, especially when Bulgarian-Macedonian relations are concerned. Nonetheless, the result is that the role of particular local communities that defined themselves beyond the national framework or were seen as controversial in terms of ethnicity have been left aside. Just as there is no mention of Macedonian-centric initiatives during the interwar and the socialist periods in the study, there is no mention of these in the catalogue. In regard to the work of Naydenova, this shift of scope can be explained by the main thesis of the album that the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition is the most important for the Bulgarians. This is the reason why the information about the modern functioning of the Cyrillo-Methodian traditions in the 20th century refers here only to Bulgaria. However, the lack of materials in the catalogue raises the question whether there really were no secular images in SRF Macedonia for example. One of the monuments of Cyril and Methodius that is included in the album is in fact a monument from the campus of the university in Skopje was founded in 1990, and the sculpture was made by the famous Macedonian artist Boro Mitrikeski. This detailed information, however, is missing.

The Bulgarian perspective manifests itself not only in a specific order of the artefacts, but also in a way in which modern cult of Cyril and

Methodius is addressed. It may be disappointing that the comparative perspective is no longer applied when characterizing the history of the national uses during the 20th century, although it has its explanation: “unlike the rest of the Slavic peoples, for Bulgarians Cyril and Methodius were still the most important figures functioning as unifiers of the nation”⁶. Indeed, the material indicates that the culmination of these chain of national memory locates itself in Bulgaria, then Slovakia, and recently Russia, nevertheless in-depth problematization of the matter is required in order to answer such questions as why the communists took in the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition. The thesis that it was due to the fact that the saints were already embedded in the national memory seems to be only a half-explanation⁷.

Naturally, all of these concerns cannot be resolved in a book which aim is to provide a catalogue, also they cannot be addressed by individual scholars in a single publication; therefore they do not diminish the value of the book. Moreover, they are in fact another proof of the topicality of the problem in the so called Cyrillo-Methodian studies. In this sense, the album itself can be treated not only as an example of a new research approach, but also as an expression of a particular cultural memory, as it confirms how extraordinary is the role of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition in the modern Bulgarian culture. It is also a testimony of the sense of responsibility of Bulgarian scholars to study this tradition in the widest possible perspective. Without doubt, the album is an important contribution to the identification of the problem of modern imagining of the Slavic Enlighteners and an indication for investigating the tradition in terms of symbolism, cultural meanings, and visual practices. It not only poses the fundamental question of the importance of imagery in shaping memory and identity, but also provides its new starting point – precisely due to the comparative nature of the publication, not to mention that at the same time it is originally designed and beautifully released, which may be suggesting a new trend of displaying images. It is an invitation to develop or even reformulate the general framework for such a research.

6 Ibidem, p. 51.

7 Ibidem, p. 54.