Stefan Rohdewald


This enormous (over 900 pages) but clearly organized and erudite tome is the work of Stefan Rohdewald, professor of history at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany. The book (which was also the Habilitationsschrift of Rohdewald) is centered around the question of the consecutive transformations of sacred religious figures in Southeastern European Slavic Orthodoxy (predominantly Serbian, Bulgarian, and later Macedonian) throughout the medieval and early modern era, the long 19th century, and the interwar period. Firmly established in the genre of “invented traditions,” it brings in a usually neglected aspect: the role and entanglement of religion in the nation-building process.

The German Habilitationsschrift, corresponding to the French thèse d’état, has no exact analogue in English. Loosely translated as a post-doctoral thesis, in Europe it has certain precise criteria. For history this means a voluminous work, the mastery of a long chronological period, demonstrating specialized linguistic (including often palaeographic) knowledge but, at the same time, broad geographical scope and, especially nowadays, a comparative approach and theoretical savviness. This comes with its advantages but also serious drawbacks. As is the case with this work, it is a monument to the undoubted professional skills of the author, his capacity to systematize an enormous corpus of written material and come to convincing conclusions. As a monograph, on the other hand, much of its original authorial contribution is lost in the often redundant and literally repetitious syntheses.

The work is organized in five substantive parts and two technical ones (bibliography and index). It is also furnished with 28 splendid illustrations. The introductory Part I (40 pages) offers the historiographical and theoretical grounding of the work within the latest literature on memory studies and nationalism, and introduces some of its central categories, such as memory sites and memory figures. Part II (160 pages) provides a survey of the religious memory sites and figures until the 18th century. Parts III and IV comprise the heart of the work with over 300 pages each and divided chronologically, the first covering the rise of nationalism, the formation and consolidation of nation states, and the institutionalization of memory culture; the second focusing on the period between the First and Second World Wars with the stark intensification and radicalization of the memory discourse in the direction of militarization.
and adjustment to authoritarian ideologies and geopolitical interests. Finally, Part V (50 pages) provides a summation of the main conclusions of the work and offers a comparative European assessment.

As already mentioned, the main analysis of the work is on the ways medi-
eval cults were nationalized and ideologically manipulated in the era of na-
tionalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Practically all religious figures from
the medieval period (and Rohdewald is amazingly meticulous and virtually
exhaustive in his survey) were absorbed and re-purposed for modern na-
tionalist use. To use just a few of the myriad examples brought in by the au-
thor, Rohdewald convincingly shows how the universalist veneration of the
St.St. Cyril and Methodius was “Bulgarianized” after the mid-19th century. Cyril
and Methodius had been revered in a universal, anational and supra-ethnic
manner since the 9th century by all Slavic peoples, the other Orthodox peoples
in the Balkans, and by Rome and Byzantium. It is true that during the Second
Bulgarian Empire with its capital in Târnovo (12th–14th centuries) they were
already Bulgarianized and used for state-building purposes, but their celebra-
tion faded significantly already before the Ottoman conquest and they had to
be virtually re-discovered or re-established in the 19th century.

Equally, the synthesis of the rich historiography on the Kosovo myth dem-
onstrates how a broadly known and venerated event across different ethnic
groups became by the 19th century the major memory site and central building
block of Serb identity. Unlike Bulgaria, where only a few medieval kings were
canonized, the Serb tradition of the sanctified Nemanjić dynasty was continu-
ous and served as a legitimation of the Serbian and later Yugoslav monarchy.
Even so, the cult of St. Sava, for example, underwent a complex evolution and
travel from the Habsburg region to the Ottoman, and from a school patron to
the national saint of a sacralized nation. By the interwar period, the formerly
erenated figures across ethnic lines were transformed into inflexible mark-
ers of separate nations to serve practices of inclusion into a homogeneous na-
tion and separation from neighboring groups. Rohdewald is especially good
in showing the complex relationship between state and church negotiating
positions and interests over a century to finally fall in line (Rohdewald speaks
of amalgamation) in the nation-building process.

Working within (and against) a predominantly nationalist historiography,
which still espouses organic nationalism and tends to overstress (if not en-
tirely invent) the ethnic aspect of medieval cults, Rohdewald understandably
emphasizes the universalist aspects of the Orthodox saints’ veneration. At the
same time, the overuse of categories such as transethnic, transregional, multi-
ethnic, transreligious, transimperial, transcultural and so on, satisfies a modish
tendency, but somewhat overplays its case. After all, there is plentiful literature