Bulwarks in a “Religious Triangle.”” Borderland Myths in East European Multiconfessional Societies in the Age of Nationalism

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History of frontier regions presents clashes and overlaps of socio-cultural and religious formations. Often, it results in mutual influences, but sometimes it may also lead to harsh confrontations, or the occurrence of typical socio-cultural patterns, not to be met elsewhere. Historically based boundaries between cultures, ethnic groups, and religious influence various (and interdependent) debates about civilization and barbarism, religious missions and self-identifications with a role of “chosen people” (e.g. as defenders of faith or culture) in the region. Antemurale (bulwark) myths are the products of such discourses and thus a specific phenomena of these regions. Their purpose is to demonstrate the belonging of a certain group to the bigger community which is supposedly more “developed”/“civilized” then the neighbor one(s). Such a legitimation and provides the society with orientation and sense by drawing imaginary boundaries within the denominationally and ethnically mixed borderland societies. As typical political myths, they help to explain the origins of the evolving nations.

The concept of antemurale christianitatis was born in the 15th century and reached its peak during the anti-Osmanic wars in the 16th and 17th centuries. The suggestion of being a “bulwark” against the Muslim threat was widely spread in early modern Croatia, Hungary, Venice, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the lands of the Habsburg monarchy. From the very beginning, the (self)-definition of antemurale was mostly limited to the Catholic lands. Territories dominated by the Eastern-rite believers, like Serbia, Muscovy, Rhodes, or Crete, were granted by the Holy See this title only with certain reservations. Although typical for the Christian-Islamic border, antemurale myths can be found in the regions where different Christian confessions meet, too. Here, the extrapolation “civilization/barbarism” is often enriched with reflections about “true faith.” In this way the antemurale myth is used as a legitimation source for different kinds of missionary activities (religious, political, and cultural).

East European frontier zones are typical regions of the spread of antemurale myths. One of it is situated along the southern, south-western and western borders of the late Russian Empire, encompassing the lands of the modern Ukraine and the Black Sea region which had been contested since the antiquity and contributed to the growth of the Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires as multi-ethnic and multi-confessional communities. There, the logic of antemurale worked on both sides.

Since the 19th century, the mythic narration on "bulwarks" has undergone considerable changes, due to the rise of nationalism and the transformations of political borders. The antemurale myths experienced a revival: Old topoi of "chosen people" and the civilization/barbarism divide have remained intact, but the anti-Islamic was replaced sharply by an anti-Russian rhetoric. Political myths of antemurale, due to its semantic flexibility, turned to be essential elements of local national ideologies.

The planned conference aims at discovering the peculiarities of the antemurale rhetoric’s application upon various national ideologies and respective “mental mapping.” But it seems more important to ask how the antemurale myth contributed to the coherence of the given local community. Thus, one focus rests upon the longue durée processes in the national consciousness, from the end of the 18th century until the interwar period. A second one lies on a synchronic perspective, which allows tracing mutual
transfers as well as multi-sided national ideological competitions and the intertwining of mythical narrations.

As the organizers aim at a comparative view on *antemurale* myths, we invite approximately 20 experts to contribute to our discussion in form of a 25 min presentation. The papers should be organized according to at least one of the following sets of questions:

- What were the specific features of the modern “bastion myths”? How do modern national “bulwark” myths relate to the old, pre-modern ones?

- How did the changing political landscape and the loss of power of the empires influence the mythical narration? How did the new pan-movement ideologies (i.e. Panславism) influence transformations in the *antemurale* myths? Can we trace the influence of specific Romantic and messianic ideas and religious concepts on the formation of modern “bulwark” myths?

- Were there any differences in mythic narration of *antemurale* on the Christian/Islamic and Western Christian/Eastern Christian borders? Were there any differences in denominationally homogeneous and in mixed areas and can we find any specifically confessional facets of it?

- How did the national “bulwark” myths correspond to other myths in the region (of the Golden Age, victim role, heroes, etc.)? Are there local nuances of the mythical narration and can we thus assume specific "core" and "peripheral" perspectives in the narratives about bulwarks which hint at a certain “colonial view”?

- Can we identify the major actors in these processes? Which role did the churches play? Was the *antemurale* myth implemented in the lower layers of the society? Can we trace certain modifications on its way “to the bottom” and vice versa? What were the most influential intermediaries in these processes?

We kindly ask the participants to send us a short abstract (1-2 pages) to be pre-circulated. The working language of the conference is English. Materials of the conference will be published.