

National Hero

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1. Definition

The search for “national heroes” unearths links to literary and historically documented, classical and present, named and anonymous individual figures and collectives. The concept of the national hero is not a distinct category, but rather a construct that is not so much shaped by the actual achievements of the [hero figure](#) – which might not even have existed – as it is by the image of the nation with which it is associated. National heroes are individuals who are said to have founded, co-founded or defended that very nation or to have helped it to gain power or prestige. The primary prerequisite for the construction of a national hero is the existence of a nation with the properties of an “imagined community”^[1], or at least the idea of such a nation, on the basis of which state, social or media actors then accord the status of national hero to certain individuals. This status is often controversial and its duration may vary. The admiration-irrelevance-disfavour cycles as well as the characterisation of the achievements that are ascribed to national heroes may be subject to profound changes in the course of the transformation of political and social conditions.^[2]

2. Nation and national hero

The emergence of a nation requires the existence of institutions that are able to convey to a large group of people the notion that they form a community, although, for the most part, they do not know

one another and never will. This is achieved for instance through education, media, museums, organised rituals and places where heroization is staged. These institutions require a symbolism that makes the nation recognisable for its members, demarcates it from and against other communities, and that is recognised by as many members of the imagined community as possible.^[3] National heroes may assume this function. As they become part of collective memory, the nation is created as an “imagined community” through their adoration and that whereby this community defines and distinguishes itself from others is manifested in them.

“In the national hero, the community models its self-image, through which it looks at history in order to justify or even to criticise the present from the past – a conception of history by which a claim to the future is also always made, no matter whether that conception extols or decries the present. The national hero serves to place in plain view these visions of history through which the past is oriented towards the present, to obtain for them public legitimacy, and to thereby impart upon them the power to make an impact. In the image that is created of the national hero, the properties are formulated in which a state or a society wants to recognise itself inwardly as a unit and with which it outwardly defines its boundaries. Thus, in the presence of the national hero, it is decided who belongs to the nation and who does not, how the nation determines its uniqueness, and whom and what the nation excludes. That is why the national hero is always a controversial figure. Whoever creates a national hero and whoever decides which virtues he embodies and for which past and objectives he stands can hope to triumph in the interpretive struggle for the self-image of the nation. Hence, the creation of national heroes is about power struggles. The fight is about the political symbolism in which the nation sees itself represented.”^[4]

This representation of a nation is based on a notion of what constitutes that nation, whom it includes, which geographic territory it covers, and who is excluded from it. This notion then makes it possible to integrate hero figures of any kind into the national narrative or to use the heroes in order to help shape it, as long as some connection to the people or the territory of the nation can be attributed to them. Whether or not this connection corresponds to the self-perception of the individual at the center of the hero narrative is irrelevant for this attribution.

A national hero is – entirely irrespective of his historical existence, his real impact and his motives – a national hero if he attains social recognition; as soon as he is denied that recognition, he ceases to be a national hero.^[5] That said, national heroes have at times proven themselves to be highly resilient. They may survive the collapse and fundamental transformation of political systems, which lead to a reinterpretation of the hero narrative, rather than the removal or repression of established national heroes. The Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski (1837–1873) is a case in point: Levski has been appropriated for a wide variety of causes and a vast number of interest groups and regimes have identified with him.^[6]

In extreme cases, a national hero is so closely associated with the nation itself that many members of the nation perceive attempts at historical contextualisation, criticism or even deconstruction of his hero status as an attack on that nation (see [section 5](#)). Conversely, the Philippine author Alejandro R. Roces has interpreted the national hero José Rizal (1861–1896), who was executed by the Spanish colonial rulers, as the cornerstone of the pride and greatness of the Philippine nation (see source 1).

Much has been said through time about Jose Rizal, the man we know from our history books to be the great Philippine national hero, martyred for defending the cause of the nation and its people during the Spanish occupation. He, to me, is still unmatched as the most remarkable Filipino in history, with his multiple skills and extraordinary intelligence and wit. Years after his execution, his story of heroism still echo [sic], though sometimes, its significance lost in the repetitive stories commonly told about his life and death, and the recitation of important events and achievements surrounding his personhood. [...]

His words and deeds became a stirring example and inspiration to other Filipinos who would later become enshrined in the pages of history as great heroes in their time. [...] The greatest example he bequeathed to generations after him and up to the present was the peaceful but inspiring way that he awakened the consciousness of a people who were then nestled in a convenient but shackling colonial rule [...]

[...] he made his life, not only a useful one, but one that excelled and shines brightly to this day. He is the cornerstone that served as a strong foundation of Philippine democracy. [...] More than a century after his death, the memory of Rizal's life and works empowers and inspires Filipinos and even other nationalities to emerge as unique and outstanding people in a new and complex global village. Despite its many problems, our race stands proud and jubilant because it has a hero like Rizal.

Source: Roces, Alejandro R.: "Rizal and the martyrs of our time". In: Philstar Global, 18. June 2009. Online at:
<https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2009/06/18/478323/rizal-and-martyrs-our-time>
(accessed on 09.10.2019).

The social recognition of a national hero is preceded by the communication of knowledge about the hero figure and of an image of that hero. Such communication relies on institutions, media and public forms of representation.

3. Communication and representation

Figures and images of national heroes are communicated via different channels. Historiography is of great significance, particularly the form of historiography that is taught in schools, especially in states that have a public school system.[7] In addition, studies on nationalism have emphasised the central role of print capitalism, that is, commercial printing that grants large groups of people nearly simultaneous access to ideas articulated in identical fashion.[8] Recent research has pointed out that this concept has to be expanded to include a wider range of media, such as sound recording media,

for the period starting at the end of the 19th century, at the latest.[9] Among other things, they have contributed to the spread of nationalist songs and stage plays. In the 20th century, audio-visual media started playing a role as well. Artistic forms of hero (re)presentation, such as those in novels, stage plays, poems, songs, films, operas, paintings and statues, may contribute significantly to the establishment of national heroes, or may even create them as heroic figures in the first place. One example of the latter development is the Swiss national hero Wilhelm Tell, whose historical existence cannot be verified, but who was widely popularised through numerous monuments, texts, popular theatre pieces and finally by Friedrich Schiller's drama.[10] Furthermore, the funerary cult plays a particular role. This may involve the maintenance and presentation of the grave, the exhumation and transfer of remains, and anniversaries and rituals associated with the death of the national hero or his final resting place; in this context, it bears pointing out the parallels to the religious treatment of relics, which indicates that there are continuities in national hero adoration to earlier forms of hero adoration, especially in the religious realm.[11]

With regard to a comparable issue, that of national monuments in terms of their connection to "national consciousness", attention has been drawn to two constraints that also apply to the construction and mediation of national heroes. First, certain forms of communication and representation are available predominantly or exclusively to established and dominant groups, in certain cases to the state alone. This pertains, for instance, to the design of the curricula of public schools and the use of public spaces, e.g. through the erection of monuments and selecting street names. Marginalised and opposition groups have appreciably fewer possibilities of having their divergent idea of the nation heard, even though the actual extent of the suppression of their voice depends strongly on the degree of freedoms within a given state, such as the freedom of the press and artistic freedom. Second, artistic forms of hero (re)presentation cannot be reduced to their nationalistic component; it has an aesthetic dimension that may follow its own inherent laws.[12]

4. Typology

The concept of the national hero encompasses the adoration of figures singled out and perceived as being exceptional as well as the notion of a [heroic collective](#) to which all citizens can belong. Among the forms of expression related to the latter notion are war memorials and cemeteries, but also the practice of awarding medals and honours to living individuals. Numerous states, such as Uganda, Namibia and the Philippines, have memorial days or heroes' acres for their national heroes (see fig. 1), where the adoration of a larger group of named individuals is linked to the idea of honouring an anonymous collective, for instance in the form of a monument to the unknown soldier.

Fig. 1: National Heroes Acre, Harare, Zimbabwe



National Heroes Acre, Harare, Zimbabwe

Source: [User:ilf_ / Flickr](#)

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States and their governments or parliaments make vastly different efforts to standardise and bureaucratised the status of a national hero. Some countries have a highly formalised hero cult. For example, in Indonesia, individuals are declared national heroes and heroines posthumously by the parliament; the result is a complete list of clearly defined national heroes and heroines, which is expanded on occasion.^[13] In many states, such a formalised national hero status does not exist, meaning that the definition of national heroes is largely shaped by social and media discourses. However, this does not preclude state institutions from seizing on or influencing those discourses, for example by using their authority to name streets, squares and schools or to design the public space. The boundary between informal forms of hero adoration and the formal attribution of hero status by the state is thus fluid.

Equally as fluid is the differentiation between mythological and historical hero figures. There is a broad spectrum between historically unverifiable individuals such as Wilhelm Tell and individuals whose lives and deeds are well documented and – in their documented form – are widely known. Most instances of national hero veneration are likely situated between these extremes: the adoration of historically verifiable individuals is characterised by precisely the same processes of selective remembrance and repression that characterise nation-building.^[14] The memory of the hero is shaped by the media and the legacy of the hero becomes canonised. The commemoration of heroes often becomes ritualised. In some cases, the national hero achieves such high status that he is subjected to claims of rebirth, meaning that later individuals are branded as the reincarnation of the national hero.^[15] In hero commemoration, such characteristics and episodes are emphasised that are conducive to achieving hero status, and those characteristics and episodes that are detrimental to it are negated and reinterpreted.^[16] If there are historically verifiable biographic characteristics that correspond to a heroic [prefiguration](#), such as an ascent from simple conditions or death by martyrdom, while not guaranteeing hero status, they do foster an individual's elevation to national hero by contributing to a perception that his or her hero status is not a construct but an ontological fact.^[17]

Martyr status also contributes to obfuscating any ambiguities that the national hero's biography may exhibit, for the hero has made the greatest sacrifice for the nation. His death calls upon others to make the same sacrifice in order to partake in the radiance of his heroism and erases any doubt as to his loyalties and his devotion to the nation.[18] "The social function of the martyr is, on the one hand, exemplary, in that he is a model to follow; on the other hand, the deceased martyr is a sacred symbol of an authority around which society rallies. At the same time, martyrdom is an unambiguous political act [...]"[19] (See also [martyrdom](#).)

A distinct type of ambiguity inherent in the biography of many national heroes is the fact that these individuals lived at a time when the idea of the nation whose champions they were to posthumously become did not yet exist. For the elevation into the rank of national heroes is not limited to persons who were actually involved in the foundation or defence of a nation state, or at least the struggle for such a state, such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). It is also accorded to individuals who are remembered for deeds carried out long before the idea of a nation state emerged and who, in their own perspective, were not at all fighting for a nation defined by ethnicity, language, culture or a political project, all of which were ideas that were alien to them; rather, they fought for status, dynastic or economic interests. This includes for instance the Javanese Prince Diponegoro (1785–1855), a nobleman who has been officially designated a national hero of the Republic of Indonesia despite the fact that he had no notion of such a construct, which would not become the object of a nationalist movement until the 20th century. His efforts were directed primarily at the subjection of Java, and although he is revered today as an important fighter against the Dutch colonisers, he barely had an idea of who they were and what intentions they had.[20]

Admirers of such individuals often resolve these ambiguities by depicting the heroes as representatives of a primordial nation who awakened the slumbering national consciousness of their people for one significant moment in history. That hypothetical national consciousness might have been latent for centuries thereafter, or so the admirers argue, but the modern nationalist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries rekindled the flame of national sensibility in the *imitatio* of the earlier hero. One example of the construction of heroes in the context of such a primordial nationalism is the heroization of the late medieval military leader Skanderbeg, who in the 20th century was established as the Albanian national hero *par excellence* and the founder of the Albanian nation.

5. Case study: Skanderbeg as the national hero of Albania

Gjergj Kastrioti, known by his Ottoman name Skanderbeg (1405–1468), was a Christian nobleman and military leader who was originally in the service of the Ottomans, but renounced them in the 1440s to reign as a sovereign ruler of a small territory. For a time, he led an alliance of Albanian noblemen – and members of other Balkan ethnic groups – against the Ottomans and later allied himself with Naples and Venice. Many details of his life are contested as the source material is fragmentary, some of the biographical sources have a mythological character and, beginning in the early 20th century, nationalist and religious movements sought to appropriate the figure of Skanderbeg.

Fig. 2: Equestrian statue of Skanderbeg



Equestrian statue of Skanderbeg

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Only a few short decades after the prince's death, the Skanderbeg motif was reproduced in literary texts. The biography written by the Catholic cleric Marinus Barletius (died ca. 1512/13) and influenced by the genre of the chivalric romance, as well as numerous other works of literature and art, portrayed him as an *Athleta Christi* against the Muslims. In the context of the West European Philhellenism of the early 19th century, he was even perceived by some to be a Greek. In general, from the Early Modern Period through to the 19th century, Skanderbeg's adoration was predominantly situated in Central and Western Europe, rather than in Albania, where under Ottoman rule the majority of the population had adopted Islam and the figure of Skanderbeg possessed little attractive power.^[21]

Not until a national movement formed in Albania in the 19th century did the figure of Skanderbeg gain in popularity as one of the few motifs available to appeal to the linguistically and religiously diverse and politically fragmented population. The independence movement at the beginning of the 20th century used Skanderbeg's banner with the double-headed eagle perhaps for the first time during the attempt at a declaration of independence in Orosh in 1911, and particularly impressively and effectively during the national congress in Vlorë in 1912, which resulted in the first, short-lived Albanian state.^[22]

In the interwar period, different interest groups wrestled for power. Each of them was trying to use Skanderbeg for their own rule over and concept of the nation.^[23] During that period – as in the subsequent eras in the history of the Albanian nation state – the figure of Skanderbeg, on the one hand, served to legitimise political leadership, with the figure undergoing a number of redefinitions under different political systems. On the other hand, his persona was a locus of negotiation of Albanian identity as a majority Muslim country in Southeast Europe. Whether Islam is a constitutive part of the national identity or was adopted only grudgingly, temporarily, superficially and under duress; whether the country should align itself towards the Slavic world or towards Western Europe, or strive for autonomy to the point of isolation; whether the Albanians are predestined for monarchy, democracy or a socialist system; how the country should define its boundaries and its relations to Turkey, Serbia, Italy and territories populated by Albanians such as Kosovo and North Macedonia – these are all questions that have been contested bitterly since the 1920s or even earlier, and the

struggle over the interpretation of the national hero Skanderbeg was one of the battlefields.[24]

In 1921, the Orthodox bishop and Albanian nationalist Fan Noli (1882–1965), who led the bourgeois camp and was prime minister briefly in 1924, published the “History of Skanderbeg”, the first modern biography on the national hero, who served as his greatest role model alongside Jesus and Napoleon. Fan Noli endeavoured to remove any doubt about Skanderbeg’s military achievements in the war against the Ottomans. He labelled the war a “Crusade” and emphasised the Christian identity of Skanderbeg and his supporters. At the level of political objectives, he attributed Skanderbeg’s “epic” successes – according to his account, Albania was the last bastion against the Turks – among other reasons to the fact that the peasants of the country, in contrast to those of Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia, did not live as serfs in a feudal system and were therefore motivated to defend their freedom, which meant that Skanderbeg’s struggle in reality was a war of the entire people (see source 2).

Source 2: Fan Noli on Skanderbeg

Skanderbeg was great in three different respects and won a place in history as a peasant leader, strategist and crusader: The social class to which he belonged was that of the petty, or rather patriarchal aristocracy, but he identified himself with the Albanian free peasant class, and became their greatest and most typical national leader in their long war on two fronts against the Turkish feudal lords and the Venetian merchant princes. [...] The title of Champion of Christendom, given to him by Pope Nicholas V and confirmed by three succeeding Popes, can be left to him safely, as he deserved it, according to Calixtus III, „more than any other Christian Prince with his memorable achievements.“ He stopped Murad II and Mehmed II long enough to make them miss the boat for Rome. His long delaying action, coming at a critical period, did much to save Italy and Europe from the greatest calamity that could have befallen them, Turkish conquest. His share in this highly important service can hardly be overestimated.

Source: Excerpt from the English translation made by Fan Noli himself of his revised biography with which he earned his PhD in the USA: Noli, Fan Stylian: George Castrioti Scanderbeg (1405–1468). Diss. phil, Boston University, 1945, 208. Online at: <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/7259> (accessed on 09.10.2019).

Fan Noli’s characterisation of Skanderbeg thus situates Albania as a primarily Christian nation. Fan Noli describes Skanderbeg’s social status and his relationship to the people in such a way that one is compelled to assume an inherent inclination of the Albanians towards liberal democracy.

Ahmet Zogu (1895–1961), who seized the office of president in 1925, ruled dictatorially and crowned himself king in 1928, was naturally more interested in Skanderbeg’s monarchical qualities. Already early on in his political career, Zogu proclaimed himself to be the grandson of Skanderbeg: just like

Skanderbeg, Zogu wanted to be the leader who unites Albanians against their enemies after centuries of division. Skanderbeg's temporary alliance with Venice served Zogu as a model for Albania's proximity to Fascist Italy, while ignoring the military conflicts that had also taken place between Skanderbeg and Venice. More than any other ruler, Zogu used the Skanderbeg myth to legitimise both his system of government and his person by presenting himself in an *imitatio heroica* as the heir and even the outright reincarnation of Skanderbeg, which was actively supported by the Italian government. He refused to celebrate his coronation because Skanderbeg's helmet, which was the true crown of Albania according to Zogu, was at the Hofburg in Vienna and therefore unavailable; he did have a portrait made of himself including this helmet, however. In the cult of personality that he created around himself, he had himself (re)presented as the direct descendant of Achilles, Alexander the Great, Pyrrho and Skanderbeg.

The Italian occupation force that took over the country in 1939 also underlined Skanderbeg's relations to Italian cities and principalities, but not as that of a fighter for Albanian independence, but as that of a protégé of the Italian powers that, according to them, had always been the guarantor for Albania's freedom and prosperity throughout history. In 1943, the Italian occupiers were relieved by the Germans, who promptly instituted a Waffen-SS division called "Skanderbeg"; the Skanderbeg myth was obviously firmly established at that point in time.

The communists under Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) did not question Skanderbeg's national hero status, but they did have to deal with the problem that he had been a nobleman, feudal lord and monarch. In 1947, Hoxha declared that Skanderbeg had been a progressive relative to the context of his time since he had fought against the Turks and led the peasants, but that the feudal and monarchical elements of his activities had been regressive characteristics that the Albanian people did not overcome until later in history. Other elements of Skanderbeg's biography, such as his alliances with nobility and the support that he received from the pope, were discounted or marginalised by the communists.

Over the course of communist rule, this ambivalent view of Skanderbeg yielded to a monolithic image of the hero. Skanderbeg was now presented as a representative of the entire Albanian people. He was also portrayed as the founder of the first modern sovereign state with a central authority, and hence the precursor of the People's Republic of Albania. Hoxha's increasing paranoia was reflected in his view of Skanderbeg: according to Hoxha, he had been betrayed time and again by his domestic and foreign allies. At the same time, Skanderbeg was considered proof of Albania's European identity and the country's important role in the history of Europe. Starting from the end of the 1960s, in the context of the Albanian cultural revolution and the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Skanderbeg's death in 1968, observers noted that Hoxha increasingly identified himself with Skanderbeg. Hoxha was said to have been entrusted with the task of completing Skanderbeg's project, namely, the unification of Albania. At the end of his life, the personality cult around Hoxha had acquired such a dimension that he – as the only person theretofore in modern Albanian history – was portrayed as Skanderbeg's equal, or even superior to him. This did not harm the Skanderbeg cult; he found his way into school books, his visage appeared in statues, paintings, monuments, music, literary works and pseudo-folklore and he provided his name to streets, ships, schools and even a beer brand.

After the fall of communism in 1991, the memory of Skanderbeg was used to justify Albania's integration into international alliances and its transition into a democratic system after decades of isolationism. Under the conditions of market economy, the name Skanderbeg was increasingly used to name enterprises and consumer goods, blurring the boundaries between hero adoration and trivialisation.[25]

Ever since Albania attained its independence, the figure of Skanderbeg, despite its variable interpretation, has been a constant and central element of state representation and symbolism, for instance on banknotes, postage stamps, flags and in all manner of public spaces. This became especially manifest in a controversy that was sparked by the Skanderbeg biography of Swiss historian Oliver Jens Schmitt which was translated into Albanian in 2008. Its publication occurred at a time when Albania's identity was being bitterly debated. While one faction viewed Albania as a country upon which Islam had merely been forced and that was clearly European in terms of culture, despite centuries of Ottoman rule, the other faction viewed Ottoman rule and Islamisation more positively since they allowed the country to function as a bridge between Christendom and Islam, Orient and Occident. In this context, Skanderbeg's religious identity was a sensitive topic that Schmitt touched upon by hypothesising that Skanderbeg had not been Catholic originally, as often assumed, but Orthodox and that his temporary adoption of Islam was one in a series of conversions for reasons of expediency, as had been typical for the region and the time. Moreover, it was considered scandalous that Schmitt assumed personal motives behind a number of Skanderbeg's actions, rather than altruistic or even nationalistic ones; he pointed out the military leader's defeats and failures; and last but not least, the historian came to the conclusion that the price for Skanderbeg's constant wars had been paid primarily by the Albanian rural population, resulting in an outright depopulation of the areas defended by Skanderbeg.

Schmitt's book, or at least the general demythologisation of Skanderbeg, met with approval on the part of some Albanian intellectuals and historians who felt that a critical review of their own history was overdue. One commentator noted that the image of a foolhardy war hero such as Skanderbeg was not suited for modernity since it served primarily to stoke a sentiment against the Turkish and Slavs. However, the book was heavily attacked both in Albania proper and in diaspora communities. While previous historical studies that contradicted nationalist ideas, for example with regard to the origins of the Albanians, had barely attracted the attention of the Albanian public, the situation was different with Schmitt's Skanderbeg biography. The reason for that might be the distinct affective impact of hero narratives. Among other things, critics accused Schmitt of serving the interests of Albania's enemies, such as the Turks, Slavs and in particular the Serbs, by defaming Skanderbeg. As a non-Albanian, Schmitt was frequently denied the right to pass judgment on the figure of Skanderbeg at all.[26]

In the debate about the framing of the national hero, "the mentality of a generation persists who time and again perceived their country as an object of the diplomacy and warfare of larger powers and sees in Skanderbeg the counter-model: Albania as a factor in world politics; an Albania that negotiates eye-to-eye with the great powers or fights against them." [27]

The example of Skanderbeg thus illustrates the functions that a national hero may assume and that make him so indispensable for his community of admirers: through his fame and victories, the nation

that he represents also attains fame and greatness. A nation that has heroes with international renown may itself lay claim to being perceived and respected on the international stage. In the case of Skanderbeg, large portions of the public associate the nation and the national hero with each other such that a deconstruction of the hero myth is understood as an attack on the nation itself. (See the texts by Ismail Kadare and Bamir Topi in sources 3 and 4.)

Source 3: Ismail Kadare: The demythologisation of Gjergj Kastrioti, a disgrace for the nation

The demythologisation of the figure Gjergj Kastrioti is one of the blemishes on the Albanian nation. There are a number of authors who have strived to achieve it in the most shameless way possible. This problem runs deep and is of fundamental importance to the Albanian nation. Demythologising the figure of Gjergj Kastrioti equals an attack on the concept of liberty.

The aim is to persuade us that Gjergj Kastrioti was a negative figure in Albanian history. In all its odiousness, this is an entirely old story. There have been theories on this before. The first of these theories was proposed roughly 200 to 300 years ago by our neighbours. Even before them, however, the Turks had provided their commentary on the subject because Gjergj Kastrioti was to them a renegade, traitor and enemy. A part of the Albanian people that may be counted among the renegades has tried to endorse this theory.

Being against Gjergj Kastrioti means preferring servitude to freedom, and Albania would be the first country in Europe to do so. It would be the first country in Europe to burden its history with a major, ugly stain that will not be removed for centuries. Perverted people with a pseudo-intellectual soul are uniting to wage this campaign.

Gjergj Kastrioti is the figure that symbolises Albania's unity with Europe. There has never been such a nefarious campaign in our history, and if we accept it, we will be the most undignified nation in Europe.

Source: Ismail Kadare: Çmitizimi i Gjergj Kastriotit, turpi i kombit, Shekulli Blog, 18.11.2008. Online at: <http://blog.shekulli.com.al/2008/11/18/cmitizimi-i-figures-se-gjergj-kastriotit-eshte-nje-nga-turpet-e-kombit/> (accessed on 10.08.2010). Translated from the German version published in: Schmidt-Neke, Michael: "Skanderbegs Gefangene. Zur Debatte um den albanischen Nationalhelden". In: Südosteuropa 58.2 (2010), 273-302, 286-287.

Source 4: Bamir Topi: Skanderbeg and the wretchedness of those attacking him

Centuries ago, on 17 January 1468, the supreme leader of Albania, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, departed this life to become the most vital personality in the entire history of Albania. Fan Noli [1882–1965], who studied him his whole life, confirmed this shortly before his death: “I sometimes ask myself whether there can be any individual today who is as vital as Skanderbeg.” He was reality, model and symbiosis of something sacred, of the struggle for freedom against bondage. He was the leader of a just and heroic defensive struggle and a man who created a state. The impact of this achievement will never fade. It was the foundation for the national rebirth until November 1912, in the sublime pursuit of an independent Albanian state, of the core of the national identity and its contemporary consciousness. [...]

It was not his own principality that was important to him, but the unification of Arbanon. His heroic struggle is a reflection of the Albanians’ volition, not his personal interests. The 25-year resistance shone for centuries afterward in the people’s subconscious as folklore and constant narrative, fostering rebellions again and again. The struggle for Kosovo’s freedom and independence was also inspired by the memory of the hero. Some envy us our national hero, his deeds, his fame and the relations that he maintained between his nation and the political and military Europe of his time, and these days they are attempting to present him in a new light. [...] Today, this or that enslaved spirit equipped with regressive courage is trying to alienate Skanderbeg’s role from our history or from the history of European civilisation. This is a pathetic attempt because history does not accept any lessons, but gives them. [...]

Today, Albanians in the entire Balkans see in Skanderbeg and his Arbanon a great model of integration into the family of nations that is a united Europe. Thanks to him, our history in that period is a renowned part of European history, which must certainly acknowledge Skanderbeg as an outstanding personality. Today, Albania joins NATO and is taking important steps in the direction of the EU, and in these acts, I see the embodiment of the oldest desires of the Albanians to live in peace, security and freedom within their natural family that is Europe, the family whose protector was Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg.

Source: Bamir Topi: Skënderbeu dhe mjerimi i atyre që e sulmojnë, Shqip, 18.01.2009. Online at: <http://www.gazeta-shqip.com/artikull.php?id=57140> (accessed on 10.08.2010). Translated from the German version published in: Schmidt-Neke, Michael: “Skanderbegs Gefangene. Zur Debatte um den albanischen Nationalhelden”. In: Südosteuropa 58.2 (2010), 273-302, 293-294.

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- 2 Cf. Langewiesche, Dieter: "Vom Scheitern bürgerlicher Nationalhelden. Ludwig Uhland und Friedrich Ludwig Jahn". In: *Historische Zeitschrift* 278.1 (2004), 375-398.
- 3 Cf. Anderson: *Imagined Communities*, 2006, 6.
- 4 Langewiesche: "Vom Scheitern bürgerlicher Nationalhelden", 2004, 376. In the original German: "Im Nationalhelden entwirft die Gesellschaft ihr Selbstbild, mit dem sie in die Geschichte blickt, um die Gegenwart aus der Vergangenheit zu rechtfertigen oder auch zu kritisieren – ein Geschichtsbild, mit dem immer auch Zukunft eingefordert wird, ganz gleich ob es die Gegenwart preist oder verwirft. Der Nationalheld dient dazu, diese Geschichtsvisionen, mit denen die Vergangenheit auf die Gegenwart ausgerichtet wird, vor aller Augen zu stellen, ihnen öffentliche Geltung zu verschaffen und damit Wirkungsmacht zu verleihen. In dem Bild, das man von dem Nationalhelden zeichnet, werden die Eigenschaften formuliert, in denen sich ein Staat, eine Gesellschaft nach innen als Einheit erkennen will und mit denen sie sich nach außen abgrenzt. Im Angesicht des Nationalhelden entscheidet sich also, wer zur Nation gehört und wer nicht, wie sich diese Nation in ihrer Eigenheit bestimmt und was sie ausschließt. Deshalb ist der Nationalheld immer eine umstrittene Figur. Wer einen Nationalhelden erschafft, wer festlegt, welche Tugenden er verkörpert, für welche Vergangenheit und Ziele er steht, darf hoffen, im Deutungskampf um das Selbstverständnis der Nation zu siegen. Bei der Erschaffung von Nationalhelden geht es also um Machtkämpfe. Gekämpft wird um die politische Symbolik, in der sich die Nation repräsentiert sieht."
- 5 Cf. Langewiesche: "Vom Scheitern bürgerlicher Nationalhelden", 2004, 375.
- 6 Cf. Todarova, Maria: *Bones of Contention. The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero*. Budapest 2009: Central European University Press.
- 7 Cf. Hutchins, Rachel D.: "Heroes and the renegotiation of national identity in American history textbooks: representations of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, 1982–2003". In: *Nations and Nationalism* 17.3 (2011), 649-668; Ranger, Terence: "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe". In: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.2 (2004), 215-234; Shimony, Tali Tadmor: "The Pantheon of national heroprotoypes in educational texts. Understanding curriculum as a narrative of national heroism". In: *Jewish History* 17 (2003), 309-332.
- 8 Anderson: *Imagined Communities*, 2006, 37-46.
- 9 Fahmy, Ziad: *Ordinary Egyptians. Creating the Egyptian Nation through Popular Culture*. Stanford University Press 2011: Stanford.
- 10 Cf. De Capitani, François: "Wilhelm Tell". In: *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, 17. Dezember 2013. Online at: <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/017475/2013-12-17/> (accessed 09.10.2019).
- 11 Cf. Todarova, Maria: *Bones of Contention*, 2009.
- 12 Nipperdey, Thomas: "Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert". In: *Historische Zeitschrift* 206.1 (1968), 529-585.
- 13 Cf. Barnard, Timothy P.: "Local Heroes and National Consciousness. The Politics of Historiography in Riau". In: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 153.4 (1997), 509-526; Schreiner, Klaus: "The Making of National Heroes. Guided Democracy to New Order". In: Schulte Nordholt, Henk

(Ed.): *Outward Appearance. Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden 1997: KITLV Press, 259-290; Schreiner, Klaus H.: "'National Ancestors'. The Ritual Construction of Nationhood". In: Chambert-Loir, Henri / Reid, Anthony (Eds.): *The Potent Dead. Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*. Crows Nest und Honolulu 2002: Allen & Unwin / University of Hawai'i Press, 183-204.

- 14 Cf. Renan, Ernest: *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Paris 1991: Bordas.
- 15 Cf. Todorova: *Bones of Contention*, 2009, 477-501; cf. also Roces: "Rizal and the martyrs", 2009.
- 16 Cf. Valenzuale, Maria Theresa: "Constructing National Heroes. Postcolonial Philippine and Cuban Biographies of José Rizal and José Martí". In: *Biography* 37.4 (2014), 745-761.
- 17 Cf. Todorova: *Bones of Contention*, 2009, 191-201.
- 18 Cf. Shimony: "The Pantheon", 2003, 317.
- 19 Cf. Todorova: *Bones of Contention*, 2009, 455.
- 20 Cf. Anderson: *Imagined Communities*, 2006, 11, footnote 4; Anderson, Benedict: "Indonesian Nationalism Today and in the Future". In: *Indonesia* 67 (1999), 5.
- 21 Cf. Schmidt-Neke, Michael: "Nationalism and national myth. Skanderbeg and the twentieth-century Albanian regimes". In: *The European Legacy. Toward New Paradigms* 2.1 (1997), 1-7, 1; Schmidt-Neke, Michael: "Skanderbegs Gefangene. Zur Debatte um den albanischen Nationalhelden". In: *Südosteuropa* 58.2 (2010), 273-302, 273-274.
- 22 Cf. Elsie, Robert: *Historical Dictionary of Albania*. Lanham 2010: Scarecrow, 444; Schmidt-Neke: "Nationalism and national myth", 1997, 2.
- 23 Cf. Schmidt-Neke: "Nationalism and national myth", 1997, 2.
- 24 Cf. Schmidt-Neke: "Skanderbegs Gefangene", 2010.
- 25 Cf. Schmidt-Neke: "Nationalism and national myth", 1997, 2-6.
- 26 Cf. Schmidt-Neke: "Skanderbegs Gefangene", 2010.
- 27 Cf. Schmidt-Neke: "Skanderbegs Gefangene", 2010, 283. In the original German: "[...] wirkt hier die Mentalität einer Generation weiter, die ihr Land immer wieder als Objekt von Diplomatie und Kriegführung größerer Mächte wahrnahm und in Skanderbeg das Gegenmodell findet: Albanien als Faktor der Weltpolitik, ein Albanien, das mit den Großmächten auf Augenhöhe verhandelt oder gegen sie kämpft."

7. Selected literature

Langewiesche, Dieter: "Vom Scheitern bürgerlicher Nationalhelden. Ludwig Uhland und Friedrich Ludwig Jahn". In: *Historische Zeitschrift* 278.1 (2004), 375-398.

Schreiner, Klaus: "The Making of National Heroes. Guided Democracy to New Order". In: Schulte Nordholt, Henk (Ed.): *Outward Appearance. Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden 1997: KITLV Press, 259-290.

Shimony, Tali Tadmor: "The Pantheon of national heroprotoypes in educational texts. Understanding curriculum as a narrative of national heroism". In: *Jewish History* 17 (2003), 309-332.

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Valenzuela, Maria Theresa: "Constructing National Heroes. Postcolonial Philippine and Cuban Biographies of José Rizal and José Martí". In: *Biography* 37.4 (2014), 745-761.

8. List of images

- 1 National Heroes Acre, Harare, Zimbabwe

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- 2 Equestrian statue of Skanderbeg

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