Abstract

Heroes and victims – how to create Identity

The 19th century saw the invention of the national hero. His main function was to serve as an ideal for the nation, representing its virtues and values. The heroes of nations were to inspire its people. Each war and suffering in Europe produced new heroic figures. Fifty years ago countries occupied by Nazi Germany commemorated their occupation by underlining their heroic deeds of its population. Even the victims of the holocaust were memorialized through the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. For example Isaac Schwarzbart explained at the World Zionist Congress in 1954 that: “the imagination and hearts of people cling to deeds of courage, sacrifice, heroism, shining examples of self-defense, strength and pride, rather than to mourning over general calamities, passive defeatism, and destruction.”

At the end of the 20th century a change took place in Europe and the hero seemed to have disappeared and any longer did recognition being fought for through heroic deeds but through victimhood. The commemoration of the Holocaust for example does not longer take place on the day of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto but on the day of the liberation of Auschwitz. The cult of the heroes has been replaced with a competition between the victims for striving for recognition of their unique historic suffering.

This change can be illustrated very well with the case of Latvia. After Latvia regained independence in 1990, the national hero vanished from the contrary and it’s the role as a victim became the emblem of the regained independence. The country did not lack “heroes”, there were many possibilities for the creation of a national hero, but they did not seem to fit the new state. The path Latvia chose by rejecting or refusing to create heroic self-images had an lasting impact on the society. This presentation will discuss the consequences of this changes.

Markus Meckl