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Tracing National Identity and Historical Consciousness through Metahistorical Events: The Impact of the Battles of Didgori, Lake Peipus, and Kosovo Polje on Collective Memory and Political Action

Introduction

History is not only chronology, nor mere cause and effect relationship, nor an exclusive result of materialistic interactions between social groups. Sometimes, history manifests a spirit that transcends human reason and that can shape the identity of nations as well as the rise and fall of civilizations. When history evolves from a list of sequential, mechanical, progressive facts into an idealistic, ideological, and mythic notion it becomes metahistory. Metahistory considers historical events as immutable values and ideal manifestations that transcend history and that remain in the collective memory of nations. As such, it deprives history of its status as a core of factual truth, pivots on narrative as the substance of historicity, and intertwines history with ideology and rhetoric.[1] When historical events transform into metahistorical, a nation forges its identity and its *Weltanschauung* around them, using them as lenses to describe the surrounding reality, to relate to other nations, and to study the evolution of civilizations. In other words, metahistorical events persist in one nation's consciousness – and subconsciousness – beyond their concrete unfolding, as part of the folk's collective memory.

Metahistory is based upon what may be called the "mythology of dates". Chronological dates are perceived as historical moments that mark the cornerstone for the birth of a nation, the emergence of a civilization, or the outbreak of a revolution. In 1936, during one of his speeches to the vast crowds, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini stated that the year 1915 – when Italy entered World War One – represented the crucial year for the history of the Italian people that may be equalled to the years 476 (the demise of the Western Roman Empire), 1492 (the discovery of the Americas), and 1815 (the European Restoration after Napoleon's defeat): this represented a typical example of transformation of historical dates into idealistic metahistorical narratives and rhetorical devices. Metahistorical narratives are common to all nations and often commemorate the core events of a civilization: for example, the Protestant Reformation (1517) for Germany, the Glorious Revolution (1689) for England, the American Revolutionary

[1] White, *Metahistory*.

War (1775-1783) for the United States, the French Revolution (1789) for France, and the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) for Russia.

Oftentimes, nations refer to metahistorical dates that describe a decisive battle that affected, for the good or the bad, their evolution or survival. Marathon (490 BC), Teutoburg Forest (9), Châlons (451), Poitiers (732), Lechfeld (955), Hastings (1066), Liegnitz (1241), Tannenberg (1410), Orléans (1429), Constantinople (1453), Mohács (1526), Lepanto (1571), the Spanish Armada defeat (1588), Vienna (1683), Poltava (1709), Lexington (1775), Trafalgar (1805), Leipzig (1813), Waterloo (1815), Sedan (1870), Vittorio Veneto (1918), Stalingrad (1943) are just few examples. Each of these battles implied either the fulfilment of a nation's independence or unification, the assurance of a nation's survival, the rise of a great empire and the decrease of another, or a national catastrophe. In this sense, battles – both when they are won or lost – are the clearest example of metahistorical events capable of creating national identity and collective memory.

Through the examples of Georgia, Russia, and Serbia, this article wishes to investigate the role of metahistorical events, specifically military campaigns that culminate in decisive battles, as instruments for shaping the national identity and collective memory of nations. Moreover, it attempts to highlight how in contemporary history metahistorical events have been exploited by socio-political elites to rally their political agenda. Since battles are in itself violent manifestations of political clashes that imply death, sorrow, and mourning, they are particularly effective in stirring the people's emotions, which can be used as catalysers for political mobilisation. This is the reason why metahistory often does not keep an important event in the realm of historiography, literature, or folklore, but exploits it for recurring claims and revindications associated to the spheres of coeval politics and geopolitics.

The article is divided as follows. A first introduction will review the scholarly debate in social sciences dealing with national identity and historical consciousness, describing the core anthropological aspects that characterize a social group as a "nation", and will highlight the role of metahistorical events as key parameters to assess the construction of peoples' collective memory. The main part of the contribution will focus on three cases, namely the battle of Didgori for Georgia, the battle of Lake Peipus for Russia, the battle of Kosovo Polje for Serbia. Specifically, these sections will highlight how the three battles have decisively wrought the national identity and collective memory of Georgians, Russians, and Serbs. Particularly, they will focus on the comparative value given by the results of the battles: with two cases resulting in victory and one in a draw, but all celebrated as a time of a higher victory of God and of the destiny of the Nation. Through this point of view, these sections highlight the ethno-symbolist

meanings of these battles and how they have been propagandised by the modern and contemporary national narrative. Finally, the conclusion will recapitulate the importance of these metahistorical events, underlining their specific coeval interpretation and how they still stimulate a debate about nation and identity, the West versus the East, religious extremism, and the clash of civilizations.

National identity and historical consciousness: An overview

What is national identity? The question has fuelled endless debates among social scientists. In order to understand what national identity entails, the concepts of "nation" and "identity" need to be briefly examined.

First, let us consider the latter concept. In sociology and anthropology, the concept of identity refers to the perception that an individual has of himself, both at a personal and societal level, making him unique and distinctive. The anthropology of identity has been divided into ethnic identity, which refers to a shared ancestry or fictive kinship, and culture identity, which describes shared representations, norms, and practices.[1] An attempt to define ethnic identity was carried out by two main scholarly debates. The first pivoted on the interpretation given by primordialism and instrumentalism. According to primordialism, ethnic identity is deeply rooted in collective experiences that shape a group's historical evolution, are self-sustaining, and are not dependent on falsification by individuals.[2] On the contrary, instrumentalism believes that ethnic identity rose as a consequence of manipulation by political entrepreneurs seeking political gains.[3] The second debate hinged on the contraposition between constructivism and essentialism and questioned whether ethnic and national communities were the result of a conscious creation or whether they developed spontaneously out of pre-existing communities. A strand of scholars[4] argued the importance of pre-existing ethnicities in a modern context for the development of ethnic identities, while another believed ethnicities and nations to be entirely modern creations forged by the industrial civilization and the modern, Westphalian state.[5] Some scholars who promoted the anthropology of identity not only focused on the political-ideological aspects but attempted to understand the deep ontological soul of identities.[6]

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1 Eriksen, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 43.
2 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
3 Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Africa*; Cohen, *Two-dimensional Man*.
4 Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*; Smith, *National Identity*.
5 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Gellner, *Nationalism*.
6 Cohen, *Self-consciousness*; Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

Second, the term nation – which derives from the Latin word "*natio*", meaning birth, folk, tribe, or kinship – refers to a community of individuals who share certain characteristics such as geographic location, culture, language, religion, history, traditions, ethnicity and possibly statehood. National consciousness is also crucial for the detection of a nation. Smith defines a nation "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members".[1] Likewise, Gellner[2] defines a nation as an ethnic group who either controls a state or who have leaders that aim at doing so. Instead, Anderson disconnects the abstract imagined community of the nation from a particular ethnic group.[3] Moreover, Boas[4] acknowledges that nations emerged throughout history and did not exist from time immemorial, nor do they represent a community of racial descent. When exploited by demagoguery, the ideas of nation and *ethnos* may become the political reification or construction of a form of authorized version of culture, establishing artificial boundaries, moulding the past to fit contemporary needs, inventing traditions to guarantee a sense of continuity with the past, and nurturing ideologists and politicians who build their agenda on national chauvinism, ethnic contraposition, and xenophobic attitudes.[5] Today, the debate around nationhood grounds on four main arguments: there exists a complex relationship between ethnicity and culture; ethnicity characterizes two or more groups, never one single group; ethnicity represents the durable and systematic message of cultural differences among groups; and ethnicity is contingent on a situation and not inherent.[6] Recent history has demonstrated, like in the cases of the Yugoslav wars or in the Rwandan genocide, that ethnic affiliation may represent the core aspect to explain the outbreak of civil conflicts. However, even if ignited by ethnonational justifications, most civil conflicts present similar features, including competition over scarce resources and the narrative of greed and grievance.[7] This suggests that ethnic affiliation triggers feelings of hatred that are rooted in deeper socioeconomic cleavages. Although most ethnic conflicts are fought over resources that are perceived as scarce – territory, political representativeness, or socioeconomic status –, they all appeal to collective identities based on notions of kinship, historical-geographical traditions, or religious worship. Many studies have attempted to explain the historical origins of nationhood,

1 Smith, *National Identity*, p. 14.
2 Gellner, *Nationalism*.
3 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
4 Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life*, p. 92.
5 Eriksen, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 46.
6 Eriksen, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 46.
7 Collier, Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*.

underscoring the importance of state centralization, prolonged warfare, standardisation of vernacular languages, the diffusion of mass literacy, the spread of the press, and the state-sponsored educational system for the development of the concept.[1]

Therefore, national identity is the combination of the concepts of nationhood and anthropological identity. Specifically, national identity refers to the concept of nationality, i.e., the idea that a group of people who share some common features form a nation and to the intensity of an individual's attachment to his respective nation. In this sense, national identity represents a synonym of nationality[2] and nationality embodies an identity that implies historical continuity.[3] National identity, which pivots on the collective sentiment of a nation, has been defined as "the maintenance and continuous reproduction of the patterns of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that particular heritage and those values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions".[4] Another definition describes it as "a collective sentiment based upon the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most attributes that make it distinct from other nations".[5] For some, national identity makes a group believe to have some common features,[6] while others focus on how it contributes to shaping national languages.[7] According to Hobsbawm, national linguistic homogeneity in multi-ethnic and plurilingual polities can be obtained only through mass compulsion, expulsion, or genocide: for instance, Poland could standardize the Polish language only because its Germans were expelled to the West, its Lithuanians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians detached to the Soviet Union in the East, and its Jews slaughtered.[8] Whereas for ethno-symbolists national identity is conceived as rooted in premodern ethnic and religious affiliations,[9] for modernists it represents a product of modernity.[10] In other words, ethno-symbolism believes in a cultural continuity between traditional and modern expressions of national identities, while modernism highlights the structural disjointedness, arguing that no national identity existed prior to the modern era. At the same time, empiricists define national identity through empirical evidence stemming from large-scale surveys

1 Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*.
2 Williams, *National Identity*.
3 Miller, *On Nationality*.
4 Smith, *Interpretations of National Identity*, p. 30.
5 Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, p. 1.
6 Fawn, *Ideology and National Identity*.
7 Joseph, *Language and Identity*.
8 Hobsbawm, *Language, Culture, and National Identity*, p. 1071.
9 Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism*; Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict*; Smith, *Nations and Modernism*.
10 Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*.

conducted among a population,[1] while interpretivists try to grasp national identity in everyday behaviour.[2] Moreover, a strand of the literature believes that there is little evidence to prove the existence of national identities, whether before or after modernity.[3] However, the appeals to preserve and safeguard an authentic national identity is often the expression of specific ideological discourses.[4] National identity can easily ignite the ideology of nationalism, which is nurtured by phenomena like religious, linguistic, ethnic, or historical affiliation. Unlike national identity, nationalism represents an ideological doctrine and practice whose "presence, intensity and prevalence can be corroborated empirically".[5] Furthermore, nationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon since it required the growth of modern and powerful states for its affirmation, like the examples of pan-Germanism, pan-Slavism, or pan-Americanism show vis-à-vis, respectively, Germany, Russia, and the United States.[6] The philosophy of nationalism rests upon several assumptions like the idea that the world is naturally divided into nations with unique features, that nations are the core of political power, that nations offer independence and freedom to humans, that international and domestic peace can be achieved only through the self-determination of nations, and that nations can only be fulfilled in sovereign nation-states.[7] In this regard, nation-states embody political entities represented by an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous population.[8] As an ideological thrust that idealizes nationhood, nationalism expropriates individual identity transferring it to an abstract collective bond by some similar features.[9] Consequently, ideologies like cosmopolitanism or internationalism – be it liberal or Marxist – are perceived as deadly threats to national collective identity since they promote unpatriotic attitudes and miscegenation.

Finally, historical consciousness represents the understanding of the temporality of historical experience or how past, present and future are thought to be connected in the unfolding of a nation's evolution.[10] The spirit of historical consciousness does not rest upon the mere remembrance and transmission of the past but in the way people interpret the present. In other words, historical consciousness exceeds the exclusive preoccupation with what occurred in the past becoming history, using this knowledge

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1 Coakley, *National Identity*; McCrone (et al.), *Who are We?*; Smith, Kim, *National Pride*.

2 Edensor, *National Identity*; Mackey, *The House of Difference*; Reicher, Hopkins, *Self and Nation*.

3 Malešević, *The Chimera of National Identity*; Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence*; Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*.

4 Malešević, *The Chimera of National Identity*, p. 273.

5 Malešević, *The Chimera of National Identity*, p. 286.

6 Bouchard, *Coming Out of Hibernation*, p. 137.

7 Smith, *Nations and Modernism*, p. 187.

8 Hobsbawm, *Language, Culture, and National Identity*, p. 1066.

9 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

10 Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*.

as an element in shaping the thoughts and actions that determine the present and the future. As a practice that is not confined to mere retrospective contemplation, historical consciousness draws conclusions from the past to set the goals of the future, creating a crucial interdependence with political action. Political action deriving from historical consciousness is never exclusively undertaken by individuals, but by the unending governmental apparatus that pursues a country's "grand strategy". However, historical consciousness is always deeply influenced by the national, social, and political groups in which it is conceived through collective memory. Moreover, historical consciousness can inspire politicians to seek the need for change,[1] or it can encourage them to pursue a specific political agenda. When combined with national identity, historical consciousness is wrought by some notable features such as images of past sufferings and injustice – e.g., the Balkan peoples' rhetoric of sorrow under the Ottoman rule –, the evocation of personal experiences to describe past events – e.g., a Frenchman stating today "*We* lost in 1815" –, the contraposition between indigenous settlers and allogenous invaders – e.g., the European first-comers vis-à-vis the Oriental, Ural-Altaic nomadic invaders of Europe, from Attila to Genghis Khan –, the reduction of social complexity to simplistic psychological formulas like the creation of the figure of a historical "enemy" – e.g. the Austrians for the Italians, the Germans for the French, the French for the English, the Russians for the Poles, and the Turks for the Greeks. Ultimately, historical consciousness creates the collective memory of a nation, which often is constituted by the remembrance of wars, battles, revolutions, invasions, or struggles for independence and freedom.

The battle of Didgori and the role of religious nationalism in Georgia

The Battle of Didgori (1121) was fought between the armies of the Kingdom of Georgia and the Seljuk Empire in Didgori, forty kilometres southwest of Tbilisi. The battle ended with a decisive victory of King David IV of Georgia over the invading Seljuk army led by Ilghazi and the subsequent reconquest of Tbilisi, which had remained in the hands of the Muslims for centuries and which became the capital of the Georgian kingdom. The victory at Didgori ushered Georgia's medieval "Golden Age" and is celebrated in Georgian chronicles as a "miraculous victory", while modern Georgians continue to remember the event every September in a festival known as *Didgoroba* [the Day of Didgori].[2] The Kingdom of Georgia had been a tributary of the Seljuk

[1] Schieder, *The Role of Historical Consciousness*.
[2] Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, p. 36.

Empire since the 1080s; however, in the 1090s the dynamic Georgian king David IV, taking advantage of the internal tensions of the Seljuk nation and the success of Western Europeans in the First Crusade, managed to establish a relatively strong monarchy and to reorganize his army in order to reconquer the lost Georgian lands and to expel the Turks. David revoked the tribute to the Seljuks in 1096, put an end to the seasonal migrations of Turks to Georgia, and retrieved various important fortresses in a series of campaigns from 1103 to 1118. Nonetheless, his main objective was the reconquest of Tbilisi, an ancient Georgian city that had been under the Muslim rule for over four centuries. The resurgent Georgian military energy led to a coordinated response from Muslims, who sent a combined army deployed near Didgori and Manglisi in mid-August 1121. The number of combatants as well as the course of the battle are described differently in contemporary historical reports. The strength of the Seljuk army varies from 200,000 to 600,000 units depending on Turkish, Georgian, Armenian, or European medieval sources. King David's army, composed by Georgians, Kipchaks and Alans, has traditionally been estimated at 55,000 men. After three hours of rough battle, the Seljuk troops were completely overwhelmed and forced to flee, leaving large quantities of spoils and prisoners to the victors. Due to the difference in the number of forces involved and the alleged invincibility of the Turks, the Georgians defined the battle as *dzlevai sakvirveli* [miraculous victory]. After the victory, king David moved relentlessly against the remaining strongholds of Muslim resistance and the following year, in 1122, he conquered Tbilisi, definitively expelling the Turks from Georgia, and expanding his sphere of influence up to Armenia.

Georgian identity began to shape from the first Georgian states in the first millennium BC up to the ninth century AD. Whereas language was the initial feature that contributed to create Georgian identity, the conversion to Christianity already in the fourth century AD imprinted indelibly Georgian national character. In modern times, the battle of Didgori has been transformed into a metahistorical event, moulding Georgian national identity and collective memory. Specifically, the battle has been interpreted in a nationalistic sense as the example of a crusade for the liberation and independence of the Georgian people from foreign, alien domination. What is crucial is that Georgian freedom could be achieved only through a religious war between Christendom and Islam, thus offering the base for connecting religion and nationhood in Georgia. In other words, the battle served the purpose of linking Georgian national identity and Georgian nationalism to the Christian Orthodox faith: in this sense, Georgian nationalism is a typical example of religious nationalism.

Today, to be Georgian means essentially to be a Christian Orthodox: "Georgianness" lies in "being Orthodox".[1] Georgian national consciousness, which reveals itself in art, literature, and traditions, is significantly reliant on language and a sense of homeland, nor could the period of Marxist-Leninist rule replace it with the principles of socialist realism.[2] Nationalism first appeared in Georgia in the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to intellectuals like Ilia Chavchavadze and it was initially directed against Russian imperial rule. Later, in the twentieth century, the main thrust of Georgian nationalism was the opposition towards the Soviet Union, the communist ideology, and Marxist atheism. Finally, between the 1980s and early 1990s, Georgian nationalism transformed into the movement for national independence.[3] It is interesting to highlight that when it first appeared Georgian nationalism represented a secular ideology aimed at emancipating Georgia from Russian imperial rule, and not a form of religious nationalism, as it turned to be after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[4]

Contemporary Georgian nationalism can be interpreted not only as religious but also as a typical example of ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is characterized by particularism and exclusivism, and is based on the principles of blood, kinship, and descent.[5] Unlike Ukraine or Kazakhstan, whose post-Soviet nationalistic manifestations have been considered examples of "civic nationalism", Georgia has expressed, like Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, a typical form of ethnic nationalism.[6] This kind of nationalism was the major factor that fostered the eruption of ethnopolitical strives in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and finds its origins in the response to Soviet socialist internationalism, which managed for a while to overcome ethnonationalism in the ethnically multifaceted Caucasus. Specifically, current Georgian nationalism represents a strand of ethnic nationalism, namely religious nationalism. Religious nationalism is somewhat typical of societies in which secular ties have begun to crumble, like in the post-Soviet and post-colonial environments, where individuals have turned to ethnicity and religion to ground social identities and political loyalties.[7] Typically, religious nationalism presents a two-fold essence: religious fundamentalism and xenophobic nationalism. Put simply, religious nationalism comprises nationalism characterized by shades of religiosity. In this context, the Georgian Orthodox Church plays a pivotal role. Most Georgians view their church and patriarch as the most trustworthy institution in Georgia. Although the 2002 constitutional agreement separates state and church and

1 Zedania, *The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia*, p. 125.
2 Tevzadze, *National Identity*, p. 439.
3 Tevzadze, *National Identity*, p. 439.
4 Zedania, *The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia*, p. 124.
5 Zedania, *The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia*, p. 121.
6 Zedania, *The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia*, p. 121.
7 Juergensmeyer, *Religion and Global Civil Society*.

guarantees religious freedom, the Georgian Church enjoys a privileged status. It often acts as a mediator for the neutralization of socio-political tensions. Post-soviet Georgian society still bears a troublesome relation between religiousness and democratic values and tolerance. Orthodox religious identity is still perceived as the precondition for belonging to the ethnic Georgian nation.[1] This does not surprise when considering that the Orthodox Church has been for centuries the most influential institution of Georgian society, safeguarding its identity from overwhelming neighbouring nations that professed Islam. In this sense, similarly to Armenians, the Christian faith saved Georgians from being assimilated by the Islamic world. Indeed, the historical legacy and the role of Orthodoxy in the Georgians' self-identification as a nation helped Georgian society to overcome the identity crisis experienced in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union. Today, the Georgian Church is not only an important social institution, but also a prominent centre of power projection, nourished by the authority and trust that enjoys among the nation. What is crucial is that Orthodoxy is not only viewed as a religion, but as a full-fledged national ideology. Georgian Orthodoxy is national in the sense that, being autocephalous, it represents the Church of the Georgian nation. In conclusion, religious nationalism plays the important role of connecting church and state in Georgia through a nationalistic discourse, with thorough implications for political institutions and civil society.

The battle of Lake Peipus, Russian patriotism, and the myth of the salvation of Mother Russia

The battle of Lake Peipus (1242) was fought near the current border between Russia and Estonia between the troops of the Principality of Novgorod led by prince Aleksandr Nevsky against the Knights of the Teutonic Order and their Livonian and Danish allies. The decline of Kievan Rus' dominance in the second half of the twelfth century was followed by the Mongol invasion of Russia in the first half of the thirteenth. Despite the constant pressures of neighbouring peoples, some Russian states gradually managed to acquire a scale of autonomy, among which the most important was the Principality of Novgorod. Located in the north-west of Russia and bordering with the Kingdom of Sweden and the Teutonic Order, its territory had been only partially ravaged by the Mongols. Novgorod's wealth relied on its commercial power due to the trade routes that crossed its territory, which connected the Baltic and the White Sea with Kiev and Constantinople. In 1240, Sweden, which was competing with Novgorod for political and cultural dominance in Finland, occupied Ingria, putting the trade routes of the city

[1] Chelidze, *Ethno-Nationalistic and Religious-Nationalistic Components*.

at risk. Under the command of Aleksandr Yaroslavich, prince of Novgorod, the Russian forces managed to defeat the Swedes in the battle of the Neva, a clash that attributed to the Russian prince the nickname "Nevsky". In the autumn of 1240, after that the Mongol invasions had undermined the might of the Russian states, the Knights of the Teutonic Order and their allied forces attacked and occupied Pskov and Izborsk, cities under the control of Novgorod. However, during the campaign of 1241, Aleksandr Nevsky, who was appointed as commander of the Russian forces, managed to retake Pskov from the crusaders. In April of 1242, Aleksandr annihilated the invaders at the battle of the Lake Peipus, also known as the "Battle on the Ice". Some claim that, after the defeat, the fleeing Teutonic Knights fell through the ice of the frozen lake due to the weight of their armours and drowned altogether, although it is likely that this detail was added later for adding a dramatic effect to the story.[1] The defeat of the Teutonic Knights and their allies by the forces of Novgorod ended the phase of the Northern Crusades in which Catholic forces attempted to subjugate, around 1240, the territories inhabited by Orthodox Slavs and pagan Finns and Balts in eastern Estonia. More importantly, it guaranteed the independence of the Principality of Novgorod and, in perspective, that of Russia.

Like the battle of Didgori, the battle of Lake Peipus was also transformed into a metahistorical event safeguarded by Russian collective memory. In modernity, the meta-historization of the event was reinvigorated especially by the 1938 movie *Aleksandr Nevskij* by Sergei Eisenstein. The film, a propaganda work of Soviet cinema, shows the clash between the Teutonic Crusaders supported by the Church of Rome and the Russians from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, that is as a clash between a subjugated proletarian mass led by a fearless hero, compared by the director to Stalin himself,[2] opposed to ruthless, imperialist conquerors. Eisenstein's movie was an obvious recall to the role of Germany in World War One, depicting the Germans as warlike Western invaders that have continuously attempted to subjugate Russia throughout history. Aleksandr's final speech invites anyone to come to Russia, as long as they do so in peace and not with manias of conquest, with a clear allusion to Nazi Germany, with its anti-communist agenda and its eastward expansion projects. Even if in the following year the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact would be signed, the movie appears as a gloomy omen when considering that only three years after its release Germany would yet again invade Russia. In this respect, the battle of Stalingrad in 1942-3 would become the "new" battle of the Lake Peipus.

[1] Anderson, *The Teutonic Order Kept at Bay*, p. 33.
[2] Bergan, *Sergei Eisenstein*, p. 305.

Aleksandr Nevsky's victory against the Teutonic Knights has been a recurrent theme during the Nazi invasion of Russia, or Great Patriotic War. Stalin's speech on 7 November 1941 marked the start of the Soviet resistance against the invading "German brigands" and incited the Soviet people to be inspired by Aleksandr Nevsky, among other key figures of Russian history, in contrasting the enemy. For the Russian mentality, the ultimate victory was not attributable to the Red Army, but rather to the *narod* [people] as a whole.[1] Victory was not ensured by Stalin or Zhukov, but rather by the heroic deeds of millions of people. The Russian people were at war not to defend Stalin, but what was dearest to them, that is *Matushka Rossiya* [Mother Russia].[2]

In this context, Russian nationalism has less to do with ethnicity or linguistics and much more with patriotism. Russian patriotism is built upon a recurrent theme: the salvation of the Russian motherland from foreign invaders. The idea of invaders that wish to violate and subjugate the Russian territory has created the myth of the salvation of "Mother Russia" from oppressors. Historically, this myth was nurtured by several foreign invasions, including the Mongol, the Teutonic, the Polish, the Swedish, the Napoleonic, the Wilhelmine, and the Hitlerite. Russian national patriotism depicts Russia as a defensive, peaceful country that is constantly attacked by aggressive, interventionist populations. The idea of a peaceful Russia that suffers from unprovoked foreign invasions is closely connected to the idea of "Russian Soul".[3] The "Russian Soul" would shape the nature of Russian people, characterizing them by a kind-hearted and hospitable nature. However, when the motherland is attacked, this "Soul" would stimulate Russians to wage war in defence of their homeland in a last man standing effort.

In conclusion, the battle of Lake Peipus has become a metahistorical collective memory. Whenever the Russians are or feel threatened by a foreign power, they recall the heroic deeds of Aleksandr Nevsky in combating and defeating the invading enemies. As metahistorical event, this battle has been transformed in a myth that – also thanks to Soviet cinematic propaganda – can mobilize millions of Russians in defence of their country. This is also the case of contemporary Russia under Vladimir Putin's government, a country deeply influenced by patriotism and conservatism that takes into high consideration historical consciousness and collective memory.

[1] Bouchard, *Coming Out of Hibernation*, p. 156.
[2] Bouchard, *Coming Out of Hibernation*, p. 157.
[3] Bouchard, *Coming Out of Hibernation*, p. 158.

The battle of Kosovo Polje and the metahistorical lore of Serbian martyrdom

The battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) is perhaps the most symbolic and iconic event in the history of the Balkans, comparable, at least for the Serbs, to the sacrifice of the Spartans at Thermopylae. The event concurred markedly in shaping the Serbian nationhood, a crusade mentality, and the Serbs' self-styled role as Europe's protectors.[1] Unlike Didgori and Lake Peipus, this battle represented in the best scenario a draw and in the worst a defeat. Better said, it represented a draw in the short term, but a defeat in the long since it allowed the Ottoman expansion into the Balkans, which would be halted only at Vienna in 1529 and, again, in 1683. During the fourteenth century, under the leadership of sultan Murad I, who reigned from 1359 to 1389, the Turks began a massive conquest of the Balkans, conquering one region after another. During the late Middle Ages, the Kosovo plain represented one of the most important crossroads of the Balkans and a valuable base for further expansions, making it an enviable target for sultan Murad.[2] On 15 June 1389, *Vidovdan* [Saint Vitus's Day] according to the Julian calendar, the Christian army made up of a coalition of Serbs, Bosnians, and Albanians commanded by the Serbian *knez* [prince] Lazar Hrebelyanovic confronted the mighty Ottoman forces. The troops of the Serbian coalition numbered around 25,000 men, while the Ottoman army around 50,000. The battle began with the advance of the Serbian cavalry, which destroyed the Ottoman left wing. The troops commanded by Vuk Brankovic also succeeded in annihilating the right wing of the adversaries, but the Ottomans were finally joined by conspicuous reinforcements and thus were able to defeat the opposing militias, tired and inferior in number. Almost all the Serbian nobility was exterminated on the spot together with *knez* Lazar. However, during the battle, the Serbian nobleman Milos Obilic managed to kill sultan Murad with a deception. After Murad's death, his son Bayezid I continued the Ottoman expansion into the Balkans and south-eastern Europe. Notwithstanding, the Kingdom of Serbia managed to survive for another century before finally falling under Turkish rule. Both armies suffered heavy losses, but for Serbia the outcome was catastrophic: a massive number of Serbian knights was slain, and the country saw most of its political and military elite disappear.

The myth of the battle of Kosovo Polje transcends the historical event itself, personifying the paramount example of metahistorical experience around which Serbian identity, collective memory, and nationalism have been wrought. Typically, Serbian

[1] Zimmerman, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, p. 11.
[2] Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, pp. 40-41.

nationalism is based on an ethnic interpretation of the history of the Balkans that contemporizes the past and historicizes the present through stories, symbols, and myths.[1] In this context, Kosovo Polje exemplifies a sort of "prism" through which Serbs interpret history, peoples, events and through which political mobilization and nationalist action is prompted.[2] Even today, the role of Kosovo Polje in the Serbian nationalist discourse is usually to provoke anti-Muslim and anti-NATO sentiments and to carry out Serbian irredentist or revisionist claims in the Balkans. The myth of Kosovo Polje, introduced in Serbian lore and traditions since the battle, shaped Serbian identity with the themes of victimization, violent struggle, justified revenge, and sacrifice for the national cause.[3] The cult of Kosovo coincides with a Serbian self-identification with the themes of death, sacrifice, martyrdom, religion, and heroic deeds. The themes of agony and victimhood that characterize Serbian identity recall similar examples, like for instance the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust. Moreover, *Vidovdan*, the specific day when the battle occurred – 15 June for the Julian calendar, 28 June for the Gregorian – has become a recurrent crucial date throughout Serbian history: for instance, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip to put an end to the Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina on *Vidovdan* (28 June 1914). Other important events connected with the history of Yugoslavia occurred on *Vidovdan*, like the emanation of the constitution of the Yugoslav state of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1921), the expulsion of Yugoslavia by Stalin from the Eastern Bloc (1948), the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars (1991), and the surrendering of Slobodan Milosevic to the authorities of the Hague (2001). Indeed, after Kosovo Polje, *Vidovdan* became for the Serbs the day of heroism and sacrifice that defined Serbian cultural identity.

If deprived of its religious component, Serbian nationalism would lose a major part of its inherent character. Thus, Serbian nationalism fostered by Kosovo Polje represents yet another example of religious nationalism – like in the case of the Croatian and the Bosnian. Basically, since Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks speak a variant of the same language – Serbo-Croatian – the core feature that defines their identity is the religious affiliation, which is, respectively, Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic. As a holy land ravaged and violated by infidels, Kosovo is viewed in religious, eschatological terms and is compared to the Passion and Death of the Christ, waiting for the Resurrection. For instance, Emmert describes Kosovo Polje as the "Golgotha" of the Serbian nation, that is the place of suffering and agony like the hill where Jesus suffered on the Cross.[4]

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1 Bieber, *Nationalist Mobilization*, p. 98.
2 Bieber, *Nationalist Mobilization*, p. 97.
3 Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*.
4 Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, p. 1.

In this sense, Kosovo is more than a geographical region, but it resembles the Christ himself. After 1389, the idea of the "Passion of Kosovo" created a typical psychology of suffering in the Serbian mindset, nurtured by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Since the battle, the church and the clergy have cultivated Serbian collective memory through sermons, teachings, and the sanctification of prince Lazar, considered "*tzar*" and martyr and sometimes portrayed in the icon while holding his severed head. Moreover, from 1346 to 1766, the seat of the patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church was in Kosovo, a land filled with Orthodox monasteries and churches – as Kosovo-Metohija, the former name of the region, illustrates. Being inherently religious, the Kosovo myth has been also named "Kosovo Covenant", referring to the idea that prince Lazar decided to sacrifice on the battlefield in order to gain the kingdom of heaven for the Serbian nation.[1]

The myth of Kosovo Polje played a special role in the 1990s during the breakup of Yugoslavia, where it has been massively exploited by Serbs for political purposes to contrast Bosniaks, Albanians, and, to a lesser extent, Croats. On the *Vidovdan* of 1989, Milosevic hold a speech at the Gazimestan – the memorial site commemorating the battle of Kosovo Poljie –where he did not exclude the possibility of armed battles in the future of Serbia's national development. General Ratko Mladic – one of the notorious perpetrators of the siege of Sarajevo and of the Srebrenica massacre – identified himself as Prince Lazar and the Bosnian Serbs as the Serbs who fought in 1389.[2] Both Radovan Karadzic and Mladic considered the war in Bosnia as the moment of revenge against the "Turks". The military operations conducted by him against the Muslim Bosniaks follow a narrative of vengeance and retaliation in the emotive context of Serbian metahistorical Kosovo Polje myth. The war in Bosnia in the attempt to forge a Greater Serbia was no common civil war but represented the final showdown to avenge 1389. Similarly, the war in Kosovo exemplified the re-enactment of the battle, where a smaller number of Christian Serbs was confronting the countless ranks of Muslim Albanians, like they did with the Turks in the past – although, ironically, in the battle of Kosovo Polje Albanians fought along with the Serbs. Despite NATO's intervention and the 2008 unilateral proclamation of independence, Serbia still claims the full sovereignty over Kosovo, which is seen as the core of the historical Serbian state and the historical see of the Serbian patriarchate. In contrast, Albanians claim to enjoy territorial rights over Kosovo maintaining that, as descendants of the Illyrians, they inhabited the Kosovar area – at the time, Dardania – long before the Serbs' arrival in the sixth century.[3]

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1 Malcolm, *Kosovo*.
2 Sell, *Slobodan Milosevic*.
3 Rogel, *Kosovo*, p. 169.

Conclusion

The battles of Didgori, Lake Peipus, and Kosovo Polje represented a turning point for the history and collective memory of three great nations. If Georgia would have lost, the Muslim rule over the country would have probably lasted much longer, Tbilisi could not be turned into the Georgian capital, and Georgian national identity shaped on religious affiliation would have perhaps disappeared. Maybe, without the victory at Didgori the Georgians would have converted to Islam, as occurred for many of them in the Ajaria region. Likewise, if Novgorod would have fallen under the rule of the Germans, the rise of the Russian nation might have been completely compromised. It is almost unimaginable to think how Russian history would have developed if the Teutonic Order would have converted the Russians to the Roman Catholic faith. At the same time, the defeat of the "western front" allowed Russian principalities to concentrate forces against the Mongols and eventually permitted the rise of Muscovy. Finally, if Kosovo Polje would not have occurred Serbian nationalism, with its typical anti-Muslim narrative, would perhaps not have developed. One can speculate whether, without Kosovo Polje, a Srebrenica would have taken place. The anti-Islamic terrorist attack conducted in 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand was carried out by an extremist who displayed on his rifle, among others, the name "Milos Obilic", the killer of sultan Murad at Kosovo Polje.

After nine hundred years, the battle of Didgori still re-echoes in the collective memory of the Georgian nation. In contemporary Georgian debate, Didgori can be interpreted through novel lenses. Following an ethnonationalist discourse, most Georgians can reinterpret it as the struggle against a new invader, namely Russia, who in 2008 intervened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, promoting the breakaway of the two regions. In this sense, since Didgori exemplifies the symbol of Georgian national and territorial unity, after the year 2008 its commemoration bears, in geopolitical terms, a clear anti-Russian character.

Instead, in the Russian case, Lake Peipus can be understood today as a new potential clash between the West – exemplified by NATO – and Russia. After the 2004 NATO enlargement, which involved former Soviet states in the Baltic, Moscow views the Alliance as the "new Western coalition of the Teutonic Knights" that threatens Russia's independence and survival. Through these lenses, NATO would represent the ultimate invading threat of the Russian space, against which Russian patriotism is ready to respond with the same vigour performed by Aleksandr Nevsky eight hundred years ago. To avoid this unpleasant scenario, NATO should put an end to its endless expansion towards the post-Soviet space, menacing Moscow's vital interests, aiming to the

neutralization – not integration – of countries contiguous to the respective spheres of influence, while Russia should renounce to the typical siege mentality based on the belief that other countries are constantly ready to invade its territory and build instead closer ties with fundamental partners like the EU and, after all, also NATO.

Finally, the meaning of Kosovo Polje in Serbian current debate affects the vision that Belgrade bears vis-à-vis important topics, including the potential accession of Serbia into the EU, as well as its troublesome relations towards the newly born Kosovar republic. The Serbian leadership has the power to choose whether to rely on an historical interpretation of modern politics, grounded on intolerant nationalist sentiments and a revanchist narrative, or to adapt to the new status quo, manifesting a constructive approach towards neighbouring countries after the Balkan nightmare of the 1990s. Still, the issue of Kosovo should be eventually solved through the participation of all actors involved, including Belgrade, and should not be in any way exploited by Tirana as a tool for implementing a Greater Albania, which would not be any better than a Greater Serbia.

Indeed, the three battles and their metahistorical role incite debates about the concepts of national identity and nationalism. They also pose infinite questions regarding the struggle between the West and the East, the difficult dialogue among religions and faiths, and the danger promoted by a clash of civilizations. To avoid present and future conflicts, perhaps the wisest choice would be to deconstruct metahistorical events, liberating them from the burden of political exploitation and chronological decontextualization: in one word, making them "historical" again.[*]

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