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Book Review

Rampart nations: Bulwark myths of east European multiconfessional societies in the age of nationalism

edited by Liliya Berezhnaya and Heidi Hein-Kircher, New York and Oxford, Berghahn

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The war against Ukraine beginning in 2014 and intensifying in 2022, has stimulated much journalistic commentary, well-informed and ill-informed, on Eastern Europe since the end of the Soviet Union, considered by Putin a geopolitical catastrophe for the *Russky Mir* (Russian World). This perspective is encouraged by the quasi-philosophy of Alexander Dugin that has similarities with those of the National Socialists Alfred Rosenberg, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt. It is a mystical philosophy derived from a belief in racial and cultural exceptionalism; and a mission to defend this in a world of friends and enemies, reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes. The western lands of the Russian Empire lost with the First World War and Bolshevik Revolution, were seen by nationalists as bulwarks of this exceptionalism, with its Eurasian identity. Recovered and extended by the Soviet Union after the Second World War, albeit veneered with a thin coat of 'socialist internationalism,' they were lost again after 1991, hence Putin's 'geopolitical catastrophe' and neo-imperialist wars.

A scholarly assessment of the history and cultures of Central and Eastern Europe is essential if we are to understand such challenges. This book is such an assessment. Edited by

Liliya Berezhnaya, research associate of the universities of Amsterdam and Leuven, and Heidi Hein-Kircher, the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East-Central Europe, Marburg, it is the first volume in a series on *New Perspectives on Central and Eastern European Studies*. The editors have made an excellent beginning to the series, focussing on the *bulwark* or *antemurale* myth by which border lands are believed to be a defensive barrier against threats from a hostile *Other*. This has been and continues to be a persistent theme in Eastern European and Russian nationalisms.

The book is comprised of four parts. *Part I. Background* has an editorial Introduction that offers a conceptual framework for ‘Constructing a Rampart Nation.’ Chapter 1, by Kerstin Weiland, considers ‘The Origins of *Antemurale Christianitatis* Myths: Remarks on the Promotion of a Political Concept.’ *Part II*, six chapters, 2-7, is entitled *(De)-Sacralizing and Nationalizing Borderlands*. The topics considered, titles summarised here, are the Romanian Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania (1700-1850); Lviv in late 19th and early 20th-century Polish travel guides; Ghetto as an ‘Inner *Antemurale*’ in 19th and early 20th century Galicia; Orthodox Crimea in the 19th century Russian Empire; monasteries in the East European borderlands (late 19th and early 20th centuries); Turkey as an anti-communist and anti-Russian bulwark in the 20th century. *Part III*, five chapters, 8-12, is entitled *Promoting Antemurale Discourses*. The topics are the absence of an *Antemurale* historical mythology from early 19th century Ukraine; *Antemurale* myths in Polish and Ukrainian schoolbooks of the Hapsburg Monarchy; maps, modern geographers and mediating the *Antemurale* myth; Russophobic polemic and the Christian Right in interwar Poland and Hungary; Viktor Vasenetsov’s *Warriors* and Russia’s bulwark myth. *Part IV*, two chapters, 13-14, is entitled ‘Reflections on the Bulwark Myths Today.’ The penultimate chapter, by the well-known Norwegian scholar Pål Kolstø, considers ‘*Antemurale* thinking as historical myth and ethnic boundary mechanism.’ The final chapter, by Paul Srodecki, University of Ostrava, provides concluding

thoughts on ‘Central and Eastern European bulwark rhetoric in the 21st century.’ There are fourteen contributors including the editors. Each chapter has a brief yet informative note of its author. There are also figures, maps, and an index. It is a rich and complex book and, it is not possible to consider the individual chapters in the detail they deserve given their uniform quality. Instead, I shall focus on the introductory and concluding *Parts*, together with three chapters from *Parts II* and *III*. This should give the reader a flavour of the book.

Liliya Berezhnaya and Heidi Hein-Kircher set out the conceptual framework of the book. They say: “Bulwark myths, otherwise called *antemurale* myths, are widespread in East European countries today, but also have a tradition dating back to early modern times” (1). Such myths have several components, most importantly the perceived cultural and territorial threat from an external *Other*; and the civilizing mission for which the community inside the bulwark must be mobilized in defence of its spatial security and culture. A claim to be a rampart nation was crucial for national identity and coherence in communities bordering continental empires, chiefly in “...today’s Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, but also in neighbouring states” (1); and for their European aspirations. The purpose of the book is to define such myths, examine how they functioned, and consider the individuals and groups that spread them in an age of nationalism.

This is done through case studies using varied methodologies but from the common perspective of political, social, and religious history. The editors do not claim a systematic or complete account of bulwark rhetoric in the region, with several questions remaining to be answered. For example, how did ideologies such as pan-Slavism affect bulwark myths? The book does show how such myths “...were, and today still are, appropriated by national movements to demarcate themselves from other denominational and ethnic groups” (28). Kerstin Weiland enhances these theoretical arguments in her excellent chapter on the historical origins of *Antemurale Christianitatis* myths; and their promotion as a political

concept, and as a semantic code. She argues that: “There is no such thing as the bulwark myth, but there is a plurality of myths related to specific contexts” (31). These national or regional discourses also have an European dimension, with a tension between them. She concludes: “A concept originally designed to further the idea of European integration and consensus was thus able to develop a disintegrative and conflict-provoking impact” (47).

In *Part II*, Zaur Gasimov, senior research fellow, German Orient Institute, Istanbul, contributes an excellent chapter on “‘The Turkish Wall,’ Turkey as an Anti-Communist and Anti-Russian Bulwark in the Twentieth Century.’ The chapter analyses anti-communist statements published and in speeches, by emigrant intellectuals both in their lifetimes and posthumously. This constituted a sustained critique that made Istanbul “...a unique Turkic and Turkish anti-communist bulwark, a certain *antemurale anti-communistatis*” (186). The chapter also considers Crimean Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and Turkestanis and their national causes “...whereby they proclaimed Turkey to be a sort of Turkic bulwark against the Soviets and Russia” (186-187). Gasimov shows that the terms of such discourses “...in many ways correspond with the European-Christian terminology of bulwark and *antemurale*” (187). However, they do not make use of such notions explicitly, although examples of their use do appear in Turkish Ottoman historiography; and in Turkish academic assessments of European perceptions of the Ottomans. The chapter is an interesting point of comparison for the notion of a rampart nation.

In *Part III*, Volodymyr Kravchenko, director of the Contemporary Ukraine Studies Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, considers ‘Why Didn’t the *Antemurale* Historical Mythology Develop in Early Nineteenth-Century Ukraine?’ It is an important contribution to what we know about the development of Ukrainian national identity. Following a historical survey, Kravchenko concludes that neither Ukraine in its modern form nor a mythology of a separate geopolitical identity existed,

although elements of *antemurale* myth are found in Cossack historical narratives. This is his short answer. The long answer is that it is the beginning of the 20th century when “...modern Ukraine began to construct its own symbolic national space, beyond the boundaries of the Rus World” (225). The publication of the seminal multivolume *Istoriia Ukrainy-Rus* (History of Ukraine-Rus) by Mykhailo Hrushevskiy (1866-1934) stimulated a conceptual revolution that laid “...the foundation for Ukraine’s own secular *antemurale* ideology as the eastern frontier of Europe” (226). Again, the First World War saw “...the subsequent integration of the western regions into the Ukrainian nation-state building process.” Kravchenko points out “...it took another hundred years for the *antemurale* mythology to gain a political dimension, and limited support” (226). He concludes that its future place in geopolitical discourse “...will be dictated by the strategy of survival in one of the most turbulent territories of Eastern Europe” (226). This is indeed what we now see with Russia’s renewed imperial assault on Ukraine.

And Russia? In *Part III*, Stephen M. Norris, Walter E. Havighurst Professor of Russian History, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, considers ‘Defenders of the Russian Land: Viktor Vasnetsov’s *Warriors* and Russia’s Bulwark Myth.’ This interesting chapter examines the painting *Bogatyri* (Warriors) by Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926), completed in 1898. It is, says Norris, a story worth telling. The three warriors were seen as defenders of Russian land and the values of sacred Orthodox culture, and the painting became a symbol of Russian cultural and national identity. This interpretation continued during the Soviet era, although Vasnetsov’s religious beliefs required caution. Norris argues that Vasnetsov’s canvas bulwark “...functioned as a national image that allowed critics to ‘see’ the nation as a ‘vivid, palpable, and tangible’ thing” (337). Norris gives a revealing account of contemporary curricular use of the painting to depict Russian patriotic masculinity that persists today. Norris argues that Vasnetsov’s “...painting has proved malleable to the articulation of a

specific Russian bulwark myth” (337). He concludes ominously of the *Bogyatri's* masculine patriotic essence: “No doubt they will continue to be called on to defend the Russian soil and act as a canvas bulwark again and again” (337). This is Art as Propaganda the use of which is not, of course, exceptional to Russia.

Part IV comprises two chapters. Chapter 13, by Pål Kolstø, is an interesting analysis of ‘*Antemurale* thinking as historical myth and ethnic boundary mechanism’. Kolstø identifies a typology of four boundary-constituting myths. These are the myth of *antiquitatis* or first inhabitants; the myth of being *sui generis* or possessed of an unique culture; the myth of *martyrium* or historical persecution; the myth of being *antemurale* or defenders of a distinct civilization against hostile enemies. The chapter analyses these, giving particular attention to the *antemurale* myth. Kolstø does this through examples. He considers contemporary usages by Milan Kundera and Samuel Huntington; *antemurale* thinking in Orthodox countries regarding an Orthodox neighbour; Belarusian *antemurale* thinking; Ukraine as an *antemurale* country; Georgia; and Russian attitudes towards its Orthodox neighbors. He concludes, perhaps unremarkably, that: “The myth of being *antemurale* is a boundary marker created by emphasising the cultural distance between groups” (365). The mental wall is constructed using cultural, historical, religious, and linguistic evidence. Kolstø’s specific contribution, however, is the assertion that it is not cultural differences that stimulate the myth, but power relations. The *antemurale* myth is “...primarily a weapon in the hands of weak nations confronted by what they perceive as strong and aggressive neighbors.” (365)

Chapter 14, by Paul Srodecki, offers ‘Concluding Thoughts on Central and Eastern European Bulwark Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century.’ It is the most tendentious of the contributions, aggravated by a prolix style. Nevertheless, it makes some observations that should be noted. For example, the role of the mass media and the Internet in painting a

picture of "...bulwarks of the European hinterland, and underlining their messianic mission" (385). This is unremarkable, given the obvious changes in communication techniques. Again, there is nothing new in contemporary bulwark rhetoric as the other contributions illustrate. It gives the countries of Central and Eastern Europe "...a sense of their own 'Europeanness,' that is, the affiliation to a Christian Occident, or in secular discourses, to Europe and the West" (386). Srodecki argues: "It also forms the foundation for a rhetoric that promotes the exclusion of political opponents and dissidents" (386). This makes the contemporary bulwark argument serve "...as a useful tool of the political Right that helps to exclude and alienate the presumed outer and inner enemies" (386).

The editors and their fellow contributors are to be congratulated on this ambitious book, which is timely, given the turmoil created by the renewed imperial aggression of Russia against Ukraine. It is, however, more suitable for the specialist rather than the general reader. The chapters are generally uniform in quality, each providing a scholarly assessment of the topic. They are supplemented by notes and bibliographies that will be of great value to fellow academics and advanced students.

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