

FAZ

BOOKS

Historical Piracy, Expulsion and Expropriation

Carsten Wieland Reviews
National Myths in His New Book

By Götz Aly

FRANKFURT. When devising historical myths, nationalist movements rarely care what really happened. Their ideas – often produced by university-trained historians – center around single events from the past, be it the Battle of Teutoburg Forest or at Mount Anna. As though history were a self-service fact market tuned to satisfying various tastes and preferences, their propaganda peels away the complex layers of context and contradiction enveloping their favorite facts and turns them to good use in cooking up a simple political meaning.

Author Carsten Wieland uses the telling term “historical piracy” to characterize such abuses. The nations whose founding myths he compares in his political science study might be different, but his analysis of national myths and political patterns in Bosnia, India and Pakistan is immediately convincing. Pakistanis, for example, call their nuclear missiles *Ghauri*. The name refers back to a 13th-century Muslim conqueror who vanquished the Hindu ruler Prithvi. Both Pakistan and India are happy to overlook the fact that *Ghauri* conquered all sorts of tribes, both Muslim and Hindu. After all, conquering was his business.

Predictably, the less fortunate Prithvi lent his name to Indian warheads. The rationale here is to prevent history from repeating itself, arguing a “historical right” to “active” defense. In a similar case, Israeli recruits vow in their pledge that “Masada will never fall again,” recalling defeat at the hands of the Roman Empire in 73 A.D.

Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic followed the pattern set by Israel and India and used defeat on Kosovo Field in 1389 to support its military ambitions. Keen to reinforce a collective image allegedly founded in history, the post-communist/nationalist government had a casket of bones tour the country, which belonged to Prince Lazar who was executed by the Ottomans, whose empire was the

largest and most influential Muslim empires of the modern period.

As in India, Serbian ethno-propaganda evokes “Muslim invaders,” while Masada recalls pre-Arabic invaders. Among their adversaries, an ordinary politician like Izetbegovic actively mutated into a mujahideen battling on behalf of God. All the countries studied were quick to jump from here to Islamic, Serb or Hindu “Socialism” and the popular myth of national and religious homogeneity. This construct in turn served to justify expropriation and the expulsion of those who did not belong, by definition of the day, to the pure national body.

Some Pakistani textbooks put the birth of the nation back to the early Stone Age, and one influential politician is fond of saying that India and Pakistan were “separate nations” 5,000 years ago.

British colonialism did much to strengthen such delusions. The first census to be conducted in India differentiated between natives, Aryans, half-castes and Muslims. The first three categories covered the Hindu caste system, while Muslims were considered a single homogeneous group.

The tendency of European, in this case British, historians to impose simplistic categories and chronologies over complex historical contexts worked to similar effect. In his 1817 book “History of British India,” British journalist James Mill distinguished a “Hindu period” (before 1,000), a “Muslim period” (until 1757) and a “British period.” Britain also played a major role in the partition of its colonies in India and Pakistan, which uprooted (“transplanted”) millions and killed hundreds of thousands.

In 1946, Viceroy Lord Mountbatten – in an ironic take on European events – called it the Balkan Plan. India provided just one opportunity for Western democracies to participate in the homogeneity craze sweeping the 20th century. Authoritarian states and dictatorships are not the only ones to blame.

Wieland’s precise analysis, supported by ample secondary and source material, sheds light on these contexts.

Carsten Wieland, *Nationalstaat wider Willen. Politisierung von Ethnien und Ethnisierung der Politik: Bosnien, Indien, Pakistan* (Nation-State Against Its Will: The Politics of Ethnicity in Bosnia, India and Pakistan). Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2001. 425 pp. €45 (\$40).