



San francis of assisi in italian cultural memory (19th - 20th century)

Maxim V. Griger¹, Enzhe M. Dusaeva¹, Nailya I. Khanbekova¹

1 Kazan Federal University, Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies, info@ores.su

Abstract

The border of the 19th and 20th centuries was very interesting. It was rich of different cultural events and philosophic questions and theories. Intellectuals as common people made plenty of essential questions trying to choose their way of life. The figure of San Francis of Assisi had become a sort of an answer for emotional searching as for artists, philosophers, the clergy, as for poor Italians, soldiers among the Great War. The article tells about the ways of visual and verbal representation and appropriation of the medieval saint and his transformation in a symbol of national identity of Fascist Italy. The authors analyze the historical and cultural processes that have defined the representation of St. Francis as one of the main heroes of the Pantheon of Italian culture and the saint patron of the country. Using the methods of memory studies, discourse analyses here had been studied anniversaries, textbooks, monuments, silent films, press, and historiography. This way creating a wide and vivid historical and cultural context the figure of Poverello became more relief.

Key words: Francis of Assisi, Franciscans, Italian culture, Italian modern history, anniversary celebrations, monumental propaganda, catholic sanctity, silent films, nationalism, nation, Fascism, Fascist culture.



1 INTRODUCTION

The Past or rather its interpretation in Present is undeniably more important and powerful than today. Man is so constituted that any historical reference works magically authoritative and everyone can create his own “historical pantheon of heroes” to navigate in Present, becoming an integral part of it. The object of this research is culture of the united Italy (second half of the 19th century – first half of the 20th century). We analyse a time of forming the Italian nation. Therefore there was a growing need in common Past and uniting heroes.

Past as it is, doesn't conserve in a cultural memory, but transformed into establishing myth. Italianism constructs by appealing to the figure of St. Francis. In the search of cultural memory we examine the following sources: monuments, textbooks, two anniversaries, movies.

Revival of St. Francis's image in modern times associates with the discovery of his ashes, which occurred on December 12, 1818, after secret excavations allowed to Conventual Franciscans by Pius VII, and the anamorphosis of the relics into the crypt of Sacro Convento [1]. This literally and figuratively marked the “decent” place for St. Francis as in physical and in mental space. The process initiated by Church, in fact, demonstrated that seemed to be in the air, the need to define a place to Francis, thereby indicating “les Lieux de Mémoire” [2].

2 METHODS

Studying the Past often means creating and interpreting it. This article is a kind of multidiscipline research and this way we use various methods of analyze. One of them is memory studies. The most important research is of Aleida Assmann [3]. The past in cultural memory is not preserved, but transformed into a reasoning myth. The Italianism is justified and constructed through reference to St. Francis.

The other context is the studies of nationalism. Even the recalling St. Francis and his revival meant forming the new nation – Italians. It was very important to create a list of heroes that could consolidate Italians and were relevant to all of them. Giuseppe Garibaldi, Dante, Gaius Julius Caesar had been already appropriated but it seemed to be difficult to form the nation in the country where religion played a great role and there was Vatican city without referring to Christianity. That's why the figure of St. Francis became a symbolic bridge between the Fascist government, people and the Pope.

In the working with verbal and visual ways of constructing the national saint it is useful the article of Enzhe Dusaeva [4, 110-134].

Analyzing anniversaries we study different commemorative practices as processions, erection the monuments, celebrations and also the representations in mass media: press and radio.



3 RESULTS

In 1882 in Assisi, Naples, Rome, Florence, Verona and other cities celebrated the 700th Anniversary of St. Francis. This anniversary didn't get the meaning and the status as the jubilees of the next century, however, appeared a special edition of Assisi's miscellany dedicated to commemorative date, various poetry, poems, eulogies. In panegyrics, sounded in official celebrations, the authors constructed not only the image of Francis as a saint, but also a poet and a source of "civic revival". Maybe to this time concern the phrase which later became a sort of "calling card" of St. Francis – "the holiest of the saints and the most Italian of all Italians" which attributed to B. Mussolini or to his friend the poet G. D'Annunzio [5]. I. Brunelli in the memorable speech on the 17th October, 1882 on the occasion of 700th Anniversary of Francis nominated him "a real Italian" [6, 8]. This phrase, in fact, expressed what was so important to the emerging Italian nation. So Francis from specific local saint has become Italian.

An important step in mythologizing Francis was placing the two monuments dedicated to him, the first one was of J. Dupre situated on the central square of Assisi and the second of Stanislao da Lista in Naples. Both monuments differ in iconography: the statue of Dupree in the XX century has become a kind of model for other statues of St. Francis. It is a figure in a humble posture with bowed head and with crossed arms. Francis in Naples was depicted with Giotto, Dante, Columbus that had become the main heroes of the Italian Pantheon in the XXth century and modernity. These monuments were an example of placing the Christian personages in the urban secular space. Since they were both placed outside the church everyone had an opportunity to see the saint each time passing by. Transferring Dupree's monument in 1888 inside the Cathedral on consideration of its safety was also a symbolic gesture: the return of its own property into a sacral space. But the process of cultural and ideological propaganda of Francis to the masses had begun; perhaps it was craved by the Church that couldn't understand the real scale of its cultural appropriation.

The next landmark on this path was the book P. Sabatier "St. Francis of Assisi" published in 1893 in France and soon translated into many European languages [7]. P. Sabatier created the image of Francis as fighter and individualist. Danish historian J. Jørgensen in the 1910's presented Umbrian saint differently, made him sweetly romantic, fascinated by nature, talking to the wolf and the birds, preaching poverty goodness and peace [8]. Just this last sweet image of Francis came to taste to the Catholic Church and to artists.



The Catholic Church as an institution, after the unification of Italy was persecuted by state, so the anniversary celebrations in 1882 looked strange. However, the desire to regain Franciscan's position using the mythologizing process of its holy founder was quite clear and understandable.

During the Great War Francis got another important characteristic - the defender of the Motherland [9, 11]. Thanks to the poetry of G. D'Annunzio Francis soldier, defender of his country accompanied soldiers throughout the War [10].

Next group of interpretations of St. Francis founded at the beginning of XXth century was silent cinema. Movies about the saint on the one hand were actually prepared by cultural tradition and its vulgar performances, on the other - by public lectures, accompanied by slides [11]. These were films of Enrico Guazzoni "San Francesco il poverello d'Assisi" (1911), "Frate Sole" of Ugo Falena and Mario Corsi (1914). The last surviving silent film was "Frate Francesco" of Giulio Antamoro (1927) [12]. We also know about the two film projects. One of them remained unrealized possibly because of the author's death, but probably the main reason was the lack of budget for its implementation.

Even three surviving film indicate the interest, not only artistic, but globally – it is obvious inquiry from growing Italian society whose dream was to get a cultural hero - saint. No one character could not be the personage of so many historical film, even Christ. "Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi" were a literary base for all silent films.

Next way of Francis's "appropriation" was numerous publications of "Flowers" [13]. In the beginning of XXth century they became a part of a new genre of children's literature, so it was clear the active use of illustrations. On the one hand the stories about the wolf and preaching the birds are the most visually presentable, and on the other are the most fabulous. So they had been easily expropriated by children's literature, being both a fairy tale and didactic sermon story.

Another important channel of translation the image of St. Francis was textbooks. Up to the second half of the XXth century high school and lyceum were not available for the most of Italians thereby we focus only on primary school textbooks. In the textbooks of the late XIX century St. Francis had not been presented, however, in the 1920s he appeared in the "notebooks for vacation" for 1 and 2 classes, "books for home reading". There presented stories with wolf and sermon to the birds accompanied with colourful illustrations.

Francis just in a few decades from a purely ecclesiastical moved into a secular space becoming a hero of the films, children's stories, defender of the Motherland during the Great War, and a figure of the Italian culture who children met at primary school.



Quintessence of this cultural process was the anniversary of 1926, which unlike the previous (1882) this time was celebrated with great pomp. 4 October, 1926 was declared a national holiday, according to the decree of 24 July, 1925 date fell on Monday. Shops, schools, government offices were closed. Celebrations were coordinated by the International committee which was located in Assisi and was under the patronage of B. Mussolini. Thousands of articles in daily newspapers, special parochial editions etc had been edited [14, 210].

In the 1920s Francis got militaristic visual embodiment, turning from exhausted into athletic man. Numerous commemorative events demonstrated the force of powerful Franciscan Order and at the same time the interest of the Fascist government in the “appropriation” and further use of Francis as a symbol of Italy.

An important contribution to creating the myth was the plan of monumental propaganda of St. Francis. We focus only on the monuments that had been placed in the 1920s in a secular space, in urban areas, close to hospitals, schools. In the anthology “Frate Francesco” was published a list of cities in which planned to place the monuments. As a result appeared monuments in Rome, Milan, Turin , Naples, Foligno, Bologna, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari, Ostuni, Barberi, Rieti, Casale Monferrato, Avellino. Perhaps there were more. This list of cities is quite interesting because some of them are not only the administrative centres of their regions, but also has symbolic importance for the Italian history [15].

4 DISCUSSION

Responding to the search for legitimacy, consensus to patronage over initiatives launched by the communes, who were eager to show their “great sons”, the Fascist government since 1926 published series of decrees about the centenary, events and heroes of the national history that had become the objects of systematic celebrations. The municipal desire to commemorate “heroes” was so strong that Mussolini himself, in order not to devalue the importance of the preparations, ordered the prefects to stop activity for the period from 1927 to 1928, because “the authorities should not shirk their duties in preparing ceremonies, manifestations, celebrations, anniversaries, centenaries great and small, various types of speeches... it is also necessary to avoid satiety of the people” [14, 226].

The main thing that learned Fascism in the Franciscan year was to honor the Pantheon of great Italians, who could draw attention of international public opinion. Indeed, in the rest of the Western world, commemorative practice developed in the way as in Italy. Therefore, fascism also relied on the strengthening of anniversaries among the great persons, guaranteeing consensus, the coincidence of interests and related to power initiatives, but due primarily by culture.



5 SUMMARY

For fascism the radiant Franciscan year 1926 provided an opportunity to observe, and therefore to study the rituals of the masses, organized by the Church. The regime with its representatives actually only joined the ceremony, but did not organize it. Fascism studding the language of traditional religion appropriated a certain sacred aura that lacked for the political ceremonies after Risorgimento.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The process of creating the national saint crowns the “Franciscan message” of B. Mussolini published in various magazines in 1926. Mussolini put St. Francis in a Pantheon of great Italians inherited from the era of the Liberals, but that had to be rethinking and revising. “The highest genius in poetry equally with Dante, the most valiant conqueror of the oceans with Columbus, a great thinker and artist as Leonardo ... but Italy with St. Francis gave even the holiest of holy to Christianity and Humanity” [16, 1]. As a result in 1939 St. Francis was proclaimed the Patron of all Italy.

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