



**DEFENDING ASGARD,
INDEPENDENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS.
THE USE OF HISTORY IN CURRENT AFFAIRS.**

**Lecture
by
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Rectors of the University of Warsaw and the University of Iceland,
excellencies,
dear guests

In Norse mythology, Asgard – *Ásgarður* in Icelandic – is the home of the gods, the *æsir*. Óðinn (Odin) is their chief. Other notables include Óðin's wife Frigg; Freyja and Freyr, the goddess and god of love and fertility; Týr, the god of war, Þór (Thor), the god of thunder; and the cunning and disputable Loki.

Most of the Norse settlers who arrived in Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries adhered to this heathen faith – *Ásatrú*. Christianity was soon adopted in the land but in the early 1970s, a few Icelanders rekindled a heathen congregation. Today, it is the largest non-Christian denomination in the country. Aside from that, many Icelanders are actively interested in this part of our collective cultural heritage.

We derive most of our knowledge about the heathen faith from poetry and sagas that were compiled or composed in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For the last two hundred years or so, these accounts have motivated writers and poets, moviemakers and many more. Richard Wagner drew inspiration from the Saga of the Völsungs when he composed his *Ring des Nibelungen* and Walter Scott, the father of the historical novel, was influenced

by the Icelandic sagas, wonderful stories of exploits and voyages, fights and family feuds. J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, fell in love with these tales. During his university studies, he would stay up through the night with C.S. Lewis and other friends, talking about “the gods & giants & Asgard”. Subsequently, Tolkien based the dragon Smaug on Fáfnir in the abovementioned Saga of the Völsungs, and Durin, Dvalin and the other dwarfs he created derive from *Völuspá*, the epic Eddic poem which describes the story of humankind from its origins to *Ragnarök*, the end of the world as we know it.

Some admirers of Tolkien’s imagined world even see parts of it in Iceland. The British writer Philip Reeve, author of the popular Mortal Engines series, visited the country and saw similarities everywhere. “When we went over one hill,” he said, “We saw Mordor ahead of us”. A few days later the fields of Rohan seemed to lie ahead.

And now back to Asgard. Thor and Loki, two gods I mentioned, may be familiar to those in the audience who have seen the extremely popular Hollywood movies about the Marvel Avengers and their adventures. With his friends, including Hulk, Captain America and Valkyrie, Þór fights Loki, aliens and all sorts of enemies.

It is great fun, it has masterful special effects, but apart from the names of some of the main characters, it has hardly anything at all to do with Norse mythology. Do we need to criticise this blatant misinterpretation and falsification of our Icelandic heritage and Nordic legends? Do we need to defend Asgard from the moviemakers of Hollywood? Of course not, I would say. To begin with, it would be utterly hopeless and silly, and if anything, these Marvel productions might leave viewers wanting to know more about the Norse gods, just like Tolkien’s books and Peter Jackson’s movies have certainly generated interest in Norse mythology, this magical world of gods and trolls, dwarfs and elves.

Yes, we can tolerate these incursions. On other fronts, however, we need to be steadfast in our defence. A few days before the fall of Berlin in May 1945, the wife of one of Hitler’s henchmen wrote to her husband: “In some ways, you know, this reminds me of the “Twilight of the Gods” in the Edda ... The monsters are storming the bridge of the Gods; ... the citadel of the Gods crumbles, and all seems lost; and then, suddenly a new citadel rises, more beautiful than ever before ...”

The ugly Nazi admiration of Norse mythology is well-known. Today, various neo-Nazi groups base in part their racist beliefs on our ancient faith and heritage. More often than not, they use symbols like Thor’s hammer and refer to Odin in their names.

And here we need to defend Asgard. “I think it’s obscene”, Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, the high priest of the Heathen Association – the *allsherjargoði* of the *Ásatrúarfélag* – recently said about such extremist links with the old faith. Indeed, we need to defend our ancient heritage against misuse by racist extremists. We need to defend diversity, freedom and tolerance, the fundamental principles of civic society.

In this defence, we can actually use ancient customs and sources. Yes, references to intolerance and outdated notions can easily be found. The first laws of Iceland forbade same-sex relations on punishment of death but we have moved from such barbarity. And as high priest Hilmarsson has pointed out, the heathen faith is “a wonderful blueprint” for multiculturalism and diversity. “The gods are of mixed races,” he underlined:

“We even have a crossdressing god.”

Again, in our sagas and other old sources it is easy to find references to the glories of warfare, homages to manliness, bravery and bloodshed. In a famous poem, the warrior Egill Skallagrímsson describes how his mother dreamt that he would grow to become a fierce Viking, plunder and pillage, slay many people. But we can also highlight the emphasis that is put on nobleness, hospitality and fairness.

And while it is true that the Norsemen could bring fear, havoc and destruction, they also came in peace. They travelled to these lands and further east, and they traded here as we can actually detect in our language. The Icelandic word for a market square is *torg*, directly derived from the Polish word *targ*. Naturally, the merchants needed assistance to be understood so in a similar way the Iceland word for an interpreter, *túlkur*, has Slavic roots, as in the Polish word *tłumacz*.

How were the visitors from afar perceived? “I have never seen such valour,” one observer noted in the tenth century: “They are as tall as palm trees, fair and ruddy.” And they bore well-made weapons and wondrous jewellery. As pleasing as this may seem we must continue with the description: “They are the most filthy of all people Allah has created. ... They never wash their hands after a meal. They are truly like silly donkeys!” Such was the verdict of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, an Arab Muslim traveller.

Yes, the past is complex, history is complex, easily subject to misuse. We must defend history from those who aim to use it to promote hatred, bigotry and intolerance. Still, the defence of history does not entail that we must promote a single, state-sponsored version of the past.

Here is what we must aim for instead: We must respect the fundamental principles of historical enquiry: Critical thinking, respect for different

viewpoints and respect for undeniable facts, however uncomfortable they may be. And we must understand the importance of history for peoples, nations and states. It was pleasing to learn that earlier this month, students and doctoral candidates from various countries gathered at this university to discuss “Memory in conflict” as part of a wider project, “Plurality of Memories in Europe in a Global Perspective”

History matters. There is no way around that. Iceland is a good case in point. In the thirteenth century, at the same time that a number of writers were composing the majestic sagas of the Icelanders, civil strife broke out and ultimately the country fell under foreign domination; the chieftains decided that the Icelanders would become the subjects of the King of Norway. Thus ended the Icelandic Commonwealth. Later Norway and Iceland came under Danish rule and such was the situation in the nineteenth century when Icelandic farmers, students and intellectuals called for increased independence from Denmark, in a campaign that has been called “a national awakening”.

In that effort, history, language and culture were central. The new national leaders argued with conviction that during the first centuries of settlement, the Icelanders had enjoyed freedom and prosperity but lost it through their own folly and foreign machinations. Dark centuries of suppression and destitute set in.

In many parts of Europe a similar story was told, Poland included, to take a pertinent example here in Warsaw. All over the continent, historians and leaders of national movements were allies in a common campaign, to restore the rights and independence of their people.

In our two countries, success was achieved in 1918. Poland reclaimed its sovereignty and so did Iceland, although the country was still in a royal union with Denmark.

During the interwar years, we went our separate ways as parliamentary democracy gave way to authoritarian rule in Poland. And then came the Second World War. Iceland proclaimed neutrality but was occupied by Britain and then entered a defence pact with the Allied Powers, tolerating their military presence on the island. Icelandic lives were lost in the conflict, mostly at sea as sailors brought supplies of fish to the United Kingdom. Per capita, roughly as many Icelanders and Americans died during the war. Still, the war brought political and economic benefits and on 17 June 1944 Iceland became a fully independent republic, after centuries of foreign domination. Yes, in the summer of 1944, a wave of joy swept across Iceland.

In the summer of 1944, the people of Poland were struggling to stay alive in their darkest hour. The heroic Warsaw uprising was launched. Iceland’s death

toll, sad as it was, pales in comparison with the horrors which the citizens of this country had to endure, the number of losses suffered here.

After the war, we continued on different paths. In Iceland, decades of freedom and prosperity followed. Here in Poland, Communist dictatorship caused yet more hardship until the people's will and power could not be suppressed any longer. The year 1989 was not that spectacular in Iceland – I can hardly remember anything important happening back home that year – but in Poland and other countries in the eastern part of Europe it should be considered as monumental as the years of independence immediately after the First World War.

And here we are together in 2020. How should we view our history? How should we use our history? Keeping in mind the different experiences of Iceland and Poland in the twentieth century, a visitor from an island that enjoyed any privileges should be careful not to pontificate about how other people should perceive the past. Still, should we perhaps be as unified in our efforts as the champions of history were in the past when independence was the avowed goal ahead?

From time immemorial, people have sought strength and support in the formation of a group, a unit with common identities and interests. Nations are “imagined communities”, as the political scientist Benedict Anderson pointed out so brilliantly, but because they want to, not because they are in some sense fake or false constructs.

Again, nobody can ignore the potential evils of excessive nationalism, the danger of xenophobia, racism and intolerance based on the alleged need to defend the purity, honour and integrity of the nation. When we recall such examples, examples that have led to warfare, genocide and utter evil, we may be reminded of another, more negative definition of nationalism – the notion put forward by the Czech-born American scholar Karl Deutsch that a nation is “a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours”.

Undeniably, the ugly side of nationalism must be fought and rejected. Just like we have to defend Asgard from racist extremists we must defend nationalism from radical nationalists. But we will not succeed in that struggle by denying peoples' need for a joint heritage and its long-proven positive attributes. Anderson put it well when he wrote:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often

profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles.

Indeed, the artists themselves have provided a similar reminder. In her song, *Declare Independence*, singer Björk salutes national sovereignty:

With a flag and a trumpet,
go to the top of your highest mountain.
And raise your flag (higher, higher).
Declare independence.

Dear friends: Let us by all means defend the positive aspects of nationalism and independence, the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of love, freedom and duty of diversity, tolerance and open-mindedness, the freedom to seek inspiration from the past but also the duty to accept and learn from the more negative aspects of our national experience.

Then we not only defend independence but also human rights, and what worth is national independence if all inhabitants do not enjoy that universally recognized basis of free societies? And what worth are histories of nations if they cannot be told in all their variety?

In nineteenth-century Iceland, not all the historically minded leaders in the struggle for independence were that concerned with individual freedom, workers' rights, equality, welfare assistance and other aspects which we now deem essential in a progressive society. And often they would argue fiercely among themselves. Now we should tell that multifaceted story, not only a positive tale of progress from foreign rule to full independence.

Similarly, the history of Iceland in the Second World War is not without its blemishes or controversies. The authorities did not want to offer persecuted Jews residence permits in the country. Trade with Germany continued happily in the first months after the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939.

To conclude, as we discuss the use of history in current affairs let us recall the wise words of Polybius, the ancient Greek historian: "Now I would agree that historians should give their countries an important role, but in no way must they make statements that are the opposite of what actually happened." Back home, the country's first historian, Ari the Learned, provided similar advice in his *Book on Icelanders*, a twelfth century description of the settlement of Iceland. "Whatever is wrongly reported in this history," he wrote, "one is duty bound to accept what proves to be more true."