



“Russian threat” to the Catholic Austrian society: constructing the Austrian concept of the enemy in the 1880s. The case of Vasili Vereshchagin

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In October 1885 the Künstlerhaus in Vienna hosted an exhibition of V. Vereschagin – a Russian painter with high international reputation. Among the paintings were two pieces which interpreted biblical episodes deliberately in the way of Ernest Renan’s book “Life of Jesus” (1863) and caused a high resonance amongst Roman Catholic authorities of Vienna. Cardinal C.J. Ganglebauer had stated in Wiener Diözesanblatt that the paintings were dangerous for Catholic faith. The further heated discussion in the press offered their opinions on what made the Russian artist convey the Biblical narrative in the way he did. The reasoning behind his “blasphemous actions” was set in his Russianness. Thus, an image of a Russian threat to the Catholic society of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was constructed through Vereshchagin’s identity and his artwork (which had no distinct signs of Russianness in the first place).

The following research poses questions such as: how was the “Russian threat” constructed even in the context of its absence? How did this debate align with the bipolar antagonism between the West and the East in the relations between the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian empires? To what extent did Russia’s policies towards the Catholics play into the picture of viewing an artist, simply on the basis of his nationality, a threat?

The research had been conducted with archival research in Russian State Historical Archive and State Archive of the Russian Federation. A brief summary of the results can state, that the “Russian threat” as a concept was prevalent in the cultural life of Vienna and was integrated into the discourse of Viennese own religious (therefore, state) stability. The portrayal of the policies of the Russian Empire on the imperial boarder towards the Catholic population played a role in the projection of “Russianness” within the Austrian intellectual society. The appeal of Russianness towards the Slavic population of the Austro-Hungarian Empire also served as a factor for establishing “otherness” in the Russians as carriers of Orthodox Christianity. All of these discourses came to life in the polemics around the paintings by Vereschagin.

Key words: Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russian Empire, Russian threat, Vereshchagin, Catholic, Orthodox, Vienna, nationalism, scandal