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WWII in the Serbian history textbooks

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze the representation of the war and the fractions in conflict, i.e. communist resistance, D. Mihailovic movement, the quisling government of Serbia and the pro-fascist movement of D. Ljotic in the Serbian history textbooks. The representation of war and its participants has undergone a significant change during the last decade of the 20th century. This short case study represents a good example of history as a collective memory and its use and abuse in the field of education.

KEY WORDS: history, textbooks, partisans, chetniks, education, stereotypes.

In the 1990s the attention of both domestic and foreign scholars was drawn to the subject of history textbooks in the Balkans. In 1993 Georg Eckert Institut in Braunschweig started a project on the national stereotypes and prejudices in the history textbooks of the South-East Europe. Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Thessaloniki started in 2001 another project, which aimed at writing the «multiperspective» history textbooks, focused on «controversial» periods and events, which are usually presented in a very different, even totally opposite way in the Balkan countries. This project also contributed to the discussion on Serbian textbooks, and provoked a considerable controversy among Serbian historians. Finally, the most recent contribution to this subject was the project of the Helsinki Human Rights Committee, started in 2006, which resulted in a booklet on the influence that history textbooks have on the young people. [1]

This research, especially the work of Wolfgang Hoepken and Dubravka Stojanovic and some other scholars, do nor refer exclusively to WWII, but to the representation of national history as a whole in the history textbooks. As for the WWII, the attention has been drawn to some changes that occured since the socialist period until today, as well as

[1] Čemu nas uče iz istorije. Uticaj udžbeničke literature iz istorije na mlade (What are we tauhgt about from history. The influence of history textbooks on the young people),

to the fact that, unfortunately, few things have changed in the style of representing historical facts and the creation of stereotypes.

As far as the quantity of WWII contents is concerned, it must be stated that it`s been absolutely enormous. In the Tito era, the average share of the WWII history accounted of 50% of the total of the 20th century history. Regardless of the importance of this event in both world and natonal history, this is certainly out of proportion. Besides, the war in Yugoslavia accounts of 2/3 of the whole material concerning WWII. In this respect, there were no significant changes during the 1990s. The share of WWII history has been significantly diminished in all the former Republics of Yugoslavia, except in Croatia and Serbia. According to some statistic analysis, in the case of those two states it accounts of 60% of the total 20th century history. In the textbook for the 8th grade of primary schools in Serbia, 43 pages have been dedicated to the war in Yugoslavia. Amazingly, the same share was given to the history of all former republics at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Besides, the world history of the WWII has been presented on only four pages (!), which makes the false impression of the utmost improtance of the Yugoslav front for the outcome of the war.

In the Tito era, the interpretation of the WWII in the history textbooks was extremely simplified. In this respect, there were no differences between the ex-republics of Yugoslavia. This representation was the following: the war broke out as the consequence of imperialist policy of the fascist states, Germany and Italy, and of the failure of the «bourgeoasie» regardless of its ethnic origin, to secure peace. The CPY was represented as the sole fighter against both occupational forces and collaborators, who were labeled as «traitors». In this respect, the representation was extremely simplified. The collaboration forces and organizations have all been represented in the same way. No effort was made to describe and interpret the ideological and political complexity of the war scene in Yugoslavia, and therefore to enable the proper understanding of different organisations, such as Nedic government, the movements of D. Mihajlovic, D. Ljotic, the Independent State of Croatia and others. The important aspect of this interpretation was underlying the «revolutionary» character of WWII in

Yugoslavia, i.e. the fact that the military victory of the partisan movement also led to the transformation of the Yugoslav society as well as to the restoration of the Yugoslav state. Therefore, the concepts of the «People`s Liberation War» and the «Socialist Revolution» were merged. Furthermore, in this interpretation, the war was totally devoid of its ethnic dimension, which certainly did not correspond to the historical facts. The terror and atrocities of war, mainly due to the ethnic conflict, were represented as if they were committed equally by every ethnic group and every political movement, except of course, by the partisans.

At the end of 1980s the legitimacy of both socialism and Yugoslavia started to loose its ground, and therefore, some changes occurred in the sphere of historical memory. The ethnic dimension of WWII, which was until then obscured, comes into the focus by discussing the number of victims and by labeling the presumed war criminals. Everything that has been a taboo for a long time, was becoming mythologized and presented in an overly emotional tone. The proper ethnic group was presented as the victim of the others, which certainly contributed to the political mobilization in the 1990s. At the time of crises and dissolution of Yugoslavia, the dual presentation of partisans on one side, and everybody else on the other, which was the interpretational matrix in the Tito era, was simply turned upside down, so that the former "traitors" now became "righteous" and were undiscriminatively rehabilitated. The former disregarding the ethnic side of the war also took another direction, and a very wrong one, by justifying war crimes of the proper ethnic group.

The interpretation of the WWII underwent a significant change in all ex Yugoslav republics. In Serbia, however, the representation of partisans remained mainly as it was. It was, nevertheless, incorporated in the total interpretation of the Serbian history as an everlasting martyrdom, which therefore, makes the armed resistance seem the only possible way of survival, and consequently, a justified one. On the other hand, killing of the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia was especially singled out, and represented emotionally with the detailed description of atrocities with the use of language inappropriate for children. Therefore, the representation of the WWII in Serbian history textbooks of the 1990s reflected the Serbian politics of the time, which was marked by both socialist and nationalist ideology.

As the partisan and chetnik movements are concerned, they were ideologically levelled in both professional historiography and history textbooks. However, the explanation and proper interpretation of the conflict between these groups was still lacking.

The interpretation of war as the inevitable fate of the Balkans, especially of the Serbs, which further implicates that the actors of war are not responsible for it, was corresponding to the isolated Serbian society of the 1990s. The absolute loyalty to its own nation, to its own community, and the “righteousness” of the war for national causes was encouraged in young people. The proper nation was represented as an object of world events, as the victim of its consequences under which it suffers, with no responsibility on its part.

Since the year 2000, the representation of the chetnics and the partisans has been significantly changed in comparison with the socialist era and the 1990s. They are equally represented, as the movements that collaborated in the beginning of the war against the enemy, but later splitted up and fought against each other. The share of chetnik movement history is now much larger, and the evaluation is also changed. In the current history textbook for the 3rd and 4th grade of secondary school, the existing matrix of interpretation was simply revolved, so that the chetnik movement took the place of the partisan one. The teaching method was in no respect improved in this textbook. The main concern of its authors was to change the interpretation of historical events. However, for the sake of reinterpretation, some deviation from the facts took place. The collaboration of the chetniks was simply ignored, and at the same time, it was imputed to the partisans. The war crimes have allegedly been committed only by the partisans, and not by the chetniks, to whom moral qualities have been ascribed, which are, however, totally denied to the partisans. The idea of the proper nation as eternal victim is the leading motif, as is the case with other history textbooks in the region.

Every interpretation of history, especially the ones in the textbooks, aims as achieving some social and political scopes. The subject of war is nevertheless in itself very convenient for fostering the processes of integration and solidarity within a certain social group.

During the 1970s and 1980s the CPY was in need to confirm its legitimacy. Therefore its policy was to represent the WWII in the same way in all the history textbooks in the country, regardless of the fact that educational policy was a prerogative of governments of the federal units. In this way, the CPY legitimized the socialist system and restoration of Yugoslavia. The socialist ideology was the core of post-war Yugoslavia`s identity, and therefore, the combat and suffering in the war was in the focus, as the common experience of all ethnic groups. The ethnic character of war crimes is willfully ignored, for the sake of «brotherhood and unity». The Yugoslav idea of the 19th century, as an elite ideology, and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was differently evaluated by its nations and ethnic groups, could not foster integration within the country as successfully as the revolution of the WWII.

However, some analyses have shown that the actual effect of this ideological representation of history was insignificant in terms of social values. Furthermore, due to ignoring of certain “undesirable” facts of history, the knowledge of ethnic dimension of the war was insufficient. The legitimacy crises of the 1980s would probably not have led to the abuse of the subject in terms of ethnic nationalism, had all the fractions in the WWII been differentiated, including the partisans. The CPY suppressed all the efforts of the professional historiography to deal with this subject from the 1960s onwards. This fixation on the painful parts of history turned out to be very negative, as soon as the ideological monopoly of the CPY ceased. The historical myths easily filled the void in the knowledge of many generations.

During 1990s the interpretation of history aimed at creating the understanding of war as a destiny of nation, and at promoting the idea of sacrifice for the national cause.

The nation came into the focus, whereas the individual totally disappeared. In the history textbooks of the 1990s history was adapted to the contemporary events. Instead of creating a distance towards historical events in the minds of students, they connected past and present in a way that suggested the “inevitability” of developments, and therefore, the war that was going on. This kind of representation creates prejudices and frustrations, which are the “longue duree” phenomena. They are strongly felt even today, given that the revisionism of history led to perverted understanding of the past of the young generations. Although born many years after the WWII, they are still divided into supporters of the partisans and of the chetniks, as a recent research of the Helsinki Human Rights Committee has shown. Since the simplified interpretation of these two movements, as representatives of “good” and “evil” was present in the last decades, they now simply changed places, whereas the dual presentation still remains. The fact that this discourse is so popular in Serbian society today, is nevertheless very upsetting.

Notwithstanding all the changes that this country and its history textbooks have undergone, there is a certain negative continuity in our school system and in the teaching of history.

Firstly, the methodological approach is positivist, traditional and fact-ridden.

Secondly, it reduces the life of a society to series of political events, mostly wars and revolutions. The same method is used in presenting both world and national history. All cultural, social and artistic movements are neglected. One gains the impression that wars, uprisings, and revolutions are the chief contribution of national history to the body of world history. The peaceful periods, represented exclusively in terms of political history, seem to be just an “interregnum” between the wars, and therefore seem to be shorter than they really are.

Thirdly, the emphasizing of war in the public discourse always served as the means of legitimizing the power.

Finally, approach to teaching of history has always been more about passing judgements then about understanding of the past, which contradicts the basic principles of history scholarship.

SUMMARY:

During the 1990s several projects dealing with the representation of history in the textbooks in ex Yugoslavia have been started. Special attention has been drawn to the changes in representation of the WWII in history textbooks that occurred since the socialist era. It has been established that during Tito era the largest share of the 20th century history was dedicated to the WWII, especially to the war in Yugoslavia, and that it was put completely out of proportion. The interpretation of the war was extremely simplified. The actors of war were divided into two conflicting parts, with no attempt whatsoever to represent the ideological and political complexity of different movements. Furthermore, the war was totally devoid of its ethnic dimension. At the end of 1980s and during the 1990s the ethnic dimension came, however, into focus, and also in a very inappropriate manner, that favoured myths over facts. The representation of the WWII in Serbian history textbooks of the 1990s reflected the Serbian politics of the time, which was marked by both socialist and nationalist ideology. Since the year 2000, the representation of the chetnics and the partisans has been significantly changed in comparison with the socialist era and the 1990s. The evaluation of both the chetnik and partisan movements has been significantly changed in favour of the chetniks.

The interpretation of history in the textbooks, has always aimed at achieving social and political scopes. In the socialst era, it was about legitimization of the rule of the CPY, and in the era of Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, about justifying the nationalist policy of the political elites. The effects of these tendencies are strongly felt today.

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