
«Do(n't) YU Remember? Rethinking the Memory of the 20th Century Wars in Former Yugoslavia»

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*Association for the Study of Nationalities European Conference
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania*

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From June 30 to July 2, 2016 Vytautas Magnus University hosted in Kaunas, Lithuania, the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) European conference titled «Europe, Nations, and Insecurity: Challenges to Identities».

On the second day of the convention, the MIREES Alumni International Association joined forces with the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in the panel «Do(n't) YU Remember? Rethinking the Memory of the 20th Century Wars in Former Yugoslavia», chaired by the President of the MAiA Executive Board Adriano Remiddi. The initiative was conceived in light of the long-lasting fruitful collaboration existing between the MIREES international consortium and ASN, which across the years resulted into the active participation of several MIREES students, professors and especially alumni, given that high rate of MIREES graduates to the ASN events.

The section consisted of four papers and a response provided by the discussant Dora Komnenović. The panelists examined how the memory of the 20th century wars has been shaped and reshaped in Yugoslavia (both royalist and socialist) and two of its successor states, Serbia and Croatia, and, more broadly, how the perception of nationalism in the Balkans has changed over the last two centuries. Three papers focused on state-sponsored memory politics and policies that are legitimized or challenged by agents such as courts, historians and veterans' associations, which in the scrutinized cases gave life to regimes of memory syncretism, parallel commemorations and diametrically opposed narratives. More specifically, Jelena Đureinović and Nikola Baković analyzed the repositioning of the official Serbian memory politics (without however disregarding

the parallel existence of vernacular and counter-memories) with respect to the First and Second World War, while Rodoljub Jovanović focused on Croatian and Serbian university students' attitude towards wars they did not experience directly. Last but not least, the fourth paper provided a macro-level approach to Balkan nationalisms. In fact, Maria Bakalova described the simplistic discourses surrounding nationalism and their limited ability to counter the current challenges to collective political identities in the Balkans.

Nikola Baković (Justus Liebig University, Germany) emphasized how the Serbian state's attitude towards Yugoslavia has changed against the backdrop of the commemoration of the First World War and the treatment of Macedonian Front veterans. In other words, the speaker illustrated how a seemingly uncontroversial episode was instrumentalized and used in order to re-evaluate other historical experiences, as the political constellation in the country was changing. In the interwar period World War I was perceived as a natural continuation of the wars of the 19th century and the final stage of the fight for the unification and liberation of all Serbs, but it was «adjusted» to include other Yugoslavs «waiting» to be liberated. This marked the birth of the myth of the Great War, which was not part of official narratives in socialist Yugoslavia until the 1960s. In this period a certain fusion of national and revolutionary legacy occurred with the aim of taming Serbian nationalism: the heroes of 1914 were seen as precursors of 1941 partisans. On the other hand, the Milošević era was characterized by a two-fold commemoration oscillating between «the biggest mistake» and «greatest military success» rhetoric. After 2000, the «mnemonic amalgamation» was stripped of its Yugoslav and socialist elements, which was most visible on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade.

Jelena Đureinović (Justus Liebig University, Germany) problematized the commemoration of the Day of the Uprising, which in Serbia was celebrated on July 7th until it was abolished in 2001 and re-introduced in 2013. Despite its removal from the list of official holidays, parallel commemorations were held *in situ* every year. The partisan myth, resting on the common struggle against the occupier and domestic traitors went from being official to counter-narrative and vernacular memory. It was then marginalized, nationalized and underwent a «revision of the revision». The removal of the holiday was interpreted by some as an act of national reconciliation, as the act of a Serb shooting another Serb was considered disgraceful. The two police officers that were killed by partisan Živorad Jovanović Španac in Bela Crkva on July 7, 1941, Bogdan Lončar and Milenko Braković, were rehabilitated in 2008. The court's ruling included parts of the essay submitted by an expert historian and provided its own interpretation of the historical context. Đureinović underlined that the process is thus indicative of the dynamics of memory politics, an

example of «re-evaluation of the past in the courtroom» that indicates how both historians and judges concur in the production of narratives.

Rodoljub Jovanović (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) relied on the conceptual and methodological tools of social psychology in order to explain how people perceive recent history, namely how students in Croatia and Serbia approach the break-up of Yugoslavia. A brief analysis of history textbooks (that are often the only history books people read in their lives) in Croatia and Serbia revealed a similar tendency of demonizing the past in order to «absolve the present» and the political leaders of the time. Furthermore, a degree of symmetry in presenting the nation as a victim of aggression or international conspiracies and blaming the «Other» was also present. Jovanović's survey among university students showed that people identifying as Croats were more likely to select Croatian independence as the main event in the break-up of Yugoslavia, while those declaring themselves as Serbs emphasized the death of Tito and nationalism. The panelist thus concluded that the social representations of history approximately match the narrative promoted in textbooks in both countries. The ways in which groups create history stems from how they remember the past and is regulated by processes such as belonging, identity, social cohesion and inter-group relations.

Maria Bakalova (University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria) analyzed the social and political function of nationalism, the role it had in nation building processes in the Balkans and its relationship with Europeanization. The presenter argued that the dichotomous perception of nationalism as «either good or bad» is inadequate to answer present-day social and political challenges in the Balkan states. These considerations were followed by a recapitulation of the historical role nationalism had in the formation and later consolidation of nation states and the internal and external perception of it. Before World War II it was positively perceived (at least inside the interested countries), while in socialist times, despite the proclaimed internationalism, nationalism was still present in internal and foreign policy. The European integration process further intensified the internal/external dimension and resulted in the differentiation of discourses for domestic and foreign audiences. Finally, Bakalova stressed, citing Halliday, that nationalism is an intrinsic part of globalization and Europeanization, both in the form of counter-reaction to integration and Eurocentric universalism or as an expression of centrifugal or separatist trends.

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