

The 'reconciliation' discourse in the post-Yugoslav context

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to show how discussions in the post-Yugoslav context use the notion of reconciliation in order to revise history and affect the nation-building process. There are two traumatic events in the former Yugoslavia, which are taken as the departure point of reconciliation advocates. The author firstly analyzes the transformation of the WWII memorial sites in Slovenia. The final goal of the debate is to reconcile the Slovenian nation, erase emancipatory dimension of the partisan antifascist struggle and rehabilitate fascism. Secondly and even more painfully the essay focuses on the problematic of Bosnia, where the reconciliation discourse plays an important role in the appeasement of different nations after the recent wars. State representatives excuse themselves for war crimes in the name of their Nation, thus everyone has to apologize to each other and forget about the past in order to continue building the nation on the purified basis. In one swoop we get relativisation of historical facts and the equalization of the aggressor and the attacked, a similar operation that is at work already in the Slovenian context. Instead of a merely critical account of the neofascist tendencies in the post-Yugoslavian context, the essay concludes with some elements for thinking emancipatory politics of memory.

Year 1942. Chetniks, extreme Serbian nationalists, try to control Goražde, a town in the Eastern Bosnia. They round up a larger group of Bosnians, amongst them more than 100 members of the family Ahmović. Chetniks cut their throats on the bridge over Drina. After the war partisans capture the Chetnik commander, who was in charge of the bloody slaughters. He is convicted to life-imprisonment. Years pass by and in the mid of the 1960s, with a general wave of democratisation in Yugoslavia, this man is released to freedom. He gets married and has kids. Year 1994. It is a different historical context: the break-up of Yugoslavia. Chetniks capture a group of Bosnians, amongst them 20 members of the family Ahmović. They cut their throats on the bridge over Drina and throw them into the river. The leader of Chetniks is a young man, whose father is the same commander, who committed the horrific crimes during WWII.¹

Introduction

The lesson of this story should not be read on the first glance as a constant re-emergence of violence, which would derive from a genetic disease of extreme fascists groups. On the opposite, the story has to be read as a historical contingency, which assumes a form of tragic repetition, but cannot be postulated as a general rule of different civil wars in Yugoslavia. Historical processes are complex articulations of political, economic and cultural instances, which do not have univocal line of development that would function without contradictions. Our theoretical standpoint is opposed to the simplistic 'orientalistic'² vision of wars in the Balkans, which perceives Balkan as a barrel of

¹ This story was told to my father on the Red Cross mission in the mid of the 90s by Husein Ahmović, who was at the time of the slaughter in Sarajevo, while a large part of his family got killed in Goražde.

² See Edward Said's excellent work *Orientalism* (1979).

gunpowder ready to explode at any moment. Some would add a psychoanalytical layer and claim that it is the return of the repressed (nationalism) that destroyed Yugoslavia. According to this portrayal, the repressed gunpowder character is a necessary part of Balkan folklore and normal functioning of Balkan society. To be sure, this orientalist view is not simply imposed by Europe, from 'outside'. The orientalist ideology is reproduced by the Yugoslav peoples themselves and operates especially in the cultural realm: songs of the famous Yugoslav poet Bajaga, which evoke 'every 50 years there is war', 'this country was made by poets and warriors', or Kusturica's films representing an exotic Balkan imagery. Spectators get an impression that guns, music and gypsies are everything one can encounter in the former Yugoslavia³. This wilderness is only to be found on the margins of Europe, the wilderness that Europe lost forever. But the historical reality is more complex than this romantic view of the authentic Balkan.

In order to get a more complete view on the Other side of Europe, we have to look closer to two events that are linked to the constitution and the dissolution of the socialist Yugoslavia⁴. Ex-Yugoslav peoples have to deal with two traumas of the 20th century, which happened in the context of the civil war: firstly, the WWII, where a new socialist Yugoslavia was built on the foundation of the antifascist struggle. Secondly, the destruction of Yugoslavia in the 1990s in the light of the fall of the real existing socialisms. How do philosophers, historians and politicians in the post-Yugoslav situation deal with these traumatic events? Undoubtedly, the most important signifier in the debates of the recent and half-recent past is *reconciliation*. The reconciliation with the past is a necessary element in the process of the formation of new nations. The mainstream ideological position claims that we should all take collective responsibility and at last live in harmony. The new history is founded on a psychologization of historical processes, where trauma is posited as the kernel of memory politics. But we should immediately pose a question: what kind of memory and with what political stakes? The most evident effects of the undergoing reconciliation are: the relativization of historical facts, equalization of partisans and local fascists in the WWII and equalization of Serbian and Croatian aggressors with Bosnian forces in the recent war.

The central aim of this essay is to show how discussions in the post-Yugoslav context use the notion of reconciliation to revise history and affect the construction of a new nation. Firstly, we will analyze the transformation of the WWII memorial sites in Slovenia, where new monuments consecrate fascist collaborators. Secondly, we will sketch the problematic of Bosnia, where the reconciliation discourse plays an important role in the appeasement of different nations after the wars in 1990s. The central stakes of this operation will be shown. Last but not least, in order to think an emancipatory politics of memory against the current rehabilitation of fascism, we will review general context of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Slovenian reconciliation is oblivion of the antifascist struggle

³ For a powerful critique of Kusturica's orientalism see Slavoj Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* (1997).

⁴ These events are also of great importance to understanding the European past and the present. The historical failure of Europe to deal with the break-up of Yugoslavia speaks for itself.

In the 1990s Slovenia the rightwing ideologies launched subtle techniques of historical reinterpretation. The debate on recent history has led to the hunt for the criminals of the former 'totalitarian regime' and revision of history. The end goal of this debate is the rehabilitation of the Slovenian fascists-collaborators, named Home Guards, which is cloaked in the term 'reconciliation of the Slovenian nation'. The first to fly the flag of the Home Guard was the Catholic Church with the political support of rightwing political parties. In their quest for the 'truth' they scored a major point when new monuments were erected⁵.

Looking closer Home Guard and Partisan monuments two major differences are located: (non)inclusion of history and the manner of presenting the victims. Partisan monuments bear active slogans referring to the historical circumstances of the occupation, the war and also the emancipatory dimension of the National Liberation Struggle. On the opposite, the Home Guard memorials are shrouded in silence. The most popular slogans found on them are: "Mother, homeland, God", "Forgive" or "Victims of revolutionary violence." This inscription does not present the Home Guard members as active protagonists, fighting on specific political grounds, but as victims of partisan warfare. One should not problematize the action to find everyone a decent burial site, but the way the question has been politicised opens up a dangerous terrain. At least two important issues arise: firstly, this type of memorials participates in writing a positive interpretation of the Home Guard as innocent victims. Secondly, there is the absence of an integral historical context on the Home Guard memorials. To be sure, this absence is filled by bishops and historians, who organize exhibitions, make documentaries on the new truth.

Memorial sites are structured like dominant political discourse. Although advocates of Partisans and Home Guard seat on the opposite sides, they share a common goal in the debate – reconciliation. This is where the monuments come in, playing the crucial role of wrapping the debate in a cloak of dignity and respect for the dead. It is in the national interest to appease the passions and to write an objective truth. But reconciliation does not have the same meaning for both sides. For Home Guards reconciliation means the rehabilitation of fascism. In one fell swoop it puts the Home Guard and the Partisan movement on the same footing and condemns the totalitarian regime established after the war. The Home Guard comes out of this equation as the moral winner that had nothing to do with the post-war totalitarian regime. From a Partisan standpoint, reconciliation means acknowledging the post-war killings and praising a certain aspect of the politics of the National Liberation Struggle. It is a defence of the National Liberation Struggle as the core of the Slovenian nationhood, as if the war had only been about national independence. The discourse on reconciliation thus relativizes the debate about the Yugoslavian event and attempts to erase all revolutionary traces of the National Liberation Struggle. In no way can the Home Guard fascist domination, their support of old Yugoslavia and of the occupation regimes be equated with the emancipatory status of the National Liberation Struggle. The Partisans were recognized as a part of the broad coalition of antifascist forces from 1943 onwards. Apart from that they gained a huge popular support and started a social revolution. Partisans did not fight only on a military front, against the 'enemy', but they invented new Yugoslavia, a new socialist political

⁵ I elaborated this topic in my article on partisans (2009).

entity that was opened to all nations and nationalities on its territory. Their dealing with class and national question meant a rupture with the old pre-war Yugoslavia⁶. But instead of affirming the emancipatory nature of the antifascist struggle, nowadays we witness the rehabilitation of fascism.

The effect of reconciliation in the post-Yugoslav context

The reconciliatory problematic becomes even more painful and necessary to discuss when dealing with post-Dayton Bosnia, the major site of the recent wars in the Balkans. Contemporary discourse of reconciliation in post-Yugoslavia set one major goal: to live in a relative harmony with different national groups. How should this be done after the wars? Official political parties (except the far Right) started acknowledging the necessity for reconciliation. Instead of a rigorous politics of memory, the practised reconciliation produced a complete relativisation of the history. Presidents of states excused themselves for war crimes in the name of the whole Nation. A message was sent that all should accept the guilt and that there should be a collective responsibility for the atrocities. Everyone has to apologize to each other and forget about the past in order to continue building the nation on the purified basis. This type of reconciliation equalizes the aggressor (Serbian and in some cases also Croatian forces) and the attacked (Bosnian people). It has concise political effects: legitimization of ethnical cleansing and the constitution of ethnically clean(s)ed states founded on the model of 'one nation within one state'⁷. Against this reconciliatory tendency some authors started advocating politics of memory⁸. The bottom line of their project is clear: to acknowledge the atrocities and inscribe the trauma in the national-building process in order not to ever forget it. Even though this solution is closer to the real history, it focalizes only on the traumatic side, that is, the atrocities of war. It produces diverse effects for the future communities. The most apparent is the construction of the enemy (e.g. Serbian), who is then segregated in the new community. This operation strengthens the ideological assumption that different ethnical groups cannot live in the same community. Also, it psychologises the historical event. According to this logic the moral and psychological inscription of trauma in the nationhood should prevent similar events in the future. But as was amongst others nicely shown by Hannah Arendt, this reasoning cannot provide a guarantee of 'never again'. Arendt would claim that this type of memorialisation does not think the situation politically and thus prevents political action. The simplistic politics of memory in the post-Yugoslavian context does not pose the most crucial questions: what were the real reasons for the break-up of Yugoslavia? How come fascism came into existence with the dissolution of Yugoslavia? Instead of moralizing about the war, one should tackle the problem structurally. This is a more far reaching process that will be materialized in the historical textbooks and political actions, which will affect the future of the political communities.

⁶ For the inventiveness of Yugoslav event see Boris Buden (2003).

⁷ Apart of other already independent states of Croatia and Serbia, Bosnia still carries an internal cleavage, which consists of two basic units: Republika Srpska with an independent political authority and the Federation of Croats and Muslims. The latter faces the problems of different political and cultural policies. The ethnical principle is inherent to the political constitution of Bosnia.

⁸ See Kuljić's article »Sećanje na zločin« (2007).

Far from answering on the above questions, we only sketch some reasons for the break-up of Yugoslavia. Recent analyses evoked political crisis: the de-legitimization of the Communist Party after the death of Tito, or the anarchic chaos of the totalitarian order that did not have enough legal regulation⁹. Others centred their analyses on the economic crisis. But what all contemporary post-Yugoslav historiographies share is their methodological standpoint: they write the history from the standpoint of the Nation¹⁰. If we agree with some formal analysis that there was a political crisis, a massive economic crisis (rising differences between different republics, paying the debt to the IMF) and a social crisis, we cannot agree with the general blaming of One Nation (bad Serbs, or bad Slovenians, it depends on the National perspective), or psychologization of the history. These historiographies overlook the massive translation of the class conflicts into the cultural conflicts. Thus, Kosovar miners that were on the strike in the mid 1980s were not seen as workers, but as Albanians. Republican bureaucracies started their political struggles within the national point of view, launching the fight against the Federal authority (redistribution of budget) and playing against one another. Strong nationalistic tendencies were articulated in the cultural sphere itself: intellectuals signing memoranda on the Serbian or Slovenian Nation, search for the national past. The rise of nationalism and liberalisation set the historical scene for the advent of stronger repressive measures from the state and rise of Milošević. The latter found a terrible, but the first effective way to answer the question: what after Tito? Irreversible political processes started in the 1980s and war of the 1990s was only a continuation of certain politics, politics of external and internal destruction of Yugoslavia¹¹. It resulted in the end of socialist solidarity and multinational political formation on the one hand, and the rise of extreme nationalism and liberalism on the other hand.

Conclusion

Against the existing politics of memory, we conclude with some negational elements for emancipatory politics of memory. The latter needs to oppose an ideological assumption that a community has to be constructed on the basis of a singular ethnical criterion. The moral formulation of the collective guilt of one nation is not a solution to the post-war situation. Undoubtedly, the agents of war atrocities need to be prosecuted, as well as the historians have to locate the agents and tendencies which were most responsible for the break-up of Yugoslavia. But a legal resolution of the problem is not sufficient.

Emancipatory politics of memory needs to root itself in a rigorous thinking of history and decisive declaration of antifascism. The specific Yugoslavian situation should not be seen as isolated, which arose on the margins of Europe. When asking what will happen to post-Yugoslavia, we are also asking what kind of Europe we want: Europe constructed on *a priori* religious and ethical basis, or Europe opened to all? Europe of exclusion, folkloristic culture and bureaucracy or a Europe of critical and political dialogues ready for new social experiments that would build a more just social and economical circumstances? Surely, the problematics of post-Yugoslavia needs to be resolved

⁹ See Mirjana Kasapović's *Bosna i Hercegovina: Podijeljeno društvo i nestabilna država* (2005).

¹⁰ Nation becomes the ultimate identification of individuals, but also a key methodological, meta-narrative standpoint that orders and thinks history.

¹¹ See an excellent book of Branka Magaš *The destruction of Yugoslavia* (1993).

internally, in its specific perspective, post-Yugoslav region needs to promote a continuous cultural exchange between different communities. Apart from the idea that living in the same community is possible, major role will be played by organisation of antinationalist gatherings and general education. Writing a collective history textbook of Yugoslavia may sound as a science fiction today, but nevertheless should be openly debated¹². As we know, the historian's role according to Walter Benjamin should be more than just dealing with the fixed past. The stake of any historiography lies in the present and future, where history is never a closed process.

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¹² Good examples of presenting the recent traumatic history can be found in the following works: novels of Slavenka Drakulić or Nenad Veličković, Joe Sacco's graphic novels *Fixer* or *Goražde* and the film *No man's land*.