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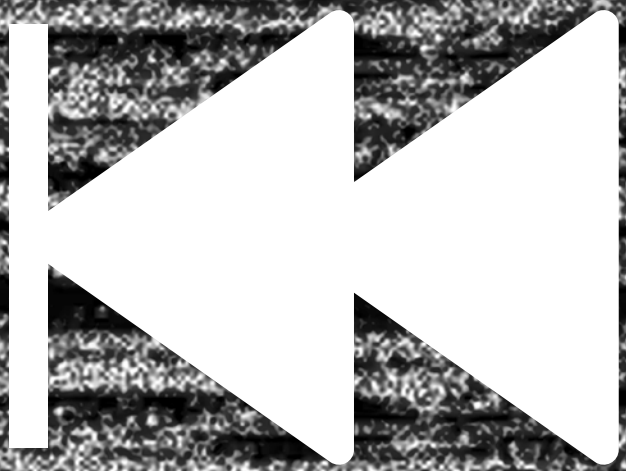
THE PAST IS NOW

Politics of Denial and Dealing with the Past in the Western Balkans



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Fostering democracy and upholding human rights, taking action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advancing equality between women and men, securing peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defending the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power – these are the objectives that drive the ideas and actions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. We maintain close ties to the German Green Party (Alliance 90/The Greens) and as a think tank for green visions and projects, we are part of an international network encompassing well over 100 partner projects in approximately 60 countries.

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contents

on populism and historical revisionism

Thomas Schad

Populism and historical revisionism were among the driving forces behind the wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. This context has been meticulously studied by scholars from different disciplines and countries. Nebojša Popov's edition *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* (1996) is one of the most important collections on the topic. Yet, the insinuated catharsis remains the key challenge: given today's rampant revival of revisionist populism worldwide, it is fair to ask which lessons can be drawn from the (post-)Yugoslav experience. For this purpose, a collective of post-Yugoslav and EU-historians came together in the public history project *Histoire pour la liberté*. Throughout 2021, this EU-funded project enabled a series of lectures and public debates in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Germany. In the following, I will lay out some of the most central questions discussed during the program in order to finally readdress the question of how and why we should learn from the 1990s.

The first event of the program at Kliofest Zagreb (May 2021), entitled "Against historical revisionism, for the revision of historical cognition", was focused on discussing the most important differences between *revision* and *revisionism*. Most crucial for this distinction is the way in which historical facts are treated: historians committed to scientific methods strive for *fact-based consent*, which may also involve controversial debates, but ultimately aspire to obtain scholarly consent. Populist revisionists, on the other hand, will (ab) use historical facts selectively, to the extent that they match their 'therapeutic purposes'. Unwanted facts will be sacrificed and evicted – while values and emotions are given priority. When populists abuse history, their goal is not truth in a scientific sense: They rather want to make "people feel good", as Dubravka Stojanović from Belgrade put it.

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Significance-driven revision of an established view of history can be induced, for instance, by major global changes. One example of how our (re)vision of the geopolitical world changes the way historiography is written is the cognition of methodological nationalism and its shortcomings which will, first and foremost, see facts *within* nation states. Other, global developments, may (inadvertently) be undervalued.

In that sense, globalization offers new prospects while at the same time, it also brings new challenges. One of these challenges, the correlation between "new" cross-border rapprochements and new divisions and conflicts, was discussed at the History Fest Sarajevo (June 2021). The troubles around the intensified Serbian-Russian relations in the context of Russian warfare, evoking the myth of age-old brotherhood, have become commonplace. Some similar phenomena are less known, like the Greek-Serbian discourse of friendship in the 1990s.

Another imported tension unfolded in early 2018, when the Bosnian capital Sarajevo "canceled" Turkish Nobelist Orhan Pamuk. Given that Pamuk openly and repeatedly recognized the Armenian genocide (anathema to Turkey's populist AKP government), Sarajevo's plans to award Pamuk honorary citizen enraged the revisionist Turkish regime. Leveraging its close ties to Sarajevo's city administration at the time, Pamuk was publicly disinvited.[1] In this case, illiberal town twinnings and party-networks between BiH and Turkey channeled the obvious exploitation of historical topics for populist purposes. All of the aforementioned, revisionist cases share a dynamic in which history is abused as a populist, illiberal asset.

Orhan Pamuk's case also points to the conflictual relationship between historiography, formal politics, and fictional writing. Under the motto "Historians for peace", these questions were discussed by the historians of the program *Histoire pour la liberté*, novelists and some political actors at Belgrade's 13th KROKODIL festival (August 2021). Whereas fiction genuinely builds upon the use of emotions and creative *bricolage*, in historiography, emotions are merely treated as analytical units. Partisan selectivity, often ascribed to emotional affinity, must be avoided for the sake of fact-based evidence.

However, in practice this rule is often broken. In (post-)Yugoslavia, established historians in the 1980-1990s were actively fictionalizing reality by abusing history. Poets and novelists like Dobrica Ćosić and Radovan Karadžić were political leaders and war mongers (i.e., criminals) at the same time. In spreading fear and groundless accusations (as in the false assertion of genocide against the Serbian people by Albanians in the notorious *memorandum* of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1985-1986)) writers, historians, and other public intellectuals all together helped paving the way to *real* genocide.

Does the conflation of myths, arbitrary storytelling and history for warfare imply that there cannot be any beneficial relationship between the stories in fiction and the history in historiography? Writer Lana Bastašić opposes this opinion: As quoted by Sarajevo's newspaper *Oslobođenje*, "it sometimes appears that the biggest truth is in the biggest fiction". Author Ivana Bodrožić from Croatia had been a refugee from Vukovar in the 1990s and (indirectly) supports Bastašić's position. In her novel *Hotel Zagorje*, she fictionalized and abstracted her own experience, far from lapsing into revisionism and falsehood. Her novel shows that truthful stories can sometimes be more easily expressed in a (semi-)fictionalized way – especially when memory is still fresh and historical protagonists alive.

(Semi)fictional stories may lack the academic rigor of historiography, yet they still can act as icebreakers for critical historiography in conflict-laden societies, by enhancing empathy and the prerequisite openness. In the post-Yugoslav context, fiction can also help to overcome remnants of war-time enmity, as the anthology *Zajednička Čitaonica (Shared reading room)* presented at KROKODIL showed. As a collection of shared stories both "from before" and from current times, the collection offers a convincing argument for the benefit of literature as a liberal, relieving *soft power*.

1 Flood, A. (2018, February 20). Pressure from Turkey blamed as Sarajevo reverses decision to honour Orhan Pamuk. The Guardian.

Every contemporary production of historiography and fiction, including film, succumb to their real-time digitalization and multiplication. Digitalization's positive and problematic impacts on the discourse of revision and revisionism were discussed at the round table at Humboldt University Berlin (October 2021).

In the background of the program, the potential to challenge illiberal revisionism through digital transmission was best illustrated by Jasmila Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis, Aida?* Treating the genocide in Srebrenica in a semi-fictionalized way, public screening of Žbanić's film was restricted in Serbia, while even forbidden in Bosnia's entity Republika Srpska.

However, free online screenings allowed the film to break the walls of silencing and denial. Likewise, all historians involved in *Histoire pour la liberté* shared their own experiences as editors and authors: often, the click rate statistics would reveal unexpected numbers and page views from areas with otherwise restricted access.

Conversely, digital opinion platforms can quantitatively dilute these achievements. Global online platforms are often in use, even by historians and students, in order to discuss matters of historiography. Yet, according to Nick Srnicek, they should rather be seen as market platforms and the shape of capitalism's present-day stage of development.

Following the logic of information scientist Constanze Kurz, it is even highly misleading to call these promotional platforms "social media". Opinions, rather than facts, are traded and amplified by platform owners and their opaque algorithms. Against the sheer power of the trade logic of the opinion market, the impact of fact checking historians may remain comparatively nominal.

Today, the widespread pairing of populism and revisionism is of increasing global concern. Only a few weeks after the last event of *Histoire pour la liberté*, Russia's Putin-regime invaded Ukraine, accompanied by heavily exploiting historical tropes in a revisionist manner. Disinformation and historical revisionism, as we would see throughout 2022, pose a conjoint threat to liberal, democratic societies *per se*. Therefore, we could finally ask if we couldn't have learned earlier from the Balkans' experience in the 1990s, and weren't there also warning signs emanating from the Russian Federation?

As the Russian dissident Kara-Muzra stated in 2017, we could have known for a very long time of what sort Vladimir Putin and his rule were. Historians and critical intellectuals, targeted by the regime, could have helped to dismantle revisionism – if they had been listened to.

The commonplace "we never learn from history" is, of course, a platitude. Yet, inverting it to the more programmatic slogan "let us learn from history!" could likewise lead to rational policy making. In the very sense of the program title *Histoire pour la liberté*, the timely detection of revisionist populism, by the help of historians, can avert the rise of autocratic rule. Revisionist populism's systemic repercussions on liberal democracy are well-known – and should make us act.

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