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## **WORLD WAR TWO AS THE SOURCE OF LEGITIMISATION AND POLITICAL MOBILISATION TODAY. THE CASE OF EX-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES: CROATIA AND SERBIA**

### **World War II as the Source of Legitimation and Political Mobilisation Today. The Case of Ex-Yugoslav Countries**

Topics concerning World War II are widely present in the public spheres of ex-Yugoslav countries. As the Yugoslav Communist Party's government and Josip Broz Tito himself were not democratically legitimised, the tale of the National Liberation Battle became the main source legitimising their regime and the founding myth of socialist Yugoslavia. Consequently, after World War II, the partisan struggle was widely used by the communist regime in its propaganda and, at the same time, the Communist Party kept the interpretive monopoly on it. Because this part of history was turned into a myth and a free debate on the traumas of the war was impossible, the peoples of the former Yugoslavia failed to face and overcome their painful past. Nonetheless, the nationalist narratives that saw their own nations as exclusive innocent victims of others survived the socialist period. Thus, these greatly contributed to the new war in the 1990s. The situation in ex-Yugoslav countries is quite dynamic and complex, and each country has its specific memory of World War II. This continues to be one of the fundamental sources used for legitimisation by groups who aspire to power and want to mobilise their supporters everywhere.

Keywords: National Liberation Battle, Socialist Yugoslavia, ex-Yugoslav countries, politics of memory, legitimisation.

Topics concerning the Second World War (WW2) are widely present in the public spheres of ex-Yugoslav countries, and they continue to evoke a myriad of emotions. This, of course, stems from the dramatic nature of these events, leaving numerous traumas in the countries' societies, all the greater because during the war the South Slavic peoples fought against each other, and because the limitations put up by the post-war communist government made it impossible to face that controversial and sensitive past. At the same time, during the entire existence of socialist Yugoslavia, WW2 was intensively exploited for propaganda purposes. This memory of the wartime experience "frozen" in 1945 became a great burden which played a large role in the failure of the Yugoslav project.

The history of Yugoslavia has attracted and continues to attract the attention of researchers in Poland. Insight into the events and relations of the history of Yugoslavia in the 20th century is provided by numerous books in the Polish language, such as Michał Zacharias's *Komunizm, federacja, nacjonalizmy* [Communism, federation, nationalisms].<sup>1</sup> Other publications, for example, from the series *Poznać Bałkany* [Get to know the Balkans], issued by the University of Toruń, may also be helpful in understanding the situation.<sup>2</sup> In the context of research on the politics of history and the culture of memory, it is worth mentioning the extremely interesting book by Tomasz Stryjek, *Współczesna Serbia i Chorwacja wobec własnej historii* [Contemporary Serbia and Croatia according to its own history],<sup>3</sup> as well as some analysis by Maciej Czerwiński.<sup>4</sup> The works of Polish scholars make a significant contribution to the study of Yugoslav history, although it should be noted that one can also find superficial or unbalanced works in the Polish language.

During most of socialist Yugoslavia, only the official interpretations imposed by Yugoslav communists existed in the public sphere. For them, the National Liberation Battle (*Narodnooslobodilačka borba*) of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Zacharias, *Komunizm, federacja, nacjonalizmy. System władzy w Jugosławii 1943–1991: powstanie, przekształcenie, rozkład*, Warszawa: Neriton, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> *Poznać Bałkany. Historia – polityka – kultura – język*, Toruń: Instytut Filologii Słowiańskiej UMK. To date, five volumes have been published. See also: *Studying the Memory of Communism. Genealogy, Social Practices and Communication*, ed. Rigels Halili, Guido Franzinetti, A.F. Kola, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> T. Stryjek, *Współczesna Serbia i Chorwacja wobec własnej historii*, Warszawa: ISP PAN – Scholar, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For example: M. Czerwiński, *Drugi svjetski rat u hrvatskoj i srpskoj prozi (1945–2015)*, Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada – Zavod za znanost o književnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2018.

WW2 was the basis of power, the fundamental source legitimising their regime and the myth of their country's foundation. According to their narrative, Yugoslavia's peoples fought together for freedom against the occupying forces and their "helpers", and the idea of the "fraternity and unity" of the Yugoslav peoples, which is the foundation of their statehood, was forged in this battle.

Owing to the absence of democratic legitimisation of the Yugoslav Communist Party's government and Josip Broz Tito himself, the tale of the National Liberation Battle became the main legitimising source of their regime. This became even more reinforced after the 1948 Tito-Stalin split when, in answering the Informbureau's accusations, the Yugoslav communists pointed out its merits in the battle against – as it had become customary to say – fascism (*Antifašistička borba*). Josip Broz's so-called political report addressed to the V Congress of the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP) in the summer of 1948 was, in essence, a long parahistoriographical text describing the history of the YCP and guerrilla warfare during the war. It was this text that, in the following decades, became the foundation of historical interpretations of the period and the basis of the official historical discourse (for example, it was listed as a part of the obligatory literature on history studies at the University of Zagreb up until the end of the 1960s).<sup>5</sup>

The main thread of this official version of the events of WW2 was about the actions engaged in by the main staff of the partisan army and Josip Broz himself, enforcing Tito's personality cult, which was later expanded by his role on the international stage, especially in the Non-Aligned Movement. Tito's image from the National Liberation Battle era is that of a courageous, determined, fair, and brilliant leader. Tito and the partisans' merits also included matters important for each of Yugoslavia's peoples as viewed from their "national interest". For example, in Croatia (as well as in Slovenia), the most important issue was the joining of Istria and Rijeka "with the mother country". After 1945, the Macedonians got a people's republic and the development of the Macedonian nation was enabled, while Montenegrins were able to rebuild the statehood they lost in 1918. For the Serbs, such an argument was that the communists defended the integrity of Yugoslavia and, by doing so, the existence of a country within which all Serbs were unified.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Najbar-Agičić, *U skladu s marksizmom ili činjenicama: Hrvatska historiografija 1945–1960*, Zagreb: Ibis grafika, 2013, 407.

The joint battle against fascism during WW2 was likewise supposed to justify the radical political, social and economic changes enacted by the communists after the war. The mass participation of people in the National Liberation Battle was highlighted, while at the same time the battle was likened to a revolution (as can be seen in the phrase “*jedinstvo narodnooslobodilačke borbe i socijalističke revolucije*”). This meant the participation in the battle against fascism was equivalent to supporting, or at least agreeing with, revolution. The promotion of the official memory of the National Liberation Battle, which was one of the main goals of the post-war veteran organisation – SUBNOR (*Savez udruženja boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata*) – was called the cultivation of revolutionary traditions (“*njegovanje revolucionarnih tradicija*”). In addition, this explanation was strengthened by communist ideology’s basic thesis: nationalism, which caused bloody conflict, is the product of the bourgeoisie; to win over nationalism it is imperative to destroy the bourgeoisie, which was openly one of the goals of the communist party. In the first decades after WW2, it was stated that “the national issue in Yugoslavia” was solved, because the bourgeoisie, the source and propagator of nationalism, had been destroyed. Over time, the party elites became more and more aware that was not the case, although the use of the term “nationalism” was avoided; when describing negative phenomena all over the country it was replaced by “chauvinism” or “localisms”.

The official WW2 narrative furthermore played an important role in the return to normalcy. After several years of bloody conflict between the Yugoslav peoples, after the wave of mutual violence, the country had to be unified. This is why the balance of responsibility/culpability carried such importance. According to the official narrative, every people had its “quislings” (traitors and collaborators), but in every one of them, the desire for freedom and antifascist sentiments are said to have existed.

To ensure, from their view, the correct interpretation of the past in the public sphere, the party introduced a sort of interpretation monopoly regarding these historical timeframes and fields of study (the interwar period, WW2 and the immediate post-war period, the history of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and the history of the workers’ movement in general). A complicated system of institutions that secured the party control of these fields was built up. This included party committees, special institutes, and social organisation committees, especially those that brought together war veterans. Professional historians working at universities usually avoided researching recent

history, leaving it in the realm of the “party historiography”, where the research of contemporary history stayed until the end of socialist Yugoslavia, with the difference that in the later period, more and more professional historians were employed in party historiography institutions. They researched historical sources, but the main points of their interpretations were commanded from above.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with the official narrative created by the communist party and Tito himself, the history of WW2 manifested itself in the public sphere in many ways, such as street naming, monuments and commemorative plates, museum exhibitions and cultural gatherings, films, etc. The public holiday calendar was based on the official narrative promoted by the Communist Party at the federal level. The order of the holidays commemorating the beginning of the National Liberation Battle in every republic was decided at the central level and did not always suit the republican communist party elites. For example, in the Socialist Republic of Croatia, such a holiday was the Day of the Uprising of the Peoples of Croatia on 27 July. For Croatian communists, the date was problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it implied a later start to the uprising than in most of the other republics and, in addition, it was the anniversary of an uprising started by the Serb population in one of the villages. Even in the 1950s, attempts were made to add to the official narrative the idea that the first partisan division in Croatia was established around Sisak on 22 June 1941. The introduction of this idea into the Military Encyclopedia (*Vojna enciklopedija*) published by the Military History Institute (*Vojnoistorijski institut*) in Belgrade was – *nota bene* – credited to Franjo Tuđman; at that time, he was at the height of his career in the Yugoslav People’s Army. Still, 22 June did not become a public holiday until Tuđman came to power in Croatia at the beginning of the 1990s and up to this day it is celebrated as the Antifascist Struggle Day (*Dan antifašističke borbe*), mainly by the left of the political scene. Celebrations are attended by numerous left-wing politicians and representatives of WW2 veteran organisations, the centre-right is usually represented symbolically, by lower-level politicians, while the right ignores or even contests the holiday. The former Day of the Uprising of the Peoples of Croatia on 27 July is celebrated by the members of the Serbian minority in Croatia.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> M. Najbar-Agičić, *U skladu s marksizmom*, 375–377, 408–428

<sup>7</sup> M. Najbar-Agičić, Titova bista i „vruće“ hrvatsko ljeto. Politička upotreba povijesti u Hrvatskoj – ljeto 2014, *Acta Histriae*, 23 (2015), br. 3, 459–474.

An opposing narrative tied to the other side of the conflict survived decades of socialist Yugoslavia, especially in families who felt the punishing hand of the communists themselves. This narrative was also developed in the emigrant communities, where groups “cultivating traditions” of the defeated nationalist formations were active. It should also be pointed out that many serious professional historical publications were also written in exile.<sup>8</sup> The scale of the influence of these emigrant publications on the dominant memory in the country is not entirely clear, but it certainly started to increase in the 1980s and entered the main discourse in the 1990s.

It should be highlighted that the entire period of socialist Yugoslavia should not be regarded as still and unchanging. These changes were the result of the dynamics of the internal situation and were more quickly noticeable in literature and film, which is the subject of a book published by Maciej Czerwiński.<sup>9</sup> Literature and film is where the new interpretation models showing a more nuanced image of WW2 could be seen earliest. Interestingly, internal tensions were always present in the party historiography as well (most of all between representatives of different republics and peoples), but they were not visible to the public. An interesting case was the discussion about the *Historical overview of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Pregled istorije SKJ)*, written in the first half of the 1960s, when the representatives of the Institute of History of the Workers’ Movement in Croatia (at that time the director of the institute was the future president of independent Croatia, Franjo Tuđman) strongly criticised the book from the position of, if I may say so, “a leftist” (a better term may be “partisan”) Croatian nationalism. The problem was that Croatian communists were dissatisfied that other peoples (mainly Serbs and Montenegrins) were credited with having the most important role in the National Liberation Movement, which they interpreted as diminishing their own. On the other hand, the official history of the National Liberation Battle was written in Belgrade, and until Tito’s death in 1980 was based on the narrative whose main author was Tito himself (according to Tito’s aforementioned political report to the V Congress).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I. Banac, “Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia”, *The American Historical Review* 1992, Vol. 97, No. 4, 1084–1104.

<sup>9</sup> Czerwiński, *Drugi svjetski rat u hrvatskoj i srpskoj prozi*.

<sup>10</sup> M. Najbar-Agičić, *U skladu s marksizmom*, 406–408.

The traditional official party narrative started to visibly weaken in the 1980s when, after Tito's death, the country found itself in an economic crisis. Then an expansion of ethnic nationalism began, especially among the Albanian and Serbian, but also the Croatian, people. Serbian nationalism at the time was stoked by the idea that the Serbs in Yugoslavia were (once again) threatened (here the historical arguments from WW2 played a crucial role), notably outside Serbia proper; while the Croats pointed out that they were continually in a worse situation than the Serbs, were being exploited by them, etc. It also became clear that opposition to the Communist Party's official interpretation of WW2 had appeared. In historiography, such an example is Veselin Đuretić's book *Saveznici i jugoslavenska ratna drama (Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama)*. The book, published in Belgrade in 1985, for the first time re-evaluates the role of the Chetniks during WW2.

During the last decade of Yugoslavia's existence, it became clear that of the antagonised nationalistic historical narratives, among other topics – or maybe even, first and foremost – the one concerning WW2, survived. An important element of conflict around the interpretation of WW2 was the issue of casualty numbers, including the number of casualties in Jasenovac, the Ustasha concentration camp. The official number of WW2 casualties that appeared quickly after the end of the war was 1.7 million, and that was the number based on which Yugoslavia demanded war reparations be determined. It was an estimate made for the Paris Peace Conference – based on a mathematical model that was supposed to reflect the demographic losses of the country. It is much larger than later demographic estimates (from the 1980s), independently calculated by Vladimir Žerjavić (Croat) and Bogoljub Kočović (Serb; emigrated to London), which put the demographic losses at around one million people.<sup>11</sup> In addition, during the decades of socialist Yugoslavia, the number of 1.7 million people was not regarded as demographic losses, but as the number of direct casualties of war. It also became common to talk about the hundreds of thousands (usually 700,000) of casualties in Jasenovac. The most noticeable and hotly debated topic between the Croatian and Serbian sides, enflaming public opinion in the 1980s, was precisely about the number of casualties in the Jasenovac camp.

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<sup>11</sup> V. Žerjavić, *Gubici stanovništva Jugoslavije u drugom svjetskom ratu*, Zagreb: Jugoslavensko viktimološko društvo, 1989; B. Kočović, *Žrtve Drugoga svjetskog rata u Jugoslaviji*, London: Veritas Foundation Press, 1985.

At that time, many academic and popular publications regarding the Jasenovac casualties were published in Serbia. The Croatian media showed enormous interest in them, publishing emotional reviews.<sup>12</sup>

In this regard, an important role once again fell into the hands of Franjo Tuđman, who had been minimising the number of Jasenovac's victims for the previous two decades, which was one of the reasons he became a sort of a dissident in socialist Croatia. It is worthwhile mentioning that the Jasenovac Memorial Site (the museum institution at the site of the ex-concentration camp) has put a lot of effort in the last decades to rectifying the official number of victims of Jasenovac (currently it is estimated at around 80,000, about 50,000 being Serbs).<sup>13</sup> Some Croatian revisionists, still trying to lessen the number of victims of Jasenovac, undermine this list, while in Serbia and particularly in the Republic of Srpska, the number is still stated as 700,000.

An interesting matter is the place of the Holocaust in the memory of WW2 in the ex-Yugoslavia. Generally speaking, in the official memory the first place was taken by heroic warriors who overshadowed the civilian casualties, including the Jewish casualties of the Holocaust and the casualties of the Romani genocide. Dubravka Stojanović describes the Jews in Serbian memory as the "invisible casualties". A large role in this phenomenon is played by the "self-victimisation" that dominates ex-Yugoslav peoples, which inhibited empathetic views of others, as well as the already mentioned narrative glorifying battle. There was no room left for Jews in the first phase of the development of the memory of WW2. And even though the first monument to Jewish casualties was erected in Belgrade in 1952, it was not noticeable in the public sphere, and the annual commemorations were focused on remembering other camps and battlegrounds, and not the ones where the casualties were Jews.<sup>14</sup>

The situation changed in the 1980s when the official narrative started to lose its grip. The focus shifted to the "nation" (the Serbian, or Croatian, etc.). An interesting thing to mention, as pointed out by Stojanović, is that this time, Jewish victims were remembered, but not for their own sake. They were always mentioned alongside the Serbian victims, which was meant to highlight the Serbs' martyrdom,

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<sup>12</sup> Ž. Krušelj, *Zarobljenici paralelnih povijesti. Hrvatsko-srpska historiografska fronta na prijelazu stoljeća*, Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/default.aspx?sid=6284> (8.11.2020)

<sup>14</sup> D. Stojanović, *Populism the Serbian Way*, Beograd: Peščanik, 2017, 173–187.

while the equating of their casualties to those of the Holocaust was supposed to garner international sympathy, especially the sympathy of Jewish centres in the USA. However, this “second phase” of the development of the Holocaust memory in Serbia did not last long: from the 1990s onwards, the memory faded away, pushed to the margins by Serbian victims, those from WW2, as well as those from the Yugoslav conflicts in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, as supported by Jelena Subotić in her book *Yellow Star, Red Star. Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, where she mainly analyses the situation in Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania, the Holocaust in post-communist states is not mentioned regarding the Holocaust itself or because of a need for remembrance, but rather, in the communist system and after its collapse, the Holocaust plays a specific role in the development and management of national identities in complex and uncertain times.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, we bore witness to the rejection of the official socialist Yugoslav history narrative, and each side/nation concentrated on its own victims and on the moments in history when it was the oppressed one. On that note, not only wartime communist crimes but even the post-war ones were interpreted solely in the national paradigm, that is, as war crimes targeting nationalities, not as the repression of the class or political enemy. In Croatia, the partisans suddenly became a Serbian force, or at least a Serb-dominated one, and as such, an enemy that at the end of WW2 and shortly thereafter committed war crimes targeting Croats.

At the same time in the Serbian nationalist narrative, the partisans were pro-Croatian, guilty of not avenging Croatian war crimes targeting Serbs, and socialist Yugoslavia was becoming an anti-Serbian creation (the republic’s borders were defined at the expense of the Serbian people, in addition to which Serbia was the only republic with autonomous provinces, etc.).

This does not mean, that everybody in Croatia accepted this interpretation, but the interpretation proved to be dominant and “close to those in power”. In this situation, the NOB (NLB) monuments present in the public space were defaced, removed, or simply destroyed (in a couple of spectacular examples, the monuments were destroyed by the Croatian Army using explosives). There was also a massive

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> J. Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star. Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, Cornel University Press, 2019.

change of street names, exemplified by the streets of Zagreb city centre bearing NOB (NLB) fighters' names which received new names – those of Early Middle Age Croatian rulers.<sup>17</sup>

Croatia tried to purify the image of the Independent State of Croatia from WW2, justifying its genesis with the bad position of Croats and the repressions imposed by the interwar Yugoslavia, as well as underlining the “bright” sides of the NDH (ISC) (e.g., the development of culture). In addition, the emphasis was put on communist war crimes towards Croats. In Serbia, at the beginning of the 1990s, equal responsibility for collaboration was entirely rejected. A part of this process was the rehabilitation of the Chetnik leader Draža Mihajlović, as well as stressing that Chetniks were first and foremost a resistance movement, that the Chetnik movement was established before the partisan one, and that cases of collaboration with the occupying forces were rare, completely tactical and forced by the military situation. During Milošević's rule, however, the partisan tradition was not rejected, but the Chetnik one was added (the Serbs had “two resistance movements”).<sup>18</sup>

It is worth highlighting that the Croatian leadership in the beginning of the 1990s did not entirely renounce the “antifascist” traditions either. These appeared in the preamble to the new Croatian constitution adopted in December 1990 and can be found there to this day. And again, it was Franjo Tuđman who (partly because of his own biography) decided to include antifascist traditions in the new official narrative. As already mentioned, the *Dan ustanka naroda Hrvatske* was removed from the calendar, but the *Dan antifašističke borbe* was added. It was an element of the so-called “policy of national reconciliation” (“*politika nacionalnog pomirenja*”) that was promoted by Tuđman during his presidency, and was supposed to lead to cooperation and the joining together of people coming from families with both partisan and Ustasha traditions for an independent Croatia.<sup>19</sup> For this policy, Tuđman is often praised, even by those on the political left, not noticing that it was a typical 1990s'

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<sup>17</sup> D. Rihtman-Auguštin, *Ulice moga grada, Antropologija domaćeg terena*, Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> T. Stryjek, *Współczesna Serbia i Chorwacja wobec własnej historii*, 397–477.

<sup>19</sup> N. Barić, „Prvi hrvatski predsjednik dr. Franjo Tuđman o jugoslavenskom predsjedniku Josipu Brozu Titu“, in: H. Kaurić, V. (ed.) *Dr. Franjo Tuđman u okviru hrvatske historiografije, Zbornik radova sa znanstvenog skupa održanoga u Hrvatskom institutu za povijest u Zagrebu 10. i 11. prosinca 2009*, Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, Hrvatski institut za povijest – Podružnica za povijest, 2011, 313–340; D. Hudelist, *Tuđman. Biografija*, Zagreb: Profil International, 2004.

ethno-nationalistic parole, and ethno-nationalism was the base for the war.<sup>20</sup>

A quick-paced deconstruction of Josip Broz Tito's personality cult was also performed. It is interesting that this happened in different ways in the different parts of the ex-Yugoslavia. This can clearly be seen in history textbooks. In Croatia, for that matter, it is pointed out that Tito did not care enough about the Croats (although he himself was a Croat, with a Slovenian mother) and was simply not "Croatian" enough. All the while in Serbian textbooks the most evident deconstruction of his personality cult was pointing out his errors as a leader during the NOB (NLB).<sup>21</sup>

Antagonisms that eventually led to the eruption of the bloody conflict at the beginning of the 1990s were based on different experiences of WW2 and the mutual animosity during that period. In this light, the most obvious conflict was the Croatian-Serbian one, but problems with the settling of WW2-era conflicts can be seen between the other ex-Yugoslav nations as well. The uprising of Croatia's Serbian population and the engagement of Serbia in the war in Croatia was justified by arguments drawn from WW2 (as opposed to the conflict in BiH, where the conflict with the Muslim Bosniaks was rationalised by the eternal conflict of Christianity with Islam). The constantly repeated element was the "genocide" committed by the Ustasha against the Serbs, so the riots and occupation of parts of Croatian territory in their interpretation became a sort of "prevention of genocide".<sup>22</sup> Widespread among the Croatian Serbs, the propaganda of Milošević's regime used the events of WW2 to stoke fear and mobilise them to oppose the Croatian government.

Although the armed conflict in the region ended 25 years ago (or 20 if you take into account the conflict in Kosovo), the tension in mutual relations is still high.

Moreover, the borders of division are not based only on ethnic or national grounds, but they also run within the nations, dividing them internally. A prime example is the situation in Croatia. Constant discussions about WW2 and the post-war period are an integral part

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<sup>20</sup> For example: <https://glas-slavonije.hr/418202/11/Zlatko-Kramaric-Tudjmanu-se-mora-priznati-iskrena-zelja-da-dodje-do-historijskog-pomirenja> (10.11.2020)

<sup>21</sup> M. Najbar-Agičić, „Od kulta ličnosti do detitoizacije. Prikazi Josipa Broza Tita u hrvatskim i srpskim udžbenicima povijesti“, in: ed. Š. Alempijević, N., Mathijesen Hjemdahl, K., *O Titu kao mitu. Proslava dana mladosti u Kumrovcu*, Zagreb: FF-press – Srednja Europa, 2006, 377–397.

<sup>22</sup> Stojanović, *Populism the Serbian Way*, 153.

of the political landscape, and the attitude towards the NOB (NLB) and Tito, on the one hand, and the NDH and Ustasha, on the other, are the fundamental principle of division on the Croatian political scene.

Even though a mainstream narrative regarding WW2 has now been partly worked out, and it, in theory, does not bear any drastically contradictory interpretations of the past, during every election campaign and in moments of crisis, elements from the plentiful memory reserves of the events of WW2 and the immediate post-war period are brought out. This memory divides the society into the nationalist “right” and the antifascist (post-communist, but liberal) “left”, and these issues are the basis on which the political sympathies of voters are garnered.

It might be worth noting that, if we set aside the more right-wing and mostly marginal political streams, the Croatian centre-right, for example the ruling HDZ (Christian democrats), board themselves off from the NDH and Ustasha heritage, but at the same time are very critical of the CPY and Tito, as well as the regime they instated after 1945. The left, meanwhile, is trying to defend the Croatian “antifascist” heritage, having a much fonder memory of the communist government and the period of socialist Yugoslavia and rejecting the approach of “rejection of both totalitarianisms” promoted by the Croatian right as relativisation of Croatian nationalists’ war crimes and fascism in general.

This is the way the memory of WW2 becomes a weapon for legitimising the positions and political aspirations of particular political parties and mobilising their voters in modern day Croatia. The conflict of memory that stems from this process keeps repeating itself without visible progress of problems being overcome. But an impression that the events of WW2 are largely a substitute comes to mind: a large, realistic problem in national memory is the memory of the war from the beginning of the 1990s, questions about which, as of right now, none of the sides seem to be willing to confront.

In Serbia, the rejection of “antifascist” traditions, that is, the narrative of Tito’s partisans happened – somewhat paradoxically – in the time after the fall of Milošević, between 2000 and 2012, in the period described as the “democratic governments”. The rejection of communism entailed the rejection of “antifascism”. This is when the emphasis of Chetnik traditions began, while the fierce dispute within the Serbian public, splitting into supporters of “antifascism” and nationalists, was raging. Since 2012, after Aleksandar Vučić’s rise

to power, his populist policy draws a lot from nationalism, but today it once again emphasises the fight against internal enemies (Vučić's coalition party is Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party, once Milošević's party). Again, the culprits for Serbian suffering are not the partisans, but the Croats, Albanians, etc. Once again, the narrative of Serbian victims, those from WW2 (Jasenovac) and the wartime years of the 1990s (operation "Storm", the conflict in Kosovo) is dominant.

The situation in ex-Yugoslav countries is quite dynamic and complex, and each country has its specifics concerning the memory of WW2, while still it is the, or one of the, fundamental sources used for legitimisation by groups aspiring for power and for the mobilisation of their supporters everywhere. Matters concerning WW2 are often substitutional matters, used because of their mobilisation potential and the emotions they evoke for diverting attention from other, more pressing, and often heated political, social, and economic problems.

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