

## Revisionism in Serbia

**Veranstalter:** Holm Sundhaussen, Free University Berlin; Nenad Stefanov, Berlin; Boris Kanzleiter, Belgrade/Berlin; Natalija Bašić, Berlin; Nicole Münnich, Berlin

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On October 27, 2007, the workshop „Revisionism in Serbia“, organized by a research group (Nenad Stefanov, Boris Kanzleiter, Natalija Bašić, Nicole Münnich) under the auspices of Holm Sundhaussen (Free University Berlin) and financed by the Thyssen foundation, took place at the Free University Berlin. The workshop aimed at intensifying the exchange of ideas between researchers from Germany and from Serbia, which is still to a large extent isolated. The objective was a discussion of the politically instrumentalized revision of historical perception in Serbia and the quite emotionalized reassessment of resistance and collaboration in World War II since the 1980s. In contrast to other East European societies, there was an explosive relationship between „hard-fought past“ and real military destruction in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. After Milošević's removal in October 2000, an open discussion broke out about how to reappraise Cetniks' and Partisans' activities. As a result, boundaries between rehabilitating non-communist democratic movements and pro-fascist respectively nationalist organizations became blurred. This has affected the democratic appreciation in the Serbian transformational society. Revisionism and its influence over current political debates is not a phenomenon limited to Serbia, but what makes it special is that the re-evaluation of World War II in Serbia takes place within a society, which also has to deal with the wars in the 1990s. Thus, the workshop examined questions of revisionism, its historical development, and its role in contemporary Serbian society, as well as its influences over politics.

The workshop began with a keynote speech by WOLFGANG HÖPKEN (Leipzig), who initiated the discussion by clarifying the terminology. To avoid simplification and stereotypes he suggested distinguishing between „revisionism“ as ideological and „revision“ as what historians do all the time. Thus, revisionism is immune to evidence, has a political impact and lacks of self-reglementations. HÖPKEN conceded that the borderlines between both terms are not easily distin-

guished. In the case of Serbia, there had been substantial attempts of „revision“ in the 1980s, e.g. the Goli-Otok-debate. Today, contrary to the stereotype of Serbia as being largely occupied with revisionism, Serbian society is more characterized by a defragmented historical memory that could be called „memory chaos“. Questions of whom to remember are still open, and there is not yet a common ground for memory. Against this background it is an interesting question why revisionist pictures gained such wide support. At the end of his talk HÖPKEN challenged the uniqueness of the Serbian case. Since there had been re-discussions about World War II in many other countries as well, this is not a pathological behavior of Serbia alone, but part of a broader, a global discussion. How specific this Serbian revisionism is became the central question of the day. In the following discussion Dubravka STOJANOVIC (Belgrade) pointed out that the historical context was unique in Serbia – an argument HÖPKEN questioned. But he as well as Ulf BRUNNBAUER (Berlin) conceded the strong political impact revisionism currently has in Serbia.

HÖPKEN's talk was followed by the first panel and a lecture by Nenad STEFANOV (Berlin), entitled with „The Ethnicizing of history: Debates among Yugoslav historians in the eighties“. By speaking about the book „The Allies and Yugoslav war drama“ (Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama, Veselin Djuretic, 1985), STEFANOV gave the audience an understanding of the beginning of re-interpreting World War II, the so-called „thunderstorm of history“. He described the attempt to re-evaluate the protagonists in the World War II. Djuretic's book claimed to describe the relationship between the Yugoslav resistance movement and the Allies, namely Britain and the Soviet Union. In fact, it was a reinterpretation of the resistance movement and the strategy of the Cetniks. Furthermore, Djuretic offered a new interpretation of General Milan Nedic, the collaborationist with the Germans. In Djuretic's apologia, Nedic tried to save the „very existence of the Serbian people“. Djuretic even integrated Nedic in a new notion of antifascism: For Djuretic, the Serbs were genuine antifascist, such a firm conviction was part of their „national character“ and „ethnic nature“. The feedback on the book was twofold. On the one hand there were irritations, how a book like this could have been published within the scientific public, even by the renowned Serbian Academy

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of Sciences. On the other hand, Serbian historians tried to maintain the possibility of a differentiated approach to the issue of collaboration by avoiding a clear condemnation of Djuretic. In the discussion, HÖPKEN affirmed STEFANOV's judgment that Djuretic's book had been a testing ground to see if the Party would still be able to maintain the authority over historic memory.

After STEFANOV's lecture about the first attempts to re-interpret Cetniks and Milan Nedic in the 1980s, Olivera MILOSAVLJEVIC (Belgrade) spoke about the contemporary rehabilitation of Milan Nedic. This attempt was visible during the Milošević regime, but it was not an integral part of the regime's politics. Nevertheless, such attempts existed within literature, memoirs or plays. Although Nedic's and Ljotic's anti-Semitism is a historically validated fact, attempts are being made to relativize and reinterpret it. This process intensified after 2000. Even though, it couldn't be linked directly to the ruling democratic parties, there were endeavors e.g. to rename streets after Dimitrije Ljotic in certain Serbian cities such as Smederevo. The crucial point for MILOSAVLJEVIC is the fact, that Ljotic's sympathy for national socialist ideas is not only suppressed: Even worse, in the attempts to rehabilitate Nedic and Ljotic MILOSAVLJEVIC detects a new affirmation of national socialist and fascist ideology. The protagonists of such rehabilitation do not hesitate any more to promote their ideologies as relevant for today's political orientation in Serbia.

In the discussion, Boris KANZLEITER (Belgrade/Berlin) pointed out that the rehabilitation of the Cetniks have a bearing on legislation today, namely concerning the planned „Law on Restitution of property“ which is about to be implemented at the beginning of 2008. According to this law all property taken through the post World War II nationalization needs to be returned, regardless if it was expropriated or confiscated. And again the question whether or not the Serbian case implies special features, since there were discussions about collaboration and the difficulty of that term all over Europe. In Serbia, MILOSAVLJEVIC stated, collaboration had always been used as a political fighting word.

In the second panel, dedicated to models of remembrance, Dubravka STOJANOVIC with her paper surveyed revisionism and the perceptions of Partisans and Cetniks in textbooks. Given that Serbia is the only country in Southeastern Europe

where the state has the only authority of publishing textbooks, the shifts in interpreting World War II gain a huge importance. After (over-)emphasizing the Partisan movement in socialist time, the first shift in the early 1990s had been to equal both Partisan and Cetnik movements as anti-fascist. But after Milošević's removal in October 2000, the primary goal of the textbooks seemed to be the complete revision of World War II. General Nedic is now presented as a man „who was saving the Serbian people“ (as quoted in one of the current textbooks). These had led to major changes in interpreting the relationship between Partisans and Cetniks, collaboration and war crimes. The Cetnik movement, STOJANOVIC said, is presented to be the only true movement against the occupiers, collaboration is explicitly justified, and there were no war crimes but a „merciless civil war“.

In the discussion, STOJANOVIC added her experiences with history teachers. Under Milošević's regime, history teachers had stopped teaching via textbooks. First this was seen as a good sign, but it turned out it was even worse, because a huge amount of history students and future teachers are supporters of the clerical-fascist organization „Obraz“. To counteract these tendencies, an alternative history seminar for teachers was installed.

While textbooks are state-controlled, the authority over remembrance in public space is much more disputed. In her paper, Olga MANOJLOVIC-PINTAR (Belgrade) pointed out that historic revision and revisionism both are reflected in public space, e.g. via street naming. Since the beginning of the 21st century, most of the socialist related street names have been changed, like „ulica 29 novembra“, which now is called „Bulevar Despotina Stefana“. This example shows the new point of reference: it goes back not only to pre-socialist times, but also to pre-yugoslav times. Today, street names are again a battlefield as can be observed at „Bulevar AVNOJa“: On the one hand, there are political ambitions to name this avenue after Zoran Đindić, and on the other hand, the response had been quite radical: in a summer night 2007 an unknown group has placarded the street with name tags „Bulevar Ratka Mladica“.

During the discussion, again the question of the Serbian specific came up since street renaming often comes along with political transitions. MANOJLOVIC-PINTAR insisted that in Serbia revisionism not only legitimizes fascism, but also provoked the war in the 1990s and complica-

tes working up the past. As an example of this, she depicted the planned monument for the wars in the 1990s. Belgrade municipality decided in 2002 that there should be a monument, but until today not only the sculpture but also the name of the monument, which is to be „to the defenders of the fatherland“, is under discussion. Nobody knows to whom the monument is dedicated, because it is not clear who was a „defender“ and what is „the fatherland“.

Heike KARGE (Leipzig) dealt with World War II and the control over memories in the first two decades afterwards, remembrance from below and the resultant conflict over memories. She traced the development of the monument at Jasenovac Concentration Camp. Only in 1966, Bogdan Bogdanovic's famous monument to the victims of Jasenovac called „Stone flower“ was finally inaugurated. Given the fact that thousands of monuments had already been built in the 1950s, not having a monument dedicated to the victims of Jasenovac looked like a disregard of these victims. On the part of the Party, commemoration of a place like this was clearly difficult within the frame of the established war narrative. Nevertheless, there had been grassroot initiatives to commemorate Jasenovac since immediately after World War II. Heike KARGE showed how local practices adapted and transformed officially permitted and promoted 'memory spaces'.

During the closing discussion once again the specificity of Yugoslav revisionism was questioned. History is always linked to political ideas, but in Serbia, albeit not the whole country is revisionist, at present a few revisionist voices are really noisy and try to influence the political course, primarily by mis-using history. „The wars are not over“ –the workshop participants summed up. Critical historians would be strengthened by similar gatherings that could include Serbian scholars like Dubravka STOJANOVIC, Olga MANOJLOVIC-PINTAR and Olivera MILOSAVLJEVIC to discuss these issues in the future. One can only hope that such an event will take place soon again – and that until then visa restrictions will be more relaxed.

### Conference overview

Welcome By Boris Kanzleiter, Natalija Basic, Nenad Stefanov, Nicole Münnich  
Keynote Lecture by Wolfgang Höpken (Leipzig): „Revisionism in Serbia“

### Panel I: History

Chair: Boris Kanzleiter (Belgrade)

Presenters:

Nenad Stefanov (Berlin): „The Ethnicizing of history: Debates among Yugoslav historians in the eighties“

Olivera Milosavljevic (Belgrade): „Reinterpreting Milan Nedic in Serbia“

### Panel II: Remembrance

Chair: Nenad Stefanov (Berlin)

Presenters:

Dubravka Stojanovic (Belgrade): „Revisionism and Textbooks“

Olga Manojlovic Pintar (Belgrade): „Public space and revisions of history“

Heike Karge (Leipzig): “‘Fictive kinship’ groups encountering official narratives: The former Concentration Camp Jasenovac“

### Concluding Discussion

Chairs: Boris Kanzleiter (Belgrade), Nenad Stefanov (Berlin)

Tagungsbericht *Revisionism in Serbia*.  
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