

Round Table: Umrežene historiografije u jugoistočnoj Europi i Njemačkoj - Networked Historiographies in Southeast Europe and Germany - Vernetzte Historiographien in Südosteuropa und Deutschland

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Veranstalter: Association for the Modern History (UHMIS), Sarajevo; Association for Promoting the Culture of History Kliofest, Zagreb; Humboldt University of Berlin; co-founded by the European Union programme „Europe for Citizens“; and supported by the KROKODIL association, Belgrade

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Bericht von: Lucija Bakšić, Graduate School Global Intellectual History, Humboldt-Universität Berlin

This event was organized as part of the larger project called „Histoire pour la liberté“ (History for the freedom), which aims to enable fruitful and tolerant discussions between scholars about the culture of remembrance in order to emphasize different narratives about the European past.[1] Furthermore, within this project three round-table discussions have already been organized – in Zagreb (Kliofest), Sarajevo (History Fest), and Belgrade (KROKODIL, at the conference „Historians for Peace“) – discussing such problems as historical revisionism, as well as the position and purpose of historiography in post-Yugoslav societies and Germany. The round table on „Networked Historiographies in the Southeast Europe and Germany“ followed the same direction, promoting shared regional experiences and better understanding of historiography. The official languages of the discussion were Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian.

The first part of the round-table discussion was titled „Historiography in Times of Global Networking – Challenges and Possibilities“, focusing mostly on communication between historians, especially during the pandemic. As Thomas Schadt emphasized, the pandemic was both destructive and constructive because it propelled the effects of the digital revolution when the entire world came to a halt. In that context, Branimir Janković described the role of the internet portal histori-

ografija.hr. Founded by Damir Agičić during the 2000s, its goal is to provide accurate information about historiography on the local (updates on recent works), regional (awareness of post-Yugoslav experiences), and global level (following new critical approaches). The main problem, as Janković sees it, is the lack of financial support and therefore the necessity for volunteering, which sometimes causes the so-called digital inequality in historiography. The latter was confirmed by Husnija Kamberović, who founded a similar platform called historiografija.ba in Sarajevo in 2019. By structuring their work around their audiences' preferences, the initial goal of these platforms is to shed light on a regional historiography, which is why they are mainly focused on the Balkans and on Southeast Europe. For Kamberović, the most important task is to enable knowledge production and information circulation in order to provide integral tools for critical discussions about the past within divided post-Yugoslav societies. Finally, despite all financial and technical obstacles, Dubravka Stojanović highlighted the high accessibility of historical content through the internet. Stojanović mentioned the project „Joint History Textbooks“ – conducted in 2005 as an extension of the „Joint History Project“, led by Maria Todorova – which resulted in six handbooks about controversial topics throughout the twentieth century (war, genocide, nationalism, etc). Due to their size, the handbooks were uploaded online and thus became widely distributed among teachers and used for further education about the Balkan region.

The speakers also reflected on television and film, trying to answer the question of how historians should deal with the flood of alternative, often fake, history in the public space. To prevent this problem, Kamberović advocated greater public visibility of historians, who should, in his opinion, be very vocal about different perspectives. In other words, historians should constantly be in search of ways to promote and strengthen their own public presence. Furthermore, Stojanović expressed her concern about the online revolution is creating an „official“ narrative, which consequently disputes the academic facts created by historians (for example, the role of the

Chetniks in the Second World War). Janković pointed out the great influence that the internet has in creating a public opinion and urged historians to question and redefine their academic positions towards answering this phenomenon. The speakers substantiated their arguments with recently released contentious movies such as *The Diary of Diana B* (2019), *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020), and *Dara of Jasenovac* (2021).

The second part of the round-table discussion was titled „Towards the Realization of Mutual Projects – Steps and Controversies“, and it was moderated by Ruža Fotiadis. When being asked about how he sees engaged history and his own position in practising it, Milivoj Bešlin opened the discussion with a focus on mass communication. According to him, the twentieth century allowed an (online) public debate without any hierarchy to take place, which resulted in placing everything under a question mark. That is to say, everyone feels invited to talk about history or even to question exact disciplines such as science or medicine as the increase of (fake) news about the pandemic constantly shows. Therefore, to prevent the spread of false historical information, historians should react. That being said, there is also a significant trend of public reactions to the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, historians are frequently funded by public institutions, and therefore they have to be transparent about their work and struggle for their position in society. As an example of this work, Bešlin highlighted the role of the portal Yu-history, which provides a unique view on the shared regional history, despite historians' different opinions, and acts as a platform for many influential historians from the Balkan and Southeast Europe.

Dino Šakanović deepened the discussion about public engagement. Šakanović has been writing for the Bosnian internet portal *prometej.ba* since 2011 and sees his role as somehow being divided between a commentator and a columnist. Despite being a trained historian, Šakanović suggests historians should improve their communication skills in order to reach a broader audience in the same way that journalists should focus more on facts and the scientific approach

to certain topics. However, even though he has already written more than 100 articles and participated in „civilized“ exchanges of opinions, Šakanović has faced many problems in his area of work. Not only was he exposed to severe criticism for his comments on different topics (for example, his views on revisionism in children's historical picture books), but he was also exposed to hate speech and threats. Due to these reasons, for Šakanović, improving the institutional protection of public intellectuals is one of the key elements for safe discussions and safe intellectual work.

Institutional support, but in an academic way, was also a point made by Agičić, who described the cooperation between Slovenian, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbian institutions as very good and in constant progress. This is the outcome of his long-term efforts to make an impact as a historian firstly on television, then in newspapers, and finally as a publisher. When he started his publishing house *Srednja Europa* (Central Europe) at the end of the 1990s, Agičić wanted to offer new historical approaches and perspectives to the Croatian readership. His initiative was recognized by many historians who wanted to publish their works, and after some time *Srednja Europa* became a prominent publishing house for various historical works. However, similar to other publishing houses, it faces many problems with distribution, sales, and funding. Also, due to the policies of publishing houses regarding work based on market demands, opportunities for mutual collaboration are greatly reduced. Still, Agičić is determined to promote cooperation between publishing houses through the joint market of *Kliofest* – a history festival that has gathered different publishers and scholars for over seven years. Although publishing houses are independent in using different business strategies, for Agičić it remains a great challenge to promote cooperation in history and history in the public space.

The third part of the round-table discussion was focused mostly on Germany. Symbolically titled „Germany – The World Champion in Facing the Past“, the discussion aimed to problematize Germany being a role model for societies like those in post-Yugoslavia in facing difficult historical narratives. In

this framework, Marija Vulesica tackled some very important issues regarding holocaust and colonialism. On the example of establishing the Topography of Terror, a memorial place in Berlin, Vulesica described how many people in West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s became conscious of and started to cope with their own history. Encouraged by the media attention, which subsequently mobilized the state to secure funding, the initiative of younger generations managed to transform a place that used to be a Gestapo headquarters into a place of remembrance, a starting point for a discussion about the German past. Simultaneously, pioneering American television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) reached the audience of several million people, sensitized the German public to victims' trauma relating to the Holocaust and confronted viewers with the role and presence of perpetrators within the German society itself. Until then, the Holocaust had been thematized mostly in Eastern European TV productions (for example in the Yugoslav film *The Ninth Circle* [1960]), which allowed the topic to be presented in a displaced and distanced manner from the German narrative. Additionally, an institutional penetration of Holocaust topics into the West German educational system(s) also encouraged young people to ask some „unpleasant“ questions about their own past. Therefore, Vulesica pointed out two key points for taking responsibility: the first one is time, which enabled „emotional distance“ between generations, and the second one is the individualization of Holocaust, which replaced the nationalistic perspective. Individualization and visibility of the Holocaust in the second half of the twentieth century, in Vulesica's opinion, opened the door for research, which continues today all over the world, especially in the USA and Israel. For that reason, when it comes to facing its own past and research, Vulesica concluded, Germany is the world champion.

However, Germany seems to be less successful when it comes to facing its own colonial past. To support this argument, Vulesica gave the example of the newly opened Humboldt Forum. Placed where once the Royal Palace and then the Palace of the Republic of East Germany stood, the Humboldt Fo-

rum collects exhibits from German colonial past. Vulesica emphasized many controversies around the exhibition since it was organized more as an example of the country's colonial past rather than its critical commentary. The result of this constellation was the resignation of Bénédicte Savoy, a leading art historian, from the Humboldt Forum's board and a demand for more acknowledgement of Germany's colonial history by the German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier during the forum's opening. When she visited the exhibition, Vulesica herself noticed that many exhibits are described as „acquired“ (erworben von), which simplifies their complex colonial origin and does not provide enough information on how these exhibits became the property of the German state, thereby confirming the assumptions that a broader discussion regarding colonialism should be undertaken. Moreover, Vulesica tackled an ongoing scholarly debate about the larger topic of holocaust and its research in context of German colonial politics. In her opinion, both sides require deeper understanding and research attention as both themes, holocaust and colonialism, deal with profoundly complex problems. To illustrate it even better, Vulesica made a connection between debates in Germany and her studying of Serbian and Jewish history in the fascist Independent State of Croatia, concluding that one cannot be understood without the other and that every research strand or topic should be equally respected. Hence, once again, Vulesica expressed her strong belief in an individual approach. By embracing different concepts and various perspectives on traces of microhistory, as well as acknowledging one's own research position, Vulesica believes that it is possible to understand broader (political) structures and make significant progress in taking responsibility for the past.

To conclude, the round-table discussion „Networked Historiographies in the Southeast Europe and Germany“ opened many important questions and expressed various opinions about the position of history and historians in Southeast Europe and Germany during this challenging time. Concurrently, it connected different perspectives on historiographies and shared some methods for fac-

ing difficult historical narratives. Eventually, what remains to be seen is how this project will continue to develop and contribute to future historical debates in order to establish better understanding between different historiographies and, consequently, societies.

Programme

Round-table discussion 1: „Historiography in Times of Global Networking – Challenges and Possibilities“ (Historiografija u doba globalne umreženosti – izazovi i mogućnosti)

Moderation: Thomas Schad (Humboldt University of Berlin)

Branimir Janković (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb), Husnija Kamberović (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo), Dubravka Stojanović (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)

Round-table discussion 2: „Towards the Realization of Mutual Projects – Steps and Controversies“ (Ka realizaciji zajedničkih projekata – koraci i kontroverze)

Moderation: Ruža Fotiadis (Humboldt University of Berlin)

Damir Agičić (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb), Milivoj Bešlin (The Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade), Dino Šakanović (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo)

Round-table discussion 3: „Germany – The World Champion in Facing the Past“ (Njemačka – svjetski prvak u suočavanju s prošlošću?)

Moderation: Thomas Schad (Humboldt University of Berlin) and Ruža Fotiadis (Humboldt University of Berlin)

Marija Vulesica (Humboldt University of Berlin)

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