

Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation

Report of international CHDR/IHJR Conference in Opatija, Croatia (September 13-14, 2009) and Belgrade, Serbia (September 17-18, 2009)

“Facing the past, Searching for the Future: the history of Yugoslavia in the 20th Century”

Organized by the Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation (CHDR) in Novi Sad this September, the conference was held in both Opatija and Belgrade. “Facing the Past, Searching the Future: the history of Yugoslavia in the 20th Century” is also a project of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation in The Hague.

The Opatija meeting involved scholars, mostly from countries in the region including Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, as well as from Italy and the UK. The two teams met on the projects entitled, “Political Myths and Nation-building in Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States” and “Collaboration and Resistance in Yugoslavia during World War II.” In presentations on myths, politics, and ideology, the prevailing opinion was that in the former Yugoslavia so-called ethnic myths dominated, in particularly those emphasizing the role of myths regarding the “chosen people” and the “promised land.”

Prof. Darko Gavrilovic opened this dialogue with the basic premise: “To understand the mythical processes, we have to understand the social and historical processes because they determine the myths, and not the other way around. Dealing with history that is continuous is the challenge of facing myths. The awareness that we were already a nationally, ideologically and religiously divided society at the time of the first Yugoslavia was only suspended during the war, not crushed, providing us with the incentive to conduct further research into the past.

With the understanding that myths and politics are inextricably connected, at this meeting they were always mentioned together because politics can hardly be imagined without the use of myths. Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Boskovic insisted on the significance of these connections and he pointed out that there is a whole array of political myths, among which he included the most frequently mentioned such as the myth of the chosen people, the myth of the brave nation, the myth of origin, the myth of the eschatological bright future, and the myth of a united Europe.

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Furthermore, the language of daily politics is so connected and interwoven with the mythical one that without these ‘supernatural’ or ‘irrational’ elements, it is almost impossible to comprehend the discourse.

Twenty years after the war and the process in which the former Yugoslav federation was replaced by several independent countries that had been constructed as nations, there is still ongoing debate about the nature of these changes, while the newly created structures remain incomplete. The destroyed socialist federation was an enigma, not only as an experimental political-economic model but also as a ‘multi-ethnic nation.’ According to Prof. Dr. Vjekoslav Perica, and other participants who agreed with him, the nations arising from it are unfinished products in the process of construction. This research project argues that in order to analyze that process it is necessary to comparatively analyze the former state as well. The subject of that analysis will be legitimization of the nation as a political and ethnic community in terms of its history, which in the extreme cases of ethnic nationalism is reduced to a historical-political conglomerate of myths.

By focusing on the situation in the former Yugoslavia 20 years after the changes of 1989, this project will present a “who’s-who” in the region today, while stressing the transience and volatility of these collective identities. Within such a context, Vjekoslav Perica concluded that it is necessary to consider the various peace activities as frequent failures insofar that they lead to freezing and cementing something which is not possible to freeze or cement. With that they are repeating the mistake of Titoism – to push conflicts under the carpet. Normalization and creating conditions for reconciliation can only come if the nature and source of conflict are properly understood at least regarding historical-mythical engineering, and removing from it incompatible and irreconcilable myths.

The topic regarding resistance to the Fascist occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and continuous concerns about the collaboration of certain people, or their movements, with the Axis forces resurfaced at the beginning of the 1990s. It is clearly seen from the (mis)use of media, in 1989-91, when every nation in the SFRY sought national cohesion and searched for the road to the creation of independent states, primarily at the expense of historical knowledge.

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Members of this team stressed the importance of reviewing the role of the resistance movement and collaborationists where they insisted on primarily following the archival sources and scientifically grounded opinions.

This scholarly meeting continued in Belgrade on 17 -18 September 2009, where the scholars were divided into the working groups that represent two further teams within the project. These are: "Tito and the national question in Yugoslavia" and "Mapping national identities in former Yugoslavia."

Dr. Mira Radojevic, a team leader of "Tito and the national question in Yugoslavia," pointed out that the research aim of her team is to attempt to analyze the impact of Josip Broz Tito in regards to the process of resolving the national question in the territory of the Kingdom of SHS, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the SFR of Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1991. There was discussion regarding the attitude of Josip Broz Tito to the national question because historical research in all new states that emerged in the former Yugoslavia contains many contradictions. During the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the eruption of nationalism in all former Yugoslav republics, according to the team leader Prof. Dr. Mira Radojevic, the historic figure of Tito was contested, humiliated and portrayed to the public in a mainly negative context. That is why an additional aim of this research is to break stereotypes regarding the historical role of Josip Broz Tito and his influence on the causes of the collapse and disappearance of the former state. Older historians have partially dealt with the attitude of Josip Broz Tito regarding the solution of the national question prior to World War II, while there is not enough scholarly knowledge covering the period after 1945 for a number of reasons: because of the unavailability of historical sources, the sensitivity of the subject as well as the fact that such a problem was not in accordance with the politics of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia at the time.

The project will address the following issues: Investigation of Josip Broz's connection with national issues during the 20's and 30's, his role in resolving this issue during the 60's, his attitude towards the Croatian Maspoku ("Croatian Spring") and the recognition of the Muslim nation in the '70s.

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As for the team that discussed "Mapping national identities in former Yugoslavia" in Belgrade, according to Prof. Dr. Ljubisa Despotovic, the research aim is "standardization of concepts such as national identity, hegemony, separatism, etc. The project also aims to encourage further research and thus help with the separation from the historic abuses."

"Here it is primarily necessary to define the basic concepts," said Despotovic, "- what is identity - or what is a nation, what is actually meant by the term national identity, and what is a collective or individual perspective of the concept. This is also the case with the concept of a common historical identity of the former Yugoslavia, and the concept of rival or conflicting identity which under historical circumstances led to the escalation of war in this region. This raises the problem of interpretation of the concept of a "lived identity" of the second half of the 20th century and the concept of "projected identity," which refers to recently constituted national communities with the development of national identity in the future. Divided identity, for example, is methodologically interesting for the analysis of members who identify as both a Serb and a Slovenian on the individual level. This topic also deals with the question of the origin and development of regional identity among the Croats and Serbs in the 19th century, the revival of the national movements in the late '80s of the last century, and the role of media in creating a new nation. "

At the end of the meeting it was concluded that the teams will continue to work and that the next meeting of teams will take place in January 2010 on Mount Jahorina in Bosnia.