

IHJR Former Yugoslavia Meeting Report

Date: 10.06-13.06.2009

Place: Hotel Mercure Metropole, Budapest

Present: Elazar Barkan, Mile Bjelajac, Sonila Boci, Đorđe Borozan, Dragan Cvetković, Ljubiša Despotović, Ljubodrag Dimic, Darko Gavrilović, Ranka Gašić, Sokol Gjermeni, Igor Graovac, Elma Hasimbegovic, Shoshana Iten, Adnan Jahić, Lidija Kapičić, Vjeran Pavlaković, Momcilo Pavlovic, Vjekoslav Perica, Mira Radojević, Edin Radusic, Irida Shehu, Sabina Veladzic

FACING THE PAST, SEARCHING FOR THE FUTURE – The Twentieth Century Yugoslav History – Shared Narratives’

The scientific meeting entitled ‘FACING THE PAST, SEARCHING FOR THE FUTURE – The Twentieth Century Yugoslav History – Shared Narratives’ was held in Budapest between 10th and 13th June 2009 organised by the Centre for History, Democracy and Reconciliation from Novi Sad and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation from The Hague. The meeting was attended by historians, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia and the United States of America. During the meeting the teams already involved in the project ‘Facing the Past, Searching for the Future’ presented the results of their work to date; the guidelines for the future activities were laid out, and three newly formed teams started the work on their projects. These included: a team composed of the historians from Albania, Montenegro and Serbia who will carry out a research into the history of the Yugoslav-Albanian political relations in the 20th century; a team made up of Serbian and Croatian historians who will explore the problems of the history of victims in the territories of Croatia and Serbia in the 20th century; and a team composed of historians from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Canada, Scotland, Slovenia and Serbia who will be dealing with political myths from the 1990’s to the present, with a purpose of identifying the key myths which not only led to wars and hatred in the region, but continue to play an important part in the process of democratization in these societies as well as in their efforts to move towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. The formation of the team of Albanian and Serbian historians attracted the greatest attention due to the fact that it was the first in history that historians from these countries meet, and the group's existence today is a serious step forward in showing the readiness of historians to jointly approach the exploration of the past. It is also a signal to politicians in these two countries that the science of history is ready to

reinforce the roads Albania and Serbia have taken on their ways towards reaching good neighbourly relations.

Based on this initial meeting, Sonila Boci, an Albanian historian, noted that the Albanian and Serbian historians have decided to approach the topic through an exploration based on the title 'Historiography vs. Memory of the Past in the 20th Century', and that they have agreed to identify the main thesis in both Albanian and Serbian historiography relevant to the Albanian-Yugoslav relations for their next meeting.

Ljubodrag Dimić, a Serbian historian, added that the historians from the two countries had a very constructive dialogue: 'We heard and understood each other. This is the first meeting between Albanian and Serbian historians. We made an agreement to draw and exchange lists of literature and the names of researchers who have been engaged with these topics, to collect the material, and develop a joint compendium on the Serbian-Albanian relations in the 20th century. We will probably start with the period from 1918. We are inviting other colleagues to join us, and it would be good if the colleagues from Kosovo and Metohija accept our invitation.'

In the second part of the meeting the scientists had a constructive debate about the problems encountered when writing joint reports, the notion/term of 'reconciliation' and the condition of the historical science in the region. They identified several problems that could be encountered in the process of working on the project which should yield the team's shared narratives on the key problems in regard to the 20th century history in the territory of Yugoslavia and Albania. In the discussion about how to find a way to write impartially about the past, Mile Bjelajac posed the question if it was possible to change views on the past, especially in the light of the fact that historians are biased since the characteristics of their national identities are incorporated in their personalities, and whether any change is possible when we were all taught a 'history coloured by passion and ideology'. Mira Radojević warned of the problem that the sources are limited, the problems of mythomania and a need for thorough archival research. Ljubodrag Dimić insisted that the development of a text should be preceded by a categorical location of the apparatus to be used, because there is a danger of misunderstandings caused by the application of different terminology on the 'same things'. The relationship between fact and interpretation is also important, because if we stay with only one aspect, history would be no more than raw material; therefore, a just approach should be found which would make any interpretation a serious one. Finally, an important question is how exactly we change our own opinions - probably through facing documents and other proof of the other side - which can

only be achieved through a dialogue. The truth is the first stop on the road of reconciliation, and if there are many truths, everything is illusory.

The discussion then touched upon the importance and the justification of the use of the term 'reconciliation' not only in the name of the Centre but also as a humanistic aim which is its own mission.

In regard to this, Elazar Barkan emphasised that although the nature of historians' work is that they often perceive the past in an individualistic way, joint work by historical committees which produce reports resulting from a joint effort of a number of people is widespread. In the process of producing a joint report there are particular difficulties arising in reports that are made in the aftermath of a conflict between two or more sides.

Darko Gavrilović commented that the 'Dialogue between Croatian and Serbian Historians' began with each side based on their scientific integrity worked alone, presenting their own work and opinions. In contrast, the challenge for a joint report is to write a collective article, which incorporates various perspectives: national and methodological. This is not a single-minded approach, rather it offers an opportunity for each scientist to say what they think and whether they agree with the collective text or not. Through our work on this project we want to explicate the relations of the various stakeholders (scientists) to each other, including both agreements and differences. We anticipate that the development of a collective text will take us closer to the truth, while being confined to small and narrow national historiographies will further isolate us, and keep knowledge limited.

Then Đorđe Borozan emphasised the importance of the term 'reconciliation', pointing out that it is essential to highlight intentions, 'and our intention is to face the past. We have a scientific and a non-scientific perception of the past. We must make a conscious effort to remove the past away from politics and make it as scientific and rational as possible. This is where I see the point and the purpose and this is the only way in which I am willing to participate.'

Finally, Elazar Barkan concluded by observing that the participants did not disagree in their presentations. He said: 'We all come here with our own histories, and there is justified hesitation of the obstacles and fear of the possibility that we face in attempting to produce shared narratives. Although reconciliation is often seen as a religious term, I do not believe only religion is entitled to use it. This notion is similar to the notion of historical truth. Reconciliation

is a process similar to seeking something but never reaching it. There can always be further historical truths, further reconciliation. The difference between historical dialogue and reconciliation is the underlying ambition. What all of you tried to explain today is very close to reconciliation. What we can expect from reconciliation are empathy and respect, and an acceptance that different perspectives exist without speaking on behalf of victims or monopolizing their opinions.'