

УДК 323.14(497)"1991/..."

DISPUTED HISTORIES - PERSONAL AND OFFICIAL NARRATIVES IN (POST) YUGOSLAV ERA HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

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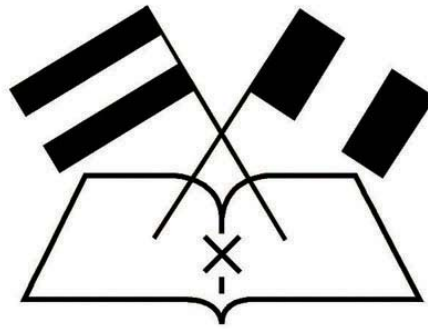


Figure 1. Disputed Histories ExLibris/logo

Abstract: This paper examines the shift that took place when official historical narratives began to be conceived from the perspective of personal histories (and identities) in the post-Yugoslav context. It opens up a space in which to imagine new positions that can lead to the construction of more coherent official historical narratives, beyond narrow national perspectives. This paper is based on material arising from the experience of working on the artistic/research project *Disputed Histories*,

which consists of a library of history textbooks and a series of complementary workshops, which compare and analyse a series of different history curricula.

Keywords: history textbooks, history curriculum, official historical narratives and identities, private histories and identities, socially engaged art practice, art and ideologies, history and ideology, Post-Yugoslav nationalisms, socialist era

I. INTRODUCTION

With the breakup of Yugoslavia during the wars of the nineties and the subsequent formation of new states, consensus about collective history also fell apart. Different versions of history textbooks began to proliferate in geographical areas where a single version had previously served as a reference during the socialist period. The effort that governments put into producing revised versions of official history curriculums is proof of the fact that historical narratives are powerful tools when it comes to engineering collective (national) identities and maintaining power positions in the new liberal-capitalist order. These revised curriculums, designed from the different national perspectives in the new former Yugoslav states, are not only different from the previous socialist version which had until then represented the unquestionable truth, but also differ from each other, contradicting each other thus maintaining existing conflicts or inciting new ones¹. However, a closer examination reveals that the new revised curriculums do not actually differ so much among themselves in essence, given that the revisions follow similar patterns. They are all perceived from a perspective based on the stabilization of national identities and on the capitalist economic system. In addition, these revisions are part of an ongoing process in most of the post-Yugoslav states, making the publishing of educational materials a profitable business². New history textbooks are introduced at the start of every school year through processes of decision-making, author selection and evaluation that are murky and undefined.



Figure 2. Examples of textbooks from the Disputed Histories Library

II. HISTORY AND THE PRESENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGING OFFICIAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Past events are over and done with - we can no longer influence them or interfere in any way. But the ways in which they are read, interpreted and represented are constantly changing according to the circumstances: these readings vary based on the context from which they are generated. We find a more familiar example of this dynamic is our own personal life stories, in which new experiences and changes in ourselves or our surroundings offer us new perspectives on our past, and make us see it with 'different eyes' and from fresh perspectives. Accumulated experiences and our ever-changing interpretations of them result in our 'personal growth', making us 'wiser' and more skilled, providing us with the tools we need to deal with the present and with future situations.

All of us can testify to the complexity of this process, which is often no easy task. We all know what it means to live in particular social, historical and cultural contexts, which also play a big part in producing our collective histories. Whether these stories take the form of legends, literature, film, media reports, public opinion, educational material, or scientific works and analysis, we are subject to their influence even as they undergo transformations and modifications.

The official historical narratives set out in textbooks are expected to be the most reliable and least subject to change, as they are presumably approved by the highest state authorities and a specially appointed team of experts⁴. They are traditionally expected to offer in-depth views of a local people's history within the wider context of historical events.

The post-Yugoslav context offered a unique opportunity to witness major changes in official historical narratives in a relatively short period of time. These changes came to the forefront in the sphere of cultural production during the period of market liberalization that came right after Tito's death. They began and took hold with the disputes among the Alliance of Yugoslavian Communists, were boosted by the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and became even more pronounced with the Yugoslav wars and conflicts throughout 90's and 2000's (resulting in its breakup). These changes are still taking place today, tending to confirm narratives imposed through a sort of cultural hegemony by providing means and positions from which to interpret them. As a consequence of the shift to new political and ideological patterns that took place in the late 80's and early 90's, there was a push for the rapid re-invention of the future foundations of the newly formed nation states. Part of this process included

the immediate release of revised history textbooks, given that each of the new nation states was declaring its independent historical development. The new textbooks written from a purely national perspective never failed to be ready for the start of the academic year, a fact that shows the important role that history plays in politics, given that *those who control the past also control the present and the future*.

There was bound to have been some filtering of information in official Yugoslav history, which was aligned with communist ideology and morality, as a result of which some historical evidence had been neglected or silenced. In particular, facts that could potentially provoke national or religious friction were silenced, given that Yugoslavia was a complex, multiethnic and multicultural state. In order to secure stability, its official version of history chose to promote a Yugoslav identity that was noticeably different to the various ethnic national identities such as Serbian, Croat, Slovenian, etc. that composed it. Yugoslav identity claimed itself to be *supra national*, and set itself the task of overcoming the notion of ethnic national identities⁵.

With the objective of establishing or re-establishing the separate nation states after the breakup, new official history curriculums produced official narratives opposed to the previous ones, and at the same time generated contradictions among themselves. While the results differ, the patterns that these new narratives tend to follow are actually quite similar: (a) early national histories, often based on scarce factual material, draw on elements of popular foundational myths - thus proving the existence of the dominant ethnicity on the territory in question through its culture, language, monuments, etc. - while the presence of other

ethnic groups in the same territory is neglected or minimized; (b) aspects such as suffering under the occupiers, resistance, bravery, uprisings for national freedom, etc. are emphasized and glorified through stylistic figures and rhetorical expressions (c) there is a rehabilitation of reactionary nationalist movements; for example, those that collaborated with the Axis powers in the course of World War II and fought against the anti-fascist communist movement were given a place in various post-Yugoslav curriculums; (d) the military actions conducted by local forces in the wars of the 90's tend to be presented as defensive, and the ones conducted by other parties as offensive, and the expelled population and refugees are mentioned only if they were part of the dominant national population.

Ironically, all these history curriculums inevitably resemble our professional C.V.s, where we choose a selection of highlights from our personal history (failing to mention the fact that we were kicked out of school or fired from our previous job, for example). Both types aim to present us in the best possible light, as self-confident and primed to ensure career advancement and access to economic funds. Young nation states, like adolescents, yearn to build their identities and to gain recognition from their elders, often pretending they are older and more experienced than they really are.

III. LOOKING FOR NEW POSITIONS FROM WHICH HISTORIES COULD BE TOLD

The nationalist discourse could be seen as the state authorities' strongest bet, and it was politically employed in order to keep the masses under control,

maintaining and reinforcing positions of power⁶⁷. On the other hand, it was generally accepted by the masses, seeing as it fit in with the concepts of the preservation of tradition, cultural heritage, family assets and propriety. But at the same time, many groups and individuals (in reality the majority of the population) who are currently suffering the consequences of privatization, unemployment, the loss of social benefits and security, the right to education, public healthcare, etc., being discredited and lacking the means for political struggle. This situation leads us to ask: How different would official history be if we tried to explain it from the position of the working class, without national distinctions? And how different would our present then be? Also, how different would our prospects for the future be?

Likewise, what would occur if we tried to see the world from a wider perspective, looking beyond the idea of social progress? For the past several centuries we have grown accustomed to conceiving the flow of history in terms of a progressive process (since the bourgeois revolutions, the development of cities, nation states, industrialization, advances in technology and science, modernization, etc.). This perception is based on the idea of historical progress measured with in terms of the increase in social security and welfare⁶⁸. While our ideas remain fixed to the same principles, new generations have been starting to experience the negative consequences of this model of historical progress and constant economic growth, as evidenced by the deterioration of basic living conditions and global impoverishment, prompting economic crises, wars for energy resources, natural catastrophes and the extinction of species.

All of these consequences, which may directly or indirectly affect us, make us see historical progress in a different and perhaps more negative light. They invite new interpretations of history, interpretations that arise from the wider context of living on planet Earth, and take into account the natural ecosystem and not just the social one.

Following along these same lines, and given that all the histories taught in schools are put forward as a mere perpetuation of struggles or wars for political domination and power, it is unavoidable to note that the main instigators, protagonists and accountants tend to be powerful men. Now that we are facing all the negative effects of this logic of historical progress, resulting in global, political, economical and environmental crisis, it becomes necessary and desirable to re-examine the position of women and their specific vision within the historical context. What makes the new feminist movement particularly interesting is precisely the fact that the position of women is directly affected by the contemporary neoliberal scenario⁹.

But what would a female-focused history be like? It would certainly not just contemplate a factual list of remarkable female representatives who have been *unjustly left out of official male history*, while maintaining the same structural logic. Because the established logic of historical narrative is in itself an act of imposition of power, 'fixing' and enforcing certain 'truths' over others. Addressed from the female position, this new vantage point opens up a whole new space in which to rethink and restructure the system of values, creating a basis on which history could be perceived and narrated from a position of non-power. Would women, from their different perspective, write histories

in such a monolithic way? Or would they instead tell more discontinuous, less heterogeneous stories?¹⁰

And finally, it is interesting to note that all three approaches merge, given that feminist history is at the same time environmentalist history and the history of disempowered classes in the neoliberal capitalist system?

With these ideas in mind, I will now move on to look at the practical part of the Disputed Histories project, explaining the way it has been conceived and structured as a long-term research project that revolves around the library of history textbooks and related workshops.

IV. DISPUTED HISTORIES LIBRARY

A. Project Outlines

The Disputed Histories Library is a growing collection of history textbooks that have been in use in the region of ex-Yugoslavia during different periods. Its principal aim is to familiarize the general public with the lesser-known historical narratives that are disseminated in neighbouring states, thus providing a broader perspective on contemporary political and economical mechanisms employed in the writing of history in the region. The collection of the library began in 2006 and currently includes over 250 different textbooks. Aside from history textbooks, the collection also includes textbooks from other subjects such as geography, language, religion, ethics, and introduction to nature and society for lower grades, as well as guides and other educational materials and literature dealing with similar topics. More recently,

the library also started to incorporate textbooks from some neighbouring countries such as Albania, Greece and Bulgaria.



Figure 3. Workshop in Banja Luka, Spaport 2010

While the physical library is located in a public space¹¹ and available for consultation, it also periodically tours either entirely or in sections as part of exhibitions, etc. The textbooks are also classified in the electronic catalogue that is available online along with digitalized pages of the textbooks¹².

When displayed in a physical space (such as an exhibition), the textbooks are classified according to the country of origin and the school grade, and also divided into three big sections according to the period of their publication:

1. *before the Wall* (issued before 1989),
2. *between the Wall and the Towers* (1989-2001),
3. *after the Towers* (2001 onwards).

This division came about through noticing that the events of 1989 and 2001 symbolically mark radical shifts in global politics that coincide (or interfere) with shifting tendencies in interpreting past events.¹³

B. The Workshops

Another aim of this library consists in organizing workshops, in which different textbooks from the library are compared and analyzed, and collaborative work and a creative practical approach result in the compilation of new publications. Through direct translation, interpretation, visual, linguistic and literary analysis of selected materials from very personal perspectives and experiences, workshop participants create new content using the technique of assemblage.



Figure 4. Workshop in Belgrade, 52 October Salon, 2011

The workshops are targeted at a wide range of participants (in terms of age, level of expertise, etc.), based on the assumption that anyone - as a subject of history (of historical events) - is entitled to discuss and

offer a critical perspective on its official representations. Based on their particular life experience, participants could be considered a sort of 'expert' in some specific historical matter.

The workshops usually take place in a recreated traditional classroom setting, where either the entire library or a section of it is displayed. The textbooks serve as the main source for the subsequent work carried out during the workshop sessions. The 'classroom' is also equipped with an ordinary photocopier and basic office material (such as pens, markers, cutters, glue, white out, etc.) that are used for mechanical manipulation of textual and visual materials.

Depending on the composition of the group and the local context of each of the workshops, a broader or more narrow theme is set and publicized in advance. Particular historical event or period, the relations between two or more nation/state perspectives, or a specific topic may define these themes. Selected textbook excerpts are comparatively analyzed and, if necessary, translated on the spot. The material is then manually compiled into a new 'zine'-type booklet that can be multiplied and distributed on completion of the workshop. In this way, the entire process is condensed and carried out within the actual workshop space.

C. The Methodology

In methodological terms, the workshops are conceived from a non-authoritarian perspective, in which the objective is to achieve new knowledge through collaborative, creative work. The methodology itself often ends up becoming the subject of the workshop.

In order to avoid getting bogged down in generalized arguments (and discussions that could go on

endlessly, leading the workshop to a dead end¹⁴), the workshops begin with a small introductory exercise that lays the foundations for the collaborative work.

At the very beginning of the workshop, participants are asked to sketch their personal histories on a piece of paper. This graphic representation may take the form of a timeline or a diagram in which participants summarize their life stories, retrospectively generating a record of the most important moments of their lives (turning points, achievements, failures, ups and downs, etc.). By introducing themselves to the group in this way –with a brief explanation of their drawing– each participant situates his or her particular experience within the wider historical context. The exercise also draws attention to each participant's particular point of view, and reveals his or her current personality (with a series of pre-formed opinions and statements) to be the result of lifelong experience. This introduction creates a necessary foundation – a common ground from which disputed historic narratives can then be constructively approached and discussed.

This exercise also gives us an insight into how events on a global scale are connected to more regional ones, and also to the ones happening in our very specific local contexts such as family, our circle of friends, colleagues, or neighbours. It also allows us to take stock of how much our present opinions, statements and, ultimately, our identities owe to situations that we have experienced or been drawn into as a result of global and local events, and how very little space may actually have remained for our free and unbiased being, thinking and acting. We may also gain a clearer idea of why and how this space has to be defended.

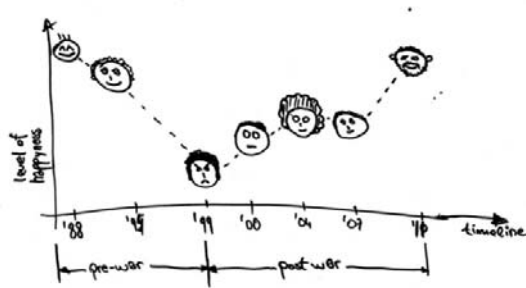


Figure 5. Example of a personal timeline: This participant chose a simple and effective way to show how his level of happiness gradually changed as he grew up and matured, from his birth in 1988 up until the time of the workshop in 2011. The time coordinates are the pre-war and post-war periods, where the war marks his lowest level of happiness. Commenting on his chart he said: "Now I've returned to the same level of happiness as when I was a baby. But it took 23 years and I changed quite a bit since then." (Gesturing towards his beard).



Figure 6. Different personal timelines converging in the 'common ground' that is temporarily set up for the duration of the workshop.

In this way, participants increase their awareness of how we - as subjects of historical events and their representations - are shaped as individuals. But it is still hard to get a grip on how this relationship works in the opposite direction: how we as individuals actively or passively contribute to the events that happen on a larger scale, and how we influence the creation or recreation of certain official narratives. This is still a pending task for future workshops.

D. The Workshops and Publications

Eight workshops have been realized to date, in Belgrade, Banja Luka, Berlin, Mostar, Rijeka, and Šabac, with four of these resulting in publications (booklets):

[1] *Our Newest Hysteria* (Oct 2010 *SpaPort*, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina). This workshop specifically set out to compare how the past 50 years were described in textbooks issued in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnian Federation and Republic of Srpska), Croatia and Serbia during the 90's and the new millennium

[2] *Migrations and Expulsions* (October 2011, *Raumshiff Jugoslavia*, NGBK, Berlin) This time, we compared how the facts regarding expelled populations and migrant flows provoked by the Yugoslav Wars were presented in textbooks in all post-Yugoslav states, as well as German ones.

[3] *Joint Histories from Serbian and Albanian textbooks in Kosovo*, (April 2011, CZKD, Belgrade).

[4] *False Truths*, (November 2011, 52 October Salon, Museum of Yugoslav History, Belgrade) Through translations and comparative analysis of textbooks describing joint events of Kosovo - Albanian and Serbian history this workshop set out to detect and connect two mutually ignored situations in two neighbouring states. The title of the issue *Istina / E verteta*

(meaning 'truth' in Serbian and Albanian) is also a reference to this aim.

[5] *Beginning of WWII in Yugoslavia: April war, upheaval and the May uprisings* (Cultures of Remembrance, City Library, Šabac, Serbia). The aim of this one-day workshop with secondary school students was to compare and discuss how the interpretation of the events around the initiation of WWII in Yugoslavia had changed after 90's.

[6] *Historia/Povjest – (OKC Abrasevic, Mostar, BIH)*. In a divided city such as Mostar, with a segregated school system and institutions, this workshop had a more ambitious goal: to engage in discussions in order to rethink new positions from where history could be perceived, beyond the current nationalist patterns.

[7] *Socialism Then and Never – (SIZ, Rijeka, 2013)*. Through analysis of pre- and post- Yugoslav textbooks this workshop aims to examine how the representation of socialist development in former Yugoslavia has been transformed in the course of recent historical shifts.

[8] *Sarajevo Assassination – (INCEL, Banja Luka, 2014)*. In the year of the 100th anniversary of the event that sparked the First World War this workshop examines and analyses conflicted narratives set out in different periods in textbooks from Austria and Former Yugoslav states (Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia).

ENDNOTES

- [1] D. Stojanović, *Ulje na vodi (Oil on the Water)*, Pešćanik, Belgrade, 2010. In her analysis of current Serbian History textbooks, Serbian historian Dubravka Stojanović drew a parallel between revised history curriculums with pre-military training guides, due to the prevalence of themes related to wars and conflicts in comparison to peacetime periods.
- [2] Meaning that pupils can't purchase or inherit second hand books that would be free or much cheaper.

- [3] This is not the case with the current textbooks in Serbia, due to contempt for the above-mentioned procedures.
- [4] O. Pupovac, "Arbitrariness of the Signifier? The construction of peoplehood in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia" (2004), in: Craig, Garry (ed.) *"Race" and Social Research: five case studies*, Working Papers in Social Sciences and Policy, University of Hull.
- [5] Humans are social beings and historically societies have developed through communities. The principles by which these communities are regulated is an important political issue. Communities based on national principles as we know them today are the result of the parallel development of capitalist relations and modern states over the last two centuries. The constitution of modern nation states is a process that goes hand in hand with the development of capitalism. In the contemporary neoliberal phase, and in the context of post-Balkan wars, it keeps economically weaker social classes under control, impeding their ability for self-identification and social and political subjectivization. V.R.
- [6] In words of Danko Grlić "Highlighting the national in our epoch primarily has (when it is not a question of anti-colonial movement) one basic function: to disguise, cover-up, camouflage and mystify class relations." (Marginalias on the problem of the nation, p. 554).
- [7] Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) theories claimed to set the bases for today's understanding of history as a progressive rather than repetitive process.
- [8] Due to the biological ability to give birth, women are much more closely bound to natural cycles than men, and this makes them more vulnerable to imbalances that may be provoked in nature. When this equilibrium is threatened, as in neoliberal capitalist relations, women are the first to note the damage. It is precisely there where 'the flow of capital obstructs the flow of rivers' where women are invited to act in defense of life. V.R.
- [9] J. Derrida, "Choreographies", Points... Interviews, 1974-1994; "Maybe woman doesn't have history at all, and not because of some notion of 'the eternal feminine', but because she completely alone could resist a certain history and withdraw from certain history (just in order to be able to dance) in which is in principle inscribed the revolution or, at least, 'the term' revolution".
- [10] At this moment the library is located in the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade in a space called "Ignorant Schoolmaster", which is a place for self-education and a public

library - an archive of articles, journals and books on Yugoslav humanities. At the same time, the library or parts of it have been moving and taking part in exhibitions, such as Spaport Biennial in Banja Luka, Raumshiff Yugoslavia exhibition at the NGBK Gallery, Berlin, 52nd October Salon, Museum of Yugoslav History, Belgrade, Cartografias Contemporaneas, Fundacio La Caixa, Barcelona, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sarjevo, etc. V.R.

[11] Available at: <http://irational.org/vahida/history/>.

[12] The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolically marked the end of the Cold War, Bloc politics and Communist regimes. For Europe it also meant the reunification of Germany and undergoing a new course in EU politics. The fall of the Twin Towers, which is still surrounded by controversy, brought with it the enforcement of control and new types of wars such as the "War on Terror",

which paved the way for the liberalization of markets, the privatization of public institutions, cut-backs of public funds, the infringement of human rights, etc. One of the ongoing tasks of the library is to detect and determine how these global shifts in perceiving history are reflected in the local regional context of the Balkans. V.R.

[13] It is well known that discussions involving history can easily turn passionate due to their power to provoke emotional identification.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Nuria Rodríguez for English editing.