



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Research Report

Title of Research Proposal:

“Making War Memories, Forging Socialist Yugoslavia”

Topic of Research

My dissertation examines how Yugoslavia’s communist regime constructed and promoted an officially-sanctioned collective memory of the Second World War between 1947 and 1972 through the building of monuments and graves to “fallen soldiers” and “victims of fascist terror.” My main questions are: How did the communists create and use these “sites of memory” to transform the war, which had demonstrated extreme levels of inter-ethnic strife among the country’s citizens, into a basis for a multi-ethnic socialist state? And how did Yugoslav citizens react to this memory making project?

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Since the early 1990s, scholars have repeatedly mentioned the memory of the Second World War as an important factor in explaining the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991. But few have actually attempted to seriously research this

subject, especially in the period before the late 1980s. As a result, the history of remembering the war during the socialist period has been explained through sweeping claims about (a) the role of the state in constructing a rigid set of memories for society in which the war was shown as a simple struggle by the “people” against foreign and domestic fascists, and (b) the role played by intellectuals during the 1980s and 1990s in confronting and destroying these “myths.”

My work challenges these claims by seeking to illuminate how Yugoslavia’s communist regime actually went about constructing memories of the war, and how Yugoslav citizens reacted to them, two important subjects that, so far, have been explained in the existing literature with assumptions, rather than demonstrated with evidence. In addition to being the first study to seriously investigate the memory of the Second World War in Yugoslavia, my work also contributes to a growing body of literature that examines how governments justify their existence, identity, and legitimacy after inter-state and/or civil wars through the creation of collective war memories. Much of this research has focused heavily on the role played by government or other elites in constructing and disseminating officially-sanctioned war memories, while ignoring how others react to such projects. My research devotes significant attention to public responses to “official memory,” and thus will provide scholars of social memory with a rare example of societal responses to state-sanctioned memory making in a socialist state.

Approach and Research Methodology; List of Research Sites

The few scholars that have examined the memory of the Second World War in Yugoslavia tend to focus on the “objects of memory” and then make generalizations about society. For example, one historian has examined how textbooks dealt with the war, and then went on to generalize about how these school materials affected the greater population’s memory of the war. This author, in short, devoted the greatest attention to objects (i.e., books). My methodology takes a different approach. I have chosen to focus on two processes: (a) the building of monuments and graves for “fallen soldiers” and “victims of fascist terror”; and (b) public responses to these structures of remembrance. But rather than making these “sites of memory” the central historical actor of my study, I focus instead on people. Specifically, I examine the activities of the Association of Veterans of the People’s Liberation War (*Savez boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata* [SBNOR]), the organization that I see as the main vehicle through which memory activists in Yugoslavia acted in regards to building monuments and graves. I have also excavated responses to their activities by individuals, groups, and other socio-political organizations.

My research is based heavily on work in federal, republican, municipal and city archives; reading of the press; and interviews. I worked in the following institutions during my stay in Serbia: The Archive of Serbia and Montenegro

[formerly the Archive of Yugoslavia]; The Archive of Serbia; Archive of Josip Broz Tito; The Historical Archive of Kraljevo; The Historical Archive of Čačak; The Archive “Ras” of Novi Pazar; The Archive of Vojvodina; The Archive for the District Court of Gornji Milanovac; and the National Library of Serbia. In addition, I conducted a number of interviews among the residents of Brezna, Mrčajevci, and Čačak.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

I have arrived at two main conclusions at this point (about halfway) in my research. First, the Association of Veterans was indeed heavily involved in the construction of monuments and graves which its members hoped would assist in promoting a particular set of heroic memories about the People’s Liberation War. The zeal with which veterans carried out their task can be seen in the fact that from 1948 until 1961 they (often in collaboration with other organizations) built more than 14,000 monuments and graveyards, a rate of more than 3 per day—everyday—for 14 years. In this sense, it is fair to say that the veterans, acting as a sort of moral and spiritual police with regards to the creating and protecting their memory of the war, attempted to make the physical landscape congruent to their particular vision of the past, and, in so doing, sought to mold the historical consciousness of the greater population.

The second conclusion I have at this point concerns the kaleidoscope of societal responses which emerged in response to these thousands of graves and monuments with their monolithic message of heroism. By analyzing archival documents, newspaper articles, and especially letters written to newspapers and other organizations (and sometimes to Tito himself), I argue that, while many people did respond positively to these officially-sanctioned “sites of memory,” others reacted in a myriad of directly and indirectly confrontational ways. Allowing weeds and grass to engulf graves; permitting pigs to forage in front of monuments and tying horses to them; building monuments to anti-communist forces; telling jokes about monuments and harassing people trying to visit them; and smashing plaques and monuments into pieces, sometimes on several occasions; all of these behaviors suggest that a serious disjuncture existed between the projects which SBNOR’s memory activists were engaged in and some segments of the population’s degree of acceptance of them. I see this disjuncture as exemplified in two types of directly and indirectly confrontational behaviors: first, as indifference or perhaps disconnectedness to officially-sanctioned memories; second, as conscious resistance to such forms of remembrance. At the same time, it is important to note that a sizable group of Yugoslav citizens were also very much mobilized with the veterans of SBNOR in the project of constructing, reproducing and protecting a set of heroic memories about the “People’s Liberation War.”

Taken together, my preliminary conclusions suggest the need to revise the existing literature on the history of the memory of the Second World War in

Yugoslavia in several ways. It has been suggested by some scholars (e.g., Hoëpken, 1999) that the communist regime's "official memory" of the war was constructed for a repressed society, and that this memory dissolved under the pressure of intellectuals during the country's final decade of existence. My research, which pays close attention to societal reactions to officially-sanctioned war memories in Yugoslavia, presents a different dynamic. That is, people were neither totally repressed by a certain set of memories about the war, nor simply passive and ready to be awakened by a group of intellectuals. Ordinary people reacted to graves and monuments—two of the most ubiquitous manifestations of "official memory" in Yugoslavia—in their own ways and on their own terms from the moment that such sites of remembrance were constructed. And their reactions, while often quite positive, were also indifferent and, at times, directly and indirectly confrontational and subversive.

Future Research Agendas

Only after a significant amount of time in the archives was I able to identify a set of local conflicts related to remembering the war that I wanted to study in greater detail. For example, one case concerns a priest in a small village in Serbia that in 1956 collaborated with local residents in building a monument to everyone in their village who was killed during the war. Their names were written on a plaque and included communists but also those who fought against the communists, some who were convicted as war criminals, and even some who were killed as late as 1947 after spending the first postwar years hiding from the communists in the forest. State security eventually arrested this priest and he was put in prison for almost 2 years. Such an instance provides an excellent opportunity to carry out a detailed local study of remembrance in Yugoslavia.

It is extremely important for historians and others interested in the dynamics of remembrance in Yugoslavia to move in the direction of carrying out local studies of how people remembered the war; the nature of remembering among neighbors (which had often fought on different sides during the war) at the village level; and how people experienced "official memory." Oral history would be the key methodology for this type of research. It is very important to move in this direction as soon as possible, as the generation that came of age during the war (and in the decade or so after) will not be around much longer.

It would also be useful to compare the history of remembrance in Yugoslavia with other cases in which populations that experienced civil and/or ethnic conflicts found themselves in the postwar period in authoritarian states which sought to impose a singular, heroic memory of the war (e.g. Spain, Ukraine, and perhaps Greece).

Policy Recommendations

Serbia is a country that continues to suffer from severe economic, political, and social problems. Rather than offering an overarching set of policy prescriptions for the whole country, I will focus on one area in which I have concrete experience.

The U.S. government should assist in financing a new research and education institute that would provide local scholars and other educators/reformers with a base of operations for research and policy formulation. Such an institute should also offer high school and university students scholarships for study abroad opportunities. Why? Serbia is an expensive place to live if one wishes to think and speak critically. All institutes and governmental ministries are run as little empires and those with critical voices are generally not employed in them, or are quickly silenced by the “tsars” that run such institutions. Thus, the most interesting, progressive, and forward-thinking minds are forced to leave the country, or live on the margins of society while attempting to struggle for positive change. I know many extremely talented people (historians, writers, educators, etc.) who live close to poverty and who are subjected to various forms of censorship because they are not willing to keep quiet about the country’s problems.

A well-funded institute for such politically marginalized, talented individuals would make an enormous difference in Serbia. First, and most basic, such an institution would provide these people with salaries that would enable them to live normally and to devote themselves entirely to their work, without having to constantly run from job to job in order to survive. Second, their research and policy advocacy would inject a certain level of competition into Serbian society which is more or less absent. Governmental ministries and institutes function on fear. Everyone is afraid of offending his or her director and thus few people propose and/or support the radical solutions that are necessary to surmount the country’s enormous problems. An institute which would not be subjected to the pressures of the country’s political parties would provide an ideal forum for people to ask and research difficult but vital questions (e.g., questions of responsibility for war crimes, education reform, censorship of writers, discrimination, etc.) Third, an institute which would hire people according to their qualifications (and not merely their political affiliation and personal connections) would demonstrate that competency rather than “who you know” or illegal activity is the crucial element for success. Finally, such an institute should offer scholarships, research fellowships, and exchange opportunities to high school and university students. 75% of Serbia’s population under the age of 25 has never been out of the country. This predicament contributes to an overall sense of isolation, cultural apathy, and the perception that the West is opposed to the country. Making available education opportunities in foreign countries (particularly in the United States) to young people would provide them with exposure to new ways of thinking and societal organization, all of which would go a long way in pushing forward positive change in Serbia.