

The controversial term “Balkanization” is frequently used to describe the process of fragmentation and division of a territory, the formation of small nation states on the ashes of ancient empires or larger states, the crumbling and pulverizing of a territory. Nation-state creation began in the Balkans in the early nineteenth century, with the first national revolutions in the Ottoman Empire and, somewhat later, the formation of early independent states. Subsequent wars produced new states, and the territory was further “parcelled”. The fragmentation grew more distinct in the 1990s, with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of wars in this once multinational and multi-denominational country, from which six or seven new states emerged, depending on whether one recognizes Kosovo’s independence. Thus the term Balkanization has gained popularity with the international public since the 1990s, and was used to denote many other geopolitical situations.

The creation of new states means producing new borders and changing old ones. This process reflects not only on problems with customs, traffic, passports and currencies, but also with historical memory. The break-up of formerly common states necessarily means the break-up of a constructed shared historical memory. One could call it the Balkanization of memory. Furthermore, it requires the constitution of a new, antagonized memory, constructing enemies from former neighbours in order for states mentally to consolidate, homogenize, gain meaning. It is necessary to create, often on the fly, a new memory, to justify recent actions, and to put together a context that provides an ethical framework for the present.

During and after the break-up of Yugoslavia, we had, as historians, a unique opportunity to observe this experiment *in vivo*, which is not a methodology inherent to our profession. Changes in the interpretation of history began several years before the war because hostility needed to be created. A new interpretation of the past was offered as a revelation, final realization, and liberation from earlier platitudes imposed on us by “enemies”. Historians suddenly became superstars, appearing on prime-time TV shows and revealing to millions of viewers the injustices we had suffered, how we have always been on the right side of history, while our enemies stabbed us in the back at the crucial moment. They explained that it was “us” who were the real victims of all historical events: misunderstood, used, pushed aside, subjugated. These were explosive combinations of historical consciousness, a mixture of self-victimization and self-heroization. Self-victimization homogenizes the nation, closes its ranks, creating a sense of vulnerability, discomfort, fear. This collective feeling is the best psychological groundwork for aggression presented as self-defence. The victim receives an indulgence for all future actions, being freed from moral responsibility. A victim cannot be a perpetrator. Heroization in all this is just the final touch, a cherry on top. Teaching about victories and forgetting defeats encourages the nation and creates the impression that this time we will win.

To produce such a revision of history, to disrupt brotherhood and unity, which was the fundamental myth that linked the ethnically mixed Yugoslav peoples since the Second World War, and to render the war in the former Yugoslavia psychologically possible, it was necessary to change everything, all the way back from the arrival of the Slavs in the Balkans,



The border between Serbia and Croatia, near the village of Bapska, Croatia, 2015

# What is a nation?

## The Balkanization of historical memory

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from the seventh century onwards. A different model of the past was required, one into which the coming war would fit as the logical and only possible sequence of events. The Yugoslav peoples had to be portrayed as having nothing in common, their common state merely an artificial creation of the great powers, with disregard for the needs and desires of its peoples.

Out from history went every individual who, since the eighteenth century, believed that only a common state in an ethnically mixed region was a way of overcoming conflicts, that the South Slavic peoples spoke the same language in multiple dialects and that their similarities were greater than their differences. Also, all the processes that led to the unification of the South Slavic peoples, all economic, communicational and social ties, all common cultural achievements and ventures were cast out of history. At the same time, all conflicts were emphasized to create the impression that conflict was the only natural state in which these peoples can find themselves, which made the coming war quite logical – because what other outcome could there be?

When the war ended, the conflict was transferred to a “smaller hot-plate”, again in the field of historical interpretation. Armed conflicts ended mainly because of the interventions of the international community, but hatred, negative emotions and mental tensions were transferred onto the field of manipulation of historical memory. Changing the mindset and erasing the previous historical memory required changing all agents of memory. All the holidays were replaced, as well as hundreds of street names; thousands of monuments were torn down; history textbooks were fundamentally altered.

And now, almost a quarter of a century after it ended, the war appears to be increasingly active, increasingly present. Each anniversary is used to aggravate further the relations between today’s states, which keeps nationalist

elites in power. The boundaries of memory have grown more rigid than state borders, they are there to divide the hostile peoples more efficiently than any wall or razor wire fence could do. One can cross national borders; there are documents, procedures in place ... but the memory border is impermeable. Each brick in it is carefully laid, every manipulated event is there to prevent the idea of humanizing the “enemy”, curbing the mere thought that talks, agreements and peace are possible. The memory lamp switches on at the simple thought of reconciliation. Political leaders might sign peace treaties, they might even kneel down and apologize publicly to the victims, but the paranoid historical narrative remains there to undo each of these gestures.

The memory of evil is also a very useful tool for governing. How can anyone advocate freedom of the press when the enemy is everywhere around us? Can you waste your thoughts, words and money on hospitals, schools and roads when the enemy is about to attack? In such tense situations, there is no time for slow and inefficient institutions. The leader is the only one who can solve the fateful, eternal problems. History has proved to be the most effective means of propaganda, an intoxicating means of keeping people in submission. Until a new war comes along.

Historians in the region have become celebrities, a fact that best demonstrates the lamentable state of its societies. People in the street approach them, some praising them, others making threats. As tensions rise in society and in the region, they are increasingly pressured, and now they are even facing open threats. This confirms what Ernest Renan said in 1882 in his lecture entitled “What is a Nation?”: “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality”. Indeed, historians are becoming a threat not only within, to semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes; they also hinder attempts by

those regimes to maintain, through misuse of history, constant tension and the impression that at any time the war could continue where it left off. The struggle to rationalize relations with the past and to understand it in its complexity has become one of the critical tools of reconciliation in Southeastern Europe, a tool for tearing down memorials and all other kinds of barriers and borders.

Historians began this work while the Yugoslav wars were still ongoing. Projects were launched to open up a dialogue on the past, find new methodologies, and communicate rational interpretations to the public. The longest-running project was the one started in 1998 by the Thessaloniki-based Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe. The first stage included a comparative analysis of history textbooks in all twelve countries in the region, from Slovenia to Turkey to Cyprus. The analyses have shown that history teaching has no educational purpose, but that it is closer to boot camp training, or mental preparation for future conflicts. This raised the question of how this can be changed. Can history open the way to reconciliation and the breaking down of mental barriers? Can you vote your way to an interpretation of history that will have a healing effect? Can a consensus be reached in interpreting controversial events? We concluded that the answer to all these questions was negative. And that observing the past from different perspectives is the only way to get across memory walls. Through the methodology of multiperspectivity, we need to present the most painful events of the past, show how different parties saw different events, and ask how a viewpoint from which a phenomenon is observed affects its interpretation. Multiperspectivity does not mean relativization of history, so perhaps the most accurate definition is one given by the British historian E. H. Carr, that multiperspectivity is like looking at a mountain from different angles – it appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, but it is still the same mountain. This project included publishing six books about the most controversial and sensitive topics of the collective past: the Ottoman Empire, the creation of nations and nation states, the Balkan wars, the Second World War, the Cold War, and finally, the period 1990–2008. The vital part of that final book is the chapter on the most recent Yugoslav wars. These books (all available online at: [www.cdrsee.org](http://www.cdrsee.org)) do not propose to answer “who started what”, but encourage thinking of the past as a controversy. The concept of a single, monolithic, national “truth” is dismantled, and ground is prepared for knowing what the other side thinks. And, most importantly, for starting a critical dialogue. We believe that this is a method to “de-weaponize” history and to cross the barbed-wire borders of memory.

Translated by Ivica Pavlović

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