
War and Remembrance in the Former Yugoslavia Since 1945

29 October 2013

Vjeran Pavlaković, professor of history at the University of Rijeka, Croatia, gave the first MIREES Open Lecture entitled “War and Remembrance in the Former Yugoslavia Since 1945”. Pavlaković’s research draws upon the concept of collective remembrance, which is according to Jan Assmann, reflected in physical objects such as monuments and public spaces. Pavlaković discussed three inter-related issues: first, how the WWII was remembered in its immediate aftermath in the socialist Yugoslavia; second, which are the ways of remembering the wars of the Yugoslav succession; and third, how is the WWII remembered in the post-Yugoslav period. The lecturer concentrated on the questions of reconciliation and if commemoration could have a negative or positive role. How representations of the past vary depending on political or cultural circumstances.

Building memorials play the role in transitional justice and memory politics, expressing the symbolic meaning of recognition of victims. Culture of memory and identity politics are closely intertwined as memorials can easily be manipulated for everyday political purposes. And it was particularly evident in socialist Yugoslavia, when the regime tried to have a monopoly on remembrance, in order to strengthen its own legitimacy. The historical narrative of WWII was dictated by the Communist Party. The society was militarized, and the fear of enemies was being enforced. We witness a huge production of memorials in the social realism style which represented soldiers as well as ordinary people, to increase the feeling of the united nation within the community. Professor Pavlaković underlined how the Yugoslav government invested in commemorating the victims of concentration camps even abroad, for example, in Gonars (Italy), where the victims were ideologically labeled as anti-fascists or communists.

The Communist Party ideology of “brotherhood and unity” attempted to downplay the relevance of inter-ethnic conflicts among the Yugoslav people during the WWII and stimulate them to develop a sense of belonging to the same political space. In 1980-s the attempt was made to liberalize the idea that other victims had to be commemorated, such as Ustasha in Croatia. The memorial parks began to be constructed, while common memory was dissolved and new separate national memories were formed. The 1990s war added to complexity and controversy of past memories conflict contributing to forming regional differences in viewing history. The perception of Ustasha movement is still dividing the public opinion, as well as Serbian involvement in 1990s wars. Another example of controversy in interpreting the past was made by Pavlaković.

For Kosovo the disputable issue has become the NATO bombing, which is positively estimated by Albanian community and negatively by Serbs, and this fact is reflected in the monuments built after 1999. In divided countries as Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina different ethnicities create their own symbols of historical representation. Monuments themselves began to influence and form the identities.

The construction of memorials and the way in which they are preserved show the

tendencies for change in public remembrance and commemoration These issues, tightly connected with historical perception, also have deepest influence onto the modern political life. Thus, problems of remembrance remain urgent, but also highly disputable, sensitive issues, easily exposed to manipulations of one or another political group.

Therefore, research of this topic requires certain degree of objectivity and delicacy of approach, which Professor Pavlaković's lecture possesses.

Lesia Shyshko

*MA candidate at MIREES Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe
University of Bologna – Forlì campus*

Anastasia Kryachko

*MA candidate at MIREES Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe
University of Bologna – Forlì campus*

Simona Mattone

*MA candidate at MIREES Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe
University of Bologna – Forlì campus*