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Serbian commentary slams scholars' project on "rewriting" Balkan history

Text of commentary by Miroslav Lazanski entitled "Gnjilane in Virginia", published by Serbian newspaper Politika on 17 February 2007

It all began with denial of the World War II Holocaust, which stirred up a huge controversy and even prompted some trials in Europe last year. Then, Germany proposed an EU-wide law that would ban racism and xenophobia in all of the Union's nations, thereby transforming Holocaust denial into a criminal act throughout Europe. Berlin also sought penalties of up to three years in prison for anyone who questions not only the Holocaust, but also other truths - devised in the West and accepted by the International Criminal Court – about recent wars in Africa, for example.

The reaction to that German proposal across Europe, and around the world, was vehement, especially in Great Britain where the proposal was seen as an attack on freedom of opinion. The British press emphasizes the big differences between the Nazi crimes and modern conflicts in Africa and the Balkans, on the one hand, and certain other armed conflicts on the other hand.

In any event, even though it is held that the winners write history and organize trials, we are once again seeing a battle over the interpretation of history. Where does Serbia fit in with all this, especially today in the context of the Kosmet [Kosovo-Metohija] problem? Have the United States and the EU now opened up an educational front for the sake of granting Kosmet independence? To what extent has Serbia been intellectually colonized over the last 10 years, and how is the war for Serbian minds going? Because the West is aware that when it comes to Kosmet, it will be very hard to win the war for Serbian hearts. But as for the war for Serbian minds - and surely the mind must function rationally - then one need only insist on realism, rationalism, pragmatism, realpolitik, on done deals and missed opportunities. And rewriting the history of the Balkans comes in handy in terms of providing "artillery support" in that battle for Serbian minds.

Thus, German and Austrian history textbooks claim in the sections concerning the ruination of Yugoslavia in the 1990s that the Yugoslav nations were "liberated" by the international community, whereas in one Austrian textbook that is still in use Christina von Kohl serves up to 17-year-olds a narrative about the "brutal Serbianization of Kosovo," about "police terror against Albanians and the inability of Albanians to get any legal protection from state institutions prior to 1999." That history textbook does not mention all the things that befell the Serbs after NATO entered Kosmet, which means that the perception of modern history continues where the wartime propaganda left off in 1999.

The project of revising Balkan history is being pursued by some 180 historians and dozens of intellectuals from Western Europe and the United States who are travelling to universities as guest lecturers so as to show Serbian historiography the way toward the truth, and to adapt the perception of modern history in Serbia to the US-German

viewpoint. They are all more or less divided into 20 teams from 40 countries, and the largest number of the history experts are from the United States (46 scholars), B-H [Bosnia-Herzegovina] (21), and Great Britain (16). They include 38 Serbs in charge of telling Serbia about its liberation by NATO and the IMF. Among the better-known foreign names are Wolfgang Petritsch, the former chief negotiator in Rambouillet and former "colonial governor" of B-H, and Stefan Troebst, a German expert on minorities.

The whole business is being paid for by two US institutes: the Washington-based Institute of Peace and the National Endowment for Democracy, which are cited as its sponsors on the website of the "Scholars' Initiative," which is also the name of this intellectual brain trust in charge of revising history. The US Institute of Peace was founded by Ronald Reagan in 1986, and its academic staff is appointed by the US president with the Senate's approval, with one member each coming from the State Department and the Pentagon, and one more from the National Defence University. For years now, that institute has invited scholars and journalists - who are, of course, selected by Washington - to symposiums that are alternately held in the town of Airlie, Virginia and in Gnjilane, Kosmet. The topics are "Nation-Building in Kosovo" or "Challenges in Reconstructing a Multiethnic Society." It also publishes works such as "Kosovo: The Road Ahead," by Bajram Rexhepi.

As for the National Endowment for Democracy, which was founded in 1983, Wesley Clark and Richard Holbrooke are the reputed experts on the Balkans there.

Serbia has not yet been culturally defeated, and the "Scholars' Initiative" is developing a special program for revising Balkan history that is intended for Serbian schools. In that programme, responsibility for the Yugoslav catastrophe is attributed exclusively to internal conflict, and most of all to Serbs. The "Scholars' Initiative" also permits some critical questions, such as "was Slobodan Milosevic's reaction to actions taken by militant Albanians legitimate?" But if the answers to such questions do not turn out as expected, then that is in turn a matter of politics, and it has no need to react to intellectual insights. Thus, the "Scholars' Initiative" is travelling from Graz to Sarajevo, Novi Sad, and Alberta in the United States. The intention is to settle scores with "nationalistic politicians, journalists, and academics that have misrepresented the tragic events of the last decade in such a way as to widen the cultural gap between Serbs and their neighbours."

Thus, Serbs must be freed of the interpretations put forward by national politicians and media concerning the events between 1986 and 2000, because they reflect on mass culture.

It appears that we are still not cultured enough?

Source: Politika, Belgrade, in Serbian 17 Feb 2007

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