

**Gorana Ognjenovic and Jasna Jozelic, eds. 2021. *Nationalism and the Politicization of History in the Former Yugoslavia*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe). xx + 377 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-65831-1 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-65832-8 (eBook), € 117.69 / € 93.08**

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The book presents a collection of case studies under the umbrella notion of “politicization of history”. The main thesis of the volume is clearly and concisely stated in the introduction, then repeated and confirmed by each chapter: history has often been instrumentalised in Yugoslavia and its successor states. This does not sound too surprising, nonetheless it is a topic worth further study. The volume does not seem particularly ambitious in terms of proposing new interpretative paradigms, notions, or theses. The aim is rather to provide the reader with insights into a selection of case studies. The 14 chapters move across the former Yugoslav territory and its history, mainly from the twentieth century up to the present, with the exception of the interesting chapter by *Marina Prusac-Lindhagen*, who deals with the domain of archaeology and the research and discourses about Illyrians.

The volume’s main strength is to offer to a non-specialist reader a historiographical overview of the selected *lieux de mémoire*. Some of the contributions have such an articulated informative character, relying on works previously published by the same authors, which are synthesised here. The contributors include acknowledged experts in their fields, who usefully summarise, with some integration, their previous relevant research, such as *Ljiljana Radonić*, who outlines the history of the collective memories of Jasenovac, then comments on the Memorial Museum in Jasenovac; or *Mitja Velikonja*, who offers an overview of the ways in which Yugoslavia is remembered in the post-Yugoslav space; or *Jovan Byford*, who writes about the contested memory of the main Nazi concentration camp in occupied Serbia, in Belgrade. In other cases, the texts do not rely on primary research, although they provide useful bibliographical reviews, such as the chapter by *Albert Bing* on Croatian historiography, or *Neven Andjelic’s* chapter on the Bosnian Muslim SS division.

The controversial historical figure of Milovan Djilas is the focus of the very instructive contribution by *Nebojša Čagorović*. The chapter shows how Djilas was first mythologised, later banned, then rehabilitated, but always surrounded by a dense corollary of interpretative ambiguities, which were put in dialogue with the

variegated public perceptions of Montenegrin history and national identity. *Jelena Subotić* and *Filip Ejdus* provide a useful examination of the official discourses and practices—termed “truth regime”, following a Foucauldian inspiration—that developed in Serbia with regard to the NATO intervention in 1999. The analysis shows who the actors were (individuals as well as institutions) that produced this widespread interpretation of those events, and how it was diffused through media, monuments, official state commemorative ceremonies, and specific laws. Extremely instructive, too, is the section about the many forms of counter-memory, i.e. contestations of the official discourse, organised by intellectuals and activists of the civil society.

The gendered perspective is thematised by, among others, *Nita Luci*, in her inspiring examination of the competing masculinities that emerged in post-conflict Kosovo. It is an innovative approach for the area, given that works about gender identities and practices have mainly focused on (Balkan/Yugoslav) women, and only exceptionally on men. What emerges is not only the strong relation between masculinity and militarisation in time of war, but also afterwards, when it comes to celebrating the (male and masculine) martyrs, denying the (perceived as feminine) social, economic, and psychological difficulties of the veterans, or celebrating leading politicians and their (traditional, Albanian) manhood.

It is of secondary importance that the chapter by *Neža Kogovšek Šalomon* and *Sergej Flere* does not directly thematise the politicisation of history, because the topic it deals with is of great relevance: the “erasure”, which took place in Slovenia in 1992, of resident permits for more than 25,000 persons. The development of this issue is carefully reconstructed, mainly from a legal point of view. *Ron Adams* and *Hariz Halilovich* write about the Serbian historical memory in the 1980s as an element that helped to shape the culture and mentality which legitimised the genocide in Bosnia. It is an important research agenda, albeit already applied by many works in the past decades, which are here partly summarised.

Being a collection of essays, the issues raised are many, variegated, and sometimes very specifically related to the single chapter’s topic. Some judgements seem to be quite questionable, for example regarding the historiographical scholarship in socialist Yugoslavia, which is described as fully subjugated to political control and ideological censorship, and dramatically isolated from the historiographical developments in Western Europe (Bing, 16; Prusac-Lindhagen, 43; and elsewhere). This sounds like a rough evaluation, which can certainly not be generalised for the Yugoslav case. Some passages perhaps do not lie at the core of the argumentation, but they leave the reader disoriented, for example when the recent wave of Croatian nationalism is presented as a mere reaction to the Serbian one (Bing, 21, footnote 5), thus neglecting the long and fascinating

history—throughout at least the last two centuries—of the Croatian national movement, together with all the other (Southeast) European ones.

There are several other theses which raise challenging, but also highly problematic questions: is it really possible, as proposed by one author (*Francine Friedman*), to place side by side the loss of property experienced by Bosnian Jews during the wars of the 1990s, the expropriation carried out by the pro-fascist and pro-Nazi Ustasha regime during the Second World War, and the nationalisations realised by the communists? Do the three historical contexts not deeply differ, implying a very different grade of peculiarity of the Jewish case, as well as different effects?

Can an informed reader agree with the statement that the assimilation process(es) experienced by the Macedonian people is a rare example “in history” (*Denko Skaloski*, 216)? What is the interpretative role here of the very long list of similar historical experiences, which took place in the modern Balkans, not to mention the rest of Europe and the world, in the last two centuries? The same chapter admittedly renounces the goal of interpreting the politics of remembrance, i.e. the book’s topic, declaring having tried to offer a rational discussion of “facts” (223). However, the only interpretative contribution of this chapter—that “politicisation” of history, broadly speaking, is not to be demonised, because it has to do with the development of collective memories and must not be considered a negative fact per se—is hardly new, and it is not developed accordingly with the highly sophisticated research already existing on the subject.

In some cases, the author refers the reader to their previous works without explicating further, which may prove frustrating for those readers who wish to know more about the reported phenomena. For example, Ognjenovic (158, see also 160) writes that Nazi allies (Ustashes, Chetniks) and even members of the SS worked as forced laborers in Nazi camps in Norway. The reader would probably have benefited from more in-depth information on such relevant and not generally acknowledged issues, notwithstanding the fact that the author has dealt with them in other works.

Throughout the book, the reader quite often encounters assessments with which they can clearly agree, and which are certainly interesting for a non-scholarly audience, but quite well known in the academic community. For example, it is a commonplace that the perception of history is influenced by cultural and political values (214–5); or that there are many sorts of collective memories and that “memories are never simply records of the past” (284–6); or that identities in Bosnia are highly nationalised and that Bosnian history is constantly instrumentalised (*Jozelic*); and I could mention other similar instances.

This is not to say that the book does not offer many thought-provoking elements for reflecting on the main topic, i.e. the politicisation of history in the (post-)Yugoslav societies. As evident by these lines, the volume offers inspiring, although qualitatively very different material for reflecting on the relations between historical memory and politics, on the ways in which collective memories are shaped, on the manifold actors, private and public, that are involved in these processes. The contributions unwrap different historical, historiographical, and social issues, which allow us to look at this extremely relevant issue, not only for Yugoslav history, from many points of view.