Standards of evasion

Croatia and the "Europeanization of memory"

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Poised on the verge of Union membership, Croatia has replaced the historical revisionism of the 1990s by a memory politics avowedly based on "European standards". Yet are those standards met and, more to the point, is the Europeanization of memory synonymous with a critical approach to the national past?

During the wars of the 1990s that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, narratives of collective victimhood served to underpin violent ethnic-nationalist agendas. In Franjo Tudjman’s Croatia, a revisionist approach to history justified national resentment and continued to prevent self-critical assessment of Croatian involvement in the conflict, compounding Croatia’s international isolation. Since Tudjman’s death in 1999, however, there has been a gradual “Europeanization” of memory; today, with Croatia set to become a full member of the European Union in 2013, the government declaredly bases its history policy on “European memory standards”. Yet does it succeed in meeting these standards and, more to the point, is the Europeanization of memory synonymous with an objective and self-critical approach to historical crimes both suffered and committed?

The Europeanization of memory

The “memory-boom” in the West after the Cold War emphasized the Holocaust as negative icon of the twentieth century and brought a change in the focus of remembrance: the figure of the hero-martyr, formerly associated with those who resisted the Nazis, has been replaced by the individual victim. [1] Not only that: the Holocaust has become a universal imperative for the respect of human rights in general and a “container” for the memory of different victims and victim groups. [2]

In Europe, this “universalization” includes another dimension: the Holocaust has become a negative European founding myth. Post-war Europe is understood as a collective with a common destiny that developed shared structures in order to avoid a recurrence of the catastrophe of the Holocaust. In its search for an identity that goes beyond economic and monetary union, this founding myth provides a compelling common narrative that is otherwise lacking. [3] This is one of the reasons why the Task Force for International
Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF) – founded in Sweden as a network of politicians and experts in 1998 – aroused so much interest and today includes 27 countries, most of them European.

The international Holocaust conference that took place in Stockholm on 27 January 2000, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, for the first time brought together heads of state with renowned experts and survivors from 46 states. [4] Among the resulting declarations was the recommendation that countries introduce a Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January or another date connected to the murder of the Jews. By 2010, 34 of the 56 OSCE member states had followed the recommendation. The “suggestion” that countries join the “Holocaust Task Force” and implement a Holocaust Memorial Day was the first step towards some kind of “European standard”. While not officially applied during the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004, these standards are likely to have played an unofficial role – as suggested by the fact that Hungary’s Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest opened a few weeks before the country joined the EU, despite no permanent exhibition having been installed at that point.

Running parallel to the “Europeanization of the Holocaust” has been a re-narration of history in eastern European countries from 1989 onwards and in particular the invention of a “golden era” before Communist rule. The narrative of the heroic anti-fascist struggle has been delegitimized along with the communist regimes and the trauma of communist crimes, often evoked using symbols familiar from Holocaust memory (railway tracks, carriages), placed at the core of memory. A “divided memory” between “East” and “West” has prompted representatives of post-communist states to demand that communist crimes be convicted “to the same extent” as those of the Holocaust. In reaction to these conflicting memories, the European Parliament recommended in 2009 that another memorial day be introduced on 23 August, the date of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939, in which the victims of Nazism and Stalinism are commemorated together (the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism). While the memory of the victims of Stalinism is thereby finally added to the European canon, the victims of both regimes are explicitly equalized, raising new problems. The new memorial day is not, in fact, an addition to 27 January, but its antithesis: while the Holocaust Memorial Day concerns the crimes of the own collective, the European Day of Remembrance externalizes responsibility to the Nazis and the Soviets. One’s “own people” are understood as innocent victims of oppression from outside, while participation in the communist regime is denied and externalized.

How, then, do European standards and conflicting memories impact on EU candidate Croatia? Which elements of Croatian memory politics correspond to the Europeanization of memory and which conflict with it?

**Croatian memory politics after 1990: The revisionist habit**

Like in other post-communist states, after Croatia gained its independence in 1990 the pre-communist period began to be referred to as a “golden era”. The so-called Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska – NDH), a Nazi puppet regime, was seen as a “milestone in Croatia’s independence”, according to Franjo Tudjman, Croatia’s president during the wars of the 1990s. The Ustasha had come to power on the back of the asset-stripping of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and begun
operating camps the same year. The largest of these was Jasenovac, a labour and death camp complex in which almost 100,000 people were killed; around half the victims were Serbs, followed by Jews, Roma and Croatian political prisoners. [5] Tudjman’s aim was to “reconcile” the Ustasha and the communist Partisans: according to him, they had both fought for the same cause – Croatia – during World War II, albeit in different ways. [6] The Jasenovac memorial played a great symbolic role in Tudjman’s scheme: referring to the example of Franco, Tudjman suggested bringing the bones of Ustasha members and NDH soldiers killed by the Partisans at the so-called Bleiburg massacre [7] in May 1945 to a “national memorial” at Jasenovac. International protests, above all from the US, prevented the idea being carried out, despite Croatia’s political isolation in the late 1990s.

Elections in 2003 saw the former Tudjman-party, the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica – HDZ), return to power. In 2005, Prime Minister Ivo Sanader emphasized at a commemoration ceremony at the Jasenovac Memorial that “the anti-fascist victory over fascism and National Socialism was the victory of those values woven into modern Europe and modern Croatia”, [8] but added that the “Homeland War” (1991-1995) was also waged against a type of fascism. During a visit to Yad Vashem the same year, he argued that, during the wars of 1990s, the Croats were victims of the same kind of evil as Nazism and Fascism, and that no one knew better than the Croats what it meant to be a victim of aggression and crime. As he told journalists after his visit, the Holocaust History Museum inspired Sanader to think about a Museum of the Homeland War in Croatia. [9] What makes this episode so telling is that his statements elicited no protests. The shift away from the revisionism of the Tudjman-era, which minimized the number of victims of the Ustasha state, to a view that recognizes the Holocaust but presents Croats as victims of Fascism, this time “Serbian fascism”, can be understood as a kind of “Europeanization of memory”, in which the problematic dimension of this development are abundantly clear.

At the annual remembrance ceremonies at Jasenovac, Sanader and his party colleagues repeatedly condemned “both totalitarianisms” – the “red one [Tito’s] and the black [Ustasha]” – like a kind of mantra, without reflecting that it was Tito’s Partisans who liberated Jasenovac in 1945. [10] The formulation closely echoes the reasoning for introduction of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. Sanader is even quoted in the Ten Year Anniversary Book of the ITF as saying, “Democracy’s victory over totalitarianism is the victory of the values embedded in modern Europe and modern Croatia.” [11] The equalization of Ustasha-Nazi and communist victims appears to be a bottom-up, post-communist process as well as a top-down, EU process.

The Jasenovac exhibition: Paying lip service to memory

The most striking Croatian example of the “Europeanization of the Holocaust” is the exhibition at the state-funded Jasenovac Memorial Museum, which after a lengthy period of debate opened in 2006. The new exhibition seems to represent progress in so far as it acknowledges the fact that mass murder and the Shoah happened in Croatia. Nevertheless, the second exhibition panel after the entrance shows Hitler together with Ante Pavelic, the head of the Ustasha, and tells visitors that during Pavelic’s first meeting with Hitler in June 1941, Hitler gave him full support for the policy of genocide against
the Serbian population. Thus, while stressing that the extermination of the Croatian Jews must be seen in the broader context of the Holocaust, which is obviously true, the exhibit also seems to want to emphasize that that mass murder of Serbs can also only be understood in this context. The fact that the Ustasha was a rare example of a regime that operated death camps of their own, without Nazi orders, is not mentioned. Moreover, while antisemitic Ustasha posters are shown and antisemitic arguments countered, there is no such approach when it comes to anti-Serb or anti-Roma hatred. Remembering the Jewish victims of the Ustasha, something that apparently can only be done in the context of the commemoration of the annihilation of European Jewry, seems to be easier than addressing the Ustasha’s mass murder of Serbs.

Critics have faulted the exhibition for not showing who the perpetrators were, which nation suffered the greatest losses and how people were actually killed in Jasenovac. After long debate, a further exhibit was added showing brute killing instruments such as knives and mallets; the nationality and the age of the victims were also included, in order to show that it was not only political prisoners that were killed, as was often claimed during the 1990s. What is still missing, however, is any focus on the perpetrators, while Pavelic continues to be referred to deferentially as Dr Pavelic.

The director of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, Natasa Jovicic, has claimed that “we want to be part of the modern European education and museum system and follow the framework we get from other institutions dealing with these subjects.” [12] The new exhibition, she has said, was designed according to the “standards of the Council of Europe and the EU” [13] and was conceptualized in consultation with international experts in order to be “internationally recognizable” and compatible with “international standards”. [14] Yet these experts came solely from institutions concerned with the Holocaust, including the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Anne Frank House and Yad Vashem. The Croatian curators took their lead not from memorial museums at the sites of former concentration camps in Germany or the Generalgouvernement, which convey the complex character and daily routine of a camp, but from institutions such as the Anne Frank House. The aim, as Jovicic has put it, was to tell “a tragic life story with the help of a few objects”. [15] Of course, one can understand the focus on the individual victim story at the Anne Frank House. But in Jasenovac, a hypermodern exhibition uses new media in order to exclusively spotlight individual victim stories. Referring critically to the “portrayal of the executioner and the victim in world museology,” [16] the director has said her aim was to avoid the tendency to show anonymous corpses and killing instruments, and instead to make Jasenovac a “site of life” that broadcasts an affirmative message. The legitimate critic of the shock-aesthetic is thus combined with an attempt to “send a message of light to the site of crime”. [17]

The favourable response to the Jasenovac exhibition from international experts [18] may be explained by that fact that it partakes in the “universalization of the Holocaust”, encouraging a symbolic and ahistorical acknowledgement of the Holocaust and, using the language of the global human rights discourse, a recognition of human suffering as a whole. In the words of its director, the Jasenovac museum thus becomes a site of “democracy and human rights” where “the youth becomes aware of the consequences of the negation of human dignity in the twentieth century, but also of the chances of a quality-oriented life in a modern, pluralistic society.” [19] When the Holocaust and World War II in general are described as “negation of human dignity”, memory becomes mere
lip service. Reinhart Koselleck’s admonition to Germany also stands for Croatia: a “modern, pluralistic society” cannot commemorate only the victims, but must also or even primarily remember the perpetrators. [20]

**Croatian history textbooks: Curricular nationalism**

The website of the Holocaust Task Force contains extensive materials on how and what to teach about the Holocaust. Teachers are to define the term, individualize the history through personal stories, use witness testimonies and provide pupils with access to primary sources [21] - requirements that have been adopted by the Croatian history curriculum. [22] But when it comes to the Ustasha regime between 1941 and 1945 and the crimes committed by the Partisans at the end of the war in 1945 (“The Bleiburg Tragedy”), it turns out that memory is still “hot”. [23] “The Holocaust” and “genocide” are defined as key terms, but also “concentration collective camps” (koncentratijski sabirni logori), [24] a term that, existing neither in Croatian nor in English, expresses uncertainty if not ignorance about the topic. The lesson on the “Independent State of Croatia” is supposed to provide information on Croatia’s subordination under the Nazi occupying powers and the execution of their will, especially the surrender of the coastal areas to Italy and the country’s economic exploitation. Croatia is thereby depicted as just another victim of the Axis. One part of the lesson is supposed to deal with “cultural achievements” during the war, [25] while another focuses on the “Ustasha-terror”. This distinction between a “good” NDH and an “evil” Ustasha – equivalent to distinguishing between a “good” Third Reich and the Nazis – reproduces the revisionist version common during the 1990s.

This syllabus has been implemented in very different ways in the four eighth grade text books authorized by the Croatian ministry of education. So how broad is the spectrum of narratives in these books? What makes this question so interesting is the fact that schools can choose freely which they use. The most frequent choice (the book by Kresimir Erdelja and Igor Stojakovic [26]) is politically “leftwing” and used in 38.5 per cent of schools; it replaces the nationalist book published by the same traditional schoolbook publishing house, Skolska knjiga, in the 1990s. Another publishing house released both a nationalist book (by Vesna Djuric, used in 18 per cent of schools) [27] and the most multiperspectival and self-reflective book available (Snjezana Koren, 18.5 per cent). [28] The fourth book (by Stjepan Bekavac and Mario Jareb) is also nationalist-revisionist and used in 25 per cent of schools. [29]

The two nationalist books reproduce the narrative about the “good” NDH and the “evil” Ustasha. Bekavac and Jareb present the rise of the Ustasha as comprehensible, “since it was only possible to solve the accumulated problems of the kingdom of Yugoslavia through the creation an independent Croatian state” – as if the Ustasha were the logical representative of every struggle for independence. Bekavac and Jareb broadly cover “cultural life and media in the NDH”, mentioning that while works of Jewish authors were banned, “a large number of publications were promoted, most of which were not ideologically coloured. One can say that the publishing sector was very successful despite the ideological control exerted by the Ustasha.” A large number of literary works “spoke about Croatian culture for the first time”; radio and film received systematic attention for the first time and were not “ideologically coloured” either. Djuric, the second nationalist author, covers the murder of communist intellectuals at the beginning of the war in a
single sentence before jumping to the “cultural achievements” of the NDH, especially the
Croatian encyclopaedia and the first full-length Croatian film. In the two other books, the
fact that the NDH was a mere satellite is stressed and “cultural achievements” are not
mentioned - despite this being a requirement in the curriculum.

Literally on the opposite page in Bekavac and Jareb covering “life in the NDH” comes a
description of the “Ustasha regime”. The authors write about “repressive politics towards
the non-Croatian population, especially Serbs, Jews and Roma.” At the concentration
camps, “the inmates (Jews and others, especially Serbs) were exposed to terror and
difficult living conditions; many were killed upon arrival or later on.” The crimes of the
Ustasha are not concealed, but nor is there any explanation as to what the mysterious
relation between the NDH and the “Ustasha regime” was supposed to have looked like.

In Koren’s text book, on the other hand, the ambiguities are openly discussed. The
chapter on the formation of the NDH starts with a photograph of the Nazi invasion of
Zagreb showing a jubilant mass, clearly raising the question of the responsibility of the
population. Popular support for the Ustasha regime is also broached: “Why did so many
welcome the proclamation of the NDH in 1941?” Koren is the only one to mention the
civil war between the Partisans, the Serbian-royalist Chetniks and the Ustasha, and thus
places the experience of the civilian population in a precise historical context (Djuric, in
contrast, mentions only the abstract “suffering of the population”). What is unique in
Koren’s book is that the crimes of all involved parties are described extensively, yet
without being equated. When it comes to the depiction of the victims of World War II,
three of the books emotionalize the suffering of “our own” victims through the inclusion
of photographs, survivors testimonies and historical sources, while using a neutral,
distanced language when writing about others. Bekavac and Jareb describe the Holocaust
as “the most severe crime in contemporary history” and make a precise distinction
between Nazi concentration and extermination camps in the chapter on general WWII
history. They even report about the EU decision to introduce a Holocaust Memorial Day.
But when it comes to the crimes of the Ustasha, they write neutrally about “repressions”.
The crimes they emotionalize are the murder by the partisans of fleeing Ustasha
members, NDH soldiers and Croatian civilians near Bleiburg in May 1945. The chapter
on the Ustasha crimes contains no testimonies and only one photograph – of the
Jasenovac flower memorial designed by the architect Bogdan Bogdanovic in the 1960s;
the chapter on Bleiburg, in contrast, contains numerous photographs of refugees and
prisoners, and the testimony of one survivor who recalls witnessing a father being shot in
front of his young son after attempting to approach him.

In the other nationalist text book (Djuric), Jasenovac is clearly designated as a death
camp where “tens and tens of thousands of people perished” – a formulation that also
sounds awkward in Croatian and suggests discomfort or uncertainty. The author then
goes on to talk about the numerous Jews, Serbs and Roma “who were killed” – the
passive form is striking – without naming the Ustasha as the killers. The “leftwing” text
book from Erdelja and Stojakovic, on the other hand, stands in an antifascist tradition
and deals with the victims of Jasenovac extensively, including three survivor testimonies;
no survivor testimonies can be found in the chapter on Bleiburg, however. In her
scholarly work, Koren, the author of the fourth, most multiperspectival text book, has
criticized the depiction of certain victim groups as the “anonymous Other”; [30] her text
book includes photographs, testimonies and historical sources representing all victim
groups.

The biased depiction of the victims in the two nationalist books corresponds to their demonization of the Serbian Chetniks. According to Bekavac and Jareb, the Chetniks planned to establish a “Greater Serbia, in which the Croats would have been punished for Ustasha crimes, of which the Chetniks accuse the Croatian people as a whole. [...] Most of the Croatian territories would have been annexed to Greater Serbia and the Croats on those territories murdered or alienated from their people.” These “plans” are obviously supposed to outweigh what the Ustasha did to their Serbian population in reality. This is the only passage in the book in which World War Two is linked to the Serbian crimes during the wars of the 1990s: Bekavac and Jareb mention a World War Two Chetnik leader who enthusiastically welcomed the Serbian rebellion in Knin in 1991, at the beginning of the war in Croatia, and praised its leaders as his worthy successors. The authors thereby imply that the Serbian rebels can be understood as a next generation of Chetniks. Djuric also depicts the Chetnik crimes in an especially cruel and detailed manner: they “attacked Croatian and Muslim civil population,” she writes, “invaded villages, marauded, killed people, destroyed churches and mosques.” The far more systematic actions of the Ustasha are, on the contrary, described simply as the “persecution of Serbs”. In the “leftwing” text book of Erdelja and Stojakovic, the Chetnik crimes are described similarly, though this seems to be more proportionate, since Ustasha crimes are also discussed in detail with testimonies included. Koren’s book, meanwhile, is the only one to place Chetnik crimes in the context of the civil war against the Ustasha and the Partisans, thereby avoiding demonization while not equalizing.

The range of narratives about World War Two in text books approved by the Croatian ministry of education is thus very broad. Strikingly for a country that will join the EU in one year, the official curriculum is most closely adhered to in the two nationalist textbooks, namely in the requirement to teach about the cultural achievements of the NDH, while the other two text books refuse to teach a revisionist version of history. While the nationalist text books seem to have no problem alluding to European memory standards in the chapters on general, international history, they distinctly fail to make any attempt at multiperspectivity with respect to the crimes and suffering of “one’s own” collective.

All too European?

Croatia was the first successor state of former Yugoslavia to join the ITF in 2005, followed much later by Slovenia and Serbia at the end of 2011. It would seem that the country felt that, if it was to become a member of the European “community of values”, it would have to signal cooperativeness in acknowledging its criminal past and reversing the legacy of the revisionist Tudjman-era. The issue of international memory standards emerged in Croatian earlier than it did in Serbia, where efforts to commemorate the Nazi concentration camp at Sajmiste as a Holocaust site have remained unsuccessful. In Slovenia, the myth of “functional collaboration” with the Nazis as a way to avoid “godless communism” flourishes, and there is no awareness of the fact that the Holocaust has also happened in Slovenia, albeit on a small scale.

Yet as the Croatian case has shown, referring constantly to European standards is not at all the same as implementing “negative memory”. As we have seen, international
educational concepts regarding multiperspectivity fail to find concrete realization: two out of four official Croatian history text books remain revisionist, celebrating the cultural achievements of the Ustasha state and demonizing the Chetniks – in doing so taking their lead from the curriculum itself. Moreover, where Croatian history politics do concord with European standards, the results are far from unproblematic, a fact that reflects negatively on the institutionalization of (European) memory more generally. The growing understanding of the Holocaust as a European phenomenon allows the subsumption of the Ustasha’s mass murder of Serbs in Jasenovac under the crimes of Nazism. This misconstrual is compounded by the international focus on the dehistorized “individual victim”, enabling a memorial museum at the site of a former concentration camp to avoid confronting the issue of the perpetrators. In the discussion of the wars of the 1990s, to refer to the Croats as the new Jews and to the Serbs as Fascists is to twist the universalization of the Holocaust into a moral lesson on human rights. Finally, the equalization of “red” and “black” totalitarianism at the site of the Jasenovac concentration camp is analogous to the externalization of the victim narrative encouraged by the commemoration of the victims of the Hitler-Stalin-pact, a manoeuvre common in other post-communist countries. In this respect, Croatia seems very European after all.

Footnotes


7. At the end of World War Two, the Ustasha, the Croatian army and civilians, together with the German Wehrmacht, fled from Tito’s Partisans towards the Austrian border. The Allied powers refused their surrender in Bleiburg and returned them to Yugoslavia, where tens of thousands were killed by the Partisans without trial.


22. Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta, *Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu skolu* [Teaching plan and program for primary school], Zagreb 2006, 284.


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