Die Vergangenheit nationalisieren
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Published in:
Jahrbuch fuer Historische Kommunismusforschung

Publication date:
2014

Document version
Tidlig version også kaldet pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Creating national pasts - Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia rewrite the shared history of socialist Yugoslavia


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The abandonment of Communism in Yugoslavia in 1990 was followed shortly afterwards by the break-up of the Yugoslav federal state and the establishment of new more or less national states out of the formerly federal republics. The establishment of formally democratic nation states led to new demands to history: The class based histories of the Communist period were reputed, and new national histories were to be written. How were these histories to deal with the common Yugoslav socialist past?

This question was often a delicate one, as several of the republics had only distant experiences of independent statehood. The period as fairly independent republics within Yugoslavia therefore constitutes an essential part of their history as states. On the other hand, the new national histories were to contribute to the consolidation of the new states by legitimising both the establishment of new ideological regimes and new national borders. Yugoslavia’s dissolution process was accompanied by years of warfare in various parts of the former federation. Indeed, the replacing of the Yugoslav federation by national states had cost dearly in most post-Yugoslav republics, though in some states much more so than in others. Thus the new histories had to explain a discontinuous and troublesome very recent past.

This article investigates how the common Yugoslav socialist state was represented in the new histories of Croatia, Serbia and, more briefly, Bosnia in the 1990s and early 2000s. The article is based on analyses of schoolbooks of contemporary history and history writing, especially historical syntheses, in Croatia, Serbia and, more briefly, Bosnia. I argue that the early post-Yugoslav representations of Yugoslav history were enveloped in descriptions of internal conflicts, while periods of peaceful coexistence
and relative prosperity were downplayed. History writing and education thus contributed to explaining and legitimising the break-up of the Yugoslav federation and to naturalising new national borders.

**Yugoslav history in crisis**

The final years of the Yugoslav federation prepared the ground for the construction of the histories of Yugoslav communism in the new republics. Yugoslavia experienced a profound political and economic crisis from the early 1980s. This undermined some of the main sources of legitimacy for the Yugoslav state, namely the relative economic freedom and welfare of the citizens of this country of ‘consumer socialism’.¹

During the 1980s, Yugoslav historians, writers and artists exposed some of the dark sides of Yugoslav communist history. This included revealing hidden aspects of the late Marshal Tito’s person; scrutinising the brutal and undemocratic take-over of power by the communists in 1945; writing extensively about the prison camps used for suspected political enemies after the Yugoslav break with the Soviet bloc in 1948 and describing the inhuman and arbitrary character of political suppression in those years.² These revelations had two types of consequences: Firstly, they led to further questioning and undermining of the legitimacy of the Yugoslav state and regime. And secondly, they led to the realization that history had been extensively manipulated and that official communist history was not to be trusted.³ The effect was that history was opened for massive reinterpretations, often of sensationalist and nationalist character.

The late 1980s saw Yugoslavia increasingly characterised by tensions among the country’s republics and national groups, not least catalysed by the aggressive centralist and nationalist politics of Serbia’s leadership under Slobodan Milošević. The growing national polarisation of Yugoslav politics was accompanied by national polarisation among Yugoslav historians from different republics, Serbia and Croatia in particular, and by sharp and confrontational historical debates across national and republican lines.

In Serbia, particularly, historical debates turned focus towards national grievances. The genocidal campaign against Serbs by the Croatian Fascists *Ustasha* movement during the Second World War became a dominant theme, at times accompanied by claims that these crimes had been deliberately silenced by Croat politicians. In Croatia, the focus on Second World War crimes was initially welcomed, but at the end of the 1980s, the emphasis of Serb victimisation and Croat culpability were increasingly seen as extensions of nationalist politics.4

The election of nationalist parties in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and elsewhere in 1990, the breakdown of the federal state and the subsequent wars only aggravated national enmity and the focus on conflicts and victimhood.

**The establishment of new national histories**

Unlike popular culture, which was characterised by widespread nostalgia for the Yugoslav communist regime, history as an educational and academic field was less inclined to discuss the history of Titoism and Yugoslav socialism.5 Whereas confrontations with the problematic sides of Yugoslav communist history were already taking place in the mid-1980s, in the 1990s discussions of the communist past were generally backgrounded by issues of national grievance and sometimes even of national survival. Rather than the communist period, which, though repressive and violent was also characterised by economic growth, relative openness and largely peaceful national coexistence, the new national histories focused on instances of confrontation and warfare among Yugoslavia’s national groups. Moreover, whenever communist crimes were seriously thematized, it tended to take place within a framework of national suffering.

Three aspects seem to characterise the new representations of Yugoslav history in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, although to varying degrees: They focused on their own nations, often rehabilitating what could be seen as ‘national’ elements of history. They

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tended to thematize internal Yugoslav conflicts. And they emphasised national victimization.

Compared to the dominant national issues, the Titoist period received relatively less attention. Still, its history was interpreted and presented in new historical syntheses, but maybe most importantly as part of history teaching material. History schoolbooks, in the post-Yugoslav republics typically sanctioned by the state and republished for every new school year, offer a transparent material for analysing priorities and developments in the official views on history. The general importance of education and school books in modern nation states’ formation of suitable citizens has long been recognised. Several studies have emphasised the use of school books for political aims in Yugoslavia and her successor states, and since the early 1990s, historians in Serbia and Croatia have severely criticised what they saw as the new regimes’ ideological abuse of history education. Also in reaction to the dominant national interpretative framework in history textbooks, a group of historians from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and other South-east European countries in the early 2000s wrote a series of joint history work books that aim to cross the boundaries of national histories and view South-east European history as shared and regional, including a multiplicity of perspectives.

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6 In communist Yugoslavia and in the post-Yugoslav republics contemporary history was taught systematically in 8th grade of primary school and 3rd or 4th grade of secondary school. Though the textbook market is increasingly liberalised, the states still have to accept textbooks for use in schools.


9 http://www.cdsee.org/projects/jhp/publications
Yet, in spite of socialist Yugoslavia’s huge importance for the development of the post-Yugoslav nation states, the narratives of the communist period have seen little investigation. The following will offer a review of my analyses of the representations of the history of communist Yugoslavia in the schoolbooks and history writing of Croatia, Serbia and, more briefly, Bosnia between 1990 and the early 2000s.

**Croatian histories of the socialist Yugoslav past**

The state formation project promoted in Croatia in the early 1990s was of clearly nationalist orientation, redefining the republic of Croatia as a state foremost of the Croatian nation. The independent Croatian state set out to remove the communist dictates from historical narratives. Instead, history writing was often subordinated to the new political projects of Croatian state and nation building. Much of the new Croatian history was profoundly Croato-centric, focusing on the republic of Croatia and her regions and rarely on a Yugoslav community or a common Yugoslav perspective. More than a handful of histories of Croatia (or of Croatia from a Yugoslav perspective) were written after 1990. This presumably reflects a need in Croatian society to firmly establish the new national entity and to explain how and why it was a natural and desirable development. In several of these books the dominant narrative of Socialist Yugoslavia emphasise abuse and oppression of Croatia under centralism and Great Serbian nationalist hegemony. According to one comprehensive history of Yugoslavia, published in 1998 “The struggle with Great-Serbian hegemonism remained a durable characteristic of the internal political life of the Yugoslav state.”

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nations. One author claimed that Croatian history can also be seen as an eternal struggle against Serbian dominance, visible in four stages in the 20th century; namely in the interwar Yugoslav state, during the Second World War, in Socialist Yugoslavia, and in the wars of the 1990s.

However, two books published in 1999 offer a less Croato-centric view on the history of Socialist Yugoslavia. Both point to the positive aspects of the federation, while especially Ivo Goldstein’s *Croatia. A History* emphasise the crimes committed by the Communist regime. According to Goldstein, Yugoslavia’s main problem was its lack of democracy, which could have been a way of meeting the challenges of a multiethnic community.Dušan Bilandžić’ *Croatian Modern History*, a detailed Yugoslav history with added chapters on Croatia, describes Yugoslavia as the European state most threatened by conflict and offers a narrative of Yugoslavia characterised by continuous crisis.

Initially Croatian schoolbooks adopted the emphasis of repression and national victimization. Chapter titles such as “the subordinate position of Croats and Croatia in FNRJ [The Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, T.S.]” or “ever heavier burden of centralism and unitarism” illustrate this view on the Yugoslav state. It was underlined how the proclaimed federalism was fake and replaced by a centralised government, and how Croats were subordinated, under-represented in administrative and powerful positions, and prevented from advancement within the administrative and stately apparatus, while Croat national feelings and culture were suppressed. While books from the late 1990s and early 2000s are less serene in their condemning of the Socialist Yugoslav state as a great-Serbian hegemonist unit, focus remains on Croatia and Croat dissatisfaction. Claims of Croatia’s subordinate position are replaced by complains

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16 Dušan Bilandžić: *Hrvatska Moderna Povijest* [Croatian Modern History], Zagreb 1999, 204.


about centralism, pressure, abuse and exploitation of Croatia’s economy and oppression of national feelings and culture.\textsuperscript{19}

Since 1990, a dominant issue in Croatian debates on socialist Yugoslavia is the so-called “Bleiburg Tragedy”, that is, the large scale massacres committed at the end of the war by the Communist controlled Partisan army against captured war enemies. These massacres and their victims, mainly members of the Ustasha militia and Croatian home guard forces, but possibly also civilian refugees, constituted a last truly silenced issue of wartime history. The history of Bleiburg opened a new perspective, which emphasised Communist brutality and made a focus on Croat victimisation possible in connection to Second World War history.\textsuperscript{20}

Apart from the widespread thematization of Bleiburg and the persecution of the Partisans’ opponents at the end of the Second World War, political oppression and crimes committed by Yugoslavia’s communist regime against its citizens were described to a varying degree in Croatian history textbooks. Books from the Tuđman period focused mainly on Croatian national suffering and only mentioned regime persecution of political opponents superficially and primarily when the victims were Croats.\textsuperscript{21} Newer school books, however, are more detailed in their descriptions of political persecution, including the purges within the party following the break with Cominform in 1948.\textsuperscript{22} In most books, much more emphasis is put on Communist repression of the Catholic Church, and on the trial in 1946 and subsequent imprisonment of Zagreb’s Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, who was convicted, unfairly according to the books, for cooperation and conspiring with the Ustasha.\textsuperscript{23} The Catholic Church is closely associated with Croatian nationalism, as Catholicism and Catholic


\textsuperscript{20} See Marko Grčić: Umjesto uvoda [Instead of an introduction], in Marko Grčić (ed.): Otvoreni dossier Bleiburg [Open dossier Bleiburg], Zagreb 1990; Želimir Žanko and Nikola Solić: Jazovka, Zagreb 1990.


\textsuperscript{22} Leček et al.: Povijest 4 [History 4], p. 232-233; 241-242; Kolar-Dimitrijević et al.: Povijest 4 [History 4], p. 195, 204.

tradition are among the main markers that distinguish Croats from Serbs, who are mainly Orthodox, and from Muslim Bosnians. Thus, the books seem again to focus on national victimization in relation to a Yugoslav centralist state.

A point of complaint particularly interesting from the perspective of the study of revisions and uses of history is the repeated insistence that Communist Yugoslavia abused wartime history to discredit the Croat nation. Schoolbooks as well as academic writing claim that Croats were forced into a complex of guilt for the crimes of the Ustasha and that these crimes were also greatly exaggerated. To add to the national grievance, it was suggested that Chetnik crimes were silenced throughout the Communist period, while Ustasha crimes were exaggerated. Thus, Croatian national victimisation was emphasised with regard to both the administration and the history politics of communist Yugoslavia, which was presented as overtly anti-Croat. This further emphasised the need to discharge ‘old’ Yugoslav history writing and adhere to a new one. While it is certainly true that Socialist Yugoslavia overestimated the number of Yugoslav victims of the Second World War, it can hardly be substantiated that the intention was to invest the Croat people as such with a complex of guilt. But obviously, the idea enforced the need for a new Croatian history.

History writing, debate and school books were often more interested in the violent conflicts surrounding it than in the history of socialist Yugoslavia itself. The Second World War, which paved the way for the Communists’ establishment of socialist Yugoslavia, and the wars of the 1990s, which destroyed that state, were rather more thematized than the peaceful period in between. There was an obvious tendency to downplay what could be seen as “Croatian” crimes, while victimisation of Croats and Croatia were foregrounded. In descriptions of the Second World War the Croatian Ustashe’s persecution and mass slaughter of Serbs were included only superficially, whereas Croatian suffering at the hands of Serbian nationalist forces or the Communist led Partisans were described rather more empathically. The war in Croatia in the

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1990s, referred to as the “Homeland War”, took a prominent position in Croatian textbooks. The accounts of war crimes committed by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary forces in the 1990s were quite explicit. Some of these books directly linked and compared the wars of the 1990s to Croatian suffering during the Second World War. Thus, in the Tudjman years especially, Yugoslav conflicts of the past were used as a source of metaphors to explain the present situation.

Serbian histories of socialist Yugoslavia

In many ways, Serbia during the 1990s experienced less of a transition than most other former Yugoslav states. Serbia’s president and former communist leader, Slobodan Milošević, and his Socialist Party of Serbia demonstrated a strange ability to stay in power, mobilising support by using nationalist symbols and agenda, and applying numerous anti-democratic means. Though Serbia was not officially involved in the wars in the first half of the 1990s, Serbia supported the Yugoslav national army fighting in Croatia and Slovenia, the Serb riots in Croatia and the Bosnian Serb Army with elite and paramilitary forces. Serbian public life through the 1990s was largely subordinated to warfare and nationalist agenda.

The developments that characterised Serbian historiography in the late 1980s continued into the next decade. The Ustasha massacres and Serbian national victimisation remained dominant themes in both academic history writing and school books. In the media Second World War history and Serbian suffering were used to

critical review see Ivo Goldstein and Goran Hutinec: Neki Aspekti Revizionizma u Hrvatskoj Historiografiji Devedesetih Godina XX. Stoljeća – Motivi, Metode i Odjeci [Some aspects of revisionism in Croatian historiography of the 1990s], in: Katz (ed.): Revizija Prošlost [Revisions of the Past], p. 189.
describe ongoing events including the war in Croatia. These two conflicts were also connected in the schoolbooks. In the words of a high school textbook from 1994:

“Comparing the events from the period of the war … with the events from 1991 in the same areas, they irresistibly give us the thought that actors, crimes and instigators are the same.”

Thus, as was the case in Croatia, the history of socialist Yugoslavia was framed on both sides by histories of violent inter-Yugoslav conflicts, which were seen as a returning or even permanent condition.

The lack of transition in Serbia was generally reflected in the history schoolbooks produced in the 1990s. They tended to follow the main narrative line from the Titoist period, but with numerous additions that emphasised Serbian national grievances. Thus the schoolbooks did not actually confront the communist past, but rather corrected it slightly from a Serbian national perspective.

The Partisan war was still a main subject in the textbooks, but it was now also seen as directed against the Chetniks, that is, as a civil war, dividing the Serbian people. Some Communist crimes were mentioned: a new, hitherto unmentioned subject in Serbian school book literature was the Partisan persecution and killing of war opponents and suspected class enemies during, the so-called “left deviations”, in early 1942. Yet, there is no mention of the Bleiburg massacres, which were a main theme in the Croatian schoolbooks. The simple explanation, again underlining the primacy of national themes, is probably that most of the victims of these events were Croats and thus uninteresting.

The descriptions of the communist period were also partly in line with Titoist tradition. Compared to the way one-party rule and political oppression were described in Croatian history books, the Serbian books from the Milošević era were rather positive


32 Gačeša et al., Istorija 3/4, 203-205; Nikola Gačeša, Dušan Živković and Ljubica Radović: Istorija 2 za II razred četrorogodišnjih stručnih škola [History 2 for the second grade of the four year vocational school], (14th reworked edition), Belgrade 2003, p. 192-193.
in their evaluation of Communist Yugoslavia, at least with regard to its earlier periods. The efforts to rebuild the country after the Second World War were praised as flamboyant and enthusiastic, and the reaction to the attack from the Comintern in 1948 as honourable and dignified.33

The strongest denunciations of communist history seem to rise from national dissatisfactions. Real condemnations of Titoism were in the chapters covering the Brioni meeting in 1966, when Aleksandar Ranković, a Serb, head of the security services and main exponent of a centralist politics in the federation, was ousted from power: “Then began the processes which separatist forces would use to break up the federation.”34 These processes led to the 1974 constitution, which was described as a disintegration of Serbia itself. Under this constitution, according to one schoolbook, Serbia was oppressed and deceived of its fair share. In Kosovo, Serbs suffered under an Albanian administration that wanted to make the area “ethnically completely pure”.35

Histories of Yugoslavia in Post-Milošević Serbia

With the fall of Slobodan Milošević and his socialist party from power in October 2000, Serbia embarked on a more thorough transition to democracy. This paved the way for outspoken confrontations with the socialist Yugoslav past in both history writing and schoolbooks. According to Momčilo Zečević, Serbian historians were driven by national megalomania, and therefore overestimated the national element of history, while at the same time denying any historical feasibility of the Yugoslav idea and state.36 These tendencies became dominant also in Serbian history textbooks.

In the early 2000s, Serbia initiated reforms of the education system, and efforts were made to liberalise the schoolbook market.37 Though the break was not immediately visible in the schoolbook material, as some older books were continuously in use after 2000, textbooks written after the fall of Milošević took a significantly different approach to Yugoslav history, the communist period in particular. The focus of the new

34 Gačeša et al.: Istorija 2 [History 2], p. 238.
35 Gačeša et al.: Istorija 2 [History 2], p. 245-246.
36 Momčilo Zečević: O uzrocima jugoslovenske krize u istoriji i istoriografiji [On the causes of the Yugoslav crisis in history and historiography], in his Prošlost i Vreme [Past and time], Belgrade 2003, p. 253.
textbooks was strictly Serbian national. Second World War history was no longer a
glorious epos of Partisan victories; in what was presented as a largely Serbian civil war
between the Communist led Partisans and the conservative and nationalist Chetniks, the
Partisans were described as the more gruesome of the two, famed for immediate
executions.\textsuperscript{38} The Chetniks, associated with excessive war crimes other parts of the
former Yugoslavia, were presented as at least as righteous as the formerly so favoured
Partisans. This was perfectly in line with the official Serbian rehabilitation of
Mihailović and his Chetniks that was completed by law in 2004.\textsuperscript{39}

Communism was the main evil in the new histories of socialist Yugoslavia, and
Communist crimes were massively thematized, not least in connection to the creation of
Socialist Yugoslavia.\textsuperscript{40} Interestingly, with regard to history politics, one high school
textbook points out how the communists deliberately distorted the memory of the
Second World War, downplayed national hatred and enforced an artificial national
balance of suffering and heroism in war history.\textsuperscript{41}

Though the new textbooks gives credit to the communists for substantial development
of the country and rising living standards, they generally have little good to say about
the Socialist Yugoslav state, which is described as a centralised one-party government,
controlled by security police and military apparatus.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, it is presented as a less
than viable construction, beginning its disintegration already in 1966, when Slovenia
and Croatia displays a craving for independence, and in the end its break down is not
casted, but only accelerated by the political crisis of the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{43} However,
Milošević is held responsible for a politics that led to enmity towards other republics,
long periods of warfare and even endangered the very existence of the Serbian people.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{38} Suzana Rajić, Kosta Nikolić and Nebojša Jovanović: Istorija 8. za 8. razred osnovne škole [History 8 for
\textsuperscript{39} See Tea Sindbæk: The Fall and Rise of a National Hero: interpretations of Draža Mihailović and the
47-59.
\textsuperscript{40} Suzana Rajić, Kosta Nikolić and Nebojša Jovanović: Istorija 8. [History 8], p. 152, 172, 174, 177; also Kosta
Nikolić, Nikola Žutić, Momčilo Pavlović, Zorica Špajjer: Istorija 3/4 za III razred gimnazije prirodno-
matematičkog smera i IV razred gimnazije opšteg i društveno-jezičkog smera [History 3/4 for third grade of
the natural-mathematical line of gymnasium and fourth grade of general and social-language line of
\textsuperscript{41} Nikolić et al.: Istorija 3/4 [[History 3/4], p. 217.
\textsuperscript{44} Rajić et al.: Istorija 8 [History 8], p. 181-182; Nikolić et al.: Istorija 3/4 [[History 3/4], p. 239-240.
Thus condemnation of Milošević became part of a general confrontation with communist past.

Few syntheses of Serbia’s Yugoslav history were published in the early 1990s. It may be symptomatic that one of them is a translation of Holm Sundhaussen’s Geschichte Serbiens, which was published in Belgrade in 2008. This, in comparison to Croatia, small interest in writing new national histories may reflect that Serbia experienced a less clear cut from Yugoslavia, both ideologically and institutionally. Indeed, Serbia together with Montenegro remained part of a rump Yugoslav federation until early 2003.

One such attempt at a historical synthesis is Cedomir Antić’ Short History of Serbia, which condemns both the communist regime and Milošević’ “postmodern dictatorship”. Focused on the Serbian state and the Serbian nation’s hardships and suffering, there is not much criticism of Serbian nationalism and the crimes committed in its service. Antić is very sceptic of Yugoslavia’s communist regime, pointing to the terror, crimes and suppression that characterised its first decade of existence. The stories of Socialist Yugoslavia are generally about crisis and failure, but also about modernisation and a certain public support for Tito. Yet, the failure leads to Milošević, whose maltreatment of the Yugoslav system, abuse of Serbia’s democratic structures and plundering of Serbian society, Antić considers even less legitimate than Titoist Yugoslavia. Though Antić’ book has already been republished twice, it had a lukewarm reception: one review suggested that the book’s second half was probably more of a political statement than history writing. Yet, the reviewer had to praise Antić’ courage in embarking on synthesising a large historical period; he had to look back to the 1980s to find successful attempts at syntheses of Serbian and Yugoslav history with which he could compare Antić’ work.

46 Ibid., p. 177-178; 190-192; 195; 197; 200-204.
Bosniak histories of Yugoslavia

The war 1992-1995 and the Dayton peace agreement cemented the Nationalist division of the multiethnic Bosnian society. Post-1995 Bosnian politics was characterised by the struggle to construct a viable state out of a war-torn, ethnically divided and often externally governed Dayton Bosnia. During the war and the years after it, Bosnia’s Croat and Serb parts often identified with the republics of Croatia and Serbia, rather than with multiethnic Bosnia. This counts for history writing and education as well.

The tendency to let ethnicity dominate history interpretations continued in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosnian Muslim-Croat federation was divided into cantons with outspoken self-governance. In areas with a Croatian majority population, history education programs were adopted from the Croatian republic. Similarly, in the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, history teaching followed the Serbian line often using Serbian textbooks.48 To Muslims, however, the Bosnian state remained the country of identification. Bosnian Muslim history writing engaged in the project of writing a Muslim national history, parallel to the general nationalisation of history in other former Yugoslav republics. The main protagonist of these histories, obviously, was the Bosnian Muslim community, or the Bosniaks, as they were increasingly called. The new histories tended to ascribe a positive role to Muslims while also emphasising Muslim national victimisation.

In the 1990s, like in Croatia and Serbia, Second World War history was a main theme. Accounts of the Second World War focused on Muslim community’s innocence and suffering, especially at the hands of Serbian Chetniks.49 History school books repeated the tendency to distance Bosnian Muslims from the main perpetrators of crimes, while emphasising Muslim victimisation, particularly from Chetnik terror.50 The interest in the Chetnik massacres of Muslims during the Second World War was actualised by the crimes committed by Serbian paramilitary units in Bosnia in the 1990s, and it was closely linked to the perception that the massacres of the Second World War were

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renewed in the 1990s. The past was used as a key to understanding the present, and again, like in the Serbian and Croatian cases, the socialist Yugoslav past was enveloped in entangled histories of Yugoslav conflicts.

Nevertheless, the Bosniak history school books from the early 2000s, unlike Serbian and Croatian textbooks from this period, presented a positive image of the communists and the Partisan movement during the Second World War, emphasising the Partisan fight against national intolerance and “fratricidal war”, while ignoring Partisan war crimes or the Bleiburg massacres. Describing socialist Yugoslavia as a one-party system initially characterised by totalitarianism and strong hand government, the schoolbooks do not specifically mention the infamous security police or the prison camps for suspected political opponents. Rather, there are positive accounts of self-management and especially of the economic and cultural development of Bosnia during Titoism. Describing Tito’s death in May 1980, a high school textbook from 2004 reads: “Tito, farmer’s child, war hero and creator of peace was carried to his tomb like a king” The book moves on to celebrate Tito’s period as the only peaceful one in Yugoslav history and to praise Tito himself for always fighting nationalism and enabling Muslims to achieve their deserved status as a nation. Obviously this perspective reflects particular Bosnian Muslim experiences of Yugoslav history. This positive perspective on communism probably reflects the fact that the establishment of a Bosnian republic as well as the recognition of a Muslim national community within it are intimately linked to Titoist communism. Serb or Croat history textbooks would hardly acclaim Tito for his commitment to peace and to fighting nationalism.

In two attempts at writing a general Bosnian history the dominant narrative line in the descriptions of the Titoist period is the Muslim community’s struggle for recognition as a nation within the Yugoslav state. Both authors give credit to the Titoist regime for providing security and possibilities for development of the Bosnian Muslim community. Yet, both raise criticism: one points out Yugoslavia’s insurmountable structural and economic problems, including Serbian dominance, while the other sees Titoism as basically a series of “failed corrections” of the Soviet system.

In conclusion:
In the new histories written in Croatia, Serbia and the Muslim community in Bosnia after the fall of Socialist Yugoslavia, we see three rather national perspectives on their shared communist past. Even the histories of state repression and crimes committed against its citizens were often written from the perspective of national suffering.

In all three cases, the history of the common socialist past, characterised both by a suppressive and at times violent regime and by primarily peaceful coexistence among Yugoslavia’s nations, was largely overshadowed by the focus on histories of national threats and conflicts. Though divergent views existed, the dominant lines of narrative most often downplayed the 45 years of peaceful Yugoslav co-existence, making them appear as an improbable incidence within a history generally characterised by national conflict.

Most visibly in the Croatian and Serbian cases, post-Yugoslav representations of Yugoslav history changed in line with political developments, though the main interpretative frameworks remained primarily national. While socialist Yugoslavia’s positive contributions to the development of the national republics were somehow recognised, the history of inter-Yugoslav conflict was more useful in supplying arguments for differentiating and distancing the new national units from their former Yugoslav neighbours. Thus the new histories contributed to justifying Yugoslavia’s dissolution and solidifying national boundaries also on the mental level.


Bojić: Historija Bosne i Bošnjaka [History of Bosnia and the Bosniaks], p. 245-246, 260, 263.