

TEA SINDBÆK

USABLE HISTORY?

*Representations of Yugoslavia's difficult past
from 1945 to 2002*



Aarhus University Press

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Preface

When in April 1941 Yugoslavia was invaded and split into pieces by Nazi-Germany and its allies, what followed was to become as much a Yugoslav civil war as a war of occupation and liberation. Groups of Yugoslavs, divided along political, ethnic and regional lines, not only fought with or against the Axis forces, but they also fought each other. During the warfare from 1941 to 1945, several hundred thousand Yugoslav civilians were killed by other Yugoslavs in large-scale massacres or concentration camps.

After the Second World War, Yugoslavia was re-established as a socialist multinational federation. The new communist regime built a large part of its self-representation and legitimacy upon the victories of the communist-led Partisans in the war. Yet the war had also left a difficult, painful and potentially divisive historical legacy to Yugoslav society; the history of these massacres could easily invoke national enmity or reawaken the political divisions of wartime Yugoslavia. In building their new ideal multiethnic state, how were the Yugoslav communists to deal with the history of massive internal Yugoslav war crimes and massacres? How would Yugoslav society and its historians represent and explain these internal massacres, and how would societal needs and political demands influence their representations?

In this book I investigate how the history of Yugoslavia's internal Second World War massacres was presented and used in politics, historiography and popular representations of history in Yugoslavia between 1945 and 2002. The book shows how this history was drawn upon for political, ideological and other purposes, and how historical representations were influenced by political developments.

Though I frequently refer to the concept of genocide and to the massacres committed during the Second World War, this is not a book about those massacres, and it does not seek to determine whether or not the massacres committed during the war constitute genocide; this question is outside the scope of the study, and answering it would demand a completely different approach. Rather, this book is about the role of history in society; about the ways in which painful and potentially divisive history may be present in society and how such history can be drawn upon for a number of purposes.

Most of the material presented here was part of my doctoral research, which I thank the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Aarhus for financing, and my supervisors, Henning Mørk and the late Niels Kayser Nielsen for kindly overseeing. Friends and colleagues in Aarhus and elsewhere commented on parts of the manuscript, and I am very grateful to each of them. I especially want to thank Wendy Bracewell, Carol Lilly and Peter Bugge for their insightful and generous reading of the final thesis. My gratitude also goes to the Aarhus University Research Foundation and Landsdommer Gieses Legat for supporting the publication of this revised version. And finally, I thank friends and colleagues in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo, especially Petar Bagarić, Srđan Milošević, Ivo Goldstein, Dubravka Stojanović, Predrag Marković and Husnija Kamberović, who kindly illuminated me in my ignorance and patiently accepted my intrusion into a history that they know so much better than I. My hope is that I, as an outsider, may approach the subject with different presumptions and perhaps detect new patterns. All errors and mistakes remain, of course, my own.

Aarhus, August 2012
Tea Sindbæk

Introduction:

I

Thematization, historical culture and genocide

Remake, a Bosnian/French film from 2002, relates the life of Tarik, a young writer from Sarajevo in the first half of the 1990s.¹ As the Bosnian conflict unfolds, he and his friends find themselves on different sides of a war they cannot support. Together with other Muslim men, Tarik is imprisoned and tortured in a camp held by Serbian nationalist forces during the siege of Sarajevo. *Remake* shows the brutal maltreatment of prisoners in the camp and the Serbian guards parading nationalist symbols associated with the Second World War Serbian Chetnik forces, who had committed numerous war crimes in Bosnia.

Tarik has recently finished a film manuscript about his father, who survived imprisonment and torture by the Croatian Fascist Ustasha movement that held power in Croatia and Bosnia during the Second World War. Tarik's father was sent to the infamous Ustasha concentration camp, Jasenovac, and *Remake* pictures him standing in a queue of naked prisoners on their way to be executed. Ustasha guards, swinging heavy wooden mallets, crush the skulls of the prisoners and throw the bodies in the river Sava. Fortunately, Tarik's father is saved by chance and returns to Sarajevo.

Remake shifts between the two wars and the parallel stories of individual suffering within frameworks of ethnic conflict and massacres. As the title suggests, the two stories could be seen as essentially the same. The story about Tarik's father is filled with easily recognisable references to elements of Yugoslav historiography of the Second World War and its massacres, for example the heavy wooden mallets used by the killers at Jasenovac. The fact that the part of the film depicting the father's experiences turns out to be an enactment of the son's manuscript underlines *Remake's* own re-enactment of history, reflecting chains of presentations and representations of the past.

The example of *Remake* illustrates several points: it demonstrates some of the ways in which history is drawn upon and referred to outside the academic and educational subject. It also shows how a historical culture, in this case that of Yugoslavia, holds an archive of historical stock-references that are connected to certain understandings of the past. Moreover, it shows how these references can be re-contextualised in order to suggest other meanings. While *Remake's* references to the Second World War draws on the communist historiography

of ‘the people against the fascists’, these references can be seen to imply an earlier instance of repetitive interethnic violence in Bosnia as well. Thus, *Remake* also illustrates a particular way of representing recent history in the former Yugoslav areas during and after the wars of the 1990s: the idea that these wars were somehow a resumption of the internal Yugoslav fighting of the Second World War, and that interethnic conflicts and violence were thus repeating themselves.

Remake is but one example of a wider cultural interest, which had continued for several decades, in the massacres and war crimes of the Second World War. The history of the inter-Yugoslav massacres of the Second World War was a prominent theme within historiography and popular history in Yugoslavia from the mid 1980s.

The question of how to write the history of these massacres was rather delicate throughout most of the existence of Socialist Yugoslavia. In a multiethnic state, such as Yugoslavia, ethnic violence and massacres are complex and sensitive questions. Soon after the end of the Second World War, the history of these massacres was subordinated to a state-bearing myth of united patriotic Yugoslav resistance and revolutionary struggle, and the history of internal Yugoslav violence was made to fit into that narrative. The myth of united resistance remained officially unchallenged until the 1980s, when history was revised, not least from national perspectives, and the history of Yugoslav war crimes was ascribed a new, much more national meaning.

While Second World War history did not become less embedded in politics with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and with the wars and the establishment of nation states, the relationship between history and politics certainly became more varied and many-sided. In the 1990s and the early 21st century, wartime massacres were crucial elements of the new national histories being written in the post-Yugoslav republics. Thus, the inter-Yugoslav massacres of the Second World War constitute a central problem of what we may call the ‘historical culture’, that is, historiography and popular representations of history in Yugoslavia from the establishment of the socialist federation from 1945 to 2002, when it was finally decided to abandon Yugoslavia as a federal state.

This book investigates how the inter-Yugoslav massacres committed during the Second World War have been represented and explained in Yugoslavia in the period from 1945 to 2002, and how these representations interact with political and cultural developments. By analysing representations of massacres and the ways in which they changed, the book shows how the events of the Second World War, through a process of thematisation, were emphasised and integrated within the ‘theme of genocide’. The aim is to demonstrate how the

history of the massacres was used in different ways for different purposes, and point out some of the consequences of these various uses.

The ways in which Yugoslav society and its historians attempted to come to terms with – and use – the painful and problematic history of the inter-Yugoslav Second World War massacres illuminate some of the problems and processes at stake when societies are to grasp the many terrible histories of the twentieth century. What are the roles of history and historians in post-conflict societies? How do we represent the past in a way that enables us to contain the “terror of history”, as Dirk Moses has phrased it, or, to paraphrase Charles Maier’s study of Germany’s struggles over Second World War historiography, how do we cope with our “unmasterable pasts”?²

The investigation in this book draws on a handful of concepts that illuminate different aspects of the problem. They are the concepts of *thematization*, *historical culture* and *use of history*, all introduced below. Particular emphasis is laid on the relationships between historical culture and society. Furthermore, parallels are identified between Yugoslav genocide historiography and tendencies within wider international developments of genocide studies.

Thematization and cardinal theme

The word *theme* has, in addition to its more general sense of ‘subject’ or ‘topic’ a specific linguistic meaning. The theme is the part of the sentence that is in focus, the point of departure; in essence it is what is being talked about.³ In English the theme is normally assigned the first position in the sentence, but it may also be emphasized in other ways, for example by predication. It may be marked; if the theme of the sentence is not constituted by the grammatical subject, but by, for example, the object or a prepositional phrase, it will obviously be highlighted. Marking the theme in this way can be described as *foregrounding*.⁴

Thematization denotes the organization of sentences into theme and non-theme. While some linguistic constructions are obviously more common or natural than others, there is always a certain degree of deliberate selection in the thematization of a sentence. The choice of theme reflects the starting point of the writer or speaker. According to Norman Fairclough, an unmarked theme represents what is assumed as given or established. On the other hand, a marked theme shows which bit of information needs to be emphasized. Thus, the thematization of texts says something about general assumptions as well as rhetorical strategies.⁵