



Centre for Southeast European Studies
Zentrum für Südosteuropastudien



UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE
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Southeast European Studies Challenges in Writing Contemporary History

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Operational Programme
Human Resources Development,
Education and Lifelong Learning

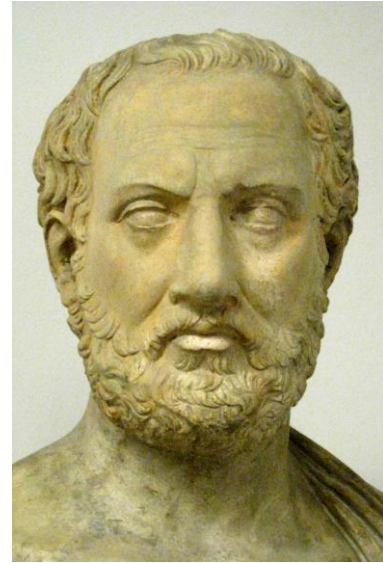


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Challenges in Writing Contemporary History

Overview

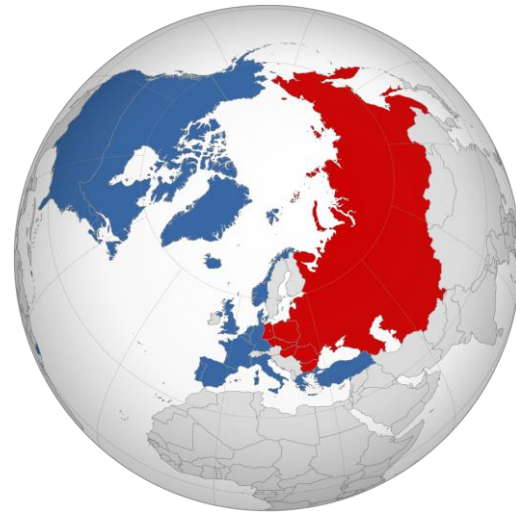
- ▶ What is contemporary history
- ▶ Challenges and advantages of contemporary history
- ▶ Facing the past or “How did the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina start”
- ▶ Is consensus on the (contemporary) past necessary



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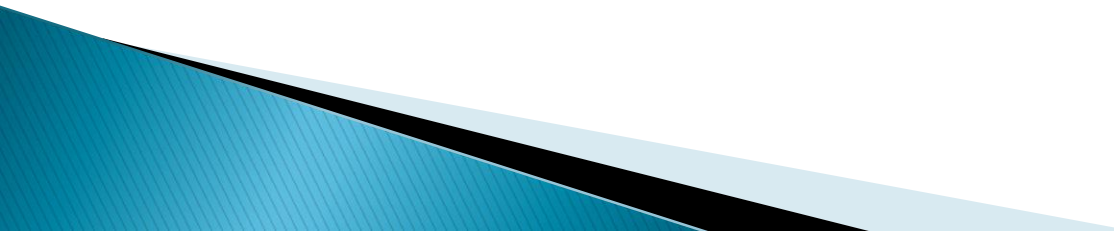
What is Contemporary History?

- ▶ Aim of contemporary history
- ▶ Timeframe
- ▶ Break points



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What is Contemporary History?

- ▶ The aim of contemporary history is to conceptualize, contextualize and historicize – to explain – some aspect of the recent past or to provide a historical understanding of current trends or developments
 - ▶ Timeframe that is closely connected to the present day / Part of history still in living memory
 - ▶ Break points in SEE: Cold War, Revolutions of 1989, Dissolution of Soviet Union, Dissolution of Yugoslavia, Ongoing process of European Integration
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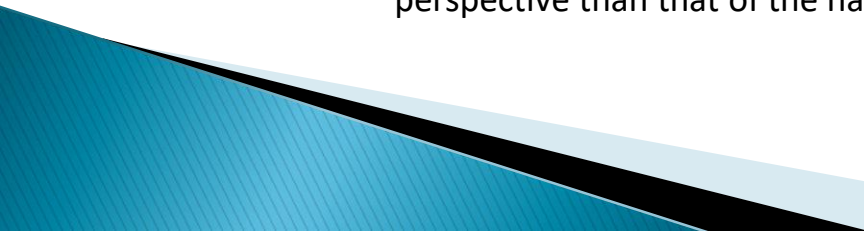
Supposed Deficiencies of Contemporary History

- ▶ The lack of time distance
- ▶ The shortage of source material
- ▶ Objectivity / Detachment

Supposed Deficiencies of Contemporary History

- ▶ The lack of time distance
 - The contemporary historian doesn't have a proper view of the long-term consequences of the events and developments which he or she investigates but the contemporary historian compensates the lack of time distance with the privilege of testimony

 - ▶ The shortage of source material
 - Yes - for sources of state provenance
 - No - for all other sources: the density of material which is publicly accessible, and which often provides more information than state documents, is constantly increasing, the problem of contemporary history is therefore rather the vast amount of available material than its lacking

 - ▶ Objectivity / Detachment
 - The criteria for dealing with topics of contemporary history are fundamentally the same as the criteria for other historical periods
 - “[A] history is never identical to the sources which bear witness to it”
 - The personal testimonies thus need to be reflected and evaluated from a different perspective than that of the narrator
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Example

How Did the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina Start?

- ▶ What kind of war was that?
- ▶ How did the war start? - At least two versions
- ▶ Can we talk about ethnic narratives?
- ▶ “Fragility of memory”
- ▶ Is consensus on the past necessary?



Film clip from "No Man's Land" by Danis Tanovic, 2001
Source: YouTube, katjusha101, 29th September 2023

What Kind of War Was That?

- ▶ War in Croatia
 - domovinski rat / homeland war / defensive war

- ▶ War in Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - Agresija na BiH / aggression on BaH
 - otadžbinski rat / homeland war
 - građanski rat / civil war
 - obrambeno-domovinski rat / defensive war
 - ...



Source: Wikimedia, Hedwig Klawuttke
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How Did the War Start?

Sarajevo – Part I

“Student Suada Dilberović, originally from Dubrovnik, is the first victim of the siege of Sarajevo and is considered as the **first victim** of **aggression** in BiH. [...] On **April 5**, a peace demonstration was held, asking Sarajevo's **aggressors** to remove the barricades and withdraw.”

“But **Chetnik** snipers fired from the roof of the hotel and killed Suada, who was on Vrbanja Bridge. Olga Sučić was killed at the same place, which is why the monument to the two of them is the **first victim of aggression** in Sarajevo, and the bridge is called *The Bridge of Suada and Olga.*”



Source: Wikimedia, Superikonoskop
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How Did the War Start?

Sarajevo – Part II

“Bloody Wedding: A Crime That Started the **Civil War** in BiH 25 Years Ago!”

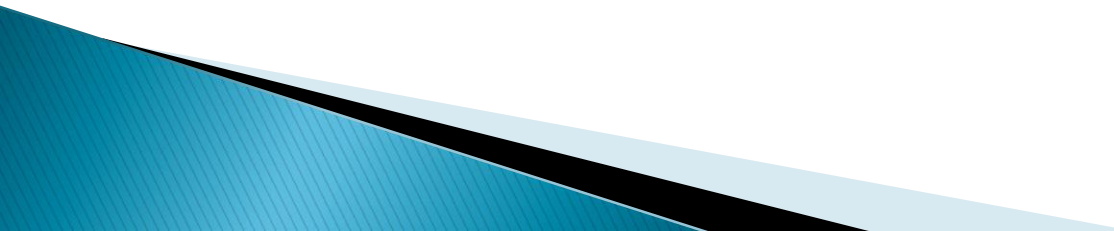
“On this day [**1st March**] in 1992, in front of the Old Orthodox Church in Baščaršija, Ramiz Delalić aka **Ćelo killed a Serb man, Nikola Gardović**, which was the **trigger for the war** in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

“SARAJEVO - Every mention of **March 1st** in Bosnia and Herzegovina reminds the Serbs of the day when the **Serbian wedding guest** Nikola Gardović was killed in 1992 in front of the Old Orthodox Church in Baščaršija in Sarajevo, indicating a **civil war**, i.e. the beginning of a tragic war conflict .”



Source: [RTVBN](#), 27th February 2014

Can We Talk About Ethnic Narratives?

- ▶ There are so many calendars as there are societies
 - ▶ Some events become a constitutive of the memory, while others are forgotten
 - ▶ Sarajevo Serbs - Divergent and different memories
 - The same ethnic group
 - The same or similar cultural and social milieu
 - Competitive memories within the same group
 - ▶ Focus on Nenad Janković (Musician) and Nenad Veličković (Writer)
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Nenad Janković Nele and Nenad Veličković

“Sometimes the archduke falls
And sometimes best man ([wedding, 1st March](#))
It is not known whose head comes first
But that's how the war begins here”

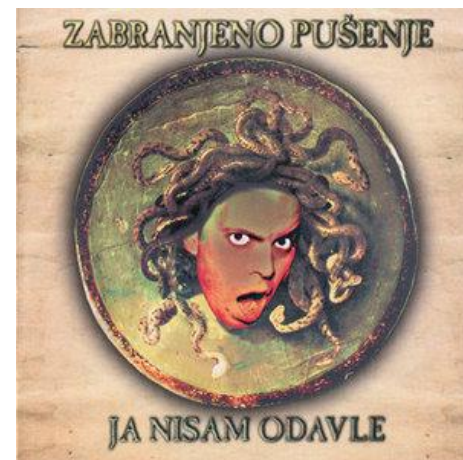
“I live in Belgrade, but I'm not from here. I'm from Sarajevo,
but I was expelled from there”

Nenad Nele Janković

“While no one agrees when the war started (I recall a
conversation in Davor's Yugo. Davor said the army is on the
border, Sanja asked which army, and I asked which borders?),
[official date is 5th April.](#)”

„Who has forced him [Nele] out? This is pure nonsense.”

Nenad Veličković



Source: Zabranjeno pušenje, 1997, album cover



Source: Nenad Veličković, privatarchiv

“Fragility of Memory”

- ▶ Individual vs. collective memories
 - Our personal memories are formed in the communicative process with the environment
 - A collective memory is made up of individual memories only if these fit into the current patterns of perception
 - Collective memory is not the sum of the individual memories, but the sum of those who fit into the dominant image of society
 - These memories live and are held through communication, they can disappear or can be replaced

- ▶ When do memories begin to be history?
 - These stories respectively sum of facts and (un)reliable and different memories are not a history, but each story is potential historical source that should be taken into consideration, verified, analyzed and contextualized

The Consensus on the Past

- ▶ Is consensus about the past absolutely necessary?
- ▶ Is consensus about the past potentially dangerous?
- ▶ The role of the state and the law – orwelization
- ▶ Can the history be reconsider?



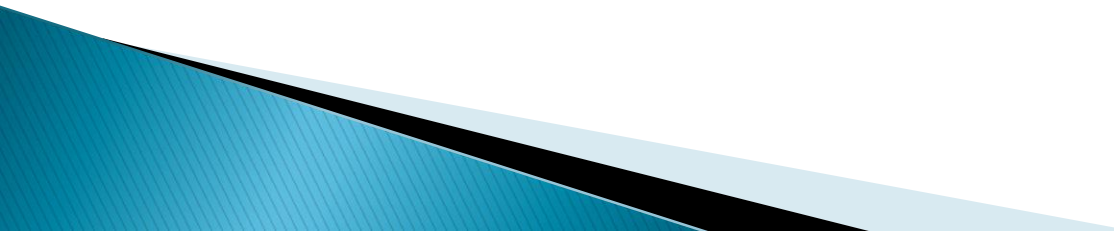
Source: Mirsad Behram, RFE/RL, Partizansko spomen groblje in Mostar, 7th January 2022.

The Consensus on the Past

- ▶ Is consensus about the past absolutely necessary?
 - DisConsensus is important for freedom of thought and for democracy
 - Closed ethnic victim narratives should be broken through with a multi-perspective approach to the past
 - Perspectives from different generations or professional groups could open up this discourse
 - As every individual must find a measure, so must every society find the necessary balance between remembering and forgetting in order to function well - We cannot live in the past, nor without it!

 - ▶ Is consensus about the past potentially dangerous?
 - In totalitarian societies there is a consensus about the past

 - ▶ The role of the state and the law – *orwelization*
 - The 2021 Memory law in Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - Reconciliation or polarization?

 - ▶ Can the history be reconsider?
 - Yes, through new sources and new research questions
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Further Readings

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