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Book Review

Jelena Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia. Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution*, London, New York: Routledge, 2020. xiii + 174pp., ISBN: 978-0-367-27804-5 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-429-29793-9 (eBook), £ 120.00 (Hardcover), £ 33.29 (eBook)

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In 2004, the Serbian parliament passed an amendment to the law governing the pension and disability rights of veterans of the Second World War. The amendment extended the privileges previously reserved for Partisan veterans to the surviving fighters of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, that is, the Chetniks of Dragoljub Mihailović. By means of a parliamentary vote, the Chetniks—who spent much of the war avoiding confrontation with the German forces, and even assisted them in anti-Partisan military operations—were formally recognised as an antifascist resistance movement. Although the controversial amendment had minimal practical consequences—eligibility rules made it practically impossible for any surviving Chetniks to benefit from the new provisions—its passing was widely praised as an important symbolic act of ‘national reconciliation’. It also set in motion other initiatives, acts of parliament, and court cases aimed at the rehabilitation of the Chetniks.

Jelena Đureinović’s meticulously researched book offers the first detailed, book-length examination of this process of rehabilitation. By tracing the history and politics of memory, from socialist Yugoslavia, through the turbulent 1990s, to the period after the fall of Milošević in 2000, the book explores how the Chetniks, castigated under Tito as collaborators, traitors, and war criminals, ended up being remembered and celebrated in Serbia as patriots, heroes, and martyrs.

The main strength of Đureinović’s book lies in the coverage of myriad arenas where the politics of memory plays out. She examines the portrayal of Chetniks in the media and museum exhibitions, as well as in television documentaries and dramas (Chapter 5). She looks at the work of various state-sponsored commissions tasked with locating mass graves of executed Chetniks and other ‘victims of communism’ (Chapter 6). She combines the analysis of documents and media reports with ethnography and interviews with activists who organise commemorations and build memorials (Chapter 7). Finally, she looks at the legal dimension of historical revisionism and the role of law and the courts in the transformation of the public understanding of collaboration, resistance, and retribution (Chapters 8 and 9).

In her book, Đureinović makes two important, broader points, essential for understanding the politics of memory of the Second World War in Serbia. First, she shows that the rehabilitation of the Chetnik movement has always been embedded in the broader nationalist, anticommunist political project aimed at delegitimising and criminalising Yugoslavia and its antifascist and socialist past. This, after all, is why the dominant narrative about Chetniks in Serbia today is not about their war-time actions, which are presented in simplistic, sanitised and often contradictory ways, but about their ‘martyrdom’ at the hands of the vengeful and murderous communists.

Second, Đureinović demonstrates that, unlike in some other parts of post-communist Eastern Europe, historical revisionism in Serbia was never part of some well-organised, state-sanctioned initiative or project. It was, rather, the outcome of continuing efforts by a motley crew of dedicated amateur and professional historians, politicians, activists, Orthodox clergy, and so on. What is fascinating about the revisionists’ struggle for recognition over the years is that it has been a success despite their ineptitude and amateurism. A notable example, discussed in the book, is the ‘discovery’, in 2011, of the remains of Dragoljub Mihailović, which was announced before any forensic analysis of the bones had been conducted. The bones later turned out to be of animal provenance. Importantly, this unsystematic, sloppy, bottom-up approach to memorialising the past is not unique to the remembrance of the Chetniks; it applies to other aspects of the history of the Second World War in Serbia. Put simply, which episode or version of the war will be remembered, where and how, depends largely on local political circumstances, the lobbying efforts of various stakeholder and interest groups, on the proclivities of individual ministers or state secretaries and their personal interest and stake in a historical event, and, most importantly, on whether the party in power believes that it can derive an immediate (and usually temporary) political benefit from promoting, or side-lining, a specific version of the past.

Alongside its numerous strengths, the book has two weaknesses. First, it would have benefitted from a whole chapter (rather than a couple of pages in the introduction) on the history of the Chetnik movement. While the author explicitly states that she is less interested in the past than in how it is remembered, to grasp the controversies and complexities surrounding the rehabilitation of the Chetniks, readers (especially those not versed in the history of the Second World War in Yugoslavia) need to be provided with information about the Chetnik movement, its politics, military actions, and shifting allegiances during the Second World War. Scholars of the politics of memory looking to cut through mythologies and exaggerations should always explain what it is that is being (mis)remembered, and why it matters.

For instance, historical background would have helped illuminate the extent to which the rehabilitation of the Chetniks relies on forgetting. The book hardly discusses the important distinction between the actions of Mihailović's Chetniks in Serbia in the summer of 1941, which are the basis of the myth of the Chetniks as antifascists and the 'first guerrillas in occupied Europe', and the Chetnik campaigns in eastern Bosnia in 1942 and 1943, which resulted in numerous mass atrocities against the Muslim civilian population. Revisionist narratives rely on the systematic forgetting of the latter. They seek to limit the history of the Chetnik movement to two episodes: the launch of the 'heroic' Ravna Gora uprising in May 1941, and the 'martyrdom' of the Chetniks at the hands of the Communists after October 1944. Although Đureinović provides a convincing, critical analysis of that which apologists for the Chetniks choose to remember, she has less to say about what they wilfully omit, and how they do it.

The second shortcoming is that, in offering a forensic examination of the activities of various 'entrepreneurs of memory', the book mainly focuses on questions about who wants to remember what and why. There is much less on *how* that remembering is done. Đureinović discusses the arguments of revisionist historians and pro-Chetnik activists, but does not delve sufficiently into their origins, or situated use. There is little analysis of the language and rhetoric of revisionist discourse, or how different motifs and arguments are mobilised flexibly, strategically, and selectively to negotiate the past, or sustain particular ideological agendas.

Despite the shortcomings, this is an immensely valuable book which, through the examination of a wide range of sources, sheds important light on the way in which Serbia today manages its past. It will be relevant and useful to anyone interested in the politics of memory not just in Serbia, but throughout Southeastern Europe and beyond.