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## Victories vs. Defeats: The Unreliability of Memory

History is not written by victors. History is written by the present. If it were written by victors their interpretation would remain “nailed down” and unchangeable for all future generations. Their “victory” would never be allowed or able to turn into a “defeat”. Numerous historical examples demonstrate the inaccuracy of this hypothesis. It is today’s value systems that determine historical events, and victories and defeats can switch places many times: heroes can become victims, and victims can become victors. These constructions are where historiography, history teaching and other memory agents intertwine. This lecture will show some 20th century examples which reveal the dynamics in the altering meanings of certain “victories” and “defeats” and their transnational consequences.

First of all it is interesting notice that the subject of victories, defeats, wars and battles seemed outdated in the 1960s and 70s, the period of absolute supremacy of the *Nouvelle histoire*, when historical events themselves fell out of favor, having been replaced by historical processes. War themes seemed too traditional, superficial, short-lived, without the depth to tell us something about the human past. However, a new methodological current of the 1980s that brought new historiographical subjects – from the social history of wars and identity to cultural memory and the national construction, brought back the research of battles, wars, victories and defeats in a big way. Naturally, through a completely new theoretical lense. This new view brought back into focus the event itself as a historian’s theme, because the event, as Le Roy Ladurie says, helps to decipher deep structures of society, by which events, and therefore wars and battles as well, become part of the *longue durée*.

The question of relations between victory and defeat turned out to be transnational, trans-disciplinary and trans-periodical. *Nouvelle histoire*’s war themes turned into altering the meaning of these phenomena, their historicity, dynamical reading of interpretations, which showed it was only with the creation of nations and nation-states

that these phenomena gained a collective meaning, whether it was collective pride or collective trauma, as the key constituents for the construction of national identity.

In this fabrication of national identity, victories naturally serve as an important garnish, they are necessary for building self-confidence, pride, strengthening the belief that all future wars will be successful. Heroes are necessary for self-identification, those are people in whose honor monuments were erected, who had songs written about them, to whom the society's values were assigned. But it is true that "heroes" play a central role in history, while "victims" are the central figures for memory. Recent studies of victories and defeats, of heroes and victims, show how the 20th century changed those relations, relativized them, assigned them completely opposite meanings. More often than not, it turned out that for the nation's homogenization a defeat was more important than a victory, that the victims held more prestige than heroes for national remembrance. It is the defeats that produce empathy for the weak and for the collective; they are more effective and homogenize the nation easier by joining around common suffering. The weaker one is morally superior, he cannot be controversial, to him everything is forgiven in advance. The role of the victim in history secures a permanent moral and political privilege that can be redeemed in the present either in the context of international relations or as a means of social cohesion within state borders. As Amos Oz wrote, we are witnessing a world championship of victims, with everyone trying to get recognition as a group that suffered the most in history. This is why, paradoxically, former perpetrators are trying to present themselves as victims, among other things because it is a position that "wipes clean" the past and the future in a moral sense, giving absolution for future actions in the name of former suffering. Hence the great danger of, as Pierre Nora says, a "generalized victimization of the past", which creates room for serious memory manipulation and its complete domination over history. Some historians call this new phenomenon the tyranny of victims.

This shift in the perception of victories and defeats was also influenced by the changes that took place in the historical reality. In fact, the wars of the 20th century themselves went through a complete transformation. Like many other historical events, all wars from antiquity until the 20th century, to paraphrase Tolstoy, were alike. It is with the rise of global, total and industrial wars, when the difference was erased between the front line and the support trenches, between military and civilian casualties, that the attitude towards war began to change. This is when wars, beginning with the First World War, lost their shining armor, and heroes who were glorified, especially in the late 19th century at the time of Romanticism, became the subject of controversy. In particular, mass crimes against civilians and genocides as phenomena of the new, mass-scale era, contributed to the shifting meaning of heroism. This 20<sup>th</sup> century change was so dramatic and comprehensive, that victims and heroes, especially after the Holocaust, completely swapped places. Civilians and

victims of mass crimes were given the role of the greatest, if not the only, heroes of modern wars. At the same time, an opposite process took place – those who were previously considered heroes, like the heroes of Verdun, from the second half of the 20th century were taken to be victims; victims of a senseless war and irresponsible elites that led to it.

The main question to be discussed in this lecture is determining the moment when the result of a battle, war or diplomatic decision attains the meaning of victory or defeat, and how these meanings changed during the 20th century. How did changes in the value system influence the shifting assessment of defeats and victories, and how the type of warfare itself, which changed dramatically over the 20th century, influenced the fact that in the historical reality it is less and less possible to evaluate how a war was concluded, or even who won: take, for example, the Korean war or the war between Iraq and Iran?

For the sake of convenience, the lecture will be divided into two parts – Victorious defeats and Lost victories, to capture the dynamics and interposition of new meanings.

### **Victorious defeats**

A defeat is more complicated than a victory. It is polyphonic. It can be accepted or rejected, proscribed or celebrated. It can produce different historical consequences – revanchism, revisionism, a new, positive start, it can set off a series of actions that abolish its results, but it can also be a point of re-examination and self-criticism, a mobilizing factor. The more complex it is – the more it offers different opportunities for interpretation and different approaches in the process of confronting it. The analyses of different types of defeat show that a war, even in cases when its result was completely unambiguous, never ends with its completion, but that over the long run it has an impact on constructing a community's identity, it gradually transforms the political, economic and cultural structures. The time in which defeat shapes a society may be divided into the short and the long duration, to capture all the differences that time brings, because what historians today measures are, as Alaida Asman says, long shadows of the past, or the shadow that the past casts over the present.

Let us then begin from the short duration, from the historical reality. This analysis should start with an unequivocal and total defeat, like the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945. The victorious Allies, because of past experience, prolonged the destruction in the final months of the war, for instance in Hiroshima, trying to end the war in an unambiguous way. At the same time, as the Second World War was coming to a close, a new world conflict was beginning, the Cold War, and it very quickly transformed the relations of the great powers. It also transformed the total defeat of the Axis, showing that the factual dimension of events is secondary for both history

and analysis. The urgent financial and every other kind of aid the recently defeated enemies received led to their rapid alignment with the most important allies, who stood against the new enemy – the Soviet Union. In just a few years, first Japan and soon after West Germany, both regained the pre-war economic strength and quickly became the leading powers of the world. East Germany, now a member of the eastern bloc, also aligned with the victorious USSR. Thus, a new Cold War historical reality altered the direct consequences of defeat and, in reality, drawn the losers over to the side of the victors. The 20<sup>th</sup> century and the speed that it brought in all its dimensions, led to the fastest transformation of defeat into victory.

Let us now see what happened with the long duration, the field of memory. In historiographical and commemorative terms, the defeat of 1945 has undergone one of the most interesting transformations in history. East Germany immediately began celebrating the defeat as a victory and a liberation from, as they portrayed it, an imposed Hitlerism. The process of confronting the past in West Germany turned into a most complex example. Processes which for decades involved historians, intellectuals, philosophers, writers, filmmakers... gradually turned the defeat, shame and responsibility for the greatest of crimes, the Holocaust, into a ground zero of a new society, which grew out of the defeat. This is how defeat in the process of memory also become an intellectual and political opportunity for reinterpreting the entire past and building a whole new present on the principle of discontinuity. Unlike Germany's defeat in 1918, which was rejected and which produced a cry for revenge, this one from 1945, with its recognition, created a new opportunity, becoming a starting point.

Same with defeats in conflicts that were significant for domestic policy, which by virtue of subsequent interpretation and glorification became important motivational factors that stimulated self-confidence and encouraged revolutionary movements, as was the case with the Long march in China in 1934 and the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Both defeats have played a vital role in self-identification, creating heroes from victims and providing motivation that allowed revenge, whether it was the Chinese revolution victory in 1949 or the overthrow of communism in Hungary in 1989.

What turned out to be the most dangerous use of defeat was its rejection, resistance to it, attempts to prevent the defeat from becoming final, to undo the trauma. There are numerous examples of attempts to produce a new reality and a new conflict to correct the previous defeat and turn it into victory. The best known example is the already mentioned German defeat of 1918, whose rejection sparked Hitlerism, launching the second world conflict, and driving Hitler to go to the end out of the obsession that the defeat must not be repeated. The year 1918 also became an important justification for the Holocaust, because the Jews were blamed for the debacle. Many examples prove that rejection of defeat and attempts to turn it into victory introduced a new spiral of defeats, as in the case of France's war in Algeria, which France went into, among other things, to boost its confidence after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu; or

the USSR, which after the Berlin crisis and the U2 incident, that had seriously shaken Moscow's prestige, got into the extremely risky Cuban missile crisis.

The most dangerous perception of defeat is one based on self-victimization. As we said earlier, self-victimization is a common constituent of national sense, it homogenizes stronger than any other sentiment; empathy with one's own victims becomes the dominant emotion, but also the trigger for revenge. The victim nation cannot be a perpetrator-nation, it is absolved of such a possibility in advance, and everything is forgiven. The book *Vencus*, edited by Catherine Horea, who is here with us today and who will present the book at the round table, cites numerous examples. But certainly the case of the lost the Battle of Kosovo, which has inspired all generations of Serbian politicians from the time of the battle in 1389, is one of the more interesting examples which will be discussed at the round table, so I'm will use this opportunity to invite you to participate. As Ivan Colovic, who will also take part in the round table discussion, shows in his book *Death in Kosovo Field*, the use-value of the Kosovo defeat was an extremely wide-ranging, it could help completely different regimes and goals or be their cornerstone. From a monarchical to a socialist regime, from Serbia to Yugoslavia and back, from the foundation of Yugoslav unity to Serbian nationalism, glorification of the Kosovo defeat, with its strength of a controversial myth, which can at the same time contain completely opposing values, was always at the political table.

What is particularly interesting today is the new re-evaluation of the defeat of the American South in the Civil War. We can take it as an example that speaks not only about political changes which subsequently re-evaluate defeats and victories, but also about changes in the value system. Namely, it is well known that after the Civil War numerous monuments were built to commemorate the heroes of the South, as acts of reconciliation and showing respect for the defeated. In later literature, this example was cited as a successful case of confronting the past and reconciliation after a difficult civil war, which served as inspiration in some other cases, among others the Spanish Valley of the Fallen. However, in today's United States, after more than 50 years of African-American struggles for civil rights and after the first African-American president, these monuments are now being torn down, although with much debate and resistance, because they have become symbols of slavery, humiliation, racial segregation and one of the darkest chapters in American history, which shows that the debate with the past is unending and that the present is what shapes and alters the meaning of past events. The militarily defeated South is only now, 150 years after the conflict, experiencing a complete moral, political and value-system defeat as well, showing that the military debacle was only the tip of the iceberg.

## Lost victories

In the historical understanding and interpretation, victories are not much “happier” than defeats. They too are misleading, and whether the winner really won depends largely on the consequences, on the attitude towards that victory and on the subsequent interpretation of that event. All these levels will affect the creation of new historical realities, will be included in the corpus of identity factors, creating room for different interpretations and changing meanings.

In this case as well, we will start from unambiguous victories and from the analysis of the “short duration” of their political consequences in the historical reality. One of the best examples is the Triple Entente victory of 1918. Not only was there no doubt about how the war ended in military terms and which states won, but their behavior at the Paris Peace Conference, and the decisions of this conference, also clearly emphasized who were the victors and who were the losers.

However, even at the time of the victory, many indicators were suggesting that its luster was not so bright, that there were certain spots that very quickly put into question that “victory”, only to soon turn it into, one could argue, a global defeat. But let’s begin at the beginning.

The brunt of the war, and therefore most of the credit for the victory, fell on France and Great Britain. However, it soon became clear that the war changed these two previously dominant states to such a degree that many historians have shown that in their victory they were defeated, in other words they lost their prestigious position and never recovered from their losses, and so 1918 is seen as “the end of the European era”. Primarily there were, of course, demographical losses which, at least in the French case, as shown by demographers, weakened the French society to the degree that we could say they were part of the cause of France’s painful defeat in 1940, collaboration, subsequent defeats in two major colonial wars and permanent descent from the position which France occupied before 1914.

In economic terms, the First World War was the first industrial war, and after the initial slump it led to a huge industrial boom not only in the United States, but also in France and the UK, even though they were directly affected by war. However, regardless of the fact that France, because of it needed to develop the war industry, even began importing labor and that it was vital for the emancipation of women who for the first time entered the factories, this development could not be compared with those on the other side of the Atlantic. It was one of the decisive factors that led the United States, thanks to the First World War, to primacy, displacing the “center of the world” for the first time outside Europe. That situation found the winning power completely unprepared for this role, so right after the war the country revived its isolationist and protectionist policies, refusing to accept the responsibilities that victory carries and the “duty” of the No.1 world power. Many historians argue that this



was a lost and unused victory for the United States, that led to a general instability and weakness of the inter-war world which remained without strong centers, and therefore without the determination needed to confront regimes which from the early thirties led the world into new global conflict. Exhausted, weary, and not eager for a new war, the triumphant European powers from the previous war were ready for all kinds of compromises to avoid a new conflict, which explains their defeats from the Anschluss, to Munich to Marshal Petain.

Such a momentous global change was also possible thanks to the fact that Russia, a great power that along with France and Britain secured the hegemonic role of Europe, had fallen out of the world competition after the revolution, which was also one of the most important results of the First World War that pushed it out of the winning alliance. Although an ally of those who would come out of the war as winners, Russia already at the time saw the war as a defeat it cannot endure, which was an important trigger for the outbreak of the revolution.

The First World War, aside from all this, led to severe convulsions at the money market, where the wartime money-printing led to inflations that undermined the previous gold standard system and thus provoked multiple collapses of financial markets, ending with the Black Tuesday of 1929. Another important factor was the war production that led to hyper-production and contributed to the collapse which hit precisely those victor states from 1918, because the defeated states were in a deep crisis from the end of the war. So in economic terms the war had defeated victory, showing that a country's economy and its citizen's living standards in modern times became more important measure of success than the battles won.

A special chapter which testifies to the ambiguity of victories belongs to the victorious powers who were dissatisfied with victory. This was primarily Italy, which quickly became a revisionist state, understanding the "victory" as its greatest "defeat". It was also defeated militarily, a fact that shaped its overall identity, but its defeat at the negotiating table of the Peace Conference was understood as one more blow from its allies, a "shot in the back" from "their own side". This is how a defeated victory quickly changed the political mood in Italy, bringing Mussolini to power only three years after the peace treaty was signed. It led Italy in an adventure when it tried to undo a victory that was understood only as a defeat, and a rejected one at that – not new a point of departure, but an attempt to correct the old.

Victory in the Far East was no different to the triumphant powers. Japan was dissatisfied that it did not get more in China, and China, also a winner, was disappointed by the allies because Japan got a part of its territory at all. Thus, both these major powers distanced themselves from their allies. Japan, not satisfied with "victory", pursued the policy of imperialism, joined the "defeated" and went into direct conflict with former allies, while China went into further self-isolation, self-sufficiency and a strong anti-Western sentiment, which was one of the factors that later contributed to the victory of the communist revolution.

Let us mention Serbia as well. In the First World War Serbia was also among the winning powers, one could call it a darling of the great powers, and it claimed the first victory over the Central Powers in August 1914. Thanks to its exceptional military effort, Serbia achieved its maximum war aim – the creation of Yugoslavia, as the strongest state of South East Europe. This victory, but also all the sacrifices made, from the massive loss of lives (a quarter of the population) to the apocalyptic events such as the retreat through Albania, became the founding myths of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, quickly becoming one of the causes of inequality in a multinational state. After the Second World War, with the new Yugoslavia created by Tito's partisans, the previous victory was sidelined, condemned as bourgeois and monarchic, anti-national and hegemonic, so that even singing popular songs from that era was prohibited. This suppression eventually produced "a memorial resistance movement" which began to form with the publication of Dobrica Cosic's *Time of Death* in 1972. It was the decade when the Serbian victory in the First World War became a crystallization point of Serbian nationalism, grounded simultaneously in resistance to communism, but also rejection of Yugoslavia itself. This is how a new remembrance and rediscovery of the 1918 victory became the foundations of Serbian nationalism in the 1980s, and Cosic's interpretation that "Serbia won in wars was lost in peace" become a basic interpretation of the senselessness of victory and the sacrifices made for the wrong goal – for Yugoslavia. This victory became a defeat which led to "the lost century" and it became an important mobilizing factor for a new war, the one from the 1990s, which apart from other injustices was supposed to correct the "wrong victory" from 1918.

Something similar happened to the winners of the Second World War, Tito's partisans, who after the fall of communism found themselves stripped from their victory. This occurred differently in different former Yugoslav republics, but in Serbia, interestingly after the fall of Milošević in 2000, there was a dramatic reevaluation of the war's results at all levels – from textbooks, street names, monuments that were destroyed or the names of schools that were changed, to the passing of the law that gave equal veterans' rights to former Chetniks and partisans alike. Right now, a court process is taking place to rehabilitate the President of the collaborationist government, Milan Nedic. It turned out that all the volumes of historiographical works written about the liberation war, hundreds of pages in the history books which generations learned from, all the tests and field trips to places of great battles were not enough to strengthen the victorious, partisan interpretation of the war, and the unambiguous winners lost the war in the next generation.

Finally, the question that remains is how to defend history from accusations that it is not a science, that it is merely a servant to every regime, that it is all pure fiction and there's nothing solid there? And what do we need it for anyway? Maybe some more examples from *Vancus* would provide further arguments to these crit-



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ics, because they show that even after twenty five hundred years after the event, its meaning is still changing, as we can see from the Battle of Alesia or the defeat of Thermopylae which Gering, for example, celebrated as a victory and that after the defeat at Stalingrad served as an example that the war still can be won, like the Greco-Persian war? Paradoxically, it seems to me that all these examples show how history is necessary and that, if it was not necessary, it would not have gone through this kind of transformation. If it were dead it would be taught without emotion, for the sake of broader education and it wouldn't be so ever-present and changeable on a daily basis. All these examples prove that it is a key component of identity construction. A change in history teaching, where apart from history itself memory would also be taught, where students would learn about this decisive relationship between the present and the past – all that would perhaps serve as a foundation of a new, analytical and critical education, which would help citizens find their way in the information era, detect manipulations of the past and, armed with this tool, have a better understanding of the times in which they live.