SOME WORDS ABOUT POLITICS IN THE EUROPEAN «POWDER KEG»

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The reviewed book by Margit Wunsch explores how the German press described the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The author focuses on media language, topics, clichés, cartoons, etc. She makes use of a wide range of mass media information – both far-right (Junge Freiheit) and far-left (Konkret), national broadsheets (Die Welt, Der Spiegel) and a tabloid (BILD), as well as a Jewish weekly by the Central Council of Jews in Germany (Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung) (p. 16).

The author carefully formulates an academic problem. She points out that on April 1, 1999 the German tabloid BILD published the headline «They are herding them to the concentration camp» on the front page. Other newspapers and magazines from March 29 to April 6, 1999 published that Serbs set up concentration camps for Kosovo – Albanians. A series of such publications accompanied the statement by the German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping, dated March 28, 1999 who had declared that the «genocide» was coming on in Kosovo. As the journalist Alexandre Levy from «Reporters sans frontières» once mentioned, the term «genocide» was permanently used at that time by German and British officials to put an equal sign between Milošević and Hitler. In this way the media manipulated the public opinion giving grounds for the changes in German foreign policy – to start intervention to the Balkans, the first one after World War II. After the description of BILD’s mistake, Dr. Wunsch puts several questions regarding the media coverage: was BILD the only exam-
ple of «poor reporting» and «bad journalism», or were there many examples of them, as well as why did the newspapers create allusions about the events of World War II? (p. 14).

Margit Wunsch explains in what way the media coverage concerns the diplomatic history. The press of that time presented a range of various opinions circulated in the political circles in Berlin on German involvement in European affairs after the reunification in 1990. These political debates on foreign relations had their roots in public discourse on the Holocaust and collective memory of World War II (p. 17–18). Researchers who studied German’s collective memory found three period of its development. The first one is the «the Adenauer era» (the late 1940s – early 1960s), during which Germans were aware of their responsibility for the Holocaust, but kept silence upon their Nazi past. During the second stage of the public debates on collective memory (the late 1960s – the 1980s) «the 1968-generation» of Germans worked out the concept of «Niewieder Krieg» («Never again war»). This slogan became the principle for the German foreign policy for next decades. The authors of that time – publicists and historians – belonged to the so-called «Betroffenheitsdiskurs» («discourse of dismay») – the public opinion accepted «a deep, all-encompassing shame» for the past (p. 19). In the early 1990s one can observe changes in Germany’s collective memory: people do not want to be as guilty as they had been earlier. As he war in Yugoslavia spread in the early 1990s, Germany was forced to choose either just to observe the events or to act. In 1999 Berlin decided to act and punish the aggressors, that is to say Serbs (as they covered in the mass media). Moreover, Germany’s involvement in intervention to Kosovo coincided with the time when public debates on that all-national dismay for the Nazi crimes and the Holocaust came to their end (p. 18–20).

The book consists of four important parts. In the first one – an introductory part – the author focuses on political debates related to German foreign policy in the 1990s and the politics of memory in the country after World War II. M. Wunsch explains the terms «genocide» and «ethnic cleansing», both terms are widely associated by the general European public with Serbian policy during the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Chapter 1 «Historical Background: Important Milestones of Balkan History» presents the so-called «milestones» of the Serbian history: «the region’s medieval history, specifically the 1389 Battle of Kosovo and the advent of three major religions, as well as World War Two” (p. 30). Chapter 2 «The
Eruption of War in the 1990s» briefly outlines the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The second part (chapters 3–5) illustrates reports of the German press at the beginning of the war (1991–1992), Srebrenica massacre and the Dayton Accords. In the third part the author of the reviewed book explores the media coverage of the war in Kosovo (1998–1999) – its beginning (chapter 6), the «Račak massacre» (chapter 7) and the NATO intervention to Yugoslavia (chapter 8).

There is no need to re-tell the book from beginning to end – a person interested in good academic reading can read the book by himself / herself. Let us concentrate on the author’s conception.

Margit Wunsch challenged the thesis by Phillip Knightley, the British journalist, who affirmed that NATO-states had a monopoly on the media coverage of the wars in the Balkans (p. 15). The author states that in spite of a widely spread view that the Alliance manipulated information during the war in Kosovo, this suggestion was neither proved, nor rejected (p. 16).

The author of the book delves into the German press without any affection either to Serbs or to the opposite sides, and preserves her own academic renommée. She proves that interpretations of the wars in the Balkans made by the German press were not just one-sided. She found several events which received extensive coverage in the media – the Srebrenica massacre, as well as the Račak incident. Those cases were reported by the German press via direct allusions to World War II and the Holocaust in particular. Dr. Wunsch carefully studies texts, their topics, lexicon, messages, as well as cartoons, provided facts, and numerical data.

The author points out that the press paid attention not to «long-term systematic problems in the Balkans», but to «imminent violence» (p. 268). Only four main topics can be found in an array of media materials. Firstly, it is President S. Milošević who was regarded as the only person responsible for violence (p. 272–273). For instance, at the outbreak of the war in Kosovo Milošević became one of the main culprits. Die Welt wrote on March 3, 1998 that the Serbian leader was not «a guarantee for stability, but rather for violence in the Balkans» (p. 171). Cartoons found him guilty all the more so (see e. g., p. 173–174).

Secondly, the German press wrote only about the Yugoslavian army and Bosnian Serb army. Those combatants, as the media stated, were also guilty of violence and even «genocide» (p. 273). Dr. Wunsch states that one
article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in April 1992 «portrayed the army as the crux of violence, quoting EC-diplomat Lord Carrington who had stated, “…that the “Peoples Army” [was] the true evil in all this confusion”» (p. 61–62).

Thirdly, it is the topic of World War II, which appeared in German newspapers in the 1990s – the lexicon of that time and references to the collective memory of the Holocaust. Dr. Wunsch finds out that while World War II influenced the German press language, references to the Holocaust decreased, especially by the late 1990s. That meant the public debates on the Halacust and all-German guilt for the Nazi crimes (p. 273–274) were over. Also, it is worth noting that blaming violence on Serbs the German press extensively used Nazi terms – «Lebensraum», «Blitzkrieg», etc., mentioning that Serbs wanted Lebensraum (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 18, 1992), and they used Blitzkrieg-tactics (*die tageszeitung*, January 9, 1992) (p. 76–77).

The fourth theme in the book is evaluation of Germany’s role in the Balkan politics. Naturally, this resulted from the changes in the country’s policy in Southeastern Europe (p. 274). The German media of the early 1990s stressed Germany’s realistic role in the Balkans, while the press of the very late 1990s appealed for immediate actions there.

As the author puts it, Russia disappeared from the German newspaper-sheets by the mid-1990s. The German media then stopped its «anti-Russian word-choices» (p. 275). According to the author, it can be explained by «the progression of international relations» and the fact that «Russia had become a relatively trusted partner» (p. 275).

In addition to those data and conclusions, the author shares her own photos from Belgrade which left the traces of the war (p. 277, 278). Margit Wunsch has written a proper academic book on information wars. But there are some moments I disagree with in the author’s conception. As far as I am concerned, I dislike an idea of milestones in history, not only regarding Serbian history. This concept (of milestones) simplifies the causes and effects of a historical process. It is true that several «cultural zones» were formed in the Balkans during the Middle Ages, and particularly during the Ottoman period (p. 30, 32). But an ordinary man will never understand the status of Serb Krajina without being explained what the Military Frontier in the Austrian Empire was. Moreover, following contemporary Western conceptions the reviewed book pays attention to the Battle at Kosovo Polje of 1389 as an element of a Serbian national myth. However,
during the appearance of a national idea, as it was in every part of Yugos-
lavia in the late 1980s – early 1990s, a range of myths shaped national his-
tory. I have to admit that the Bosniaks have their own national narratives,
as well as the Croatians and the Kosovo-Albanians. Their narratives are
probably much more mythologised then the Serbian one. The question is
why Western historians concentrate only on the Serbian narrative?

Referring to Russia of the 1990s, I doubt that international relations
had any «progression» (see the above statement). At that time Russia had
just ceded Serbia to the Western countries, at least until «Primakov’s loop»
on 24 March 1999.

I could agree with the idea that the Balkan countries are the «back-
yards» of Europe. Even integration within the European Union does not
convert these countries from the European «powder keg» into «the old
good Europe».

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