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The role and the production of formal history in nation building processes: the case of Macedonia

The processes of defining and re-defining nations in the Balkans, especially in the post-Yugoslav countries in the 1990s, have always centered around the questions of the different identities: national/ethnic, religious, political, cultural, etc. The public and academic discourse have been bursting with forceful debates over origins of Balkan nations, their “primordial” right over certain territory, age and continuity of “statehood” claims that the modern identities are ancient, unchangeable and frozen categories, or exclusive rights of ownership.

The appearance of the Macedonian state on the map of the Balkan countries in 1944/1945 as a member of the Yugoslav Federation has triggered a process of nation-building rooted in emancipation, political sovereignty and cultural authenticity, national right for participation in the history, national pride, national heroes, victims, etc. This process has been carried out by Macedonian political and cultural elites, as in the other Balkan states,

The constitution of the first national institutions of educational, scientific and cultural character in the Republic of Macedonia took place after WWII. The University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” was founded in 1946, and two years later, with a decree, the Macedonian Government founded the Institute of National History (INH). Its foundation could be also considered a beginning of official academic historiography in Macedonia. Only few years later, in 1949, the government established the Museum of Macedonia as a key organization in preservation and promotion of Macedonian “culture.” The present Museum is an amalgamation of 3 museums of archeology, history and ethnology.

In the focus of my interest will be a study of the so-called formal history, its role, production, and presentation, as well as the link between the Institute of National History and the Museum of Macedonia. Having in mind that the independence of Macedonia 1991 was followed by changes in political, social, economical context etc., it will be also necessary to explore the attitude of the state towards the formal

history in order to understand the ambiguities of nation-state building processes before and after the independence 1991. Hence, one of the main questions of this research is how different is the role of formal history in Republic of Macedonia in the last 16 years when compared to the socialist period – Socialist Republic of Macedonia?

Having in mind the premise that the nations and nationalisms are product of the modern times, I build on the constructivist theories, (here I have in mind Benedict Anderson, “imagined communities”) that nations could be constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed. In this vein, my research project tries to understand the role and function of the formal history during the process of consolidation of Macedonian national identity. In several research phases, divided along chronological and problem-oriented lines, I’m going to analyze the following issues: the structural settings of the national institutions (Museum of Macedonia and the Institute of National History) from their establishing up to nowadays; historiography production and research methodology; catalogue of exhibitions and publications of the Museum of Macedonia, etc. In this sense I will raise several principal questions:

- How the above mentioned institutions were established, which were/are their goals, assignments and function in the society?
- Where and who had been deciding about their work and who had been conducted/managing them?
- What is the relation between the politics, history and historiography in the Macedonian case?
- What are the major differences in the historiography production (if there are) before and after 1991?
- What are the major differences in the attitude of the state towards the formal history before and after 1991.
- Could we “unpack the package” of contexts which in fact put the above mentioned institutions in position of important agencies in production of national narratives and certain forms of identities?
- Could the boundary’ spaces be separated between the “need” for national history, national myths, symbols etc. on one side, and the phenomenon of growing nationalism, especially in the last 15 years, on the other?

- Could we delineate between history as a political action and history as a strictly academic enterprise?
- Could we trace changes in the methodological paradigms in the historiography production before and after 1991?

This is a novel approach given that no one yet has systematically studied either the Institutions in which formal history is being produced, or their role and influence in the nation-state building process.

Having in mind the significance of official history, the proposed project carries a major responsibility. Namely, the analysis and comparison of the two institutions, the Institute and the Museum, will necessarily address sensitive issues such as the Macedonian national identity. This, in effect, carries unavoidable risk for me to be misunderstood, since I am working as a researcher in the INH. The double position of (someone who is “inside”) and researcher who is obliged to respect the academic standards (research principles, ethics and methodologies), also raises the question concerning loyalty and commitment. I am aware that these self-reflexive questions are inevitable and will remain closely embedded in my research.

In comparative perspective I’m going to analyze the following research topics:

- ✚ The socio-historical context in which the Institutions were formed;
- ✚ The goals and tasks defined in accordance with the laws and the internal documents;
- ✚ Structure, human resources and funds before and after 1991;
- ✚ Analysis of the historiography production and the research methodology through several adequate examples: (the mechanisms of constructing the Other);
- ✚ Symposia and conferences organized by INH: overview of the key topics;
- ✚ Overview of the research projects of INH (frequency of specific topics) and curricula analysis (post-graduate studies) established after 1991;
- ✚ The Museum building and the exterior and interior Museum space;

✚ Overview of the permanent exhibitions and the frequency of the topics of temporary exhibitions, especially after 1991;

✚ Field work research:

- interviews and conversations with retired and present historians, museum workers and former directors;

- interviews with defined target groups (university professors, academicians/scholars, politicians, journalists and etc.) and their perceptions related to the meaning of formal history.