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## Politics of Memory, Historical Revisionism, and Negationism in Postsocialist Serbia

**Abstract** This paper explores the phenomenon of revisionism in historiography, while focusing in particular on illegitimate revisionism and negationism. It is indisputably true that historiography must be subject to constant revisions. Like all scientific theories, it needs to be characterized by a sort of “conservative” openness towards new ideas; however, revisions and negations are often put forward without scientific grounding. They reject the well-established historiographical methods, while opening themselves to various kinds of ideologies, biases and manipulations. The paper further offers a synthesized overview of the revisionist practice in dominant parts of the society and historiography in post-communist Serbia. The change in the ideological paradigm that occurred in the 1980s was accompanied by a politically motivated reinterpretation of the past, which primarily focused on World War II in Yugoslavia. In Serbia in the 1990s, Tito’s Partisans were no longer celebrated as national heroes and fighters against fascism; they were replaced by the royalist and nationalist Chetniks led by Draža Mihailović, whose collaboration with the occupying forces was purposefully glossed over. The nationalist interpretation of history and the new revisionist politics in Serbia were supported by the state and the activities of its three branches: legislative, executive and judicial. In spite of the political changes that took place in Serbia in 2000, the dominant nationalist matrix in historical interpretations and revisionist politics remained unchanged.

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**Keywords:** Politics of memory, illegitimate revisionism, negationism, historiography, post-communist Serbia, legitimation of Chetniks, Second World War.

One of the highly important, yet never fully resolved questions in the philosophy of science is the issue of differentiating between science and pseudoscience, that is, the question of whether there is a clear demarcation line between them and what it actually represents. There is no consensus on this matter (e.g. Popper 1935/2002, 1963; Lakatos 1970; Laudan 1983; Škorić 2010); yet, that does not mean that certain guidelines or rules cannot be

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followed, based on which one can be more or less certain whether the object of scrutiny is indeed science or pseudoscience. The relationship between pseudohistory and history is merely a part of this problem, which is at times easily solvable and sometimes a true challenge. There are some pseudohistories that are easily debunked (e.g. Lefkowitz and MacLean Rodgers 1996; Feder 2014), but proving that some ideas are absurd does not necessarily signify that the work of a historian is done, since certain parts of the public (as well as some historians) may still believe in the disproved ideas, even after being faced with the fact that there is no evidence to support the ideas or theories in question (Allchin 2004). However, this falls under the domain of history's public reputation and the public activities of historians who should (also) work on educating the general public, which is the duty of all scientists; nonetheless, this matter is beyond the scope of this paper.

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On the other hand, there are certain more subtle (or seemingly more subtle and serious) pseudohistories which are not products of blatant fabrication of facts and evidence, but rather, they are illegitimate revisions of the existing theories and facts. Revisions do not have to be bad per se, since they are necessary means for improving the adequacy and exactness of our knowledge about the past; however, there are some revisions which are not (primarily) intellectual by nature, but rather politically or ideologically motivated. The most radical versions of illegitimate revisionism are labeled as negationism, with the best-known example being the negation of the Holocaust (e.g. Lipstadt 1993; Drobnicki, Goldman, Knight, and Thomas 1994; Stone 2004).

Holocaust denial is not a novel phenomenon, but it gained in popularity in the mid-1970s, owing to the intellectual climate in which the Western rationalistic tradition was undermined and the idea that there is no single truth about the past, but only its multiple interpretations, was on the rise. Such climate began to form in the 1960s, when certain authors began to claim that texts do not have fixed meanings and that their meanings are determined by readers' interpretations, not the authors' intentions. In such context, one could hardly speak of the objective truth of a text, let alone an event, and thus, the truth morphed into a variety of truths and equally valid perspectives, which led to a dangerous situation in which it was hard to reject as invalid even the most absurd of the ideas.

In itself, it is not unreasonable to say that the reader's perspective is of certain importance in assigning meaning to a text, although that importance was (and is) certainly exaggerated. Furthermore, those streams of thought brought attention to the fact that the social groups with little or no power were constantly ignored, which was true. However, since deconstructionism, postmodernism and similar schools of thought claim that every experience is relative and that there are no fixed truths, an atmosphere arose in which

it was appropriate to bring into question the meanings of historical events and practically everything was allowed, since there was no historical reality (Jenkins 1995). If history as a science can differentiate between the explanations which are closer or further from the truth, then any attempt of illegitimate revisionism, and consequently, negationism, has a rather difficult task of disproving the established truths or explanations which are the best or in the highest accord with the evidence. Conversely, if the historians themselves condone various “positional histories”, in the sense that the historical truth depends (solely or primarily) on, for example, the socioeconomic statuses of the historians or the time they live in, then it is clear that the revisionists and the negationists may legitimately claim that their history is one of the versions of the truth (Evans 1999).

### **The basic features of illegitimate revisionist and negationist historiography**

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History as a science is plagued by the problem of defining the boundaries between history (what truly happened in the past), revision and denial/negation (Popper 1945/1947). This weakness is frequently exploited by the authors who, for various reasons, wish to revise the official versions of history in numerous ways, since sometimes it is indeed rather difficult to differentiate between history and pseudohistory, or between legitimate revision and untruthful negation. Even if something like that was possible, a new problem would arise in regard to the standard of the evidence and interpretations to be chosen as accurate or the most accurate. The idea that lies at the foundation of the solution to these problems is that not all interpretations of history are equally valid.

However, regardless of all the criteria that some historians or philosophers may set, they would always be compromised by some authors, for several of the most common reasons or motives. (Feder 2014). The first of them most certainly is money, where various frauds, myths, mysteries or fictional histories are used for the purpose of selling artifacts, books, lectures, T-shirts and the like. Apart from the money, there is also fame, where it is believed that by disproving a certain belief from the past, an individual may become both famous and wealthy. As far as illegitimate revisions – that is, denials and negations – are concerned, certainly, the most significant factors are nationalism, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, religion and romanticized past. Quite often, the goal of negationism may be to prove that a certain nation or “race” was the first in something or the first to do something, or to romanticize the past in order for people to believe in it because it was better, as well as to attempt to establish a relationship between a belief system and an (allegedly) sensible and significant history of faith. Most often, these

reinventions of the past serve the purpose of fulfilling some current personal or political interests, needs, motives and the like, guided by the so-called therapeutic values (Tucker 2008) which offer their followers psychological peace, satisfaction and basis for the uniting of like-minded individuals. These values in historiography usually include: the denial of historical guilt (the Holocaust), the promotion of self-respect (national myths) and the elimination of a sense of alienation and absurdity (conspiracy theories). Finally, there is another mention-worthy factor, the one of mental instability, since people with “strange” ideas may also be mentally unstable individuals (Feder 2014).

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Therefore, it is indisputably true that historiography must be subjectable to constant revisions, at least potentially, as is the case with scientific theories, which represents a variation of the Popperian criterion of demarcation, that is, the refutability or falsifiability of scientific theories (Popper 1935/2002). Falsifiability is not an entirely satisfactory demarcation criterion; yet, saying that a theory needs to be falsifiable is not the same as saying that it needs to be subjectable to revisions. This very openness is what makes science different from dogmatic systems of thought, such as religion. If historiography was not open to revisions, that would mean that it has reached the final truths about the past, which is impossible; however, at the same time, if all kinds of revisions were accepted, there would be chaos (Cohen 1952). Hence, historiography (and science in general) must be characterized by a sort of conservative openness towards new ideas. All of this does not mean that history is a science which constantly progresses linearly, that is, by creating a certain orthodoxy, which is further revised, only for the revision itself to be revised again, and so on. Historians tend to quarrel among themselves more than they work on the goals of developing a paradigm (Kuhn 1962/1970), a research program (Lakatos 1970) or a research tradition (Laudan 1977). All of the above makes it hard to reach a consensus in historiography, which further makes any linear model of the development of history as a science rather unsatisfactory. Historians are more interested in *why* than *how* revisions happen (Shermer and Grobman 2000/2009). Revisions are not inherent to historical evidence, which is why they can hardly be encompassed by the historiographical logic and why they mostly emerge due to individual and collective motivations which do not rely on archival discoveries, but are based on external dispositions, beliefs and values (Hughes-Warrington 2013).

Tucker (Tucker 2008) distinguishes between three types of legitimate historical revisions. The first type includes revisions which are guided by the evidence – they are the result of the discovery of new evidence and emerge when new evidence supports a new or a so far neglected hypothesis (as opposed to old, well-established hypotheses). Furthermore, science prefers hypotheses which offer broader explanations in contrast to those with narrower scopes, which may be another reason for revising. The second type

involves revisions which are guided by meaning, that is, the ones that revise something that historians believe holds great importance in history. Historians must conduct careful selection and structuring of the evidence, and the perception of the significance of the evidence gets altered by historical changes – the importance of certain events and their outcomes may become clear only long after they happened. The third type includes revisions which are guided by values and they emerge when historians reevaluate the historical events and processes they describe and elucidate. They can also occur as a consequence of the discovery of new evidence or due to a revision in the value system the historian employs in order to evaluate events, actors, affairs and the like.

The problem elaborated at the beginning of this text refers to the fact that it is not possible to trace the line which separates a true scientific revision from dogmatic, illegitimate revisionism or negationism. However, although there is no absolutely reliable way to do that, it is possible to set some guidelines which can help differentiate (more easily) between history and pseudohistory. Such guidelines can also have a wider range of applications, that is, they do not have to be exclusively limited to history as a science (Shermer 1997/2002), but can be used in every encounter with “peculiar” claims. The first question to be addressed is the one regarding the reliability of the source of the claim – negationists often seem like they are quoting or drawing upon reliable sources; however, more detailed research unambiguously shows that they are indeed distorting the facts or taking them out of context and adjusting them to their own agendas. It is also useful to know whether the source in question has previously made other claims which proved to be exaggerated or false, which would certainly bring the source’s credibility into question. It is always important to check whether some other scientist has verified the given claim – negationists usually make claims that are not verifiable or are verified only by other negationists, which is known as the so-called incestuous citation (Shermer and Grobman 2000/2009).

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Further, it is important to explore how the claim fits into all that we already know about the world and the way it works – illegitimate revisions or negations usually ignore the practical reality of the modern political systems (e.g. there are certain theories according to which the Jews had fabricated the whole episode with the Holocaust in order to get war reparations from the Germans and receive help from the Americans; such theories obviously neglect the facts about German payments made to the survivors, not the victims’ families, as well as the American help which ensued for political and economic reasons, not out of a sense of guilt) (Shermer and Grobman 2000/2009). What should also be taken into consideration is the attempt to refute the thesis, that is, the question whether the individual who is proposing the thesis has also attempted to refute it, or has only stated the evidence

which supports it – this is one of the most common errors in thinking, which stems from confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998). In relation to that, one must ask the question whether all the relevant rules and research techniques are being followed, or only the ones which lead the researcher to the desired conclusion – one should bear in mind that even the serious and successful scientists can rather easily abandon these rules in favor of ideology. If no clearly defined evidence is available, it is useful to ask the question whether the majority of evidence converges with the conclusion of the given claim or with some other/different claim. Negationists do not seek proofs which converge in some conclusion, but rather seek evidence which fits into their ideology. Similarly, they do not analyze the evidence as a whole, but focus on the details which may often be inconsistent, in which case they may work in their favor, while failing to realize they might be making various logical fallacies in reasoning (Fischer 1970).

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One should keep in mind that negationists usually do not offer new theories of history, but rather focus on undermining the existing ones. Basically, what they do is criticize the opponent, without ever stating their own attitudes, thus avoiding the possibility of becoming the objects of criticism themselves. That is not the way science, and consequently, history, can function – a revision may include legitimate criticism of an existing paradigm or offer a new paradigm in its place, but negation is rarely anything more than a blatant attack. The problem which particularly characterizes the work of negationists is that, even if they are offering a new version of history, the model they are offering cannot explain the past the way the model they are criticizing can; that is, they consistently offer significantly weaker explanatory models. The evidence, which presents the greatest problem in devising new theories, is most often found in the unclarified details from the past, which is why resorting to ignoring, rationalizing and denying the evidence is quite common (see Boyce and O'Day 1996; Kopeček 2008). Finally, it is useful to know whether personal convictions and biases are what guides the choice of evidence of the one making the claims, or whether it is the other way around. Everyone finds the task of being objective to be rather difficult, and all people have their own personal and ideological convictions, so the real problem is not how to avoid them, but how they influence research and how can they be diminished.

### **Ideological and political rehabilitation of the Chetnik collaboration**

A more pronounced manifestation of revisionist tendencies in Yugoslavian and Serbian society appeared in the late 1980s and it has reached its peak after the year 1990. Changes introduced into textbooks and teaching programs

represented merely a minor manifestation of this phenomenon, since at the same time, a systematic defamation of the Partisan movement and antifascism in general was in full swing, and the traces of the antifascist tradition were being meticulously and rather systematically removed from the public space: towns, streets, squares and institutions were renamed, certain monuments were removed and so on (Radović 2013). Still, the most dire consequences of such rise of historically revisionist orientation were suffered by the science of history itself, due to the undermining its own foundations and critically heuristic methods (Jovanović & Radić 2009).

Therefore, the contemporary ideological and political revisionism in Serbia is the result of syncretism between academic revisionism and the revision of the past on the part of state politics, and it is based upon systematic deletion from collective memory and persistent negation and distortion of historical sources, which are discredited as a part of the “ideological times” or “remains of the communist historiography”. Hence, the politics of historical revisionism in Serbia is indubitably characterized by the “ignoring of the scientific contribution of the postwar Yugoslavian historiography, demonization of socialism, relativization and neglect of the contributions of the Yugoslavian antifascist movement, relativization and normalization of quislingism, and finally, as the most radical manifestation of the rewriting of the past, apologia of quislings and frequent victimization of prominent collaborationists who have lost their lives fighting against the communists or stood trial before the postwar courts of the Socialist Yugoslavia” (Radanović 2011: 260). One can no longer speak of these as isolated incidents or a passing trend, but of something that has grown into a systematic phenomenon, a commonplace in the alleged research and superficial analysis of the historical events in Serbia and Yugoslavia in the past decades, especially during World War II.

The most prominent subject of historical revisionism in Serbia for the past three decades has been the Chetnik movement lead by Dragoljub Draža Mihailović, despite the fact that all relevant sources about the *Yugoslavian Army in the Homeland* and its commander were published by mid-1980s, and no new sources have surfaced since.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, it is exactly the matters of

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3 The majority of the documents related to the activities of the Chetnik movement during World War II were originally published in the *Anthologies of the NLW* [*National Liberation War*], which were successively published by the Institute of Military History during the 1950s. The entire corpus about the Chetniks available thus far, together with the international sources of German, British, American and other provenances, was published by the same publisher in Belgrade, in the period from 1981 to 1985, in the four books of the volume 14, entitled *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije* (*Anthology of the Documents and Data about the National Liberation War of the People of Yugoslavia*).

ideology, motives for action and the nature of the Chetnik movement during World War II that continue to be the subject of debates, not only in Serbian historiography, since this movement has been studied for decades in Yugoslav and world historiography in the context of military history in the Balkans (Pajović & Radević 1969, Radonjić & Jurjeva 1987).

638 In the late 1980s, in the time of progressive delegitimation of the ruling communist ideology, a monograph by Veselin Đuretić was published – *The Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama* – and it was the first work to abandon the antifascist consensus in the interpretation of the history of World War II in Yugoslavia, while adopting nationalism as the key point of reference in the interpretation of the war (Đuretić 1985).<sup>4</sup> The book is not characterized by any epistemological improvements, since it does not offer any new facts or a new research methodology<sup>5</sup>, which is why the author’s revisionism may be reduced to the incorporation of the well-known facts into the new ideological concept of Serbian nationalism, which was becoming increasingly dominant. This approach was the precursor of the one soon adopted by the author’s revisionist continuators. With no noteworthy heuristic, an entirely novel interpretation was offered, including the relativization of the matter of the antifascist struggle, which should be the main criterion in the evaluation of the nature and actors of World War II. The thesis of “preservation of biological substance” of the nation as the main motive for collaboration, which Đuretić proposed in his book, would soon become a popular and highly frequent explanation in historiographical revisionism in Serbia. Unlike the following generations of revisionists, the Đuretić does not explicitly negate the Chetnik collaboration, but only finds various reasons to justify that historical fact, and for the first time in Yugoslav historiography, an author sees both need and virtue in that act (Nikolić 1999, Nikolić & Dimitrijević 2011, Mihailović 1998, Samardžić 2004–2010, Dimitrijević 2014, Cvetković 2006). He does not explain how the “existential” justification of collaboration fits into the mass killings of the non-Serbian and rural Serbian population committed by the Chetniks, along with the clearly stated intention to physically exterminate the members of the Partisan movement (Radanović 2015).

Such relativization reached the level of absurdity with the claim about different manifestations of Serbian “existential realism” and factual denial of betrayal, accompanied by the fact that the Chetniks and other collaborationists

4 The first edition of the book was published by the Balkanological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

5 Đuretić’s book triggered an avalanche of polemical reactions in Yugoslav historiography. First, a round table about the book was held in October 1985. Then, on the 17th and the 18th of December 1985, a scientific gathering was organized, which was followed by the publishing of a collection of papers entitled. Kačavenda 1987, Bešlin 2013: 90–92.



were being placed into an unambiguously patriotic context. Veselin Đuretić went to great lengths to find as many euphemisms as possible for the Chetnik collaboration with the occupying forces. Some of the formulations adopted by subsequent historiographical revisionism are: “existential dialectics”, “Serbian self-defense dialectics”, “national realism”, “national maneuvering”, “*modus vivendi* with the occupying forces”, “existential motivation for collaborationism”, and the like (Đuretić 1985: 7, 30, 11, 135, 157, 160, 230). Đuretić ascribed key significance to the Chetniks, glorifying them as the pinnacle of Serbian history, and this approach was adopted by the subsequent revisionist practice, although even during the World War II, in which they come and go, Mihailović’s Chetniks did not play a dominant historical role. One of the most widely accepted theses of the emigrant historiography<sup>6</sup> represents the fundamental idea of Đuretić’s monograph, as well as all of the revisionist works that followed – the outcome of the war in Yugoslavia (1941–1945) was decidedly influenced by the Allies and determined regardless of the activities of the domicile actors. Although one must not underestimate the influence of the Allies, the victory in the war on the Yugoslavian land was won by the uncompromising antifascist struggle of the Partisan movement, which, as the war progressed, gained increasing support from the members of the anti-Hitler coalition (Barker 1978, Marjanović 1979, Petranović 1983, Petranović 1992). Pseudoscientific attempts made by revisionist historiography liberated the Chetniks from the stigma of crime and collaboration, with the intent of their complete moral rehabilitation and reaffirmation, while the defeat and loss of the support from the Allies were explained by an international conspiracy pointed against the Serbian people, and not as the result of their actions, widespread collaboration and crimes against non-Serbian civilians (Bešlin, 2013: 91).

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After the regime change in Serbia on October 5, 2000 and the overthrow of the authoritarian president Slobodan Milošević, the crucial features of his government’s ideology and the dominant nationalistic orientation did not change. On the contrary, the misinterpretation of this overthrow as the final act in the destruction of communism, after which immense strides were made to reaffirm and homogenize the “new” nationalism (Milosavljević, internet), led to the creation of a climate which allowed revisionist ideas to blossom, and the reinterpretations of the role of the Chetnik movement had reached their peak (Milosavljević 2012: 115–119, 169–171). *Modus operandi* of the new narrative, whose purpose was to nationalize antifascism and compromise the National Liberation Struggle of the Partisans, sums up to an

6 Save rare exceptions, the authors of the emigrant history were active participants and notable protagonists of collaboration with fascism. Some of the major works in emigrant historiography are: Krakov 1963, Jareb 1995, Karapandžić 1958, Karapandžić 1959, Topalović 1964, Topalović 1968, Knežević & Knežević 1982, etc.

attempt to install anti-anti-fascism as the fundamental value of a society built on anti-communism, through negation and demonization of the entire historical experience of the Socialist Yugoslavia (Kuljić 2005: 171–184). In the previous decade (1990–2000), Serbian government, which was personified by Slobodan Milošević and characterized by a syncretism between rigid socialistic and extremely nationalistic ideas, created an ideological basis which allowed the revisionist discourse to develop freely (Kuljić 2002), which is why by the year of 2000, a new generation of historians arose, whose goal was to adorn the glorification of the Chetnik commander Draža Mihailović with a scientific nimbus and who introduced their own “original” interpretations and “creative explications” of the past into the first history textbooks after the democratic changes that took place on October 5, 2000.<sup>7</sup>

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According to the years-long research conducted by Dubravka Stojanović, in the newly canonized history presented in the textbooks used to educate Serbian students in this age of transition, Draža Mihailović was described as a man who was educated in France and a connoisseur of French fine literature, while in the same textbooks, Tito was described, in accordance with the black-and-white image of the past, as an unscrupulous agent of the Comintern. The Partisans were labeled as collaborators, while the Chetnik collaboration was not even mentioned in the first editions of the textbooks after the year 2000. In subsequent editions, the Chetnik collaboration with Italian fascists was mentioned, however, in a positive context, as the best solution at the given time, according to the interpretations of the textbook authors (Stojanović 2010: 136–137). Several dozens of history textbooks by various authors and publishers which were authorized by the relevant state institutions do not diverge significantly in their interpretations of World War II in Yugoslavia, which is why the variety can only be described as a failed attempt of pluralization, that is, a particular case of pseudo-plurality. Revisionist history textbooks do not mention the crimes the Chetniks committed against civilians, particularly the Muslims and the Croats, and overlook the mass killings of civilians on the occupied Serbian territory.<sup>8</sup> The only Chetnik crimes that are mentioned are the ones against the individuals aiding the Partisan movement, and the context makes it clear that such deeds are exculpable. Still, according to the textbook authors, even those murders

7 In Serbia in the 2000s, school textbooks, which are normally methodologically conservative, since they contain indisputable and scientifically verified facts and interpretations, became a subject of experimentation and have been filled with unverified and scientifically highly controversial claims. This is why these textbooks and the approval they received from the relevant institutions gave rise to heated public debates and discussions, started in Serbian weekly magazine “Vreme”. See: Ast 2002: 28–30.

8 Slaughters of the rural population in villages Vranić near Belgrade and Drugovac near Smederevo represent symbols of mass crimes the Chetniks committed against Serbian civilians. Radanović 2015.

were committed by the members of the renegade Chetnik units who did not follow the chain of command. On the other hand, the textbooks speak of the Partisans, the only anti-fascist movement in Yugoslavia, as the ones who “left behind them so-called ‘dog cemeteries’, that is, unmarked mass graves of their opponents and the people feared the Partisans whose ‘kangaroo courts’ cold-bloodedly sentenced people to death. . . The secret and public murders of respectable individuals and common peasants, murders out of revenge, as well as the murders of the members of the CPY [Communist Party of Yugoslavia] who defied them, happened on nearly daily basis” (Stojanović 2010: 137). In these textbooks, the causes of the Chetniks’ defeat in World War II are interpreted solely in relation to the betrayal by the Allies. However, even this lack of the Allies’ support to the Chetniks remains unexplained and thus rather confusing, having in mind that the Chetniks are portrayed as the only true resistance movement standing against the occupying forces (Stojanović 2008: 159).

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In the early 2000s, the literary, publicist and historiographical interpretations left the image of the Chetnik movement in Serbia unrecognizably retouched, and the only, final touch remaining was to establish the trend of institutionalized selective politics of memory through legislative and judicial practice of the new government (Bešlin 2013: 92–97). This establishment and fortification of revisionist politics was realized through three legal acts adopted by the Serbian National Assembly.<sup>9</sup> In the name of the demagogically proclaimed “brighter future” and for the purpose of the ideological imperative of “national reconciliation”, which cannot be achieved without normalization and exculpation of the defeated collaborationist formation, on December 21, 2004, the highest legislative and representative body in Serbia adopted the *Act on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on the Rights of Fighters, War Invalids and Members of Their Families*, which became publically known as the *Law on the Equalisation of Chetniks and Partisans* (Radanović 2012: 81–110).

In accordance with Article 2 of the Law, the *Ravna Gora Commemorative Medal 1941* was established: “In regard to the rights granted by the Law on the Rights of Fighters, War Invalids and Members of Their Families, the individuals awarded with this medal are equaled with the ones awarded with the Partisan Commemorative Medal 1941” („Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o pravima boraca...” 2004: 1). Article 15 involves amendments to Article 35 of the Law on the Rights of Fighters: “All the rights granted by this law refer to all participants in the NLS [National Liberation Struggle],”

<sup>9</sup> We do not mention here the Law on Restitution, since it does not influence the historical science directly, but it should certainly be viewed, in a wider sense, as a part of a greater process of revisionism in Serbia, since it undoubtedly belongs together with the laws on equalization of Chetniks and Partisans and rehabilitation. Stanković 2009: 215–236.

including, as suggested by the legislator, the members of the Chetnik movement, “regardless of whether the court found them guilty of participating in the battles against the Partisan units, the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslavian Army” („Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o pravima boraca...” 2004: 1). Thus, *lege artis*, not only were the rights of the individuals awarded with the *Partisan Commemorative Medal* equaled with the rights of the ones awarded with the newly established *Ravna Gora Commemorative Medal*, but it was also the prelude into the final step in the political rehabilitation of the Chetnik movement.

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The next legal act that decreed the new image of the past was adopted by the Serbian National Assembly on April 17, 2006, and it was the *Law on Rehabilitation*. Article 1 stated that it regulates the “rehabilitation of individuals who were, without an administrative or court ruling, deprived of their life, liberty or other rights in the period from April 6, 1941 to the day of implementation of this law, and who lived on the territory of the Republic of Serbia” (“Zakon o rehabilitaciji” 2006: 9). According to Article 5 of this law, a request for rehabilitation may be submitted by “any individual or legal entity”, regardless of whether the request is submitted directly by the individual who was deprived of rights after the said date (“Zakon o rehabilitaciji” 2006: 10). The legal solutions provided by this act were harshly criticized by the professional public: “This law is in discord with one of the basic principles of criminal-legal rehabilitation, which states that rehabilitation depends on the severity of the criminal act. It is obvious that the purpose of this law is to rehabilitate the ones found guilty of severe criminal acts, including crimes against humanity” (Sekulović 2009: 21–22). From the standpoint of historiography, it is important as another manner of octroying the historical truth and conducting a planned relativization of the past. Following the lead of the Law on Rehabilitation, state-inspired revisionism was taken to a higher level, by decreeing the court truth about specific historical events, personalities and processes. During the court processes of rehabilitation of Draža Mihailović, Prince Pavle Karadorđević, Dragiša Cvetković, Momčilo Janković and others, an entire pseudohistory of Yugoslavian state and society in the twentieth century was written (Sekulović 2016, Milošević 2013, Radanović internet).

Finally, along with the legislative and judicial branches of government, the executive branch gave its own contribution to the implementation of revisionist politics in Serbia in the 2000s. In April 2009, the Ministry of Justice of Serbia formed a specialized state committee in charge of the search for the remains of Draža Mihailović<sup>10</sup> and several months later, in accordance with the Serbian government’s decision, on July 9, 2009, a committee was

10 The full title of the Committee: *State Committee for Determining the Circumstances of the Execution of General Dragoljub Draža Mihailović*.

formed and then finally constituted on November 12 – the *State Committee for Finding and Marking Secret Graves with Remains of the Individuals Who Were Executed After the Liberation in 1944* (shortened to: *State Committee for Secret Graves of the Individuals Executed After September 12, 1944*) (Radanović 2014: 143–174). The hiring of scientists and public figures known for their explicit right-wing and anti-communist orientation, the statements made by the state secretary at the Ministry of Justice, as the coordinator of the committees, and the statements made by some members of both committees, all pointed to the main intention of the makers of the state politics of historical revisionism, which was to portray the Chetnik movement as “one of the two anti-fascist movements in Serbia” and the commander of this movement as “a victim of the postwar state repression” who was “denied the right to his own grave”, although he was “the first guerrilla fighter in occupied Europe” (Radanović 2014: 143–144). Ideological stance expressed by treating Draža Mihailović as one of the innocent victims and the martyrological pattern formed around him were further highlighted by the ignorance of the European practice after World War II, according to which the individuals found guilty of war crimes are not buried in marked graves, in order to prevent their public memorialization and victimization (Calvocoressi 1948). The leading electronic and print media generated tension in the society, due to the recent discovery of multiple mass graves of “communist terror”, by aggressively disseminating the major ideas of the revisionist narrative about the Partisan villains and the Chetnik victims. Due to the unprofessionalism and ideological blindness, the work of both of the state committees formed for the purpose of implementing the revisionist politics did not yield the expected results.

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Over the nearly three decades after the change in the legitimation paradigm in Serbia and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which relied on the antifascist value consensus, of which Serbia was a part, anti-fascism morphed into one of the manifestations of the new ideological orientation – nationalism. Since all Yugoslavian nationalisms, including the Serbian nationalism, ended the war in a sort of collaboration with fascism, it was necessary that the compromised ideological predecessors be freed from the stigma of quislingism (Bešlin 2013: 18–23). Furthermore, in a society characterized by normalized ethnic nationalism, it was unreasonable to expect that anti-fascism would remain the dominant orientation in the understanding and interpretation of World War II. Finally, the wars waged by the nationalistic elite in the ruins of Yugoslavia (1991–1995) could not be fought with the ideas of left-wing internationalism of the Partisan antifascists, but with the very negation of politics of national equality through rehabilitation of the defeated conservative right-wing quislingism of the World War II.

Having this context in mind, since the inauguration of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia (1987) and the inauguration of the new ruling nationalistic ideology,

which was followed by the mostly conservative opposition to Milošević taking his place in 2000, regimes have changed, as well as their representatives, but the ideological paradigm persevered, which intensified the politically motivated historical revisionism accompanied by the demonization of Yugoslavia, negation and defamation of Yugoslavian antifascism and the proclamation of the new heroes of World War II – the Chetniks. Therefore, as the Serbian country was characterized by the indisputable personal discontinuity of the ruling structures, the continuity of the nationalistic ideology and illegitimate revisionism prevailed, as its important manifestations. The goal was almost fully accomplished, since in the eyes of a large part of the public, media, textbooks and collective consciousness, the Partisans and the Chetniks switched the places they occupied on the positive and negative ends of the historical interpretation.

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As can be seen from the example of the Chetniks and their rehabilitation in Serbia, we are speaking of a combination of negationism and illegitimate revisionism, where the past is changed primarily in order to serve particular ideological and political interests, which was supported by the state and various political structures which changed over this period. Systematic efforts were (and are) put into denying historical responsibility of the Chetnik movement and its leader for war crimes and collaboration (betrayal of their country), which was, above all, motivated by the nationalistic motives which were dominant in the atmosphere of the wars and postwar society after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Driven by its own nationalistic and political interests, dedicated to the goal of legitimizing and justifying wars it started over the post-Yugoslavian legacy, the state politics in Serbia encouraged and supported the historically revisionist matrix, while ignoring and manipulating the historical facts and thus undermining the elementary principles and methods of critical historiography as a scientific discipline.

### **Illegitimate revisionism as a therapeutically-aesthetic historiography**

As one may notice, the revisionist historiography is immune to evidence and it usually neglects scientific methodology and obscures the epistemological issues, especially in regard to the distinction between evidence and fiction, which is further supported by the atmosphere of legitimization of multiple truths (Tucker 2008). That also means that illegitimate revisionism (illegitimate from the standpoint of orthodoxy, which earns its status by virtue of evidence, not mere consensus among experts) is dominated by non-epistemic values (McMullin 1982; Škorić 2010), which were already discussed in this paper. In the introduction, we also stated that evidence is not always of deciding importance and great enough influence to easily turn someone away from wrong ideas and unscientific interpretations. Inter alia, the reason for

that is the fact that revisionist logic is similar to the logic of conspiracy theories (see e.g. Coady 2006; Uscinski and Parent 2014) – every claim can be spun to suit the liking of an advocate of revisionist or negationist historiography. Often, skepticism is misused in the exact same way, and revisionists refer to themselves as skeptics, while labeling others as naïve and gullible individuals, without realizing that skepticism is *not* an approach which does not recognize the well-substantiated ideas and promotes the ones supported by little or no evidence.

The question of consensus in historiography is in a way subsumed by the question of consensus in science, and so far, no satisfactory answer has been offered (Cole 1992). Still it is possible to offer certain rational arguments which would support the idea that historiography can reach at least a loose consensus on multiple matters. For example, historians, like any other group of scientists, represent a rather heterogeneous category in regard to non-epistemic values, as well as the socioeconomic status and cultural background. If a consensus has been reached in such a group, it is highly likely that it was reached due to common knowledge and facts, while there is a rather low possibility of it being a collective delusion, conspiracy or that, for example, a single truth suits the interests of so many different individuals. Therefore, there is no heterogeneous consensus in the revisionist historiography, but it is dominated by homogenized biases and misconceptions (Tucker 2008) – the reality and horrors of the Holocaust are recognized by explicitly distinct scholars around the world, while most negationists tend to be supporters of Nazism.

Therapeutic historiographies do not wish to accept the truth without a fight; they wish to adjust it in order to suit their own interests, expectations, hopes and the like. Hence, one could ironically conclude that their truth must possess a certain appealing esthetic quality in order for it to be acceptable – if something is in discord with the already existing ideas, conceptions and beliefs, then it cannot be true. In the psychological sense, these qualities could be useful, positive or interesting, while having nothing to do with the truth. Historiography does not exist in order to suit someone's liking; its aim is to discover the historical truths and determine the historical facts, while spreading the ideas about social and cultural diversity to the domain of truth is both absurd and unacceptable (Lefkowitz 1996). Unless diversity is equaled with truth, which must not happen in the sense that everyone has their own truth, that scientific truth must respect multiculturalism, that the truth is gender-sensitive, contextual, and culturally specific, that means that certain boundaries of academic freedom must exist, as well as responsibilities for everyone who neglects them.

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Politika sećanja, istorijski revizionizam  
i negacionizam u postsocijalističkoj Srbiji

Apstrakt

Polazeći od distinkcije između nauke i pseudonauke, rad se bavi pojavama revizionizma u naučnoj historiografiji sa posebnim akcentom na pojave nelegitimnog revizionizma i negacionizma. Iako nije sporno da historiografija mora da bude podložna konstantnim revizijama, jer kao i svaka naučna teorija mora da ima neku vrstu konzervativne otvorenosti prema novim idejama, česte su pojave nenaučnih revizija i negacionističkog pristupa. Ove pojave odbacuju utvrđene istoriografske metode uz otvaranje prema različitim vrstama pristrasnosti i manipulacije. U radu se dalje daje sintetizovan pregled revizionističke prakse u dominantnim delovima društva i historiografije u postkomunističkoj Srbiji. Promena ideološke paradigme krajem osamdesetih godina prošlog veka donela je i politički motivisanu reinterpretaciju, pre svega, Drugog svetskog rata na jugoslovenskom prostoru. Umesto dotadašnjih Titovih partizana u Srbiji u poslednjoj deceniji 20. veka rojalistički i nacionalistički četnici Draže Mihailovića bivaju proglašeni za nacionalne heroje i borce protiv fašizma, dok se njihova kolaboracija prećutkuje. Nacionalističko tumačenje istorije i nova revizionistička politika u Srbiji uživala je podršku države kroz delatnost sve tri grane vlasti: zakonodavne, izvršne i sudske. Uprkos političkim promenama u Srbiji 2000. dominantna nacionalistička matrica u istorijskim interpretacijama i politici revizionizma, nije promenjena.

**Ključne reči:** Politika sećanja, nelegitimni revizionizam, negacionizam, historiografija, postkomunistička Srbija, legitimizacija četnika, Drugi svetski rat.

