

# Editorial

*In order to account for the present, to justify it, understand it, or criticise it, the past is used, selectively appropriated, remembered, forgotten or invented<sup>1</sup>*

“How did the past create the present?” – This would be the usual question for historians who strive for a most accurate possible reproduction of what has happened in the past and seek to understand how past events are connected to the present. In the present volume of *Euxeinos*, we propose, however, to turn the question the other way around, looking at history and historiography not as something given, but as a product of a specific political context – as was proposed by Catherine Tonkin, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman, quoted in the epigraph above.

“How did the present create the past?” is therefore the guiding question for the contributors to this special issue. In the post-Soviet space and the Balkans, memories of historical events are repeatedly instrumentalised for the purposes of nationalist mobilisation and repression, often against the background of armed conflicts. The present collection of articles sheds light on the topic from the perspective of Ukrainian, Russian, Georgian, Serbian and Western European specialists from research and practice in historical politics and conflict and peace research. The authors pay special attention not only to the political instrumentalisation of history in its respective political context, but also to the role that civil society, research and education can play in mobilising for, but also defusing conflicts and historical-political disputes.

Aleksandra Sekulić depicts in her article the rise of conservative and neo-fascist tendencies in Serbia, and describes the role of the liberal elites as a target, but also as an actor of resistance against this repression. According to the author, the arts (theatre, visual arts, and architecture) play a special role in this struggle for survival and political emancipation, as a means of expression and a space for critical discussion.

Olesya Khromeychuk focusses on the parallels that Ukrainian main-stream historiographers and artists draw between the past and the present, comparing Kyiv’s Anti-Terrorist Operation since 2014 in Donbas (ATO) with the anti-communist resurgent army of the 1940s and 1950s (UPA). The author describes how de-communisation and rehabilitation of the heroes of the past reinforce archaic gender stereotypes and reflect a highly political, one-sided interpretation of history.

This brings her to conclude with a general reflection on the ethical role of historians and the need for more critical, multi-perspectival thinking in contemporary Ukraine.

Malkhaz Toria writes about the difficult fate of ethnic Georgians who live as a minority in the Gali region of de-facto independent Abkhazia. Notably, according

to the author, the state-building policies on both the Abkhaz and the Georgian side entail a strong politicisation and instrumentalisation of historical narratives. As he shows, history and the ethno-territorial hierarchies of the past are re-invented, in order to legitimise the claim for statehood (and, therefore, for conflict) in the present. As a result of this historical argumentation, the Georgians of Gali are socio-economically marginalised and remain a main target for repression by the de-facto government in Sukhumi.

Ekaterina Klimenko is interested in the (contested) historical narratives in Russia since the eruption of the Ukraine conflict in 2014. Whereas most of the analytical literature concentrates on World War II as a screen for the (nationalist) re-invention of the past, the author dedicates her article to another object of contestation in Russian historiography, which are the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s and 1940s. In her analysis, Klimenko observes not so much a re-Stalinisation (i.e. a reactivation of the Stalin cult) in the present historiographical discourse, but a new and intensive tendency of “forgetting” the repressions as a socio-political topic.

Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska examines the instrumentalisation of history in the public discourse of today’s Ukraine, especially in the educational system. Based on interviews with history teachers and NGO experts from central, eastern and southern Ukraine, she identifies topics and actors in this re-interpretation of the past. Further, she analyses the conflicts, which can be triggered by incongruences of interpretation and by an excessive hierarchisation of the discourses of the past (ethnic vs. official, local vs. national views of the past).

Cécile Druey dedicates her article to the different types of conflict between memory groups in Chechnya. Based on Jan Assman’s concept of cultural and communicative memory and using examples of Chechen and Russian (contested) historiography, she links the way of what and how something is remembered to the political claims and the unequal power relations between these groups, which eventually leads to conflict.

Anna Chebotarova’s article analyses the influence of the military conflict in Donbas and the Crimean crisis on the formation of collective memory in post-Maidan Ukraine. In a meticulous sociological study conducted in different regions of Ukraine, the author explores the population dimension of collective memory, rather than the official and institutionalised dimension. She argues that while the role of “memory warriors” is growing in the political sphere, the Ukrainian society remains heterogeneous and ambivalent in its attitudes towards history.

This Euxeinos issue was originally inspired by the conference “Instrumentalising the past and political mobilisation – the painful experiences from Eastern Europe and the Balkans”, organised in March 2017 in Basel by swisspeace and the History Department of the University of Basel, and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The plan to publish the results of the discussions

in Basel was then carried out within the framework of the SNSF research project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested History in the Post-Soviet Space”, under the auspices of Carmen Scheide (University of Bern, Switzerland).

We would like to take this opportunity to express our warmest gratitude to all those who have accompanied this publication project, be it with their critical advice, by organising and hosting discussions, or with financial and moral support. We are deeply grateful as well to the University of St. Gallen and the team of Euxeinos, who made this publication possible. And last but not least, we would like to sincerely thank the authors who have contributed to this issue for their critical thinking and writing, and for the courage in the everyday work they do in their own contexts.

**by Eliane Fitzé and Cécile Druey**

### **Endnotes**

- 1 See Elizabeth Tonkin, Marion McDonald and Malcolm Chapman, eds, *History and Ethnicity*, ASA Monographs 27 (London: Routledge), 1989, 5.