

Gavrilo Princip: hero or villain?

As Balkan countries prepare to mark the start of the first world war, history books show widely different interpretation.

"Those people were terrorists – Gavrilo Princip and the rest of them," said Salih Mehmedovic, standing at the spot by the Latin Bridge in central Sarajevo where the young Bosnian Serb shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary 100 years ago.

Mehmedovic, a Bosniak, said he had no doubt that Serbia was responsible for the murder. "They did what they did on the orders of Serbia. We should blame Serbia for the war," he insisted.

As Balkan countries prepare to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the first world war this summer, each is teaching its children a different interpretation of the killing that triggered the conflict.

Princip is portrayed in the history books of the various countries of former Yugoslavia either as a terrorist or as a rebel with a cause – reflecting contemporary divisions in a region still recovering from the more recent conflicts of the 1990s.

While they were part of Yugoslavia, children in all these countries were taught the same history. Now they all have their own versions of the truth, shaped by the more recent wars, and are passing it on to the next generation.

"There used to be only one discourse about World War I while the country was still Yugoslavia," said Nenad Sebek, executive director of the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, which has analysed school textbooks in the region.

"That country disappeared 23 years ago and the discourse disappeared with it, because the new countries that came out of the former Yugoslavia had different perceptions of the past. Now the past is being adjusted to fit whatever discourse the ruling elites in these countries want at the present moment."

In ethnically divided Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no commonly held view either about Princip or about the origins of the first world war.

Different interpretation

Bosnian Serb children are taught a different interpretation than Bosniaks and Croats, for whom Princip was a Belgrade-backed political assassin. For Bosnian Serbs, the murder was merely a pretext for Austria-Hungary and Germany to attack Serbia.

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Comment [1]: We have different interpretations of the past, different "truths"

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Comment [2]: Current circumstances affect our views on the past

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Comment [3]: As people splinter their views on the past also splinter

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Comment [4]: Narratives are created after the fact to fit present ideals and what's convenient

These divisions are also reflected in the rival commemorations that will be held in Bosnia. A series of events will be held in Sarajevo, including exhibitions, concerts and a meeting of young peace activists from around the world.

Bosnian Serbs will hold their own events in the eastern town of Visegrad, organised by film director Emir Kusturica, while a statue of Princip is due to be erected in Serb-run eastern Sarajevo.

In mainly Bosniak areas, such as Sarajevo, the Bihac region in the north-west and the central Zenica-Doboj area, school textbooks highlight Princip's links to Serbia. The Sarajevo textbook says that Princip's group, Young Bosnia, was "supported by secret organisations from Serbia", while the Bihac textbook states more directly that the plotters were "supported by Serbia". The textbook for Zenica describes Young Bosnia as a "terrorist organisation".

The history book used by Bosnian Croat pupils also describes Young Bosnia as a "terrorist" group. But in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity, Young Bosnia is simply described as an "organisation" and textbooks stress that Austria-Hungary "used" Franz Ferdinand's assassination "to blame Serbia" and declare war on the country.

Unsurprisingly, this description of the war's outbreak is similar to the one contained in textbooks used in Serbia itself.

Zeljko Vujadinovic, a history professor from Banja Luka in Republika Srpska, said that in Bosnia, "what we are looking at is the current political mind-set transferred to the past".

Suggestions that Young Bosnia was a "pre-WWI al-Qaida" were a result of the 1990s conflict, he insisted.

Worldwide events

"The characterisation of Young Bosnia and Princip as terrorists is an attempt to place the blame for huge worldwide events on 'Serbian territorial expansion policies', which is evidently flawed," Vujadinovic said.

Zijad Sehic, a Sarajevo history professor, agreed that the past had been redrawn in the aftermath of the 1992-95 conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It was only since the fall of Yugoslavia that Princip has been described as a Serbian nationalist rather than as a fighter for Yugoslav unity, he said. "Now that there is no more Yugoslavia, his actions are being viewed more narrowly and he has been reborn as a Serbian hero."

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Comment [5]: Emphasizes the idea that you can influence people's ideas about the past by being picky about the word choice and emphasis on certain events, words.

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Comment [6]: Importance of language and word choices in learning about history. Language is an important WOK when learning about history

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Comment [7]: It is like when people project their own mindsets on others, similarly our present minds affect our memories of the past.

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Comment [8]: History is an attempt to make sense of the past and make it relevant. At the time, one interpretation didn't make sense but it may make sense now so now that interpretation becomes popular. Emotion about the past and present affects our views on history.

A new monument to Princip is also due to go up in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, where children are taught that he was struggling for a just cause. Serbia will be minting a silver coin with his face on it to mark the centenary, and the government will stage exhibitions.

The Serbian Orthodox church meanwhile has proclaimed the assassin a national hero. "Gavrilo Princip was just defending his freedom and his people," a leading cleric, Metropolitan Amfilohije, said recently. "In Serbia, there is still the old narrative from the former Yugoslavia, which says that the first world war happened because there was this great hero called Gavrilo Princip," Sebek said.

"He assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was the personification of the occupying forces of Austria-Hungary, and then Austria-Hungary and the German empire invaded Serbia, and the brave Serbs struggled and suffered during the war but were on the right side."

On Gavrilo Princip Street in Belgrade, many people insisted that Serbia did not cause the 1914-18 war.

"Serbia was exhausted after two Balkan wars [in 1912-13] and didn't want war in 1914. The Great War was a result of the imperial aspirations of Austria-Hungary and Germany," said Aleksandar Dasic, a web editor.

Jelena Cebic, a salesperson, said: "The blame for World War I should be on Austria-Hungary and its imperial desire to capture the whole of the Balkans for its empire. Serbia should not take any blame for Princip."

Serbian school textbooks maintain that the overall cause of World War I was "the fight between the big powers for economic control and domination of Europe".

The seventh-grade textbook says that Austria-Hungary "used" the Sarajevo assassination as an excuse for a "long-desired" war against Serbia, "even though the Serbian government was not responsible for the assassination".

The Sarajevo assassin is described simply as "a young Serb from Bosnia".

"Princip was part of the Young Bosnia movement and he believed that assassinations and personal sacrifices could change Austro-Hungarian policies towards the Serbs and other South Slavs," the book says.

A chapter is devoted to Serbia and Montenegro's heroic victories during the conflict, while Austria-Hungary's alleged war crimes against Serbs are given prominence.

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Comment [9]: This is an intentionally provocative action.

"The Austrian army committed horrific war crimes against Serbian civilians," the textbook says, detailing mass detentions in camps, the burning of villages, the torture of civilians and the banning of Serbian national symbols and the Cyrillic script.

But Dubravka Stojanovic, a professor at Belgrade University, argued that the history of the war is taught in Serbia "in the context of national myth and the interpretation of Serbia as a nation that sacrificed itself".

Princip had been used as a tool to promote the ruling ideology, Stojanovic said.

"During the era of [former leader Slobodan] Milosevic, the caption under Princip's image [in textbooks] said 'Serbian hero'," she said.

"It is not like that anymore - but it is written that he was a Serbian nationalist, although he said himself that he was a Yugoslav nationalist," she concluded. Schools in Croatia teach that Serbia was to blame for helping to spark the 1914-18 conflict, by seeking to expand its territory and supporting a terrorist. Croatian history textbooks maintain that Serbia was one of the countries responsible for the outbreak of first world war.

Territorial expansion

While acknowledging that Austro-Hungary wanted to secure control over south-eastern Europe, the fourth-grade secondary-school textbook says that Serbia "sought territorial expansion over areas that were under Ottoman rule up until the [1912-1913] Balkan wars, and was unsettled with the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to Serbian territorial pretentions towards Bosnia and Herzegovina".

It describes Young Bosnia as a group that carried out "illegal terrorist actions" and favoured Serbia taking control of Bosnia and Herzegovina with a view to creating a "Greater Serbia".

"A secret organisation named 'Unification or Death' [also known under the name of the Black Hand] was formed in Serbia in 1911, with the mission of achieving Greater Serbian aims through terrorist activities," it says.

"The aim of the organisation, defined in its constitution, was the 'unification of Serbs'," it adds.

Historian Martin Previsic argued that the idea of a plan to create a Greater Serbia is a theme that runs through Croatian textbooks, beginning in the 19th century, stretching through both world wars and on into the history of the former Yugoslavia. "That line leads also to 1991 and the 'Homeland war' [against Serb forces in 1991-95]," he said.

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Comment [10]: People who are presently in power write the history that gets read. They have "power" over the past.

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Comment [11]: How you interpret this quote is relevant and important. Language matters

Some parents in King Tomislav Square in Zagreb were not so sure Serbia was to blame. "The idea of liberation from the Austro-Hungarian empire was legitimate, although it is still hard to see Gavrilo Princip as a hero," said one, Drazenka Kosic.

Parents in the capital Pristina, with recent memories of Belgrade's violent repression of Kosovo Albanians, insisted that Serbian aggression was definitely a factor behind the outbreak of World War I.

"The whole world has suffered because of Serbia," said one Pristina local, Ajvaz Abazi.

"Serbia has harmed many people, as well as those from Kosovo, so naturally they give high importance to their own criminals [like Princip]," said another, Xhevdet Hoxha.

But Kosovo's schoolchildren are actually taught a version of history that still closely resembles the narrative in the old Yugoslav textbooks, in which Serbia is treated relatively sympathetically as a country trying to avoid a war.

The passages on WWI, written after the 1998-99 conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army and Belgrade's forces, describe Princip as a "Serbian nationalist" rather than a Yugoslav one – but they do not accuse Serbia of responsibility for the conflict.

Austrian ultimatum

Describing the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia after Franz Ferdinand's murder, the textbook suggests that Belgrade had legitimate reasons for rejecting it.

"For Serbia, accepting such a request would mean losing its independence," it says.

Arben Arifi of the Kosovo Institute of History said there was a practical reason for the relatively benign interpretation of Serbia's role.

"The authors who wrote the history schoolbooks before and after independence are, more or less, the same," Arifi said.

But Shkelzen Gashi, a political scientist who specialises in history, argued that Kosovo schoolbooks are full of "inaccuracies, lies and falsifications, which very much increase suspicions amongst schoolchildren regarding Serbia".

"Serbia is not directly accused [of starting the war], but indirectly, by saying the war began because of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand committed by a member of this nationalistic Serbian organisation, Gavrilo Princip," Gashi said.

Macedonia accuses 'imperialist' great powers

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Comment [12]: Memories are malleable and memories form the basis for history. Personal limitations can be the limitations in history

Macedonian school textbooks describe the conflict as "the first world imperialist war" and focus on the division of Macedonian territory that followed. However, Macedonians blame neighbouring Bulgaria in particular for aggressive expansionism, not Serbia.

Macedonian historian Novica Veljanovski was also keen to exonerate Serbia. "It has been proven that the Serbian state had no intention or plan to kill the Archduke Franz Ferdinand," he explained. "Serbia cannot be blamed for the start of the war."

The Macedonian school textbook says Austria, Italy and Germany were the instigators, using the assassination by Princip's "secret revolutionary organisation" as a pretext.

"Austria-Hungary used this event to accuse Serbia of organising the assassination, sending an ultimatum to Belgrade with almost unacceptable terms," it says.

Bulgaria is accused of conducting an "expansionist policy" and of joining the war to "take the whole of Macedonia".

Many people in the capital Skopje also did not blame Belgrade for WWI.

"Why Serbia? No. Everyone knows that the assassination that [Princip] carried out was only used as an excuse to start the war," said one Skopje resident, Slavjan Radenski. "An entire country cannot be blamed for the actions of one man," said another, Milanka Malinova.

At the spot in Sarajevo where Franz Ferdinand was assassinated 100 years ago, some locals said they were not concerned about what pupils were taught about the first world war. "I don't know and I don't care," said Adnan Tepic. "We should just forget such a distant past."

Others argued that only the facts should be taught, without any bias. "We should teach children the fact that the assassination happened, but we should leave it to each individual to find their own interpretations for themselves," said Atija Masic.

As the centenary approaches, there is little hope that rival ethnic and political groups in the Balkans will find a shared view, said history professor Zijad Sehic. "We will never have agreement on this issue. The views are too far apart. There will never be a common truth."

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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/06/gavrilo-princip-hero-villain-first-world-war-balkan-history>