

UPF Slovakia examines Icons of Fame, Images of Identity at the Peace Embassy

Barbara Grabner
May 22, 2024



Bratislava, Slovakia, May 22, 2024 - our Peace Embassy was the venue of an educational evening with guest speaker, Mischa Gabowitsch PhD, a historian and sociologist at the Research Centre for the History of Transformations at the University of Vienna. He researches protest and social movements, war memorials and military cemeteries.



His lecture provided insight into the purpose of war memorials in Soviet and post-Soviet textbooks. The main motive of most memorials is the liberating role of the Red Army. A famous example stands in the Treptow Park in Berlin; the huge statue of a soldier holding a rescued child became ubiquitous in Soviet school textbooks and other printed media.

Projecting pages from textbooks on the screen, the lecturer explained the collective memory connected to

the memorials from the 1950s until today. The older members of the audience who were familiar with the Russian language, could easily read the pages on the screen.

In regional textbooks, portraits of local heroes were the dominant feature. In this way, pupils could identify not only with the entire "socialist motherland" but also with their own republic or region.



'After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the textbooks in the fifteen successor states differed considerably, as did the narratives about the history of the world war,' commented Gabowitsch. Currently, there is a growing gap; in some nations war memorials disappeared from textbooks and in others, notably Belarus and Russia, their presence increased. 'Today, there is a growing divide between those who have been familiarised with Soviet war memorials as icons of a cult of remembrance and symbols of emotional attachment, and those who see the same memorials as alien objects, as imposed markers of occupation and Sovietisation.'



In Russia, it almost seems as if the situation has been reversed since the Soviet era. In national history textbooks, the so-called Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) is supplanting other symbols of history. A standard history textbook published in 2019 features on its cover a photograph of the above mentioned Treptow memorial and a painting of the liberation of Minsk in 1944 - two images associated with the Second World War but ironically located outside of Russia.

The evening concluded with fundraising for 'Schools for Peace' in Kiev, a project managed by the International Relief Friendship Foundation (IRFF). Miloš Klas, Secretary General, UPF Slovakia, showed slides outlining how UPF Ukraine helps school children to study in the secure basement of their schools. Mischa Gabowitsch donated his fee to this project, and many guests made contributions.