

UPF-Slovakia Historian Explains Shifting Views of Iconic War Monuments

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Bratislava, Slovakia – Historian and sociologist **Dr. Mischa Gabowitsch** explained how perspectives on wars change over time, in an informative presentation at the Peace Embassy in Bratislava on May 22, 2024. Dr. Gabowitsch, a researcher at the Research Centre for the History of Transformations at the University of Vienna, studies protest and social movements, war memorials and military cemeteries.

His lecture provided insight on the purpose of war memorials in Soviet and post-Soviet textbooks. The main theme of most memorials in the Soviet era was the liberating role of the Red Army, he said. A famous example is located in Treptow Park in Berlin, Germany. The huge statue of a soldier holding a rescued child became ubiquitous in Soviet school textbooks and other print media.



Projecting pages from textbooks on the screen, Dr. Gabowitsch explained the collective memory connected to the memorials, from the 1950s until today. The older members of the audience were familiar with the Russian language, and could easily read the pages.

In regional textbooks, portraits of local heroes were the dominant feature, he explained. This allowed pupils to identify not only with the "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," Dr. Gabowitsch said. Presently, there is a growing gap, as in some nations war memorials disappeared from textbooks and in others their presence increased, notably in Belarus and Russia.

"Today, the divide grows between those who are familiar 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 Sovietization."

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 a photograph of the above-mentioned Treptow memorial and a painting of the liberation of Minsk in 1944 on the cover – two images associated with World War II, 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). **Mr. Miloš Klas**, president of UPF-Slovakia, presented slides showing how UPF-Ukraine helps school children to study in the secure basements of their schools. Dr. Gabowitsch donated his speaker's fee, and many guests also contributed to the cause